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Metropolis – Editors' foreword

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**Abstract:**

This paper is the editors foreword to a Special issue of *Built Environment* on the Polycentric Metropolis in Europe. It introduces the Mega-City-Region hypothesis developed in the European POLYNET research project and sets out the main arguments of a policy-oriented discussion of this notion.

**Key words:** Polycentricity, Mega City-Regions, Europe, Development

Thirty years of academic literature depicts what is now known as a change in the nature of world economic organisation. Globalisation, facilitated by developments in information and communications technology, and the emergence of a flexible post-fordist economy that is increasingly specialised in knowledge intensive functions are the two key dimensions of firms' changing modes and scales of production.

Economic geographers among others have analysed the consequences of this global post-fordist economic change in the urban field. Growing and expanding metropolitan regions in numerous parts of the world are extending beyond the perimeters of major agglomerations. Even city-regions (Scott et al., 2001) seem inadequately large spatial units to fully describe the selective emergence of the enlarged metropolitan regions described as *Polycentric Mega-City-Region (MCR)* in Hall, Pain (2006).

However, the debate on the importance and the role of the emergent Mega-City-Region is embedded in a wider context of spatial organisation of socio-economic activities. The process of internationalisation and globalisation of the economy, politics and culture seems again to boil down to the question whether "the world is flat" (Friedman, 2005) or whether "the world is spiky" (Florida, 2005). Thomas Friedman's hypothesis (2005) builds upon the levelling effects of information and communications technology (ICT). Thus, it is a series of ITC-related modes of organisation of production and of services that has enabled a workforce of millions of well qualified people to enter the global competition. India, China, Russia and other post-Soviet countries have therefore helped to make the world more "flat" with regard to opportunities to compete for jobs and add value. On the contrary, it is Richard Florida's hypothesis (2005) that the world, despite the "flattening" impacts of ICT is still a "spiky" place, with only a very limited number of true global players – that is the 'world cities'. Florida concedes that globalisation indeed has had a levelling effect in as much that more players have entered the competition. But the growing importance of the knowledge economy – and its requirements for talented and creative people, high-quality urban locations and organisational networking – produces a counter-force that brings about a (re-)concentration of added value and innovation to only a very few true global urban areas. Florida argues that "the main difference between now and even a couple of decades ago is not that the world has become flatter but that the world's peaks have become slightly more dispersed – and that the world's

hills, the industrial and service centers that produce mature products and support innovation centers, have proliferated and shifted” (Florida, 2005: 50). With reference to Peter Taylor’s pioneering ‘world city network’ research, Florida identifies a relatively small group of leading city-regions that are the peaks in the world of the knowledge economy.

And it is exactly at this point that the POLYNET project focuses in to look more closely at the intra- and inter-firm knowledge-based connectivities that functionally define these mega-city regions that form the spiky parts of the global map.

### *The Mega-City-Region hypothesis: changing city-regions in a changing economy*

Some MCRs are self-evidently morphologically polycentric and thus follow a development form that is encouraged in EU spatial policy (ESDP - EC 1999). However it is argued that inter-urban functional connections, resulting not only from commuting but also from knowledge intensive interaction - virtual communications and business travel - within and between advanced business service firms, inter-link the constituent cores of the MCR in a common network :

' (MCRs are) a series of anything between ten and fifty cities and towns, physically separate but functionally networked, clustered around one or more larger central cities, and drawing enormous economic strength from a new functional division of labour. These places exist both as separate entities, in which most residents work locally and most workers are local residents, and as parts of a wider functional urban region connected by dense flows of people and information carried along motorways, high-speed rail lines and telecommunications cables' (Hall, Pain, 2006, introduction)

At a wider spatial scale, such polycentric systems are inter-linked with other city-regions forming European and global knowledge networks or archipelagos (see also Veltz, 1997).

However, the resulting 'space of flows' (Castells, 1989) linking metropolitan regions together over national state borders has major implications for policy. In spite of a common recognition of the disappearance of the 'nation state', the very role of these nation states in the development of a competition oriented neo-liberal regime since the 1980's (Brenner, 2004) demands a deeper understanding of complex local-global interrelationships between economic development, spatial planning policies and polycentric MCR development.

### *Polynet<sup>1</sup>: MCRs in North West Europe and key policy issues*

The European funded Interreg IIIB Polynet research project has investigated the emergence of eight MCRs in North West Europe and has aimed to pinpoint the key issues for policy arising from this new scale of functional interrelations. The first task of the program was for the eight teams to arrive at a preliminary definition of their MCR and provide a statistical overview of it. Commuter flows between the constituent MCR Functional Urban Regions (FURs) were used to assess their functional polycentricity. Surprisingly, the results showed a weak degree of polycentricity for all the MCRs – even MCRs that appear polycentric in terms of their morphological development, are not polycentric in functional terms defined by daily commuting.

However, the following stages of the research provided insights into another form of functional polycentricity based on the knowledge intensive business flows in Advanced Producer Services (APS). An initial quantitative study adapted GaWC world city network analysis for the MCR scale. Measurement of office functions and locations revealed potential inter-urban links to be investigated in interviews with the senior business actors based in each MCR. The quantitative results suggested Rhine-Ruhr and the Randstad are the most polycentric MCRs in terms of their office distribution whereas Paris, Rhine-Main, Greater Dublin and to a lesser degree South East England, appeared relatively primate. The degree of polycentricity of Central Belgium and EMR Northern Switzerland was unclear. Additional analysis on firm connectivity for the latter

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<sup>1</sup> POLYNET (Sustainable Management of European Polycentric Mega-City Regions) is a €2.4 million research project funded by the European Regional Development Fund under the INTERREG IIIB North West Europe programme. Partners involved: The Young Foundation (formerly Institute of Community Studies; Lead Partner); University of Amsterdam; University of Heidelberg; Université Paris-1; University College Dublin; Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich; Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development (ILS), Dortmund; Loughborough University; and Université Libre de Bruxelles

indicate a bipolar structure with Zurich and Basel being the two leading functional urban areas (Thierstein et al. 2006).

However the subsequent interviews shed an altogether different light on the question of polycentricity. The eight MCRs show the same intense concentration of APS firms within their major cities' central economic cores. The resulting space of flows interlinks these central cores together in a functional network on a North West European scale. In some cases however, there is evidence of a functional division of labour, for example in the Rhine-Ruhr and Rhine-Main cases, and of internal MCR functional interaction – this was surprisingly well developed in South East England given its apparent morphological mono-centricity and emergent also in Zürich. The observations confirmed the existence of MCR formation processes however in other examples. Notably Dublin and Paris metropolitan region - the two most monocentric formations studied but interestingly the well-known morphologically polycentric Randstad region did not seem to have developed important functional linkages.

The key findings of the final stage of the project are the focus of this Built Environment special issue – comparative studies of policy making responses at the MCR level for the eight POLYNET cases: the Randstad, Rhine-Main, RhineRuhr, Brussels, Zürich, Dublin, South East England and the Paris metropolitan region, in which official documents and discussions with senior policy-makers at focus group meetings were analysed.

### *Conflicting scales of polycentricism : Spatial planning policies and MCRs*

The overarching question addressed in this special edition focuses on a basic contradiction identified in the policy analysis, between European priorities to implement polycentric spatial planning at all scales. The ESDP and NWE Spatial Vision for the so-called 'Pentagon' encourage polycentricity from the regional to the EU scale, yet, the POLYNET findings suggest a potential conflict between European level polycentricity - intended to strengthen the European periphery and territorial cohesion - and polycentricity at the level of the MCR that is

supposed to sustain and enhance knowledge-based flows into Europe through the Pentagon (a priority of the Lisbon Strategy – EC 2000).

The aim of this special issue is address the policy implications arising from the POLYNET study. Three key questions will be specifically discussed:

- **What is the awareness of policy-makers regarding the increasing and yet very different realities of the MCRs' formation in North West Europe?** How are the economic changes occurring at a metropolitan level being taken on board? What attention is given to the rise of the knowledge intensive economy and to the role of Advanced Producer Services? Is awareness of MCR formation processes important? For instance, are firms' functional inter-linkages and the division of labour within the MCRs and with other regions taken into account? Is there an awareness of the dilemmas raised by these profound economic and spatial changes and is this a priority in the political agenda?
  
- **What are the consequences of emergent MCR functional perimeters on administrative and political geography at different scales?** What powers exist to address dilemmas at the MCR level and what forces are resisting the implementation of MCR and metropolitan-level development projects? What are the prospects for institutional development at the level of the MCR? Does the organisational structure of a nation state – Unitarian vs. federalist – make any difference with regard to the level of awareness of the existence of MCR or the willingness to adopt a MCR policy strategy?
  
- Apart from these institutional dilemmas and practices, **what strategies are needed to confront pressing MCR priorities for sustainable economic and spatial development** including a wide range of interrelated sectoral policies for transport, education, social equity and the environment?

It was not the purpose of the POLYNET research programme to directly analyse the effective degree of implementation of MCR-related spatial policies. Its aim was to identify the main principles used in recent spatial policies and



their potential implications for MCR and wider European development. It came as a surprise to the whole Polynet project team to learn how crucial is an awareness of the spatial scale of MCR. With regard to policy making – especially on a regional, national and supra-national level – a gap in perception still seems to exist between the documented and normative policy approaches on polycentric development of MCR – as in the ESDP (1999) – and knowledge and recognition about the factual degrees of functional polycentricity and the spatial scale of MCR.

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