

# The Contested Rooting of an Entrepreneurial City: The Case of Tilburg

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## 1 Private cities

In present urban marketing processes European cities are increasingly rhetorically conceptualized as “entrepreneurial” spatial units that “compete” with each other in order to “sell” their “products”.<sup>1</sup> An important element in the entrepreneurial performance of cities is the objectification of the identity of the city. The city is more and more turned into an object-like value organization in order to facilitate its exploitation, performance and marketing. Through the use of symbols, slogans, themes, and story-lines cities intend to objectify the culture of the city by conveying a particular image attractive to (potential) “buyers of the products” of the city. It is this objectification process of cities that we put central in this contribution.

The careful entrepreneurial promotion and orchestration of the city image to attract potential “buyers” of “products” of the city, mainly tourists and investors, is also meant to boost civic pride and identification with the own city.

Hence, not only visitors are seen as buyers of the products of the city. Also inhabitants of a city, the citizens, are being thought of as customers of the firm that is the city. The public sector is thereby taking over characteristics once distinctive to the private sector-risk-taking, inventiveness, promotion and profit motivation.<sup>2</sup> Put differently, cities increasingly perform being firms.

The inclination to model after business is demonstrated in the case of Tilburg, a city in the south of the Netherlands, through the development of the “Tilburg Model” of local administration from the mid-1980s onwards. The “Tilburg Model” represents a fundamental shift in the organization of local public administration characterized as New Public Management (NPM).<sup>3</sup>

NPM chimes with the notion of “entrepreneurial cities” in that it urges authorities to become “earning rather than

spending”. To do so, NPM recommends the transformation of administrative bodies into self-managed agencies that are accountable to the city politicians on the basis of contractual agreements and performance indicators.

The “Tilburg Model” of NPM has emphasized, in particular, the transformation of local administrative bodies with the aim of tightening financial control and accountability.<sup>4</sup> In a later instance, the model was adapted to bring forward a more outward looking and democratic style of local government, with specific interest in the neighbourhood level. Initially, then, the “Tilburg Model” was part of a cultural change which paved the way for a more entrepreneurial stance in city politics underpinning the business-like performance of the city. Through both its administrative approach (the “Tilburg Model”) and administrative performance (notably financial) the city could be sold to the outside world. More recent changes encouraged a stronger interest in the meaning of the city to local citizens, by performing the city’s administrative innovation at the neighbourhood level.

*Citizens are clients and municipal departments are business units.*

Urban Planning Summary, Tilburg

*Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not any simpler.*

Albert Einstein, 1951

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The web-site of the municipality of Tilburg ([www.tilburg.nl](http://www.tilburg.nl))



## 2 The invention of urban tradition



The wrapped city

(1)  
See Hall, T.; Hubbard, P.: The entrepreneurial city: new urban politics, new urban geographies. *Progress in Human Geogr.* 20 (1996) 2, pp. 153–174;  
Harvey, D.: From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance in late capitalism. *Geografiska Ann.* 71 B (1989) 1, pp. 3–17

(2)  
Hall, T.; Hubbard, P.: The entrepreneurial city, l.c.

(3)  
Denhardt, Robert B.: Theories of public organization. – Orlando 2000

(4)  
Hendriks,.; Schalken, -: Local government and the new public management: the case of the Tilburg model. In: *Lokale Verwaltingsreformen in Aktion*. Hrsg.: Wollmann, H., Grunow. – Basel 1998

(5)  
Houtum, H. van: The borders of comfort. Spatial economic bordering processes in and by the European Union. (Paper presented at ESA, Helsinki 2001)

(6)  
Pine, B.; Gilmore, J.: The experience economy: work is theatre & business is a stage. – Boston 1999

(7)  
cf. Houtum, H. van; Lagendijk, A.: Contextualizing regional identity and imagination in the construction of new policy configurations for polycentric urban regions, the cases of the Ruhr area and the Basque Country. *Urban Stud.* 38 (2001) 4, pp. 743–764

(8)  
Houtum, H. van; Lagendijk, A.; Dormans, S.: De strategische dimensie van stedelijke identiteit (the strategic dimension of urban identity). Research proposal for the Partnershipprogramme DGVH / NETHUR 2000

(9)  
cf. Bauman, Z.: *Life in fragments*. Essays in postmodern morality. – Oxford 1995

(10)  
cf. Sennet, R.: *The uses of disorder*. Personal identity and city life. – London 1996

In the representational process of “objectification”<sup>5</sup>, the already shining elements of the firm that is the city are polished up further and “sold” as wrapped “prêt-à-porter” packages, ready to disentangle and “use” to one’s liking.

Increasingly, in producing such easily digestible city products, one seeks for a certain cultural link with local experiences and feelings, for narratives, images and representations that resonate with local beliefs and aspirations. Cities strive for a strategic identity product that not merely resembles its goods and services but that expresses an experience.<sup>6</sup> The aim is to bridge an urban identity as a way to sell an enticing and stimulating experience of the city – the city as a product – and an urban identity as an experience of place attachment and a familiarized, orderly, easy and comfortable place of experience – the city as a home.<sup>7</sup> The historical legacy of the city is thereby narrated, reinvented and simulated in a fashionable way, making an imagined historical theme time-line along which present developments are rooted.

In the case of Tilburg, the tradition of textile industry has been put on stage and spotlighted. The background of its image-campaign is that after a long period with a dominant position of the textile-industry, the city of Tilburg felt that it had to restructure its economy after the decline of the industrial base in the 1970s. This process of restructuring led to the development of a new city image based on the motto of “Tilburg: A Modern Industrial City” (TMI) in the beginning of the 1990s. Undoubtedly, the notion of an “industrial city” resonates with a major part of the city’s economic and physical past. The cultural roots of the city were seen as the main ground for choosing this particular image.

In a recent study<sup>8</sup> we discussed the urban identity formation in Tilburg with a peer-group of local key actors. According to the interviewees, all actively involved in the strategic formation of the image of the city, the mobilization of the city’s industrial past is meant to boost the uniqueness of the city’s profile in the current Dutch urban competition. The new motto attempts to

comply with their demands of strategic identity making – to be coherent, selective, unique, ambitious and realistic – while suggesting continuity with the past. The image-makers realize that the connotations with the word industrial are not uncontested, yet, they argue, it is a strategically necessary decision to choose an outspoken image for the city of Tilburg that is rooted in the past.

## 3 The ambiguous process of rooting an urban identity

However, realizing such a bridge between the strategic and cultural identity of the city is far from easy. A city’s cultural identity tends to be difficult to grasp, as it is often fragmented and conflicting.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the notion of an urban identity itself is arbitrary and elusive. The identity of a city is a social construct and cannot be seen apart from social interaction, erratic interpretation and contextualization. The identity of a city is dynamic and “liquid”. It is principally impossible to fix, freeze and box an urban identity like that of Tilburg, as every single perception is contingent and highly dependent on its social and spatial context.

Hence, the city may be a spatially fixable unity in terms of urban sovereignty, this is surely not the case in terms of urban identity. The identity of a city is principally unbounded, as it is a dialectical, dynamic interchange between its “insiders” and its “outsiders”, of those who daily use the city, “belong” to the city and those who “belong” to other places. The majority of these daily users do not necessarily have merely one purified type of identification with the city.<sup>10</sup> There is not one strategic image or narrative that fits their perception of the city perfectly.

Hence, there is not one firm cultural and historical identity on which a strategic identity can be built. The foundation on which the strategic identity is built is shaky, as it is principally contested and liquid.

## 4 Modelling the city

In strategic identity construction however, there is no room for conflicting images and stories. This makes the search and selection

of a strategic identity a deeply political process in which normative choices of exclusion are made. The city's non-marketable historical and architectural "failures" as well as the filth and the impurity that is present in every city and make the city "alive", are cleansed from the glossy representation of the city.<sup>11</sup>

In the post-modern "de-signing" in urban planning the city is culturally emptied, the image, the sign is sundered from its substance. In this process the eclecticism of fashion and style supersedes a search for enduring values.<sup>12</sup> After the stripping the city is re-read, re-ified and re-presented according to the new and one-dimensional theme. Put differently, increasingly cities model for the making of postcards and postcards model for the making of cities.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of Tilburg, the strategic stripping and repositioning was a highly political and controversial process. Several claims were made for the new image of the city. Representatives of the education sector emphasized the importance of the university and schools for the city and wanted Tilburg to be marketed as an "educational city". Transport and logistics claimed for a profile as a "transport city" and the health sector also wanted to be the main factor in the new image.

Despite strong pressure and lobby from these groups, the municipality selected the image of a modern industrial city, since it was felt that this reflected the cultural legacy of the city most adequately. Once decided for, the TMI-motto became the heart of the external imaging of the city. All official printings were labelled with the TMI-logo and on every possible occasion the city presented itself as a modern industrial city.

The discussion on the cultural rooting and purification of the identity of Tilburg is however not over, on the contrary. Some proponents of the motto argue that Tilburg now is known as a modern industrial city and that it already cost a lot of energy to promote it. Changing the motto now would be highly inefficient, they argue. Others state that TMI is the best alternative and

that it is better to be known with a bad image than not be known at all. What is more, they argue, the slogan has now strengthened the industrial-historical image of the city, making it more difficult to find another "grounded" identity.

To counter the strategic disadvantages of the TMI-motto public actors themselves are now giving different instrumental interpretations of the same motto. For instance, the emphasis is put more on the "modern" aspect of the motto. Tilburg is not only a city with modern industries, but is also developing as a "modern city". A comparable interpretation is made by the flourishing cultural sector in the city. They talk about the "cultural industry" as an exponent of the modern industrial city. So while the historical-cultural dimension of the slogan remains powerful, its instrumental significance is re-interpreted and re-made via new discursive routes.

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## 5 Discussion

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In sum, in this contribution we have highlighted the narrative rooting and embedding of the strategic imagining of the city. We have looked at the city of Tilburg to illustrate and empirically enrich the post-modern debate on the objectification of the identity of a city. It has become clear that a city's strategic identity cannot mirror an overall identity, as it is intrinsically a timely and selective fixation of certain perceptions of a city's dynamic identity.

The selective and strategic making of an urban identity thereby masks important elements of a city. Since the selected strategic identity is reproduced in daily praxis, the masked elements are implicitly forced to find creative ways to adjust to and fit in the newly founded territorial identity or go around it.

Here lies a task for us, as researchers, to critically analyse and follow what the consequences are for these not illuminated, so-called unmarketable aspects and dimensions of a city which might well make the city alive in the first place and a place worth and attractive to live in.

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(11)  
cf. Sibley, D.: Geographies of exclusion. Society and difference in the West. – London 1995

(12)  
cf. Harvey, D.: From managerialism to entrepreneurialism; l.c., p.13

(13)  
Houtum, H. van: The borders of comfort; l.c.