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Big is beautiful?

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A satellite night view of Europe, where the landmasses are outlined by a dense network of yellow and white city lights against a dark blue background. The lights are most concentrated in Western and Central Europe, with smaller clusters in the East and South.

Urban Europe

Fifty Tales of the City

EDITED BY

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen

Urban Europe

Fifty Tales of the City

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen (eds.)

AUP

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18. Big is beautiful?

Small-scale urban projects for a new century

Stan Majoor

All over Europe in the past three decades, the trend has been towards large-scale urban projects. The aim of these systematic interventions, developed in close collaboration between governments and large private investors, has been to strongly direct spatial, economic and social developments in specific sections of cities. Major construction programmes have been implemented around strategic locations in former port areas and at (new) transport nodes, especially those of the growing European high-speed train network. These programmes have involved a combination of offices, hotels, housing, retail, culture, entertainment and new public spaces. Notable projects in the Netherlands have included the Zuidas and the southern bank of the river IJ in Amsterdam and Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam. Comparable goals are being aimed for in projects such as HafenCity in Hamburg, Rive Gauche in Paris, Docklands in London and Donau City in Vienna. A discourse of globalisation and competition has naturally played a major role among the politicians and economic elites who initiated such transformations. They have emphasised the need for positioning cities better as a good place to live for new (and wealthy) residents and for accommodating high-value economic and cultural functions that would otherwise go elsewhere. In short, they have pointed to the importance of strengthening the nodal function of cities, especially in the service economy.

Have these large-scale spatial transformations in the recent past been successful? This is an important question, but in view of the large number and diversity of the projects, one that is not easy to answer. Moreover, one is always faced with the tricky methodological and political question of how success can be

measured. Generally speaking these projects have delivered what could be expected in view of their goals. The transformed city districts have indeed been enriched with high-quality residential and office space, facilities for consumers and (sometimes) culture. They have become vehicles for large-scale property investments, and some cities have been able to improve their position in economic networks – obviously at the expense of losses for others. In terms of urban planning, architecture and programme they have often reflected a fairly elitist view of the city. Many of these projects have not been fine examples of democratic participation in the development of their concepts and decision-making. Closed processes that depoliticised projects have been more typical. After all, according to their proponents the usefulness and necessity of the projects were beyond any doubt. But precisely this point is open to criticism. The profits have often gone to private developers, investors and owners, while the government authorities were the parties who made major preliminary investments and took risks.

Changing conditions and crisis effects

Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to see what the future value of such ‘urbanisation solutions’ is in the light of changing conditions and evolving societal values. Many large-scale projects in the recent past have strongly emphasised the creation of colossal (and speculative) office complexes in expensive market segments. However, a wide range of technical and societal developments are causing these traditional workplaces of the service economy to rapidly lose importance. There is a comparable degree of uncertainty about the future of large shopping centres. On the other hand, many areas still have a shortage of ‘urban living’ for a wide range of target groups. The city is currently popular as a place to live and work among business starters and (small) families, while older people too can find the amenities they need here, as well as something to do. These groups are seeking mixed

neighbourhoods with amenities and space for small-scale business activities. In accordance with this idea, modern cities should realign towards a more finely meshed structure of economic functions and an accessible housing market.

Besides this changing demand we are also seeing a development in thinking about how major urban transformations come about. The global financial and economic crisis of 2007-2009 once again showed that real-estate markets are growing ever more interlinked with international financial systems and have thus become more volatile. Due to their speculative and growth-oriented nature, major urban projects have contributed strongly to real-estate bubbles. The large property developers and financiers behind these projects have become more vulnerable and thus also more cautious. Another problem is that they often offer standard solutions that consumers experience as oppressive. The crisis, together with the partial stagnation of the traditional development model in many cities, has fuelled a shift towards a more participatory model of urban development that has slowly but surely been growing for some time. Residents and entrepreneurs are seeking control over their own (spatial) environment and are creating opportunities through innovative forms of spatial use and reuse or at locations where traditional developers and financiers see no potential.

Towards new urbanisation solutions

Urban transformation through such smaller-scale initiatives, closer to the end users, is an attractive perspective in a situation that involves, on the one hand, uncertainty and criticism of the one-sided results of many projects and, on the other, a need for more ownership – in a broad interpretation of the term – of urban space. The economic crisis has created opportunities for this. On many (temporarily) disused sites, possibilities are being granted to collectives of private persons for temporary functions. Projects commissioned on a private (collective) basis

in the housing market give groups of residents more control over the development of future living environments.

How can European cities of the 21st century enable such initiatives to grow into full-fledged elements that can replace the mostly large-scale, systematic projects of recent decades? One important challenge is to link the principles of small-scale approach and private initiative to larger societal, spatial and ecological transitions that are now facing cities. These transitions are wide-ranging, such as issues of inclusivity of neighbourhoods for all levels of society. How can we live and work together while retaining our diversity? How can we achieve high or higher density without a loss of quality? And what about the necessary energy and mobility transitions, in which cities must play an important role? The challenge is to enable small-scale approaches and private initiatives to also achieve collective goals, without becoming trapped in large-scale, systematic project planning.

Facilitating the small-scale approach

Government authorities in particular will need to change their approach. While in the recent past they have focused on collaboration with major financial institutions in designing cities, now a new role is required. Facilitating small-scale private initiatives feels counter-intuitive for many ambitious spatial planners who base their work on traditional control models. The origin of contemporary urban planning – both its ideas and its implementation in various planning guidelines and legislation – lies chiefly in government intervention in and regulation of ‘spontaneous’ development by individual owners and users. This is of course accompanied by all kinds of noble intentions for more fairness, more efficiency and more democratic control. Can spatial planning develop in a direction that remains in line with (or renews) these goals while offering more space for private initiatives? Can a new balance be found in the city between private initiative and controlling conditions?

For government authorities this will mean not determining everything themselves but instead trusting the creativity of the city and its players to take on responsibility. At the same time requirements will still have to be set, for instance in the area of accessibility and affordability. Democratic legitimisation of the direction taken by the urban development will also remain an important task of the authorities. Sometimes public (pre)investments will be needed, for instance in 'difficult' locations, or to give society a small push in the right direction. After all, not all urban nodes are taken up by private parties. This does not automatically mean large spatial goals will have to be abandoned: an accumulation of small steps can sometimes more effectively achieve a transition than changes that are imposed top-down and often prove difficult. Examples from Germany and the Netherlands show that recent (collective) self-construction projects for housing often offer much greater perspectives for an energy transition than do laborious rounds of negotiation between authorities and the business community at national and European level. In this way, urban policy has the potential to become not only more dynamic, but perhaps also more progressive and effective.

Is this picture overly optimistic? The small-scale approach is certainly not a panacea for the new city. Nor will it do away with inequality, conflict and sometimes merciless economic processes of elimination. Rather, it is a way of thinking and acting in order to deal with these issues in a pragmatic way, an approach for realising new futures and practices in the city, off the well-trodden path that in recent decades has mostly involved facilitating large-scale area development by institutional players. And so it is also a quest for new financing models that dispense with speculation and are implemented directly by the owners and users. The biggest problem lies with the planners and politicians themselves: they are still far too accustomed to the idea that only their (large-scale) interventions can change society and urban space in a positive way. For them, a new era means a necessary reflection on both planning instruments and their attitude towards society.

The author

Stan Majoor is Professor Coordination of Urban Issues at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and is coordinating the priority area Urban Management. His research interests are (new approaches to) coordinated area development, participatory planning processes and the organisation and implementation of urban policies.

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