

*“Stones make a city rise; people give it depth.”*

The Dutch version of this sentence – ‘*Van stenen gaat een stad de hoogte in, de mensen geven diepte*’– was written by our city poet Derek Otte, and I think it suits this city very well.

Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to wish you a very warm welcome to Rotterdam. My name is Said Kasmi and I’m Vice Mayor for Culture, Education and Tourism in this multicultural city. You’re now in the most beautiful and historic room in this City Hall. Or rather, in the entire city.

As you probably know, after the devastating bombardment of May 1940, Rotterdam was left without a city centre. This City Hall dating from 1920 was one of the few buildings in the centre that was still standing. That’s why, today, this is a monument we cherish and are proud of. You might have already walked past the statue called *De Verwoeste Stad*, meaning The Destroyed City, by Ossip Zadkine. It’s a statue of a man with a hole in his torso in the place where his heart should be. Full of horror, he’s throwing his hands into the air. When the war was only just over, this city began its reconstruction.

Near here, on Coolsingel, there was an illuminated advertisement with the words “*Aan den slag. Rotterdammers weten van aanpakken*”, meaning ‘Let’s get to work. The people of Rotterdam always get the job done.’ Young and old, rich and poor, everyone rolled up their sleeves and got on with rebuilding the city. There was an enormous sense of unity and solidarity, and people began dreaming about the future again.

In January 1948, Rotterdam received permission from Queen Wilhelmina to add the motto *Sterker door Strijd*, meaning ‘Stronger through Struggle’, to the municipal coat of arms, as a reminder of the misery that Rotterdam had endured and the rapid reconstruction. You could say that resilience is inextricably linked to Rotterdam. In this respect, ELIA has chosen the right city to hold this conference. And that’s not the only reason why.

Rotterdam and culture are an excellent combination. With internationally renowned art institutions and art companies, festivals and art schools, the city has a lot to offer. Music, dance, theatre and visual arts bring the city to life. Whether it’s listening to a breathtaking concert, connecting with the characters in a play or marvelling at a painting, it’s beautiful when art has an effect on you.

In Rotterdam, we believe that art and culture should be accessible to everyone: on the street, at school and in the neighbourhood. Being actively involved in art and culture offers children, young people and adults opportunities to shape their own way of living in the world, their relationship with others and society and their own identity. It gives people resilience. It has definitely made me resilient! Let me tell you why.

As the son of parents who cannot read and write, I never visited a museum, theatre, concert hall or library except with school. I actually lived in two worlds: in the Moroccan world when I was at home, and in the Dutch world at school and on the streets. It was at secondary school that I started to question everything. I started reading other books: about sociology, psychology and philosophy – books that make you think. In a magazine, I was struck by a column by Paulo Coelho about a wise old man living in a monastery in the mountains of China. Schools visited him and had the chance to ask him questions. He had an answer to everything. Until one day he thought: “If I were to say, ‘I don’t know’ ... what would happen then?”

That column really got me thinking. I suddenly wondered what would happen if I answered my own questions with “I don’t know”. And I did. I started thinking for myself. In the meantime, I have found very different answers. Art and culture have helped me in this, making me strong and resilient.

Rotterdam is a city of two speeds. We are a dynamic world port city with modern buildings designed by world famous architects and high-rise residential towers. More and more people want to live, work and stay here. And the number of foreign tourists in Rotterdam keeps increasing. At the same time, there is a feeling of unease among part of the population. For many Rotterdam residents, success is happening too fast. They are not benefiting from it themselves. As a result of internationalisation, migration and globalisation, they recognise the Rotterdam they know and love less and less.

In our coalition agreement entitled 'New Energy for Rotterdam' we express our pride in the city. However, we also conclude that an incredible amount of work still needs to be done to ensure that every Rotterdam resident can have and maintain a good way of living. A city is only truly inclusive if it's designed in such a way that there is sufficient housing, cultural facilities, public space, green spaces and accessible public transport for everyone, and in such a way that everyone feels safe and can flourish.

Achieving this is quite a complex matter, in which the cultural sector plays an important role. We still have a long way to go, but we are already seeing results. Numerous initiatives from the cultural sector – too many to mention – are working towards a more resilient Rotterdam.

I would like to reflect on one of them and that is the new production by the Rotterdams Wijktheater called *TOEN /WIJ /NU /ZIJN*, meaning THEN /US /NOW /BEING. It's a performance in which "ordinary" Rotterdam residents from all over the world tell their story. What brought them here? Where did they come from? How do they get by? It's a performance about memories and dreams for the future. As far as I am concerned, strength and resilience are also about then, about us, about now and about being.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have a lovely evening here in our City Hall, and shortly in our beautiful Laurenskerk. And I hope that this resilient city will be a source of new inspiration for you.

Thank you for your attention.