URBAN IDENTITY BUILDING THROUGH INNOVATIVE DESIGN – ROTTERDAM EXAMPLE

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Summary: *Although often criticized for being almost meaningless and without unique features, contemporary architecture paradoxically found itself facing the challenge to create urban diversity. Only contemporary design that implies certain distinctive qualities seems to be able to correspond to such a purpose. Rotterdam in the Netherlands represents an example of how contemporary, innovative design can be used as a powerful tool for establishing recognizable urban identity, even within delicate European cityscape.*

Keywords: *Urban identity, identity building, urban heritage, innovative design, Rotterdam.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As McLuhan observed back in the 1960-es, contemporary global circumstances are gradually turning the world into a 'global village' (McLuhan, 2003). Urban environments and architectural praxis in such a setting are as never before facing certain universalization and internationalisation trend. However, global construction industry turned incapable to satisfy traditional values, while simple continuation of architectural tradition, besides preserving the existing heritage, is no longer considered as appropriate in urban identity building conducted through architecture and urbanism (Will, 2009: 14). As a result, certain 'generic approach' in shaping and designing cities seems already to be triggered off (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995). Therefore, among the most controversial emerging phenomena are certainly gradual deterioration and loss of local urban identities (Welsch, 1999; Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Mitscherlich, 1965; King, 2004).

Although often criticized for being almost meaningless and without unique features (Smyth, 2005: 228; Mitscherlich, 1965), contemporary postmodern architecture found itself facing the challenge to create diversity and simultaneously establish 'sense of place' through planning and development decisions. Despite the claim that European cityscape is to a slightly moderate extent subjected to the global influences due to its strong bonds with heritage (Castells, 1989), it certainly isn't immune to them. Having opposite value typology in comparison to built heritage, only contemporary design that implies certain distinctive qualities seems to be able to correspond to such a purpose

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(Gospodini, 2002). Rotterdam is one of the few European cities, which opted for modernisation rather than reconstruction after the fatal destructions of the II World War. After a long quest, this city is nowadays an example of how contemporary, innovative design can be used as a powerful tool for establishing recognizable urban identity - even within delicate European cityscape.

2. INNOVATIVE DESIGN IN URBAN IDENTITY BUILDING

Being highly complex and multi-layered phenomenon, urban identity can be described from perspectives of various disciplines, ranging from psychology and sociology, to urban design and development; lately even in terms of branding and marketing of cities (Hilber & Datko, 2012: 19-29).

The most recent trend among scientists and practitioners, as a reaction to globalization, goes into direction of recognizing all the values and significance of urban identity, as well as its integration into the urban development concepts, emphasizing the importance for identity of a city to function not only inwards, but outwards as well (Hilber & Datko, 2012). From the perspective as a set of *distinctive characteristics of built environment,* urban identity within the frames of this paper will assume exclusively the visual identity of the place itself, as "the special character of the location, its unmistakable uniqueness" (Lalli, 1992: 291) that distinguishes it from any other places (Watson & Bentley, 2007: 1).

Special local and regional identities for a long time used to be spontaneously constructed, as a result of vernacular processes, without anyone necessarily aiming to achieve them. However, after more than a century of new technological potentials, design ideas, and various laws and regulations for controlling rapid industrial urbanisation, regionally distinctive built forms ceased to occur by default. Instead, "the question of regional character has become a question of choice and, therefore, of design rather than of necessity" (Watson and Bentley, 2007: 1, quoting Michael Hough).[2] Since, urban design became a determining and canalizing factor in formation, change and reproduction of urban identities (Watson and Bentley, 2007).

In addition, in the era of economic globalisation, innovative design schemes also became a powerful medium to attract economic development of cities (Gospodini, 2002: 30). As an example, innovative architecture was strongly supported by the practice of commissioning famous architects by civic leaders to produce landmark structures, in order to raise a city's international profile and boost its positioning on global competitiveness stage. Design that is working as a landmark and place-identity generator thus became a key factor for many cities to attract new enterprises, residents and urban tourists, making urban morphology itself a sightseeing, tourism and economic resource (Gospodini, 2002: 31). As initiators of further investments and development, iconic architecture in such contexts also play an important role in urban image-making and marketing, and therefore hold certain primacy in creation and control of sense of a place (Smyth, 2005: 84; 228).

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[2] Hough, M.: *Out of Place: Restoring Identity to the Regional Landscape.* Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1990

3. EXAMPLE OF ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

An interesting example to illustrate innovative approach to urban identity building among European cityscape itself is certainly Rotterdam in the Netherlands. During the bombardment in 1940, when the entire historical town and parts of the port were destroyed, not only the city's growth was brought to a standstill, but it was also a major turning point in its overall development. The vision about the city's future in the post-war period was at first marked by the idea of continuity between the inter-war years and the post-war reconstruction. However, the 'Foundation Plan' for reconstruction from 1946 by Cornelis van Traa proposed creation of an entirely different city from what existed before, with a modern road system addressing urban problems associated with the increasing use of cars. This zoning plan was in fact based on strict separation of the four main urban functions: traffic, work, housing and recreation (Van de Laar, 2007), which later created new challenges for the city. The final major feature that marked urban development was certainly deindustrialisation, which for Rotterdam meant relocation of former port and industry further westwards during the 1960-es and 1970-es (Doucet et al, 2011). Vast areas along the river Maas suddenly became empty zones in the very heart of the city itself. Redevelopment of the brownfield areas along the river certainly required a strategy that would not only initiate the production of attractive urban spaces, but also ensure further transformation of all the areas in question.

As a consequence of such dynamic series of historical events, urban centre of Rotterdam was characterized by relatively low built ratio, with deficit in housing, unsatisfactory quality of public open spaces, and thereby by an urban environment with generally low urban qualities. The solution for accumulated urban problems the City Municipality of Rotterdam found in mobilizing new means for creating recognizable urban image and identity through various means of planning. In order to achieve the main objectives - to reach both strong economy and attractive residential city, as defined by the *Rotterdam Urban Vision* strategy, (*Stadsvisie Rotterdam*, 2007), thirteen developments areas have been designated as crucial. These zones are called 'Very Important Projects' (VIP Projects) and are mostly distributed along the waterfront or in the very historic area of the city, along the so-called "Nutshell" high-rise area. They are all logistically based on the principle of innovative and flagship developments, with the final aim to create desired 'city lounge' quality (*Binnenstad als Citylounge*, 2008).

Innovative design, flagship projects and urban experiment in Rotterdam have a long history. *Witte Huis*, built back in 1898 in Art Nouveau still, was one of the first high-rise buildings of Europe.[3] In the late 1970-es and during the 1980-es, there were many new and particular designs introduced, in order to provide a sense of a place to the featureless city centre, like the Central Library (1977) or Cube House (1984; image 1). But besides these early experiments, there are other main reasons why Rotterdam today became an environment where innovative design is welcomed and easily accepted. War destructions that devastated historic environment certainly left many empty parcels and whole urban areas where architects even nowadays have the possibility freely to express their creativity. That is one of the reasons why there are many important organisations and renowned architectural offices based in the city, making at the same time Rotterdam an

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[3] According to the Rijksmonument report, www.monumenten.nl 2013-02-09

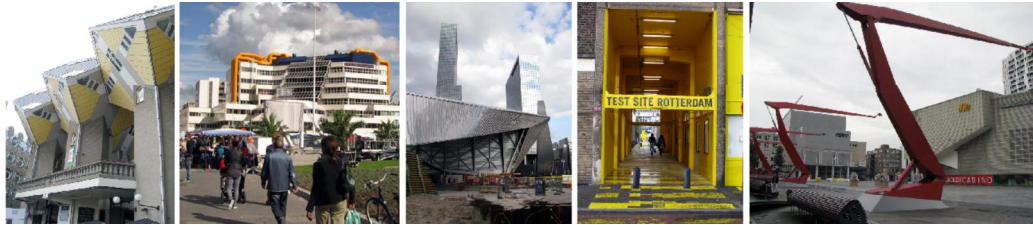absolute centre of design and architecture, not only in the Netherlands, but on the global scale as well.

Image 1. Examples of innovation and experiment in design within the former historic urban core of Rotterdam (Cube House, Central Library, Centraal Railway Station, Test Site Rotterdam, Schouwburgplein). Own photos, 09.2012

Innovation in urban and architectural ventures in Rotterdam reached its peak during the 1990-es, when some of the most important flagship projects have initiated urban development, making recognizable features of the city till today. Blaak Station (1993) and Schouwburgplein (1996; image 1) in the historic centre are only some of the most iconic developments, which provided character to the attractive, but neglected urban core. In addition, further development of the earliest skyline around the main train station in the Central District, was secured through a special master plan for this area, involving a new station building with strong sculptural character (image 2). This iconic structure had the role not only to improve traffic and connections, but also to serve as a magnet for further development of the isolated business environment. After relocation of parking places underground, as well as of motorized traffic in an underground tunnel, a system of newly designed pedestrian squares, which planners unofficially call 'the red carpet to the city', ensured a smooth connection with attractive 'cultural' way, leading further to the opposite side of development axis on the riverfront.[4]

With the completion of the iconic Erasmus Bridge (1996; image 2), not only a vital connection with less-developed southern Rotterdam areas have been established, but also a flagship project for overall redevelopment of the empty brownfield site on the river. The idea of developing an attractive "River City" (*Binnenstad als Citylounge*, 2008) was even more fostered with the construction of the first skyscrapers on the pier with prominent location during the 2000-s (image 2). Former headquarters and departure hall of the shipping company Holland-America Line (HAL) on *Wilhelminapier*, which until 1972 carried passengers to the United States (Van Ulzen, 2007: 199), served as a suitable framework for redevelopment of the complete Kop van Zuid area. Many new iconic skyscrapers of the globally recognized 'star architects' are in the meanwhile creating a recognizable ensemble of an iconic, vertical city on the water, which already became a new face of the city, and one of the most used motives in urban branding and marketing. The whole riverfront area is simultaneously being transferred into an attractive strip of recognizable architecture with innovative quality (image 2). Therefore, besides the

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[4] Since 2000, the City Planning Office treats the axis from the inner city to the left riverbank as Rotterdam's prime high-rise zone.

creation of the links with the river, central to the project for the former port area was the creation of higher-income housing, attracting offices to the city, bringing city centre functions to the riverside, and finally enhancing Rotterdam's competitive position in the Netherlands and Europe (Doucet et al., 2011: 133). However, experimenting and conceptualising are going a step further. Sustainable Floating Pavilion, launched by the City Municipality, is relocating the focus to the aquatic environment, connecting innovation in design and technology (image 2). These movable, futuristic structure turned the former port into an urban laboratory for testing the future forms of alternative and sustainable housing, at the same time showing the endless possibilities of innovation in designing our cities.

Image 2. Innovation in design as flagship projects along the waterfront of Rotterdam (Wilhelminapier with Erasmus Bridge, Unilever Building, Floating Pavilion). Own photos, 09.2012

4. CONCLUSIONS

Being experimental field for modern architecture and urban planning during a range of years, for Rotterdam meant following a unique path towards finding its lost identity. In fact, innovation and experiment in general became in the meanwhile an integrated part of its tradition and the main core of its metropolitan identity. This extreme example of establishing recognisability and fostering competitiveness through innovative design proved potentials of contemporary architecture, which in varying degree can serve as a viable alternative and inspiration for drafting urban development strategies, even for less progressive or more traditional European cities.

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КРЕИРАЊЕ ИДЕНТИТЕТА УРБАНЕ СРЕДИНЕ КРОЗ ИНОВАЦИЈУ – ПРИМЕР РОТЕРДАМА

Резиме: Иако често критикована због одсуства значења и особених карактеристика, савремена архитектура се парадоксално нашла пред изазовом да успостави различитост урбаних средина. Само савремени дизајн који подразумева извесне квалитете особености би могао да одговара таквој сврси. Ротердам у Холандији је пример савременог, иновативног урбаног дизајна, као моћног средства за успостављање препознатљивог урбаног идентитета, чак и у оквирима европских градова.

Кључне речи: Идентитет урбане средине, креирање идентитета, градитељско наслеђе, иновативни дизајн, Ротердам