THE EVOLUTION OF FAIRS, HOW FAIRGROUND DEVELOPMENT REFLECTS HISTORICAL PLANNING DISCOURSES

Rick Vermeulen[1]

Abstract

Fairs have a very long tradition within the cities of Western Europe. Medieval markets, World expo sites, early industrial facilities, venues constructed after World War Two and modern state of the art convention centers all take up a specific role in the city. By opposing a traditional and a modern discourse in urban planning, this paper argues that through the course of fair development, these venues have shifted more and more towards the modernist discourse. This has resulted in large efficient venues but has decreased direct relationships with their surroundings. The paper ends with the discussion of a recent and partial reversal of this trend and relates this development to broader shifts in the orientation of urban planning.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, many cities have invested in their exhibition centers. Some cities renovated their old centers that were constructed in a previous exhibition center boom in the years after the Second World War, others have built new centers at regional subcenters. The amount of newly constructed and extended exhibition centers is extraordinary and unprecedented (Fenich, 1992; Kay, 2005). Between 2000 and 2005 the number of square meter exhibition surface worldwide had grown with 40% (Wallace, 2007). This sparks an interest in the historical development of these sites and in what this tells us about current development. When we look at the longer lines of fair development in Western Europe, we see that there have been previous waves of exhibition center development in the second half of the 19th century, the 1920s and directly following World War Two (Vermeulen, 2011). This paper describes these periods of development and also places them in the light of an ever strengthening dominance of modernist values, striving for efficiency through enlargement of scale and isolation from other functions. It is argued that this is emblematic for the overall development of cities. The paper ends, however, by discussing what can be argued to be a revival of traditional urban values of diversity and small scale in urban planning. It is suggested that recent divergence in exhibition center development strategies shows on the one hand a continuing of the modernist logic and on the other hand this revival of traditional urban values.

[1] Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam. [r.vermeulen@uva.nl]

To support these arguments, illustrations are given from the development history of different fairs around Europe, most notably Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Munich and Vienna. The word fair is used, even though it is in some contexts a little outdated, to indicate what has at several moments in time and place been also called expo, exposition center, exhibition center or convention center. A fairground is the broader ensemble, also encompassing adjacent outdoor exhibition terrains and complementary infrastructure like parking lots and free standing restaurants and theatres. First, two ideal typical urbanist models will be introduced, thereafter the development of fairs in different time periods will be described. The article will end with a discussion of current developments.

2. The traditional and the modern city

Before planners took over the control of the development of the city, cities developed organically. This rendered functionally very mixed neighborhoods where working, living, trade and cultural activities were spatially very close. The central squares of medieval towns where trade, religion and government were represented are emblematic for this diversity. All these combined activities ensured close relations between different activities but also produced inefficiencies, mutual nuisance and congestion. With planning and modernization came the separation of functions. As the footprint of different activities became larger and markets demanded efficiency, each function was moved to its own particular location, often to the borders between city and countryside. This functionalist logic was especially dominant in the post World War II period when specific areas for working and living were designed and developed. This period produced a massive amount of monofunctional districts and buildings. Markets were replaced by food centers, town halls by government centers, urban shopping streets by peripheral shopping malls and university campuses by university complexes and, later, technology parks. Relations with other functions vanished as these autarkic complexes housed everything that was needed for an efficient fulfillment of their tasks.

Modernist development went at the expense of the diversity and livability of urban centers. With many functions moving out, they were deprived of their diversity and functional separation, resulting in the absence of functional relations. Especially US cities were hollowed out by these processes and found themselves during the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s in a downward spiral (Frieden and Sagalyn, 1991). As fewer people had business in the center, this center became less attractive for business to settle. For functions traditionally enmeshed in urban centers, people now went to dedicated locations where their sectoral needs were efficiently answered.

There has always been a counter current to these developments, most famously represented by Jane Jacobs in her – scholarly (1961) and activist- work. This view on city development adheres to many of the traditional traits of urban development. They propose gradual development and transformation and, most importantly, a diversity and mix of functions. Illustrative for the influence of this strand of thought is the attention for (new) urbanity, the return of many cultural functions and small businesses to city centers and the preference of a growing part of residents for urban environments, reflected in increasing rents and property values.

Francoise Choay (1965) has termed these two different ways of urban development as cultural (culturaliste) and progressive (progressiste), we will here use the terms traditional and modern. They can be opposed and seen as ideal types for the analysis of urban development. Where modern development advocates separation, disintegration, efficiency and scale; traditional development advocates functional mix, small scale and relations.
This paper will use these two ideal types in order to typify the historical development of fairs in Western Europe. They have always largely followed the dominant discourse as they moved from very traditional to structures that can be termed very modern. At this moment, they can be argued to be at a crossroad where we see diverging development with some exhibition centers opting for a continuation of the modernistic pattern and others for more traditional values.

3. The medieval city

The first fairs originated at strong centers of production or at crossroads of international trade routes. Cities like Leipzig, Lyons and Frankfurt benefitted greatly from their central location within Europe. As centers of production shifted, so shifted the dominance of fairs within Europe. Whereas in the twelfth till fifteenth century the Flanders and Champagne fairs were dominant, this shifted in the 16th century to Frankfurt and later to Leipzig (Allix, 1922).
The first of these fairs were extensions of local markets that were held at the central squares of medieval towns. As markets became larger and more prestigious, soon arcades and covered passageways were constructed to prevent for rain and snow. Such a central location also favored local businesses, especially guest houses and inns. Not seldom, local commerce was supported by decree. In medieval Munich, a center of the salt trade, merchants had to stay at least 24 hours in the city (Schafer, 2005). In Munich, the location of the fair was the central Marienplatz, which was also the site for festivities, government and jurisdiction. The markets were held at religious holidays, thereby integrating them with religious life of the city. This integration also serves as the etymological origin for the words fair (English), Messe (German), Fiera (Italian) Feria (Spanish), which all mean religious festival.
Only at the beginning of the 19th century, the Munich fair had grown to such an extent that it could not be housed at the central square anymore. Different sites were allocated for different goods to be marketed and often some kinds of halls or stands were erected (Schäfer, 2005). The first signs of functional separation became visible, even though integration of the different sectoral fairs with their surroundings and city life was still largely in place.

4. World fairs and exhibitions

By the mid 19th century the phenomenon of the international exhibition rose in importance. The immense World Expo's that followed the 1851 World Fair in London are of course the most pressing examples but also many thematic and regional exhibitions were held (Mattie, 1998). These events marked a shift in the sense that they were no longer focused on economic exchange but rather on display and showing what mankind was capable of. This was also reflected in the venues where these events were held. Contrary to the market-like settings of earlier

exhibitions, architecturally impressive facilities were erected at international exhibitions, exemplified by the appealing and prestigious Crystal Palace of the 1851 London World Fair. Many cities followed with similar facilities like the Paleis voor Volksvlijt (Amsterdam, 1864), the Glaspalast (Munich, 1854) and the Rotunde (Vienna, 1873). The construction of new facilities and the mere size of the events often required a location outside of the city. Although the terrains were often found adjacent to the city, this provided a first stage of disintegration between the city and the fair. Nevertheless, this connection was still very apparent. Local residents visited the fairs and also side events like carnivals that were accompanying them (Bennett, 1994).

This combination was more permanently realized in cities like Munich and Vienna. In Vienna, the legacy of the 1873 World Fair had resulted in an amusement park and exhibition facilities at the Prater, which were after the fair conserved and extended (O'Brien, 1981). In Munich a 'Vergnugungs- und Ausstellungspark' was realized by the city in 1904, facilitating large exhibitions as well as a leisure environment for residents (Lauterbach, 1984). In these days, the combination between cultural consumption and exhibitions was still very common (Bennett, 1994). In Frankfurt, the Festhalle was constructed in 1909, providing a space for concerts, exhibitions and other events. Till today, this building serves as a central venue in Frankfurt and an important place for its residents (Bauer, 2009).

With early industrialization in the first half of the 20th century, the exhibition space at these fairgrounds was extended. Gradually, the architecture of these facilities became more sober and functional. As these additions served predominately to facilitate the enlargement of exhibitions, they also had a more monofunctional use.

In the 1920s, cities like Amsterdam (1922) and Milan (1923) continued this development in their new exhibition facilities (Heijdra, 1995). Those were much more functional and efficient than the earlier generation that was developed two decades earlier in Vienna, Frankfurt and Munich. They merely served the display of goods, produced by the emerging industrial sectors of the city. There was also no surrounding amusement park as the focus shifted towards mere exhibiting. This more sober layout was also inspired by the economic crisis that was hitting the world during the 1920s. Moreover, these exhibition centers were no longer developed by the municipalities themselves but by industrial sectors. The RAI exhibition center in Amsterdam was developed by the bicycle industry of the Netherlands, in its aim to concentrate dispersed exhibitions in a single time and place. As they had developed their own venue for this purpose, they soon started to sublet it to other organizations (De Jong, 1986; 1982).

Again, these new facilities were realized at the border of the then-existing city. With a physical separation from the city and a separation between cultural consumption and display and exchange, these facilities were again more functional than their predecessors.

5. The functional city

World War Two marks the further modernization of exhibition facilities in Europe. During the war, many facilities had been ceased for military purposes and many facilities, especially in central Europe had been damaged by air raids and other acts

of warfare. The exhibition centers of Frankfurt, Milan, Munich and Vienna were all to a considerable extent destroyed. Although exhibition centers were certainly not the only aspects of the city that needed attention after the war, all cities decided that their exhibition centers needed to be rebuilt. Especially in German cities, the reconstruction of the fair was seen as an important impetus for economic recovery. Although Hannover is the most apparent example of this strategy, it hosted already in 1947 an export fair for over 730.000 people in a 30.000 m2 facility, also other cities like Frankfurt, Munich and Cologne followed pretty soon (Möller, 1989).

They used the remnants and old sites of the pre-war facilities, initially by constructing temporary facilities, but later also for more permanent structures. Economic recovery led to an increasing interest in trade fairs through the 1950s and 1960s, which required again larger halls. These new facilities consumed most of the park-like environments that had characterized pre-war fairgrounds. Moreover, as industrial products like cars, building equipment and agricultural machinery required larger halls than the smaller pre-war manufactures, individual halls also increased in size (Kölbl, 1984). Functionality and efficiency replaced aesthetics and diversity. In Frankfurt, the terrains around the restored Festhalle were fenced-off to prevent people from sneaking in.

Although the extension of the city around the exhibition centers of Frankfurt and Munich made them, at least geographically, more embedded within the city, they were functionally segregated. In Amsterdam, this segregation was also geographical as the fair was again moved to the border of the city in 1961. The halls constructed here were also considerably larger than the ones at the central city location (De Jong, 1968; 1982).

The processes of enlargement and segregation can be seen as mutually reinforcing. First the growth of exhibitions required larger halls which in some situations led to the need for a new location, often out of town. Second, these larger events also produced larger crowds which produced more noise and traffic. Especially the busses, cars and taxis needed to transport visitors were in many cities seen as nuisance by surrounding residents. This, again, led to all sorts of measures to alleviate or prevent these side effects, which often led to increased separation. New parking lots were developed to prevent visitors from parking in residential areas. Often, residential streets were closed off for visitors during event days. Loading docks were covered to mitigate noise from constructing and deconstructing exhibitions. Highway exits and connections routing to public transport stops were made more efficient to separate visor flows from residents. Moreover, first the nationalization and then internationalization of fairs made that visitors came to an increasing extent out of town and, consequently, that local residents frequented their home-fairs less often. Fairs turned their back to the surrounding neighborhoods.

The continued enlargement of fairs and fairgrounds has led to a situation in the early 1980s where most fairs are now conceived as segregated and underused parts of the city where normal residents hardly ever go. The extensive use of the fairgrounds, often taking up large surfaces at relatively central locations, has led to questions of the legitimacy of this use in some cities. Neighboring residents conceive negative effects related to parking, traffic and noise over positive effects on the urban

economy. In both Amsterdam and Munich this has posed serious limitations to the extension of fairgrounds.

6. The polycentric city

It is therefore not surprising that many cities have considered the relocation of their fairs towards the urban periphery. During the 1980s and 1990s, the periphery of European metropolises has developed rapidly into an attractive environment for economic activity (Phelps and Parsons, 2003; Keil and Ronnenberger, 1994). The relocation of exhibition centers in, amongst others, Munich, Milan, Madrid and Stuttgart, has been facilitated and has strengthened this development (Jesse, 1998). New fairs are used to instigate regional sub-centers. Also the newest generation of World Exhibitions is used for this purpose as cities do not have inner city locations available of the size needed for the most current events. In Munich, a new fairground was constructed for the National Garden Exhibition of 2005. The old fairground had faced problems with extension and neighborhood nuisance since the 1970s. In Milan a new fairground opened in 2005 at a former oil refinery between the city and the airport.

This move away from the city center signifies the definitive cut between the exhibition center and other urban functions. Where modernization had already cut functional ties, relocation also separated city and fair geographically. Thereby, most fairs have become truly international places, only connected to their host city by their name, history and some spill-over effects to the urban economy. These large facilities have several in house restaurants, conference facilities and in many cases also hotels. Dedicated high speed rail stations, highway exits and convenient connections with the airport ensure accessibility and prevent the mixing of visitor flows with conventioneers. The monofunctionality of the complexes ensures that nothing different from exhibitions and conventions takes place there. This has left them far from the situation of the medieval market or the international exhibition when fairs were hallmarks on the urban calendar.

7. Back to the city.

Just when modernization seemed to have reached its final stage, consumerism and cultural economy have sparked new interest in the city (see for example Florida, 2002; Zukin, 2010). In recent years, urban centers have gained a new attractiveness and reinvigorated themselves from the derelict places they were during the 1970s and 1980s (Law, 1992). To this testify new waterfront developments (Judd, 1999) and entertainment districts (Sagalyn, 2003). These developments do not thrive on efficiency, large scale and separation but rather on the opposite: functional diversity and small-scale. Part of the revival of urban centers are, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries so-called convention centers, smaller and compact versions of exhibition centers and fairs. Hong Kong, Vancouver, Liverpool and Boston are amongst the cities that have constructed such convention centers in an attempt to add a different function and use to their waterfronts. Cities that have not removed their centers from their urban locations also cease on this opportunity. Frankfurt and Amsterdam are investing on their inner city locations. Primary reason not to move to the periphery is the synergy with urban amenities and other functions. Traditionalist urban views are

taken in consideration again and now form a serious alternative to modernist strategies.

8. Conclusion and discussion

Fairs in Western Europe started out as very traditional, diverse functions, enmeshed in urban life that developed more and more into modernist, functional facilities. Throughout the years they have increased in scale and decreased in integration with the surrounding city. Since World War Two, the fair in Amsterdam has increased almost three times in size, Munich more than four and Frankfurt almost five and a half times. In this regard, they can be argued to represent a broader shift in urban planning towards modernist principles and organization. In recent years, however, both fairs and urban planning in general is attributing renewed value to traditional urban values. This has resulted in divergent patterns of fair development with on the one hand, large scale, efficient peripheral venues and on the other hand centrally located facilities, striving for added value through a relationship with the city.

Hence, current exhibition center development reflects current ambivalence in planning where the modern and traditional discourse exist side by side. Many cities are trying to get the best of both worlds as they concomitantly strengthen and diversify their historic cores as well as develop peripheral nodes of activity. In the case of a single entity like a fair, such a balance is less easily found. Nevertheless, some cities attempt to offer both efficiency and urbanity in multiple facilities. In Paris, several central and peripheral facilities have united in a single organization offering different levels of urbanity and efficiency. In Milan, a small part of the central exhibition center was conserved as a new integrated convention and exhibition center was build outside the city.

Literature

ALLIX, A. 1922. The Geography of Fairs: Illustrated by Old-World Examples. Geographical Review, 12, 532 -569.

BAUER, T. 2009. 100 Jahre unter einer Kuppel, Die Geschigte der Festhalle Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Messe Frankfurt GmbH.

BENNETT, C. 1994. The Exhibitionary Complex. In: DIRKS, N., ELEY, G. & ORTNER, S. (eds.) A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

CHOAY, F. 1965. L'urbanisme, utopies et réalités, Paris, Seuil.

DE JONG, S. 1968. Geschiedenis eener Nederlandsche Vereeniging, RAI 1893-1968, Bussum, C.A.J. van dishoeck.

DE JONG, S. 1982. Het Glazen Huis, doeltreffend exposeren, Aarlanderveen, Van Lindonk.

FENICH, G. G. 1992. Convention Centre Development: Pro's, Con's and Unanswered Questions. Journal of Hospitality Manangement, 11, 183-196.

FLORIDA, R. 2002. The Rise of the Creative Class. Cambridge: Basic Books.

FRIEDEN, B. & SAGALYN, L. 1991. Downtown, Inc.
How America Rebuilds Cities. Cambridge: MIT Press.

HEIJDRA, T. 1995. De Oude RAI, Niets zo lang als tijdelijk, Alkmaar, De Milliano.

JACOBS, J. 1961. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York: Random House.

JESSE, R. 1998. Messe Munchen, Entwurf, Planung, Realisation, Munchen, Prestel.

JUDD, D. R. 1999. Constructing the Tourist Bubble. In: JUDD, D. R. & FAINSTEIN, S. S. (eds.) The Tourist City. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

KAY, A. L. K. 2005. China's Convention and Exhibition Center boom. Journal of Convention and event Tourism, 7, 5-22.

KEIL, R. & RONNEBERGER, K. 1994. Going up the country – internationalization and urbanization on Frankfurts Northern Fringe. Environment and Planning D-Society & Space, 12, 137-166.

KOLBL, W. 1984. Die Bauaktivitaten der Munchener Messe- und Ausstellungsgesellschaft mbH. In: MUNCHEN, M. (ed.) Vom Ausstellungspark zum Internationalen Messeplatz, Munchen 1904 bis 1984. Munchen: Munchener Messe- und Ausstellungsgesellschaft mbH.

LAUTERBACH, B. 1984. Ein Ausstellungspark entsteht. In: MUNCHEN, M. (ed.) Vom Ausstellungspark zum Internationalen Messeplatz, Munchen 1904 bis 1984. Munchen: Munchen Munchener Messe- und Ausstellungsgesellschaft mbH.

LAW, C. 1992. Urban Tourism and its contribution to economic regeneration. Urban Studies, 29, 599-618.

MATTIE, E. 1998. World's Fairs, New York, Princeton Architectural Press.

MOLLER, H. 1989. Das deutsche Messe- und Ausstellungswesen. Standortstruktur und raumliche Entwicklung seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, Trier, Zentralausschess fur deutsche Landeskunde.

O'BRIEN, G. 1981. The Parks of Vienna. Journal of Popular Culture, 15, 76-86.

PHELPS, N. & PARSONS, N. 2003. Edge urban geographies: Notes from the margins of Europe's capital cities. Urban Studies, 40, 1725-1749.

SAGALYN, L. 2003. Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon, Cambridge, MIT Press.

SCHAEFER, M. 2005. From Mediaeval Market to Modern Trade Fair, Munich, Herbig.

VERMEULEN, R. 2011. Exhibition Centre Development in Europe: A Multidimensional Historical Analysis. Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie, 102, 441-454.

WALLACE, V. 2007. The Global Exhibition Venue Industry: Is there an over-supply in space? 5th International CEO Forum. Barcelona, Spain.

ZUKIN, S. 2010. Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places, New York, Oxford university Press.