The attractive city: Catalyst of Sustainable Urban Development

Van den Berg, Leo; Van de Meer, Jan; Oligaar, Alexander
Erasmus Univ. Rotterdam. Postbox 1738. NL-3000 DR Rotterdam

Hiri erakargarria lortzeko egin beharreko inbertsioak hirien ongizatea, oparotasuna eta garapen iraunkorra lortzen laguntzen duela argudiatzen dugu artikulu honetan. Informazio eta jakintzaren ekonomiarako trantsizioak erronka bat da tokiko gobernuen-tzat eta beste hainbat eragilerentzat, hiri erakargarri eta abegikorra, gizarte eta ingurumen orekatuko, sortzerakoan.


En este artículo, argüimos que la inversión en conseguir una ciudad atractiva contribuye al bienestar, prosperidad y desarrollo sostenible de las ciudades. La transición a una economía de la información y del conocimiento supone un reto para los gobiernos locales y otros actores a la hora de crear una ciudad atractiva y accesible con un equilibrio social y medioambiental.


Dans cet article, nous alléguions que l’investissement fait pour obtenir une ville attractive contribue au bien-être, à la prospérité et au développement durable des villes. Le passage à une économie de l’information et de la connaissance représente un défi pour les gouvernements locaux et autres acteurs au moment de créer une ville attractive et accessible possédant un équilibre social et environnemental.


INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, quality of life aspects determine how attractive locations are to people and business companies. Cities where the living is pleasant are often successful in economic terms as well. Presumably a city’s aesthetic qualities work as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth. Because the prime object of urban policy is to optimise welfare and prosperity (and therefore economic growth), many cities make efforts to make themselves more attractive. To that end they invest in provisions related to culture, sports, leisure, relaxation and shopping, as well as in public gardens and parks and improved access by private cars and public transport.

Such investments are supposed to contribute considerably to the sustainable development of the city. Success on that score requires not only a clear vision of the city’s future development but also consideration for the way users perceive urban services. Moreover, public and private actors are challenged to join forces, since governors and company managers alike are confronted with the same questions. What is an attractive city? How to increase a city’s attractiveness? And what should the role of the public and private sectors be? Those are the questions we like to discuss in this paper.

DYNAMICS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

With changes in the urban environment, the quality of life has become increasingly important to urban development. Economic, social, demographic and technological evolutions (exogenous factors) have in the past century affected the location behaviour of persons and companies and thus the role of cities in the economy [Van den Berg, 1987]. Success is not an enduring situation. Looking at the top ten of largest European cities since the year 1000, major changes have occurred through the years. Cities like Constantinople, Cordoba, Bruges, Milan and Sevilla used to be among the top three European cities (in 1000 and 1400 respectively), but were completely absent in the top 10 of 1900 [Hohenberg and Lees, 1985].

Fundamental developments have had a great impact on the shape and economic importance of cities. According to the Urban Life Cycle Theory, various stages in urban development can be distinguished [Van den Berg, 1987]. Until the nineteenth century, cities were compact settlements, mostly surrounded by walls and moats, enjoying their own rights and freedoms. The industrialisation of the (West-European) society from the nineteenth century onward had considerable consequences for the spatial dispersion of economic activities and for the social and economic role of cities. Industrialisation totally upset the work processes. Very unlike the agricultural community, in the industrial society many workplaces were crowding in and around the factories that had settled in the cities.

Because the population was relatively immobile, the factories in the city automatically attracted a dense concentration of workers. As a result, cities saw their population rising fast. Factories settled in certain cities not to their quality of life so much as to the proximity of raw materials and/or a logistically favourable situation (for instance on the seashore or near a river). The appeal of a location was thus more or less inherent to permanent aspects. Additionally, the distribution of the houses depended almost exclusively on that of the employment (‘people moved to where the factories were’).

In the course of the twentieth century, people could increasingly afford to live farther from the workplace thanks to their rising prosperity and greater mobility. New residential neighbourhoods arose around the inner cities, and villages at small distances from cities acquired slowly but surely an urban character. The advent of the motor car as an affordable means of transport made many people decide to leave the city for a cleaner, greener, safer and easier accessible suburbs, or even villages still farther afield. The spread of the residual function thus separated itself from that of employment. From the 1960s onward the service sector has gained import in many West-European cities. In comparison with manufacturing industry, the service sector could choose locations without heeding permanent factors. As a result, employment deconcentrated as well.

The city in a new setting

The increasing mobility, the rising prosperity and the growing importance of the quality of life have not slowed down urbanisation; on the contrary, the proportion of people living in an urban environment has risen steadily since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Urbanisation led to the growth of cities first and to that of surrounding municipalities next, and the contrast between city and suburbs has become fuzzy as a result. In much-urbanised regions of Europe like the Dutch Randstad, Flanders, the Ruhr Area, Greater London and Greater Paris, cities tend to grow together, so that it has become very difficult to determine where a city begins and where it ends.

In the present social setting the city has gained a new content. Many economic activities have left to concentrate around nearby transport junctions, such as airports. The monocentric city has given way to the polycentric city region [Hall, 1995b]. The city is no longer the walled-in settlement of yore, but the hub of the urban regional network, consisting of several economic centres, among which the inner city of the central municipality. On that level, the term ‘functional urban region’ (FUR) is sometimes used for a region which from its home-to-work traffic constitutes something of a unity. The network building of cities manifests itself on even higher levels. Many cities in Europe form regional networks with a multitude of mutual functional eco-
The notion of ‘city’ has gained an emotional connotation. The place that used to be the city now determines the aspect of an entire region. Residents and companies situated formally outside the boundaries of the central municipality, yet feel a functional and emotional bond with ‘the city’. Functional relations are, for instance, home-to-work and home-shopping traffic (residents), producer-customer and supplier-producer relations (companies). Nor do visitors (tourists) bother with political-administrative municipal boundaries. In their perception, attractions formally outside the city boundaries belong to the city that stirred their imagination in the first place. People tend to imagine cities larger than by the existing administrative definition they are.

As residents, businesses and visitors become more mobile all the time through technological, social and political developments, competition between locations rises to an ever higher scale. And so, in that word-wide competition it is regions rather than cities that are the main actors. The status of a region (the perception of its qualities as a location for people and businesses as well as a tourist destination) relies, however, very much on the image of the city from which the region derives its name. One spatial consequence of the urbanisation process is that the city cannot possibly be regarded in isolation from the region, nor the reverse.

**Challenges for cities and implications for urban management**

Today, cities and metropolitan regions are confronted with several challenges that result from fundamental changes in our society. Cities face the transition to a new era, often referred to as post-industrial and a service economy, or –more recently– an information and knowledge economy. This transition can be considered the result of technological innovations (in ICT and transport, among others) and economic/political changes (trade liberalization, European integration). This new stage of urban development –the fourth stage in Van den Berg’s Urban Life Cycle– is accompanied by changes in the location preferences of people and firms, who make ever higher demands on location attractiveness (quality of life, safety) and accessibility. On the one hand, the city’s customers have become more footloose as their increasing mobility allows them to make a selection from a wide range of location options. On the other hand, however, the importance of location has only increased since the introduction of new technologies. In other words: distance might be dead (or anyway less important than it used to be), but location is still alive!

Cities have the potential to act as focal points in the knowledge economy, being the traditional places where knowledge is produced and exchanged. At the same time, however, cities run the risk of growing social exclusion, being a by-product of liberalisation and globalisation, and they face the threat of terror and clashes between cultures, which makes them more vulnerable in terms of safety and security.

The economic setting in which cities are now operating makes new demands on urban management. Globalisation, European integration and the increasing mobility of people and companies make for keener competition among cities. In the present phase of urban development as defined by Van den Berg [1987], more than ever before an active, anticipating and initiating role is reserved for the government. The local government, whose aim is to raise the prosperity of its citizens, must exert itself more energetically than before to enhance the city’s appeal to residents, companies and visitors. Increasingly, cities are expressly engaged in acquiring businesses, residents and visitors. They invest more consciously than they used to in their own part in the economy and try to assume a recognisable profile [Hall, 1995b].

**PROPERTIES OF THE ATTRACTIVE CITY**

Now that the importance of attractiveness has been pointed out, the question arises what factors nowadays determine the attractiveness of cities.

**Location behaviour and attraction factors**

The appeal of a certain location (not necessarily a city) depends on a multitude of factors and differs by target group (residents, business companies and visitors) [see Van den Berg, 1987]. In general, residents set store by good, affordable dwellings in a clean and safe environment, availability and diversification of employment and a generous supply of high-grade services related to education, culture, health care, relaxation, shopping, religion and social security. Companies choose their location –among other criteria– by availability of space, land prices, tax rates and other legal regulations, the quality and quantity of the labour supply, the presence of other establishments (suppliers and customers), the market demand, the status of a location, the quality of the living environment and the presence and quality of services in the close vicinity.

The location behaviour of residents, businesses and visitors has changed rather a lot in the last few decades. For residents the increased mobility has greatly lengthened the maximum home-to-work distance; the increased prosperity allows people to make ever higher demands on their dwellings, but also on the services in the immediate environment. The proliferation of single households and earning couples has also affected the spatial behaviour of residents.

Various developments have affected the spatial behaviour of companies. The advance of information and communication techniques has intensified
network building within and among companies. In our computerised society physical nearness is no longer necessary to maintain certain relationships [Castells, 1996]. That is not to say that face-to-face contacts are no longer needed. On the contrary, the increasing import of high-grade information, especially in creative, innovative and complex production processes (such as research & development, marketing and management), and the fact that economic activities are organised more and more in networks, make face-to-face contact all the more essential. Companies increasingly rely on access to information and on employees educated and trained to provide it. Therefore, the quality of life has become a prominent location factor. As in earlier days the workers moved to the factories, things are now reversed. Now, high-grade activities preferably settle in zones that satisfy the high requirements of employees as to the level of services and a pleasant living environment.

In general terms ‘soft’ location factors are becoming more important than traditional ‘hard’ ones [Funck, 1995]. Hard location factors are often easy to quantify and have a direct influence on the costs or revenues of a business (think of transportation costs and sales opportunities); examples are the geographical situation (market), the presence (and proximity) of services and the position in relation to transport and communication networks. Soft location factors are harder to quantify and their influence on profit is indirect; examples are the quality of life, the diversity and quality of cultural and leisure services, and the status of a given location.

The city: a collection of locations

The city is in fact a collection of locations. People decide to live in (or near) a city or to visit a city, and business companies decide to settle in (or near) a city, in consideration of a wide fan of factors. Not the quality of one given location (a house, a business building or an hotel) is decisive so much as the quality and accessibility of (urban) provisions. One motive for settling in a certain business park may be the proximity of a lively inner city. Some people choose a certain city to live in for its nearness to an area of natural beauty, others for its excellent schools, cultural services, and shops.

The appeal of a place also depends on the quality of other (proximate) locations; the travel costs to bridge the distance between two places decides how much they affect each other’s appeal [Van den Berg, 1987]. Improved access can enhance a given location. For an attractive city, internal accessibility is, therefore, vital. An excellent public-transport system and an adequate road network are indispensable elements in a polycentric city. Nor should the needs of pedestrians go unattended. For shopping and entertainment, ‘at walking distance’ appears to be still a valid criterion, in spite of the growing mobility.

In their endeavours to stimulate prosperity (the final objective of urban policy), governments need to take into account the attractiveness of the living environment (for residents) as well as the lure of the location environment (for companies) [Van den Berg, Klaassen and Van der Meer, 1990]. Presumably, to strive for (qualitative and sustainable) growth is preferable to stagnation or contraction [see, for instance, Funck, 1995]. Furthermore, it is realistic to assume that a pleasant living environment contributes to an attractive location environment, as high-educated employees tend to make high demands on their living environment.

In theory, the appeal of the living environment depends on the quality and accessibility of services, the living environment, the natural surroundings [see, among others, Van den Berg and others, 1990]. The attractiveness of the location environment is determined by factors such as the quality of the (potential) labour supply, technical provisions (the price-quality ratio of business locations and complementary services), technical infrastructure (accessibility; important for the living environment as well), and the geographic location with respect to economic gravity centres. Moreover, business companies, in choosing their location, consider the production structure of private enterprise in the city (with a view to easy supply, among other reasons), and the organising capacity of the government as partner of private enterprise [Van den Berg and others, 1990]. Local and national rules and regulations (among which taxes and incentives) may also affect the appeal to businesses.

An attractive city is composed of basic elements and distinguishing elements. To the first category belong such qualities as a clean and respectable environment, a varied and high-quality housing supply and good internal accessibility. Basic elements are the indispensable ingredients of an attractive city. Distinguishing elements determine the city’s position and status. Unusual buildings (so-called landmarks), museums and attractions serve as such.

Appeal to visitors and tourists

An attractive city draws not only residents and companies, but also tourists. A city’s attraction as a tourist destination relies on the presence of and access to primary as well as complementary tourist products [Van den Berg, Van der Borg and Van der Meer, 1995]. Such primary tourist products as attractions, museums, events, the climate and the landscape are the elements that draw the tourists in the first place, while the complementary products, such as hotels, restaurants, shops and convention centres, just add to the appeal. The spatial behaviour of visitors like that of many others is subject to change. People tend to take more frequent but shorter holidays [Van der Borg and Gotti, 1995], for which they choose from a lavish supply, from city trips near home to tours of exotic countries.

There was a time when everybody had one holiday a year in a fixed period. Nowadays the movements of tourists are hard to predict. Especially
active, cultural, varied and flexible holidays seem to enjoy a growing popularity. The visitor behaves more and more like a zapping consumer, wanting and able to compose his own package of activities [Amsterdam Tourist Board, 1998].

**The harmonious city: sustainable urban development**

From the above, the attraction that a city exerts may differ by function (living, working, leisure pursuits) and by target group (for instance, business tourists versus leisure tourists). Although cities will always specialise to some extent, a degree of equilib-rium in functions as well as target groups seems desirable. Negative aspects of monofunctionality are one-way traffic flows [Van den Berg, Klaassen and Van der Meer, 1990], lack of liveliness [Jacobs, 1961], and vulnerability to economic fluctuations and other exogenous changes. Moreover, the function and target groups appear to need each other. On the one hand that has to do with the rise of the network econ-omy and on the other with the wish to ensure the city\'s liveliness. A classic model of one-sided development is shown by Venice, where mass tourism has crowded out residents and business companies.

Cities are challenged to be harmonious not only in terms of functions and target groups, but also socially and environmentally. An accumulation of social problems (such as unemployment and crime) in a few neighbourhoods can have a nega-tive, degrading effect on a city. That is one reason why many cities nowadays strive for income different-ation within the neighbourhoods. On the other hand, the concentration of people of foreign extrac-tion, mostly co-inciding with concentration of social problems, appears to carry positive elements as well. Such concentrations underline the cosmopoli-tan character of a city [Hall, 1995b]. A good exam-plar of such a neighbourhood is Kreuzberg in Berlin, sometimes dubbed \"little Istanbul\" for its dense concentration of ethnic Turks. In that neighbour-hood, liberalised opening hours and a flexible gov-ernment policy have created scope for the development of an alternative economy (with mar-ket booths in the streets).

Environmental problems (such as air pollution and nuisance) also pose a threat to cities, as they negatively affect the quality of the location and liv-ing environment. As metropolitan regions tend to become polycentric, the demand for connections between the various centres grows. As a conse-quence, cities are challenged to find an optimum balance between accessibility and environment, promoting public transport and \‘smart growth\’ (avoiding unlimited suburbanisation).

**Promotion and image building**

In competing with others, cities cannot confine themselves to simply investing in the quality of urban services. To communicate the (acquired) attractiveness to people and business in and outside the city is also important [Funck, 1995]. To create a distinguishing image is one of the greatest challenges which cities are facing. Communication and image building are prominent elements of a strategic city-marketing policy [Van den Berg, Klaassen and Van der Meer, 1990]. A poor image can keep tourists away [Van den Berg, Van der Borg and Van der Meer, 1995] or businesses from establishing in the city.

In most cases, no univocal image of a city or a town quarter emerges. For one thing, the image is often dependent on the distance between the city and its (potential) \‘customer\’. The image on the national level may differ from that on the interna-tional scale. For another, there tend to be differ-ences among target groups – tourists take a different view from companies –or within target groups– for instance between social classes.

**INVESTING IN THE ATTRACTIVE CITY**

As pointed out above, residents, companies and visitors make claims on the city, such as a certain level of services and a high-quality living environ-ment. Investments in those location factors con-trIBUTE to the city\’s attractiveness. Modern infrastructure that improves the accessibility, and urban provisions for culture, sports, events, leisure, amusement and shopping are desirable to that end.

The local government will try for an optimum allocation on the level of city or region. Preferably, the investments contribute substantially to the prosperity and well-being of de inhabitants, for instance by generating sufficient employment even for the bottom layer of the labour market. Many municipalities invest in their city\’s attractiveness with a view to modernising their economic structure and/or putting new life in underprivileged neigh-bourhoods under the heading of \‘social revitalisa-tion\’. Social revitalisation helps the efforts of many municipalities to deal with threats of social dichoto-my (between poor and rich).

However, the government is not the only investor in that connection. Private parties can also do their bit towards a progressive city by investing in servic-es of culture, shopping, entertainment, leisure, edu-cation, etc. Besides, residents and business companies can invest in the city by beautifying the outsides of their houses and the immediate environ-ment of their house or business premises. Private investors tend to apply other criteria than the gov-ernment, and consequently are reluctant to invest in risky or low-profit projects, while ignoring the posi-tive effects that their investments might have on the attractiveness of the city. To private investors, the company\’s immediate profit is mostly the primary decider of the investment choice.

Nevertheless, to maximise the shareholder\’s value is no longer the only objective of business companies. For the sake of continuity they do pur-
sue other objectives. An increasing number of companies make investments that are not immediately profitable, but can indirectly have a favourable effect by improving the corporate image. Entrepreneurs are becoming aware of the wisdom to satisfy not only the shareholders, but also other influential parties (so-called stakeholders). Among them can be reckoned the employees, the people living in the environment of the company premises, the customers, the suppliers and common-interest groups. Hence, social involvement can be an instrument to avoid damage to a company's reputation, being a matter of 'enlightened' self-interest.

That self-interest can also manifest itself in relation to 'the attractive city'. For indeed, companies profit from a location in an attractive city because of a greater sales market, better accessibility, the availability of qualified staff and a good image. Therefore, it is not unthinkable that companies will increasingly become prepared to invest in the quality of the living environment, social revitalisation and city marketing [see also Funck, 1995].

The importance of organising capacity

The creation of an attractive city requires what we call 'organising capacity'. The divergent interests and the various functional and spatial relations among actors make investing in the attractive city an organisational challenge. Van den Berg, Braun and Van der Meer [1997] point out that organising capacity is the foundation of modern urban management. They define 'organising capacity' as the ability to bring all actors together for the purpose of together generating new ideas and develop and implementing a policy that responds to fundamental developments and creates conditions for sustainable economic growth. The organising capacity depends among other things on vision and strategy, public-private networks, political and social support and leadership.

A vision and a related strategy are helpful to get the parties aligned. Vision and strategy determine in what direction a city will develop, and that implies making choices, not only by the government but also by other actors in the city. Investments need to follow logically from the vision and strategy. The formulation of vision and strategy in consultation with relevant public and private actors (to get the necessary support) is to be regarded as presenting the city's profile. A market-oriented approach is preferable. In view of the city's strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and threats in the surroundings, development potentials can be identified. City marketing [see among others Van den Berg, Klaassen and Van der Meer, 1990] and region marketing [see among others Van 't Verlaat, 1997; De Kruijk, Otgaard and Renssen, 1998] are current management philosophies about developing an attractive city.

Co-operation among municipalities and between government and private enterprise is an essential condition for successful city marketing and region marketing. Public-private networks are indeed necessary to adjust investments in the attractive city to optimum effect. The formation of such networks depends on the level of co-operativeness found in a city or region. In many cases that is a question of culture, but spatial-economic circumstances (like a common opportunity or threat) can boost co-operativeness. Without political support, investment plans for an attractive city have little chance of success. Support from the national government and/or the European Commission is often a decisive factor for getting the necessary funds together. Besides, public investments depend on political decision making on various levels (from Europe down to the borough). Political support is also influenced by the social support. The support of the population and the private sector for certain investments is indeed essential to the level of services and the friendly welcome and attitude given to visitors of the city. A proud population adds to the positive image.

The fourth element of organising capacity is leadership. Leadership can be vested in a person as well as an organisation. In many cases the government takes the initiative to invest in the attractive city, but private actors, too, can assume leadership. A strong leader has authority, knowledge and the use of an extensive network. A charismatic personality enhances the capacity to activate others and get certain things done.

Effects of investment in the attractive city

Investment in the attractive city is not an objective by itself. In the vision of the (local) government, such investment should make an optimum contribution to the well-being and prosperity of the inhabitants. Funck [1995] points out that urban growth (in the broad sense) can manifest itself in different ways, such as population size (by age groups), the migration balance, commuting balance, the number of enterprises (by size, and control structure), the number of job opportunities (by quality groups, such as educational requirements, income categories, quality of workplace), income creation (as total or per capita income), urban taxes revenues, the sectoral structure of enterprises, and of urban employment (or of income creation), and the relative number of headquarter functions and of jobs in such functions.

In general, the local government is considered responsible for taking care that the investments produce adequate effects. Four types of effects can be distinguished: (1) a rise of the quality of the living and location environment; this effect can manifest itself for instance in a rising quality of services, transport infrastructure and public space; (2) a reinforcement of the economic structure; for instance evident in the rise of new growth poles in the city, the rise of new growth sectors and an increasing number of visitors; (3) a reinforcement of the social structure; this effect can manifest itself among other things in a decrease of unemployment, a rise
of the average income, a reduction of the social
dichotomy, a rise of the average educational level,
and a decline of crime; and (4) an improvement
of the image; for instance to be identified by market
research (inquiries) and indirectly to be derived from
an increase in the number of visitors, residents
and/or business companies. As a rule, investments
in the attractive city aim at one or more of the
above effects. It is important, however, to recognise
that the effects are not isolated, thus requiring an
comprehensive (overall) assessment.

TO CONCLUDE

The transition to an information and knowledge
economy demands a pro-active style of urban man-
agement. Cities need to respond to the increasing
demands of companies, visitors and inhabitants,
without sacrificing sustainable development. They
face the difficult task of combining attractiveness
and accessibility with a social and environmental
balance. The quality of the location environment
can no longer be isolated from the quality of the liv-
ing environment, especially not in knowledge-inten-
sive local economies. Obviously, local governments
are primarily responsible for taking care of a sus-
tainable urban development. They are expected to
take the lead in developing strategic visions on the
long-term future of their cities. But it is certainly
not a one-man action: other actors –including the
private sector– have to be involved in the process,
which requires organising capacity on behalf of the
local governments.

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