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Urban Perspectives of the World

Urban Perspectives of the World

Inaugural lecture

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by

Jan Nijman

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Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, Geachte Collega's en Gewaardeerde Toehoorders,

I want to use this opportunity to reflect on the nature of the field of Urban Studies. In accordance with the international orientation of the field and in the presence of our own international staff, I will do so in English. My lecture will discuss the field of Urban Studies mainly from a purely academic point of view, the opportunities it offers but also some of its intrinsic challenges. It is a broad field and my words today will reflect my own views, my affection for the sort of broad historical-geographical scholarship of the likes of Lewis Mumford, Fernand Braudel, Peter Hall, John Friedmann, Richard Walker, or Gyan Prakash. I will refer to some of my own research, but I will also aim at what I consider to be the field of Urban Studies at large.

My main argument is that the urban scale provides a critical lens on the social world, particularly in the present era of globalization. And while Urban Studies is evidently associated with the city, I will argue that the urban is about more than the city. The lecture is rather wide-ranging and will for the most part be situated somewhere between Amsterdam, the United States, and India, and I will appeal to your versatile imagination as we jump around the globe.

The renewed attention to the field of Urban Studies is also driven by interested parties and stakeholders *outside* the academy, including government and the corporate sector. So I will include some remarks about the social relevance of the field and how we might position the Centre for Urban Studies inside and outside of the university. Inaugural speeches generally focus on the speaker's specific area of expertise but since my appointment is closely related to the Research Priority Area in Urban Studies and the establishment of the new Centre, I should also reflect on the general nature of the field, some of the big questions, and where it fits. As a result, there is quite some breadth to my lecture, maybe a bit unusually so, and I ask you to bear with me.

Urban studies

Let me start off with some general observations. There are two intriguing qualities of the field of Urban Studies that explain its appeal and at the same time

pose a challenge. First, more so than the other social sciences, Urban Studies provides an experiential dimension, revolves around the scale of experience: we can see the city, hear it, smell it, even feel it. We can sense the urban atmosphere, particularly so in public spaces. I will never forget, on my first visit ever to New York now some 30 years ago, climbing up the steps from the subway to find myself in midtown Manhattan, in awe of the surrounding ultimate urban landscape, that ultimate human-made landscape. Later, I would let my thoughts wander: imagine the reaction of a Mayan peasant who for the first time entered Tikal, or a Mesopotamian nomad who first put sight on Babylon?

The urban atmosphere in a more general sense is not restricted to such historical iconic places. Miami feels a particular way, Amsterdam feels a particular way, Mumbai feels a particular way. To witness the layered material expressions of history in the city's built environment can give a sense of awareness that is a powerful addition to 'knowing.'

But if empirical observation in Urban Studies is enormously enriched through the scale of experience, it also causes relentless interference with what we would generally consider scientific or scholarly investigation. How to process, interpret, order, individual subjective experiences in a scholarly fashion – or to keep them out of the equation – is hugely problematic. It can be viewed in part as a matter of positionality and reflexivity as discussed in current cultural studies but it really goes to the more fundamental epistemological question how we can know the city. It is telling that, notwithstanding all we know and have achieved in this field, one of the hardest things to define is the city itself, as a discrete phenomenon. When I suggested, earlier, that we can see the city, that was not really true. What we see, or hear, or feel, is a street, an intersection, a bridge, some people walking or bicycling, traffic, a set of buildings, bricks, steel, glass; and it is momentary.

We never experience the city in its entirety. It is a bit like the parable about the blind men and the elephant where each, without having ever seen the animal, gets to touch a single part – the ear, the end of the tail, the trunk, its side, or the tusk – and each coming away with a different experience and definition of the whole. And it seems fair to say that a city is a lot more complicated than an elephant. We cannot observe the city in its entirety, we can only theorize it or, following the ideas of the philosopher Charles Taylor, we can only contemplate the city as a social imaginary, a rather fluid set of images and understandings closely tied to prevailing discourses.

Thus, when it comes to knowing 'the city' from a general epistemological perspective, we could say that our understanding is shaped in an intricate interplay between the individually subjective, prevailing social imaginaries, and allegedly objective data (often quantitative) assembled according to more posi-

tivist social science practices. And somewhere in that brew, the city manifests itself.

If the experiential dimension is one particularity of the field of Urban Studies, the other is that the material urban environment forms a combination of, on the one hand, the unintended outcome of a range of social processes and agencies (think of Norbert Elias' notion of development or social process) and, on the other hand, the intended result of deliberate planning. Inside the academy, this results in the coexistence of Urban Studies and Urban Planning; the first primarily aimed at understanding, the other with an explicit applied orientation. And, our ability and urge to shape the urban environment immediately politicizes the field. After all, it presses the questions "what kind of planning?", "for what purpose?", "for whom?" And, more generally, "what kind of city do we want?" This is, most basically, why Urban Studies is sometimes presented as "critical urban studies" – because there is in some respects no way around dealing with urban studies without addressing such political questions. Because we don't just study the city, we aspire to make it.

This is also where the outside stakeholders come in: local government, national government, corporations, NGOs, and a host of other organizations. They have specific interest in urban development and in giving it a particular direction. They have ideas and agendas, they know what kind of city they want, or they think they know. And they would like us to produce the kind of knowledge needed to support their agendas. There can be no doubt that the recent surge of Urban Studies in institutions of higher learning, in Europe, the US, and elsewhere in the world from Dubai to Singapore to Shanghai, is in part due to these demands for policy-relevant research. Let me return to this matter later on, the question of the positioning of Urban Studies here at the University of Amsterdam.

An urban revolution

The most *comprehensive* reason for the renewed interest in our field lies in the fact that the world is in the midst of an urban revolution. This revolution is comparable to the one that accompanied the industrialization era of the latter part of the 19th century – but the present transformation is much more massive. Today, twice as many people around the world live in cities than did only three decades ago.

Urban revolutions are geographically highly uneven and their epicenters are concentrated in particular world regions. In the 19th century, it was England, northwestern Europe, and North America; today, it is East and South Asia. In

the past decade alone, China added 194 million urban dwellers (more than the entire population of Brazil) while India added 91 million (exceeding the total population of Germany).

Urban revolutions are not merely about rapid urban growth, or about numbers – they are about social transformations that go beyond quantitative change and reach far beyond the cities at the centers of the revolution – say, Manchester in the 1860s, or Shenzhen presently. Urban revolutions of this order, it seems, change everything. They are closely related to shifts in the mode of economic production. The urban revolution of the 19th century was intimately tied to industrialization. Cities became important sites of production that demanded labor, and urbanization took off. The mode of production changed; the urban social fabric was reconfigured and a new class system took shape; urban lifestyles adapted; the meaning of work changed; politics changed. The ramifications reached far beyond the urban landscapes that so conspicuously marked the transformation. Urbanization and industrialization, together, propelled changes at wider scales, affecting national economies and spurring international trade, demanding adaptive political responses by states, and fueling imperialist tendencies with the new need for raw materials to keep production apace. The world geopolitical and geoeconomic order changed, dominated by countries best positioned in this urban-industrial revolution.

The current urban revolution, which has been under way for about three decades now, is closely tied to the rise of the information economy and, with it, processes of globalization. India's urbanization is in no small part driven by the fast growth of the IT sector. More importantly, both China and India have fast-growing urban economies that rely very much on exports, and on foreign investment – in other words, on a highly globalized economy that would not be possible without that same information technology that facilitates unprecedented capital mobility.

Other parts of the world, the West as well, are also affected by the revolution even though some of these parts already had very large urban populations. In cities such as New York or Amsterdam, the shift toward the information economy since the 1980s has been accompanied with changing class structures, altered space-economies, and a new urban politics. It is precisely because of the globalizing capacity of information and communication technologies that the present urban revolution is, virtually, immediately global whereas the global effects of previous revolutions took longer to become apparent.

Thus, the numbers of urban growth are important, but we should primarily focus on the deeper economic, social, and political alterations behind the numbers. We are reminded of Lefebvre's prescient observations, made in 1970, that the world was on the verge of a fundamental transformation in which the

urban would become more or less coterminous with the social; that we needed to think in terms of an encompassing “urban society” instead of discrete cities versus rural surroundings. In Lefebvre’s words, “The urban problematic [becomes] worldwide” (Lefebvre, 2003, pp. 5-6).

The urban lens

The notion of the ‘urban lens’ and the idea that the urban is about more than the city requires some elaboration, and illustration. The now very common and much repeated observation that more than 50% of the global population lives in cities, while important, is actually a bit distractive precisely because it steers too much attention to the city itself. And note that according to many census definitions around the world, the threshold of ‘urban’ is very low – in India, for example, towns of 5,000 people or more are counted as ‘urban’.



Urban and rural in India

The first point to be made here is that, geographically, urbanization processes, by definition, reach far beyond the city. In India about 31% of the population is now considered urban but it is quite clear that because of tightly knit urban-rural relations, a much greater share of the population is affected. In Mumbai, particularly among first- and second-generation migrants, these relationships take the form of remittances and labor flows, between the city and the village, sometimes across enormous distances. These strong ties between the city and the village also have important implications for cultural definitions of what is urban and what is rural. As Sen (1975) pointed out some time ago in a path-breaking article, the maintenance of ancestral traditions, family ties, and cul-

tural identities, including caste, has been a condition for successful adaptation in the city. So, for example, among urban immigrant communities, the extended family did not break down as modernization theories would have it, but they rather flourished.

The functioning of Indian cities is intricately connected to the rural areas and the representation of the big city, the centrality of the city in the geographical imagination among Indian rural folk is an interesting topic, still rarely addressed in the literature. I once traveled some 350 kilometers to the remote interior parts of Maharashtra, a two-day journey as I remember. In one of the villages a Marathi speaking woman gave me a curious and contemplative stare, made a remark about my white skin, and then said to another: “he must be from Mumbai.” In the past decade, tentative data suggest that, while the growth rate of India’s megacities dropped, most of the new urban growth was at the lowest levels in the urban hierarchy; the number of new census towns tripled; i.e., towns that were classified as rural villages of less than 5000 people only ten years ago. This part of India’s urbanization begs research attention – and it is at the urban-rural interface.

Urbanization reaches beyond the city, in this and other ways. Another increasingly important usage of the urban lens is in studies of environmental urbanism or urban ecology or sustainable urban development. Notions of ‘urban ecological footprint’, ‘urban metabolism’, or the ‘hungry city’, as in Carolyn Steel’s book, place cities in a wider environmental context and focus on the regional interdependence between city and hinterland.

The urban lens can also serve as a kind of magnifying glass, where a specific focus on the city or a particular part of the city can reveal much about society at large. Let us shift our attention to yet another part of the world and let’s focus on the American suburb, a quintessential element of the US city. Let me do so to illustrate how the urban lens can enrich our understanding not just of a suburb, not just of a city, but of much broader historical social processes and the peculiarities of an entire society, economically, culturally, historically and in in terms of *Zeitgeist*, technologically, and ideologically.

American suburbia

North America, and especially the United States, may be considered the ‘birth-place’ of the prototypical 20th century suburb. The so-called ‘sitcom’ suburb of the 1950s – white, middle class households with male breadwinners in single family homes – was ingrained in American minds and assumed near mythical proportions – in itself a good reason to question its veracity.



American suburbia since the late 19th century

In preindustrial times, suburbs were viewed as undesirable and shady places on the edge of town; marginal neighborhoods with a mix of the poor and people with licentious habits. The word “urbane,” instead, referred to sophistication, elegance, and high-class. The elites occupied the *center* of these compact pre-industrial cities that mixed residential and economic functions (trade, services).

This arrangement came to an end with the industrial revolution. Cities became sites of industrial production, often with detrimental environmental effects, and they grew much more dense. This resulted in a growing interest of the elites in new housing on the urban periphery. Upper class status became associated with mansions on large estates in a quiet, lush, suburban environment while the city center turned into a scene of congestion, pollution, crime, and crowded working class residential areas. If industrialization is commonly associated with urbanization, it should be added that it was associated, too, with the beginnings of suburbanization as we know it.

But there was another, cultural, reason that suburbanization became such a salient expression in the American landscape. The individualized, nuclear, family was very much an American institution (closely related to the ‘American

Dream') and demanded a single family home – which was easier to realize in the spacious suburbs than in the city center. Hayden (2003, 5-6) observes that: "Unlike any other affluent civilization, Americans have idealized the house and yard rather than the model neighborhood or the ideal town." The possible realization of this ideal in the green suburbs, at a time that existing cities had rapidly lost their appeal, was at times imbued with religion: in 1921 the National Real Estate Journal wrote that the "Garden of Eden" was the "first subdivision" (National Real Estate Journal 1921, 22). The new suburb, in this ideology, was at once frontier and destiny.

Suburbanization after World War Two took on such massive proportions that it fundamentally altered the urban order. From 1950 to 1980, the suburban population tripled and the United States, some said, had become a "suburban nation" (Duany et al 2000). Suburban living was now readied for mass-commodification. Far from a restricted elitist bourgeois ideal, the suburbs became part of an American Dream for all:

"There are two mythic journeys in the US. The first ... was the trek to the West, ending in California. The second, the archetypal journey of the mid-20th century, was from the city to the suburbs. ... it was a quest signifying acculturation, Americanization, and ultimately success. In this second mythic American journey, the family car replaced the covered wagon, and the single-family home displaced the family homestead as iconic representations." (Hanlon et al, 2010, 6)

At a more mundane level, it was hardly a trivial coincidence that typical family cars marketed in the US since the 1960s were wagons and (later) vans and SUVs, carrying such designations as Explorer, Journey, Odyssey, or Caravan.

Suburbanization was not, of course, just an expression of American culture. The urban lens also highlights the workings of a political economy. Suburbanization had become the business of an extremely powerful industrial conglomerate that employed (and helped generate) the American suburban imaginary to full effect. It included huge corporations such as General Motors (which offered a helping hand in the demise of the electric streetcar) and General Electric (which had embarked on the mass production of household appliances for single family homes); local "growth machines" (Molotch 1976) consisting of developers, builders, and banks; local governments that provided conducive zoning and building regulatory frameworks, and sometimes direct subsidies; and, last but not least, a federal government that was central to the financing of homeownership, the construction of highways, and that in various ways espoused suburban ideologies.

To some, the transformation of the United States into a suburban nation (Jackson 1985; Duany et al 2001) actually signaled the end of the suburban ideal. Since the 1960s, architectural critics had begun to depict suburbs as low-brow, boring, and banal.

The monotonous, mass-produced, subdivisions of the postwar years certainly were a long way from the carefully designed elite suburban mansions of the early 19th century. More importantly, suburban culture as a whole came to be regarded as uninteresting, conservative, and spiritless. It is not hard to discern elitist undertones in such critiques, even if the critics themselves were very much socially engaged. Examples include “Jane Jacobs’s (1961) picture of her own idyllically bohemian Lower Manhattan neighborhood in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

Between 2000 and 2008, suburbs in the country’s largest metro areas saw their poor population grow by 25 percent – almost five times faster than primary cities. At the same time, the last decade witnessed gentrification of the central city, wealth moving back in (Brookings Institution 2011). The suburban population continued to grow apace but increasingly it wasn’t because Americans were passionately pursuing their dreams and seeing them fulfilled – it was because many people did not have anywhere else to go. Even then, homeownership (in the suburbs) proved a risky proposition. The mortgage crisis that began in 2008 and that still leaves (in 2012) about 22 percent of homeowners “under water” with negative equity is particularly widespread in US suburbs (Ellis 2010).

This brief expose about what we could label the rise and fall of the American suburb is as much about an idea as it is about a space in the city and it appears that the traditional imaginary of the suburb has proven a great deal more tenacious than its material counterpart. This is the urban as magnifying glass of the social as well as an illustration of persistent temptations to view the city in utopian terms.

The urban-global dialectic

I have to ask you to shift gears, again. I said earlier that the urban provides a critical lens on the social, especially at a time of globalization. So let us consider the urban now at the scale of the city or metropolis at large, and the global.

Imagine a globe, encircled with myriad ceaseless flows of people, information, money, ideas, commodities, even pathogens – this is how we tend to visualize globalization. Each of these flows originates some place and goes

some place and these places tend to be cities that perform as important nodes in the global system.

The urban landscape, therefore, expresses the articulation of global flows, touching down, taking off, and leaving impressions. Globalization is conditioned and facilitated in cities as much as it shapes cities. My interest in cities is shaped at the confluence of the urban and the global. Living and working in Miami, at a time that the so-called world city literature gathered momentum, had a big influence on my research agenda and how I came to view the social, the world, and the urban.

World cities are considered the basing points of the global economy, together forming the spinal cord of the world economic system. Initially cities were regarded primarily in terms of their controlling economic capabilities, for example evidenced in the presence of corporate headquarters or stock markets. And the rise of the information economy, which is largely embedded in urban areas and draws on an urban workforce, has reinforced the notion of the city as a site of production.

These same cities are often essential sites in the world of consumption, as well. Miami is an international shopping center for the affluent from Latin America and the Caribbean – and as such it is a key site in the realm of cultural formation far beyond the city limits. Singapore may be an even more powerful example. One of the world's biggest ports, at a global cross roads of trade and commerce, it is also where international elites gather – whether in the spectacular rooftop pool of the Las Vegas-inspired Marina Sands Hotel, in the iconic 19th century Raffles hotel, or elsewhere – to consume and express themselves, to affirm their status, in turn shaping consumer preferences and aspirations of populations far beyond this island city. There are now many studies about the role of upwardly mobile urban middle classes, the emergence of which has as much to do with the global economy as it does with the global diffusion of tastes, identities, status symbols, and aspirations.

John Friedmann's paper on the "world city hypothesis" ranks among the most seminal writings in the social sciences of the past three decades. The idea that a city's external linkages and functioning are reflected in and interrelated with its internal structure remains a powerful premise, even if this central argument has been crowded out somewhat by apparently irresistible temptations to indulge in more shallow global city rankings.

The idea of a global urban network is, I believe, hugely important to our understanding of how the world works, and how cities function. But it's extremely difficult to model this global urban network in a way that approaches reality, as it requires enormous amounts of data that for the most part don't exist. As far as statistics go, we still live in a state (not city) centered world. But

then it doesn't remain just an empirical problem. Since existing empirical research tends to rely on highly limited data, we are at risk of conceptualizing the global urban network in ways that are overly simplistic and biased. It concerns, in part, a problem of positionality. Let me illustrate this point with an anecdote.

About ten years ago, during a lecture at the Indian Institute for Technology in Mumbai, I was confronted with a question from the audience as to 'where Mumbai ranks among world cities' (the lecture was not about that topic and the question came out of left field). This was just over a decade ago, and the city hardly figured in any of the existing studies at that point. I remember trying to bring the news gently but to no avail. The audience was taken aback by what they considered a striking lack of appreciation by 'world city scholars' of Mumbai's 'obvious' significance as the economic capital of a country with nearly one-sixth of humanity. While I was not ready to submit to the biases of local city boosters, I vividly remember feeling compelled to rethink the validity of world city theory. As the audience would have it, surely something was wrong with it.

About six months later, I gave a talk at UCLA and I reiterated my experience in Mumbai. The reaction of the audience there was, as I recall, quite blunt: surely we should not let our understanding of the urban world be influenced by the subjective views of Mumbaikars?! I was left somewhat frustrated with this point of discussion because, at the time, I could not quite articulate what I felt was the crux of the issue and why it mattered. But in hindsight it did become more clear, and it is not that simple.

While it is not necessarily true that all knowledge is local, there is a good deal of truth to the point that world-views are – from Mumbai to Los Angeles. There is no such thing as a view from nowhere. The fascinating confluence of urban studies and globalization studies exhibits this inherent tension between the 'local' and the 'global' – not just conceptually but also in terms of methodological approaches. Generally employing data on international firms, the global urban network is almost without exception constructed from 'the' center outwards, i.e., London, or New York or other cities centrally placed on the mental maps of (predominantly western) scholars. And, almost by definition, other cities in the world then appear on the map on the basis of their importance to that center. It is bias, systematized. The counter-view from Mumbai or, more generally, from India, is especially instructive because, from a truly global perspective, it simply seems that a billion people couldn't be wrong.

So what I am trying to point here is that one of the big questions in the field (with relevance across the social sciences) is to conceive of this global urban

system, that we have made considerable headway, but that considerable work remains to be done, both in terms theory and methodological designs.

Positioning urban studies

This brings me to the final section of my lecture, the strategic positioning of Urban Studies, and of the Centre for Urban Studies. To begin, the foregoing discussion underscores the need for a global comparative urbanism. Perhaps the most important big debate in the field today is about the challenge of developing urban theory in global context; urban theory that has global relevance while sensitive to regional variation and to diverse regional historical trajectories. Social science, and social theory especially, is still largely produced in North America and West Europe, and travels, whether really portable or not. We know, for example, that notions of the American urban ‘ghetto’ don’t fit easily in the context of the Dutch city, or the Indian city for that matter; we know that the meaning and connotations of the concept ‘urban middle class’ are widely different in England, Brazil, or China. So we are struggling to find the general, to formulate general theoretical frameworks in a response to increasing global interconnectedness, while being confronted with highly diverse and dynamic empirical realities. At a deeper level, we struggle with the notion of urban modernity, a concept full of tension because ‘modernities’ in the plural is something of an oxymoron, yet they seem to exist. I have written elsewhere in more detail about the epistemological and methodological challenges of a comparative urbanism (Nijman 2007). Suffice it to say here that in order for us to make headway in some of the most pressing academic debates of our time and to be interesting to scholars elsewhere, our scope must be global and comparative.

This does not exclude, of course, an emphasis on Amsterdam, whether in its own right or, better yet, figuring prominently in comparative studies. Some of the most productive and best known centers for urban studies in the past were situated in major cities: the Chicago school of the 1920s or the Los Angeles school of the 1990s. Chicago and LA were considered paradigmatic in their time, they served as models to understand urban patterns and processes in general. These schools of thought were trend-setting and they were underwritten by a sizable cluster of local scholars that quoted each other enthusiastically (Park, Burgess, or Wirth in Chicago; Soja, Dear, or Davis, in LA). Being in a place like Chicago, LA, or *Amsterdam* is a priceless advantage to urban scholars. You have your laboratory next to your office [in fact, the way our university if economizing on office space you may soon find yourself in the laborato-

ry on a permanent basis, but that's another discussion]. Amsterdam enjoys huge 'brand-recognition', globally, and the brand is generally perceived in favorable terms, whether in reference to planning and design, traditions of tolerance, or the city's rich history. We have superb scholarship on Amsterdam that is known world-wide, also because Amsterdam's urbanity has appeal beyond our borders.

Chicago held its position longer and more convincingly than Los Angeles did. The LA school was less persuasive and was short-lived because, by the end of the 20th century, the singular (some would say obsessive) focus on Los Angeles itself did not sufficiently resonate in a global-urban world (Nijman 2000). We will not make that mistake. And, I should add, you don't have to be a pollster to know that Amsterdam is a much more likable (and livable) city than LA. Our city has all the requisites to 'model' in this urban-global world. And our Centre for Urban Studies is very well positioned, with an impressive range of expertise, local to global, for the kind of balanced strategy required to play a leading role in the field, world-wide.

The surge of the field of Urban Studies has been accompanied with increased attention and demands of stakeholders outside of the academy. Governments left and right are taking a great interest in the urban. In China, India, and many other rapidly developing parts of the world, urbanization is generally viewed as synonymous to modernization, as a good thing. From Shenzhen to Dubai to Astana, the urban is central to the desired future and cities are filled with designs and symbols that represent not just modernity but ultra-modernity.

China currently is 50% urban and the government aims to raise the number 70% by 2050. India now is 32% percent urban and its government has declared it is aiming at 40% by 2030. It is clear why: cities, through economies of scale and clustering, allow better provision of medical care, education, and a host of services and amenities. Cities are the main sites of production *and* consumption.

In the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, local urban and metropolitan governments fret over competitiveness. Here, it is not so much about new futures, modernist aspirations or utopian ideals – it is about adapting in an increasingly competitive world, and about maintaining or improving productivity and standards of living. While it is clear what policy makers would want their cities to provide, it remains pretty vague exactly how these cities would work or how these urban futures would be achieved.

Universities must respond, and urban scholars must respond. Let me qualify that remark and emphasize that there is no doubt in my mind that the essence of academic institutions, of universities, lies in the independent pursuit of knowledge; knowledge for the sake of knowledge, pure and simple. And I believe that

to compromise that essence is to jeopardize the long-term integrity, and credibility, of the university. But that does not mean that we could not *also* freely concern ourselves with producing knowledge on demand, if *we* choose to. Indeed, academic freedom does not absolve us of social responsibility. This is especially true, I think, when it comes to “urban universities” that are in various ways embedded in and profess social engagement with their city or city-region. And, quite obviously, it is especially pertinent to the field of Urban Studies.

If universities don’t respond, private think tanks will. The McKinsey Global Institute, for example, has been particularly active, publishing two influential reports in 2011 on the role of cities in the global economy (one specifically on India) and emphasizing the importance of continued rapid urbanization. There is no time here for detailed criticism so let me just say that corporate consulting reports parading as scientific research are another reason for urban studies scholars to get involved, exercise influence.

In Amsterdam, too, there is substantial demand for policy-relevant knowledge about urban development, the city’s competitiveness in the world of commerce, and future scenarios. A number of our colleagues have through the years maintained strong relations with local government agencies.

Of all present-day world cities, Amsterdam may have the longest history of experience with the urban-global logic. This 17th century painting by Gerard de Lairese depicts Amsterdam in the form of the ‘Virgin Goddess’ (*Stedemaagd*). This type of allegory originated in the city-states of ancient Greece and was revived in Renaissance Europe. In early modern times it was tempted into use especially as a symbol of the urban republic. Her hand resting self-assuredly on the globe and with Mercury, the god of trade, behind her in a supporting role, she is presented with prized goods from east and west. Amsterdam’s city goddess is still with us today, her statue located at the entrance of the Vondelpark, at the Stadhouderskade.

Back in that glorious Golden Age, The Hague was at a comfortable distance. We could be forgiven for feelings of nostalgia, especially at the university. At a time when the city, the university, and *local* government witness increased opportunities and demands for partnership and innovative ventures, *national* government has taken the university in what could be described as a financial stranglehold. There is enormous intellectual capital and expertise, but scientific research agendas are increasingly set by The Hague and too often human resources cannot be flexibly employed for contract research. We have to overcome such institutional constraints, and I am sure we will. It is important to respond actively to demands for policy-relevant knowledge, and we shall meet that challenge, especially here in our own backyard. The fates and futures of this great city and our University are entwined.



“De Stedemaagd” – Gerard de Lairesse, ~1675

Final words

In preparing for this event, and not having a great deal of experience with the ritual as it is practiced in Holland, I asked a seasoned and respected colleague “so what do you consider a proper ‘oratie’?” He replied: “well, it has to have a beginning and an end, and it should last about 45 minutes.” I actually thought that was tremendously helpful. So let me turn to a proper ending.

I hope I have been able to convey some aspects of the beauty and the importance of this interdisciplinary field – a field that is cognizant of the continued significance of related disciplines but that, in interdisciplinary fashion, offers unique and substantial contributions. The field faces some major challenges, to be sure, but so does every other cutting-edge scholarly endeavor. It is what keeps us going in the academy.

I was drawn to his opportunity at the University of Amsterdam in the first place because of the diverse group of outstanding scholars that come together in the Centre for Urban Studies and that deserve the credit for laying the foundations of the Centre before my arrival. We have a critical mass of expertise in Urban Studies that rivals any in the world and I am grateful to be among you. You hail from different disciplines and sometimes from different paradigms but we all share important interests and I believe we have an unusual and exciting opportunity to advance interdisciplinary scholarship, pure science, and socially relevant knowledge. I want to express my appreciation to the Rector Magnificus, the College van Bestuur, and to the Dean of Social and Behavioral Sciences, for their vision and support for Urban Studies as one of the University's Research Priority Areas. Thanks to the Urban Studies Advisory Board for its guidance; to my colleagues in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences for their enthusiasm about Urban Studies; and to Joni Haijen for coordinating the Centre in a way that combines American optimism and Dutch level-headedness.

Finally, I should return to the experiential dimension once more, at a personal level. I know what it is like to be a migrant – twice. And I know that, after having been elsewhere for over two decades, there is really no such thing as going *back*. Questions about identity, cosmopolitanism, belonging, the inherent tension between cosmos and hearth, and home, to me have powerful personal resonance. Milan Kundera, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, suggests that events that happen only once are like mere accidents and that we derive meaning from things only when they are repeated, patterned, when they last. History, longevity and tradition, give a place meaning. Amsterdam has always exercised a pull on me. There is something about being in this city, walking the streets, riding my bike along the canals, that evokes a sense of place, and identity, quite incomparable to any other. A place to live, to study, and a place to be.

Esteemed colleagues, dear family and friends, thank you for your indulgence.

Ik heb gezegd.

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