26. New cities as testing grounds for a new urbanity

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If you think of ‘the European city’ you tend to think of an old city. Only rarely is this term associated with the new cities that developed half a century ago and that at the time were considered to be the European answer to both the congestion of the old cities and the resulting suburbanisation. The old cities attract millions of visitors every year. They are centres of culture and recreation. The fact that Euro Disney is situated in Marne-la-Vallée does not contribute to the popularity of this new city itself; for most people, it is first and foremost Disneyland Paris. The old cities are also the engines of the new economy, driven by knowledge, creativity and innovation, and are the old continent’s best hope in its efforts to compete with the ‘emerging markets’.

The urbanity of the European city is tremendously popular, and over the past years the focus of this interest has shifted from the busy commercial city centres to the surrounding districts, the creative living and working environments. These small-scale, multifunctional urban villages – city districts with an almost village-like quality, along the lines of Jane Jacobs’ Greenwich Village – are increasingly the destinations of city trips. This typical type of urbanity has grown to represent the ultimate benchmark in urbanity, one that every other place in Europe’s urbanised landscape is measured against.

In addition to the old cities, Europe has a number of new cities which were designed in the 1960s, and realised in large part in the following decades. The new cities are clearly distinct from the urbanity that characterises the old city. Where once they were the embodiment of an urban ideal that was intended to transcend the flaws of the old city, they now seem to have become the black sheep of the urban family. They are even depicted as having been
a planning failure which contributed to the decline of the old city and formed an obstacle to growth and regeneration. However, the question is whether the old cities can survive without the capacity for innovation that has characterised the new cities since their conception.

**Metropolitan landscapes**

The statistic is repeated ad nauseam: as of 2014, more than half of the global population lived in cities, and by 2050 this will have increased to two-thirds. But what does that tell us? The map of global urbanisation shows a number of metropolises that the major European cities – let alone the cities in the Netherlands – pale in comparison with. Some view the Netherlands as a densely-populated country with many small cities, while others view it as one single, sparsely-populated city – a city that, at nearly seventeen million inhabitants, still is nowhere close to being able to count itself among the major world cities.

What is true for the Netherlands is also true for many regions in Europe that are made up of an agglomeration of bigger cities, smaller towns, villages and suburban areas, connected by roads with ribbon development, motorways and railway lines, surrounded and separated by rural and recreational landscapes. The bigger European cities, such as London and Paris, also have this kind of fragmented structure, which rarely conforms to the familiar blueprint of a densely-concentrated city centre surrounded by more quiet residential districts ringed, in turn, by suburbs and leafy, affluent homes and neighbourhoods.

From a social point of view, suburbs can feel a lot more urban than many inner-city neighbourhoods, which will sometimes have a markedly suburban character. The fact that not every city dweller is an urbanite, that some urban neighbourhoods share many of the qualities of villages, and that the suburbs are in fact home to many urbanites has already been pointed out by many human geographers and urban sociologists. The
everyday reality of the urban landscape will often bear little resemblance to the original plans for the city. However, this European city – spread-out, but compact in comparison to other world cities – is the result of recurring attempts to create an attractive city for its residents.

The city as a residential town

Of course, the city is more than just a place to live – it is also a place to work and a centre for culture, both of which are also important draws for new groups moving to the city. Few economists would deny that the quality of life that a city offers is an important prerequisite for the flourishing of the urban economy. However, that this is a key element of a city’s identity is less evident than might be expected. Of course, the city always has people living in it – after all, there would be no city without a population – but for many, all the city really offers them in this regard is a roof over their head.

The city as a residential town does not come about as a result of the people that move there permanently, but in reaction to the departure of those who can afford to be based outside the city. In 1868, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted wrote that ‘No great town can long exist without great suburbs,’ but Central Park in New York – which he designed together with Calvert Vaux – was also conceived as a way of retaining wealthy residents in Manhattan.

Successive attempts at uniting urban and suburban qualities have effectively made the major European cities into metropolitan landscapes. They are the result of an ongoing process of seeking out and heightening those qualities that make the city an attractive place to live – which always partly occurs in response to suburbanisation, which kept flourishing in new forms. That search focuses on defining the nature of urbanity, a quicksilver concept that resists definition and continually changes meaning. Sometimes, it stands simply for bustle, diversity and
liveliness – with the obvious apparent contrast with the dull suburbs – while at other times, urbanity is thought of as being virtually synonymous with culture, civility and community, which renders it at odds with the reality of urban life.

New cities

In these metropolitan landscapes, the new cities created in the UK, France, Scandinavia, the Netherlands and various countries in Eastern Europe forty to fifty years ago take up a special place. Examples are the Villes Nouvelles (including Marne-la-Vallée, Cergy-Pontoise, Évry) surrounding Paris; Milton Keynes between London and Birmingham; Zoetermeer, Almere and a number of smaller so-called growth poles (or satellite towns) in the Netherlands; Nowa Huta near Krakow in Poland; and Hoyerswerda and Eisenhüttenstadt in the former German Democratic Republic. They were intended as a solution both to the congestion and lack of quality of life in the existing cities, and to the increased suburbanisation that was expected as a result of growing wealth and increased car ownership. The spectre of the unbridled sprawl of the US loomed, but this was not the only type of suburbanisation people were afraid of. Paris’ banlieues, with their endless sea of small houses (pavillons) interspersed with high-rises (grands ensembles) represented just as much of a spectre – and one that was altogether closer to home. In the early 1960s, the French president De Gaulle flew over the Paris conurbation together with the urban planner responsible for its design and spoke the memorable words: ‘Clean that mess up!’ Not long after that, a plan for five new satellite towns in the greater Paris area was on the table.

The damage to the landscape that could result from suburbanisation left unchecked, was – and still is – on the agenda. However, the new cities are also the umpteenth attempt to create a form of urbanity that could bring together the benefits of both urban and suburban living – all the benefits of the city without
the drawbacks, not just on a spatial and physical level. Socially, the new cities were intended to square the circle between individualisation and community. With this goal, they symbolise the ideals of urbanity and collectivity as an alternative to the chaotic disorder of the periphery and the *my home is my castle* mentality of the suburbs. These ambitions and ideals help define the new cities as a ‘modern’ project, perhaps the last major project to embody the modernity that defined post-war European urban planning. Around 1980, just at the point that architecture and urban planning were falling under the spell of postmodernism, the German philosopher Habermas described modernity as not a finished, but an ‘unfinished project’. Only a portion of the promises and expectations of this modern project ended up coming to fruition. This is also true for the new cities, which are quintessentially modern in character.

**The new city as an unfinished project**

The large 1960s high-rises on the outskirts of the major cities have assumed the role previously played by the inner city as the setting for crime novels and thrillers. If anything, the few novels or literary accounts of the new cities (for example Hoyerswerda, Évry, Cergy-Pontoise and Lelystad) are characterised by a sense of disappointment: about the failure of ideals and the puncturing of expectations. During the construction of those new cities, those expectations were adjusted on the hoof, to the extent that no new city would ever be able to meet them. Long before they neared completion, the ideal of the new city had been jettisoned in favour of a newfound appreciation of the old city. Urban regeneration and the transformation of the existing city became the new credo.

This newfound appreciation of the city coincided with the demise of the old economy. The major industries disappeared from the cities, and old industrial estates and port areas were transformed to better reflect an economy based on services and
knowledge. New museums and theatres were constructed to make the city attractive to a demographic of knowledge workers and large groups of visitors. In the wake of these developments, the ‘creative city’ arose, populated by a new creative class, in whom creativity was coupled with a low income. In view of this new urbanity, the still-incomplete new cities were immediately rendered obsolete. Where several years previously they had been prototypes of progress, now they were hangovers from the era of the organisation man, as William Whyte described the economy of large-scale industries and organisations. The new cities went from representing ideal examples of a new suburban urbanity to symbols of the anti-city.

What is striking is that this new urban ideal led to feverish attempts to also make the new cities more ‘urban’ – based on the somewhat limited conception of urbanity that lies at the heart of the concept of the creative city. But just as, back in Jane Jacobs’ time, Greenwich Village could not function without the diversity and cultural exchange facilitated by the scale of New York City as a whole, the creative city cannot exist without the new cities. Together they form part of agglomerations that are, effectively, the real new cities. Within these structures, the original new cities are home to the broad middle class, without whom the urban economy – and the urban system as a whole – cannot function, but who are increasingly unable to find affordable housing in the old city. The emphasis on the creative economy fails to recognise diversity as a key component of the vitality that enables a city to reinvent itself and shapeshift time and again. Currently, this vitality expresses itself in initiatives promoting self-organisation on different levels: from collective self-build projects to home care for the elderly, from the self-management of public space to the development of new meeting spaces, and from energy generation to urban agriculture. This is also referred to as ‘the new city-making’. These initiatives are not restricted to the creative districts in the old cities. The new cities in particular provide opportunities for an innovative approach in these areas. Suburban urbanity is an ideal environment for
the self-management of new public space, collective energy generation and urban agriculture.

**Suburban urbanism**

The relationship between the old and the new city is not static. The new cities are no longer suburban living areas exclusively for the middle classes. Socially, they are changing from being relatively stable environments into what might end up being the most dynamic of the conurbations. New groups of immigrants moving to the city settle there, alongside the more established immigrants who are improving their economic and social position and leaving the old city. While the new city is becoming more socio-economically and socio-culturally heterogeneous – and therefore more urban – the new ideal of urbanity actually seems to be ‘suburbanising’ the old city on a social and spatial level.

The ‘urban’ preference of new, highly educated urban families for the old city neighbourhoods has markedly suburban characteristics: sheltered urbanity, as urban geographer Lia Karsten describes it. This gives rise to a striking contrast between old cities that are suburbanising and new cities that are urbanising. It is time to breathe new life into the idea of *suburban urbanity*, which may in fact be the defining feature of the European city – not just to make the old city a more attractive place to live for those who can afford to settle there, but above all to return the ‘unfinished projects’ that are the new cities to their original position as testing grounds for a new urbanity.

**The author**

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Further reading


