

# Events and urban space: a challenging relationship?

---

Greg Richards

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to consider the relationship between urban events and urban public space, asking whether cities have enough space for events and whether events have enough space in cities.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Policy analysis surrounding events and festivals in the Netherlands is used to understand the dynamics of urban events, supported by content analysis of policy documents. A vignette of event space struggles in Amsterdam illustrates the contradictions of the event/space relationship.

**Findings** – The research identifies a policy shift in the Netherlands towards urban events from expansive, festivalisation strategies to defensive, NIMBYist policies. It exposes contradictions between protecting space as a living resource and the exploitation of space for regenerative purposes. Three future scenarios for urban events are outlined: conflict and competition, growth and harmony and digitalisation and virtualisation.

**Practical implications** – Develops scenarios for the future relationship between events and urban space.

**Originality/value** – Provides an analysis of the recursive spatial implications of the growth of the events sector for cities and the growth of cities for events.

**Keywords** Amsterdam, Urban space, Spatial planning, Event policy, Public space, Festivalisation, Festivals

**Paper type** Research paper

Greg Richards is based at the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands and Breda University of Applied Sciences, Breda, The Netherlands.

## Events and space: a changing relationship?

Cities are increasingly locations for events of all kinds, which are staged in a wide range of different spaces, from purpose-built event venues to local parks. Urban events are usually conceived of as temporal phenomena, as a “time out of time”, as [Falassi \(1987\)](#) put it. The fact that events literally “take place”, occupying a certain space during a certain time, is less frequently emphasised.

Events are a major force in shaping cities, supporting a wide range of urban policy aims, including image improvement, tourism promotion and economic, social and cultural development (Richards & Palmer, 2010). In The Netherlands, for example, the number of festivals grew by 45% between 2015 and 2023, despite the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the total 81 million festival and event visitors in 2022, 69% attended in one of the 50 largest municipalities – predominantly in urban areas ([Response, 2023](#)). This concentration will increase in future as the urban population grows. In the European Union (EU), 75% of the population lives in urban areas, and this is predicted to increase by up to 84% by 2050 ([Alonso Raposo et al., 2019](#)).

The rapid expansion of urban events in the past 30 years has increasingly caused people to ask whether there are now “too many” events, particularly in cities. [Getz \(2000, 2017\)](#) is one expert who has been asking this question over the past two decades. [Mulder, Hitters and Ruttent \(2021\)](#) argued that the proliferation of festivals would lead to “festivalisation” (a term they used to describe the exponential growth in the number of festivals, but which was

Received 19 December 2023

Revised 8 March 2024

Accepted 14 March 2024

© Greg Richards. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

earlier linked to the increased mediatisation of urban space), and some have wondered whether there might even be “over-festivalisation” emerging (Wise, 2021; Richards & Leal Londoño, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily changed the debate about event space, as events were cancelled, and audiences were limited. The explosion of virtual meetings and events reduced the need for face-to-face meetings to experience things or to exchange information (Breek, 2022). But as the Dutch post-COVID festival boom indicates, the pandemic created pent-up demand for events, as people sought physical co-presence after long periods of restrictions (Mortimer, Andrade & Fazal-e-Hasan, 2024).

The growth of urban events seems to be unstoppable. However, there may be one important constraint emerging – the availability of space. Not only are more events taking place, but they are also attracting larger numbers of people. More room is also required for increasing use of technology, safety needs and accessibility. This indicates a growing demand for event space in cities in the foreseeable future. Will cities be able to find room for the expanding event industry, particularly in view of the many competing demands for urban space? This discussion about the costs and benefits of making space for events is particularly important in a small country like The Netherlands, where space is at a premium, and demand for space is rising fast.

This paper considers the factors behind the rapid increase in event space demands, as well as the evolving debate about the legitimacy of making space for events. It reviews the literature and policy documents relating to events and space, drawing heavily on the Dutch context. The Netherlands is arguably an extreme example of urban space pressure, with 508 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, compared with 278 for the UK and 35 for the USA. However, the “critical instance case” (Yin, 2000) presented here helps to illustrate many spatial issues which are now beginning to emerge in cities around the globe.

The research questions addressed in this paper are:

- RQ1. What are the major trends affecting event and festival development in cities in the medium and longer term?*
- RQ2. How is the dynamic relationship between events and urban space developing, with particular emphasis on urban planning and design and the impact of events in public space?*
- RQ3. How will spatial challenges impact on urban event development in the future?*

## Methods

This paper uses policy analysis to identify trends in the spatial development of events. This analysis focuses on The Netherlands, as a country with sharp spatial challenges, a long history of spatial planning and a mature and dynamic events and festivals sector.

Policy documents relating to events and festivals were analysed for seven major cities in The Netherlands during the period 2018–2022, all of which have recently developed events policies in the context of national spatial planning legislation. The cities selected include the most populous urban centres (Amsterdam and Rotterdam) as well as smaller provincial cities with a strong tradition of event organisation (Utrecht, Delft, Dordrecht, Eindhoven and Tilburg). For each city the event policy was examined, along with the relevant spatial planning framework documents. Each spatial planning framework document was subject to content analysis to identify the prevalence of material relating to events and festivals in the proposed policy. The aim of this analysis was to establish the prominence and likely future role of events and festivals in the spatial policies of Dutch cities.

A review of the debate on event development in Amsterdam was also undertaken using media sources over the past five years, focusing on debates around event policy and the

use of urban space for events. This also enabled groups active in the debate surrounding event and festival development to be identified. The websites of these groups were also analysed to trace the development of debates on event policy. This analysis resulted in a vignette exploring the dynamics of the event/space nexus in a single city.

The following sections of the paper consider the growth in event space demand, including a review of relevant academic sources, the changing nature of event policy and future challenges in the spatial development of events and festivals.

### The growing demand for event space

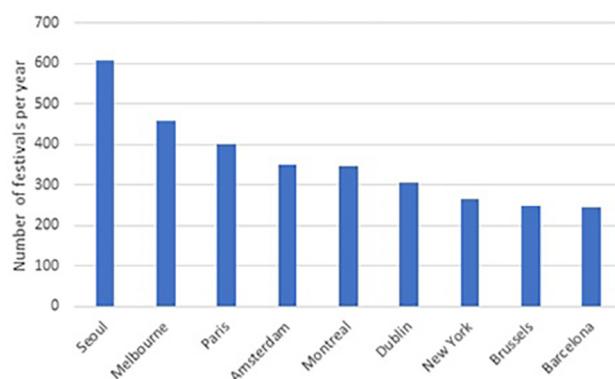
Globally, events are growing in number and size. Data from the World Cities Culture Forum show that the top ten festival cities staged over 3,000 festivals between them, despite the negative impacts of COVID-19 ([Figure 1](#)).

The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI) reports that the global supply of indoor exhibition space grew from 27.6 million m<sup>2</sup> in 2007 to 40.6 million m<sup>2</sup> by 2022. They also note that “the number of ‘mega venues’ – those with more than 100,000 sqm of space – continues to grow” ([UFI, 2022](#)). In 2021, there were 73 mega venues around the world, compared with 61 in 2011, a growth of 20%. The top ten exhibition venues globally increased their available exhibition space by over 20% between 2011 and 2023, reaching 3.6 million m<sup>2</sup>. Construction is currently underway for phase 2 of Shenzhen World, which will become the biggest indoor exhibition area in the world, with 500,000<sup>2</sup> of space.

In The Netherlands, the number of festivals rose from 708 in 2012 to 1,211 in 2022, an increase of over 70% ([Response, 2023](#)). Events, and more specifically festivals, seem to have become a profitable business model that has stimulated an increase in supply. As [Braun \(2019\)](#) shows in the case of Rotterdam, the turnover of the public events sector in the city experienced a growth of 6.9% per year between 2011 and 2018.

Despite the growing space use of events in cities, there has been little previous academic research on this issue. Scholarship has emerged on the relationship between specific spaces and event activities ([Smith, 2015](#), [Smith, Vodicka, Colombo, Lindstrom, McGillivray & Quinn, 2021](#); [Lynch & Quinn, 2022](#)), or the appropriation of space by street festivals ([Munro & Jordan, 2013](#)). However, such studies usually focus on contested uses of space or the changing use and commodification of specific spaces (e.g. [Roult, Auger & Lafond, 2020](#)), and they tend to

**Figure 1** Number of festivals held in major cities ([WCCF, 2023](#))



**Sources:** Data from world cities culture forum (2023); graph created by the author

consider single spaces in the city rather than the overall supply of event space. [Antchak & Adams \(2020\)](#) note the growing use of museums and art galleries as “unusual venues” for business events, and [Nolan \(2020\)](#) found that the supply of business events venues has grown with the development of purpose-built event space. She also notes the emergence of the hybrid venue, or blended use of a physical space and virtual reality. Intensified use of urban space is also reflected in the development of peer-to-peer rooftop rentals for events in Barcelona ([Anguera-Torrell, Arcos-Pumarola, Cerdan Schwitzguébel & Encinar-Prat, 2021](#)).

[Gold and Gold \(2018\)](#) studied the use of urban space for staging major events such as the World Fairs and the Olympic Games. They note the challenge of finding space close to urban centres: “The preferred solution to the problem of finding spaces for large-scale ambulant events has long been to select sites with sufficient land for the assembly of festival venues, but close enough to the heart of the city to fit into the mainstream of urban life”. ([Gold & Gold, 2018 p. 354](#)). They identify five broad categories of event spaces:

1. using temporary sites;
2. procuring vacant land close to the city centre;
3. finding sites at the urban fringe;
4. reclamations, or spaces produced by dredging and infill; and
5. brownfield conversions.

These previous studies generally do not consider the relationship between event space use and urban processes. Usually, the focus is on the event itself, or the local community, rather than the city. A notable exception is the work of [Lehtovuori \(2005, 2011\)](#). His extensive study of events in Helsinki considered the use of public space by events, and how they can create new meanings for those spaces. Lehtovuori identifies a growth in events in Helsinki from the late 1980s onwards, stimulated by a desire to animate the city and drive economic growth. Existing spaces such as Senate Square became regular event locations, and new post-industrial spaces such as Töölönlahti Bay or Makasiinit emerged. Lehtovuori argues that events make places fluid and open to different interpretations, giving new meanings and roles to urban spaces.

The number of events is also growing through diversification and specialisation in supply, as [van Vliet \(2018\)](#) notes with the growth of film festivals in The Netherlands. This trend is repeated globally, with the [World Cities Culture Forum \(2023\)](#) reporting a total of over 1,400 film festivals in 42 cities worldwide. The number of festivals is also growing because many events have now branded themselves as “festivals” ([Richards & Palmer, 2010](#)). The transition from “event” to “festival” arguably implies an increase in space usage, with festive elements being added to the event programme and growing event durations.

Increased tourism has also driven increased event space use. Globalisation of the event sector has stimulated the creation of more international festivals and supported the development of festival circuits for performers, organisers and venues. [Gorchakova \(2017\)](#) has analysed the growth of internationally touring blockbuster exhibitions, while [Jarman \(2021\)](#) has analysed the growth of “fringe” festivals, a model which now extends around the world. Some studies have also noted the growing proportion of tourists in festival audiences (e.g. [Richards and King, 2020](#)).

The supply of urban space may have a certain degree of elasticity because of the use of “new” spaces such as rooftops, more space-efficient technologies and the intensified use of existing spaces, for example. But this flexibility has limits. As [Smith \(2015\)](#) shows in the case of events held in London Parks, the need for grass spaces to recover between events places limits on the number of events. The limited supply of space therefore increasingly

represents a constraint on many event activities and increases the level of competition between different space uses.

### The dynamic policy space of urban events

Urban policies represent an important mediator in the shaping of event space. Cities can make space for events, by creating new event venues or allowing the use of new spaces for events, or they can restrict event space by limiting the number of event days or closing locations for events. The rapid growth of urban events, coupled with growing spatial pressure in city centres, has led to growing calls for regulation and organisation of the event field ([Pløger, 2010](#)). Event policies need to reconcile competing demands from event organisers, residents, businesses, the tourism sector and other stakeholders.

We can see the development of thinking about event policy over recent years in the case of Amsterdam. The city had around 60 major festivals in 2001 and by 2017 Amsterdam Marketing was reporting 350 a year. In 2019, [Response \(2020\)](#) listed over 400 major events in Amsterdam. As early as 2003 there was already debate about whether the city had “too many festivals” ([Amsterdamse Kunstraad, 2003](#)). From a cultural perspective, criticism was levelled at large summer festivals, which arguably added little or nothing to the cultural supply of the city. The first city-wide events policy, developed in 2004, talked about funding major events on the basis of their ability to attract visitors, but this was later narrowed to their role in stimulating overnight tourism, reflecting a changing discourse around tourism in the city.

New event related policies emphasise the need to balance the needs of residents, businesses, visitors and other stakeholders. The events policy adopted by Amsterdam in 2021 was introduced against a background of “decreasing support for using public space for festivals”, coupled with “increasingly scarce public space that has to be shared by a growing number of Amsterdammers” ([Mokum Reclaimed, 2020](#)).

Decreasing public support for events was marked by the creation of pressure groups. For example, Mokum Reclaimed (Amsterdam Reclaimed) initiated a campaign against staging festivals in public space. This had two objectives:

1. to remove large festivals from public parks; and
2. to link events policy to event licensing so that the municipality could manage events more effectively.

The activities of groups such as Mokum Reclaimed and declining public support for festivals led to an early evaluation of the policy. Event industry groups were disappointed by the new policy, which they felt did not offer them sufficient security in the face of the risks linked to events.

Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic there were signs of a decline in the number of open-air events in Amsterdam. Despite the falling number of events, there was an increase in complaints about events from residents. In 2019, 24% of Amsterdammers reported problems related to events ([Klingen, de Wilde, Ramlakhan & Hesseli, 2022](#)). In the city of Tilburg, more complaints were received about events during the pandemic, when there were very few events, than in previous years ([Gemeente Tilburg, 2023](#)). Research in Amsterdam indicated that the increasing density of the city was to blame, particularly citing festival locations where recent residential construction had brought residents closer to festival locations. This underlines the point that the spatial effects of events are not dependent on event activity alone, but also on their dynamic relationship with the urban environment. In particular, the rise of “Not In My Backyard” (NIMBY) attitudes is evident, with extensive debates about the location of a wide range of facilities, as well as the staging of events ([Van der Aa, Groote & Huigen, 2004](#)).

The recent development of a national spatial planning framework has also influenced these debates in The Netherlands. Events have been included as one of the activities that municipalities are required to consider in their spatial plans. As the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management (2022) argues, if the spatial plan allows events to be held in a particular area, a reason must be given for that decision, and the appropriateness of holding events in relation to the surroundings evaluated. The Ministry notes that many municipalities have an events policy, which usually outlines the locations where events may be held. The reasoning for the choice of event locations is often missing, however.

Municipal environmental policies provide useful information on event space. Many municipalities list event locations, together with information on their size, permitted event days, noise levels and other restrictions. Using these data for major cities in The Netherlands we can see that Amsterdam, Rotterdam and the Hague together have about 2.2 million square metres of event space, in a total land area of 453 million square metres ([Table 1](#)). This is an average of around 0.5% of available space across the three cities. This underlines the relatively small proportion of total land area available for events, particularly when restrictions on the total number of event days are considered. For Rotterdam, for example, the average number of event days per location is 27, indicating an effective event occupation rate of just over 7% per year.

The spatial planning framework also establishes societal targets with respect to sustainability, liveability and improvement of the physical environment. The law envisages a balance between conservation and use of the physical environment. In the area of event policy, one can detect a shift away from space utilisation (permitting events to create economic opportunities) towards space conservation (protecting the physical and social environment from the effects of events).

This shift from “expansive” towards “defensive” event policies is reflected in the spatial visions developed by many cities in The Netherlands. There are relatively few mentions of events in the spatial policies of Dutch municipalities. If we take the city of Tilburg (population 228,000) as an example, we find that the main terms used in the spatial vision for the city (Gemeente Tilburg, 2021) are “space” (302 mentions) “economic” (269) and “living” (187). Items related to “visitors” (19) “events” (8) and “tourism” (2) are at the bottom of the list ([Table 2](#)).

This shows not only that spatial issues are top of mind for municipalities such as Tilburg, but also that events have a very low profile in terms of general spatial policy. This is perhaps not surprising given the traditional focus of planning on buildings and economic development. But it also demonstrates that the growth of the events industry has made relatively little impression on urban policy.

In spite of the relative lack of attention for events in the spatial vision, the ambition of Tilburg for 2040 includes developing creativity and events, because:

With a contemporary (sometimes) temporary interpretation, they offer space for creativity, commercial services, events and culture. The developments in the *Spoorzone* (area around the

**Table 1** Event locations in public space in selected Dutch cities

City	Event locations	Total event area (m <sup>2</sup> )	Total land area of municipality (m <sup>2</sup> )	% event area
Amsterdam	63	774,794	165,000,000	0.47
Rotterdam	20	1,362,400	206,000,000	0.66
Den Haag	7	112,000	82,000,000	0.14
Total	90	2,249,194	453,000,000	0.50

Source: Own elaboration from municipal documents

**Table 2** Content analysis of the spatial vision for the city of Tilburg (2021)

Term	Mentions
Space	302
Economic	269
Live	187
Work	155
Residents	103
Sustainable	92
Knowledge	90
Care	87
Industry	87
Education	82
Innovation	76
Culture	74
Ecology	69
Strategy	41
Smart	37
Mobility	37
Recreation	36
Labour	32
Digitisation	26
Society	26
Climate	25
Identity	25
Story	23
Balance sheet	20
Visitors	19
Events	8
Tourism	2

Source: [Gemeente Tilburg \(2021\)](#), own elaboration

station) have supplemented the centre of yesteryear, with emphasis on knowledge, education, culture and entrepreneurship in combination with housing, offices, catering and events.

The plan also sees the ambiance of the city being improved by: "Stimulating art, events and other initiatives that contribute to the 'experience' of Tilburg". But there is little consideration of the experience of the city for either residents or visitors. In the consultation on the environmental plan, there are specific mentions of noise and other problems related to events, as well as the lack of international events. This relative lack of attention for events in spatial policy is not confined to Tilburg. [Table 3](#) shows that even large Dutch cities make little specific mention of events in their environmental vision documents. There is a negative relationship between the number of events staged in these cities and the number of event-related terms listed in their environmental vision (correlation -0.14).

**Table 3** Mentions of events in the environmental vision documents of selected Dutch cities

City	No. of mentions of "events" in environmental vision	No. of events held, 2019
Utrecht	42	136
Delft	18	29
Dordrecht	14	31
Amsterdam	10	432
Eindhoven	10	104
Rotterdam	9	218
Tilburg	8	53
Average	14	143

Source: Own elaboration, data sourced from the environmental visions of the cities

The relative lack of attention for events as a policy area in the spatial planning ambitions of Dutch cities is potentially worrying for the events sector. As well as seeing events as an important economic tool, cities now also worry about their negative effects, such as noise and complaints from residents. In their policies, cities such as Tilburg recognise the contradictions of increasing pressure on space: “We don’t want more events, but we need space to cater for an attractive event programme” ([Gemeente Tilburg, 2023](#)). Policies therefore highlight controls on the number of event days in specific locations, particularly in residential areas. They also emphasise noise limits and the need to reduce nuisance for residents.

This is an indication of the more “defensive” policy stance in respect of events, which has replaced the expansive “festivalisation” strategies of the past 20 years, which were based on the generation of visitor flows, economic impact and atmosphere ([Hitters, 2007](#)). As the Rotterdam Spatial Vision (2021) states:

From the 1970s onwards, a widely felt “lack” of conviviality was noted in the city centre. In response, extensive event programming took place, pavilions were built on the boulevards and squares and attention was paid to adding more homes (in the centre).

The drive towards festivalisation and atmosphere has helped to resurrect and rejuvenate many city centres in recent years. But by turning the city centre into a consumption space, the event sector has also undermined its own spatial legitimacy ([Platt & Finkel, 2020](#)). Welcoming attitudes towards events have faded and divergent positions regarding the use of public space for events have emerged ([Smith, 2015](#)). Residents have often become more hostile to events (particularly large music festivals), pitting themselves against festival organisers and municipal event departments. More vocal residents mean local administrations have become more cautious in granting event licences. The extension of local democracy, with more local consultations and referenda on development issues, means residents now have a stronger influence on event policies.

The current defensive attitude of most Municipalities towards space for events implies controls on the number and type of events in specific places to minimise resident complaints, and a changing perception of the appropriate roles for events in policy agendas. Events are often seen as ephemera without important links to key stakeholder groups, such as residents or businesses. The relatively weak position of events on the scales is underlined by their lack of profile in the spatial plans, and by their relatively modest economic role. The declining weight of the event sector in spatial debates is illustrated by the following vignette on struggles over festival space in Amsterdam.

### Vignette – struggles over festival space in Amsterdam

Amsterdam, along with many other large cities, has designated “festival locations” where large-scale events can be held. These are usually coupled with specific criteria regarding their use, such as visitor and noise limits, as well as a limit of event days per year. These spaces are usually temporary, taking up part of a park or areas designated for future development. The existence and use of festival spaces are often contested, with negotiations taking place between many different stakeholders.

For example, [Flach \(2019\)](#) reported the decision of Amsterdam to close the N1 festival location on the outskirts of the city. The area (110,000 m<sup>2</sup>) had fallen vacant awaiting the development of a new industrial park. This decision was met with enthusiasm from residents but generated disappointed reactions from event organisers. The N1 site had become a regular venue for large dance festivals, which are no longer allowed in the inner city. In 2019, six major festivals were held on the site.

The major problem with large music and dance festivals is noise, which often generates complaints from residents. The events policies of many municipalities now include noise

limits for festivals, with powers for officials to close events that exceed agreed limits. The Awakenings Festival staged close to Amsterdam, was within the limits when measurements were made at the festival site. However, because of a temperature inversion the noise travelled much further than normal, generating complaints from people living over 8 km away: "I can hear the music loud and clear through triple glass and noise cancelling headphones" ([Verhoef, 2023](#)). These problems have grown as the city of Amsterdam has expanded through the growth of new suburbs and increased housing density. The city's population rose from just over 750,000 in 2009 to 900,000 in 2023, an increase of over 17%. Festivals that were once peripheral are now much closer to residential areas. In 2018, the City of Amsterdam developed a new events policy, placing limits on noise from events, the number of event days and requirements to use the "best available technology".

Pressures on event space contrast with the cultural policy of Amsterdam, which has the aim of preserving "free spaces" on the edge of the city as creative hubs ([Space of Urgency, 2019](#)). For example, the event location at Thuishaven, part of the Port of Amsterdam, has been operating for 10 years. In that time the area has slowly developed as a year-round event venue, with a large circus tent as the centrepiece. There are now 190 people working in the area, which now advertises itself as the "cultural freeport of Amsterdam". The site houses mainly house and techno events over the summer. A warehouse provides the opportunity to stage events in the winter as well ([Roele, 2023a](#)).

"Thuishaven is not a club, or a warehouse. It's a unique experience. Located on the Western outskirts of Amsterdam, the site is surrounded by heavy industry, massive oil tankers and scrap metal yards. Thuishaven has several stages, bars, surreal decoration pieces and curiosities. Incorporating materials purchased or found at neighboring scrap yards, the site radiates a raw and industrial atmosphere" ([Thuishaven, 2023](#)).

Events also add to the general user pressure of the city. In spite of the fact that the municipality arranged extra transport for the Amsterdam Dance Event in 2022, at some moments during the five day event the level of crowding on the river ferries was considered "unacceptable" ([Roele, 2023c](#)). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the city has also made active efforts to limit the size of major events. In 2023, two festivals held on King's Day were reduced from 70,000 to 40,000 visitor capacity. This led the festivals organisers to claim damages from the city for loss of income.

Event policy is also influenced by shifting cultural policies. In Amsterdam, the proposed new cultural policy is designed to give newcomers space in the events calendar of the city, so that the events "better meet the needs of all Amsterdammers". This means that existing festivals now face competition for their established slots in the festival calendar. A special organisation is foreseen that will have the task of dividing the "scarce locations" in the city between event organisers. However, this policy may be difficult to implement given the rising costs of festival organisation and the need to attract larger visitor numbers over more event days to ensure financial viability ([Roele, 2023b](#)).

## Future challenges in the event space

The future holds even greater challenges in the use of urban space for events. Important economic, environmental and social trends will imply a significant increase in the demand for space in The Netherlands and elsewhere. These challenges include:

- Energy transition.
- Housing supply.
- Sustainability and creating "room for nature".
- Increasing population density of cities.
- Transport and logistics.

The energy transition implies a vastly increased use of space for renewable energy. In The Netherlands, the target of the Government to generate 16% of the country's energy via renewable sources would imply the use of over 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> for solar panels, or 2% of the land area. The Ministry of Spatial Planning has also indicated that it would not encourage the development of solar power farms on agricultural land, making this problem even more complex ([NOS, 2023a](#)).

Housing will need much more space in the future. With household sizes declining, there is a current shortage of over 200,000 dwellings, forecast to grow to 1 million by 2030 ([NOS, 2023b](#)). Areas on the edge of major cities are increasingly being used to provide new housing, with the effect of bringing more people close to event areas. Increased housing supply is also contributing to the densification of cities, reducing the open spaces available for events.

The growing proximity of residential areas and sites of major events is leading to a growth in friction between local communities, event goers and event organisers. We have seen that in some cities, complaints about events have risen even as the number of events has declined. There is a growing group of "festival haters" who are increasingly making their voices heard. The growing tendency for important spatial planning decisions to be influenced by local consultations and the possibility to initiate referenda about such issues makes conflicts more likely in the future. There is a growing trend towards "Nimbyism": people generally tolerate festivals and other events, if they are "NIMBY" ([Smith, Osborn & Vodicka, 2022](#)).

The need to "make room for nature" will also increase the pressure on scarce urban space. The recent passing of a law on nature restoration by the [European Parliament \(2021\)](#) mean that EU countries must have restoration measures in place by 2030 covering at least 20% of their land and sea areas. This will mean more restrictions on the use of rural areas for events, increasing the pressure on urban event spaces. It will also affect available event space indirectly by reducing the possibility to expand housing and other functions in rural areas, again increasing the pressure on urban space.

More space will also be needed for transport and logistics in future. A recent report ([JLL, 2023](#)) indicated that land shortage as a major issue for logistics operators, particularly around major cities. In The Netherlands, the growth in e-commerce means an extra 1.2 million m<sup>2</sup> of logistics space will be needed by 2025 ([CBRE, 2023](#)). Moving the goods to customers also means that more transport space is needed, for example, for parking and new roads.

These trends all point in the direction of increased pressure on space for both urban development and events and festivals.

### The future of event space

The growing number and size of urban events is increasingly clashing with other space demands in cities. Not only is the "objective" amount of space for events becoming more pressured, but the subjective space is also shrinking. As the sound and nuisance footprint of events increases, and more residents also move into housing close to festival spaces, so their tolerance tends to decrease. NIMBY attitudes about events are following trends already seen with other functions, such as refugee housing, for example.

Commercialisation and commodification of events also affects resident attitudes. Residents might be tolerant of community and free events, but the perception that festivals are earning money at the expense of resident quality of life tends to generate resistance. Many music festivals can only survive by attracting large audiences and charging significant ticket prices. They may be out of reach of local residents, and they also tend to adopt a "citadel" form, with fences and security keeping locals out ([Wynn, 2020](#)). Acceptance of event space

use is likely to be higher when events are integrated into the urban fabric and permeable and accessible for all (Simons, 2017). These are important issues, because events are vital for the functioning and wellbeing of cities. How can we move forward in future to use the important benefits of events and festivals for cities, as well as improving the quality of life of residents and visitors?

### ***Scenarios for the future of urban events***

The ability of cities to support a healthy event and festival ecosystem will depend on the interaction of governance structures and the effects of market forces. Given the trends outlined above, we can sketch out three general scenarios that represent different forms of regulatory and market operation.

*Conflict and competition.* In the “business as usual” case, which seems to currently prevail on the post-COVID-19 landscape, different stakeholders increasingly fight for room in the city, with growing competition between events for basic resources. Events begin to shop around between cities for space, support and facilities. Faced with an over-supply of events, cities become less proactive and more likely to adopt defensive policies.

Event policies as currently framed often pose the events field as a zero-sum-game, in which each city has to compete with all others to stage events. This attitude is strengthened by event bidding competitions, such as those for the Olympic Games or the European Capital of Culture (Baade & Matheson, 2002; van der Steen & Richards, 2021). In this scenario, increasing amounts of money are invested in bidding for and staging events, with the likelihood of diminishing returns to most cities.

*Growth and harmony.* Where different stakeholders recognise a common interest in providing space for events, more collaboration can emerge between event organisers and between cities and regions. Specific event locations are developed to promote multiple use and synergies between events and other functions, and a healthy balance between stakeholders.

Achieving such spatial justice will be an important pillar of sustainable urban development in future. The Dutch national spatial policy legislation Nationale Omgevingsvisie gives an indication of how such spatial equity might be achieved. The three important factors to be taken into consideration in weighing different interests in the use of space are:

1. Combined functions are more important than single functions.
2. Characteristics and identity are central.
3. Avoid shifting the problem to other areas.

Using these principles means that more effective use can be made of the scarce space that exists through combined uses (as suggested by Roult, Auger & Lafond, 2020, for example), while ensuring that people feel linked to the places they use and live in. Importantly, the common tactic of shifting the problem onto other areas or groups of people (usually the poorer segments of society) is reduced by this approach. By adopting a bold, holistic approach to urban planning, it should be possible to offer events and festivals the space they will need in future, as well as meeting the needs of other urban space users.

*Digitalisation and virtualisation.* One potential fix for the shortage of physical space is to expand into the digital world. Strong growth in digital and virtual events could reduce pressure on physical locations, by providing new event spaces alongside the growth of virtual and hybrid events. This is already happening in some areas, notably eSports, which is estimated will generate of \$2.5bn in revenue by 2025 (de Freitas, 2021).

Greater attendance at virtual events should reduce the market for physical events, potentially easing user pressure on urban space. However, one of the question marks in the

digitalisation scenario is the extent to which digital events will provide an alternative to physical ones, or if there will simply be more digital as well as physical events taking place.

These three scenarios are not mutually exclusive and may manifest themselves to a greater or lesser extent in different cities. Ideally cities should try and develop more holistic event policies and move away from a “festival-centric” view of event activity. In policy terms, this could also be supported by a shift from event-centric to sector-centric and network centric approaches to event policy ([Richards, 2017](#)).

### The future of urban events

The evidence presented here suggests growing challenges in the provision of urban event space, with growing demand clashing with dwindling supply. New approaches to urban event space must respond to fragmenting stakeholder positions and the need to consolidate and combine urban space use. Moving towards more positive scenarios for event space, such as a future of growth and harmony, will require cities to engage with more creative solutions for staging events. The drive towards making cities more compact to use resources (particularly space) more efficiently, will mean that cities will need smaller, more valuable events. In the 15-min city of the future ([Khavarian-Garmsir, Sharifi & Sadeghi, 2023](#)) dense, socially and functionally mixed neighbourhoods will lack large event spaces. Instead, the emphasis will be on using flexible, multi-use spaces, such as parking spaces or school playgrounds. Events will also be increasingly shifted towards the urban periphery, where use can be made of land left fallow for biological farming practices, or bodies of water suitable for floating events. In The Netherlands there has long been discussion on moving functions offshore, including relocating Schiphol Airport and housing developments ([Skjold, 2003](#)). Floating event spaces would also provide the option of moving locations, with floating festivals visiting their audiences without the need for large-scale mobility. Floating festivals ran successfully on cruise ships before the pandemic and could potentially provide creative solutions for coastal cities in the future.

Events and festivals will also increasingly need to be part of the hybrid space solution to energy transformation challenges. This is already evident in the use of event space parking for energy generation in The Netherlands ([Loopings, 2022](#)). Such “blurred” use of space ([Richards, 2021](#)) is counter to current planning frameworks that designate single functions, usually separating living, working and leisure spaces. In the future, cities will need to consider the many different ways in which event spaces can be used, for example through temporal or seasonal variation.

Achieving such refocusing will also mean that event policy needs to be better linked with other policy areas, breaking out of the self-referential events silo ([Richards, 2020](#)). Creating a more multi-faceted view of the effects of events requires a shift from a narrow view of event impacts (usually generating economic impact) towards a broader view of event effects. Events and festivals not only concentrate spending, but they also act as generators and stimulators of connotation, connection, contagion and content. They create meaning (connotation) to provide a space in which people can connect to each other and to place. The post-COVID events and festivals boom is an important sign of how much events were missed in cities.

### References

- Alonso Raposo, M., Ciuffo, B., Ardente, F., Aurambout, J. P., Baldini, G., Braun, R., ... & Vandecasteele, I. (2019). *The future of road transport, EUR 29748 EN*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Amsterdamse Kunstraad (2003). Niet het aantal telt- maar de toegevoegde waarde. *Advies Ten behoeve van een festivalbe leid*, Amsterdam: Amsterdamse Kunstraad.

- Anguera-Torrell, O., Arcos-Pumarola, J., Cerdan Schwitzguébel, A., & Encinar-Prat, L. (2021). P2P rooftop rentals in Barcelona: a descriptive analysis. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 7(2), 328–343.
- Antchak, V., & Adams, E. (2020). Unusual venues for business events: key quality attributes of museums and art galleries. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 6(4), 847–862.
- Baade, R. A., & Matheson, V. (2002). Bidding for the Olympics: fool's gold. In Pestana Barros, C., Ibrahímo, M. and Szymanski, S. (Eds), *Transatlantic Sport: The Comparative Economics of North American and European sports* (pp. 127–151), Edward Elgar.
- Braun, E. (2019). *Economisch Onderzoek naar de Publieksevenementensector in Rotterdam*. Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam.
- Breek, P. (2022). Neighborhood governance during COVID-19: what is lost with reduced face-to-face communication? *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 1–19, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2022.2105225>.
- CBRE (2023). Global e-commerce outlook. Retrieved from <https://news.cbre.nl/growth-in-e-commerce-extra-12-million-sq-m-of-logistics-space-needed-by-2025/>
- European Parliament (2021). REPORT on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030: Bringing nature back into our lives. Brussels: European Parliament.
- Falassi, A. (1987). Festival: definition and morphology. *Time Out of TIME: Essays on the Festival*, Vol. 1, NM: University of NM Press.
- Flach, H. (2019). Amsterdam schrap festivalterrein N1. Haarlems Dagblad, 9 februari 2019.
- Gemeente Tilburg. (2021). *Omgevingsvisie: TILBURG 2040*, Tilburg: Gemeente Tilburg.
- Gemeente Tilburg. (2023). *Evenementen Maken De Stad*, Tilburg: Gemeente Tilburg.
- Getz, D. (2000). Festivals and special events: life cycle and saturation issues. *Trends in outdoor recreation, leisure and tourism*(pp. 175–185), CABI.
- Getz, D. (2017). Developing a framework for sustainable event cities. *Event Management*, 215, 575–591.
- Gold, J. R., & Gold, M. M. (2018). 'Urban segments and event spaces: world's fairs and Olympic sites'. in Hein, C. (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, (pp. 348–363), Routledge.
- Gorchakova, V. (2017). *Touring blockbuster exhibitions: Their contribution to the marketing of a city to tourists* (Doctoral dissertation, Auckland University of Technology).
- Hitters, E. (2007). Porto and Rotterdam as European capitals of culture: toward the festivalization of urban cultural policy. In Richards, G. (Ed.), *Cultural tourism: Global and local perspectives* (pp. 281–301), Howarth Press.
- Jarman, D. (2021). Festival to festival: networked relationships between fringe festivals. *Event Management*, 25(1), 99–113.
- JLL (2023). Retrieved from [www.jll.co.uk/en/trends-and-insights/research/european-logistics-market-update-q3-2023](http://www.jll.co.uk/en/trends-and-insights/research/european-logistics-market-update-q3-2023)
- Khavarian-Garmsir, A. R., Sharifi, A., & Sadeghi, A. (2023). The 15-minute city: urban planning and design efforts toward creating sustainable neighborhoods. *Cities*, 132, 104101.
- Klingen, J., de Wilde, S., Ramlakhan, K., & Hesseli, N. (2022). *Overlastmeldingen door amsterdammers*, Gemeente Amsterdam.
- Lehtovuori, P. (2005). Experience and conflict: the dialectics of the production of public urban space in the light of new event venues in Helsinki 1993–2003. PhD Thesis.
- Loopings (2022). Zonnepanelen op parkeerplaats Walibi Holland officieel in gebruik. Retrieved from [www.loopings.nl/weblog/19683/Zonnepanelen-op-parkeerplaats-Walibi-Holland-officieel-in-gebruik.html](http://www.loopings.nl/weblog/19683/Zonnepanelen-op-parkeerplaats-Walibi-Holland-officieel-in-gebruik.html)
- Lynch, D., & Quinn, B. (2022). Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 242–261.
- Mokum Reclaimed (2020). Het nieuwe evenementenbeleid van Amsterdam. Retrieved from [www.mokum-reclaimed.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/analyse-evenementenbeleid-2021-amsterdam-mokum-reclaimed.pdf](http://www.mokum-reclaimed.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/analyse-evenementenbeleid-2021-amsterdam-mokum-reclaimed.pdf)
- Mortimer, G., Andrade, M. L. O., & Fazal-e-Hasan, S. M. (2024). From traditional to transformed: examining the pre-and post-COVID consumers' shopping mall experiences. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 76, 1–9.

- Mulder, M., Hitters, E., & Rutten, P. (2021). The impact of festivalization on the Dutch live music action field: a thematic analysis. *Creative Industries Journal*, 14(3), 245–268.
- Munro, I., & Jordan, S.. (2013), 'Living Space' at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe: spatial Tactics and the Politics of Smooth Space. *Human Relations*, 66(11), 1497–1525, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713480411>.
- Nolan, E. (2020). The supply and design of different types of venues for business events. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 6(4), 691–710.
- NOS (2023a). Aanleg van zonneparken op landbouwgronden veel moeilijker. NOS Nieuws, 26th October. Retrieved from <https://nos.nl/collectie/13871/artikel/2495457-aanleg-van-zonneparken-op-landbouwgronden-veel-moeilijker>
- NOS (2023b). De Jonge: na 2030 nog eens miljoen woningen nodig. Retrieved from <https://nos.nl/artikel/2494375-de-jonge-na-2030-nog-eens-miljoen-woningen-nodig>
- Platt, L., & Finkel, R. (2020). Cultural festivals and the city. *Geography Compass*, 14(9), 1–21.
- Plöger, J. (2010). Presence-experiences—the eventualisation of urban space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(5), 848–866.
- Response. (2023). Festivals en concerten 2022. Retrieved from [www.respons.nl](http://www.respons.nl)
- Richards, G. (2017). Emerging models of the eventful city. *Event Management*, 21(5), 533–543.
- Richards, G. (2020). Cities, events and the eventful city. In Page, S. J. and Connell, J. (Eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Events* (pp. 273–286), Routledge.
- Richards, G. (2021). DisPlacements: the future of urban public space and tourism. *The European Prize for Urban Public Space*, CCCB, Barcelona. Retrieved from [www.publicspace.org/multimedia/-/post/displacements-the-future-of-urban-public-space-and-tourism](http://www.publicspace.org/multimedia/-/post/displacements-the-future-of-urban-public-space-and-tourism)
- Richards, G., & King, B. (2022). The experience of cultural festivals: evidence from Hong Kong. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 19407963, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2022.2033249>.
- Richards, G., & Leal Londoño, M. D. P. (2022). Festival cities and tourism: challenges and prospects. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 14(3), 219–228.
- Richards, G., & Palmer, R. (2010). *Eventful Cities: Cultural Management and Urban Regeneration*, Routledge: London.
- Roele, J. (2023a). Festivalterrein Thuishaven bestaat 10 jaar: 'In het begin was het cowboyen' Het Parool. nl, 12 mei 2023.
- Roele, J. (2023b). Nieuwe festivals, is dat nog wel realistisch? Het Parool, 27 May.
- Roele, J. (2023c). Gemeente: druk op ponten was tijdens ADE te groot, ondanks extra inzet veren, *Het Parool*, 16th May.
- Roult, R., Auger, D., & Lafond, M. P. (2020). Formula 1, city and tourism: a research theme analyzed on the basis of a systematic literature review. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 6(4), 813–830.
- Simons, I. (2017). The practices of the eventful city: the case of incubate festival. *Event Management*, 21(5), 593–608.
- Skjold, A. (2003). Tomorrow's floating homes: part house, part boat, part offshore rig. *The Futurist*, 37(3), 38.
- Smith, A. (2015). *Events in the City: Using Public Spaces as Event Venues*, Routledge.
- Smith, A., Osborn, G., & Vodicka, G. (2022). Private events in a public park: contested music festivals and environmental justice in Finsbury park, London. In Plüscke-Altof, B. and Sooväli-Sepping, H. (Eds), *Whose Green City? Contested Spaces and Environmental Justice in Northern Europe* (pp. 83–102), Springer International Publishing.
- Smith, A., Vodicka, G., Colombo, A., Lindstrom, K. N., McGillivray, D., & Quinn, B. (2021). Staging city events in public spaces: an urban design perspective. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 12(2), 224–239.
- Space of Urgency (2019). Research report in the context of the administrative assignment for free space. Amsterdam, 30 October 2019. Retrieved from [www.docdroid.net/loBW9CY/space-of-urgency-amsterdam-free-space-advise-summary-en-pdf](http://www.docdroid.net/loBW9CY/space-of-urgency-amsterdam-free-space-advise-summary-en-pdf)

- Thuishaven (2023). Culturele vrijhaven van Amsterdam. [thuishavenevents.nl/](http://thuishavenevents.nl/)
- UFI (2022). World map of exhibition venues. Retrieved from [www.ifi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/UFI\\_World\\_Map\\_of\\_Venues\\_2022.pdf](http://www.ifi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/UFI_World_Map_of_Venues_2022.pdf)
- Van der Aa, B. J., Groote, P. D., & Huigen, P. P. (2004). World heritage as NIMBY? The case of the Dutch part of the Wadden sea. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 7(4-5), 291–302.
- van der Steen, T., & Richards, G. (2021). Factors affecting resident support for a hallmark cultural event. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 13(1), 107–123.
- van Vliet, H. (2018). *Festival Atlas 2017: Film Festivals: An Overview and Analysis of the Film Festival Landscape in The Netherlands in 2017*, Deventer: Plan B Publishers.
- Verhoef, G. (2023). Veel geluidsoverlast in Haarlemmermeer door technofestival awakenings. NOS Nieuws, 14 mei 2023.
- Wise, N. (2021). Events across ASEAN: product-oriented regeneration and value-added image promotion. *Place Event Marketing in the Asia Pacific Region* (pp. 60–76), Routledge.
- World Cities Culture Forum. (2023). Data on over 70 cultural indicators. Retrieved from [www.worldcitiescultureforum.com/data](http://www.worldcitiescultureforum.com/data)
- Wynn, J. R. (2020). *Music/city: American Festivals and Placemaking in Austin, Nashville, and Newport*, University of Chicago Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2000). Case study evaluations: a decade of progress?. In Stufflebeam, D. L., Madaus, G. F., Kellaghan, T. (Eds), *Evaluation Models. Evaluation in Education and Human Services*, Vol. 49, Springer. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-47559-6\\_11](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-47559-6_11)

## Further reading

- Gemeente Rotterdam (2021). *De eranderstad: Werken aan een wereldstad voor iedereen*, Gemeente Rotterdam.
- McGillivray, D., & Frew, M. (2015). From fan parks to live sites: mega events and the territorialisation of urban space. *Urban Studies*, 52(14), 2649–2663.
- Response (2020). Festivalmonitor. Retrieved from [www.respons.nl](http://www.respons.nl)
- Traveller's World (2023). Gandhisagar Floating Festival 2023, Retrieved from <https://travellersworldonline.com/gandhisagar-floating-festival->
- Van Rijsingen, H. (2023). Zorgen bij organisatoren na verbod op festival in natuurgebied: "Niet meer rendabel met alle regels. Een Vandaag, 20th April 2023. Retrieved from <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/zorgen-bij-organisatoren-na-verbod-op-festival-in-natuurgebied-niet-meer-rendabel-met-alle-regels/>

## Corresponding author

Greg Richards can be contacted at: [g.w.richards@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:g.w.richards@tilburguniversity.edu)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:  
[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)  
Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)