

# The city as trademark

We constantly hear about the debilitating effects of globalisation on third-world economies, but what does globalisation mean for towns,

cities and regions as destinations in the developed world?

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*Cities need to build their own unique identities on the basis of their own originality*

Any city that wants to remain visible in the global village will need to offer a unique proposition

For a long time, the world economy was determined by scarcity. Nowadays, it is abundance and the ability to fine-tune supply to individual desires and needs that are determinant. This applies not only to major brands such as Philips and leading supermarkets, but also to cities and regions. Any city that wants to remain visible in the global village will need to offer a unique proposition: it must be the setting for a unique range of original experiences, a place that cannot be copied, and which attracts a certain type of person in a certain stage of life to give form to its identity, further enriching it with their presence and behaviour.

Globalisation has shrunk the world. Borders have disappeared, both physically and culturally. One taste, one language, one art, one entertainment and, who knows, maybe with the further development of modern communication technology, one global mind. The development of a global culture offers social advantages, but disadvantages too. If the framework we live in grows more uniform, perhaps we will come to better understand each other worldwide, which in turn will facilitate effective access to knowledge, insights and ways of thinking from different cultures and worlds. On the other hand, we see that the global culture that has been manifested so far in the world – a superficial monoculture – is only inspiring and durable on a limited scale. This duality is becoming an increasingly important guideline in urban development. How much global culture should a city have in order to function as part of the modern, globally-orientated world? And how much culture may a city have before it loses its own identity and originality and becomes invisible?

How do you facilitate encounters with global culture without losing your own identity and originality? And how do you position yourself in a market that, with the growth of individualism, tends more and more to prefer the exotic to dull mediocrity?

Urban development will increasingly have to take shape from a global perspective. The strategic aspect of importing concepts and formulas from other parts of the world is no longer sufficient to be able to claim an enduring position on the market. Freedom of choice is one of the most important gains of Western society. Diversity is a prime condition of this. So a one-sided supply that is exclusively developed on the basis of the values of an all-comprehensive global culture will eventually fail to satisfy the public.

So the question is: How should you arrive

at new ideas and concepts? How do you abandon the current method of product innovation based on the principle of copying and elaborating on the knowledge, experience and success of others? And how do you forge new urban solutions, concepts, ideas and products that are surprising and distinctive, and which cannot be copied?

It is looking more and more as though we need not expect traditional marketing to come up with an answer to this. It is too much orientated towards the existing market and still assumes that a mission will be successful as long as you manage to adapt your supply to the demands of the market. The problem with this is that, on the basis of more or less the same analysis, that market will also generate more or less the same adequate positioning and market approach.

And if different parties target the same market, there is a great likelihood that they will gradually come to behave in the same way and resemble one another more and more. So it does not make much difference whether they have copied one another or simply been inspired by the same market. Their supply and positioning in the market will gradually become more and more identical, which is diametrically opposed to the market principle of freedom of choice and diversity. This is not such a problem in a highly regionally divided world, but in the modern, globalised world the formulas will become increasingly predictable and will eventually no longer be able to arouse the interest of the public.

#### Finding the right form

The growth of individualisation and globalisation offers opportunities for urban development to take shape proceeding from a different tradition. Never before have we been so free to arrange our lives in accordance with our individual desires and needs, no matter how whimsical or exotic these may be. Whatever your talent as a person, organisation, enterprise, region or city, the chance is greater than ever that somewhere in the world you will find people who will be interested in your talents, both personal and commercial. And this forms an essential basis for arriving at surprising and distinctive new ideas and developments from within, and therefore by definition original, distinctive, surprising and significant.

In terms of marketing and product innovation, however, this means that the world has to be more or less turned upside down. Everything we have learned about

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responding to the wishes and demands of the market will have to be replaced by responding to our own motivations. The more successful we are in that, the greater the chance that we will produce something original. For example, the better Amsterdam is able to create a unique culture in the long term, the greater the likelihood that it will be recognised and appreciated in the future.

This creates a new framework for giving shape to cities in terms of their origin, not exclusively in terms of their historical importance and a paralysing nostalgic desire to preserve the past, but from within, in terms of the city's cultural singularity and the unique chemistry between people. A physical ambition – a thousand homes, 20,000 sq metres of shops, 100,000 sq metres of offices, or a London-style shopping mall – is no longer enough. Instead, cities will have to develop a specific and unique identity, a place which is experienced as original and inimitable, which attracts a certain type of person in a certain stage of life to contribute to giving form to the identity of that city and further enriching it with their presence and behaviour.

What about Amsterdam's so-called Southern Axis or Zuidas, for example? As it looks at the moment, it will become the Manhattan of the Netherlands. Businesses and developers are fighting to establish their headquarters on the most expensive site in the country. All the same, it is worth reflecting on which Manhattan we are creating there. Are we trying to imitate the New York Manhattan? Or are we reflecting the trends in Berlin as a new European centre of commerce? And how should a specifically Amsterdam-style Manhattan look to distinguish itself from the other Manhattans in the world? What properties, qualities and image ought the Southern Axis to have in order to be able to perform a unique international function? And what culture should we develop there that is characteristic of Amsterdam – not invented, but original and rooted in the local and regional culture? Does that imply, for instance, that the Amsterdam Manhattan should be smaller in scale, more artistic, more wayward and village-like than its North American counterpart?

Thinking along these lines goes much further than a well-conceived spatial vision, an original architecture, or the copying of an attractive commercial concept. It includes the creation of an identity which can be appreciated in a unique way, which is profoundly original, and which cannot be copied, with the intention of extending and

accentuating the existing market position of a city so that its unique position can be claimed with even more conviction in the future. This touches on such points as scale, structure, programming, functions, leisure facilities, the sort of actions and activities that characterise the image of the city, events and – in the last resort – the chemistry of the people who operate there.

You could also consider shopping precincts along these lines. What ought the Almere shopping precinct to look like in order to strengthen the identity of that city? What chemistry are you looking for? What should presently make the environment of the city centre of Almere a unique experience that cannot be compared with any other shopping centre in the Netherlands? And what about the shopping precinct in, say, Bijlmermeer in South-East Amsterdam? Shopping precincts are situated in an environment that represents a culture of its own. All the same, almost every shopping precinct has the same image because they are developed on the basis of the idea that a shopping precinct is a physical facility. But once you have managed to grasp the identity of an area (why people live there), it becomes possible to give a shopping precinct an image and identity that people can relate to.

Think too, for example, of a specific range of shops, the scale, the type of interaction with customers, and specific events which can only be brought out to full effect in that shopping precinct. It follows automatically from this train of thought that the Bijlmermeer will generate a set of characteristics utterly different from those of, say, the inner city of The Hague. There is no longer any need to stick to the standard theme: Christmas, Valentine's Day, and so on. Each site will generate its own themes on the basis of its own originality, resulting in an ever greater suprapregional impact.

But that also calls for integrating new disciplines in urban development, a way of thinking that is not usual among planners, urban designers and architects. Urban developments must be given a more thematic content, but then on the basis of themes that are strongly rooted in the existing local identity and culture, so that the city's own market position can be claimed even more strongly in the future. The range of themes will then need expressing spatially as worlds of perception, so as to be able to offer the public a range of experiences that is unique and meaningful.



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