

# **Toward a European Urban Systems Concept and Strategy:**

An Executive Summary of a Research for the European Commission  
(1996)

## **1. The Research Goals**

The research arose in the general framework of the goal to "identify the necessary instruments for the integration of cities into their regional environment".

From its initial conception, the general aim has been however read as motivated by the fundamental problem of managing and reconciling the pursuit of two basic goals, to which the "integration of cities in their regional environment" was finalised:

1. that of ensuring for all European citizens an elevated *access to the city* (i.e. access to all functions or "superior" urban services which produce the "city effect");
2. that of guaranteeing that the concentration of urban services (or centrality) (necessary to obtain the city effect) was realised without that *overloading of functions* which produces today social and environmental damage.

The "integration of cities in their regional environment" has thus been read as a means to render *compatible* the two above-mentioned objectives, *that are tendentially in conflict*.

The objective of the research was identified therefore in the study of the instruments for achieving the point at which the two goals could be achieved at the reciprocally conditioned maximum, i.e. their "optimal" point.

The research aimed therefore at providing the ingredients for a definition of the "optimal centrality", with which to orientate the urban territorial policies, by implementing a polarization of the centrality in the cases of an excessive scarcity of city effect,

and a depolarization of the centrality in the case of an excess of urban overloading.

## • **The Research Framework of Reference**

Still within the general organisation, the research started from the realisation that the problem of reconciliation between the two goals (which moreover are "historic" goals present in all the forms assumed by the theory of town planning in its evolution), is posed in a substantially different way in the case of:

- "*large cities*", which suffer more from overloading and from socio-environmental malaise and less from the lack of a city effect

- "*medium and small-sized cities*", which suffer on the contrary more from the lack city effect and less from an overloading of functions and socio-environmental malaise.

The goal of the research has therefore been split: how to realize the general goal in the two geographical-urban cases in question: that of the large cities on the one hand, and that of the medium and small-sized cities, on the other.

In reality the basic goal: the answer to the question: "*What is the optimal centrality?*" is then articulated in the two cases: "*How to achieve this in the large cities?*" and "*How to achieve this in the medium and small cities?*"

## **3. The Specific Objects of the Research**

### *3.1A Definition of a Policy-oriented Standard of Urban Quality of Life*

Given the goal of the research and its articulations (as indicated briefly above)<sup>1</sup>, the research has defined its *objects*. In or-

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<sup>1</sup> For further clarification on the organisation of the research, see, obviously, the introductory part of the Report.

der to measure the *city effect* or *urban overloading*, it was necessary to have some measurers (or indicators): the research has been posed as the *specific object* to discuss and produce these measurers or *indicators* both of *city effect* and *urban overloading*.

And in this research we have aimed also at the purpose of evaluating and harmonising - *on the European scale* - (or at least that of the four member countries to which the research is for the moment limited)<sup>2</sup> - the *levels or thresholds of acceptability* concerning the indicators studied or preselected (levels or thresholds that we will call "*policy-oriented standards*"). Given the organisation of the research (see above) such levels or thresholds of acceptability concerning the indicators of city effect or urban overloading, represent an acceptable level of "*urban quality of life*".

### 3.2 *Guidelines for a reorganisation of the territory that maximises the application of the policy-oriented standard of urban quality of life*

Since such an acceptable level (or policy-oriented standard) of urban quality of life should constitute the goal to be achieved by the *urban policies*<sup>3</sup>, the research has posed as a subsequent specific object how (by means of the theoretical definition of the optimal city, obtained by means of the definition - via measurement - of the *policy-oriented standards of the urban quality of life*) to transfer the results of the research - *rebus sic stantibus*, given the actual situation in each national territorial environment - into *guidelines for the "reorganisation" of the centralities in the various European countries involved in the research*,

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<sup>2</sup> France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> By urban policies here is understood the orientation, decisions and interventions of the city management agencies at any territorial or jurisdictional level they occur (i.e. at local, regional, national or even at the European Community level).

in a way that conforms to the conditions prescribed by the theoretical model of optimal centrality defined by the research.

And, given the above-mentioned splitting of the problem in the two cases of large and medium-small cities, this second object of the research (the reorganisation of centralities) has been reduced, in substance, to seeking how:

- a. to eliminate the eventual overloads of the centralities acquired by the large cities;
- b. acquiring sufficient centrality for the medium-small cities.

### *3.3 Formulation of Guidelines for the Realisation of "Urban Systems" Resulting from the Reorganisation of the Centralities*

As a corollary to the reorganisation of the national territories (under study) according to the criteria of "optimal centrality", the research has also posed itself the formulation of guiding criteria - to be provided to hypothetical managers of urban policies (at any territorial level) to pass from the current state of urban organisation (which creates disequilibria with regard to overloading, on the one hand, and the deficit of urban effect, on the other), to the hoped-for state of reorganisation, that would rebalance these disequilibria. In this the research has drawn upon the most up-to-date approaches in town planning, and applied them to the specific case of the new territorial organisation outlined.

## **4. The Results of the Research**

### *4.1 In the Field of the Definition of the Minimum or Maximum Thresholds for the Measurement of "Optimal Centrality"*

The exploration of criteria and possibilities of "measuring" with indicators the city effect and urban overloading has in-

creased knowledge about the territory, even though it has not provided certain and definitive results<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, the uncertainty of the results was predictable because of a series of factors, amongst which:

1. The fact that - despite the relatively extensive existence of urban research activity (and relative literature) - the specific theme of indicators or measurers of urban well-being has not in recent decades been much studied and the cases of systematic research are few. This makes the research carried out pioneering and original, with all the defects deriving from the first explorations of unexplored territory. The research has however the merit of having produced a series of evaluations and proposals (and a relative quantity of documentation), with the discussion of which we can hope for future progress in the measureability of urban well-being and the quality of urban life.
2. The fact the research has been carried out with a panel of evaluations including experts from different nationalities, that reflected therefore national situations at different levels (in particular with regard to the state of the development of urbanisation), and implied different life styles and mentalities. This has produced inevitable differences in evaluations, in particular in a subject in which evaluation has not had the support of a consolidated set of objective data, and the choice of the actual data, in order to render measureable the concepts and give them a quantitative basis, has to be founded on appreciation of a qualitative type.
3. The fact that the measureability, and the proposed measuring, was relevant not to the entire field of urban indicators (still unexplored, as said), but to the narrow field of city effect indicators and urban overloading. This has made the ground even more impervious for exploration. We have im-

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<sup>4</sup> The report of the results of this theoretical part of the research are collected in the First Part of the Report, corresponding to *Operation 1* (as defined in the initial project of the research itself).

mediately to point out that whilst the major difficulties were met in the field of city effect indicators (because of the differences of approach and evaluation, and also because of the inexistence of valid conventional measurements) in the field of overloading less difficulty has been found, in particular because of the relative development had in recent times in environmentalist research, in particular in the field of pollution levels (air, water, soil, etc.); whilst still in a backward state is the study of other forms of congestion and overloading.

Notwithstanding this, the research has obtained in its course a strong homogenisation of the concepts and points of view, and managed to formulate, albeit with many imperfections, a core of indicators of city effect and urban overloading, which has served to construct the model of the "optimal city", which has been utilised in the subsequent stages of the research.

#### *4.2 In the Field of the Survey of the Situation with regard to the Existence of Urban Disequilibria in City Effect and Urban Overloading*

The research has confirmed, in its empirical and econometric research<sup>5</sup> many of the hypotheses on which the research itself was based. In particular:

a) that in the four national territories subjected to the study, there are very strong disequilibria with regard to the city effect; and that therefore in the European countries in question (which represent however a large amount of the territories of the Union) there are large parts of the population who still either a) do not have access to the city, or b) have an imperfect or difficult access (not within the daily time span, as should be the case in the

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<sup>5</sup> The details of this research are in the Second Part of this report (in particular that which gives the individual national reports), that reports on *Operation 2* as defined in the initial project.

model of "optimal centrality"). And that therefore an "urban policy" should be imposed aimed at extending this access (or right) to the city for all interested citizens;

b) that in the four national territories the existence is confirmed of "environmental" overloading in the large cities, whilst in the medium and small cities liveability from the point of loads is normally better;

c) that to the process of de-urbanisation of residences (anagraphical growth of some areas of medium and small centres, in particular in the areas that surround the large cities) does not correspond an inversion of values of centrality, i.e. the city effect does not improve in the medium-small cities;

d) that the system of metropolitan transport has seen an intensification of commuting towards the large centres, at a higher rate than that for the general average growth of daily and periodical mobility.

#### *4.3 In the field of the proposal for scenarios for reorganisation of the urban framework in the single national territories*

On the basis of provisionally fixed criteria (policy-oriented standards of optimal centrality) it has been possible to propose - in a totally "tentative" way - a reorganisation of the national territory by urban systems (or urban ecosystems) which each corresponded to the optimal centralities.

The operation has not been free of difficulty, but has been carried out in each of the countries studied, in the various directions hoped for:

1. as a creation of urban systems alternative to the existing large metropolitan centres, finalised on the one hand at "depolarising" these latter (making them achieve a lightening of the environmental pressure and an improvement of liveability), and on the other, trying to bring the scarce current centralities to the levels of "optimal centralities". This has led

most time to proposing the aggregation of several current - insufficient - centralities in *new centrality networks* - each of which would be capable of reaching overall the prescribed level of optimal centrality. These new networks or urban systems would be decidedly "to be polarized", if they are to interrupt a pressure predictable in the future on the "historic" centres that are overloaded which must be depolarized;

2. as a creation of alternative centralities, within the large metropolitan areas that are currently overloaded, and capable of splitting the current compacting and monocentrism (which bring unacceptable levels of congestion and pollution according to the policy-oriented standards prescribed) and to attract towards the new optimal centralities within such areas, shares of the catchment areas that now gravitate on the historic centres to be polarized. These alternative centres could transform the current and tendential monocentrism, into a future more balanced polycentrism, which could assume the nature of an urban network, but without the excesses of the current environmental pressure and without losing the benefits of the city effect;
3. as a creation of networks between cities which already present satisfying levels of interaction, such as to approach the prescribed levels of optimal centrality, but which, if not subjected to an explicit strengthening of the links and rationalisation of the functions, risk losing competitiveness with regard to the most centralised metropolitan areas.

Even if the research has arrived at - as said - designing the confines of the various urban systems that have arisen from this summary analysis, such a design must be considered more as an exemplification of the work to be continued, rather than a definitive proposal. The research has aimed in fact at suggesting more the criteria and guidelines for a work of design to be further carried out - on a national and European scale - rather than defined territorial proposals.



On the other hand the research has served to highlight the fact that a planframe useful to orientate the decision-makers and urban public operators of any level cannot be carried out apart from on a national (and also European) scale given the strong interdependence existing between the solutions adopted between a decisional level and another, and between simultaneous decisions at the same territorial level. The political "modalities" (from the spontaneous and free adhesion, to persuasion, bargaining between institutions, regulations and legal obligation etc.) with which to pursue the hoped for directions and advisable guidelines, are a matter for the jurisdiction of the existing institutional orders and the eventual reforms of the same in order to adapt them to choices. And such modalities are not the object of the research, not even from the merely scientific point of view, and have been completely neglected as the object of the research<sup>6</sup>.

#### *4.4 In the Field of the Formulation of Guidelines for a Policy of Implementation of the Urban Systems Proposed or Eventual other Similar Territorial Configurations*

The research however has been devoted, in its concluding parts, to the formulation of Guidelines (for the use of institutional decision makers, at all levels) of an urban policy which intends to implement the strategic urban systems of the type outlined. These guidelines are *technical* - and precisely of the town-planning technique - and do not concern - as said above - the *political* modalities of implementation.

They have been formulated for the purpose of bringing attention to the factors of interdependence of the decisions in the

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<sup>6</sup> The extended contents of this part of the research are contained in the Third Part of the Report, which gives the results of *Operation 3* (as defined by the initial project); and is present in particular in Section B which collects the national reports, whilst in Section A it is only summarised.

territorial and urban field, and may render ineffective decisions which are not consistent with some necessary conditions.

The research has had as a result the study of various aspects making up a policy of implementation of urban systems, in particular:

- a. the requirements of the urban systems
- b. the typologies of the urban systems
- c. the functional components of the same urban systems
- d. the operational fields of the policy of urban systems<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The extended contents of this part of the research are contained in the Third Part of the Report (which discussed *Operation 3*), in particular in Section A.