International Urban
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Association Internationale
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INTA

Cities in Metropolitan Regions -
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International symposium on urbanism
Organised by the City of Getafe, Getafe Unesco centre and INTA

Report on the symposium

The International Symposium on Sustainable Urbanism CITIES IN METROPOLITAN REGIONS, held in the city of Getafe by the Getafe Unesco Center on the 24th, 25th and 26th of November was remarkably rich in content and proposals.

The Municipality of Getafe and the Unesco Centre asked INTA to contribute to a forward looking analysis of the metropolitan process that affect the European territory. Speakers such as Bart Vink from the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure in charge of the long-term vision of the Randstad; Christer Larsson from the City of Malmö; David Kooris from the Regional Plan Association of New York; Jaime Lerner from Curitiba; Sonia Duran from the Region Capital in Columbia; Jose Maria Ezquiaga from the University of Madrid; Stéphane Cobo from RATP; Maurice Charrier, Vice President of Grand Lyon; Alfonso Martinez from Bilbao; as well as the Spanish Secretaries of State for Housing and Planning and many other speakers debated on the strategic factors of sustainable development of metropolitan regions such as metropolitan governance, new planning scales, public financing and better integration of municipalities and neighbourhoods.

The organisation of the metropolitan territory is a critical issue not only for the life of citizens, but also to ensure the efficient operations and relationship carried out every day by the various social and economic agents. Global trends such as globalisation, economic decline of developed economies, population shift and climate change are leading to a new geography of thinking. These transformations are challenges that go beyond political borders, surpassing the local scale of single municipalities. To be able to efficiently and rapidly confront them, there is a growing need for a metropolitan plan.

The Conference explored mechanisms that support new metropolitan synergies that aggregate functions rather than zoning them, that foster values rather than infrastructure (Alfonso Martinez). The cooperation of the different metropolitan stakeholders and the need for democratic governance were regarded as essential to articulate visions, identify alliances and provide space for synergy, flexibility and initiatives.

How can urban stakeholders either government, business and community, jointly produce a metropolitan narrative that is not only built around a common identity but also around common projects? How make sure that the metropole becomes a place of convergence rather than of clashes (Maurice Charrier)? What lessons can be learned from the Dutch Randstad or New York or Scandinavia examples of polycentrism, areas in which nodes concentrate activity and interactivity between themselves (Bart Vink).

In a context in which transport agencies make people moving less and energy operators how people can spend less energy, where divisions between work and home, center and periphery are being blurred, there are reasons to learn not to fear complexity, and to embrace it (Inés Sánchez de Madariaga, Carlos Pinto).
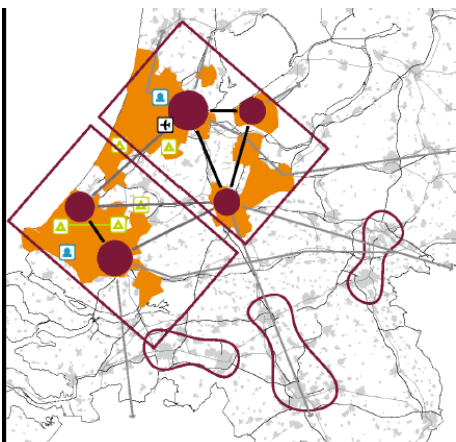
Randstad: the polycentric metropolis. Slide: Bart Vink

The metropolitan challenges

Complexity is a central feature to the metropolitan process: functional and fiscal zoning related to property tax is leading to an insufficient supply of housing and more unconnected office parks; the lack of diversification of investment severely reduces resilience of the territory (David Kooris); the "shrinkage" of public space and the loss of human quality are leading to spatial and social segregation, resulting in a metropolitan archipelago composed of large unconnected artefacts and islands (José Maria Ezquiaga). This process is encouraged by real estate promotors who build on the urge of people to live in protected areas. Interrupted models, also induced by the construction of dispersed commercial centres, the suburbanisation of families and the delocalisation of economic activity to the periphery bringing deterioration of the city centre and higher dependence on private transport (Stéphane Cobo). The impact of sprawl has implications across social, economic and environmental concerns at the detriment of the whole territory (Xerardo Estevez)..

Embracing complexity

Accepted complexity in the planning process can avoid fragmentation of the territory (Pedro Ortiz, Salvador Rueda). Distributed workplaces, provision of affordable housing in affluent neighbourhoods, mix functions and use a variety of urban forms, can generate a metropolitan anthology that can act as a platform for cooperation (Sonia Duran).

Strong leadership, both at central and local levels, is needed to articulate a collective vision and identify competences and talents. The State remains a player in metropolitan future by bringing together the different municipalities and funding projects of national interest. Mechanisms need to be designed to engage the broad group of stakeholders and shape a coalition that can help craft the vision (Pedro Castro).

If Metropolitan areas want to adapt to the urban reality, they need to introduce flexible mechanisms that allow participation and cooperation. The quality of relations between public and private actors and actions is one the major conditions for successful and sustainable development (José Manuel Vasquez).

Territorial associations such as the Regional Plan Association of New York or Deltametropool in the Randstad have been established to identify the scales at which current challenges function and to conduct objective research to conceptualise the public benefit of projects and articulate the relation between different projects. Through such associations change can be influenced and solutions identified to tackle challenges; they identify infrastructure investment that enables the region; support or oppose visions; predict places where future development might come; and create the connection between the different planning agencies.

"The spaghetti city" based on complexity". Slide: Christer Larsson

Weaving together public and private operations can help to integrate the urban development process, identifying flexible participation according to the project. The role of government and private sector needs to be objectively assessed; privatising technology parks for example is not likeable to be successful, because nobody will invest in the same way in infrastructure as the government can.

Successes are combination of individual and collective initiatives. Community participation in urban development projects needs to be encouraged, so that people can relate to the process. People know their communities better than we ever will. (David Kooris)

Intensification of intermodality nodes

Mixing functions (employment, residential, entertainment, retail) can create commuting systems that operate in both ways, spreading activity over the area. Models where people live far from work are unsustainable. We can provide housing closer to workspaces and workspaces closer to housing. Flexible workspace, where facilities, such as video conferencing are made available, can be foreseen in spaces of interaction, or the "Fourth Urban Space" (Christer Larsson); spaces where life, work and public services come together. These spaces will make it possible for people to move less and combine modes of transport.

Stations as spaces of interaction. Slide: Stéphane Cobo

Intensification of the area development around intermodality mobility hubs will create territorial density. Nodes need to be identified to stimulate the distribution of functions around the metropolitan region. A better coordination between land use and transportation, integration of modes of transport, including collectivised private transport such as public bikes or car sharing, will make it easier for people to make their movement more sustainable. Spatial development around mobility hubs can increase efficiency of car usage, provide alternatives to the use of the private car and stimulate multi-modal use.

We often see transport stations that turn their back to the city. They should be transformed in open areas of information, intermodal hubs, places of interaction where people can work, meet, exchange information and entertain (Stéphane Cobo). The economic downturn is constraining new constructions, which leads us to rethink how we can give new functions to existing infrastructure. Stations can be much more than what they are today.

A new phase for urban planning

Planning has become more complex and more humanistic. Trust, interaction and integration are key values that planners need to use. More than merely designing beauty, architecture is providing a frame in which unexpected things can happen. Good architects understand urban morphology and can help facilitate the urban process, using a variety of forms allowing a mixture of services and purposes (Pedro Ortiz).

Urban "acupuncture" (Jaime Lerner) - small scale projects - will help the metropolitan process and encourage a trickle down effect: the Government Island in New York, the green heart in the Netherlands, the airport city in Cundinamarca, the high-rise at the harbour in Malmö or in Spain. "Landscape cities" is a new way to look at the close integration

between Nature and City, where the built environment meets the sea and the landscape (Christer Larsson), defined by high-quality public space, supporting trust and integration.

Neighbourhoods at metropolitan scale
The metropolitan agenda needs to address the role of cities in agglomerations and identify potentials and challenges that the proximity of surrounding municipalities or neighbourhoods brings along. Neighbourhoods have to be opened to the city (Maurice Charrier). The conditions for successful development at the scale of the neighbourhood is good cooperation with the centre city ("couple de force") and projects that are defined by sustainability, experimentation and the quality of the relations between public and private actors and actions. The role of neighbourhoods is to receive the population - the challenge is the affordability of the housing and gentrification which needs to be addressed by public action.

Functions such as universities and hospitals can help to recognise the role of the neighbourhood, combined with mobility connections. High architectural value and high quality public space, similar to centre city, increase that value.

The Future is now
Urban leadership is defining a long-term vision that provides space for the variety of urban actors to implement projects; space for complexity, flexibility and contributions and space where talent can grow, activity can thrive and where the benefit for the public is enduring. This user-centered process involves policy-makers, economic actors, community members and designers.

Together, we need to invest in ideas and a flexible economy and in infrastructure that facilitates this. Common projects and a collective discussions come before the institutionalisation.

The future is today: addressing the long-term is a matter of urgency now.