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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Building 'Holland's Tallest Office Block': The Transnational Origins and Troubled History of a Speculative Office Development in Post-War Rotterdam

Tim Verlaan* and Alistair Kefford†

This article examines the remarkable surge of UK property development activity in the Netherlands which took place in the early 1970s, with a focus on Rotterdam. It explores some of the structural and commercial reasons behind this boom in transnational development activity, relating it to political and economic conditions on both sides of the North Sea. We examine the role of the property developer Town & City Properties Limited and its role in exporting UK development practices and techniques to the Netherlands, taking Rotterdam's SOM-designed Europoint Towers as a case study. This trio of hulking, 22-storey office towers dominated Europe's most important port. When erected, they were the tallest buildings in the Netherlands; when sold in the mid-1970s, they formed the largest property transaction the country had ever seen. The Europoint project provides an ideal lens through which to examine the growth and global transmission of new commercial architectures, along with the increasing internationalisation of commercial property development in this period. Architecture remained important to such projects, but the profession tended to become somewhat subsumed within the wider corporate structure of internationalising development companies, or else the work was contracted out to 'starchitects' to lend landmark building projects further prestige. This early episode of transnational urban property development provides new insights into the historical genealogy and chronology of the global commercial systems of architecture, development, and investment that dominate present-day cities.

Property Developers, Commercial Architects and the Post-War Context

In 2007, the city of Rotterdam decided to move thousands of its civil servants to De Rotterdam, a gargantuan office development on the banks of the river Meuse designed by Dutch starchitect Rem Koolhaas. It turned out that this decision was a *sine qua non* for the project, as its developers feared they could not attract enough tenants on their own. Soon after the ground-breaking ceremony in 2009, the global financial crisis began to seriously affect occupancy rates and, by extension, property values in the Netherlands. The municipal decision significantly worsened the situation in Rotterdam and led to a public outcry, as it resulted in an additional 60,000 square metres of vacant office space in the Europoint Towers – the complex that from 1977 until 2014 was home to many of the city's municipal departments ('In wanhopig Rotterdam is elke bouwput welkom', 2013; Vanstiphout 2013). Europoint was another flagship building project much like De Rotterdam. The three sturdy square towers, located at a key transport junction to the west of the city centre and adjacent to the docks, were designed by the renowned American firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

(SOM). Upon completion, they were the tallest and largest office blocks in the Netherlands. However, their completion in 1974 coincided with a global property crash and most of the office floors in the towers remained unlet and empty. This embarrassing situation encouraged the city authorities to buy the complex from its original developer in 1976. For both the Europoint and De Rotterdam developments, the municipality's decision to occupy these extravagant and speculative office complexes offered a vital lifeline to a struggling commercial endeavour.

The Europoint project was a product of an earlier – and little known – period of expansion and internationalisation in commercial architecture and development during the 1960s and 1970s. The architectural scheme was initially designed by SOM to serve as the Netherlands' first 'World Trade Centre', as part of the global rollout of this American commercial typology. Financially, Europoint was the result of a joint venture between a local transport company in Rotterdam, Overbeek, and a British property company, Town & City Properties Limited. Town & City were at the forefront of a wave of British property investment in the Netherlands that reached its peak in the early 1970s (Verlaan 2021), when it was estimated that British firms were responsible, for example, for 25% of development activity in Amsterdam ('British and European Property', 1974). Rotterdam – as will

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be seen – was another major focus of activity. Town & City's operations in 1970s Rotterdam were also directly linked to the course of post-war urban redevelopment in the UK (Kefford 2021), where the company was a major player in the London office market, a favoured partner in state-sponsored urban renewal schemes, and a popular investment for the City of London's powerful financial institutions.

In this article we unpick the multiple actors and forces that came together to produce Europoint and which operated at a number of different scales, from the local to the global. We highlight the unique developmental context of post-war Rotterdam – an archetypal reconstruction city, which also boasted one of the world's busiest ports. In the years following the war, Rotterdam's planners, politicians, and business interests set their sights upon a vision of the city reborn as a thrusting commercial capital – a dynamic, globally networked linchpin of the modern Dutch economy. The national development context was also important, as intercity competition and structural shifts towards the service sector led Rotterdam to pursue modern office development on an extravagant new scale. This was where the American masters of corporate modernism came in, and we explain how SOM came to design landmark modern office buildings for Rotterdam in the context of the firm's wider trajectory of internationalisation and commercialisation at this time. SOM designed Europoint on behalf of a British property company as a speculative venture, rather than for an owner-occupying client, and we attend closely to the supporting cast of developers, financiers, and real estate brokers that were (and are) fundamental to such building projects and yet whose activities and agendas often remain obscure.

Europoint's unique history and complex transnational lineage tells us much about the emergence of an increasingly internationalised system of large-scale commercial development, which continues to operate powerfully today, but which was novel and experimental in the post-war era. Commercially oriented architects played a crucial role in this process, lending international design prestige to landmark building projects, but so too did a wider cast of commercial forces as development companies, investment flows, and market dynamics began to operate more freely across national borders. The social and economic consequences of this internationalised and financialised system of spectacular (and speculative) urban development are the cause of much concern today, and such dynamics have attracted powerful scholarly critiques (e.g. Fainstein 2016; Stein 2019; Sklair 2017; McNeill 2009; Atkinson 2020). Yet we know very little of the historical emergence of these globalised models of urban commercial development across the 20th century. Indeed, many of the most significant scholarly treatments of present-day patterns of globalised, capitalistic urban development seem unaware of the existence of the important post-war precursors we reveal here, and instead date such developments from the late-20th-century, 'neoliberal' era (e.g. Sklair 2017; McNeill 2009). This article uses the Europoint case study to fill some of these gaps in our knowledge,

offering important insights into the historical genealogy of the global commercial systems of architecture, development, and investment that determine how cities look and function today. It examines some of the concrete processes, actors, and agendas through which such systems emerged – outside of the conventionally accepted chronologies of neoliberal urbanism or 'the global city' (Sassen 1991). We also show how these models of urban development came to be transferred between different national contexts – with different cultures of building, business, and planning – by following the evolution of new transnational links between specific countries, in this case Britain and the Netherlands.

Piecing together the history of a commercial project such as this, with a complex transnational lineage, is challenging. Although the historiography of Rotterdam's post-war redevelopment is extensive (see, in particular, Sennema 2015; Van de Laar 2007; Wagenaar 1992), Europoint figures only as a footnote. Scholars have instead focused on the reconstruction of Rotterdam's city centre, on landmark expansion projects such as Pendrecht, and on the public planning agendas that underpinned such projects. Tracing the history of private development projects is less straightforward, and our source base is necessarily diffuse and diverse. We have drawn upon a wide range of newspaper reportage, particularly in the business and financial press, and spanning both the Netherlands and the UK, to piece together the details of the development itself, the various actors involved, and the wider commercial processes of which it was a part. We have also made use of Rotterdam's municipal archive to track down details of the city's dealings with the Europoint development, and, in the UK, records relating to Town & City's business activities have been consulted in the unlikely locale of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, which holds the business archives of the shipping corporation P&O (Town & City's parent company).

A Corporate Development in a Booming Economy

During the early post-war decades, the Netherlands experienced an unprecedented boom in office construction driven by structural shifts in the economy, in particular the expansion of the service sector. By the late 1960s, the tertiary sector was responsible for more than 50% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and such activities – commercial services, administrative and clerical work – required vast amounts of new office space, built to new standards. The expansion of the welfare state with its growing army of civil servants and technocrats also formed an important source of public sector demand (Schuyt, Taverne, and Van Berkel 2004). At the same time, the maturation of the Dutch property industry led developers and investors to take up a more active role in the planning and construction of office buildings. The rise of the service economy and expansion of state responsibilities went hand in hand with the embrace of modernist architecture as the preferred style for both public institutions and private companies, which initially remained firmly wedded to their

central office locations in Dutch cities. Since the Industrial Revolution, offices had conglomerated in central urban districts due to their optimal transportation and communication facilities and easy access to professionals working in other sectors of the service economy (Hall 1966). Post-war planners expected that, with the rise in car ownership, suburbanisation, and continuing economic growth, city centres had to brace themselves for massive redevelopment, an expulsion of housing, and the removal of 'economically unviable' functions (Wagenaar 2009: 450–456).

The city of Rotterdam faced its own unique set of circumstances. The German bombing of its central area at the beginning of the Second World War had provided local planners with a more or less clean slate, which was cleared even further by additional demolitions of historical buildings during the war and immediate post-war years (Van der Pauw 2006; Wagenaar 1992). In 1946 the city council accepted a redevelopment scheme that envisaged a new central business district on the location of the devastated inner city, which was to become the focus of Rotterdam's reconstruction efforts: 'It has to become the highlight of the city; the natural centre where all the other city parts direct themselves to, that represents the city as a whole ... and literally and figuratively the core' (ASRO 1946, cited in Rooijendijk 2005: 73). The city's plan recommended the separation of urban functions and traffic streams in combination with a thinning out of the urban fabric, and the reservation of the city centre for shops, offices, and car infrastructures. Rotterdam emerged as an international exemplar for efficient and functional urban reconstruction planning, which placed supreme emphasis upon automobility and the commercial functions of its reorganised central business district. The city's plan did not, however, offer a clear-cut vision of the future (Andela and Wagenaar 1995: 16). Indeed, in the words of one planner, 'too many advance commitments ... were considered an impediment to future economic initiatives and, moreover, inconsistent with a free, democratic society' (Meyer 1999: 318).

Such plans came from the hands of the local planning department, which became increasingly powerful during the post-war period in relation to the municipal executive. Still, in the Dutch political system, urban planning was firmly in the hands of locally elected city councils. In larger cities such as Rotterdam, these councils were made up of 45 members of political parties, who after quadrennial elections would appoint and monitor a municipal executive consisting of five to seven aldermen. Throughout the period under examination in this article, Rotterdam's aldermen for urban planning were all members of the powerful Labour Party. Indeed, up until the 1990s, electoral change in local Dutch politics was fairly limited, and the social democrats had more to fear from internal, factional machinations than from opposing political parties (Verlaan 2015: 542). This was the case in Rotterdam as well, where the modernist visions of the 1950s and 1960s only came under attack after members of the New Left gained a political foothold in the 1974 and 1978 elections and managed to steer the planning department away from its business-minded and rationalist attitude towards the future

of inner-city areas. This change in the tides of politics and planning eventually came to influence the decision-making process over the Europoint development as well.

Throughout the post-war period, the city centre was gradually – and often haphazardly – rebuilt in a mostly functionalist style. In a dual economic strategy, during this period local officials prioritised the expansion of harbour activities on the city's fringes along with office construction in central areas. Office employment was better paid, required less space, and was less polluting than manual labour (Verlaan 2016). As such, in addition to its industrial base, the service economy provided Rotterdam with rosy economic prospects. Rotterdam's key infrastructural and economic asset, the port, was a major developmental priority both locally and nationally, and the plan placed great emphasis on the westward expansion of its harbour, which was to be connected to the city by a rectangular grid of multi-lane expressways (Provoost 1996: 49). Rotterdam embraced a heroic yet pragmatic attitude towards urban planning, in particular towards other Dutch cities. As one city councillor stated in 1946, 'One can see Rotterdam in the year 2000 as the grandiose, most modern social city of the Netherlands ... next to Amsterdam as the historical capital of culture and The Hague as the administrative centre' (Handelingen, cited in Van de Laar 2007: 463).

In the decades that followed, the city centre did indeed become even more modern but rather less social, with the majority of building plots zoned for offices and a corresponding lack of attention to local residents' needs (Couperus 2015). A prime example of the focus on office construction was the 1965 initiative to build a World Trade Centre in the outdated basins of the centrally located Leuvehaven (Van Dijk 1995: 179). Just like its counterpart in New York, it was the local port authority that took a leading role in this development. In 1968 SOM presented a design for two identical towers 145 meters in height, which would house the port authority along with international corporations with branch offices in Rotterdam (Ploeg 1999: 95). The scheme would be financed by the Shell and Philips pension funds, which in the preceding years had become interested in property due to its generous and rapid returns on investment (Verlaan 2017: 42). The World Trade Centre would become a corporate development *par excellence* (Figure 1).

The involvement of SOM forcefully underlined this point. The American firm's architects and engineers were the recognised masters of corporate modernism, and had pioneered the application of the International Style to commercial office building. The glass-sheathed façade of the firm's 21-storey Lever House in New York – completed in 1952 on Park Avenue as the new corporate headquarters for the Lever Brothers Company – was ground-breaking in its use of glazed curtain walls on such a tall commercial building and marked the onset of an era of large-scale corporate construction that would utterly transform America's business capital. By 1961, SOM's 60-storey Chase Manhattan Bank – a glazed, gleaming monolith which stood out starkly from the city's interwar skyscrapers – was by far the most prominent post-war addition to the Manhattan

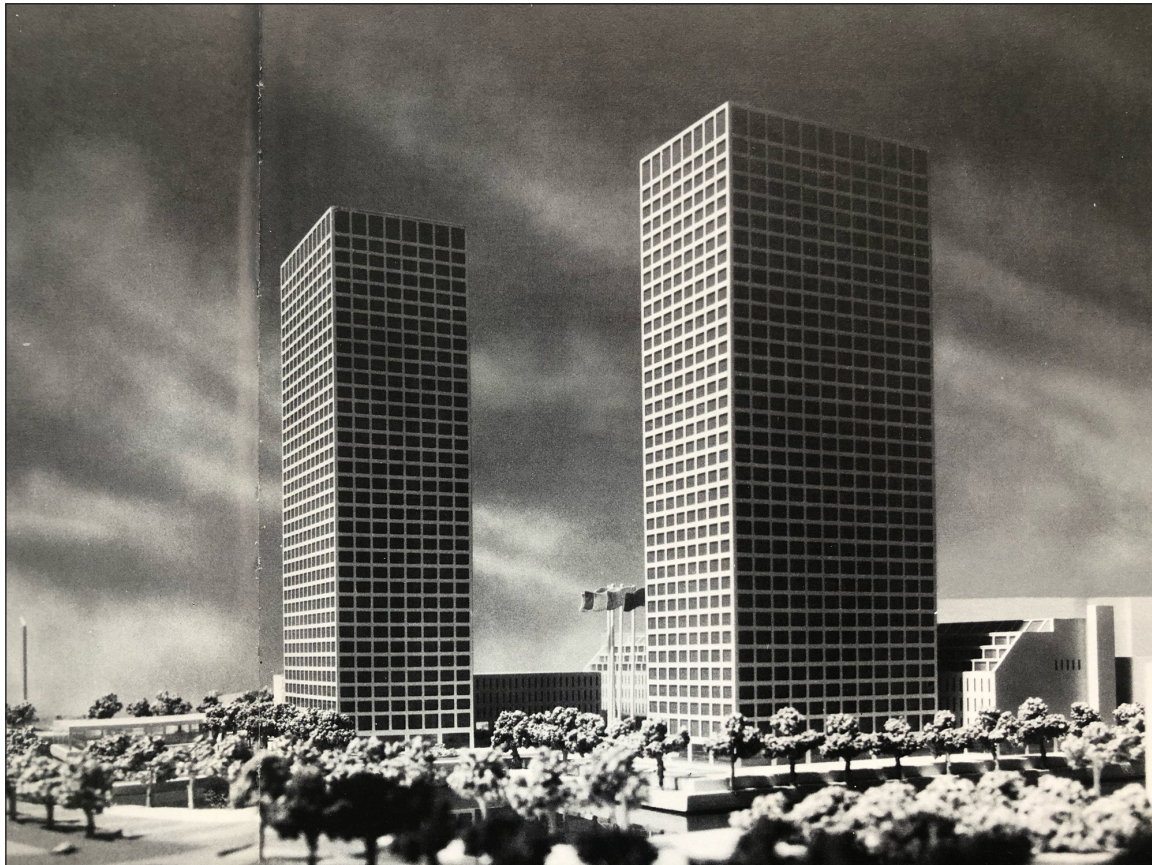


Figure 1: SOM's World Trade Centre model for Rotterdam's Leuvehaven ('Bestemmingsplan Leuvehaven goedgekeurd', 1970).

skyline. SOM's entry into Europe was aided initially by its status as a favoured architectural partner to the US government. In the early 1950s the firm was working for the US State Department in Germany, where it designed airy residential blocks for employees of the American Consulate in Bremen, along with a new US Consulate building in Düsseldorf, completed in 1954 (Danz and Hitchcock 1963). In a sign of the firm's growing international reach, SOM was also responsible for designing the Istanbul Hilton in the early 1950s, and by the mid-1960s had completed a striking new headquarters for the Banque Lambert in Brussels. This project, with its chunky concrete exo-skeleton and its glamorous international provenance, was one of the most important modernist buildings in the rapidly redeveloping Belgian capital. SOM was thus a natural candidate to design Rotterdam's prestigious international office project in the shape of the proposed World Trade Centre.

During the second half of the 1960s, multiple cities in Europe and beyond were vying for their own World Trade Centre, which served as a triumphant symbol of the thrusting commercial vitality of its host city. The typology, which would typically house shops, restaurants, and hotel facilities as well, was also seen as the ultimate remedy to the disinvestment and large-scale suburbanisation of employers and residents of the period. When Rotterdam's World Trade Centre was on the drawing board, outside of New York only Tokyo boasted its own World Trade Centre, but Brussels and Amsterdam had well-advanced plans for theirs. This demonstrates how already during the post-war

period cities increasingly became international competitors for investments, jobs, and prestige, in a foreshadowing of the late-century 'global city' model (Sassen 1991). As there was only room for one World Trade Centre in the Netherlands, Amsterdam and Rotterdam were in direct competition with each other ('Maandag in Den Haag vechten om World Trade Center', 1968; 'Bouw wereldhandelscentrum Amsterdam start in '70', 1969). The showdown prompted the Rotterdam city council to quickly approve the land-use plan for the Leuvehaven plots ('Bestemmingsplan Leuvehaven goedgekeurd', 1970). A planning adviser to the municipality was adamant about the significance of a local World Trade Centre: 'The concept has an attractive power and value for which there is a worldwide susceptibility ... It seems a scramble has begun between cities that already play an important international role and those who hope to do so in the future' (Van Embden 1971: 5).

Despite this enthusiasm and competitive incentive, the changing tides in local politics and planning soon came to hamper Rotterdam's World Trade Centre scheme. In 1971, much to the chagrin of Shell and Philips, the local Labour party proposed to provide the building plots only as a leasehold to the financial investors, retaining the freehold ownership for the city ('Wereldhandelscentrum in politieke storm', 1971). The proposal signals an increasing wariness towards business interests in local planning matters. A feasibility study published in the same year concluded that SOM's

design was too expensive and unattractive to potential investors, and presented an alternative, smaller design by the British firm of Llewyn-Davies Weeks Forestier-Walker & Bor instead ('WHC moet gat tussen centrum en Leuvehaven dichtmaken', 1971). The Shell and Philips funds committed themselves to financing the scheme only on condition that they were granted freehold ownership of the land, rather than leasehold tenure ('Pensioenfondsen gaan handelscentrum betalen', 1971). These terms were ultimately accepted by the city council – for whom the World Trade Centre had by now become an essential prestige project – in the spring of 1972. The alderman for economic affairs even declared that, if necessary, the city would fund the scheme itself ('Handelsreus komt', 1972). As will be seen, in the end this affirmation turned out to be the scheme's swansong rather than its crescendo.

The British Discovery of the Dutch Property Market

While discussions about a central location for the World Trade Centre raged on, in 1971 the trading and transport company Overbeek presented a different major office

scheme for approval, again drawn by SOM, which would become the Europoint complex. The proposal involved erecting three outsized office towers alongside Overbeek's existing headquarters to form a new sub-central office complex at the Marconiplein, adding almost 100,000 square metres of new office space to the city and serviced by an 800-car parking facility. Overbeek's managing director, H. Irmer, had become fascinated by the work of Mies van der Rohe while travelling the United States, and he hired SOM after learning that several of its employees had studied with the starchitect. To overcome the language barrier, a Dutch architect was appointed a member of the design team as well ('Dr. H. Irmer, initiatiefnemer van Europoint verheugd over internationaal bouwteam', 1971: 2–4). The scheme's location on the periphery of the main urban centre was in line with Rotterdam's ambition to create a number of subcentres for the service economy while continuing to trade off the successes of what was by then the world's busiest port (Schuyt, Taverne, and Berkel 2004:152) (Figure 2). In 1972, the municipal executive published an overall plan for the economic future of Rotterdam that foregrounded the service economy not only in the city centre, but also in a number of subcentres

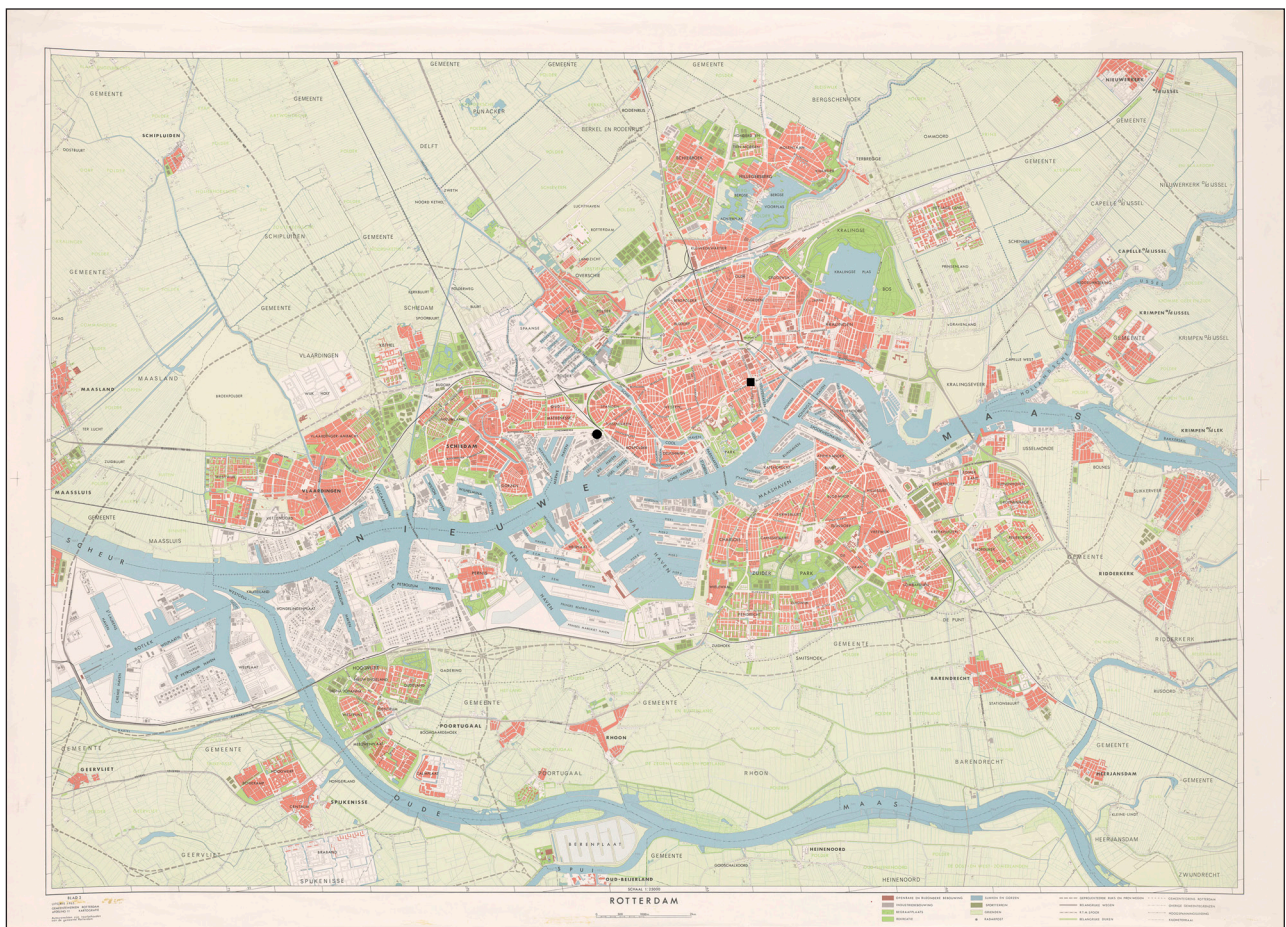


Figure 2: Map of Rotterdam in 1965, with the central business district designated by a black square and the Marconiplein plot with a black circle. Rotterdam Municipal Works, 'XXX-61-2 Plattegrond van Rotterdam en het Europoortgebied. Blad 2: stadsagglomeratie: Rotterdam, Nieuwerkerk aan den IJssel, Capelle aan den IJssel, Krimpen a/d IJssel, West-IJsselmonde, Spijkenisse en het Botlekgebied'. Topografische seriekaarten vervaardigd door Gemeentewerken Rotterdam, Geschat 1886–2010, Stadsarchief Rotterdam, <https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/136D468690AD47C48EBD5007B30A4087>.

connected to the central business district by metro (Dienst van Stadsontwikkeling 1972).

The Marconiplein sat three kilometres from the centre at an important transport interchange that connected the city with the Nieuw-Mathenesse dock area, surrounded by seaport-related businesses. The name of the new development, Europoint, tied it explicitly to the 'Europoort', the title given to the major westward extension of Rotterdam's port area. In contrast to the World Trade Centre, the planning process proceeded relatively smoothly. Although Europoint was not supposed to compete with its centrally located counterpart, at the ground-breaking ceremony on 1 December 1971, Irmer was clear about his company's ambitions: 'The project is designed to accommodate first-class office space, for which there will be demand in this hub of business activities in Western Europe [Rotterdam, TV]. Mayor Wim Thomassen, who was present to drive the first pile, seemed to agree by stating that British companies in particular would be interested in renting Europoint's office space after their country had joined the EEC ('Britse interesse voor Rotterdam', 1971).

The office towers at Marconiplein bore a remarkable resemblance to SOM's earlier design for the World Trade Centre project. The original design shows three blocks – one measuring 140 metres in height and two 95 metres – fitted with box-shaped, tinted-glass windows ('Het kan nog wel hoger in Rotterdam', 1971; 'Bouw kantoorpand aan Marconiplein begint', 1971). At the time, civil engineers estimated that the wet soil conditions in the western parts of the Netherlands could hold buildings up to 143 metres tall, thus Europoint's height was not chosen arbitrarily (Engel 1969: 1868–1873). Ultimately, however, the design was amended to comprise three identical blocks, each 95 metres tall and housing 30,000 square metres of lettable office space over 22 floors. The towers did not make use of the glazed curtain walls for which SOM had become famous, but instead had a more solid and substantial façade with a light-coloured travertine grid housing the regular pattern of square dark windows, which were fitted flush with the building's external surface. To complete the image of total regularity and perfect linearity, the width of the façade was expanded by 6 centimetres every 6 floors, 'offering perspectival correction and making the towers look dead straight' (DiedererDirrix 2021). The towers were supported by concrete columns within the façade and a central core housing the elevators, stairwells, and services. Although SOM's World Trade Centre scheme had clearly been repurposed for Europoint, the new building's promoters also drew a clear line between the two projects. In the Dutch press it was reported that Overbeek 'certainly do not have the pretence of building a kind of World Trade Centre'. This typology 'would require a maximum of facilities, such as shops, restaurants and a hotel', whereas the Europoint was 'nothing more or less than a high-quality office complex' ('Kantoorkolos Marconiplein', 1971) (**Figure 3**).

SOM's involvement in this speculative scheme reflected the firm's shifting modus operandi by the 1970s. In an authorised monograph published in 1970, the firm prided itself on its international clientele of governments and

corporate institutions while casting doubt over its future in America: 'SOM's work is now most successful and convincing in two areas: in their modest servicing and transport buildings; and in embodying and reflecting the values of the large American hierarchical institutions of commerce and defence which their own organization has grown to emulate. But, as it is precisely these institutions which are at present under siege in the United States, no predictions should here be made for the next decade' (Woodward 1970: 19). In defiance of the seemingly bleak prospects and economic downturns, over the 1970s SOM was commissioned to design numerous urban office towers, both at home and abroad, although not with quite the same bravado and prestige as during the firm's heyday in the 1950s and 1960s. SOM was increasingly designing towers for property developers, rather than directly for the firms that would occupy them. These new clients, according to Albert Bush-Brown, were concerned with 'managing investments made by foreign and American speculators [and this] set architectural constraints SOM had seldom known in earlier work for corporate patrons' (1983: 11). Indeed, by the early 1970s, critics had come to ridicule the SOM acronym as standing for 'Same Old Model'. The firm became known for its rapid design process, which attracted investors in need of quick planning approval and fast rental income to carry the high cost of borrowed funds (Bush-Brown 1983: 19). The relative anonymity of SOM's clients during the 1970s was mirrored by the firm's corporate culture and work ethos, in which it was uncommon to release the names of designers, and group efforts were favoured over individual achievements (Adams 2007: 27).

These terms of doing business would certainly have suited the British developers that partnered with Overbeek on the Europoint scheme, Town & City Properties Limited. Town & City was one of the most ambitious and expansionary amongst a clutch of British property development firms that had seen dramatic growth in the post-war decades driven largely by speculative office developments. Just as in the Netherlands, the emergence of a recognisable property development industry in the UK was essentially a post-war phenomenon, tied to both the booming service economy and the wave of state-sponsored urban redevelopment associated with modernist urban renewal. Town & City was only established in 1956 and the firm initially specialised in the lucrative London office market, where commercial rents for office space were amongst the very highest in the world ('The Philosopher's Stone', 1972). The company also moved quickly to extend its operations beyond London, installing modern office buildings in many of Britain's provincial towns and cities and also developing a new specialism in large-scale retail development and central area renewal. The firm was responsible for planting dozens of American-style shopping malls across the UK. Many of these projects were part of state-sponsored urban renewal schemes, undertaken in partnership with the public sector during the high moment of enthusiasm for comprehensive redevelopment and urban modernism in Britain (Kefford 2021).

As a public company, Town & City was run by a board of directors on behalf of its shareholders. In practice,



Figure 3: Overbeek's director, H. Irmer, hovering over a model of the Europoint development ('Dr. H. Irmer, initiatiefnemer van Europoint verheugd over internationaal bouwteam' 1971: 3).

however, the firm was steered heavily from its foundation by one man, Barry East, who served as both the chairman and managing director (Erdman 1982: 140). Although East was the dominant force in decision making, Town & City interestingly also retained the services of an advisory panel of specialists 'qualified to advise the Board on property development matters in the widest aspect' (TCPL 1971). Membership was dominated by figures from the leading London brokers and estate agents but also included the celebrated planner Max Lock, the prominent architect Ian Fraser, as well as economic analysts and legal experts. Town & City was also in the vanguard of the financialisation of urban property development in this period and forged close links with the insurance companies, pension funds, and other cash-rich financial institutions that

offered 'open-ended finance' to the firm in return for large tranches of shares and seats on the company's board of directors. In comparison with other countries, the British property development industry was tightly harnessed to the financial sector from an early stage. The long-standing importance of the City of London as a global financial centre was particularly significant here, and Town & City's role as a major landlord and developer in the prestigious London office market brought the company into close contact with the centres of high finance and corporate power in the city.

Less than twenty years after its formation, then, Town & City had established itself as a formidable commercial actor and was firmly ensconced amidst the centres of economic and political power in post-war London. But the

company was not content with dominating the redevelopment landscape of Britain alone, and from the mid-1960s Town & City began to turn its attentions overseas on an increasing scale. The company had long had a foot in the Australian market, where it built and operated suburban shopping malls and centrally located office blocks in the rapidly growing cities of Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide. There was activity in North America too, in New York and Boston, for example (TCPL 1971). In its overseas projects, Town & City tended to focus on the type of activity it knew best – the development of landmark modern office blocks – and it came to see the principal cities of neighbouring European countries as a favoured sphere of operations. By the early 1970s the firm had built striking new office blocks in prestigious locations in Paris and Brussels, but it was in the Netherlands that Town & City concentrated most of its European development activity.

The Netherlands, or 'Holland', as it was universally referred to in Britain at this time, was attractive to British developers for a number of reasons (Verlaan 2021). The country was seen as culturally and commercially close to the UK, with many shared traditions of business and capitalist enterprise: 'They think the same way as we do', *The Financial Times* property correspondent put it (O'Halloran 1970). The Dutch ability to operate confidently in English was another big attraction for linguistically challenged British businessmen. At the turn of the 1970s many in the British property sector also felt that Dutch cities were on the cusp of a particularly fertile moment for commercial development activity. Cities such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam had made clear their intentions to pursue large-scale office development and service sector growth, and public controls over building had been relaxed in the mid-1960s. Yet the Dutch commercial development sector remained far smaller and less experienced than that of the UK. In 1971, for example, it was reported that the Netherlands had only 17 publicly listed property companies, in comparison with Britain's 105 (Coopman 1971).

Traditions of investment were different too, with the Dutch financial sector much less comfortable about pouring large sums of money into speculative building projects. The Dutch press reported that Town & City – with its strong backing from major British financial institutions – had gone into partnership with Overbeek to develop Europoint because 'it was not possible to finance the gigantic complex entirely with Dutch capital' ('Kantoorkolos Marconiplein', 1971). In general, the Dutch investment climate was more conservative, making it more difficult for developers to find long-term finance, and planning regulations were stricter. In comparison to its overseas counterpart, the market was very much in its infancy, and at the start of the 1970s, the Netherlands was judged to be ripe for exploitation by British property firms (Verlaan 2021). British business papers such as *The Financial Times* began to take a keen and detailed interest in the commercial potential of the Dutch market, reporting precisely, for example, on the square footage of existing office space, current rental prices, and projected future demand in Rotterdam (Van der Heijden 1970).

Town & City's Europoint development was thus part of a wider surge of British development activity in the Netherlands and in continental Europe more generally, as British developers looked to internationalise their operations and tap the potential of neighbouring urban property markets. British business correspondents waxed lyrical over the 'pioneering' operations of 'courageous developers', and crowed that 'British development expertise [was] unique, formidable, and a force to be reckoned with anywhere in the world' (Allan 1972). Such swagger and bravado were evident in many of the European development schemes themselves. Town & City's publicisation of the Europoint towers as 'Holland's tallest office block' was characteristic, as British developers out to make an impact overseas pursued grandiose, oversized building schemes. Town & City's enlistment of SOM as architects for its Europoint development thus corresponds with an overall ethos for such international activity which rested on record-breaking, skyline-busting statement architecture (Figure 4).

Making Europoint Work

When the second Europoint tower was topped out in 1974, the Dutch trade press and popular media went along with British enthusiasm. This was a building of American allure, stated the *Cement* journal, while a planning periodical spoke of a 'futuristic' ensemble fulfilling all the demands of the modern age ('Het gebouw Europoint II te Rotterdam', 1974: 303; 'Kantroopand in de modernste versie Europoint II', 1974: 83–84). However, the oil crisis of 1973 and the onset of an economic recession led to a slump in the uptake of new office space. In addition to the economic downturn, the electronic revolution and automatising of clerical work further threatened the profitability of the Dutch office market. Contrary to the property sector's confident projections, it transpired that the supply of office space in the Netherlands was actually far greater than demand (Verlaan 2021). Rotterdam was no exception. By the end of 1974, the city counted some 250,000 square metres of commercial office space standing empty (Van der Heijden 1974). A report on Rotterdam's economic future published in the same year, ominously subtitled 'A City in Doubt', now suggested that the knowledge economy might be a viable alternative to the flagging industrial and office sectors (Nederlands Economisch Instituut 1974: 24).

The growing doubt about further accommodating the service economy was fed by growing criticism of the aesthetic and social consequences of the office boom. During the 1950s and 1960s, Rotterdam had done little to alleviate the plight of inner-city residents. Although the working-class areas to the west and north of the city centre were earmarked for comprehensive redevelopment, in the end the city's focus on economic recovery left few resources for improving living conditions and social wellbeing (De Liagre Böhl 2012: 85). In addition, the results of the office building spree in Rotterdam's city centre were wholly disappointing. These criticisms were effectively summarised by social psychologist Rob Wentholt in his influential study into the experiential aspects of modern urbanism. His interviewees showed a widespread discontent



Figure 4: Drawing of the first Europoint tower sitting next to the Overbeek headquarters near Marconiplein (Engel 1969: 1869).

with the quality of Rotterdam's newly built environment, which they characterised as 'cheerless, impersonal, bare, cold, stiff, corporate and clumsy' (1968: 36). Such criticism was repeated ten years later, when the planning journal *Wonen TA/BK* invited the renowned architecture critics Stanislaus van Moos, Francesco Dal Co, and Kenneth Frampton to evaluate Rotterdam's reconstruction efforts. They were united in their criticism of the city centre—which in the words of Frampton was a collection of 'buildings looking for a city'—although more ambivalent about the Europoint development. Dal Co observed,

One cannot deny that there is a certain grandeur to SOM's towers; ... two cycloptic prisms of perfectly clear design, proportion and details amidst docks and a suburban traffic junction — as if they were trying to prove that a rational architecture is only possible as an abstract projection, disentangled from every organic and historic continuity. (Van Moos, Dal Co, and Frampton 1979: 32–33)

Against this background of growing dissatisfaction with the business-oriented attitude towards urban planning

and worsening living conditions in inner-city neighbourhoods, Rotterdam began shifting towards a more considerate and socially conscious approach. The starting point was a cultural event in 1970 which transformed the modernist city centre into a vibrant festival ground, and made local residents realise the potential of mixed functions and urban densification (Van Ulzen 2007: 67–72; Van der Ploeg 1982: 8–13). Within the urban renewal areas, a younger generation of architects, planners, and social workers began cooperating with long-time residents to advocate for affordable social housing. After the municipal elections of 1974, the growing unrest resulted in a majority of 24 out of 45 seats for the local Labour Party, which had promised to change the tide in urban planning and listen better to the concerns of those affected by its redevelopment agenda. The neglect of social and cultural issues in urban planning was addressed by the appointment of aldermen Hans Mentink and Jan van der Ploeg, who shared an assertive and understanding approach towards resident concerns; as the latter proclaimed,

Too much priority has been given to economic affairs. The interests of the people who have helped to make this city rise from its ashes have been neglected, which has resulted in distrust towards the authorities concerning the future of inner-city neighbourhoods. (De Liagre Böhl 2012: 85)

Mentink was distrustful of property developers. He compared them to wild animals by stating that 'you can tame them, let them jump through a flaming hoop', and he memorably criticised another mid-1970s office block (the 95-metre Shell Tower) as 'the last erection of big business' (Bakker and van Hoorn 1977: 28).

Soon after its instalment, the new municipal executive put words into action and persuaded the planning department to go along with a more cautious approach to urban renewal. A ban on office construction in the city centre was announced, and in 1975 the plans for a World Trade Centre in the Leuvehaven were replaced by a vast housing complex ('Wel woningen, geen WHC aan de Leuvehaven', 1975). At the same time, the municipal administration was searching for new and more spacious accommodation itself. The worrying slowdown in the uptake of office space in the Europoint development – in 1976 only four out of the 21 floors in the first new tower were let while the second tower stood empty and construction had yet to commence on the third tower – presented itself as a blessing in disguise. Early in 1976 the city was approached by Town & City's agents to see if there was interest in buying the vacant office blocks, and a transaction was swiftly concluded. In March the municipality offered the equivalent of 154 million euros for Europoint II and III (the first two towers), which together measured almost 60,000 square metres of office space and could house up to 3,000 civil servants. The offer was accepted a month later with the remarkable provision that Town & City was granted building permission for Europoint IV (the third tower) as a final addition to the complex (Stadsarchief Rotterdam 443-2/541). In Britain, the transaction was reported, with

a further touch of boosterism, as 'the largest ever property sale in Holland', while Town & City's new chairman, Jeffrey Sterling, pronounced himself 'impressed by the speed with which the municipality had gone through with the acquisition' (Guirdham 1976: 9).

Sterling had good reason to be pleased with this outcome, because Town & City's finances were in freefall at this time. The company was one of the highest profile casualties of the 1974 property slump which finally brought the over-confident and over-inflated British property sector crashing back down to earth. As a result, Town & City spent the middle years of the decade embarked on a fire sale of its biggest property assets, which was conducted under the careful supervision of the London financial institutions that had lent the firm so much money in the boom years (Reid 1982). As part of the fallout, Barry East, the company's chairman since its inception, was forced to step down in favour of Sterling. In a process of 'degearing', the company sought to reduce its debt commitments wherever possible by selling off its most valuable properties to realise any available funds. However, the middle of a property crash and global economic downturn was certainly not the most propitious time to be selling up, and Town & City expected to lose money in these transactions. With respect to the company's mostly unoccupied Europoint development, and in the context of the collapse in local demand for office space outlined above, Sterling noted that such 'large blocks might be difficult to dispose of' and 'assumed that Town & City might make a large loss on the buildings' (Guirdham 1976: 9). Thus, for all Rotterdam municipality's tough talk on the property business, the city's purchase of the Europoint towers was a financial lifeline to the crisis-ridden British developer. Town & City used Rotterdam's guilder payment to settle its substantial Dutch tax bill and to pay off the short-term Dutch guilder loans with which it had financed the project. In the end, and despite the wider commercial calamities it faced, Town & City managed to extricate itself from the Europoint scheme in profit, and used the remaining funds to pay off some of its other foreign, non-sterling debts.

Rotterdam's municipal executive, meanwhile, explained the transaction in an official memorandum as part and parcel of its progressive urban policies. The city was already considering building new office blocks for its expanding bureaucracy, and freeing up reserved plots in inner-city locations would result in additional space for affordable housing, it was suggested. Relocating municipal offices from the city centre to the peripheral Marconiplein was in line with dispersal policies and could boost the liveability of Europoint's surroundings. The municipality also claimed that bringing multiple departments under one roof would increase the efficiency and productivity of its civil servants. In a letter to those departments required to relocate their employees, the municipal executive apologised for the lack of participation and the secrecy surrounding the purchase (Stadsarchief Rotterdam 443-2/541). The response from municipal staff was unanimously negative: the location was viewed as too far from the city centre and other parts of the administrative

apparatus; the office towers were not designed for the work of civil servants; and their surroundings were judged unattractive and unsafe – particularly for female employees (Rotterdam, Stadsarchief, 443-2/541). For its part, the local press was fairly generous in its treatment. Journalists defended the cost effectiveness of the deal and explained the municipality's swiftness by highlighting the apparent interest of competing buyers, including the Dutch multinational Overseas Gas and Electric Company ('Europoint was bijna failliet', 1976; 'Europoint voordelige koop voor Rotterdam', 1976; 'Aankoop kantoorflats toch goedgekeurd', 1976).

After the city council had approved the transaction, the municipal departments grudgingly began preparations for their move to the Marconiplein. One of the staff magazines stated that personnel felt 'screwed over' but also that officials were still learning how to organise participation from below (Van de Winckel, Langschmidt, and Post 1976). The dissatisfaction of municipality staff was evident during a naming competition organised by the city's water company for its new premises, which resulted in suggestions such as 'Point of No Return', 'Towering Fiasco', 'The Straitjacket', and 'Neuropoint' ('"Riezenkampf"' 1977: 3). When asked for his feelings about the move, a municipal planner said the 'business-like' environment of the Europoint towers would have an 'alienating' effect ('Verhuizing met "weemoed" naar Europoint', 1977), thus reproducing the criticisms levelled at his own department during the preceding years. Employees of the Rotterdam port authority, who were initially supposed to relocate to the World Trade Centre but also ended up in Europoint, were particularly bitter about the move. A reporter explained their feelings in early 1977: 'The people who run the world's number one port will vacate a unique nineteenth-century building with its very own atmosphere, and will end up in a modern giant where today (and we might fear in the future as well) the atmosphere of the straight line dominates. A line that to our discomfort we have come to know so well in Rotterdam' (Meijer 1977: 15). This criticism of 'the atmosphere of the straight line' was especially resonant in the Europoint case where, as has been seen, SOM had gone to extreme lengths in the design to ensure the buildings' lines looked absolutely dead straight.

Upon moving into the towers, employees voiced further criticisms of both the design and the atmosphere of the buildings. Workers complained about the lack of 'gezelligheid', or conviviality, and the symptoms of sick building syndrome (Engelsman 1978: 3), a condition in which people become mentally or physically ill from the building in which they work or reside. And, despite the buildings' high-spec design features and supposed sophistication, there were plenty of complaints about how new technologies and materials actually worked in practice. The air-conditioning, for example, seems to have been a complete failure, with workers complaining that the number one problem with the building was the stiflingly hot atmosphere. One civil servant working in the building explained that 'there are no sun blinds on the north, east and west sides [and] the sun is baking on the windows all day long'. The air-conditioning reportedly offered little more than a

'rustling of the air'. The chairman of the Port Authority staff association agreed, complaining that the 'facilities that should ensure an optimal working climate ... leave something to be desired'. This individual voiced a litany of complaints and concerns: 'the static electricity of the floor covering, the isolation from the outside world, the elevators that work too slowly and the poor cleaning of the offices' ('Hier werken is geen pretje', 1978). Workers' representatives were also concerned about fire safety in these unprecedentedly tall buildings. The staff association felt that contingency plans, fire drills and other emergency precautions were inadequate and worried about the potential consequences.

The anger and resistance which now surrounded Europoint reflected broader changes in the field of architecture and urban planning, as the backlash against large-scale modernist renewal became increasingly vocal across the 1970s. In Rotterdam and elsewhere, long-time residents joined forces with a younger generation of urbanites and designers, who managed to get a foothold in local politics and steered planning agendas away from commercially led redevelopment and suburbanisation (Klemek 2011: 129–173). By the end of the 1970s, comprehensive redevelopment and modernist architecture had become thoroughly discredited as cure-alls for Rotterdam's urban ills. The clean-slate policies and grand gestures of the immediate post-war period were replaced by a more cautious, small-scale approach to urban renewal. Older buildings, including the much-loathed tenement houses from the 19th century, were to be renovated instead of torn down, and long-time residents rehoused in their own neighbourhoods instead of new developments on Rotterdam's outskirts (Maandag 2019: 18–66). Sometimes residents took matters into their own hands, as happened with the former offices of the city's port authority; following the authority's relocation to Europoint, its former headquarters were occupied by squatters and converted into affordable housing (Boer, Otero Verzier, and Truijten 2019: 226). At the end of Rotterdam's new, more cautious and socially conscious period of urban renewal, which lasted from 1974 to 1994, more than 120,000 housing units had been built through renovation and new builds (De Liagre Böhl 2012: 93). Since then, the city has continued to densify and rehabilitate its central areas, although in the last three decades the focus has shifted from lower- to middle- and higher-income groups (Hochstenbach 2017).

The fate of Europoint continues to be entangled with these wider developmental trends and social pressures in the city. After the municipality vacated the towers in 2014, they were sold to a Dutch investor, who converted the former municipal offices into 883 swanky apartments for expats and young urban professionals, exemplifying the city's growing attractiveness for the professional and creative classes. In a rather painful search for authenticity, the new owners rebranded the modernist ensemble as the 'Lee Towers' – after 'The Singing Crane Mechanic' Lee Towers, a Rotterdam dockworker-turned-crooner who has become something of a cult figure for younger generations. Thus, today as in the past, Europoint's long-running

story continues to reveal some of the tensions and disjunctures between the international commercial forces that produce the modern urban landscape and the local contexts and cultures in which it must be embedded.

Conclusion

The history of Rotterdam's Europoint towers is complex and composite, operating across a number of different spatial scales, from the local to the global, and drawing in a wide range of actors and agendas. Perhaps most significantly, the development of the towers in the post-war period sheds important light on a little-known moment of transnational commercial development activity in the 1960s and 1970s. Through Europoint, we can discern the emergence of a nascent international system of commercial architecture, building, and investment that was taking shape – unevenly and experimentally – before the arrival of the post-1980s 'global city'. These activities and development processes clearly prefigure the globalised patterns of capitalist urban development and city-building of the early 21st century. As such, the history of Europoint challenges widely held ideas of the chronology of such modes of development and sheds new light on the mechanics and actors involved in their emergence and diffusion. We have attended here not only to the proto-architects involved in this process – SOM – but also to the important set of wider actors – property developers, financiers, brokers – whose evolving activities were crucial to the emergence of new models of transnational commercial urbanism. It is also significant to note the important role of public authorities, both locally and nationally, in the Netherlands and in the UK, in encouraging spectacular new forms of commercial building as part of their wider planning agendas for urban economic growth and renewal. The importance of the channel of influence and interconnection between the UK and the Netherlands in this early wave of transnational development activity also reminds us of the unevenness and the contingent clustering which characterises 'global' systems and connections – a point brought out by both the global city literature and scholarship on globalisation more generally (Sassen 2007; Brenner & Keil 2020).

Despite these internationalising thrusts, local contexts always remained critically important. Spectacular commercial building projects usually involved strong doses of local boosterism and an intercity competitiveness which increasingly operated at an international level. This made the prestige and symbolic capital brought by internationally known architects such as SOM especially important. At the same time, however, roving international actors like Town & City found themselves forced to negotiate local regimes of planning and landholding, local property markets, and local systems of borrowing and finance. None of this was straightforward, particularly in the 1970s, and linguistic, legal, cultural, and commercial obstacles abounded. In the case of Europoint, the significance of (shifting) local contexts reasserted itself forcefully as the politics of planning, architecture, and urbanism in Rotterdam evolved in new directions. Europoint's unspectacular afterlife as an overpriced municipal office block

was a poignant symbol of the commercial and social risks involved in such grandiose speculative development. The building's reception was marred by critiques of the alienating effects of anonymous corporate modernism and large-scale redevelopment which spoke to wider anxieties about the character and consequences of Rotterdam's post-war journey from destruction to renewal.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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