

‘When my sister and I first came to New York from a small city, we used to amuse ourselves with a game we called Messages. I suppose we were trying, in a dim way, to get a grip on the great, bewildering world into which we had come. The idea was to pick two wildly dissimilar individuals - say a headhunter in the Solomon Islands and a cobbler in Rock Island, Illinois - and assume that one has to get a message to the other by word of mouth; then we would each silently figure out a plausible, or at least possible chain of persons through whom the message could go. The one who could make the shortest plausible chain of messengers won. The headhunter would speak to the headman of his village, who would speak to the trader who come to buy copra, who would speak to the Australian patrol officer when he next came through, who would tell the man who was next slated to go to Melbourne on leave, etc. Down at the other end, the cobbler would hear it from his priest, who got it from the mayor, who got it from a state senator, who got it from the governor, etc. We soon had these close-to-home messengers down to a routine for almost everyone we could conjure up, but we would get tangled in long chains at the middle until we began employing Mrs Roosevelt. Mrs Roosevelt made it suddenly possible to skip whole chains of intermediate connections. She knew the most unlikely people. The world shrank remarkably. It shrank us right out of our game, which became too cut and dried’ Jane Jacobs, 2003 “Dark Age Ahead” pp.134-5

Noordpoolgebied Arctis 3 Zuidpoolgebied Antarctis



CITIES AS SISTERS

SISTERS IN CITIES

1 Wereldkaart Staatkundige indeling - Wereldverkeer



‘Concurrent with the development of sister cities from 1950 onward has been a spectacular growth in international tourism and sport; the pen pal movement; the formation of a planetary community of radio hams; high-level scientific and cultural exchanges; numerous exchanges agreements among widely separated universities and the resultant study abroad programs; the Peace Corps and similar governmental and private programs based in affluent countries, such as the Experiment in International Living, Servas International, and Service Civil International and the efforts of the World Federalists, the Universal Esperanto Association, and likeminded organizations agitating for international amity, and those concerned with global environmental and social issues’ Wilbur Zelinsky, 1991 “Twinning of the World” p.5

Cities as Sisters

Rotterdam

“Particular networks link particular groups of cities...

Some of these intercity geographies are thick and highly visible - the flows of professionals, tourists, artists and migrants between specific groups of cities. Others are thin and barely visible - the highly specialised electronic financial trading networks that connect particular cities”

Saskia Sassen 2007 “Seeing Like A City”

According to the urban economist Jane Jacobs (2), cities are, and have always been, the basic unit of economic activity. Economic activity is generated not just within the city, through the activities of resident producers and consumers, but through export and import from other cities. In Western Europe, these city-centred economies became organised into state-centred economies in 1648, with the signing of the Westphalia Treaties which confirmed nation states as primary political units. Since the 1960s however, writers and researchers such as the Dutch-American global theorist Saskia Sassen have placed increasing emphasis on the role of the city as a ‘basing point’ in international trade relations, and the idea that ‘cities could more be important than countries’ as actors in a global economy (1). The economic fate of cities depends on their position in international flows of trade and investment, and on their ability to adapt the legacy of their economic history to create an innovative and dynamic economy. This project looks at sister city relationships in the context of cities’ ability to create autonomous economic relationships, and the opportunity for Rotterdam to capitalise on its existing migration-based links to support economic relationships with the ‘countries of origin’ of its immigrant populations.

Rotterdam on the Rhine

The book ‘De gemeente-wapens van Nederland’ (3) is an encyclopaedia of heraldic crests symbolising the different cities in the Netherlands. Only one of around 700 crests carefully illustrated and described, Rotterdam’s symbol shows two lions supporting a shield depicting four lions, posed above green and white stripes and topped by a crown. The whole ensemble stands on a platform which is washed by waves of the Maas River. The proliferation of municipal heraldry illustrates that cities have historically held a high degree of autonomy in the Netherlands. Rotterdam received a ‘city charter’ in 1340, which meant that the city was ‘largely able to determine [her] own policies... primarily in the field of jurisdiction but also, for instance, in the establishment of trade contacts’ (4). This autonomy continues - in 2009 the City of Rotterdam published a comprehensive policy document entitled ‘Rotterdam World City: fixed directions, new ambitions’, which sets out Rotterdam’s Programme for International and European Activities (5). ‘Rotterdam World City’ describes Rotterdam’s existing sister-city connections, and identifies priority areas for new international relationships. Three themes emerge from analysis of cities linked with Rotterdam: geographical links based on the Rhine/Maas river as a conduit of trade and cultural through Western Europe; international shipping connections through relationships with other port cities; and, more recently, a focus on more distant, less familiar cities with strong potential for beneficial economic relationships. Rotterdam’s ‘sisters’ also illustrate another set of relationships, based both on historical colonial connections and on contemporary migration patterns.

In his analysis of city-to-city networks, Rotterdam-based economic geographer Ronald Wall highlights the importance of boats and shipping in determining the strength of relationships between cities in the early years of the industrial revolution. Canals and rivers were used for transporting goods locally and regionally by barge, and steamships for transporting goods between continents (6). During the 1830s – 1880s, ‘...the primary global cities were port-cities that utilized strategic advantages and accommodated new transport technologies’ (6, p.55). These port cities were connected to each other through shipping routes, and remain connected today. As a major port city, many of Rotterdam’s sister cities are also ports. Rotterdam’s first ‘sister city’ was Kingston-on-Hull, a port in the north-east of England, which signed a formal agreement with the City of Rotterdam in 1935. This link recognised the Rotterdam-to-Hull ferry connection, which still operates (5). In 1940, Rotterdam united with Antwerp, the second city of Belgium which lies 78 kilometres to the south and is also a major sea port. Rotterdam and Antwerp have not always enjoyed an amicable relationship, exemplified by the blockade across the Scheldt River enforced by the Dutch Republic from 1585–1792, which prevented access to the North Sea from the port of Antwerp, and forced goods to travel through Rotterdam at Antwerp’s expense. By 1940, however, the two great competitors adopted each other as sisters. In 1945, Rotterdam became sister to the city of Oslo, Norway’s hub of trade, banking, industry and shipping.

The relationship between Basel and Rotterdam, initiated in 1945, illustrates the role of regional river networks in city-to-city connections. The River Rhine runs from its source in Switzerland through western Europe, linking Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria, Germany, France and the Netherlands. When the river reaches the Netherlands, the name changes as the water splits into three main distributaries. One of these, the Beneden Merwede, joins the Lek river near Kinderdijk, and becomes

the Nieuwe Maas which flows through Rotterdam and out to the North Sea. There is a long history of trade along the Rhine, and Rotterdam’s identity as a ‘World City’ rests on its location at the mouth of the river. For centuries, control of the lower Rhine has allowed Rotterdam to monopolise trade between internal European countries and the rest of the world. Hundreds of kilometres upstream, Basel is also a ‘river city’, gaining importance from its position as the only cargo port in land-locked Switzerland. Between Basel and Rotterdam, the Rhine runs through the next city to join Rotterdam’s family – the city of Duisberg (Germany), which connected with Rotterdam in 1950. Duisberg is Europe’s largest inland port – a centre for receiving, processing, and redistributing shipping containers. From Duisberg goods are shipped west to the sea ports of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Antwerp.

Rotterdam in Europe

The term ‘sister’ is an interesting choice to describe the relationships between cities. Firstly, it implies that cities are female – an idea reflected in Latin-origin languages in which the word city takes the form of ‘la ville’, ‘la città’, ‘la ciudad’. Secondly, it suggests a genetic bond or perceived likeness between the two places, a similarity which is even more strongly suggested by the term more commonly used in the United Kingdom, ‘town twinning’¹. Indeed, early relationships formed by Rotterdam reflected existing connections with similar cities - ‘similar name, similar economic function, similar export structure, similar geographical location’ (7, p.449) – originating in water-based transport and trade. Similarity as a basis for sister city relationships also extended to geographical proximity. In 1952, the European Economic Community was founded by a group of countries known as the ‘Inner Six’ – Belgium, the Netherlands, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and France – all of which are located in the west of the European continent. Every city which paired with Rotterdam in the 1950s was drawn from within these six nations. Relationships established between Rotterdam, Cologne (Germany), Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg), Lille (France) and Turin (Italy) were all reciprocated, forming a quintuplet of sisters. The addition of these cities to Rotterdam’s existing relationship with Belgium’s Antwerp ‘completed the set’ of Rotterdam’s international relations with other members of the European Economic Community. This close group was joined by Nuremberg (West Germany) as a ‘partner city’ in 1961, and by Liege (Belgium) in 1976. The 1960s witnessed Rotterdam’s sister affiliations extend beyond the borders of western Europe into other ‘Western’ nations – an ambiguous term which originates from ‘western Europe’ but generally interpreted to include other highly-developed capitalist economies such as the United States, Australia, and Japan (8, p.24-5). Wall (6) characterises this period as the age of oil, noting that the evolution of city-to-city networks were influenced by the rise of mass production, motorization and the increasingly use of the aeroplane for business and leisure travel between affluent nations. He crystallises the increasing mobility of people and trade into the formation of a triadic relationship between the world’s three most powerful countries, represented by the cities of New York (United States), London (United Kingdom) and Tokyo (Japan). By 1987 these three cities were the three largest cities in the world. Rotterdam formed a relationship with Kobe, a prominent port city in Japan’s sixth-largest city in 1967 and in 1969 became a ‘sister port’ of Seattle (United States)¹¹.

In his seminal work on sister cities, ‘The Twinning of the World’, Wilbur Zelinsky notes that ‘...in the 1980s, twinning arrangements involving communities in the First World and those in the Soviet Union and socialist countries of Eastern Europe... begun to multiply rapidly’. He explains that the basic motivation of these twinings are ‘...as a potent instrumentality for creating an economically and politically unified Europe’ (9,p.7). In the period 1976 to 1984, Rotterdam became a sister to cities in six Communist economies. Rotterdam’s port identity is reflected strongly in the choice of sister within the target country: Burgas is Bulgaria’s most important port, Constanta hosts the largest port on the Black Sea, Gdansk is Poland’s principal seaport, and Saint Petersburg is an important Russian port on the Baltic Sea. Rotterdam’s sororal gestures even extended to Cuba – a Communist country aligned at various times with both Chinese Communism and the Eastern Bloc - when Rotterdam and Havana became sisters in 1983¹¹.

Rotterdam in Asia

These relationships were accompanied by Rotterdam’s second connection to the Asian continent, when a pact was signed between Rotterdam and Shanghai (China) in 1979⁹. At the time, Rotterdam was still proudly advertised as ‘the largest port in the world’. Since the 1990s this moniker has now been awarded to sister Shanghai although Rotterdam remains ‘the largest port in Europe’. Although Shanghai had signed sister city agreements with Osaka and Yokohama (Japan) in 1973 and 1974 respectively, 1979 marked the beginning of Shanghai’s adoption of sister city relationships outside of Asia. Besides Rotterdam, Shanghai began new relations with Milan (Italy) and San Francisco (USA). ‘These relationships follow the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, who became the leader of the Communist Party of China in 1978 and is credited with opening China to foreign investment and the global market. Since 1979, Shanghai’s investment in sister city relationships has accelerated, to the point where the city now boasts sixty-six sisters across the world. Shanghai’s growing sisterhood is part of a wider trend, according to Ramasamy and Cremer (7) who have documented the dramatic increase of sister cities within Asia after 1990. Their research highlights the role of cities as centres where the ‘external process of capitalist expansion and accumulation and the internal process of socioeconomic transformation’ are brought together’. Unlike the enormous nation-states of China and India, cities are political, social and economic units understandable and comparable to urban units in other nations. During President Hu Jintao’s January 2011 visit to the White House, he noted that ‘...we have also seen very broad-ranging development of the exchanges [between the United States and the People’s Republic of China] at sub-national level. So far, our two countries have already established sister relationships between 36 provinces and states, and we have also developed 161 pairs of sister cities between our two countries’ (10).

As Saskia Sassen notes economic links between cities are not visible. Although some cities, particularly in Europe, list their sister cities on signs marking the entrance to the city, sister city relationships are generally part of this invisible network. Accordingly, sister city diplomacy has been challenged by citizens who literally

cannot see the significance of the relationship. This has prompted many cities to reassess the potential value of sister-city relationships (11). Research to quantify the benefits of these connections suggest that sister city relationships are ‘...a policy instrument through which cultural distance can be reduced, so as to facilitate business relationships between countries with different cultures’ (7, p.447). Specifically, the rapid rise in Asian economies and increasing contact between European and Asian countries has highlighted the importance of cultural understanding in trade and business relations, and led to increasing interest from policy-makers and business people in ‘cultural awareness’¹⁰. Rotterdam created links with Osaka (Japan) in 1984, Busan (South Korea) in 1987, and Tokyo (Japan) in 1989. South Korea was one of the world’s fastest growing economies from the late 1960s until the early 1990s. By the late 1980s, Japan had experienced 10% growth for four decades, and was the second-largest economy in the world. According to Rotterdam City Council, the relationship with Osaka dates back to 1970, ‘...when the Osaka Merchandise Centre, now the International Business Centre of Osaka, was set up in Rotterdam. In December 2007, Rotterdam City Hall hosted the kick-off for celebrations surrounding 150 years of diplomatic relations (in 2008) between the Netherlands and Japan and 400 years of trading relations between the two countries in 2009. Both of these occasions provide opportunities to promote Rotterdam even more among the Japanese business community, with targeted business events’ (5, p.34). Interestingly, this connection is not highly visible. There are few Japanese people living in Rotterdam, very few Japanese shops and only two branches of the popular nation-wide ‘Sumo’ all-you-can-eat sushi and grill chain restaurant.

Rotterdam in the world

Various studies have defined and redefined the definition of an economic ‘world city’, ranking acities based on their concentration of producer services, multinational headquarters or subsidiaries and other characteristics. Although Amsterdam appears frequently, Rotterdam is never among the names on the lists of world cities (6). Amsterdam’s pre-eminence as the ‘first modern economy’ in the 1700s (6, p.53) was based on the colonisation of peoples in Asia, Latin America and Africa by the Netherlands, and the extraction of natural resources and labour from those places. The establishment of Dutch administration over cities such as Willemstad in Curacao, Jakarta in Indonesia and Cape Town in South Africa (4) could be seen as the first ‘city-to-city’ relationships between Dutch cities and their colonial headquarters. This is especially true because the Dutch West India and Dutch East India Companies, which carried out colonisation, were not state organisations but private companies possessing quasi-government powers, financed and directed by the urban elite largely drawn from the powerful cities of Amsterdam and Middelburgh. These city-to-city relationships, however, may be better characterised as master-slave, parent-child^{VI}, rather than sister-sister. In her 1984 book ‘Cities and the Wealth of Nations’ Jane Jacobs (2, p.68) states that ‘...imperial powers have typically shaped conquered territories into supply regions’ – that is, producing only two or three products to supply for export, rather than a diversity of products. ‘Often enough, [imperial powers] have also deliberately forestalled conquered territories from engaging in production for their own people and producers, in the interests of keeping the conquered people as captive markets for manufactured goods of cities produced by cities of the imperial powers themselves’.

Over time, relationships can evolve. Wilbur Zelinsky comments on an abundance of more recent sister-city relationships ‘...between the imperial powers of Europe and the US and their former colonial possessions’ (9, p.21). Rotterdam and Jakarta became partner cities in 1983. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed with the port city of Santos, Brazil in 2006, and with the state of Pernambuco, Brazil in 2007, where the Dutch briefly imposed colonial rule from 1630 - 1654. Rotterdam’s connections with other Dutch ex-colonies Cape Verde, Surinam and Curacao are made at the national level, because municipal government is considered to be very weak. These relationships focus on knowledge transfer, with emphasis on work, education, safety, security, cultural activities, police and fire services, and trade relations, including supporting economic development in sister cities. However, trade relationships between the Netherlands and ‘countries with a special bond’ are not always realistic. For instance, ‘...the Rotterdam business community sees only limited economic potential in Surinam’ (5). Surinam, the smallest sovereign nation in South America, is slowly diversifying from the colonial plantation economy supplying coffee, cocoa, sugar cane and cotton for European markets to an economy based on mining, agriculture and ecotourism.

Following the independence of their respective countries, a large number of Indonesians, Surinamese, Cape Verdians and Antilleans took up the opportunity offered by the Dutch government to migrate to the Netherlands. ‘They joined the group of ‘guest workers’ from countries such as Turkey and Morocco living as ‘allochtonen’ (foreigners) in the Netherlands. The ‘Rotterdam World City’ policy prioritises strengthening municipal diplomatic ties with Germany – Rotterdam’s ‘number 1 trading partner’ – and to the BRICT countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and Turkey), large countries characterised as ‘emerging markets’. ‘Rotterdam World City’ terms Turkey a ‘country of origin’ but notes that ‘the accent in international relations with Turkey and Turkish cities has gradually shifted, however, from the socio-cultural field to the economic’ (5, p.18). Turkish academics Levent et al. comment on Istanbul’s focus on forming sister city relationships with European cities in the 1990s as ‘parallel to the integration process to European Union’ (12, p.9). Turkey became an associate member of the European Economic Community in 1963, reached a customs union agreement in 1995 and began full membership negotiations with the European Union in 2005. Istanbul and Rotterdam became sister cities in 2005.

Networks past and future

Australian researcher O’Toole (13) identifies three phases of sister city relationships: an associative phase which is characterised by international friendship and awareness; a reciprocative phase based on educational exchange; and finally a commercial phase where cities evolve existing relationships to pursue business opportunities. The evolution of relationships from personal to commercial is useful in considering the future of Rotterdam’s sister city relationships, specifically with cities in the ‘countries of origin’ of Rotterdam’s immigrant population. The new importance given to relationships with the BRICT countries

illustrates how connections formed for social or political reasons can change to become important economic links, as the fortunes of the sister cities change. Morocco, also applying for accession to the European Union, is seen as a potential business opportunity and the ‘gateway to Africa. Indonesia is also picked to be a possible major economic force in the coming decades.

Rotterdam’s changing perceptions of itself can be traced through the evolution of its chosen sister city relationships, from reinforcing its similarities with European neighbours, to international shipping connections with other port cities, to – most recently – the aspiration to become a ‘World City’ focussed on economic development. Many sister city relationships are initiated by local business owners or migrants with overseas connections, rather than through government organisations. Zelinsky observes that ‘...the explanation for a particular twinning is to be sought in the personal histories of the community’s makers and shakers, be they war veterans, transplanted business executives, or other influential immigrants’ (9, p.23). Because of the internationalized business environment in many immigrant communities, migrants may be the people best-placed to initiate and strengthen economic relationships between Rotterdam and their countries of origin (1, p.287). Their skill at operating within two cultures can ‘...make a useful contribution to overcoming cultural barriers to trade and investment’ (7, p.448). Rotterdam is by nature a port city, a hub for people and products which arrive and are redistributed. Rotterdam is not a world city, but it has the world in it. The city’s strength is in the diversity of its connections. By capitalising on existing personal connections, economic histories, and sister city relationships with ‘countries of origin’, Rotterdam could rediscover her original role as a meeting place between different people and cultures, and as a market place for economic and business activities.

- Notes
- ^I Having both a sister and a twin brother, I am aware that fraternal twins (as they are commonly called) are no more similar genetically than two sisters born of the same parents. They just happen to be born at the same time. However, people normally assume that I am more similar to my twin than to my sister.
 - ^{II} These relationships may have been based on a ‘me too’ philosophy which can also be observed in relationships between real sisters, as illustrated by the Russian proverb: Jealousy and love are sisters.
 - ^{III} 1983 also happens to be the year in which I was born into this world as a sister and a twin, encapsulated by the British proverb: You can’t pick your family, but you can pick your friends.
 - ^{IV} And 1979 was the year in which my sister was born, although she would not become a sister until 1983.
 - ^V My sister will begin a Masters in Business Administration at Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business in Beijing in late 2011, which claims to provide ‘Unsurpassed Global Knowledge, Unrivaled China Insight’.
 - ^{VI} A relationship between a big sister and a little sister can also contain the elements of cruelty, domination, and exploitation, along with love .
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Text: Biddy Livesey
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Map image shows official sister cities, partner cities, and sister ports of the City of Rotterdam, 2011.

