



Torre Lombarde,  
Milan, Italy



Parc de Bercy,  
Paris, France



Rhine bank,  
Deutz, Germany



Parc de Bercy,  
Paris, France



Hammersmith hotels,  
London, UK

When urban functions are concentrated in new city centres the advantages are considerable: it facilitates the efficient use of space, puts a brake on mobility and enhances the quality and diversity of the urban environment. Recommendations based on the Bureau Stedelijke Planning bv's study of new urban centres in Belgium, Germany, France, United Kingdom and Italy have implications for the successful development of new subcentres in the Netherlands. By Pieter van der Heijde and Eric Hoppenbrouwer, photography: Bureau Stedelijke Planning

# Wanted: successful urban centres

Space is often at a premium in city centres in the Netherlands. Therefore, new locations are needed, not just for housing and business parks but also for offices, retail and leisure facilities. What will be the best spot for future in-town functions? In the city centre, spread across the city or concentrated in specific locations? Spreading urban functions across the city does little to further the development of attractive business environments and leads to extra traffic flows. Concentrating urban functions in new city centres on the other hand, offers considerable advantages when it comes to developing powerful urban networks: it stimulates the efficient use of space and puts a brake on mobility, especially when the new centre is near a traffic hub.

## The Netherlands

A concentration of urban functions strengthens the basis for facilities and creates living and working environments

that are in short supply in big cities in the Netherlands. A subcentre can be defined as the greatest concentration of central-urban functions after the city centre, with a multi-functional design and facilities. These centres are best located near a traffic hub, have a metropolitan image, a clearly recognisable identity and different levels of scale. A well-known large subcentre is La Defence in Paris. According to Dutch standards, Amsterdam's Zuid-As will be such a large-scale subcentre. The authorities are prioritising this area's development into a top international location. Amsterdam Arena/Amsterdamse Poort, Rotterdam Alexander, Amstelveen Centrum and Scheveningen Bad also count as new hotspots. The question is how can they be given optimal form, what is needed to make it work? In cooperation with ING Real Estate, Bureau Stedelijke Planning studied eight new centres in Belgium, France, United Kingdom, Germany and Italy. Let's take a close look at the results.



Bercy,  
Paris, France



Köln arena,  
Deutz, Germany



Rubattino,  
Milan, Italy



King Street Hammersmith,  
London, UK



Rubattino,  
Milan, Italy

# 'An integral vision is crucial for suc

## Europe

The majority of the new centres studied in Europe were the result of planned large-scale development. In some cases recent restructuring projects were involved: Bercy in Paris, Brussel-Zuid and Rubattino in Milan. Other new centres are greenfield developments like Vélizy in Paris, London's Brent Cross and Milan's Torre Lombarde. Many of the planned new centres are near motorways, their boundaries often being formed by physical barriers such as motorways, railways and rivers. They are often located on the edge of residential districts too. First of all, a subcentre cannot function optimally without access by public transport and car, that much is obvious. According to Dutch scientists Priemus, Nijkamp and Dieleman (authors of 'Meervoudig Ruimte-gebrek', 2000) a concentration of functions creates a cluster of potential traffic flows allowing efficient traffic systems to be applied. Above all, traffic flows can be eased when there is a connection between new subcentres and transport hubs. While a subcentre facilitates access by road, it also means a surfeit of asphalt, heavy traffic flows and congestion, not really a positive image. Another disadvantage is that noise, pollution and traffic emissions make residential development much more complex. A subcentre set between the ring roads and the city centre is the best place for a business location however. Hammersmith, for example, located between Heathrow and London's city centre, is a perfect spot for multinationals and business hotels.

## Facilities

However a fully-fledged central-urban environment requires more. The location needs at least a theatre, a concert hall and a stock exchange or town hall. Such facilities are important both when it comes to 'marketing' a subcentre and enlarging the basis for other facilities. The optimal facility package would include a large supply of apartments as well. For liveliness on the street the retail function must be fully deployed, which does not mean putting shops in a covered shopping centre as in Brent Cross and the Docklands in London or

Paris-Vélizy. These areas are not very inspiring as it comes to liveliness. In residential districts the commercial facilities make things lively during the day. In Milan's Torre Lombarde for instance the commercial facilities situated at each corner of the apartment buildings form a cluster of busy specialist shops. A park and a square make things lively and attractive as well. Pedestrians should not be restricted in their movements by buildings or other obstructions, parking places for instance should be situated below ground where possible, or in aboveground car parks if necessary, in any case, out of the way. When the shops and offices are closed at night, it is the residential and leisure functions that determine the degree of liveliness and safety on the streets.

## Urban quality

Multiple use of space is another important condition for a subcentre's central-urban character. Compact medium-rise buildings, including road underpasses, underground car parks, a metro station and function clustering, should reinforce it. Optimal use of space can be achieved with high-rise buildings and multifunctional use of space. Some of a subcentre's buildings should be large-scale with a striking landmark character. For example, the extensive Kölnarena in Cologne-Deutz, Germany and the Palais d'Omnisports in Paris-Bercy are clear symbols for these new centres. Modern, striking and varied architecture enhances a subcentre's spatial quality. Re-using historical buildings also enhances the image and attraction of these districts. In Bercy former wine depots have been transformed into an attractive leisure/retail area with specialist shops and catering establishments. In London's Hammersmith and Cologne's Deutz historical buildings like churches or monumental stations also serve to enhance the image of these subcentres.

## Development vision

On the other hand asphalt, aboveground car parks, outdated buildings and the wrong handling of materials detract from a subcentre's spatial quality – in this respect

# Successful subcentre development'

Paris-Vélizy and London's Brent Cross are examples of how not to do it. The main purpose of the exterior of these large-scale shopping centres is to promote easy access by car. A subcentre's image and success however are determined by the quality of the public space. Another way of enhancing the spatial quality is to invest the returns on real estate development in public space. In Paris-Bercy for example the returns on luxury apartments on the edge of the park were used to finance the park's quality fittings. For optimal quality a clear development vision and strict building regulations are crucial, both for the layout of the public space and for the building.

## Economic power

Let's presume a subcentre requires all above conditions. What is left, good recognition and a positive identity. Take for example large-scale facilities like a high-speed railway station, comprehensive leisure functions, a large shopping centre or an attractive park. Brussel-Zuid for instance is known primarily for its high-speed railway station and Paris-Vélizy owes its identity to its large shopping centre. A large-scale facility bearing the subcentre's name reinforces its identity: the names Bercy Village and Parc de Bercy reinforce the recognition of Paris-Bercy, which the names KölnMesse and Kölnarena fail to do in the case of Cologne-Deutz which is a pity. The urban image has an impact on a subcentre's image, important factors being high-quality design and handling of materials. In Paris-Bercy, despite its situation in a run-down district, high-quality layout of public space and attractive buildings made it possible to develop a subcentre with a positive identity. Milan-Rubattino is another case of high-quality development in a run-down urban district. Besides image and recognition, a large concentration of functions – preferably combined with a transport hub – is important for the economy of a subcentre.

## Conclusion

What can we learn from the subcentres in Europe? Since we have a great shortage of space in the Netherlands, the risk is that a

continuous, monotonous urban area of residential districts, working areas and facility centres will arise within the urban networks. New subcentres however can break through this monotony by bringing variety to the design and functional structure of cities. The intensive use of space with medium-rise building can facilitate the efficient use of space within these centres, whereby green areas can be preserved. A good thing for the Netherlands, our green space is precious. Moreover, this gives rise to new forms of living and working environments that stand out against the surrounding urban development districts. The results of the study of new subcentres abroad are relevant for the successful development of new ones in our cities. That is, a subcentre must be multifunctional with some large-scale leisure facilities. Apartment buildings and proximity to a transport hub broaden the basis for retail and other facilities. Housing and leisure functions also make the streets livelier and safer at night. Striking architecture, well-laid out public space and cultural and historical elements enhance the spatial quality. Apart from image and recognition, a large concentration of functions, preferably in combination with a transport hub, is important for the economic functioning of a subcentre. A good location in the city and optimal accessibility are important as well. Finally, an integral development vision is highly important for the successful development of a subcentre.

## Authors

*Pieter van der Heijde is the director and Eric Hoppenbrouwer a consultant with Bureau Stedelijke Planning in Gouda, the Netherlands.*  
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Torre Lombarde,  
Milan, Italy



Palais Omnisports,  
Paris-Bercy, France



Brent Cross Shopping Centre,  
London, UK



Bercy Village,  
Paris, France



Torre Lombarde,  
Milan, Italy