The Power of Imagination

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In architectural writing the history of cities has traditionally been told as the story of their most outstanding civic and architectural monuments. By comparison, the idea that a city is more than just a collection of important individual buildings and that its function and image rely equally on cultural, political, social and economic factors is relatively new. Though it was neither written by an architectural historian nor primarily directed at an architectural readership, Carl Schorske's seminal study, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (1980), can in many ways be considered a model for such an approach.[1] The book includes, apart from inquiries into literature, politics and psychoanalysis, an extensive account (a biography, almost) of the building of Vienna's Ringstrasse, all reflecting the breadth of Schorske's interests as a cultural historian. Immediately hailed as a pioneering work upon publication, Schorske's study can today be seen not only as a major achievement in re-evaluating a chapter of pre-modern urbanism, but also as a striking demonstration that architecture and urbanism constitute major forces of more than just the morphology of a city, determining instead the peculiar intellectual climate of a society in general.

Whether prompted by Schorske's analysis or not, architectural writing has since seen an astonishing upsurge in books concerned with the idea of the biography of a city. Earlier studies, however, had pioneered the way. While John Summerson's *Georgian London*, published in 1947, applied the traditional methodology of architectural history to an entire city at a certain moment in time,[2] Reyner Banham a few decades later undertook an 'ecological' reading of the contemporary city in his *Los Angeles: The City of Four Ecologies*.[3] Banham's approach is now typically read as innovative in absorbing a topological and geographical context in order to explain the specific layout of a city like Los Angeles. What was perhaps more important, however, was the fact that Banham included in his survey aspects of architecture that his teacher Nikolaus Pevsner would have classified as mere 'building' and thus unworthy of serious scholarly evaluation. By celebrating engineering marvels such as freeway viaducts or commercial roadside sheds on the same level as the finest examples of Southern California's architectural heritage, Banham set out to overthrow such traditional value judgements. This assault on the snobbery of architectural high culture was launched at roughly the same time as Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*, another study that fundamentally changed the way architects and historians write about cities.[4] This book, in turn, generated (and continues to generate) its own acolytes, perhaps most noteworthy of which is Rem Koolhaas' 1978 book *Delirious New York*.[5] Here, the architect became a ghostwriter to the city in order to uncover the intricate connections between architectural imagination and built reality. Whereas architects up to the 1960s had seen themselves as creators of (utopian) cities-to-be, Venturi and Scott Brown's analysis of the Las Vegas Strip and Koolhaas' 'retroactive' manifesto for Manhattan shifted the role of the architect to that of reader and interpreter of an extant urban reality.

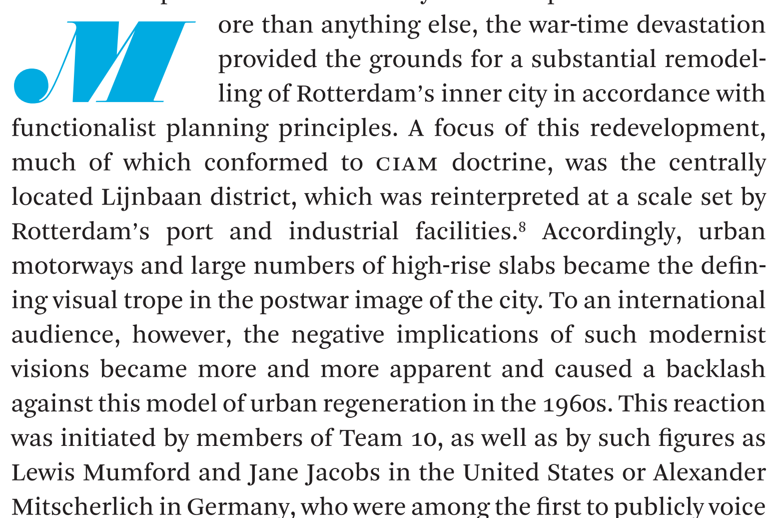
More recent writing on cities seems to be prompted by yet another concern. As western society moves from industrial to post-industrial, service-oriented modes of operation, cities have increasingly become involved in a fierce competition for media attention, with city marketing now recognised as a chief task of municipal administrations. In this rivalry among cities, architecture plays no minor role. In fact, ever since Frank Gehry's Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, which transformed an ailing post-industrial Basque port city into a thriving hub on the grand tour of international tourism, local governments worldwide have recognised the impact of the so-called, and now ubiquitous, 'Bilbao effect' and tried to emulate it. According to their rationale, iconic buildings (another construct that dominates modern architectural marketing vernacular) have the power to constitute an important, if not decisive factor in the economic base of an entire city. Even though this dynamic seems to have slowed down after its first euphoric years (and with the recent crisis in the financial markets, it may well now come to an abrupt end altogether), the logic of the 'Bilbao effect' has captured not only buildings but, more generally, the entire circulation of images on cities. Municipalities willing to play the game have become more and more adept at controlling the circulation of images in order to present themselves in a favourable light. In turn, architecture and architectural writing increasingly run the risk of being exploited and instrumentalised as suppliers and producers of such powerful images, whether actual or virtual, for city marketing. Just like the global players among the architectural firms, large cities have their own marketing divisions or employ consultants who try to regulate what is being said and shown about their employers. Such underlying business strategies are sometimes not easily made out in contemporary writing on cities but must now, it seems, be reckoned with.

According to the American economist Richard Florida, the control of the circulation of images is not the only prerequisite for successfully positioning a city in a globalised world. In his best-selling book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, he argues that a so-called 'creative class' plays a key part not only in shaping the mental image of contemporary cities but also in generating economic value. However, Florida's penchant for catchy phrases seems to suggest that his theses owe more to the popularised language of marketing seminars than they do to serious sociological scholarship. For example, he argues that three Ts (for talent, tolerance and technology) are decisive in the global competition among cities.[6] Memorable as this rhetoric may be, it remains questionable whether successful urban development can really be explained adequately with such terminology. The flaws of Florida's theory (the associations of whose name seems to epitomise his whole argument) are also evident in the fact that he seems unable to define precisely who this 'creative class' might be. The term remains a rather nebulous denomination for anyone involved in 'creative' production of any kind. Despite (or perhaps even because of) the problematic aspects of Florida's argument, his book has become something of a gospel for urban marketing strategists around the globe.

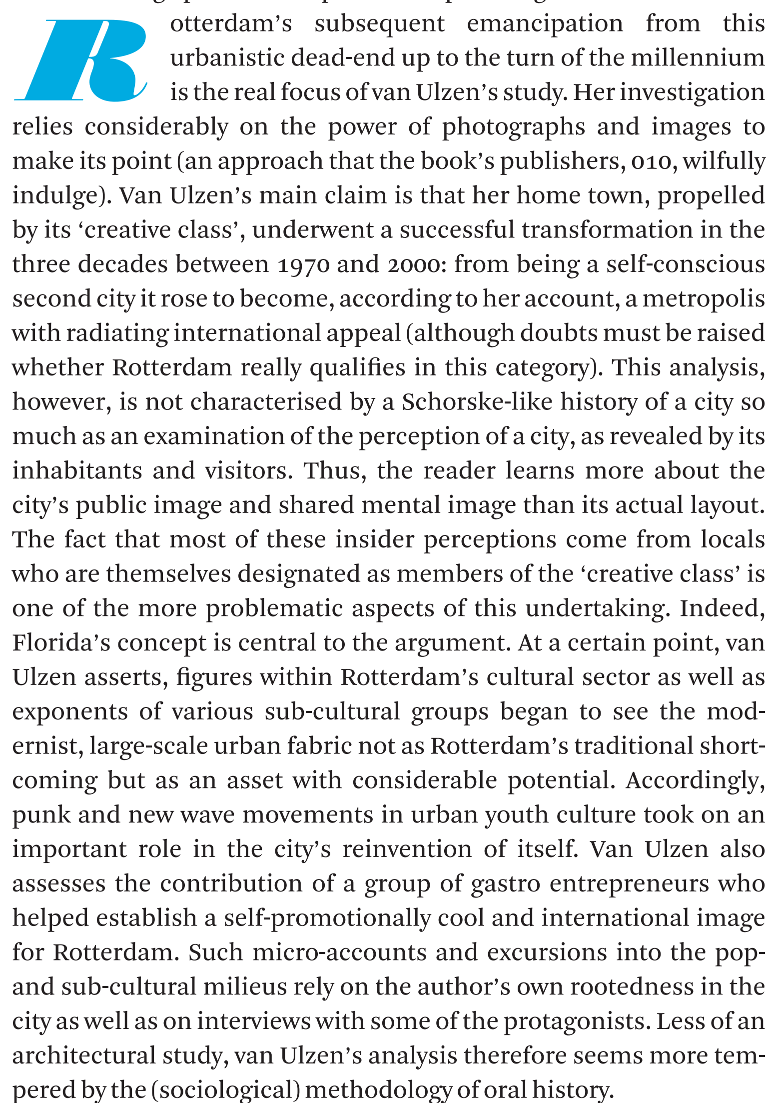
That said, over the past few decades certain cities seem to have successfully transformed themselves from major sites of industrial production into centres of the creative industry. A particularly interesting case in point is the Belgian city of Antwerp. Even though it was an important cultural and intellectual centre from the sixteenth century onwards, Antwerp owed its wealth primarily to its port and its

status as a leading merchant city. More recently, however, the city has reinvented itself as the fashion capital of northern Europe, with its Royal Academy of Fine Arts producing a host of innovative designers.[7] While Antwerp would be worthwhile for a thorough investigation of the economic impact of the creative classes, the art historian Patricia van Ulzen has taken Antwerp's Dutch sister city, Rotterdam, as the focus of her recent book (a re-working of her PhD thesis), *Imagine a Metropolis: Rotterdam's Creative Class, 1970–2000*. This choice may seem obvious set against the background of the author's biography – Rotterdam is van Ulzen's home town – but it seems less imperative in light of the city's economic base, which remains solidly blue-collar (in image, at least). On the other hand, Rotterdam's more recent fame as a laboratory for contemporary architecture, as well as its history as one of the most thorough modernist postwar inner-city planning initiatives, appears a promising point of departure for a study investigating the impact of architectural 'creativity' upon the social life and physical morphology of a city.

Although the history of Rotterdam dates back to the thirteenth century, the municipality saw a rapid expansion only from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. The thriving port drew large numbers of labourers to the city, which led to one of Europe's most ambitious communal housing programmes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Under J J P Oud, who served as municipal housing architect from 1918 to 1933, Rotterdam became a centre for architectural innovation, and with this transformation the city began to change from a merchant's town to a modern industrial city. While the story remains untold in van Ulzen's account, she does demonstrate that Rotterdam was typically represented at that time with motifs conventionally associated with the image of dense urban conurbations, such as high-rise structures, brightly lit neon signs, motorised traffic and the industrial port. Subsequently, the circulation of such images started to dominate the internal and external perception of Rotterdam. According to van Ulzen, this iconography provided the city with a visual identity (although it remains questionable whether Rotterdam's inhabitants readily identified themselves with such a modernist, internationalist image). But perhaps more interesting, as argued by van Ulzen, is the fact that the circulation of such imagery can be understood as a self-promotion campaign through which the city differentiated itself from its traditional rival, Amsterdam – a city whose own postcard clichés of *grachts* and gable-roofed townhouses successfully fostered the image of Dutchness and picturesque homeliness. In contrast to this nostalgic image, Rotterdam aspired to be a modern city at a metropolitan scale.



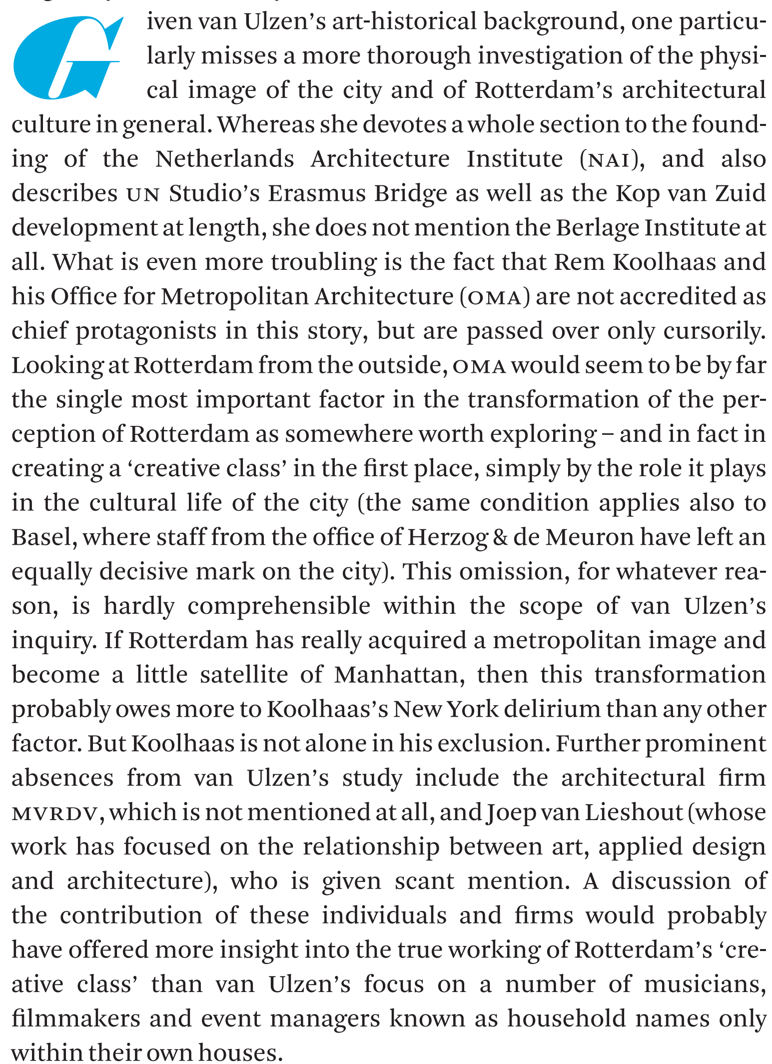
More than anything else, the war-time devastation provided the grounds for a substantial remodelling of Rotterdam's inner city in accordance with functionalist planning principles. A focus of this redevelopment, much of which conformed to CIAM doctrine, was the centrally located Lijnbaan district, which was reinterpreted at a scale set by Rotterdam's port and industrial facilities.[8] Accordingly, urban motorways and large numbers of high-rise slabs became the defining visual trope in the postwar image of the city. To an international audience, however, the negative implications of such modernist visions became more and more apparent and caused a backlash against this model of urban regeneration in the 1960s. This reaction was initiated by members of Team 10, as well as by such figures as Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs in the United States or Alexander Mitscherlich in Germany, who were among the first to publicly voice criticism against CIAM doctrine.[9] Large-scale urban planning initiatives, which had formerly been considered progressive, were increasingly discredited as inhospitable and even inhuman. This critique rapidly gained momentum and reached full impact by the end of the decade. Van Ulzen does not attempt to contextualise her argument within this broader spectrum of international architectural discourse but instead limits herself to local urban history. What remains untold is the fact that Rotterdam's fate reflected this general reaction against modernist dogma. As for the city's specific microclimate, the authorities attempted, without much success, to give the city a friendlier and small-scale face, a strategy that should be seen in connection with the 'townscape' movement propagated by the British *Architectural Review* from the late 1940s onwards.[10] In 1970, Rotterdam staged the C70 festival, which consisted, among other things, in refurbishing the main route through the city centre with colourful small-scale pavilion-like structures. Ironically, this quest for a humanising *gezelligheid* was a more or less deliberate attempt to copy the successful Amsterdam model, though set against Rotterdam's strictly modernist layout, it remained a largely unconvincing episode in its post-CIAM planning.



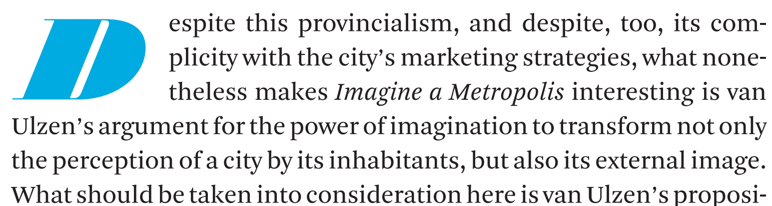
Rotterdam's subsequent emancipation from this urbanistic dead-end up to the turn of the millennium is the real focus of van Ulzen's study. Her investigation relies considerably on the power of photographs and images to make its point (an approach that the book's publishers, 010, wilfully indulge). Van Ulzen's main claim is that her home town, propelled by its 'creative class', underwent a successful transformation in the three decades between 1970 and 2000: from being a self-conscious second city it rose to become, according to her account, a metropolis with radiating international appeal (although doubts must be raised whether Rotterdam really qualifies in this category). This analysis, however, is not characterised by a Schorske-like history of a city so much as an examination of the perception of a city, as revealed by its inhabitants and visitors. Thus, the reader learns more about the city's public image and shared mental image than its actual layout. The fact that most of these insider perceptions come from locals who are themselves designated as members of the 'creative class' is one of the more problematic aspects of this undertaking. Indeed, Florida's concept is central to the argument. At a certain point, van Ulzen asserts, figures within Rotterdam's cultural sector as well as exponents of various sub-cultural groups began to see the modernist, large-scale urban fabric not as Rotterdam's traditional shortcoming but as an asset with considerable potential. Accordingly, punk and new wave movements in urban youth culture took on an important role in the city's reinvention of itself. Van Ulzen also assesses the contribution of a group of gastro entrepreneurs who helped establish a self-promotionally cool and international image for Rotterdam. Such micro-accounts and excursions into the pop- and sub-cultural milieus rely on the author's own rootedness in the city as well as on interviews with some of the protagonists. Less of an architectural study, van Ulzen's analysis therefore seems more tempered by the (sociological) methodology of oral history.

Although the intimacy and immediacy of these encounters allow for a number of insights into the everyday culture of the city, the relevance of unfiltered first-hand accounts ultimately turns into the book's pitfall, too often robbing it of a critical perspective. Furthermore, in resorting to a sociological form of enquiry, the book misses a critical assessment of the change of the city's image that

arose from architectural and urbanistic insights. In several instances, van Ulzen's analysis gives way to a laudatory appraisal of Rotterdam's benefits and virtues more reminiscent of a tourist information brochure than a sound scholarly inquiry. Repeatedly, the author unnecessarily plays Rotterdam's edginess off against Amsterdam's alleged sedateness, thereby uncritically replicating a collective rivalry apparently widespread among proud Rotterdammers. She does not pause to consider what this attitude may say about a certain provincialism characteristic of second cities, and even diagnoses a 'Rotterdamming of Amsterdam' over the last few years in order to insinuate a recent reversal in the cultural relevance of the two cities. (In this context, one would expect her to mention that this effect probably owes more to the general renaissance of the city than anything else.) Ultimately, van Ulzen's study seems to suggest that Rotterdam's reinvention was an almost singular occurrence. By not comparing the object of her inquiry to other cases in point, she misses the opportunity to single out precisely why Rotterdam's story is remarkable and worthy of more than just local interest. In these instances, the author seems to fall victim to the marketing machine that undoubtedly stands behind the transformative processes she originally set out to analyse.



Given van Ulzen's art-historical background, one particularly misses a more thorough investigation of the physical image of the city and of Rotterdam's architectural culture in general. Whereas she devotes a whole section to the founding of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), and also describes UN Studio's Erasmus Bridge as well as the Kop van Zuid development at length, she does not mention the Berlage Institute at all. What is even more troubling is the fact that Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) are not accredited as chief protagonists in this story, but are passed over only cursorily. Looking at Rotterdam from the outside, OMA would seem to be by far the single most important factor in the transformation of the perception of Rotterdam as somewhere worth exploring – and in fact in creating a 'creative class' in the first place, simply by the role it plays in the cultural life of the city (the same condition applies also to Basel, where staff from the office of Herzog & de Meuron have left an equally decisive mark on the city). This omission, for whatever reason, is hardly comprehensible within the scope of van Ulzen's inquiry. If Rotterdam has really acquired a metropolitan image and become a little satellite of Manhattan, then this transformation probably owes more to Koolhaas's New York delirium than any other factor. But Koolhaas is not alone in his exclusion. Further prominent absences from van Ulzen's study include the architectural firm MVRDV, which is not mentioned at all, and Joep van Lieshout (whose work has focused on the relationship between art, applied design and architecture), who is given scant mention. A discussion of the contribution of these individuals and firms would probably have offered more insight into the true working of Rotterdam's 'creative class' than van Ulzen's focus on a number of musicians, filmmakers and event managers known as household names only within their own houses.



Despite this provincialism, and despite, too, its complicity with the city's marketing strategies, what nonetheless makes *Imagine a Metropolis* interesting is van Ulzen's argument for the power of imagination to transform not only the perception of a city by its inhabitants, but also its external image. What should be taken into consideration here is van Ulzen's proposition that the primary bearers of such urban visions are neither government authorities nor city planners, but rather a multitude of individuals offering both shared and disparate futures for the city without any given script. In this context, a successful urban policy needs to take such bottom-up processes seriously rather than insist on imposing planning strategies from above. In this model the role of the authorities would be to provide a favourable terrain for individual actors without monopolising initiatives and thereby depriving subculture of its importance. This seems to be the valid lesson of van Ulzen's book, not just for theoreticians and practitioners of architecture, but for those charged with the running of our cities.

Patricia van Ulzen
Imagine a Metropolis:
Rotterdam's Creative Class, 1970–2000
010, 2007

I am thankful to Thomas Weaver, from whose insightful comments this essay has greatly profited.

1. Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, Knopf, 1980).
2. John Summerson, *Georgian London* (London: Pleiades Books, 1947).
3. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1971).
4. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).
5. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1978).
6. Richard L Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York, Routledge, 2005).
7. These fashion designers, all of whom were taught by the designer, teacher and museum director Linda Loppa, have been referred to as the 'Antwerp Six' and include Ann Demeulemeester, Dries van Noten and Dirk Bikkembergs.
8. Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p 740. See also Stanislaus von Moos, 'Verwandlungen der modernen Architektur', in Günther Eifler and Otto Saame (eds), *Postmoderne – Anbruch einer neuen Epoche? Eine interdisziplinäre Erörterung* (Vienna: Passagen, 1990), pp 117–62.
9. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961); Alexander Mitscherlich, *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965).
10. Townscape was in fact another important source of an early postwar CIAM critique. See Ivor de Wolfe (Hugh de Cronin Hastings), 'Townscape: A Plea for an English Visual Philosophy Founded on the True Rock of Sir Uvedale Price', *The Architectural Review*, no 636, 1949, pp 354–62; Gordon Cullen, *Townscape* (London: Architectural Press, 1961).