

# Hub Cities 2.0 for the 21st century

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**Publication date**

2016

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Urban Europe

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Arbonés Aran, N. (2016). Hub Cities 2.0 for the 21st century. In V. Mamadouh, & A. van Wageningen (Eds.), *Urban Europe: fifty tales of the city* (pp. 105-110). Amsterdam University Press.

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# Urban Europe

*Fifty Tales of the City*

*Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen (eds.)*

AUP

The publication of this book is made possible by generous grants from ACCESS EUROPE, ARTES, Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), City of Amsterdam and the EFL Foundation (Van Eesteren-Fluck & Van Lohuizen Stichting).



Originally published as: Virginie Mamadouh en Anne van Wageningen (red.), *EU@Amsterdam. Een stedelijke raad. Essays over de Europese stad*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015 [ISBN 978 96 6298 174 4]

Translation: Gioia Marini, Emma Rault, Giles Rosbander and Marc Warmerdam

Cover design: Sander Pinkse Boekproductie

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 94 6298 490 5

e-ISBN 978 90 4853 581 1

DOI 10.5117/9789462984905

NUR 740 | 754

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## 12. Hub Cities 2.0 for the 21st century

*Núria Arbonés Aran*

In recent years, cities such as Amsterdam have used the term *hub city* to define themselves in a global context. Hub cities are cities that play – or aspire to – a crucial role in the international and globalising economy. As such they form a hub, a ‘node’ of relevant traffic. What exactly is meant by this is open to different interpretations.

### Port City 2.0

In the beginning, the term hub city appeared to be primarily intended to indicate an upgrade of old international port cities with their booming open economies. The main difference was that today’s hub not only referred to the *physical* connections with other important hubs but also the *virtual* ones. Tangible signs of this shift were the old commercial areas and industrial zones in Western cities that had been largely rehabilitated as legacies and serviceable for more high-quality manufacturing industries and services in accordance with the digital age. These places received names with symbols such as @ or # as a reference to their upgrade to new urban economies. Hub cities can also be recognised by their metropolitan character: they are cities with an important, appealing and advanced spatial and functional infrastructure; an international look and feel; a certain grandeur; and a concentration of a cosmopolitan populace and culture.

### Competition

To be able to compete, hub cities must have a differentiated and communicable identity as its brand. Many cities in the Western

world have presented this identity with symbols related to ports of which the hallmarks are openness, prosperity, tolerance, hospitality, a melting pot of cultures, inventiveness, freedom and safety, and a port of connectivity. This also fits perfectly the classic definition of port cities as prosperous commercial enclaves whose success was mainly due to their ability to transform primary goods and ideas into commercial value. Port cities were seen as places where needs and trends could be identified more quickly, where diversity was a guarantee for plenty of ideas, and where commerce yielded an inexhaustible source of industriousness and prosperity. Since the 1970s, Amsterdam has often used this image to define an important part of its character as a progressive city. This allowed Amsterdam to recover its image of openness, entrepreneurship and tolerance that had characterised the city, not only because of its tradition of trade but also due to the ideas of philosophers such as Spinoza.

The allegories of port cities such as Amsterdam are that they were a welcoming environment because the city's commercial tradition had an egalitarian effect on society. This can be explained using what Jane Jacobs calls the morality of commerce – a morality characterised by tolerance, integrity, resourcefulness, optimism and trust. In contrast to the morality of guards who had to defend the borders of territories, this morality was not designed to fight or mislead others but rather to engage in honest transactions and interactions: weigh merchandise carefully, sell no defective material, take part in untainted competition, offer a fair price for honest food and drink, etc. Based on this morality, port cities became open, tolerant and safe for innovation and differences in opinion. Well-known city experts such as Max Weber, Jane Jacobs and Saskia Sassen have shown that such things as science and critical art have been able to thrive as a result of this climate.

At first, the hub city appeared to be an upgrade of the tolerant and commercial allegory of the port city in the context of the 21st century. But it soon became clear that with this upgrade, the significance and legitimisation of the port city had shifted. Somehow the hub was given *carte blanche* to bid in the contest

for the best place in a globalising world. A certain kind of rhetoric has become common practice in this contest, and it is a rhetoric that resembles the monopolistic doctrine of strategic management striving for total market conquest. In this contest, anything goes. This is also the so-called 'business-as-war strategy', full of militant language inspired by quotes from Attila the Hun, Machiavelli and General Patton.

The business-as-war theories can be described as pessimistic because they assume that man is by nature bad. Their reference point is that it is permissible to grab anything that can be grabbed before anyone else does. The idea is also that goods in the world are scarce, just as talent is, and that it is therefore one's duty to conduct oneself in a combative manner in the world and to enter into strategic alliances. Business-as-war theories also hold that it is perfectly legitimate to mislead the competition in order to reach the higher goal: victory.

In these competitive business-as-war theories, the strategic forces of the city become like dependent units with the purpose of acquiring scarce resources. This simplifies the ultimate function of the hub city to its most basic level: to swiftly amass enough incomes, investors and the targeted populace – the right students, the specific talent in each sector, the proper tourists. Eat in order not to be eaten and grab whatever you can grab before it's too late. This has resulted in a kind of militant language in which immoderate self-praise is seen as a virtue.

It would be laughable if it were not for the fact that such strategies have been used for a long time as if they were synonymous with commercial and economic thought. While it may not be implemented wholeheartedly, it is widely accepted as an unavoidable human evil. This is a shame because it has gone so far that even educational institutions have begun calling their students 'clients' that ensure liquidity. This is why the focus on international talent is seen as a lucrative tool and a necessary instrument to be able to survive in times like these. In this line of thought, it is no longer a contradiction to extol certain target groups as very welcome even as they are mainly seen as sources of income.

## Discomfort

This discrepancy might explain why the language that hub cities have come to use feels increasingly discomfoting. Evidently in major cases such as the globalising city, it is difficult to find the right balance between on the one hand pure informative language and on the other hand propaganda. Hub cities have apparently felt compelled to go along with a somewhat crazy, self-flattering declaration of their character. When one repeatedly hears that Amsterdam is in its very DNA a hospitable, open and tolerant city with well-educated citizens who are open-minded and know many foreign languages, one recognises this as the making of 'hub city' propaganda. For the record, it is not that Amsterdam is not a nice city with nice people – on the contrary – but the self-evident manner in which such virtues are claimed is striking.

Values such as these are not innate and they are certainly not exclusive to specific peoples. The teachings of Spinoza, tolerance, international orientation – these things are not something you can inject into genes and they are also not magically inherited. Those with a capacity for foreign languages have learned and practised these languages themselves and the same goes for tolerance and openness. That is simply the way it is. This is also the reason the reputation of places is not a fact that is fixed for eternity. A credible, self-proclaimed, positive reputation can only be distilled from genuine substance that is continually moulded with great care. A good reputation is something that one must continuously live up to.

## Hub City 2.0

It turns out in the long run that hub cities that base their legitimacy and strategy on business-as-war theories can prove that they are by definition diverse, open and tolerant. But in fact, these strategies encourage the troops to fight for a future in which competitors are eliminated and in which prosperity is

preserved for their own city and tribe. Openness and honesty towards the other – the competitor – are by definition ruled out.

In recent years, a number of city marketing experts and practitioners have begun to doubt the legitimacy of these competitive strategies. The international academic literature on the subject has also been critical about the substance and usefulness of interpretations that rank cities and regions into winners and losers on the basis of a number of confusing criteria. The time is ripe for us to investigate the effect of economic scripts such as these and to write new ones. It appears that the moment has come for us to reconsider serious elementary issues with regard to so-called hub cities.

For what if, as the mayor of Paris said a few years ago, the city dares to recognise its mistakes and decides to blur the physical boundaries of the city with its *banlieues*, purely for the sake of all its inhabitants? What if a hub city follows not the theories of competitive strategists such as Michael Porter but instead philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza? What if a hub city embraces the allegories of a genuine metropolis in the original sense of the word – a ‘mother city’? The city as a loving mother, a refuge, who loves her children with all their talents but also all their imperfections, fears and nightmares. What if a hub city is not driven by the amassing and hoarding of money needed to finance a hypothetical future as an all-dominating city but instead is the place where all sorts of people can earn their money in the here and now, trading freely and safely on the basis of a commercial morality? What if hub cities start working together for the sake of humane laws and the interconnection of commerce, science, friendship and love? Wouldn’t hub cities and their inhabitants stand a much better chance if they were genuinely modest of being more prepared for the 21st century – our century?

## **The author**

**Núria Arbonés Aran** is programme director of City Marketing in Europe and Cities & Visitors at the Amsterdam University of



Applied Sciences. Through her research on image formation of places and people, she hopes to contribute to a more nuanced and realistic urban governance and opaque city marketing.

### **Further reading**

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