

Cobblestone Stories. Leiden as an ideal for New Urbanism?

Interview with Mark Neupert

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What is it like to live in an old, historical town like Leiden? Living, working and shopping in a historical town is nothing unusual for many Dutch people, but to anthropologist Mark Neupert visiting Leiden it was almost like ‘discovering a tribe in the Amazon’.¹ His fascination resulted in an ethnographic documentary called *Cobblestone Stories: A Year of Modern Living in Leiden, the Netherlands*. Roaming Leiden with his camera, he captured such daily scenes as people walking, cycling and shopping around town. In April 2017 he aired a preview in the Museum of Anthropology (*Museum Volkenkunde*). In this interview, we wanted to find out why he decided to make a film about Leiden and how the city contributes to the ideas of New Urbanism. This movement arose out of the concern that modern American cities are over-reliant on cars and lost the virtues of old city patterns.

Mark Neupert is Professor of Anthropology at the Oregon Institute of Technology. He started out his career with degrees in archaeology and anthropology, and is currently interested in human interaction with technology, urban planning, and ethnographic filmmaking. He took a sabbatical year off to live in Leiden for research and to make this documentary.

You are an anthropologist. Why are you interested in historical city planning?

This film is a bit different than what people might expect from an anthropologist. My academic background starts in archaeology, and ends in cultural anthropology and ethnography. In my studies I have always been interested in the interaction between technology and people: how is human behaviour shaped by technology and how do people in turn shape technology. Whether I have done fieldwork in the Philippines on traditional

¹ Bark Dirks, ‘Bijzondere volksstam, die Leienaars’, *Volkskrant*, 3 april 2017.

pottery production, or fieldwork in Southern Louisiana on the impact of off-shore oil-drilling, I have always worked from a materialistic, archaeological point of view. , We were digging up the old technology to explore that relationship between technology and behaviour. Through those studies I started learning about city design, social history, urban planning and architecture.

Why did you make *Cobblestone Stories* and what does it aim towards?

It aims at different levels. In the United States, every trip starts with getting in a car. There is a movement trying to improve the livability of our cities. People, particularly millennials, are trying to find something different to live in than suburbia. They are rediscovering the nice parts of city-living and then realize we do not really have nice cities in the United States. There is a movement afoot in the U.S. that at least opens the conversation and tries to change the rules about how we build our cities. In one way, the film just seeks to add something to that conversation. More specifically, I made this film for my students. They would read books about walkable cities, walkability, biking, and mixed-use (for example, apartments located above shops). When I talked with my students about having apartments above shops, I have had students say: 'Who would want to live that way? I don't want live on top of Walmart!'. Americans have been growing up in this environment for fifty years, and have forgotten older ways of designing cities, different kinds of arranging things in the landscape. I realized that my students had no idea what I was talking about. They could read the words, but in their minds they could not imagine. Film is a great medium for letting people immerse themselves into something different for a while.

What other advantages does film have over writing a book, as a scholar?

Film is an easy way to record a lot of information, and it is convenient if you want go back and look at things in more detail. The film itself is the analysis, but it is also a sampling of the city, that others can then look at and think about. This film has very little voice-over, it is far more just showing scenes of the city. Other professors at my university show the film in a

variety of classes, and they use it in ways that I did not anticipate. For example, in another class, they are talking about how different cultures communicate through different styles, and how the environment may shape communication styles in cultures. They show this film about Leiden and ask the students: ‘What do you think? How can you see this design of a city affect the way people interact, communicate, and create associations?’

Why did you choose Leiden?

The first time I was in Leiden was approximately twenty-five years ago for a conference at the university. I made a very short little film where my wife was pretending to be a student from the student association of Minerva, walking from a Minerva house to the university. It was just a ten minutes film, but when I started showing that to my students they were blown away. I decided to do a much bigger, better film to actually work with *Leidenaars*, showing their day to day life, answering questions like: ‘How do I get my groceries? How do I go to school? Where do I get a haircut? How do I get to work?’

So, part of the reason I chose Leiden is that I went to a conference there and discovered this city. But more importantly, Leiden always struck me as a really excellent example of old urbanism. It has grown outside of its old city walls and has become modern in some ways, but the old pattern is still intact. Leiden has had its ups and downs economically; poverty is one of the best friends of preservation. Whereas in the U.S., we used to have a lot of old town patterns, but in the 1960s we bulldozed inner parts of our cities, which is why we have all these big skyscrapers in every city. That is modernism, it is the Bauhaus and Corbusier, saying: ‘these are old, blighted parts of the town. Let's scrape that off and build anew.’

Thirdly, the size of Leiden is just perfect. You can walk from one side to the other of the old city. You can actually get to know the whole place. Americans have some walkable cities like New York, which are cities with millions of people. So in our minds we think that: To be walkable, you have to be big. Leiden is the evidence that you could do it on a much smaller scale.

And finally, Leiden's culture of using the space is still intact and thriving. In Leiden, people never lost touch with how to use their city, how to use the space to create a feeling of community and a glue that binds

citizens together. In America they are trying to rebuild places of this kind, but we have gone two generations not knowing how to use these places as a normal part of the day. Tourists visit them, but these walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods are not part of the fabric of everyday life.

What makes Leiden different from other Dutch or European towns and cities for the purpose of your research?

First, Leiden does not have a lot of tourism, because it does not rely on the tourism industry – it has the university, the medical center, and all sorts of industries. Leiden does not have to commodify and sell its space. It remains authentic.

Also, there is this tie between Dutch culture and American culture that is very old and goes very deep. There is still this element of Dutch culture that runs through American culture in the way public space is used, although Americans do not realize it. Other European towns, for example in parts of Italy or Spain, have an inward looking house structure. The Dutch, on the contrary, still have these elements of publicness about their spaces, which lines up nicely to parts of American culture. Because of this affinity between Dutch and American cultures I think it makes a lot of sense for Americans to look at Dutch cities, because they are not too foreign.

Within the Netherlands – I have been all over there – Delft is nice, but it is overrun by tourists. Den Haag is larger, and it has this sort of harder, grittier feel. Haarlem is very nice, but I guess I am biased towards Leiden. One of the things that I enjoy about Leiden, and I try to convey in the film, is the amazing visual detail: in the city form, the shops, the stones and streets, the bricks, and the buildings. They are all a bit different, so you have an incredible visual interest going on, wherever you are.

Do you think you romanticize Leiden, and ignore some of its problems?

When editing a film, you cannot show everything about a city in forty-five minutes. It is impossible. I am guilty of choosing to focus on that relationship between the old pattern, the old technology, the old canal city, and how people live in that space. That was really the focus of the film.

That is what the question of the film is: how does this old urban planning pattern drive behaviour? That question drove the choices of what I aimed my camera at, and what I ended up editing into the film at the end. There are some negative things that I captured, such as traffic jams, but these do not really answer the question of what it is like to live in an old compact city. Every filmmaker is going to put in the material that tries to convey his message. Of course, every culture, every place has its issues with poverty, racism, immigration, gentrification, or other social issues. However, that was not the main theme of the film.

Let's talk about New Urbanism. Can you explain what it is and why this movement is appealing to you?

Right now, we are designing the places we live in at the scale of automobiles, and that is what the U.S. has been doing for the last fifty or sixty years. Instead, we should be designing at the scale of people. At its heart, New Urbanism is about streets and places for people. The goal is to build a more human habitat at a smaller scale that meets the needs of people rather than cars – and being a person, not a car, I think that is a great idea. New Urbanism might help with a lot of issues. Implementing it would be good for our economy, the environment and health.

How can you apply old patterns from cities such as Leiden when building new cities? Is that even possible?

It is possible, and there have been attempts at it. The problem has been though, that they are very small sections of a much larger city pattern. Because developers want to have a big space on which to build, they often put these attempts on the outside of towns. It turns out that it is very difficult to build something new that is not dependent on the larger, existing car-based pattern. However, cities like Portland Oregon, for a good example, have been applying these principles in their old downtown areas. When buildings are getting too old and getting demolished, they are trying to rebuild that old pattern. It is going to take two generations to fix – it also took two or three generations to get away from the old pattern, from the 1930s to now. The key thing is to change the rules in city codes: What you

are allowed to build, what is permissible, and what you want to support. In some cities, it is illegal to build something that looks like Leiden, because of zoning regulations, building codes, and so on. So, a big part of what the new urbanists are trying to do is to change the rulebooks, so this kind of development can start coming back.

Do new developments not lack the historical environment which makes Leiden so special? Can they be successful without it?

That will be a problem, since our history is not that deep. Nowadays, we do try to preserve our older buildings or their facades so we can keep some of the sense of historical place through the architecture. In some places like Boston or Georgetown there still is the old pattern that they brought over from Europe, and people love it.

Normally in the U.S., little alleyways are where you keep your trash, they are ugly and scary. In Leiden you have all those alleys, such as around the *Pieterskerk*. Leiden grew organically, around the river, and then the canal-systems, and so it has this very organic shape to it. You can walk from the *Pieterskerk-Choorsteeg* into the *Breestraat*, just in a very short walk the space can feel very small, and then very large. Whereas in the U.S., it is square blocks everywhere. In a grid-system, space is always the same, block after block, it is the same scale. So, you lose a lot of that visual interest and the changing scale of going from an alleyway into a street. There is a town in Colorado, Boulder, where they have turned an old sort of main street into a pedestrian-only zone twenty years ago, which is working very well. Just the last few years, they started discovering alleyways.

What is your next project going to be?

Cobblestone Stories was very focused down on the streets with the people. I think it would be interesting to talk to city officials and city workers. How, from the other side, do you build and maintain an environment like this? Trying to answer questions such as: How do you treat the history, how do you try to do new things in an old space? How do you move traffic through? How do leaders in Leiden make those decisions, what are they planning, and what is their vision? I think that would be a really nice sequel to this

film. *Cobblestone Stories* is how it plays out in the street; let's now talk to the people who are responsible for designing and maintaining the city.