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Spatial opportunities of exhibition centers: Explaining path-dependencies in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Munich and Milan

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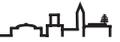
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CHAPTER 2

Research Question and Methodology

Abstract

The following chapters will try to answer the question: ‘What drives exhibition center development in Western Europe and how can the divergent geographical pattern of these developments be explained?’. They will do so through a qualitative approach that is guided by the sensitizing concepts that will be developed in Chapter Three. With an eye on future generalization due attention is paid to case selection. On the basis of a metropolitan ranking of host cities and an impact ranking of exhibition centers, four cases are selected.



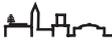
2.1 Research Question

The previous chapter has given a general introduction to the history and current development of the exhibition sector. From this overview arises a highly dynamic sector that has a tradition of reinventing itself. Functional shifts, first from economic exchange to promotion and later from promotion to interaction have throughout the past century brought about three phases of large-scale construction. Apart from the necessity to place greater emphasis on the facilitation of interaction, the current boom in exhibition center construction also seems to be caused by an internationalization of the sector that toughens competition for the largest and most profitable events. Because a large part of economic benefits falls outside of the exhibition centers, it is argued by many scholars of urban development that having a strong exhibition facility is also highly valued by city administrations. It is, however, not from the perspective of municipal government but rather from the perspective of the exhibition facilities themselves that decisions will be analyzed and explained. This provides an original and unique perspective on how decisions of individual actors are shaping metropolitan configurations.

The current era of trade fair development shows a divergent geographical pattern for Western European facilities. On the one hand, there is enormous investment in centrally located facilities, while on the other we find many newly constructed facilities outside of the urban core at what can be deemed peripheral locations. As the processes underlying exhibition center development, namely specialization and internationalization, seem to drive exhibition center development all-over Western Europe, such a differentiated pattern is remarkable. Apparently, exhibition centers define different spatial strategies to similar competitive demands. In other words, international trends have locally different outcomes. With trade fairs being at the same time places embedded within their local environments and nodes in international flows of people, goods and information, these are locations where both these worlds collide. It is through the recent processes of relocation of exhibition centers that these dilemmas are now also brought to and manifested in urban peripheries.

It is within this tension between the global and the local that the central question of this research is framed:

“What drives exhibition center development in Western Europe and how can the divergent geographical pattern of these developments be explained?”



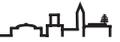
2.2 Research Methods

Rather than merely demonstrating the spatial configuration of trade fairs, this thesis aims at explaining these patterns. Why do some cities opt for new investment into their centrally located exhibition centers while others relocate to new facilities in the urban periphery? How are these decisions conditioned by historically developed structures and on-the-spot emerging opportunities? Particularly suited for why and how questions are qualitative research designs (Ragin, 1987; Yin, 2003). The nature of the research makes quantitative research designs like the experiment, in which the idea is to separate the phenomenon from its context, ill-suited. More importantly, as the selected perspective on the relocation of exhibition centers explores new avenues of research, no quantifiable hypotheses have been raised on which this study can elaborate.

Rather than applying and testing definitive concepts, this research draws on an explorative approach. In order to avoid a completely open exploration, however, sensitizing concepts will be defined in the conceptual model of this study. The introduction of these concepts enables to focus the explorative research on strategic concepts (Blumer, 1954; Bryman, 2008). The concepts of physical form, function, spatial embeddedness and institutional setting will be introduced as the sensitizing concepts of this study and provide the areas to look for possible explanations of patterns of exhibition center development.

How exhibition centers are shaped through these dimensions will be analyzed by three social mechanisms (Hedström and Swedberg, 1996) that are derived from path dependency theory. Increasing returns, lock-in and critical junctures all evolve around the notion of continuity and change in development trajectories. Rather than providing a testable theory, this toolkit, that will be developed in Chapter Three, provides the concepts through which to analyze exhibition center development and can be tested on its own merit for the analysis of urban development.

A qualitative research design makes it possible to allow for many possible explanatory variables within the frame of the strategic sensitizing concepts. This, however, comes at a cost. Because of the wide amount of possible explanatory variables, data collection requires a lot of time and effort. Therefore, within qualitative research it is usually not possible to investigate the whole of the population (Ragin, 1987). Strategic choices have to be made on which parts of the population to assess (Yin, 2003; Gerring, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 2006). These selected instances are then the cases selected for in-depth research. Hence, a case study design is chosen to look at why exhibition centers make different choices towards their location. This question implies a comparative research design, implying that at least an example of a central and a peripheral



trade fair should be included to allow for a thorough comparison.

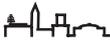
2.3 Data collection

Methods for data collection in case study research are broad and range from qualitative surveys to participant observation. The nature of the research, however, further funnels the methods suitable. The sensitizing concepts only provide the areas where to look for explanations but do not provide concrete variables. For surveys, questionnaires and structured interviews, a sense of the most important variables, derived from theory, is necessary. Only when possible explanatory variables are known, one could ask for them.

In line with the above sketched research design, data collection should be more open. This leaves analysis of secondary sources, semi-structured interviews and observation as possible methods. In order to get to the deeper motivations behind the spatial strategy making of the exhibition centers, these sources of data have been drawn on extensively. Physical plans, strategic papers, manifestos and contracts were analyzed and side-visits proved very valuable to observe the physical status and everyday functioning of the complexes under investigation. These sources of primary data were complemented by secondary data like books and chronicles on the development of exhibition centers, academic writings and newspaper articles. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with stakeholders were solicited to place insights from these sources into perspective and get inside information. Stakeholders included employees of the trade fairs involved in spatial and physical strategy, politicians, civil servants, architects and representatives from neighborhood associations as well as observers of the process like academics. A complete overview of the interviews conducted can be found in Appendix B. This allowed for a triangulation of research methods and reduced the possibility of potential biases through the position of the subjects interviewed.

2.4 Case selection

In contrast to quantitative research designs, for which data processing methods have made it possible to include almost an infinite number of cases as long as numeric data is available, case study designs can only include a few instances from the broader population of the phenomenon under investigation. This makes the outcome of the research highly dependent on the cases selected as deviant or atypical cases might have, if selected, enormous and troubling influence on the research outcome (Collier and Mahoney, 1996). Despite this danger, many scholars argue that generalization



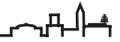
from a few cases to a broader population is indeed possible if due attention is paid to case selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gerring, 2004; 2006; Yin, 2003).

Of crucial importance is how the selected cases report to the central research question as well as to the broader population. For this research on the different locational choices of trade fairs, the research design is that of a comparative multiple case study as we want to know about the motivations behind the two different strategies. So, at least one central and one peripherally located exhibition center should be selected.

More difficult is to determine how individual cases report to a broader population and which of these cases should be selected with an eye on future generalization. Gerring (2006) suggests a most-similar case study design in which the selected cases are as similar as possible except for the outcome variable: in this research their relative position towards the city center. Because we only have sensitizing concepts and no concrete measurable variables, however, the variables to keep constant in this approach are in this phase of the research unknown. On what aspects should the cases be most similar? The preceding introductory chapter has already demonstrated a wide variety between exhibition centers in year of origin, size, ownership and host city. One could imagine that the motivations for trade fair development are much different in Paris and London than in Rimini and Herning.

Therefore, explicit choices have to be made. Underlying this analysis of central and peripheral trade fairs is the current debate on the changing nature of the periphery of urban regions (Keil, 1994; Soja, 2000; Phelps et al., 2010; see also the introduction to this work). Such processes have exclusively been observed and described for the larger European metropolises (Balducci, 2003; Foot, 2000; Salet et al., 2003; Keil and Ronneberger, 1994). Although it would be interesting to research the internationalization of smaller urban agglomerations through large-scale facilities like exhibition centers, or look at the processes taking place in their urban peripheries, this is a field of research that is embryonic at best. The objective of this research is to contribute to the discussion on the internationalization of the peripheries of large urban settlements through functional relocations.

Therefore, it seems wise to select cases that are at least similar in that they come from the largest and most competitive agglomerations of Western Europe. This also fits the observation that internationalization and specialization of the urban economy are in relation to exhibition center construction. The most obvious criterion for such a selection is obviously the number of residents. Many have argued, however, that competitive power is not only dependent on population but also on aspects like international connectivity, livability, and number and quality of amenities. Over the past decades, this has led to a wide variety of international metropolitan rankings like the Quality of



Life Index (Mercer, 2012), the Global Power City Index (Mori Memorial Foundation, 2011) and the Metropolräume in Europa from the Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR, 2010). These studies all focus on one or several aspects of competitiveness. Problem with these studies is, however, that not all agglomerations with exhibition centers are present within the studies or that the analysis is taking place on a different geographical scale. Therefore, a new ranking has been developed that incorporates apart from the urban population also the yearly number of tourists and passengers at the airport, two categories that seem of particular importance for the business-tourist economy.

Cases were also selected to control for the impact they have on their host cities. Although all facilities described in the previous section are amongst the largest facilities in Europe, they still differ considerably in size and number of visitors. As such it might be expected that their impact, both positive as well as negative, differs as well (see paragraph 1.2 for a thorough overview of these impacts). The larger the number of visitors, the larger the potential economic spin-off but also the larger the potential congestion and nuisance. Moreover, the larger the area of the trade fair, the more pressing questions about the legitimacy of a trade fair occupying that area might become.

Therefore, exhibition centers have also been listed on their relative size and visitor numbers. Unfortunately, not all venues had data available on their number of visitors. Hence, not all exhibition centers could be included. In Figure 2.1 exhibition centers are placed according to their place on the metropolitan index and according to their size. This figure shows a clear correlation between impact of the venue and competitiveness of the metropolitan region. There are, however, also a few facilities like Hannover that have a disproportionally large impact or cities like Amsterdam where their metropolitan score would suggest a bigger impact of the venue on the host city.

In this way, it becomes possible to better determine the relationship of the different exhibition centers towards the broader population. Because we are interested in those cases situated in metropolitan agglomerations, it makes sense to select cases from the right side of the scheme. If indeed the impact of the facility on its host city enlarges with its size and number of visitors, then these effects will be most manifest for the exhibition centers situated at the top of the scheme. Hence, it makes sense to select both Frankfurt and Milan as crucial cases of a central and a peripherally located facility respectively.

Meanwhile, these large impact values might make these cases into extreme cases which are not necessarily representative for other exhibition centers. Therefore, it makes sense to select also a peripheral and central exhibition center with more typical

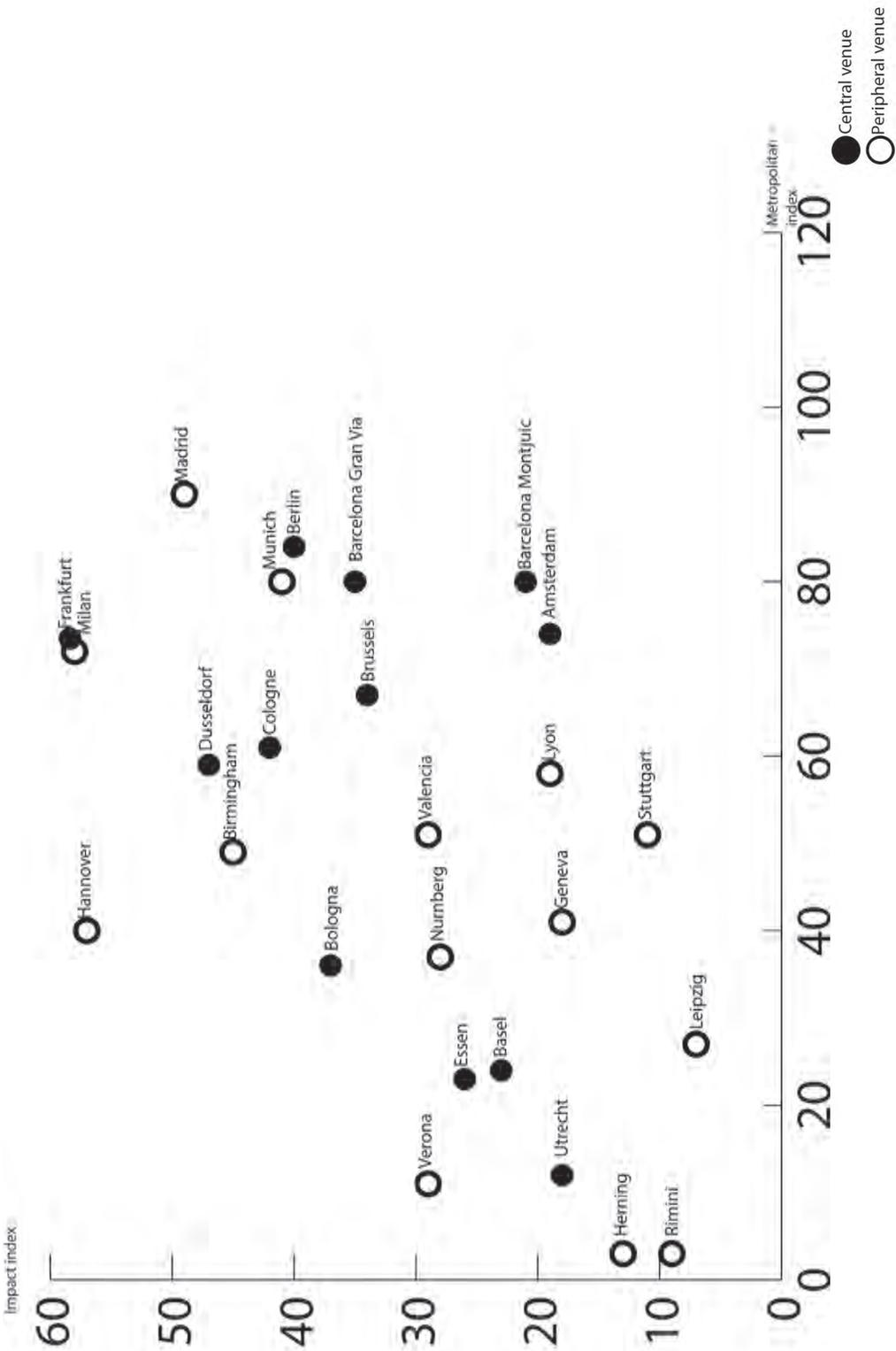
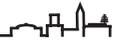


Figure 2.1: European exhibition center ranked by impact and metropolitan index



impact scores to see if similar processes were at work here. To this end, Munich and Amsterdam are selected.

By including a quantitative step into case study selection, it is hoped that stronger claims can be made towards generalization in the final phases of the research. For one, this approach warns us not to extend conclusions too easily towards exhibition centers in smaller urban regions. On the other hand, stronger claims could be made to those facilities in the metropolitan areas of Europe. Moreover, including cases with different impact scores might on the one hand help to single out crucial motivations but on the other hand curb troubling influence of extreme cases.