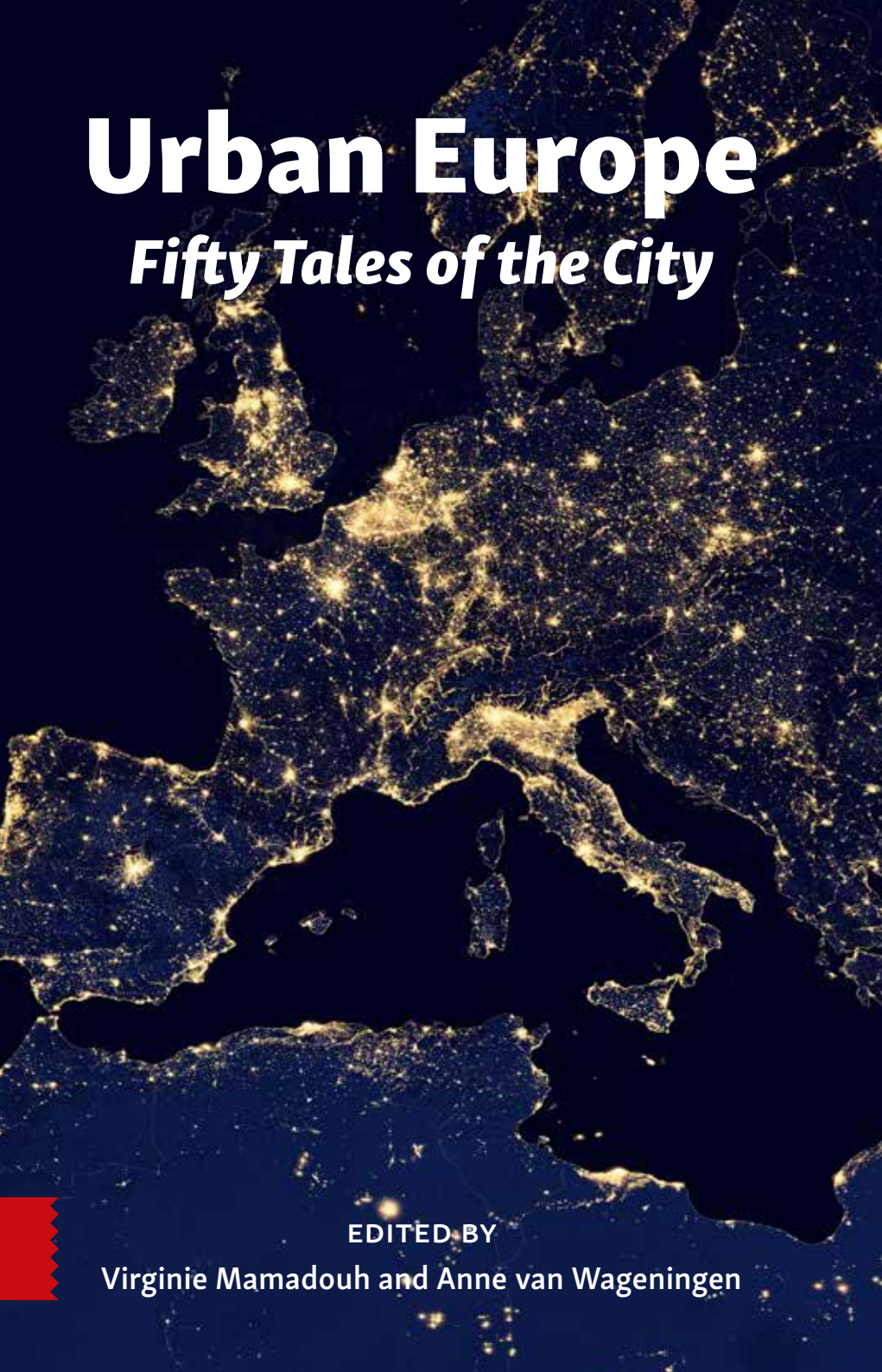
Urban Europe

Fifty Tales of the City



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Fifty Tales of the City

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen (*eds.*)

AUP

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Virginie Mamadouh
Anne van Wageningen
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1. Urban Europe and the European Union

An introduction

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen

On 24 June 2016 the Council of Ministers of the European Union met in Brussels and discussed the result of the Brexit referendum the day before. Amidst the astonishment about the choice of the British voters, and the soul searching exercises about the future of the EU, the ministers also had to take care of the scheduled business, although most of their decisions that day went unnoticed. One of these decisions was the adoption of an Urban Agenda for the European Union with the formal endorsement of the Pact of Amsterdam. The Pact had been agreed at the Informal Meeting of EU ministers responsible for Urban Matters on 30 May in Amsterdam, during the Dutch presidency. Since then, the European Union has officially had an Urban Agenda.

This was the occasion to ask both Amsterdam academics and practitioners to share their views of the city and to compile this collection of essays to reflect the complexity of the roles, functions and problems of cities to address in the urban agenda. The aim of the volume is to contribute to the much needed public debate about the future of European cities. After decades of discussion, the role of cities in European politics has been formally acknowledged, but it is certainly not the conclusion of urban politics but on the contrary a stimulus for further deliberations. The sharing of knowledge and research insights about what makes cities what they are and how they function (and sometimes not) is in this context a fundamental step towards better cities.

Europe: A continent of cities

A large majority of Europe's citizens live in an urban area – 70% if we include cities, towns and suburbs – and this share continues to grow. Europe is a continent of cities, and is one of the most urbanised areas in the world. Cities are the engines of economy and social innovation and play an important role in many of the most pressing social and environmental challenges Europe faces: unemployment, social exclusion, integration, energy transition etc.

Cities have now been given a formal say in EU decision making and will work together with the Member states, the Directorate-Generals of the Commission and other European stakeholders in 12 partnerships to make EU policies urban proof, to ease communication between EU institutions and municipalities, to enhance cities' access to EU programmes and moneys and to improve the circulation of expertise and knowledge about urban issues.

This new formal position for cities in the EU is part of a general trend rooted in the awareness of the fact that a growing proportion of the (world and European) population live in cities but also in changing relations between the states and their cities. Many cities have developed their external relations to distinguish themselves in the world economy. More and more is expected of local authorities. Through decentralisation reforms, many European states have delegated policies to their municipalities, partly to dismantle an uncompetitive national welfare state, partly to bring policy making closer to the citizens and to acknowledge for local differences in needs and opportunities. Moreover, mayors and local governments are often expected to be better equipped than states and national governments to deal with the daily concerns of their citizens. As the American political scientist Benjamin Barber argues, many social and environmental problems would be more effectively dealt with, if mayors ruled the world. The United Nations has also acknowledged this trend and is working on the New Urban

Agenda, a global urban agenda to be adopted at the *Habitat III World cities at crossroads* Conference in Quito in October 2016 to 'guide the efforts around urbanisation of a wide range of actors – nation states, city and regional leaders, international development funders, United Nations programmes and civil society – for the next 20 years'. The draft document available in September 2016 lists paradoxically much more ambitious and detailed goals than the Pact of Amsterdam, but remains of course more performative where the Urban Agenda for the EU entails a change in the constitutional architecture of the EU – even if it went unnoticed in the light of the Brexit and the reform needed to address the many crises the EU has to face.

An Urban Agenda for the European Union

It took twenty years to get Member States to agree on this urban agenda, which was a priority of three successive Dutch presidency (in 1997, 2004 and 2016). Member states widely diverge in terms of (non-)existence of their urban policies, the competencies of their local authorities and the relations between municipalities and other state levels.

The Urban Agenda is the outcome of twenty years of discussions. In the 1990s the European Commission proposed to adopt an Urban Agenda to tackle urban problems more efficiently. At the time urban problems (unemployment and economic restructuring, social exclusion, housing shortage, etc.) were dealt with only marginally in the EU15 because they were not Community competence (and they still aren't). They were covered to some extent but not systematically by the policies for territorial cohesion and by the structural funds.

In the course of time, it became clear that the Member States – especially in the post 2004 enlarged European Union – differ widely in this regard. Some like the Netherlands, Germany, France and the UK were pleading for a EU urban policy (although different ones) while other were opposed to

that. Some have extensive national urban policies, other don't. Moreover their cities, their strengths and their weaknesses are completely different. As a result they fell to reach an agreement about what a common urban agenda could be, but statements regarding cities were regularly adopted by the Council during successive presidencies, stressing themes that were dear to them.

A new élan came from the European Commission, with a report *Cities of Tomorrow: Challenges, Visions, Ways Forward* in 2011 and in 2014 a formal initiative of the Commission, followed by a wide Public Consultation. With the wide support of other EU institutions (the Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee), the Council of European Municipalities and Regions and the input of influential city networks such as EUROCITIES and the Mayors of EU Capital Cities, the Urban Agenda under construction became more and more a programme *with* cities than for cities, and with local authorities as the local states (called urban authorities in the Pact of Amsterdam), rather than only with the larger cities – hence the use of the term 'urban areas' rather than cities in the document.

The Public Consultation revealed huge divergence about what cities were (large cities, towns, suburbs, urban areas, etc.) and the importance of the relations of cities with their hinterland, as well as some consensus on the fact that the urban agenda should not be a new EU policy competence, not a new programme or budget line. Instead the attention was put on better regulation, better funding and better knowledge through an integrated approach both vertically (between levels of governance from the EU to the local) and horizontally (between policy domains). More specifically it enhances the urban proofing (or the urban mainstreaming) of EU policies, which means taking early on in the decision making process the impact of the shaping policy on local authorities and to the direct engagement of Commissioners and EU civil servants with cities.

Whether the 12 partnerships between representatives of the Commission, the Member States, cities and stakeholders

– which have been established for three years to launch this urban mainstreaming exercise for domains ranging from urban poverty to circular economy through asylum seekers and digital transition – will be successful falls out of the scope of this volume. Instead it seizes the opportunity to draw the attention to the multidimensional character of European urban life and the many challenges it currently faces.

Stories about European cities

To mark the Dutch presidency and the preparation of the Pact of Amsterdam, academics and practitioners working in and from Amsterdam were asked to share their expertise in short pieces to illustrate the diversity of approaches to the city as socio-spatial reality. This volume thus brings together fifty essays on European cities for the sake of Europeans and others wishing to enhance their knowledge of these cities. These essays offer tales of European cities, Amsterdam and others, from a wide range of perspectives. The authors often present a concrete case, but the processes they discuss are at work in similar ways in other cities just as well. Local specificities need to be acknowledged to capture the very diversity of European cities, but the aim of this volume is to stress the diversity of perspectives to study them. Most contributors are trained and/or work in the social sciences (geography, sociology, anthropology, political science, urban studies, migration studies, urban and regional planning) and the humanities (history, law, media studies). These multiple disciplinary perspectives offer different clues to read the city and investigate its many facets. The essays have been grouped in six sections dealing with key urban questions: citizenship, nodes and connections, creativity, (social) sustainability, representation and identity, and governance networks. This reflects the diversity and the complexity of the roles, functions and problems of cities to be addressed in the Urban Agenda.

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Further reading

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