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

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Publication date
2013

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

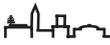
Vermeulen, R. (2013). *Spatial opportunities of exhibition centers: Explaining path-dependencies in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Munich and Milan*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Epilogue

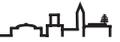
The ultimate aim of finalizing a PhD manuscript is proofing academic competences. In crafting mine, I've did my utmost to oblige to academic standards. Therefore, empirical and theoretical contribution to the field of urban studies have been central. The particular fact that I've over the past five years concurrently worked as a civil servant at the Physical Planning Department of the Municipality of Amsterdam, however, almost obliges me to pay some attention to the practical relevance of my academic endeavors.

The appropriate place to do so within the format of a thesis is in an epilogue. The appropriate way to establish linkages between theory and practice in general, I strongly feel, is through discussion. It has been my observation that foremost through sharing, confronting and debating empirical observations and practical experiences both worlds of the schizophrenic start of my professional life can come together. This epilogue is my opening for this discussion. I invite all to join and make this work more relevant.

The conclusions of this research are discouraging for the large-scale, top-down mega-project. If the current economic crisis that is sweeping municipal budgets all over Europe has not already stopped this old-fashioned way of urban development, then this work should be a warning. No matter how well intended plans can be, there should be a fertile opportunity structure in place for a project to take hold. If this is not the case, then stalemates like in Munich and Milan should be expected.

Moreover, it is often the facility itself that is the most appropriate actor to identify the opportunity structures and assess the necessity to act. This is again most prevalent in the actions taken by the Munich Fair in 1985 but also a lesson to be drawn from the acquisition of the terrains of the former railway yards by the Frankfurt Fair. Amsterdam provides a negative case where the municipal ideas of a relocation of the exhibition center were rejected by the local exhibition center. Notwithstanding the leading role of trade fairs in their development, government backing has turned out as indisputably necessary in large-scale trade fair projects. This is inherent to an economic sector that often lacks the economic cloud to finance its own physical development.

With regards to the future development of trade fair venues in Europe, the identified



divergent pattern of 'peripheral' and 'city-center' venues is an interesting one. It is very likely that both types will further specialize and develop distinctive niches. This might result in even larger and more rationalized venues in the periphery, geared at the hosting of efficient, large-scale events.

Central-city venues, on the other hand, will have to dwell even more intensively on their urban-trump card: the idea that a trade fair is more than a business event and that some activities belonging to business travel are best performed outside of dedicated venues. This means that those venues will have to restore integration with their surroundings: a radical break with the rationalization of past decades. The concept of city-wide-events in which parts of the event are held at places other than the exhibition center itself will gain in importance for this segment of the market. The ViParis consortium, in which the main conference and exhibition centers in Paris are joined under one organization, is a model that fits these kinds of events properly. Also other cities might develop poly-nuclear venue structures that can be used separately but join forces for the hosting of larger events.

The nature of the event will determine if it is best served by a peripheral or central facility. Venues that can combine an urban location with sheer size like Frankfurt and, to a lesser extent, Cologne will become rare and will have a unique competitive position.

Even those locations, however, will derive the greatest competitive benefits from being at the forefront of developments in the economic sector. Throughout the decades, the focus of fairs has shifted from exchange to display to interaction. Whether these are physical in nature or stemming from the current rapid developments in ICT, facilities that anticipate earliest on new developments, will be the winners in the international competitive market for trade fairs.

Finally, when a longer term perspective is employed, it might very well be that facilities that are today relocated to the urban periphery will be encapsulated by the urban fabric, just like Frankfurt's Festhalle was in 1909 at the border of the city. History teaches us that what was once conceived as peripheral might in fact in the future be central.