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EuroPolis
from nowhere in particular
to particularly here

Europe is culturally diverse and that is a huge asset to be fostered. European cities as result of local culture therefore also vary a great deal. How can this uniquely European condition be preserved in a global trend towards standardisation, ultimately levelling the variety. EuroPolis traces the history of the European urban system, focussing on middle sizes cities and makes suggestions what the EU's role in supporting its diversity can be.

The idea of a unified Europe is at risk these days. Millions of refugees arrive, conflicts appear at its eastern and southern borders and the unevenly distributed competitiveness of the different European nation states reveal structural deficits that put the whole undertaking of a more united Europe at risk.   It is uncertain how the European Union and the whole continent post crisis will look like[1].

One result for sure will be that cities become more important. Increasing urbanisation accumulates more and more people to cities and migration from inside and outside Europe only reinforces this trend. Economic activity is more and more focussing on cities and consequently power shifts. The European Union has started to recognize that. In its 2014 – 2020 regional policy cities play a crucial role[2]. Alone, until now little has been decided and a sensible EU urban policy is still not in sight. To understand what this could be, it is worthwhile reflecting on the development of European cities in the past and developing a policy that is in line with general political goals but also with the unique European urban landscape.

THE EUROPEAN URBAN LANDSCAPE

The urban landscape of Europe is a result of its history. Its roots date back to the Roman Empire and since layer after layer has been added – partially erasing the previous ones, but often adding new urban centralities.

The romans considered representations of the central power in the vast territory they controlled essential to securing its possession and its borders. Consequently the whole Empire was covered with a network of cities, serving as military garrisons that soon developed into vibrant market places. The form of the Roman cities followed a standard system. They were located in strategic places: shallow river crossings, plateaus overlooking valleys or key through routes in mountainous landscapes.

With the decline of Roman rule gradually a more heterogeneous pattern of political rule emerged. Local war lords, dukes and kings each either extended already existing cities or transformed the areas around their castles into cities. With trade becoming more important trade posts along important routes flourished and also developed into larger settlements and ultimately cities.

The turbulent times of the middle ages with their frequent wars and constant shifts of borders

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[1] For scenarios for Europe until 2030: The EU and the East in 2030 published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, ISBN 978-3-95861-053-8
[2] http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/urban-development/

Figure 1. European Urban Network in Roman Empire (117 AD)
Source: author
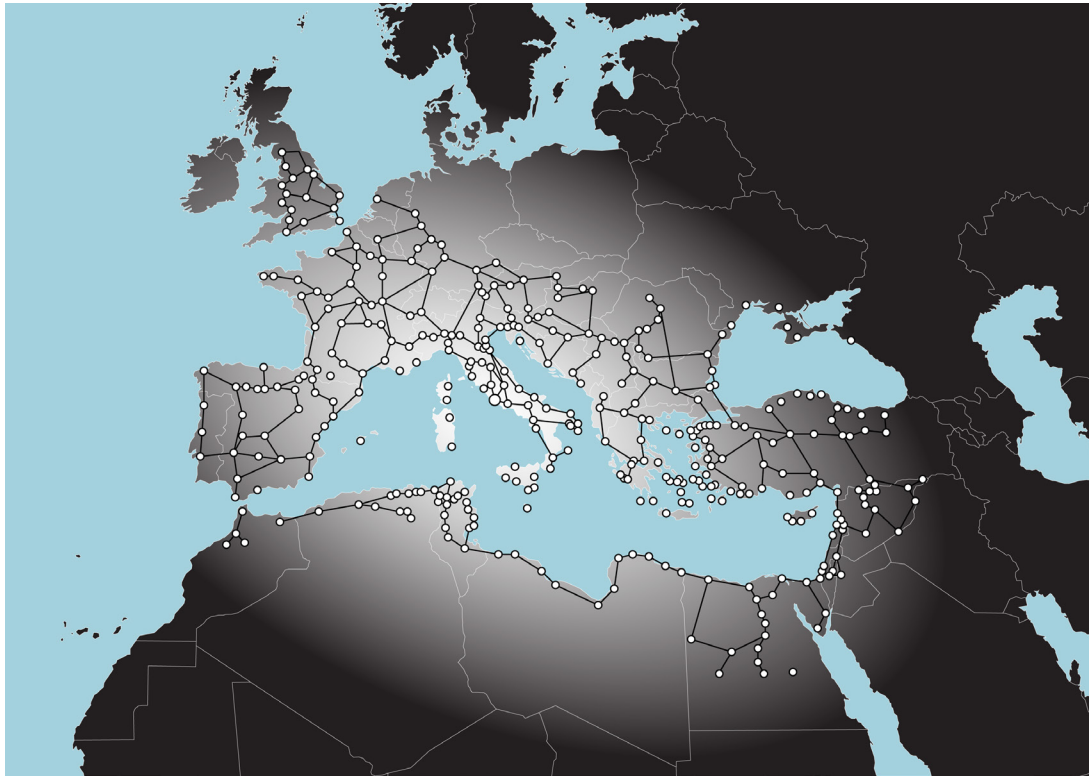
further increased the number of urban places in Europe since each local ruler aimed at securing the newly conquered lands by means of settlements. When in the 14th century the big medieval trade unions like the Hanseatic League and the Serenĕsima República de Venessia emerged, they could already base their activities on a relatively dense network of increasingly urban settlements.

The next layer of new urban cores unfolded in Europe during the industrial revolution. Areas rich in natural resources – above all coal and water – transformed into dense urban cores with some of the biggest cities of their time. All within few decades. During that time – but especially after World War II – Europe saw a significant increase in population. With established urban cores already overloaded and with industry still strongly polluting, planners sought to
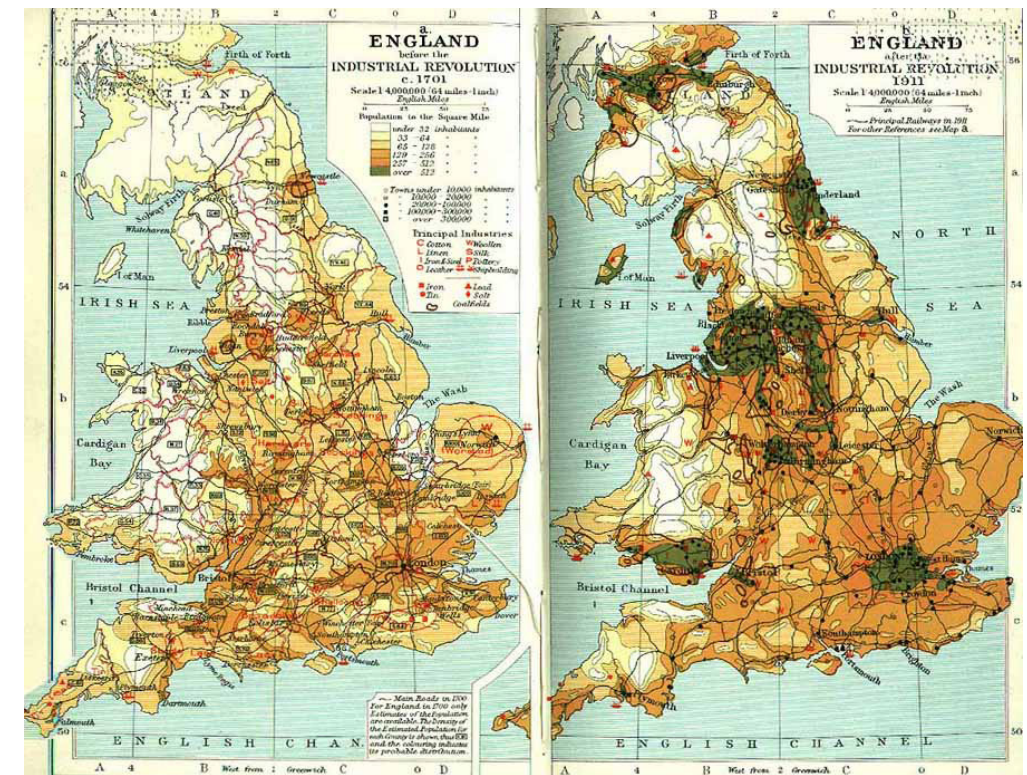
solve the problem in creating new urban cores – the new towns.

As a consequence of World War II and to avoid violent conflicts in the future, the European Community for coal and steel and its successors EC and EU were established. With it funds became available to help poorer regions, ultimately supporting the dispersed urban landscape that has emerged over the centuries.

Europe's urban landscape is a product of a number of facts and conditions that do and did not exist elsewhere in the world.

• A comparatively high population density over the centuries
• A relatively small overall size of Europe
• A frequent change in borders between spheres of influence within small territories
• For most of the time the absence of one strong

central power controlling large territories under a unified rule
• Topography and river network that could be handled with the means available at the time
• Cultural richness and diversity

An economic success story from early trade, to colonial expansion to technological innovationIn most regions of the world we find a very different urban pattern: Concentrated metropolises and metropolitan regions that house the majority of the population and economic activities with the rest of the country being relatively empty. Europe also has a number of metropolises (London, Paris, Moscow), and their weight has increased in the last two or three decades, but by no means are they as dominant as their counterparts in Asia or America.

Today one can conclude that in urban terms the-

re is no place like Europe. No other area in the world has managed to develop an equally overall dense, diverse and fine grain urban pattern – a pattern whose most important characteristic is the network of mid-size cities ranging from about 100.000 inhabitants to populations of just under one million.

But what is so special about them?
How do they differ from cities elsewhere?
And what is their potential in the future?

THE WORLD IS SPIKY AND EUROPE IS A HIGH PLATEAU

In a widely published research project, American sociologist Richard Florida[3] and his team found that persisting global trends lend themselves to a bigger and bigger concentration of talent, economic activity, wealth and business opportunities in few places – the metropolises of this

Figure 3. Population density in Europe
Source: Eurostat, Graphic: Author

Figure 4. Density distribution in Europe and elsewhere
Source: Author
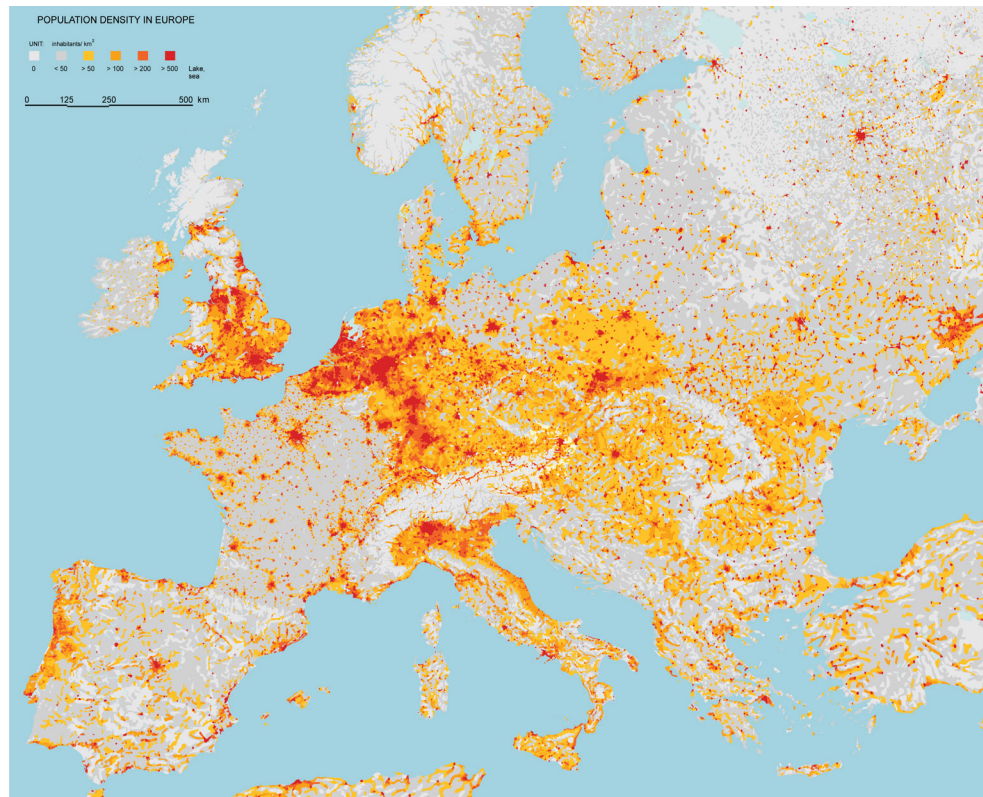
world, ranging from Tokyo in the East to Los Angeles in the West. The global economy therefore gets dominated by few spikes in an otherwise increasingly flat – read less developed – economic landscape. Florida foresees that this ever increasing concentration will lead to an economic victory of these metropolitan areas over other regions. The peaks become higher and the 'flatlands' become lower and lower – or in development terms: the metropolises flourish and become bigger and bigger metropolitan regions or megacities and the rest gradually gets decamped and obsolete as a place of human habitat.

On a closer look however, these 'flatlands' greatly differ. While they are low lying in most parts of the world, in Europe they form a high plateau which is largely made up by the dense network of mid-size European cities.

The economic model and its attractiveness to people worldwide greatly differs from the models on the rest of the globe[4]. While others are opting for ever growing concentration, Europe has adopted a distributed model that secures relatively even distribution of opportunities and avoids the negative effects of hyper-dense agglomerations for the benefit of the quality of life for a wide range of people in a large region. Above all it is this very condition that makes Europe so unique and does not compare to any other global region.

[3] Richard Florida: The world Is Spiky in The Atlantic Monthly, October 2005
[4] The 'Where to be born index' that measures where the best opportunities for a healthy and prosperous life are lists 10 European countries under the top 20. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Where-to-be-born_Index
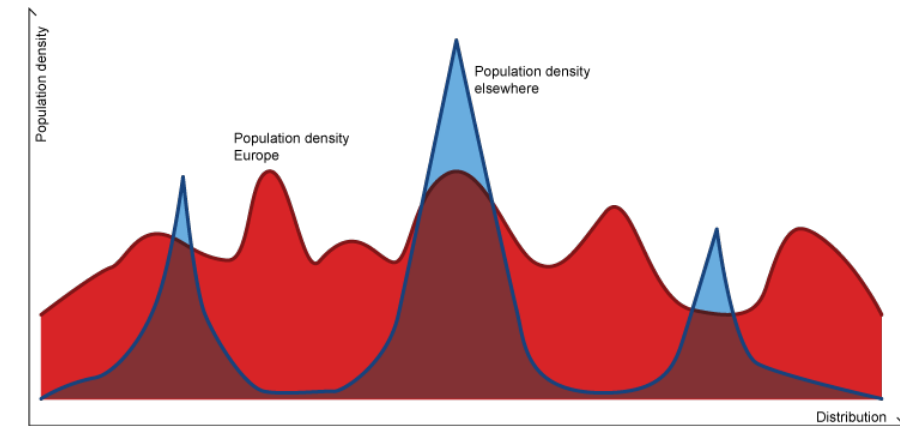
METROPOLITAN ASPIRATIONS

Despite this global uniqueness of the European urban fabric, the mid-size European cities compete. They compete globally with other, often significantly bigger urban agglomerations, and they compete with each other, both on a national and European level. While in the 1950's to 1980's the battle field was economic power and the ability to attract producing industries and trade, this changed to tertiary sector businesses in the decades after. To attract the new players, soft factors became more important: Quality of life – public safety, reliable legal systems, good education, social welfare, short commutes, good connectivity and a rich cultural life. With the former more or less achieved, especially the latter two became fields of action.

### FROM BILBAO TO HERFORD – IMPLANTED METROPOLITAN SCALE

While no exact date can be defined, when mid--size European cities started taking action, a single event, the opening of the Frank Gehry designed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in 1997 can be considered a game changer. A single building and the media hype it generated put a city that was largely unknown to most people outside Spain onto the map of global tourism. Bilbao became a city recognized worldwide by importing 'a touch of New York'. The city realized a genuinely metropolitan program in a context that was not metropolitan. By means of the Guggenheim, Bilbao all by a sudden had created a level playing field with other, much bigger cities that historically always had attracted more international interest. This could be clearly measured by the number of overnight stays in the city and has been widely described as the 'Bilbao Effect'[5].

Another example – this time changing connectivity patterns – is Lille's Euralille (First phase opened in 1994). The construction of the high speed train line between the Channel Tunnel, Brussels and Paris was used to establish an entirely new business quarter, drawing its success not from spatial proximity to any of the metropolitan cities but from the possibility to reach London, Paris and Brussels, three capitals within less than 1/2 hours[6]. With this genuinely metropolitan piece of infrastructure, Lille was able to attract the headquarters of some of the biggest retailers of Europe[7] and became a place of living for commuters working in the northern outskirts

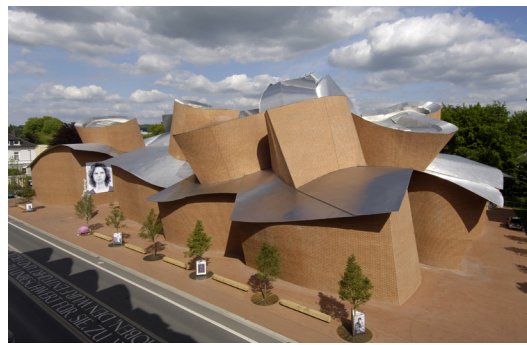[5] A summary about the 'Bilbao effect' can be found here: http://www.forbes.com/2002/02/20/0220conn.html
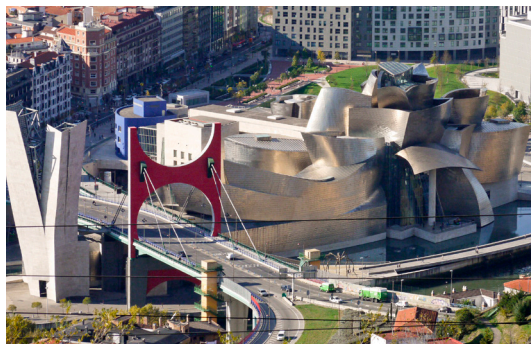
of Paris and commuting by high speed train.

Over the course of the last two decades almost every mid-size European city developed its own smaller or bigger 'Guggenheim', hoping of the same effect observed in Bilbao. While some were reasonable successful, for many others these metropolitan implants turned out to be hugely expensive sinks of tax payer's money with little to no effects. The Marta in Herford – designed by the same architect as the Guggenheim – did not manage to attract more tourists. The numbers of overnight stays were even lower in the year of the opening than the years before the museum enriched the cultural landscape of the city. One of the reasons can be sought in the lack of understanding that it needs more than a new building. A rarely talked about fact of Bilbao's development is that the Guggenheim is only the crown jewel of a city regeneration program called 'Bilbao Ria 2000'[8]. Started in 1992, this program laid the foundations for the cities success in the last 20 years. The necessary regeneration of the steel and harbour industries was used to improve the quality of the urban environment of the city on a broad front. New transport infrastructure, new city quarters, reduction of environmental pollution, a new airport and other programs attracting people all contributed to the popularity of the city. In the meantime it has become common ground that only a broader approach that combines regeneration with new inserts of program has a chance of succeeding.

EU POLICY AS A DRIVER OF QUALITY AND UNIFORMITY

The European Union and its predecessors have led to significant quality improvements of cities, particularly in Western and Central Europe. Structure funds, cultural funds and programs[9] such as the European Capital of Culture have delivered stimulus that has profoundly changed most of the mid-size European cities in the last 30 years. Today, next to national programs, these programs form important drivers for regeneration. The complete overhaul of Spanish cities, such as the revival of Barcelona, was only possible with the help of EU funds.

However the political aim of the European Union to achieve comparable living standards in all regions has led to a funding system that tends to supports 'comparable' and therefore uniform solutions with lesser importance on regional background and specifics. This is further enhanced by the central – read EU commissioned – decision making and unified procurement regulations[10]. The fact that many planners and designers, especially the stars of each discipline, operate in many places in parallel adds to an increasing uniformity. The omnipresence of information via electronic media allows for almost real time spreading of new or promising ideas that then are copied everywhere. Not always with success. The model of implanting a sensational metropolitan flavour to these mid-size cities also dates quickly. The 'Bilbao effect' slowly vanishes and – to keep the profile up – a new sensation needs to be presented every 20 to 25 years.

As a result of these trends mid-size European cities become more and more similar in their appearance and the concepts they use. The incredibly rich and diverse urban landscape in Europe gradually gets replaced by a European consensus model – in a way a biggest common denominator. This model however has its flaws: It depends on availability and continuity of the same funding streams as in the past. It also depends on sustained and positive economic and demographic prospects of the individual localities the programs are supposed to support. That is not a given everywhere. Some regions loose big amounts of their population . Especially those regions with an erosion of their once thriving industrial base and traditionally rural and poor areas are affected. With the people the money disappears as well. Lower tax revenues, lower purchase power and subsequently lower private investment all in the end increase the pressure on the public budgets. But even in more prosperous and thriving regions, communities are struggling to secure the budgets necessary for metropolitan projects due to public debts beyond reasonable and economically affordable levels[11]. Furthermore it seems that local population has become tired of the conflict laden discussions around the future course of their city and prefer the comfort of 'the good life' – a trend that local politics try to provide for in avoiding any initiatives that could be controversial. But big investments in big infrastructural or cultural projects – especially when there is no immediate necessity – are almost always controversial and, even though desirable for a city's competitiveness, often do not happen anymore.

A NEW CULTURE – ACTUALLY – AN OLD ONE BUT WITH SOME TWEAKS

Mid-size European cities simply have to invent new models for the future if they want to stay competitive for talent, tourists and trade. But how? To come to a new model, it might be worthwhile looking back. The lack of unity that existed in Europe for most of its history has delivered a key ingredient to originality: the uniqueness of places and a strong local identity. Rather than the EU, the member states and city governments trying to level differences, they should celebrate and use them as the basic ingredients to developing a contemporary local

6 Travel time Lille–London(St.Pancras):1:23h,Lille–Paris(Nord):1:01h,Lille–Bruxelles(Midi):0:35h
7 Auchan,AmazonEurope,3Suisses,Decathlon,LaRedouteandmanymorehavetheirheadquartersinGreaterLilleandalso many logistic hubs serving the North of France and BeNeLux are located here.
8 http://www.bilbaoria2000.org/
9 URBANIasaprogramtoimproveEUcitieswaslaunchedin1994.ProlongedasURBANIIitranuntil2006.Afterthatitwas integratedintothemoregeneralEUprogramsfosteringcohesion.Nexttothistopdownfundingprogram,URBACTserves as a networking program for all EU cities and towns.

10 MoreinformationoftheEU'sprocurementprocessandnormscanbefoundhere:http://ec.europa.eu/growth/single--market/public-procurement/index_en.htm
11 OneexamplefromthecomparativelyrichGermany:http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/wirtschaftspolitik/marode-fi-nanzen-die-pleite-an-rhein-und-ruhr-13319575.html

DNA. Setting, urban spaces, buildings, traditions, craftsmanship, mentality… – they all are different between many places in Europe and should inform this genome as they did in the past rather than being a generic unrooted add--on to something already defined – it should deliver a genuine Europolitan City. Europolitan urban culture should not be mistaken for a new form of nationalism or separatism. In the contrary – it is a truly European approach fostering a better understanding that being different but belonging together actually is a value and not a problem.

Almost naturally such a new urban culture would help achieving a number of goals and allow utilizing concepts that pave the way into the future. And the good thing is – its individual elements are already being used and happening all over Europe. Alone – it is not happening in a co-ordinated and consistent way.

MORE EXCLUSIVE AND MORE INCLUSIVE

Using local traditions and existing urban environments should form a starting point. Since many cities are still relatively different and unique, they can build on that. Further developing the inherent qualities of open spaces and buildings that have been emerging over the last 2000 years will boost the exclusivity, rather than reduce it. On the social side such an approach would lead to more inclusiveness since a more local approach also can help activating social groups that usually are overlooked or do not have a stake in urban development since they cannot compete with international investment, price levels or speed.

A good example of a place using this approach successfully can be found in a city like Amsterdam. The historic structure of the city limits the amount of cars it can sensibly take. Rather than building more and more roads, Amsterdam has reverted to promoting the bicycle as the mobility means of choice. This not only has led to the preservation of the historic center but also keeps small businesses afloat that – without the limitation on cars and therefore the need for service provision closer by – would be outpriced by suburban shopping centers. In Amsterdam you still find super markets and construction markets all over inner city locations. This leads to a more even distribution of services and with the bike as main means of transport different social groups also live closer together to keep the local urban society functioning.

MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE

A more local approach also relies more on what is there already. All mid-size cities in Western Europe have areas that are under-utilized due to demographic changes and the change from an industrial production to a post-industrial service industry: Old shipyards, factories, public buildings and in some places even office locations. Rather than destroying them they can form a key ingredient to the local identity. Often they are silent reminders of a civic or industrial past that helped forming the city in its current shape. Destroying them would also mean deleting some of this rich culture. Instead they can be reused for different purposes. A factory can become anything – from a luxury loft quarter across a museum to the premises of new types of making industries. Ultimately reusing buildings not only keeps the local spirit but also reduces the environmental impact compared to removal and new construction.

There are many examples of this approach. A particularly interesting one is the city of Nantes. On the Ile de Nantes, a former shipyard, an

Figure 6a. Albert Heijn, biggest supermarket chain in the Netherlands. Shops in Amsterdam (excluding convenience stores). Average Size of an Albert Heijn supermarket: AH supermarket 800–1000 m²
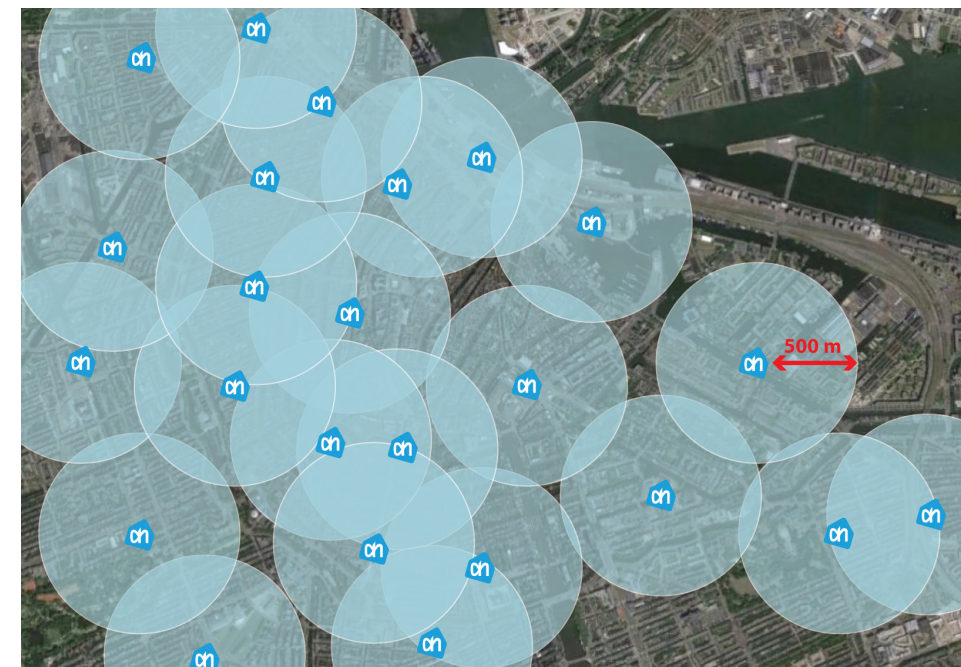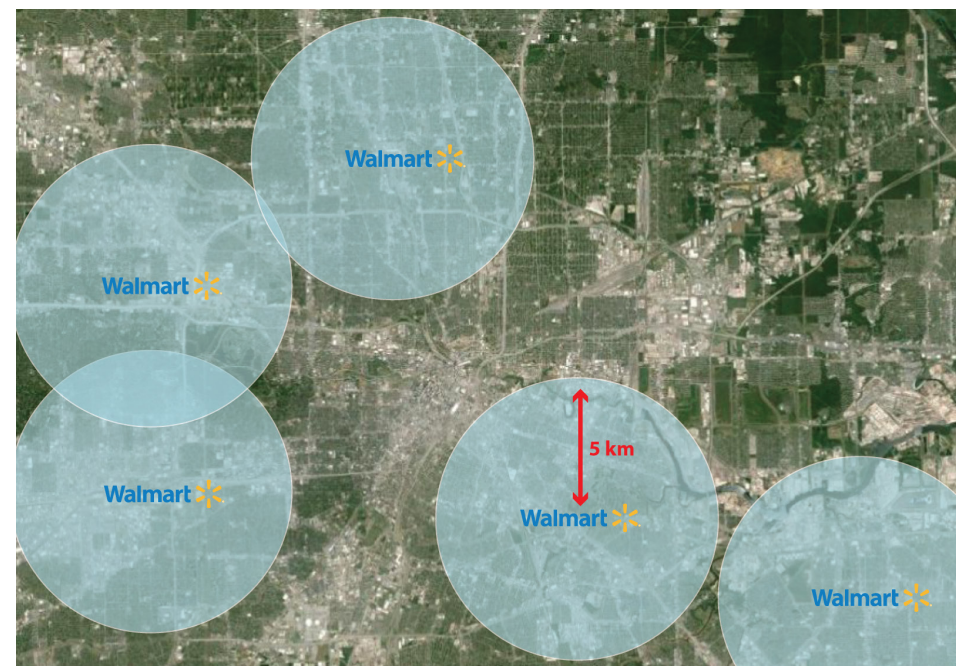Source: Author, Aerial pictures: Google

Figure 6b. Walmart, biggest supermarket chain in the USA. Shops in Houston. Average size of a Walmart supermarket: 18.000–26.000 m²
Source: Author, Aerial pictures: Google

entire new city quarter has been developed. Adaptive re-use of many of the old buildings today creates an interesting mix between old and new – something that feels very local and contemporary at the same time. The secret behind this successful attempt is that not only the spatial development but also the economic and cultural development of the place has been part of the undertaking. Machines de l'ile – the world famous group that builds enormous robot like elephants, figures and other fantasy creatures have been allocated there, establishing a tourist and cultural hot spot. Local start ups have been allocated in only lightly touched up warehouses, keeping rents low and attracting a forward looking economic profile. The development and implementation of the new Ile de Nantes itself was a learning and transformation process for the established institutions and actors.

LOCALLY SOURCED

A truly local development model strongly leans on local knowledge and practice as well as people that understand the local context. This cannot be done with people from outside only. At the same time locally sourcing urban develop-

Figure 7a. La Fabrique Cultural Center – a new building on an old bunker
Source: Author

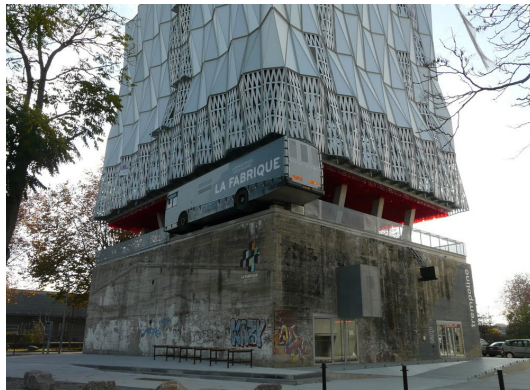**Figure 7b.** Office building at Rua Arthur III – a collage of a 1970's generic building with a 2000's intervention
Source: http://static.panoramio.com/photos/large/53392160.jpg

Figure 7c. Place Francois II – an eclectic mix of old and new
Source: google street view

Figure 7d. Old factory hall – transformed into a covered public park and the home of Les Machines de l'Ile – a performance group using large scale robots
Source: http://www.iledenantes.com/files/images/projet/les-fonderies/s190609adh025.jpg

ment does not mean excluding external contributions. They can be a very fruitful and refreshing addition and a critical testing force for any concept developed. Like business consultants that are considered important reviewers for companies, external companies and individuals can fulfil the role of unprejudiced reviewers that have no further reaching direct interests.

There are very few examples where larger cities are developing such a local model of urban development and governance. Locally sourced development therefore mainly can be found in smaller villages and towns. One example is the Swiss village of Vrin, where the local government and residents seek to develop the village but also its economic base out of local traditions[12] [13]. Bringing this approach to Europolitan level could be a role the EU is fulfilling in the future, for example by supporting potential candidate cities that are willing to pursue this direction.

MORE SOFTWARE DRIVEN AND LESS HARDWARE FOCUSSED

Urban development since Modernism has been focussed on creating urban hardware on industrial scale: buildings, roads, bridges, subway systems… . In many cases this is the result of the belief that more or less every problem in cities can be solved by technical means. Interestingly locally generated solutions usually rely less on technology and – if at all – more on low tech. This is the result of a much more experience-based observation of problems and the development of custom made solutions that ideally serve the purpose they have been developed for. Typically these solutions also are not hardware

Figure 8a. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/42/Vrin_Totenstube.jpg

Figure 8b. http://static.panoramio.com/photos/large/7482394.jpg

Figure 8c. http://www.detail.de/fileadmin/_migrated/pics/Textbau_Basel_Vrin.jpg

[12] The effort won the village of Vrin the European Award for village regeneration in 2010.
[13] More on the development of Vrin and other similar villages can be found in monthly Hochparterre – Themenheft Oktober 2014: "Surselva: Aufbruch im Dorf"

Figure 9a: Old People's Home in Horb, Germany: Big infrastructure isolating elderly and requiring costly specialist staff
Source: Author

Figure 9b: Collective housing of people suffering from dementia with other elderly: Small unit where social networks stay that is co-run by all and take care of by elderly not suffering from illnesses. It also allows them to receive free accommodation and a small salary, significantly reducing cost.
Source: http://www.die-pflegebibel.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/005-Tisch-decken_quer_Ronja-Gysin.jpg

only. They usually combine hardware with a particular way of using and operating it. They are hardware and software solutions.

Fostering such solutions and supporting the processes that let emerge them is a key task for local administrations. This however requires a reconsideration of current European tendering practice that typically aids larger, less local and more hardware based solutions.

MORE CREATIVE AND MORE INVOLVING

There is a global trend for standardisation. Obviously this helps establishing comparative quality across larger areas. But it also marginalizes or eliminates whatever does not comply and it levels out individuality and difference, which we recognised as a central ingredient to the European identity. While this is a desired trend where standards are helping improving product safety or increasing consumer rights and lead to quality improvements, in urban de-

Figure 10a: Waterfront of Dublin, Ireland
Source: Author

velopment standardisation often has the contrary effects. Cities lose their local flavour and with that the competitive edge and the unique selling points they have over other cities. This is not inevitable but it requires careful reconsideration of what is essential to quality and what is dispensable.

The both follow the same procurement and development model and deliver the generic waterfront that could also be in Hamburg, Marseille or St. Petersburg.

HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN?

EU urban policy as a chance to develop the Euopolitan City

The EU's increased focus on urban areas can be a chance to help achieving the Euopolitan City. It will require a shift in focus of any subsidy program related to cities. Rather than focussing on infrastructure and hardware only, they should be more integral to also target other key aspects that have a huge impact on cities – social, economic, cultural ones. The software of cities.

The fact that the EU has no direct role in urban and regional development in that context can be an asset to use actively. Rather than directly being involved in local development, the European Union could rather support general aims indirectly. How those are filled in however should re-

Figure 10b: Waterfront of Copenhagen, Denmark
Source: https://drscdn.500px.org/photo/11057987/m%3D2048/7494e-07443a7e7747e56d4847b7b4aa1
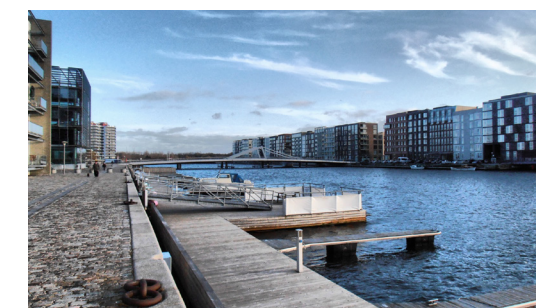
main subject to local interpretation.

Cities and other local stakeholders could develop proposals that are reviewed by a group of local and international experts. They check the proposal against its local rootedness, potential for achieving local goals, soundness of the business case, not only in the investment phase but also in operation. During the implementation this group also monitors progress and results that have been booked. The experience gained through this process should be immediately fed back into the supervisory system, informing and improving how it is operated.

In the medium and longer term this 'mentor model' not only delivers more local results but it also has the chance of reengaging local urban societies in European matters. The Europolitan City could become an integral and even essential tool of a post national and much more networked EU.

It could turn out that the a really United Europe is a lot more about what it has been before the nation state was invented: a rather successful collaboration model between cities.