



CALL FOR PAPERS Colloquium, Ghent University, 19-21 April 2012

MID-SIZE CITY.

THE DUAL NATURE OF URBAN IMAGERY IN EUROPE DURING THE LONG 20TH CENTURY

Urban life and the imageries surrounding it come in many shades and colors. The full spectrum however is little explored. Discussions in urban studies over the past two decades have been animated by the polarized attention to metropolitan urbanity on the one hand and to urban sprawl on the other. As yet, the mid-size city seems to be overlooked. Although the mid-size city presents the bulk of cities on the finely grained network of cities on the European continent, its middle of the road urbanity rarely stirs the imagination of the urban commentator.

While little thematized, the presence of the mid-size city in the contemporary reflection on the future of the metropolitan region is striking. The mid-size city seems to be the winning formula in the competition over new inhabitants. It proved to be very popular as an urban condition for living, working and recreating— maybe precisely because of its “normal” and little exciting character. Moreover, discussions on sustainable urban development are dominated by a vision of a polynuclear transport oriented environment. The *transition town movement* has repackaged the provincial city as the quintessence of ecologically responsible citizenship. A series of concrete projects have begun to address the urban ecology made up by regions of small and mid-size cities: the *Mid-Size Utopia* project of the Dutch urban planner’s office Zandbelt&vandenBerg, the reflections on distributed urbanisms and porous urban ecologies by the Italian planners Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò, the *City Visions Europe* project of the Berlage Institute etcetera.

The renewed interest in the mid-size city is also reflected in popular media. The Belgian city of Ghent, for instance, was the setting of a primetime crime series – a kind of city marketing that is now copied by several cities in the Low Countries. In more ‘serious’ film and literature genres, too, the mid-size city re-emerges as an environment that enables to describe ubiquitous ‘metropolitan’ phenomena against the contrasting background of a common place urban setting.

The upcoming colloquium will address the question of the mid-size city in greater depth by defining it not so much in terms of size, but rather by focusing on the specificity of the imageries surrounding it. The mid-size city will be explored as an elastic concept that can absorb a multitude of – often contradictory - images of urbanity, as a *milieu* in several senses of the word: an environment, a medium and an intermediate or hybrid form forging its own definition of urbanity.

Images of mid-sized cities seem to be marked by a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, they are often dissociated from a typically metropolitan urbanity, and profiled as an orderly accumulation of a number of well-defined urban functions (cultural, economic, educational, tourist, etcetera). Depicting itself as easily approachable, as wholly manageable, the “cozy” mid-size city seems to distance itself

from the fascinating but alienating chemistry surrounding the imagery of the metropolis. On the other hand, the metropolitan lifeworld seem to have seeped into medium-sized urbanity, bringing along typically urban psychosocial experiences. If urbanity is in the First World indeed not concentrated in the metropolis anymore, but an omnipresent phenomenon (as such notions as “the postsuburban condition” suggest), then perhaps it can be pre-eminently understood in mid-sized cities, where small-scale approachability is combined with metropolitan lifestyle. Inquiry into these cities may teach us one or two things about the new forms urbanity has adopted in a late modern context.

The dual imagery of medium-sized cities could, more precisely, be approached from a threefold angle:

1. **Material focus** | From a material point of view, we ask ourselves which concrete architectural elements abound in representations of mid-size cities. How do these cities combine material elements from both smaller townships and the metropolis in such a way as to signal a new kind of urbanity? Can we formulate critical architectural thresholds that turn a town into a mid-size city, and the latter, in turn, into a metropolis? Do mid-size cities, for instance, unlike smaller towns, portray escalators and traffic-free shopping streets, but do they, conversely, abstain from exhibiting metros and airports? Which are the recurrent elements?
2. **Functional focus** | The functional angle sheds light on the concrete urban functions that mid-size cities selectively profile themselves by. Which modernizing (shopping, university, high-tech, culture, etcetera) and historicizing (own identity and past, folklore, historic centre) functions are highlighted in their image-building? Is the official profile of these cities sometimes subject to reductionism, and if so, can artistic and fictional representations lay bare a more complex reality? Do novels and films, for instance, stage characters whose concrete experiences invalidate the approachability that city branding depicts? Or what happens when photography and film go beyond the clearly defined functional zones, into the periphery, the city’s indeterminate blind spots, its wastelands?
3. **Experiential focus** | The experiential viewpoint, which tends to be largely expressed in artistic images, focuses on how mid-size modes of urban experience are similar to or different from the metropolitan or small-town experience. What typifies this specific urban public domain? Artistic images of medium-sized cities seem to render typically metropolitan mentalities (as described by Simmel in *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, for instance), as well as deviant ones. While some urban areas (brothels, entertainment district, sites of economic activity, consumer spaces) may stage scenes that are reminiscent of metropolitan urbanity, other experiences (*petit bourgeois*, suburban, offshoots of the *flâneur*) rather present mid-size cities as a utopian condition countering urban disarray. In addition, the confrontation between local and global experience (through communication networks, internationalization, global leveling out, tourism) may constitute another duality marking the imagery of such cities.

Call for Papers

GUST invites abstracts of no more than 500 words. All abstracts and papers must be written in English. Please send your abstract, affiliation, as well as a short CV to dr. Bruno Notteboom, bruno.notteboom@ugent.be.

Dates and deadlines

- 31 January 2012: deadline for paper proposals submission
- 15 February 2012: notification of paper acceptance
- Start of the conference: 19 April 2012, 2 pm
- End of the conference: 21 April 2012, 4 pm

Keynote lecture

Paola Viganó, co-founder of Studio Associato Bernardo Secchi Paola Viganó and professor at Università IUaV of Venice.

Practical information

The symposium is free of charge. Travel, accommodation and conference dinner are at the expense of the speakers' institutions.

Venue: Ghent University and Ghent City Museum (STAM). During the symposium, a guided tour in the exhibition *Edmond Sacré. Portrait of a City* in the STAM will be organized. For more information, see <http://www.stamgent.be/en>

For more information on GUST, see: <http://www.gust.ugent.be>

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