

Smart Sustainable Cities 2017 – Viable solutions for the future

In the past three years many students, teachers and researchers have worked on the ESSENCE program (European Sustainable Solutions for Existing and New City Environments). This is an international project that we developed with our CARPE partners (Consortium on Applied Research and Professional Education) from the Centre of Expertise Smart Sustainable Cities, led by the research group New Energy in the City, and in cooperation with the research groups Co-Design and E-business. Other participants in this project were institutions for higher education of Turku, Hamburg, Manchester and Valencia.

On Wednesday 14 June teachers, researchers, lecturers, students and companies gathered at the conference Smart Sustainable Cities – Viable Solutions to share the outcomes of this project. Instead of a conference where attendees just sit and listen, the attendees were challenged to work hard in workshops. If by 2050 over 70 per cent of the world's population lives in cities, we need each other to keep those cities livable. In every aspect.

After the opening words of Jan Bogerd, President of the Executive Board of HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, and keynote speeches by Thomas Rau (Rau Architects & Turntoo) and Maarten Hajer (Utrecht University), the minds were sharpened. Thomas Rau made clear to us that we are a guest on this planet and therefore we should handle it consciously. Maarten Hajer invited us to dream about the future, to think about the frames we use when we talk about sustainability and the stories we tell.

Thereafter the participants splitted up in session groups working actively on viable solutions for 2050 around the four conference topics: Living well together, Innovation and opportunities, Systems in the city and Physical transition. What stood out is that the solutions are definitely not just about technique, but at least as often about human and social aspects. There was, for instance, a lot of discussion about inclusion and participation, new business models and entrepreneurship and how we can invite people to change their behavior.

In addition to these workshops, there was the Final of the Transition Zero Award. During this session the six finalists of the Transition Zero Award Challenge pitched to a jury their solutions to sustainability issues in different municipalities. The Transition Zero Award is an annual Award - this year issued by the National Professor platform Urban Energy - for student teams from the CARPE countries competing for the best and most feasible solution to sustainable use of energy. This year's winner was the team from Utrecht Net Zero Energy Housing. They received their prize - 3.000 euros - from Marjan Hammersma (Secretary General at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science) on the main stage. This team also stressed that sustainability is not only about technical solutions but also involves participation of the residents since they will have to start using these new solutions. What do we have to do to make that happen?

Andy van den Dobbelsteen (Delft University of Technology) provided the closing speech. He pointed out that quick action is needed to move forward with sustainability but also perseverance, innovation and integration with what already exists.

The international conference that concluded the ESSENCE-project, was a great success, with nearly 300 participants - researchers, teachers, students and business representatives - working on concrete steps towards sustainable and resilient cities in 2050.