

Envision Charlotte’s Eco-Network Speakers Series Launches with “Global Engagement and Circular Economy” Lecture from Dutch Ambassador

It’s always been true that the seasons go round and round. But our stuff? Not so much.

However, that’s changing with the arrival of a new approach to business called the “circular economy,” first imagined in a mid-1970’s policy brief to the E.U., and later updated in a [first-of-its-kind report by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company in 2012](#).

At a community-wide event in April, part of Envision Charlotte’s newly-launched Eco-Network Speakers Series, His Excellency Henne Schuwer, Dutch Ambassador to the United States, discussed the circular economy as a lens through which to view fresh approaches to addressing pressing ecological and economic challenges. The Ambassador’s visit came at the invitation of Charlotte Mayor Jennifer Roberts, whose own public service career has long emphasized sustainability.

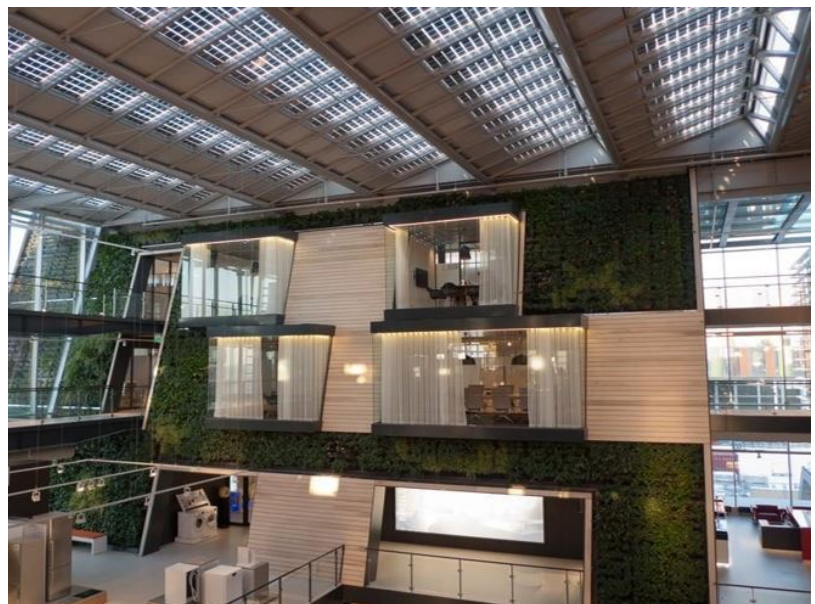
Set against a backdrop of Charlotte’s lively Uptown Arts District, Ambassador Schuwer greeted an audience of community members and local stakeholders with praise for Charlotte’s progress towards becoming an environmentally-conscious community.

Considering that the Netherlands is a global leader in shifting business practices towards sustainability, it was a generous commendation for Charlotte. But as Schuwer explained in a thirty minute speech followed by a “fireside chat” with Envision Charlotte Executive Director Amy Aussieker, Dutch leadership comes by way of necessity-driven design.

The Netherlands’ recovery from the 2008 global recession was notably slower than its eurozone neighbors, Schuwer told the audience, and the circular economy emerged as a potentially important economic intervention. He went on to explain the [theory of the circular economy](#), which

suggests that wealth creation is derived through “radical resource productivity.” That’s a fancy way of saying that companies that reduce the costs of production by utilizing recycled inputs will be rewarded by the market.

To illustrate, an image from his slide deck showed the ultra-sustainable Bosch





Siemens Hausgeräte Inspiration House in Hoofddorp, outside of Amsterdam, part of a larger project called [Park 20/20](#) designed by American architect William McDonough. The development was built according to circular economy principals (or, “cradle to cradle” design, a term McDonough popularized with his 2002 book by the same name) and is 40 percent more energy efficient than current code.

Another factor in the Dutch sustainability regime is concern for the outsized impact climate change could have on their country: parts of the Netherlands sit below sea-level. [Given the looming threat, a Dutch court](#) in 2015 ordered the government to cut carbon emissions by 25% within five years to protect its citizens from climate change in world’s first climate liability suit.

And yet, what the Dutch can do, Americans can do, seemed to be part of the diplomat’s message. Entreating the audience to see things differently, to be well-rounded instead of narrow-minded, Schuwer showed how the old approach to business the world has known for more than a century and a half is troublingly linear. In that old industrial model, raw materials like iron and aluminum are taken out of the earth, made into things like refrigerators and soda cans and, at the end of their useful life, tossed out. The circular economy, by contrast, is not flat but round, a wheel-like, non-linear flow of stuff that’s constantly “regenerating.”

After a vigorous question and answer session with local stakeholders and community leaders, the take-home message for Charlotte was clearly that we should view the circular economy as one way to make money—and support livelihoods – in an increasingly resource-constrained world. It’s a message that Envision Charlotte shares. And, through our work to spark conversation and action around sustainability since 2011 in uptown Charlotte and beyond, it’s one we will continue to impart. We invite you to join us.

Bring friends and colleagues with you to future EcoNetwork Speakers Series lectures and other special events! Visit our website to learn more: [http://
envisioncharlotte.com](http://envisioncharlotte.com).

Photo provided by The Embassy of the Netherlands in Washington, D.C.