
Editorial: The future of the city system: dreams, idols and reality

Teresa de Noronha*

Research Centre for Spatial and Organizational Dynamics,
University of the Algarve, Portugal

Email: mtvaz@ualg.pt

*Corresponding author

Peter Nijkamp

Department of Spatial Economics,
VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Email: p.nijkamp@vu.nl

1 City policy: a search for urban idols

Cities are multi-faceted organisms that grow – or decline – in a complex force field that is shaped by

- 1 internal mechanisms (e.g., local labour or housing markets, demographic composition)
- 2 other competing cities – both in their vicinity and somewhere else on our planet
- 3 general regional, international or global drivers.

Cities in our modern world have turned into economic, cultural and logistic centres of economic development, which exert both centripetal and centrifugal forces on all actors involved, be it local or supra-local. The strategic management of urban agglomerations calls for fine-tuned and forward-looking urban policies [Nijkamp and Kourtit, 2011, (2012), p.291; Kourtit et al., (2013), p.5].

In the future, urban agglomerations – in particular, mega-cities – will likely become self-organising powerblocks that will call for focused administrative and governance structures, perhaps at a distance from a strong central government intervention. They will – based on subsidiarity principles – probably be more in charge of their own future, in particular in fields such as infrastructure and sustainable transport, ICT applications and logistic initiatives, land use and built environment, housing and labour market policy, international contacts and agreements, migration and cultural diversity policy, and social and educational policy. The governance of large urban agglomerations will most likely be based on rational, business-like principles, from a strict managerial perspective [Nijkamp and Kourtit, 2011; Kourtit et al., (2013), p.17].

In a recent article, McGee (2010) argues that modern urbanisation policies should not only address international (or global), national and local policy concerns, but also rural concerns. In his view, rural developments are increasingly less focused on peripheral areas, but are more and more to be seen as ‘extended urban spaces’. He then identifies various research priorities for these urban spaces, namely, understanding their reconfiguration, understanding their functional integration, establishing strategic policies on sustainable urban development trajectories, developing research on policy responses to urban sustainability challenges, and acquiring new insights into governance and management responses for achieving urban sustainability.

Recent study refers to various new pathways for innovative urban policy calling for governance and marketing of local based initiatives such as:

- need to improve local leadership and strategic decision-making capacity
- stimulation of innovative institutional and stakeholders’ behaviour, with a particular emphasis on creative knowledge-industries
- exploitation of physical, cultural and economic assets based on local strengths
- need to encourage local entrepreneurship and innovation based on private-public partnership (including SMEs)
- improvement of institutional coordination at all public decision-making levels
- enhancement of the knowledge and R&D basis of cities
- focus on urban neighbourhoods with an appropriate mix of users, investments and institutions
- employ culture and creativity in ‘place-making’ strategies in urban agglomerations
- development of an effective urban image and marketing strategy
- development of the city as a place ‘*to be 4 all*’ (Kourtit et al., 2013).

Which scientific tools do we have to address the uncertain future of our cities? A systemic view on the future is badly needed, as major policy decisions, e.g., on infrastructure or land use, will decisively influence the future course of cities. In the past years, several urban planners and researchers have resorted to ‘cool tools’, in particular scenario analysis, as vehicles to map out the orientation and bandwidth of urban developments in the future (see Nijkamp et al., 1997; Duranton, 2007; Rifkin, 2004). A very interesting and rather comprehensive scenario study on urban futures – for the year 2040 – in the Netherlands was recently produced by ter Weel et al. (2010). Against the background of general economic – including global – developments, the authors aim to stretch out two important future forces, viz. the division of labour and the evolution of cities economy [Kourtit et al., (2013), p.11]. By distinguishing two extreme developments for each of these two factors, they are able to design four ideal-typical scenarios for the urbanised economy in three decades from now. These scenarios are not predictions, but possible images of economic and urban futures of the country, which are marked by a mapping of uncertainties in the light of past developments, stylised facts, internal consistency and an open future. Such scenarios may function as ‘flight simulators’ for policy makers and stakeholders, so as to be pro-active and resilient. The scenarios distinguished in the study by ter Weel et al. (2010) assume various pathways on

the importance of human capital (e.g., levels of skills), the future of labour, urban development (e.g., urban sprawl), technological development (including ICT), globalisation forces (including trade and international business), and so forth. The central hypothesis is that the division of labour and the role of cities will determine the future of the urban economy [Kourtit et al., (2013), p.11]. Studies of this nature are especially useful to identify vulnerability parameters, tipping points, and bifurcation patterns in urban evolution.

An important question is of course, which city – or urban agglomeration – has been successful in implementing a strategy that boosts much support and broad recognition. One way to answer this question is to undertake a cross-comparative benchmark analysis based on measurable indicators of performance or success. Another way would be to inquire among people how satisfied they are with the socio-economic state in the city they live in. And finally, we might resort to expert opinion to get a balanced picture of the achievements of the city concerned. In the present special issue of the *International Journal of Global Environmental Sustainability* we have adopted the latter approach, in the sense that complementary information has been acquired from the two previous sources, wherever possible.

Clearly, in an election period, various political statements on the ideal future of a city are often voiced, but in the post-election period such voices are usually not heard anymore. It is therefore an important task and a great challenge to monitor urban development and to trace whether a city is still on course [Kourtit et al., (2013), p.12]. This is a fascinating task in the search for ‘urban idols’. Two elements are often missing in the search for ‘*urban idols*’:

- 1 a rational and transparent evaluation system for judging the broad economic, social, cultural, technological and ecological performance of a city
- 2 an advanced strategic performance management system for all stakeholders in the city as a whole in order to offer guidelines for managerial improvements in urban governance.

A solid evaluation of the broad, kaleidoscopic performance of cities has to be based on various judgment criteria which – with different degrees of political importance attached to them – will determine the outcome of this assessment exercise [Kourtit et al., (2013), p.12]. Thus, this special issue represents the justification for a comparative benchmarking experiment among various cities.

2 The contribution: from unexpected to expected

This publication exalts the beauty of cities as a solid instrument to promote them. After the introduction in this editorial, the publication is divided in two parts. Part A, ‘In search of beautiful cities’, includes a significant variety of perspectives on cities and their role as drivers of regional development.

The first contribution in Part A is offered by Karima Kourtit, Peter Nijkamp and Teresa de Noronha Vaz. They offer a general sketch of the drivers of city dynamics, against the background of a shrinking world, with more competition regarding the performance of cities. Who will be the winner or the urban ‘idol’?

In an original paper on ‘My urban idol 2050 – the city of Gothenburg’, Charlie Karlsson provides a scenario for the possible future development of the Gothenburg region determined by the potential of the city of Gothenburg. Its construction is based upon information and ideas of experts related to the city’s past experiences.

Next, the article by Jacques Poot and Emma Elisabeth Vloeimans entitled ‘“Urban world idol”: could Shanghai rank #1 by 2050?’, reinforces the interest in better perceiving and stimulating the economic performance and wellbeing of the city’s residents, considering that in the near future population will concentrate even more in urban areas. The authors identify Shanghai as the best city around 2050 and, assuming the prominence of Asia in the global world, in an optimistic view, they explain why that this city might even take the number one position in the world.

Antonia Gravagnuolo, Paolo Franco Biancamano, Mariarosaria Angrisano and Amalia Cancelliere analyse next in their paper ‘Assessment of waterfront attractiveness in port cities – Facebook 4 Urban Facelifts’ the factors that reinforce the sense of attractiveness of cities. Their research evaluates the changes in the attractiveness of urban waterfronts and focuses on the specificity of regeneration, growth, development and promotion of port cities. In this case the city of Torre Annunziata serves as a case study to evaluate urban quality, thereby helping stakeholders to define better conditions for sustainable development of port cities.

Among the multiplicity of factors to contribute to an improvement in the architectural aesthetics of cities, Palermo is then used as an example where urban renovation could have a huge impact on the city and, consequently, on the regional improvement. In their article on ‘Design and use of a Facebook 4 Urban Facelifts’, co-authored by Filomena Borriello, Paola Carone, Elvira Nicolini and Simona Panaro, the authors provide new methodological advances.

Part B of the journal is entitled ‘Assessment of beautiful cities’, and its chapters are more oriented towards a macroeconomic interpretation of regional analytical goals than the previous Part A. First, in a paper, entitled ‘Built to last: population aging and long run development in metropolitan Europe’, the authors Luisa Gagliardi and Marco Percoco identify the role of demography on the growth perspectives of European metropolitan areas. Their conclusions confirm how essential the demographic structures of the population are for the economic prospects of European cities and, furthermore, how those with higher levels of dependency ratios may have lower growth rates in the long run.

Another regional study is provided by Rupert Waters who, in his article, entitled ‘Clusters and resilience: economic growth in Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire’, analyses the most important knowledge economies in the UK Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire region. The author points out flows of knowledge and skills development as the major factors responsible for the formation of successful clusters and discusses how those have had a positive impact on the local economy.

In contrast to the previous discussion, the subsequent paper by José Andres Dominguez, Teresa de Noronha and Eric Vaz focuses on two neighbouring regions in the Southern periphery of Europe. In their contribution, called ‘Sustainability in the trans-border regions? The case of Andalusia – Algarve’, the authors identify the basic causes and constraints for the development of the Southern border between Spain and Portugal. They argue that national governance systems are of utmost importance for regional dynamics and furthermore that those municipalities with higher development levels are also less sustainable from an environmental point of view. In addition, fragile

socio-economic systems, either tourism-oriented, (in Portugal), or agri-business-oriented, (in Spain), seem to have their roots in the long-term past paths of development.

Next, the article, by Eduardo Dias, Marianne Linde and Henk J. Scholten, called ‘Geodesign: integrating geographical sciences and creative design in envisioning a ‘New Urban Europe’’, stresses the importance of uncoordinated human intervention, also as a factor of change in a world where the unexpected should be expected. The authors call for futures that are persistently designed with a full understanding of consequences and by integrating science and creativity in the design process. This contribution is a perfect end for this part when the authors explain that geodesign could facilitate the projections of a ‘*New Urban Europe*’ and probably help to better plan the use of land and minimise the long term irreversible costs of growth.

References

- Duranton, G. (2007) ‘Urban evolutions: the fast, the slow and the still’, *American Economic Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1, pp.197–221.
- Kourtit, K., Nijkamp, P. and Partridge, M. (2013) ‘The new urban world – opportunity meets challenge’, *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, Special issue, June, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp.149–151.
- McGee, T.G. (2010) ‘Building liveable cities in Asia in the twenty-first century’, *Malaysian Journal of Environmental Management*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp.14–28.
- Nijkamp, P. and Kourtit, K. (2011) *Urban Europe Scoping Document*, Joint Programming Initiative, Urban Europe, VU University, Amsterdam.
- Nijkamp, P. and Kourtit, K. (2012) ‘The ‘New Urban Europe’: global challenges and local responses in the urban century’, *European Planning Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp.291–315.
- Nijkamp, P., Rienstra, S. and Vleugel, J. (1997) *Transportation and the Future*, Wiley, New York.
- Rifkin, J. (2004) *The European Dream: How Europe’s Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, Penguin, New York.
- ter Weel, B., van der Horst, A. and Gelauff, G. (2010) *The Netherlands of 2040*, CPB Special Publication 88, Koninklijke De Swart, The Hague.