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## PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE CITY TOURISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to examine policies and planning for sustainable city tourism in Amsterdam and Rotterdam and relate them to the notions of ‘tourism reset’ that emerged during the COVID pandemic period. Amsterdam is a prime European tourist city and has been suffering from problems associated with overtourism. Rotterdam receives much less tourists and can be seen as an emerging tourist city. Both cities have recently adopted new tourism policies, essentially future tourism visions. The case of Amsterdam and to a lesser extent that of Rotterdam show that formulating and agreeing on a tourism policy vision is easier than the decision-making process and implementing a vision. The instruments and powers of local government to manage the quantity and qualities of tourism are limited. Overtourism problems have stimulated carrying capacity thinking, which is considered inadequate for a multi-faceted problem like urban tourism.

**Key words:** tourism, sustainable planning, Netherlands, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, tourism policy.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Like elsewhere in Europe, COVID-19 has had significant impacts on city tourism in the Netherlands. Very quiet tourist cities in 2020 signified a new citizen experience. Citizens did not have to deal with the problem of overtourism and were

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‘taking over the streets’ again. However, this situation came with a price as vacant hotels and closed tourist attractions led to income losses. Perceived from the simple triple bottom-line (3-P – people, planet, profit, or environmental, social, and economic categories) (Day, 2021), environmental categories were affected positively due to less travel, citizens enjoyed quieter cities, but profit and people involved in tourism-related economic categories were negatively affected.

In 2021, city tourism started to recover in the Netherlands, but remained well below the pre-pandemic levels, especially due to lower numbers of visitors from outside Europe. In 2022, the number of Asian tourists travelling to Europe has been still low due to COVID-19, and due to the war in Ukraine, and fewer American and Russian tourists are entering the country. The Municipality of Amsterdam (2022) prepared a forecast with three scenarios based on various uncertainties. The expectations are that pre-pandemic tourism numbers will be reached again by 2024, and that business travel, important for tourism, too, will be structurally lower due to the practice of doing more business meetings online. In many European cities, especially those with problems associated to overtourism (Koens *et al.*, 2020), citizens, local governments, and researchers concluded in 2020 that a time for a ‘reset’ had come, meaning that a fresh look at (the values of) future city tourism practices was needed and that new sustainable tourism policies should be formulated (Nientied and Shutina, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to examine policies and planning for sustainable city tourism in Amsterdam and Rotterdam and relate them to the notions of tourism reset. Amsterdam is a prime European tourist city and has suffered from problems of overtourism. Rotterdam receives much less tourism attention and can be considered as an emerging tourist city. Both cities recently adopted new tourism policies, essentially future tourism visions. Amsterdam developed a plan in 2020 envisioning interventions to tackle overtourism problems (Amsterdam & Partners, 2020). Rotterdam learned from Amsterdam’s earlier overtourism challenges and developed in 2019/2020, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, a policy vision stating that Rotterdam’s well-being is the starting point for all tourism actions (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2020). The tourism policies of both cities are related to overtourism and sustainability of tourism; Amsterdam wants to curb overtourism problems, whereas Rotterdam developed a policy vision to avoid the issues of overtourism. In Rotterdam’s case, social and environmental sustainability are leading themes. In Amsterdam, the ‘tourism reset’ discussion was intensive in 2020, in Rotterdam the loss of city tourism had a weaker impact and was accepted as one of the effects of the COVID-19 restrictive measures.

This paper focuses on real-world practice. Planning and tourism development in current times is highly uncertain and it is based on uncertain expectations and interpretations rather than trends, figures or timelines. The article is based on an analysis of policy and local council documents and media reporting, visits, and (street) interviews. Below, we first examine the tourism reset intention and then

offer brief descriptions of the policy visions developed in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. In a subsequent discussion we show that the gap between a positive vision of sustainable tourism on the one hand and the implementation of a vision and the impacting rights and interests of various stakeholders on the other is significant. It also becomes apparent that environmental concerns are secondary to social and economic considerations.

## 2. CITY TOURISM: THE RESET INTENTION

Many scholars, organisations working in tourism, and prominent tourist cities discussed in 2020 the future of tourist cities. Benjamin *et al.* (2020, p. 2) summarised much of the sentiments when they stated that “Now is the time for academics, practitioners, travellers, and humans to take a pause, reflect, unite, then reset the tourism industry.” Most tourism stakeholders understand that some kind of a reset is needed. A ‘reset’ means that cities should plan and manage tourism in a different way, find a better balance between the interest of the tourism sector on the one hand and city liveability and citizen interests on the other. This point of a better balance between tourism and liveability for citizens is the key issue in discussions on the future of tourism, while the triple bottom-line environment category is hardly included. A tourism reset implies that the interests of all stakeholders will be affected, those of the citizens, local tourism businesses, local government bodies, and of the absent stakeholders, i.e., tourists. The reset debate in the Netherlands mainly occurred in Amsterdam, and was between the local government and concerned citizens. It was started before the pandemic by citizens who were disturbed by the volume of tourists and tourist behaviour. Other stakeholders were initially less involved. In the real world, all stakeholders’ rights are affected, like the right to conduct tourism business, the tourism right of free access (Perkumiené and Pranskūnienė, 2019), the resident right to a pleasant neighbourhood, the local government right to attract certain categories of visitors (e.g., higher-paying cultural and business visitors), and discourage other categories such as budget and party tourists (Tourban, 2021).

Tourism is a complex practice and occurs in dynamic situations. Fragmentation is typical for (urban) tourism – there are many suppliers and operators, diverse demands, many intermediaries, many indirect stakeholders, complex chains, etc. Digitalisation adds to the complexity of the sector. Tourism interactions in cities may cause nuisances like crowding and loud noise at night and this affects liveability for residents. Various unwanted social, cultural, and economic developments may occur, which have been extensively described in literature. Some include: crowding, bad tourism behaviour, gentrification and higher rents for locals due to

tourism growth, mono-economic cultures in streets, issues between AirBnB renters and neighbours, increasing prices in bars and restaurants, traffic accidents from inexperienced tourists renting bicycles, etc. Dodds and Butler (2018) identified three types of factors explaining overtourism: agents of growth (tourisms business aiming at short-term profits, tourists with higher purchasing power, and bucket lists), technology (IT, mobility), and power (e.g., airport authorities and large hotel chains have the power and provide employment). Novy and Colomb (2019) categorised the main topics of contention characterising contemporary struggles around urban tourism, through a taxonomy of the most prominent negative effects and externalities. They identified many economic, physical, social, and socio-cultural and psychological impacts of urban tourism on people and urban spaces. Not only problems have been discussed, but also possible solutions. Various reports have dealt with possible policy interventions regarding overtourism. For example, the European Parliament (2018) lists no less than 121 possible policy responses, showing that the issue of overtourism is multi-faceted.

In 2020, many tourist cities, including Prague, Barcelona, Milan, Amsterdam, and Berlin, discussed their tourism futures with their citizens. These debates were ongoing when the outbreak of COVID-19 incited new experiences (the relief of a quiet city) and added a new dimension to the discussions. Governments and international organisations debated more sustainable tourism cities. Some cities, like Berlin or Milan, implemented already in 2020 projects to create more open spaces and more bikeable cities to avoid crowding. One interesting example is that of Dubrovnik (Vladisavljevic, 2021). The small town received 1.4 million foreign tourists in 2019, and 179,000 in 2020. In 2020, people were relieved because citizens had their city to themselves, they could walk their streets again. The mayor promised a plan for a manageable tourism future in which residents would not be alienated from their town. But a year later the town was getting desperate since the economy had collapsed. Dubrovnik depends on tourism for its livelihood and was happy to welcome tourists again in 2021. Larger cities are less dependent on tourism because they have a more diverse economy and more national tourism can compensate to some extent for a loss of international visitors, but segments of the economy suffer.

Various international meetings on tourism futures were conducted. Mayors of some of Europe's leading destinations met in Porto to discuss new tourism policies and projects during and after the COVID-19 pandemic period.<sup>1</sup> At the City Innovators' 2021 event<sup>2</sup> main tourism cities presented their plans and projects. At face value, most plans focussed on curbing problems associated with overtour-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ftnnews.com/mice/42114-restart-urban-tourism-with-sustainability-innovation> [accessed on: 23.06.2022]

<sup>2</sup> Entitled "Destination Cities: Accelerating Urban Tourism and Economies", see <https://cityinnovatorsforum.com/events/smart-city-events/destination-cities-accelerating-urban-tourism-and-economies/> [accessed on: 23.06.2022]

ism and efficiency, through physical adjustments and selective tourism marketing. Discussions were not about topics such as tourism degrowth, the rights of stakeholders, a clean and green environment as first priority, the role of digitalisation or the limited powers of local government. Tourism degrowth policies, the most effective way to enhance environmental sustainability and curb overtourism issues, are complex because economic interests are huge, and stakeholder rights are affected (Sharma *et al.*, 2021). A critical point is that it is usually very complicated, socially unacceptable, or physically impossible to exclude anybody conducting tourist or non-tourist activities from using resources in a city (Briassoulis, 2002). Cities and their public spaces have fluid boundaries, and multiple, overlapping, and potentially conflicting uses and user groups, volatility in uses and institutional arrangements, and variances between *de jure* and *de facto* property rights.

### 3. TWO DUTCH TOURISM CITIES

Tourism in Amsterdam and Rotterdam varies considerably, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Amsterdam and Rotterdam tourism<sup>3</sup>

<i>Amsterdam tourism</i>	<i>Rotterdam tourism</i>
10,4 m. visitors staying one or more nights, (2019), 900,000 inhabitants (2022)	1,3 m. visitors (2019) staying one or more nights, 652,000 inhabitants (2022)
Historical charm and beauty, crowded, culture and ‘free city’	Modern architecture, space, culture, ‘new urban tourism’
Tourism growth, conflicts, petitions, Disneyfication of the city, dissatisfaction, gentrification as a market outcome	Emerging tourism, no serious claims or struggles, gentrification as a quiet local government policy
2021 policy: tackle overtourism problems. Spread, manage crowds. Make tourism sustainable	2020 policy: avoid overtourism, tourism should contribute to the sustainable city and all of its citizens
Appeal: ‘respect for Amsterdam’	Appeal: ‘make it happen, do like locals’

Source: own work.

<sup>3</sup> Figures pertain to tourists spending one or more nights in the city. The total number of visitors in 2019 to Amsterdam was 22.4 million. In 2020, the latter figure decreased to 8.4 m, and 3.3 m tourists spending one or more nights. Sources of the figures: <https://onderzoek.amsterdam.nl/interactief/toerisme-in-amsterdam>. Rotterdam <https://onderzoek010.nl/> [accessed on: 23.06.2022]. Figures are estimates. The VFR segment (Visit Friends Relatives) remains unregistered as tourists, and that also applies to exchange students.

*Amsterdam* is widely known as a tourist city. Tourism growth has been rapid. Nowadays especially overtourism-related issues receive much attention, from researchers and in local debates and various media. The contributions of Geritsen (2019), Noordeloos (2019), and Smith (2020) offer relevant background information on Amsterdam's tourism development. The attractions of Amsterdam are known well: a beautiful and charming city centre with canals and historic buildings, a museum, a party-scene, and coffee shops where soft drugs can be enjoyed. Amsterdam witnessed in 2020 a city almost devoid of tourists, and relieved citizens got 'their' city back.<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, small and large tourism entrepreneurs could not exploit their assets. Like in other prime tourist cities such as Prague or Barcelona, the tourism 'reset' discussion intensified. It progressed and resulted in a document entitled 'Redesigning the visitor economy Amsterdam, Vision 2025' (Amsterdam & Partners, 2020) and a regulation on maximising the number of tourists, named Balanced Tourism (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021), was discussed by the local government and later adopted. The regulation is the local government's response to the initiative of over 30,000 citizens who demanded in 2020 a discussion at the local council on the maximum number of tourists.

The vision document was made on basis of a consultation of citizens, experts, civil servants, representatives of the tourism economy sector, and others. They are all 'partners' of Amsterdam's municipal tourism office. Young people from the suburbs and tourists were not involved in the vision formulation process. The vision sketches a sustainable visitor economy: "We aim to create a visitor economy that adds value and does not cause disturbance or disruption by 2025" (Amsterdam & Partners, 2021, p. 7). The vision addresses the triple bottom line and states that its aims at reinforcing resident quality of life and the visitor experience, and this should fit within Amsterdam's ambition of sustainable growth. It addresses social issues (quality of life, inclusiveness), ecological issues (commitment to a circular economy through sustainable consumption, sustainable mobility, and waste management), and economic issues (income for entrepreneurs, maintaining facilities). Main lines of thought of the vision include: (i) consciously attract visitors who come for the culture and uniqueness of Amsterdam and add value to the city;<sup>5</sup> (ii) develop more insight into tourism behaviour through centralised data management to attract visitors and guide them effectively through the city; (iii) encourage, facilitate and communicate good business practices; (iv) involve neighbourhoods, strengthen their identities, and give them a say in decision-making; (v) manage

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<sup>4</sup> Deutsche Welle, 22.06.2020, Coronavirus: A fresh start for Amsterdam tourism? <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-a-fresh-start-for-amsterdam-tourism/a-53855534> [accessed on: 23.06.2022].

<sup>5</sup> Tourists adding value to the city is often understood as tourists who spend more. The director of Amsterdam & Partners has asserted, however, that all visitors who respect the city, irrespective of their purchasing power, are welcome. See the debate at <https://dezwijger.nl/programma/een-nieuwe-bril> (Fair Tourism #4, in Dutch) [accessed on: 23.06.2022].

nightlife, especially reduce noise pollution and disruptions; (vi) make the city liveable – design an integrated master plan to restore the balance between living, working and valuable visitors; and (vii) redesign public spaces, with a focus on crowd management. The document contains a long list of proposed actions. Among these there are many spatial planning interventions, such as prohibiting private holiday rentals (AirBnB is increasingly curtailed in some districts in Amsterdam, the vision proposed a complete ban for the whole city); spreading visitors and making lesser-known neighbourhoods more attractive for visitors through, for example, cultural offers; undertaking new spatial planning for tourism businesses avoiding overconcentration; making crowding maps and a forecast dashboard for directing visitors; creating greener space and more blue-green initiatives; and investing in sustainable public transport, smart logistics, etc.

It has been estimated that about 70% of all tourists are the so-called respectful tourists, and 30% are less so, they are ‘consumers’ who create nuisances and they are facilitated by tourism entrepreneurs whose only goal is the ‘exploitation of tourism without caring for interests of other stakeholders.’<sup>6</sup> Amsterdam wants to increase the 70% category at the cost of the 30% ‘disrespectful’ one (sometimes confusingly labelled as ‘budget tourists’). If the estimate of 30% is correct, it means about 2.5–3 million visitors staying overnight (2019).

The 2025 tourism vision was received well by most stakeholders, even though some were somewhat sceptical regarding its implementation. After a debate, the desired maximum number of tourists was discussed at the local council. A conclusion was reached that the 2018 tourism number (including 20 million of day visitors) should be the maximum and a warning system was outlined. However, what the local government can exactly do to maintain this 2018 number is uncertain, because it cannot close hotels or stop visitors at the municipal boundaries.

**Rotterdam** can be labelled as an emerging tourist city. Research interest in Rotterdam’s tourism is fairly recent, namely since tourist numbers started to increase after around 2010 and Rotterdam received international recognition as a ‘cool’ city. The contributions of Nientied (2021), Nieuwland and Lavange (2020), and Nientied and Toto (2020) give a background for Rotterdam’s tourism. Tourists come to Rotterdam to visit the harbour or the zoo, to see the architecture, to experience a ‘cool’ culture, to enjoy festivals and sports, and some because so many people go to Amsterdam and they want something different. Rotterdam has come to be recognised as a progressive city in terms of its architecture and waterfront development, with high-rise residential and office developments and special urban design. Some urban attractions in Rotterdam include the reconstructed Central Station, the new Market Hall, and the Erasmus bridge. This bridge over the Meuse connecting the northern and southern parts of the city was opened in 1996 and

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<sup>6</sup> As discussed in the debate (footnote 5), and mentioned in various newspapers. 70% is a rough estimate (because nobody really knows), sometimes a figure of 75% is mentioned.

soon became the city’s most significant landmark for citizens and visitors alike. Favourable reviews of Rotterdam as a tourism city in travel guides such as Lonely Planet, in international magazines, and on social media from influencers have contributed to the increase in visitor numbers (Nientied, 2021).

The case of Rotterdam is in many ways the opposite of Amsterdam. The city is quite different; it lacks the old world charm because the centre was destroyed during the Second World War, and the inner city’s layout is much more spacious. Tourism developed only in recent decade, and is still modest compared to that of Amsterdam. Since Rotterdam is not so well-known as a tourist destination, tourism pressure has been lower due to smaller tourist numbers and the city’s spatial character. Since Amsterdam has the aura of a ‘free tolerant city,’ Rotterdam is not a magnet for party goers or coffee shops. In 2020–2021 there was no local mood of ‘getting our city back.’

Rotterdam presented a new tourism policy in 2020, just before COVID-19, called ‘As a guest in Rotterdam, a new perspective on tourism’ (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2020). The policy is meant to better focus Rotterdam’s economic, social, landscape, and cultural resources on specific types of visitors that align with Rotterdam’s broader policy aims (Nientied and Toto, 2020). The tourism policy, which is a vision document rather than a policy one with a clear implementation strategy, deals with 4 themes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Policy themes of Rotterdam’s tourism policy vision document

<p><i>Identity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In Rotterdam we remain Rotterdam</li> <li>– Rotterdam is more than the inner city</li> <li>– A hospitable city, now and in the future</li> <li>– Valuable encounters between visitors and locals</li> </ul>	<p><i>Liveability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Unique offer of arts and culture</li> <li>– Balance between liveliness and liveability</li> <li>– Investing tourism income in the city</li> </ul>
<p><i>Sustainability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sustainable transport in and to the city</li> <li>– Green innovations in the shop window</li> <li>– Clean, tidy, circular</li> </ul>	<p><i>Local economy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Space for authentic spots</li> <li>– Attractive business climate</li> <li>– Work for Rotterdammers</li> <li>– A Rotterdam way of overnight stay</li> </ul>

Source: developed based on Gemeente Rotterdam, 2020.

The tourism policy states that the four policy themes are intertwined. “By looking for a balance between the importance of the economy, liveability, sustainability, and identity of the city, Rotterdam can seize the opportunities of tourism and at the same time we stay close to ourselves” (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2020, p. 8 [authors’ translation]).



Rotterdam's tourism policy could qualify as a post-pandemic tourism policy, since it starts with the remark that tourism should serve the city, and not the other way around. However, post-pandemic tourism policies have associations with overtourism problems, and that is hardly relevant in Rotterdam. Rotterdam has already learned some lessons from Amsterdam's development and started in an early stage with thinking about future tourism. Rotterdam's marketing channels led by the local government and its partners, now follow two mantras for tourism. Next to the general slogan 'Rotterdam Make it Happen', the new catchword is 'Do Rotterdam' (do like the locals), and subsequently the term 'Do-rist' is used. Due to COVID-19, attention for tourism dwindled, except for some marketing campaigns. In 2021, a policy for new hotels was approved. The policy indicates that new hotels will be spread throughout the city, to maintain an appropriate balance between quietness and livelihood.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

During the early pandemic period in 2020 there were big debates in Amsterdam about the issues of overtourism. A key question now is whether the new vision and the new Balanced Tourism regulation can enable the local government and partners to manage these issues. In Rotterdam, tourism was not a topic of much debate, but a question for Rotterdam's tourism is whether the new tourism vision can guide the city to achieve for what it aspires, namely attracting the right type of tourists. Our assessment is that in both Amsterdam and Rotterdam, policy implementation will be arduous for three basic reasons.

##### **4.1. Limited local powers to alter tourism**

Amsterdam and Rotterdam both follow a logic that so many tourist destinations employ; focus on 'good' tourists who you would want to receive and thereby try to discourage other tourists from coming. Amsterdam has discussed tourism numbers and interventions to achieve respectful tourist behaviour. Rotterdam aims at avoiding overtourism problems and has formulated a vision about how tourists can help the city achieve its broader economic, social, and environmental objectives. In Amsterdam, interventions have included a new policy for 'shop diversity' (a ban on more tourist shops and 'nutella-bars' in certain streets), a ban on holiday rentals in 3 neighbourhoods in the city centre. Earlier in 2017 a restrictive policy to stop new hotels was approved, but already several building permits for new

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<sup>7</sup> See Gemeente Rotterdam, <https://www.rotterdam.nl/vrije-tijd/toerisme/> [accessed on: 23.06.2022].

hotels were issued before that, enlarging the stock with a few thousand rooms. The interventions also included that large tour groups were no longer allowed, the water and boating policy dealt better with nuisances related to the waterways, and an investigation has taken place into the tourism carrying capacity of the city's various neighbourhoods and districts. Furthermore, plans have been made for spreading tourists over the Amsterdam metropolitan region, to lessen the burden on the city centre.

In Amsterdam, it has become evident that the powers of the local government to control tourism are limited. It is not the local government's actions but cheap airline tickets, online booking platforms, tourism preferences, and continuous marketing that are thought to have been the main drivers of tourism growth. The local government has no say over cheap tickets, only a limited say on renting out rooms via booking platforms, and tourism preferences are outside the sphere of influence. The city can change tourism marketing but one can only wonder about the importance of the local government's tourism office's marketing; social media are like autonomous marketing mechanisms, airlines promote regional cities to sell tickets, big events attract visitors (and refusing festival goers from outside Amsterdam is impossible), and visitors who post nice images and selfies. Local government tourism promotion may be more important for emerging tourism destinations like Rotterdam, but once a city gets the attention, this role is taken over by other agents. Hospers (2019) for example has concluded that "the emergence of Porto as a must-see destination is mainly due to technological factors: without Ryanair, EasyJet and Instagram it would be less popular."

The number of tourists visiting the city cannot be controlled, and to influence the type of tourists and tourism behaviour is far from easy. One example is Amsterdam's intervention regarding cruise ships. Local authorities wanted less cruise ships and introduced a restrictive policy and higher taxes. In 2019, the number of vessels shrank from 180 (2018) to 128 (2019), while in 2020 there were only 11 due to COVID-19. What happened in 2019 was that many of the cruise ships sought the harbour of Rotterdam, with the latter earning a fee for berthing cruise ships. Upon berthing, buses were waiting in line on the quay in Rotterdam to drive the tourists to Amsterdam, a one hour ride. The overall outcome is that there are much fewer big cruise vessels in Amsterdam, making the water quieter and more pleasant for other users, and that Amsterdam still gets the visitors and more buses in traffic.

Both Rotterdam and Amsterdam envisage the spread of tourism. However, spreading to areas without clear tourist attractions in the district is difficult. Moreover, Amsterdam city break tourists want to see the museums or Anne Frank house or the red-light district or the coffee shops for a cannabis joint. They do not come for the Amsterdam beach or parks outside the city centre. In Rotterdam, the tourism plans want to promote the lower-income Southern part of the city, but this part of the city will only attract visitors if there is more to see and experience than

the current reported asset of ‘a multicultural ambiance.’ That is something most Western European cities have. Without special sites or perhaps starting a cool gentrification arts culture, lower income neighbourhoods (multi-cultural or not) do not attract tourism. Rotterdam approved a new policy for hotels in 2021 (Stadsonwikkeling, 2021), considering the guidelines of the tourism vision. Spreading hotels throughout the city and acceptable impacts on the neighbourhood environment are among the criteria for issuing permits for new hotels.

Amsterdam’s case shows that taxing tourism has limits: young visitors from Germany, Belgium, Holland, and France coming for events or night life sleep in their cars just outside the municipal boundaries and remain unregistered. And it is known that expensive tourist cities (like Lucerne in Switzerland) still have issues with tourism. Perhaps increased tourism tax will lead to a modest shift in day visitors, but not much can be expected because tourism tax will remain a small part of the overall tourism expenditures and has limited specific effects (Biagi *et al.*, 2020). Even the limitations set on AirBnB and new hotels will have a limited impact – other municipalities in the metropolitan region do not introduce such barriers, and public transport in Dutch cities is good. In a critical review of Amsterdam’s overtourism approach, the IDS (International Destination Strategies) consultant has concluded that without serious measures like kerosene tax, airport tax, higher tourism tax, a no room rental regulation for the whole metropolitan region, a reduction of the number of festivals, etc., tourism will continue to grow, as will the problems of overtourism.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.2. Visions appease all, but implementation is critical

In both Amsterdam and Rotterdam, vision development was conducted by coalitions led by former municipal tourism marketing offices. Amsterdam & Partners is seen as the actor that caused overtourism because for many years it just worked on unrelented tourism promotion. The tourism marketing offices of the two cities changed their missions from marketing machines into ‘partnerships serving the cities,’ coordinators for sustainable tourism.<sup>9</sup> For decades their mindsets have been on tourism promotion and tourism growth – not on topics such as urban resilience, sustainability, or tourism degrowth. The new partnership organisations have led the processes of policy vision formulation, but they give advice and have no responsibility for policy implementation. The visions produced are typical Dutch examples of what can be expected from a broad association of stakeholders. All stakeholders have agreed with the vision, and this raises the question of how is it possible that everybody agrees. This point is that a positive vision has

<sup>8</sup> See <https://destination-strategies.com/overtourism-amsterdam/> [accessed on: 23.06.2022].

<sup>9</sup> See <https://en.rotterdampartners.nl/> and <https://www.iamsterdam.com/en> [accessed on: 23.06.2022].

been made, but no major rights or interests were threatened (AirBnB was affected in Amsterdam but was not part of the process).

Implementation is not a partnership concern, but starts as a series of political issues dealt with by the local government at city councils. The outcomes may or may not be in line with the tourism policy vision. For example, local authorities estimate that about 20–25% (or 30%) of Amsterdam's tourists, mainly in the 18–35 age groups from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, do not show respect for the city. They come for smoking and drinking, and they throw loud parties in AirBnB rentals, or come for festivals combined with a visit to the city. A discussion in 2021 was held about closing coffee shops, where soft drugs are sold and that are supposed to be an attraction point for 'nuisance tourists.' About 3 million mostly young tourists visit the 166 coffee shops in Amsterdam (Snippe *et al.*, 2020). A public debate in 2021 ended in heated discussions about human rights, Amsterdam's traditional tolerance, the risk of illegal drug sales, and related criminality. There was no political majority for regulating the coffee shops and selling soft drugs only to registered citizens of Amsterdam. The mayor of Amsterdam, responsible for city safety, still aims at prohibiting foreigners from entering coffeshops, closing about a two-third of the coffee shops and tackling the problem of street dealers selling drugs,<sup>10</sup> but the council is blocking her plans. It is expected that the issue of regulating the coffee shops will remain on the political agenda for a long time. The point at stake of this example is that a joint formulation of a positive sustainable tourism vision is one thing but the implementation and thus affecting rights and interests of stakeholders is something very different.

### 4.3. Carrying capacity and sustainable tourism

In Amsterdam, the limits of growth have been reached according to citizens and the local government, while in Rotterdam tourism growth is possible, and desired. Amsterdam wants less nuisance tourists to keep the city liveable, Rotterdam wants to have the right type of tourists who contribute to the city. This thinking in terms of carrying capacity limits perspectives (Buckley *et al.*, 2015). A museum can work with the notion of carrying capacity; allocate time slots, sell tickets and manage the crowds, but local governments cannot fence off an open-access city or stop people from coming to the city. Local governments have only a limited influence on the numbers and types of visitors, and on how visitors behave. New marketing and branding concepts have a limited reach. Tourist decision-making and behaviour is much more complex, uncertain, and ambiguous than ever before. Word of mouth,

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<sup>10</sup> Gemeente Amsterdam, Raadsinformatiebrief Stand van Zaken plannen beheersbare cannabismarkt en aanpak straatdealen, 11 April 2022, <https://www.amsterdam.nl/nieuws/nieuwsoverzicht/maatregelen-cannabismarkt/> [accessed on: 23.06.2022].

many different (social) media (Gretzel, 2021), and many different tourism providers offering new ‘cool things to do’ influence tourist behaviour. Berlin is now ‘cool’ and a place to be, so people go to Berlin. Rotterdam is getting cool (Nieuwland and Lavange, 2020), so tourists who want to be early adopters go to Rotterdam. In Amsterdam one can feel free, and who would not want that? In short, many people visit Amsterdam or Rotterdam irrespective of what tourism marketing suggests. The cities’ tourism partnerships work with branding and marketing as their main instrument, and that has serious constraints. For example, Rotterdam’s marketing campaigns around the desired type of tourists (labelled the Do-rists) have a very limited reach because the number of followers on social media is limited. NB, both Amsterdam and Rotterdam tourism agencies show on their Instagram pages still the typical beautiful city pictures. They focus on desired tourists, but do not send messages about unwanted tourists. This would of course be problematic, discussions about justice and equity would soon arise. Carrying capacity and looking at the role of local government and its partners signify a rather reductionist approach to tourism sustainability issues. In carrying-capacity thinking, the critical variables are the tourist numbers, the types of tourists and nuisance/ liveability levels. But sustainable tourism is much more complex. E-tourism and digitalisation have complicated matters (Gretzel, 2021; Molinillo *et al.*, 2021) as they encourage more interactive relationships among companies, tourists, and destinations, and among tourists themselves, affecting the processes of destination image and visit intention creation. Bergrath (2021) has stated that solving overtourism in Amsterdam is quite a mammoth task. To intervene in the existing situation is not enough; tourists are not the main culprits of the problem either. Virtually every solution will raise new questions, like the example of the cruise ships showed. An approach such as system thinking would be required to look at the whole, acknowledging that implementing sustainable tourism practices is a complex problem, with a large number of actors, different types of rights, and various non-linear changes.

Panasiuk (2020, p. 34) has described sustainable tourism in cities as “a situation where negative consequences of tourism activities are not irreversible for the environment, while bringing positive effects to tourists, communities of reception areas, as well as entities providing tourist services” and concluded that threats are of a diverse nature. Panasiuk concluded that overtourism as result of mass tourism has been analysed, but a less perceived problem related to the functioning of urban tourist destinations are the issues of the condition of the natural environment. Both Rotterdam and Amsterdam have developed environmental ambitions and want to be climate neutral in 2050. The relationship between environmental concerns and tourism is not well elaborated in the tourism visions. Both cities promote public transport, walking, and biking, but the biggest environmental impact of tourism, namely travel (Wood, 2017), is not considered in the cities’ environmental arguments. Aall and Koens (2019) have concluded that environmental concerns are poorly dealt with in sustainable tourism discussions.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARK

The tourism policy visions of Amsterdam and Rotterdam have positive intentions. Both strategies follow a containment approach and intend to limit the quantity (Amsterdam) and the composition of tourism. The case of Amsterdam and to a lesser extent the case of Rotterdam show that formulating and agreeing on a tourism policy vision is easier than the decision-making process and implementing a vision. The instruments and powers of the local government to manage the quantity and quality of tourism are limited. In Amsterdam, political processes at the city council will address conflicting interests. The state government and powerful players such as the airport, airlines, global tour operators, and global tourism platforms cannot easily be influenced by the local government. The case of emerging tourism in Rotterdam is different. Tourism problems are limited and the policy vision does not receive much attention other than adjusted marketing and branding, and a new hotel policy. The need is not there yet. Urban interventions have been implemented, among others a major urban renewal of the Southern part of the city, but for other reasons than guiding future city tourism.

The cases of Amsterdam and Rotterdam are far from unique, or new for that matter. This article discussed that academic and policy thinking in terms of carrying capacity may be useful for destinations where access can be restricted (a museum, an island, a fenced-off tourism attraction, etc.), but for open access places like cities, carrying-capacity thinking is limited to giving suggestions on the desired quantity and quality of tourism. The origins of the problems, the dynamics and the future of tourism cannot be captured well with carrying-capacity thinking. New approaches are necessary.

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