


# Imagine IC

What we are, what we do,  
and why

Talk by Marlous Willemsen, Imagine IC Director, at the Critical Heritage of Europe research project's international PhD seminar Curating the City, by the University of Amsterdam at Tolhuistuin, 18 January 2018



I did prepare, but I didn't really want to prepare the statement of 10-15 minutes that you asked for. In fact, I only agreed to come today in the understanding that I didn't have to prepare anything. Why was that important to me? There are two reasons.

First of all because Imagine IC – which is where I am active, where, most of the time, I much like to go in the morning and where I often stay late – is a very small ... organisation. Organisation? Boring! Institution? No. That doesn't make it any less boring. And it's too solid.

Imagine IC is a project, rather. A project in the sense that we are aiming for something outside and beyond the organisation. But a project is a hazardous business. As a project, before you know it, you've lost your multi-annual and, in our case, crucial (government) funding.

So let's say we're an ambition. An ambition promoted by a network, which is serviced, in its turn, by a small team. And that's where I was heading: Imagine IC is ambitious: it seeks to be inviting as an existential policy. But there are only few of us who do the administrative and politically strategic work, next to the additional fundraising. And these days in particular are very busy, as, like so many others, we are delivering our annual report.


The second reason for me being reluctant to make a statement was the fact that Imagine IC is a participatory strategy. Given this experience, this habit, if you like, I feel more at ease in a conversational presentation of our work and aims.

This being said, the rest of my statement is on three further themes:

- curating
- the city
- emotion networking.

### On curating

Over the past years, we at Imagine IC have spent quite some time thinking about the term "curating" and sometimes used it. The fact is, that we do not have curators among our colleagues at the moment. At least, there is no one with this title on her, his or zher contact card. I think we feel that "curating" has too much of an established connotation that does not go well with how we understand our work: curators are star-dusted individuals who deliver a show, producing a pieces to be admired. At Imagine IC, however, we often say: the best heritage worker is a community worker. But still, and more in line with an older meaning or origin of the word, "curating" is an interesting concept and may be exactly in accordance with the things we intend to do.



I was trained as an Arabist, and, as a linguistics enthusiast, I looked into the etymology of the term: the glamorous meaning of “curating” has been in use since the 1980s only, it seems. Earlier, the word “curator” in English meant “vicar” or “priest”, from medieval Latin. Both meanings are linked to the Latin word for “taking care”, “healing”, even.

I believe this is what we dream of doing. Moreover, we are convinced that we can only do it together (if at all), in an interactive process. So I suggest we at Imagine IC, or the Imagine IC network, seek to co-curate the city. What city?

### On the city

Imagine IC is based in the Amsterdam Southeast borough. Southeast is located outside the ring road – that is to say, when you look at the ring road with Central Station in your back. Most Amsterdammers consider Southeast the very outskirts. To us, though, it is another city centre. A centre with a different outlook on the city. A centre with other societal and cultural urgencies.


Together with Amsterdam North, where we are today, Amsterdam Southeast is the biggest borough. It is much newer though. Southeast was incorporated (“annexed”, some say) in the mid-60s to create housing for the middle classes. The villagers in the area became citizens of Amsterdam almost overnight and gradually got a lot of new neighbours. Of a middle-class background or otherwise.

From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, from the period in which Surinam gained independence, the borough has become home to many newcomers in Amsterdam and the country.

Imagine IC is based in one of the Southeast neighbourhoods, “de Bijlmer”. This was the first newly-developed area. Originally, it was a set of high-rises, but it was fundamentally reconstructed from the 1990s onwards. In the Bijlmer, Imagine IC shares a house with the Amsterdam Public Library and presents itself as a mix of an archive, a museum and a stage for meaning-making to elements of people’s daily lives in the neighbourhood.

I should like to state that Imagine IC makes heritage and that the network co-curates heritage – bearing in mind that heritage-making is inevitably a collective process – and that we do so in order to complement and update collections (or lists, or inventories) in the city and in the country.

It is our conviction that themes and items that are urgent in de Bijlmer and Southeast are, for this very reason, also relevant for the city and the country as a whole, and that the city and country will gain by additions and updates from de Bijlmer and Southeast, because the borough is a nursery of Dutch society and a laboratory for ways of living together.



## On emotion networking

Given our vision that living together is important, and that bubbles are ultimately socially destructive, we at Imagine IC would like to make the Southeast social realities operational as a laboratory for heritage making.

Using our experiences and experiments as a basis, Imagine IC and the Reinwardt Academy for Cultural Heritage in Amsterdam have been developing (since 2013), a way of working that we have come to call emotion-networking.

By this, we mean heritage-making with open and dynamic networks of people who all feel connected to a particular item, or inspired to comment on it, and will engage in the discussion on its meaning – and who do not all feel the same kind of connection. We understand networking” as an alternative to community work.

Collective emotional connectedness is often considered key to the definition of heritage. But to us, emotional connectedness is varied. And in the concept of emotion networking, an “emotion” does not only refer to affect, but rather to feelings that have been made social, such as in opinions, positions.

It is our hope that the process of collective heritage-making by emotion networks – i.e. their process of identifying, valuing, contesting, rejecting, ... elements of different and divergent daily lives, at the same time offers insights into other people’s feelings and positions, and might result in changes of opinion and position, and in mutual understanding.

But of course, it could also result in heated debates. Time will tell.  
At present, we are still in our laboratory.