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# The culture-led construction of the urban image. New public libraries in the Netherlands.

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## Abstract.

This paper deals with the role of culture and in particular of the cultural institution of the public library in the (re)construction of the urban identity in a context of an evolving postmodern cultural economy. Paralleling a cultural turn in post-industrial socio-economics, the production of 'signs' of aesthetic contents supports logics of urban branding able to create desire and induce attractiveness through social and spatial identity. Accordingly culture becomes a local asset. A new generation of public libraries is increasingly becoming part of this narrative in a more efficacious way than other cultural institutes like theatres or museums. This rising urban relevance of public libraries is paralleled and supported by their transformation from introvert repositories of collections into hybrid, multifaceted institutions targeted upon the aspirations of a community. Libraries today are environments of synchronic production and consumption of culture by 'prosumers'; a collective access-door to digital marketplaces and platforms. This evolution is evident in the Netherlands too, where many contemporary urban projects involve a new public library as the cultural anchor for refreshing the urban image. These new libraries contribute in different ways to the construction / transformation of the plural identities of the urban setting: as field of negotiations among cultures and agencies; as an architectural image that embodies the re-envisioning of local urbanity; as a creative, value-making workshop forging the image of the community. It is thus interesting to read the parallelisms among the urban image of the city, the branding topics, and the type of public library: an anatomy of its architecture, programming and strategic management. Drawing upon available research on city-library relationships this paper will discuss recent Dutch experiences emphasizing the connections between different local urban images and identities, and their strategic construction between design and community participation.

Key-words: culture-led development; library architecture and programming; hybrid building; urban identity; strategic governance-related networks.

## Introduction.

For the continuity of their construction in time, cities can be understood as architectural artefacts (Rossi 1966). These artefacts are the spatial materialization of the transformation of social and economic structures<sup>1</sup> and this includes collective symbolism and aesthetics intentions. Socio-economic transformations are carved into both the physical (i.e. buildings, spatial interventions) and the mental (i.e. policies, social relationships, traditions) dimensions of cities. Understanding the valence of the social and economic processes for change has therefore a great relevance for the understanding of urban settings, their transformations and the evolving image-values they communicate and through which they aim to be identified. What correlations exist between current socio-economic changes and the identity of the contemporary city?

## Economy of signs and space.

The contemporary city is deeply rooted into the industrial city, at least for what concerns western urbanizes. The rise and development of the industrial city went hand in hand with the rise and development of industrial capitalism. Current urban transformation are therefore strongly correlated to the transformation of that capitalist socio-economic system within a contemporary post-industrial phase whose characters are not yet fully unveiled. The reading offered by Lash and Urry (1987 and 1994) of these transformations is interesting as it emphasizes the pervasiveness of the image-based character of the present socio-economic phase and the centrality of 'culture' in it, with the underpinning role of technological change (Caso 1999). Lash and Urry (1987) describe the process of transformation of industrial capitalism through the three phases of the liberal capitalism, the organized capitalism and the disorganization of capitalism – this last phase characterized by 'post-Fordist' industrial processes: more fragmented and flexible types of productions that circulate internationally supported by the velocity of ICT flows. To Lash and Urry (1994) these post-Fordist types of industrial capitalism are increasingly "economies of signs and space" for they rely upon a growing dematerialization in the production processes, in which no longer material objects are the predominant objective of productions but 'signs' either of cognitive or aesthetic nature.

"These signs are of two types. Either they have a primarily cognitive content and are post-industrial or informational goods. Or they have primarily an aesthetic content and are what it can be termed postmodern goods. The development of the latter can be seen not only in the proliferation of objects which possess a substantial aesthetic component [...] but also in the increasing component of sign-value or image embodied in material objects. This aestheticization of material objects takes place *in* the production, the circulation or the consumption of such goods". (Lash and Urry 1994, 4).

It is not only the object in itself which is embedded of sign-value, but the entire process is permeated of aesthetic content in all of its phases of image creation, diffusion and fashioning – aiming to generate collective rituals. This process is essentially design-centred earlier than knowledge-centred, meaning that the design of products and services makes up a considerable part of the production cycle. Design here is about the development of a strategy of symbols for explaining and identifying (branding) a set of life-style-embedding goods and services, which in turn requires a consistent research effort. In this, the new industrial phase has borrowed much of the typicality of the cultural industry. Lash and Urry (1994) observe a ‘cultural-turn’ in production instead of the ‘commodification of culture’ often lamented by commentators.

“[...] it is argued that culture, which once in a golden past was part of the ‘sacred’, is becoming more and more like manufacturing industry. Our point is rather the opposite. Even in the heyday of Fordism, the cultural industries were irretrievably more innovation intensive, more design intensive than other industries. The culture industries, in other words, were post-Fordist *avant la lettre*. We are arguing [...] against any notion that culture production is becoming more like commodity production in manufacturing industry. Our claim is that ordinary manufacturing industry is becoming more and more like the production of culture. It is not that commodity manufacture provides the template, and culture follows, but that the culture industries themselves have provided the template”. (Lash and Urry 1994, 123).

Post-industrial modalities of production are thus increasingly culture-led processes, and they entail an aesthetic dimension which seems to be embedded in postmodern societies. The centrality of design as signifier in culture-led postmodern socio-economics has another implication that is relevant to this paper’s argumentation. It concerns the growing dynamics towards individualization that are operating within the disorganized, flexible production processes proper of these post-industrial economies:

“Flexible production [...] is at the same time *reflexive* production [...] in the sense that much work has to go into the design of new products; these are typically long-cycle job-tasks entailing a whole series of judgements and decisions between alternatives in regard to product quality and process optimality. It is reflexive in regard to individualization.” (Lash and Urry 1994, 122).

In this context individualization refers to subjectivity: individuals assuming decision-making responsibilities within the production process, which is demanded by organizational flexibility and (un)structuring. This development finds correlations into society-wide dynamics towards individualization and atomization<sup>2</sup>. What is relevant here, is the introduction of the concept of ‘reflexivity’ in the production process for it overcomes the original conception of the individual as a simple, passive ‘consumer’ of such aesthetic postmodernity, instead stating a critical, subjective behaviour of the individual engaged into the production of aesthetic content.

The modalities of economy productions and social communications that are largely diffusing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century back up Lash and Urry’s vision of a culture-led socio-economics entailing postmodern values. The 2016 Rotterdam Biennale (Brugmans et al. 2016) has addressed the ‘next economy’, an umbrella-concept for a cloud of different but parallel economies often bearing ethical responsibilities towards ‘our common future’<sup>3</sup>. These economies are supported by dematerialized flows of information (design, communication, research...) or are dematerialized themselves being in fact services. Examples of this cloud of parallel eco-economies include the recycling economy, the green economy, the sharing economy, the so-called gig-economy or uber-economy – all supported by the mobility of information and by the opportunities enabled by telecommunication applications and digital platforms. What all these ‘next economies’ have in common, is an increasing critical reflexivity, customization and active participation of individuals in the production processes as makers, offerors, or consumers; and a strong cultural orientation in terms of creativity, individual entrepreneurship and aesthetic content<sup>4</sup>. This is for many sides an ‘atomized’ economy with a strong social participation featuring a close intertwining between producers and consumers. These dynamics have been well captured by Sacco (2011), an influent cultural economist. According to Sacco we are now entering a new cultural era: Culture 3.0, which differs from Culture 1.0 (characterized by patronage) and Culture 2.0 (characterized by re-production capabilities) for the explosion of the pool of cultural producers. Sacco’s account travels the same trajectory of Lash & Urry (1994) but in the other direction, for it moves from the cultural industry and the proactive individual to arrive to the challenges for contemporary industry.

“The hallmark of Culture 3.0 phase is thus the transformation of audiences (that are still the reference of the ‘classical’ phase of cultural industry) into practitioners [...] – accessing cultural experiences increasingly challenges individuals to develop their own capabilities to assimilate and manipulate in personal ways the cultural content they are being exposed to. The passive reception patterns of the ‘classical’ cultural industries phase are now being substituted by active, engaging reception patterns. The other hallmark of this phase is the pervasiveness of culture, which ceases to be a specific form of entertainment to become an essential ingredient of the texture of everyday life” (Sacco 2011, 4).

Sacco stresses the strategic importance of an active cultural participation for the overall economic development. For this, the enhancement of DIYs capabilities by individuals in conceiving, designing, developing, servicing, producing and exploiting products of any type – physical or mental – and their availability to all is a decisive factor (Caso 2015). The pervasiveness of cultural, often aesthetic contents for everyday life is thus a distinctive character of the present phase of post-industrial society. It is a ‘critical’ reflexivity characterized by the interchangeability at any step of producers and consumers. These ‘prosumers’ (Ritzer et al. 2012) are the new reality in product development and the

new paradigm in socio-economic constructions. They are culture-embedded by being design-embedded, and they are individually defined by customization. How does this paradigmatic cultural-turn embedding everyday life take position in contemporary urbanizes, and how does this dynamic participate of urban identities?

## The city as an environment for creation.

Contemporary spatial settings increasingly place culture at the centre of their experience (Miles & Paddison 2005; Abrahams 2016) in this paralleling and somehow reflecting the described socio-economic dynamics. In a changing global economy, cities increasingly implement 'cultural planning' for fostering creativity and innovation (Mercer 2006). The metaphor of the creative city, an interpretation of the city as creative enclave that have penetrated the urban understanding since a few decades now<sup>5</sup>, offers a bridge between the socio-economic narrative of the postmodern condition and the transformations in urban space and city-experience. The Creative City (i.e. Landry 2000) provides a framework for innovative solutions and related initiatives, supposedly able to refresh the social, economic and cultural urban milieu. Central to the concept is the value of diffused creativity<sup>6</sup> (Florida 2002) feed by a strategic governance that provides room for those innovations and creative enterprises that find their main battlefield in the urban challenges (Carta 2007). Beside a nurturing education, a space for starting enterprises, high quality infrastructure, sport, leisure, a diversity of accommodation typologies and an increase in urban liveability – a crucial asset of the creative city concept is to expose urban dwellers to a truly varied equipment of cultural infrastructure (Mercer 2006). Not surprisingly then, cultural planning has consciously occupied city agenda's at least since the '90s, replacing the post-war focus on housing.

The long-list of cultural programmes involved in (re)development projects especially included art galleries, museums, opera houses and theatres. These programmes are often targeted on the high-end protagonists of the creative city and are housed in buildings intended to be themselves high-end cultural symbols. The construction of the identity of the post-industrial city has been consequently advocated by branding strategies based on sensationalism: the realization of large projects with an iconic charge able to generate attention and consequently to function as catalyst for investments and tourism – most famous examples being Bilbao's Guggenheim (the 'Bilbao effect') or the Tate Modern in London (Plaza 2008). These buildings are designed as urban signifiers that symbolize the cultural engagement of the city by carving the branding intentions into their aesthetic (physical and mental) dimensions of signs and marketing. Yet, these strategies seems to only touch upon a few chords of the potentialities of culture-led (re)construction of the postmodern urban identity and correlated socio-economics (Plaza 2008; Evans 2009), and proved to be arid in the end: attempted replications of Bilbao-like strategies returned ever lower results (Abrahams 2016). Recalling the distinction of Sacco (2011), they belong to an early 'Culture 2.0' paradigm for being designed as top-down operations targeted upon cultural consumers – thus mainly intended for tourism. A stimulating 'cultural infrastructure' for the Culture 3.0 creative city would instead require major inclusive partnerships between all agents, including administration, public and private assets, individual consumers and all creative producers of culture – not only artists:

“Within the context of a more coherent and comprehensive strategy of systematic coordination of all of the indirect effects of cultural production and participation, it would be very important to orientate local projects of cultural revitalization toward a pro-active, participative approach that builds local skills and capabilities assets rather than toward mounting inauthentic, instrumental spectacles to the benefit of hit-and-run tourism” (Sacco 2011, 9).

In other words, “the role of culture in re-defining the social and symbolic foundation of the place” (Sacco 2011, 9) should be encapsulated within projects that elaborates upon the local identity and assets, investing on the human capital system of the place by creating platforms for the economic empowerment of communities. Which cultural infrastructures have the potential of realizing such an engaging local identity?

## Libraries as new cultural signifiers.

In response to this transforming context of diffused creativity and prosumers, art galleries, museums, opera houses, theatres and other cultural typologies are increasingly engaging their visitors in a more proactive way offering them workshops and other cultural experiences, or they 'hybridize' becoming the experiential stage for other happenings<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes the context of the city becomes itself an experiential stage (Lorentzen et al. 2015). This especially holds for truly historical urban locations<sup>8</sup>, but also for many dismissed areas of the industrial era with their romantic, abandoned landscape made of chimneys, large halls, erratic open spaces and rusty infrastructures: industrial spaces suddenly transformed into cultural spaces.

However it is the public library that shows the most impressive evolution and the greatest potential of providing the urban realm with an engaging cultural infrastructure as described in Mattern (2014), by addressing creativity in the challenging context of a raising 'knowledge society' devoted to 'knowledge economy' (EC 2015). These new libraries are in no way just the repository of collections, no longer they solely rely on an obsoleted unicity of 'place-for-borrowing-books'. They are becoming proactive platforms for social encounter and community action (Lankes 2012), workshops for freeing diffuse creativity at all levels of the contemporary (western) society – explicitly including ethnic minorities and the big migration flows. In their development libraries are hybridizing, meaning that they tend to offer a vast array of services and to assume a variety of roles far beyond their original mission (Mattern 2014). Experience, Innovation, Involvement, Empowerment (explore, excite, participate, create) is the reference cloud to

which the contemporary library devote itself (Jochumsen et al. 2012). In many cases they merge with other agents or engage in alliances with other public or private bodies – forming a new cultural ‘thing’. This variety in content and expressive tools offered by libraries potentially facilitates hybridization across different forms of creativity for producing new personal content to share with the community expressing own identity and talents (Lessig 2008). This exercise should be at the base of an economy of diffused creativity entailing subjectivity and active cultural participation.

Not surprisingly then, the recent history of culture-led city (re)developments are welcoming new library buildings with an own urban power and symbolic meaning like the Sendai Mediatheque (2001, Ito), the Seattle library (2004, OMA), the Birmingham library (2013, Mecanoo). The latest impressive example in this row is the new library of Aarhus (2015, Schmidt Hammer Lassen Architects), which represents the state-of-the-art in library architecture and programming. The main difference between other land-marking cultural buildings and these iconic library buildings lays in the programmatic inclusiveness and bottom-up modalities of the latter ones (for they are the rein of autodidactic knowledge and action) which makes of them not simply an urban centre but just the centre of the community. Nevertheless, the context in which the library operates is not always the global but more often the local, in this being significant at different scales and contextual situations including the low-end neighbourhood and the derelict community. Especially in these positions the library is potentially able to confer engagement, knowledge and a platform for economic empowerment. Skot-Hansen (et al. 2012) categorized three main strategies for library interventions in the context of culture-led (re)development projects in cities, drawing upon the distinction made by the British DCMS (2004): 1 cultural icons and landmarks, 2 place-making and urban identity, 3 community vitalization.

Re. 1: cultural icons ought to be unique; they bear a clear aesthetic / symbolic quality and are part of an urban branding strategy. Libraries like those in Seattle, Birmingham and Aarhus can be labelled as iconic. They have a clear global impact and are supposedly able to generate a revenue in their cities, either economically or spatially. Icons may have as well a local meaning as a part of an urban branding strategy of particular urban areas – most likely in large metropolis. Skot-Hansen (et al. 2012) mentions Arup’s Peckham Library in South London.

Re. 2: place-makers function as cultural anchor for development and / or revitalization of certain urban areas. They are local signifiers in the sense that they (re)construct the urban dimension by providing collective meaning and identity. When icons are often stand-alone landmarks, place-makers are embedded in urban structures regardless of their size. Libraries like in Salt Lake City (2003, Safdie) are thought as city-improvement both in morphological and programmatic sense: variety, public space, engine.

Re. 3: libraries in culture-led operation of community vitalization address socio-economic challenges. They are oriented on the specific area / community and address local potentialities, accompanying a strategy that privileges a positive approach above focusing on problems and negativities. An example in this category can be the Idea Store at London Whitechapel (2005, Adjaye), or the many (small) intervention thought in relation to a specific socio-spatial situation (like Rentemestervej Copenhagen, Garage Malmö, Library 10 Helsinki). Interesting enough, many examples of this category refresh old centralities, once at the heart of a community before becoming obsolete. See for instance the Waiting Room at Colchester UK, previously the bus station and now a library focusing on making and performing (Willingham and De Boer 2015).

According to scale, context, ambition and actors involved, the library can hold a specific meaning in urban identity. How does the decision-making process concerning library development works through image-forming and identity?

## The library and the process of the construction of the identity.

The potential of contemporary libraries for activating culture in a context of creative economy makes of libraries a wanted playground for urban policies in both programme and space. The new public libraries are indeed not only celebrating culture in most contemporary, postmodern acceptance, but they are ‘urban interventions’ tout-court for they are organized, thought and realized by complex collaborations involving an array of local agents eventually striving for a variety of urban goals. Libraries are thus expression of a chosen urban identity when (re)constructing the urban image.

Vallet (2013) observed the growing contribution given by the public library to strategic public networks for future developments and innovations in cities. In her work she focuses on the role played by public libraries involved in these strategic partnerships, emphasizing generic and specific strategic roles and choices. The investigation surveyed nine libraries in Flanders and the Netherlands. For what it concerns the specific choices, Vallet (2013) developed a comparable taxonomy than Skot-Hansen (et al. 2012): the ‘urban landmark’, intended as a symbolic representation of urban quality and identity; the ‘area-oriented herald’, supporting innovation and (re)development of certain urban areas; and the ‘target-group patron’, libraries dedicated to groups considered vulnerable or in needs of support. Each category is characterized by a set of similar choices. Interestingly, Vallet (2013) emphasizes the importance of architectural design for library identification, in which several common design choices emerge like an open architectural design and a flexible interior. Generic process-related choices are very interesting too as they evidence the (long) phase of negotiation:

“On the one hand, all nine city innovation projects engage a complex and heterogeneous set of public and private actors to determine the further role of the public library involved (e.g. different departments of urban government, social profit organizations, real estate organizations). Each of these actors has its own interests and preferences, which often complicates a turbulent first conceptual phase of the library city innovation project. Nonetheless, such an extensive consultation of urban

actors and stakeholders is considered to be self-evident in the network-wise approach of the city innovation project.” (Vallet 2013, 655).

The governance-related strategic networks and the participating urban actors all shape the urban operation each from the own specific mind-set and associated urban goals. Accordingly, the shared identity informing the public library in the context of strategic urban goals is the result of a participated process of negotiation between parallel, sometimes contrasting desired identities. Among these desired identities it is possible to distinguish at least:

- A desired urban identity pursued from a political and administrative position.
- A desired ‘corporate’ identity of the institution as contemporary, renewed agency (meaning, staff, services).
- A desired ‘bottom-up’ identity from the perspective of the community and users (action committees).
- A desired identity proposed by the designers expertise and background.

The construction of the culture-led urban identity through the public library is therefore the result of this dynamic negotiation process within the governance-related strategic networks. Due to the inherent complexity of negotiations and to the vulnerability to changing conditions, these processes usually span a long period. In order to survive, then, the process needs a conceptual platform that synthesizes the different instances into an intuitive (visual) model which is flexible enough to resist modifications and explicit enough to generate dynamic consensus.

Anticipating on the selection of experiences described in the next section, this model is increasingly more a ‘design-centred’ model that visualizes the opportunities for the specific context. This model is a subjective contribution to the strategic governance network by the designer, conveying his/her ability to construct convincing narratives by synthesizing and accommodating the instances at play. To become a consensual playfield, this model cannot just be cognitive but needs to acquire an aesthetic, visual valence in order to communicate and share with different mind-sets. Here the parallelism with the earlier described cultural turn by Lash and Urry (1994) is evident.

## The experiences in NL.

The evolution of library buildings as cultural infrastructures and expression of urban identity did not escaped the Netherlands, where a new generation of public libraries have seen the light. A new Public Library Act (VOB 2015) has reorganized the sector and has updated and clarified the core functions that the library (intended as an interconnected system of physical and digital access) should offer. The local government holds responsibility for guaranteeing the services, yet depending on local concertation – which also implies libraries’ necessity to fulfil local neediness (Caso 2016) for (digital) literacy, community support, and social integration.

A selection of recent libraries in The Netherlands is described below, reporting an initial ‘anatomy’ of aspects playing a role in the process of identity forming and imagining derived from the previous discussion and desired identities: Category (following categorization of Skot-Hansen et al. 2012; and of Vallet 2013); Characters of general identity (common to many Dutch libraries); Publicness (how the library expresses the public value); Interior (specific qualities of the internal landscape); Specific value (peculiar aspects of the library goals); Expression (library exteriors); Specific value into the design (the specific design qualities in relation to library idea); Designer value (the designer identity in the project); Process (the development of the operation). In one case (Spijkenisse) the discussion is more detailed.

### DOK Delft.

The DOK library (2007; Dok Architects; interior: Aat Vos) is designed in relation to the identity framework of Delft as centre of innovation and experiment, in turn linked to the image of the city as the seat of a high ranked university. The DOK is a concept-library for it broadly employs new technologies and organizes its different parts by low-threshold relationships embedded in a fresh and friendly design. The library is clearly a meeting place and a stage for local events, but also a platform to familiarize with digital technology for the availability of many innovative gadgets. Creativity and story-telling are most important key-words for DOK which also hosts DOKLab, an internationally known office specialised in library innovation. Anno 2016 DOK merged with the local extracurricular Art School (VAK). This will involve a far-reaching redesign of the physical library.

- Category: local landmark (as mentioned by Vallet 2013) / place-maker by categorization Skot-Hansen (et al. 2012).
- Generic identity characters: transparency, open-floor structure, friendly interiors, public platform, program variety.
- Publicness: DOK is a square, a low-threshold public space for debating. Transparencies in façade emphasize the relationships with public realm.
- Interior: fresh bright colours and dynamic shapes support a strategy of place-making.
- Specific value: DOK is at home in low-threshold technology and innovation, users can familiarize with. Dok has heavily invested in Wi-Fi, interactive touch-screen tables, tablets, digital collections, self-service systems. Although advanced it is not designed as a centre for students of the local university, also due to the large academic library and facilities on campus. It has been one of the first libraries equipped this way, inspiring other libraries.
- Expression: the library is part of a city-block belonging to a city plan for renewing the area which has been leading in the design. In that framework the library is characterized by transparency and by large glazed parts

within the ordered window raster and brick walls of the city block. This transparency emphasize and reveal library's publicness.

- Specific value into the design: DOK addresses sustainability by recycling / reusing the load-bearing structure of the pre-existing building block. This structure is left in sight in its rough materiality as a sign of temporality and easiness. The small additions adjust the building to morphology of urban plan. They are employed to improve functionality and expression of the public value.
- Designer value: Liesbeth van der Pol is an internationally appreciated architect. The city block housing the library is contextually designed and escape an evident architect's signature, yet remaining present. The interior responds to the research and signature of Aat Vos.
- Process: close collaboration between designers within the frame of the urban plan; this collaboration particularly involved users (the library) in a participated process, directed to emphasize innovation. Design is a platform.

## OBA Amsterdam.

OBA Amsterdam (2007; JCAU) is explicitly thought as a way "to accommodate the vast array of books representing many centuries of our culture in a multi-functional public building designed to be an exciting, adventurous place to visit" (from assignment). At the same time the library is the very anchor of the downtown Oosterdokseiland (ODE) development and the first building realized there, followed soon after by the Conservatorium. OBA houses (special) collections and provides many workplaces to students. Above all OBA is a place of encounter, a restaurant with a panoramic view over the historical centre, a platform for expositions, a small broadcasting studio, a theatre, and offers facilities for meetings. This programme offers a strong cultural mix to all urban dwellers. OBA is the largest library building in the Netherlands, and one of the larger in Europe.

- Category: local landmark (mentioned by Vallet 2013) / place-maker (mentioned by Skot-Hansen et al. 2012).
- Generic identity characters: open-floor structure; variety program and collections; study-places; spatial diversity.
- Publicness: the bottom floors are the prolongation of the street and have public meaning. The top floor houses public services: theatre and restaurant. The transparent broadcasting studio means another publicness.
- Interior: exceptional variety in furniture and in spatial situations supports a place-making strategy. Voids are connections.
- Specific value: OBA is a students' hub, a meeting point. It is a catalyst for the area ideally bridging between central station and Nemo museum. It is a platform for Amsterdam culture. Starting the ODE development, it earmarked the area as a desirable place for living, working and leisure.
- Expression: OBA shows a relatively blind façade that in turn emphasizes the great inner variety in architecture and spatial situations. The three-parted elevation accords to the internal articulation and is characterized by symbolic gestures (portal) without being iconic but fitting the scale of Amsterdam architecture.
- Specific value into design: the internal variety is remarkable. Sustainability by energy savings and energy production (closed elevations, natural ventilation, photovoltaic elements, and connected to the LTEO<sup>9</sup> system of ODE) has been largely publicized.
- Designer value: The OBA carries the recognisable signature of Coenen's architecture. A quality-mark for the municipality.
- Process: the relationship with and embedment into masterplan ODE has added complexity: more project managers collaborating (one for ODE/MAB and one for OBA/municipality).

## Rozet Arnhem.

Rozet (2013; Neutelings Riedijk Architects) is the new cultural cluster downtown Arnhem. The project is part of the attempt to repair the fracture between the city centre and the waterfront area that occurred as consequence of the Battle of Arnhem during WWII. The reconstruction has produced typological, morphological, programmatic and perception discontinuities, and originated the lacking of good connections to the river-side along with an impoverished feeling of collectiveness. The last plan for the area proposed a pedestrian route connecting the railway station to the river. Rozet is located along this route and has the ambition to revitalize the area with its catalyst working. The cluster houses a mix of cultural and art functions, among which the Heritage Centre, the extracurricular Art School, an Auditorium and the Public Library. This last is the true bearer of the public meaning attracting a large diversity in visitors. Peculiar typological solution is the climbing streets wrapping the entire programme and realizing the connections between programs and people. The street is a public place to seat, meet, read or just observe who's passing by. The architecture of Rozet clearly supports the image of the building as a public, cultural intervention. The details on the façade thematise Rozet and make it recognizable in Arnhem.

- Category: area-oriented herald / place-maker.
- Generic identity characters: variety in services, public space.
- Publicness: Rozet is a public street that connects people and programme and is a public space of encounter.

- Interior: interpretation of the architecture of the public interior. High-quality detailed architecture of decorated concrete tiles and wood. Library-dedicated area adopt place-making strategy through furniture.
- Specific value: Rozet ambition is to provide an integral answer for an urban question. Rozet architecturally integrates different cultural and educational functions: it is a 'culture house' in NL fashion and potentially a precursor of future realizations. Rozet adopts intelligent space saving solutions in response to urban constraints.
- Expression: Rozet's solid expression is given by coherence in materialization and decoration (same decorated concrete tiles system throughout the building). The main features of the design are reflected in façade: transparency employed at entrance, street, auditorium – against an otherwise 'closed' materialization.
- Specific value of design: Climbing street as building signifier / identity bearer. High-quality refined detailing and materialization.
- Designer value: Neutelings Riedijk's care for signifying details and for smart typo-morphology solutions has played a role in the winning entry for Rozet design. This turned out to be a success factor due to the office international fame and positive criticism.
- Process: Neutelings Riedijk selected after 2009 competition. The process was very rapid: about 4 years from competition to inauguration. An office specialized in programming has followed the whole process, from competition brief to construction. The municipality played a leading role in participating procedures; the preliminary design has been the platform for the participated procedure (stakeholders, users).

## De Boekenberg Spijkenisse.

Particularly interesting is the case of De Boekenberg<sup>10</sup> (2012; MVRDV) the new library of Spijkenisse, a small municipality at the outskirts of Rotterdam. Due to its particular conceptual charge connected to the municipal ambitions, De Boekenberg shows paradigmatic traits of a strategic construction of identity characterized by 'signs of aesthetic content' (Lash and Urry 1994). Therefore it deserves a more precise anatomy of this process of identity (re)construction through the different identity layers.

Since the 70s Spijkenisse has increasingly become a sleeping suburb of Rotterdam. Due to lacking renovation plans and the competitive attraction of Rotterdam, Spijkenisse growingly suffered from downgrading housing stock, impoverishment of services, declining social quality (wealth move out, less well-in move in, migrants) and a general lack of identity within the region – all in a mutual downgrading spiral. Since the second half of the previous century the municipality has worked to a new plan with the ambition of tackling the impoverishments and reconstruct the identity of the city as representative of new liveability and able to unlock desire. For this, Ashok Bhalotra was chosen as advisor for the renovation of the city-centre through Soeters Van Eldonk's romantic architecture, and where an ambitious re-programming aimed to pull-up the image of Spijkenisse particularly through the realization of cultural buildings: the new theatre by UN Architects, and the new library by the international renowned MVRDV, well known for their sharp concepts and iconic architecture. The following anatomy discusses several layers of the construction of the image of the library as a pillar for reconstructing Spijkenisse identity.

- The library employs 'the book' as symbol and as main feature/object in the narrative. On the one hand it expresses the collective understanding of the library, being in this way a clear 'message' for users; on the other hand it becomes 'decoration', aesthetic content above its cognitive meaning. Being visible from the outside, the books confers the building its name – likely expressing the desire to re-state the relationships among library and book: the book as metaphor for the building; the book as collective identity of the institute.
- A second symbolic metaphor in the narrative lays in the morphology chosen for the total urban intervention including the adjacent buildings, that apparently refers to the origin of Spijkenisse as rural community. In this metaphor the library building is the farmhouse and the surrounding buildings are the service-buildings as in a traditional Dutch farm. This metaphor is constructed on the aesthetics (the form) content of the building, with little abstraction. The design of the library came first, the other buildings emerging later in the process as an opportunity (Baartman 2013). Thus we can argue that the library assumed an additional metaphorical meaning projecting another formal interpretation of library's envelop (yet originated by other considerations) upon the surrounding parts.
- A third aspect refers to the choice for the materialization: a continuous brick blanket covering the entire intervention (library block and surrounding buildings, excepting the glazed pyramid of the library) which goes so far to clad lift doors – then necessarily a brick pattern wallpaper. This conceptual choice emphasizes the unity of the intervention (including market-square) but at the same time identifies this as 'enclave' in the city. Here the concept is elevated above the real necessity of homogeneity – and becomes a necessity itself only in service of the branding goal: a strategic choice informing the architectural choice.
- The technical engagement associated with the realization of the Boekenberg is a fourth aspect to be remarked. Climatic, energy balance, CO2 neutrality and other performances required by law resulted more challenging because the 'glass pyramid' concept. This technical aspects was then directed to profile the library as a masterpiece of technical ability as well – adding more layers of sustainability (all materials are recycled) and pushing were possible the performances beyond the due requisites. In this context thus, technicalities assume a meaning that goes beyond the building engineering and become aesthetic material for communication.



- A fifth, crucial aspect in this process of construction of building image embedded into the reconstruction of urban identity is the selection of MVRDV for the design. This choice is part of a branding strategy that employs the international resonance of the architect's name as a vehicle to foster (inter)national notoriety. This identification library-city has been consciously realized: the selection of MVRDV as winning entry was decided by explicit preference of the political decision-makers in order to push the identity ambitions of the city. Maybe other designs were better libraries, but not better 'icons'.
- The iconic working of the library derives from the previous points: an easily readable, strong intervention embedded into a conceptual approach that raises far above the functional necessities. The most challenging solutions were produced by conceptual choices pushing far beyond the necessary brief. This is shown as well by costs and size of the intervention, compared to the Spijkenisse context.
- Final point in this (limited) identity anatomy refers to the imagining, the marketing the Boekenberg like a life-embedding phenomenon. Beside attracting the attention of architectural commentators and the specialised press, MVRDV and Spijkenisse also welcomed the production of publications over the library, its architecture, process and meaning: story-telling, narratives transforming De Boekenberg into an 'event'.

Referring to the layering of desired identities that conjure up into the construction of the actual total image of urban identity, this discussion enlightens the realization of the desired identities of the municipality and of the architect, while the desired identities of the community and of the institution itself remained under-represented. Indeed the local community has not been fully involved, either there has been a strong opposition to the Boekenberg that delayed the realization a great deal. Although the process has been quite top-down, yet the library today offers the community a platform for education, local entrepreneurship and for local associations and is becoming more popular and participated. The desired identity of the institution itself, and of library staff, is probably the real neglect of this process as it is reduced to 'book decoration' and 'icon users'. Maybe it is also for this reason that the library few years after opening (2012) has been already re-organised (2016) for matching changing demand, and for owning process by all users.

- Category: urban landmark / local icon.
- Generic identity characters: transparency, materialization, morphology, typology.
- Publicness: the Boekenberg is structured as an up-climbing spiralling street connecting services and being the stage for encounter and activities. The library has direct, low-threshold relationships with the market square. Overwhelming transparency as invitation to public.
- Interior: the interior architecture is characterized by its materialization: brick blanket covering all parts; recycled plastic (black KLP) for bookshelves, balustrades and desks; wooden loadbearing structure in sight; glazed pyramidal roof.
- Specific value: iconic meaning of intervention is overwhelming. The Boekenberg is a billboard for the ambitions of the city, an urban branding machine for Spijkenisse.
- Expression: the transparency of the glazed pyramid and the gigantic pile-up of books are the main ingredients of building expression, assisted in this by the brick basement which extends itself over the local city pavement and the other buildings belonging to the intervention.
- Specific value into design: the spiralling-up street wraps-in the generic programme (offices, auditorium, meeting room) providing maximum exposition of the decorative content made of books. The technical engagement for realizing extended sustainability has a relevant state-of-the-art value for climatic engineering.
- Designer value: the building exhibits the personal signature of Winy Maas / MVRDV. This is inextricably intertwined with the branding success of the operation.
- Process: MVRDV was selected after a competition. The local decision-makers somehow forced the choice, which was therefore little participated. Beside, a strong personality as Winy Maas doesn't tolerate intromissions and leave little room for compromises at any level. With a similar ambition animating the political will, there was no much space for a consensual operation in the community. The opposition to the project contributed to the very long process of about 10 years between conception and inauguration.

## Few deductions.

The conceptual lines cutting across this contribution depict a critical role for a culture-led identification of contemporary urbanizes. Socio-economic transformations enlighten peculiar characters of diffused creativity and subjectivity for which the renewed public library emerge as versatile cultural infrastructure with a role as identity-bearer for the creative city. Yet, the process of construction of the image of the contemporary library and its relationships to the reconstruction of the urban identity relies upon the negotiations among concurring desired identities. The initial anatomy of Dutch cases-studies added empirical specificity to the discussion, in turn enabling several additional deductions:

Libraries in the Netherlands are seldom 'global icons' although their impact for the interested areas can be sometimes 'iconic', and although they are often designed according to bold architectural concepts. Examples of libraries for 'urban vitalization' (Skot-Hansen et al. 2012) or 'target-group patron' (Vallet 2013) are more frequent. Yet the actual dynamic of library geography in the Netherlands shows a trend towards concentration, privileging urban place-makers libraries types: local identity above global identity.

In the light of the community embedment of the library, the diversity in context and concepts shows there is not such a 'corporate identity' of the physical library. Many libraries even assume different names. Yet there exist sets of identity-makers contemporary libraries are familiar with (programming, variety, friendliness).

The predominant desired identity depends on the specific situation. However, although the process is generally participated, the predominant identity tends initially to reflect the position of the city (politics, administration) or of the designer earlier than those of the institution and of the users. The more when the identity-content becomes urgent to politics.

Drawing upon the previous point, design is often used as a platform for discussion and consensus involving different desired identities. This introduces a degree of (professional) subjectivity in the process, where the designer potentially acquires a leading status.

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## Notes.

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<sup>1</sup> Yet correlation is not causation. This paper rejects determinism and simplistic cause-effect relationships to embrace a constellation of parallel, somehow correlated dimensions. Different conceptual lines will cut across each other forming a cloud depicting the theoretical framework.

<sup>2</sup> To Lash and Urry (1994, 6) traditional structuralism fails to explain current socio-economic developments. Traditional structures are substituted by informational and communication structures fostering individualization.

<sup>3</sup> Mostly bottom-up fuelled, they often pursue a decarbonized future as a precondition for smart ways of goods productions involving ecologies of reuse and cradle-to-cradle practices.

<sup>4</sup> Consider for instance the aesthetic charge inherent to developments like the 'experience economy' (Pine II and Gilmore 1999).

<sup>5</sup> The concept has been often misused, yet the creative city has meant a relevant conceptual step in understanding urbanizes for it emphasizes the opportunities inherent to urban densities resulting in an augmented innovative charge.

<sup>6</sup> There is a strong correlation between this diffused creativity and Sacco's Culture 3.0 theory.

<sup>7</sup> Hosting fashion events, pop-up initiatives, debates, fairs... This is as well a reaction to declining welfare.

<sup>8</sup> In Italy for instance, Florence has leased famous historical sites to private and commercial parties; Naples historical centre recently staged fashion defiles.

<sup>9</sup> Long-term energy storage.

<sup>10</sup> Book Mountain.