

THE ROTTERDAM ZUID LEZING
VERSION 1.1
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(translated from Dutch)

Last May, the so-called Rotterdam Lezing was delivered for the 25th time. This annual lecture is Erasmus University's gift to the city. During the Rotterdam Lezing, prominent professors from Erasmus University are given a beautiful platform in the city center to present their research as relevant to Rotterdam. It has touched on many topics in recent years: on love for the city, on multiculturalism, on poverty, on digitalization, on sustainability, on citizen initiatives, and on broad or inclusive prosperity. It is a tremendous honor to be asked to do this as a professor. And every year, this lecture attracts many people from "outside the university."

Yet, there are some things that don't sit quite right. Such as the assumption that professors at EUR are the ones to give the Rotterdam Lezing. That, apparently, it is the scientists who are the ones to look at the city with knowledge and expertise in the first instance. That such a lecture is a product of a single brilliant mind. That the brainpower of that one brilliant mind is so special that it can be considered a gift to the city. And that a lecture is a monologue, to which "the city" –despite the claim that science comes "to the city" – is still expected to listen as an audience.

Why is that a problem? Well, because it presents as a neutral given something that is not neutral at all. Moreover, a platform like the Rotterdam Lezing, despite all the undoubtedly wonderful intentions behind it from the organizers and speakers, can actually reinforce the idea that "the city" should be grateful that scientists from Erasmus University are willing to dedicate their precious intellectual energy and individual genius to educating the city. To improving Rotterdam. And even to saving Rotterdam.

The idea that the university can save Rotterdam is particularly prevalent in regard to Rotterdam-Zuid. Demonstrating that a university is more than an "ivory tower" is increasingly happening through saving "Zuid". Through better policies. Through smarter interventions. Through better behaviour, as if "Zuid" did not need to be protected against the bureaucracy of municipal agencies, from racist housing policies, from greedy housing corporations, from the traces of the Rotterdam Act, from newly planned prestigious high-rises, or from surveillance technology. No, above all, it is claimed that "Zuid" needs to be protected from itself. By becoming more resilient. By being more entrepreneurial. By living healthier. By being flexible.

In that sense, much academic research, or attempts by the university to make an impact, is already based on a lecture on Rotterdam-Zuid. What can "we" actually do to turn the tide? Who are these "we" then? And can we "claim" the idea of the Rotterdam Lezing and translate it into the Rotterdam-Zuid Lezing, one that does not rely on the authority of one individual, but on the imagination of a collective? An

imagination that no longer accepts that "Zuid" is reduced to one or two subordinate clauses in a scientific article. That residents and initiatives in "Zuid" are expected to freely and gratefully contribute their brilliant minds and time to help the impactful careers of scientists flourish?

That "Zuid" can be nothing more than a problem area and therefore may be used as a canvas for reckless experimentation by municipal and scientific institutions. Would that work, the Rotterdam-Zuid Lezing? Can the university's logic and hunger for data be satisfied by mirroring its tools?

That is only possible if we acknowledge that these tools no longer fit. Only then can we critically analyze and collectively revise them. The university's tools are shaped by systems that measure, weigh, and define according to logics that are not always our own. By mirroring these tools, we expose what they presuppose, what they forget, and who they serve. Only then can we design new tools/instruments together: rooted in community, nourished by experience, and focused on equality. Knowledge is not created in isolation but in encounters. Knowledge lives in the relationship between those who ask and those who tell, between those who research and those who experience.

Language is a tool that connects or alienates. The words researchers use to speak about Rotterdam-Zuid are often formed outside our lived experience. They speak of target groups, interventions, disadvantages, and risks—words that reduce us to problem areas instead of people with dreams, values, and stories. But our reality demands a different language. A language that listens and allows itself to be shaped by encounters. A language that not only analyses but also acknowledges. Because only when language changes can the conversation change or shift truly begin.

The terms "researcher" and "target group" create an unequal relationship from the outset. They place the university in the position of the questioner, the thinker, the maker, and the community in the role of the object, the source, and the case study. But we are not a target group. We are people with stories, with knowledge, agency, and self-determination. It is therefore essential that researchers critically reflect on their language, their attitudes, and their methods, not just during the research, but even before the first contact. Because inequality begins with the definition.

And how do "we" write something like that as a collective?

We, the people of Rotterdam-Zuid, refuse to remain trapped any longer in the narrative written about us. We are not the "disadvantaged neighborhood," we are not statistics, not problem areas, and not a backdrop for the impact agendas of institutions. We are a community with a rich history, with creativity, strength, and dreams. Our imagination is radical because we refuse to settle for cosmetic solutions. Our starting point is from fundamental values: radical equality, solidarity, inclusivity, and community spirit. Radical imagination means that we envision a Rotterdam where every person matters and where systems no longer keep us small.

It means that we dare to dream beyond the logic of market thinking. We don't just dream; we take steps to make those dreams a reality. Because we know: people are not born vulnerable, but made vulnerable by policies that, for example, have allowed landlords to extort tenants for decades, by institutional racism amongst the police and tax authorities, by humiliation on sports fields, by inequality in education, and by a government that destroys families with benefits and regulations.

These experiences have created a gap between us and the institutions that claim to work for us. That gap will grow as long as policy is made for us instead of by us. As long as institutions like Erasmus University think for us. As long as we remain merely “the target group” and not the co-decision-makers. It's time for this logic to radically shift: control must be returned to the people. Control over research and over data. Analyze problems together and devise and implement solutions together.

We believe that for every problem, the community is the solution. Where systems divide us, we connect. Where institutions distrust, we build trust. Where we are kept small, we radically reimagine how great and just our Rotterdam can and should be.

The Rotterdam-Zuid Lezing cannot be a lecture from above, but a collective voice from below. A platform where our radical imagination is not restricted or used, but is recognized and celebrated. Because we are Rotterdam, and it's time for the city to stop talking about us, and start acting with us in the neighborhoods, the districts, and the streets.

Historically, Rotterdam has primarily been seen as a working-class city, and if you came from Rotterdam, you were often seen as nothing more than a laborer. Yet, there's so much more to a person than just where you come from. Everyone should have the opportunity to move from survival to aspiration, and such opportunities should be given especially in Rotterdam-Zuid. Not through pressure from above, but by seizing the opportunities offered by the residents themselves.

Everyone has their own knowledge and experiences, their shadows, but also their morning light. Instead of endlessly researching this, let's dare to use it. Let's see that morning in everyone together. We are all flesh and blood, but also with unprecedented potential. Why should it matter where we come from? Or what qualifications we hold? There are more than enough successful entrepreneurs in Rotterdam-Zuid who haven't received a higher education!

Everyone has the potential for greatness, but together we must lay new foundations to unleash everyone's potential. Our systems are actually designed to go beyond our limits and collectively achieve more than we could on our own, not to flash our status or gain promotion, but to truly advance the whole.

This Rotterdam-Zuid Lezing is a lecture where you can see the greatness of “Zuid” and its unique potential through our lens. We know how to move each other forward. Where the opportunities and possibilities lie, and where we are already strong.

Rotterdam-Zuid is like a garden that, despite hard soil and little sun, continues to bloom. Zuid shows that where systems fall short or researchers unintentionally frame, blame and shame us, we are capable of standing up for ourselves. By taking initiative, by organizing ourselves, and by compassionately taking action for others: humanity prevails in everything we are and do.

We are no longer a collection of individual voices, but a choir resounding from the streets, homes, and hearts of our neighborhoods. This is not about independence, but about responsibility and ownership. Because in the power of connection, coming from a committed community where we take responsibility for each other, lies the key to equality, and we ourselves are building a foundation for a future in which children can dream, young people have opportunities, and the elderly can live with dignity. Zuid may be financially poor, but it is rich in love, commitment, talent, and resilience. A true source of creativity, solidarity, and perseverance, because we, we are aware: Every one of us is equal!

It is time for this to be recognized and also an invitation not to dictate certain structures and policies from above. But to build together, based on the needs of Rotterdam residents, a foundation strong enough to endure for generations.

Is this Rotterdam-Zuid Lezing an invitation to dialogue, or a stepping stone to new research that once again reduces us to subjects? A true transformation requires more than good intentions. It requires reflective techniques that force researchers to question their own assumptions and perspectives before and after entering the neighborhood. Because research fatigue doesn't happen by itself. It results from repeated, one-way gathering without acknowledgement, without feedback, without building relationships.

Only when this reflection leads to changes in attitude, language, and methods can we speak of a lecture that listens instead of transmits. A lecture that doesn't start with the research question, but with the community and the people.

Who would listen then? Is academia flexible enough to play along if the rules were reversed?

What if the people of Rotterdam-Zuid were to conduct research at the university the way the university conducts research in Zuid? Would they then also listen to our findings, or would they dismiss our words as "anecdotal" or "unrepresentative"?

Because while academia reduces us to target groups and statistics, we see how that same academia treats its own people. We see PhD students who conduct research for years on low wages without any job security. We see postdocs who jump from temporary contract to temporary contract, with no prospect of permanent employment.

We see the cleaners, the security guards, the café workers (often our neighbors in Zuid) who are not employed by the university, but by temporary employment

agencies or other companies that make huge profits at the expense of their employees. Why not decide to make a positive societal impact by giving all facilities staff permanent contracts at the university itself, with a livable wage and conditions necessary for a good life?

What would happen if we launched an investigation into the precarious working conditions at Erasmus University? If we mapped the stress, burnouts, and mental pressure? If we investigated how the university system makes its own employees vulnerable by prioritizing competition over collaboration, by glorifying individual excellence while cutting back on collective care?

Would they then be willing to dismantle to follow our recommendations? Would they dare to change their own systems as they expect us to “change”?

Perhaps we would all benefit much more if “the university” first thoroughly examined itself. If it were to acknowledge that knowledge is not neutral, but is shaped by who sits at the table and who is excluded. If it were to investigate why diversity and inclusion still remain buzzwords instead of reality. Because as long as the university dares not question itself, any form of “community-oriented scholarship” remains a form of colonization, well-intentioned perhaps, but still based on the assumption that we are the problem and they have the solution.

So, dear listener, give it a try. For us, it has long been the most natural thing in the world: using humility as strength. A quality that becomes visible in service. Serving our environment, our neighbors, our children, our entrepreneurs, our colleagues, our city, and yes, also you.

Because honestly, how long do you think we'll let ourselves be carried away by empty terms and the same old visions that mainly *sound* good? It's time to shift and reassess structures, buzzwords, and beliefs. Enough is enough. The question isn't whether you should, but whether you have the courage to join us!

This first draft of the Rotterdam-Zuid lezing was written by Mustapha Eaisaoui, Sarah Ghede, Joshua van den Ham, Sherida Patra, Annet van Otterloo, and Vanessa Umboh of the Cooperative Consultancy Bureau of the Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative and Jiska Engelbert (EUR) for a first public presentation on Thursday, September 18, 2025.