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# Becoming partners in urban development

## A case-study research on the strategic roles of Flemish and Dutch public libraries in the future development of cities

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of public libraries within urban networks aiming for the future development and innovation of cities and how this influences their own strategic plans and decision making

**Design/methodology/approach** – An explorative case-study design in five Flemish (i.e. Antwerp, Genk, Ghent, Ostend and Roeselare) and four Dutch (i.e. Amsterdam, The Hague, Delft and Roosendaal) public libraries.

**Findings** – The research results identify one generic strategic role and three specific strategic roles of Flemish and Dutch public libraries. The latter concern the so-called roles of an “urban landmark”, an “area-oriented herald” and a “target group patron”.

**Practical implications** – This paper provides a unique and interesting overview of alternative strategic roles for public libraries in urban networks aiming for the future development of cities.

**Originality/value** – It is the only study in Flanders and the Netherlands providing empirical information on the strategic roles of public libraries in urban development

**Keywords** Public libraries, The Netherlands, Strategic management, Case-study research, Flanders, Urban development

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Strategic management and planning are becoming well-known concepts within public libraries (Kostagiolas *et al.*, 2009; Zhixian, 2008; Pacios, 2007; Matthews, 2005; Masson, 1999). They are considered to arm public librarians with the ability to respond successfully to future challenges such as the evolution towards open and modern centers of information dissemination, knowledge development, cultural participation and social interaction (Bewick and Corral, 2010; McMenemy, 2009; McKnight *et al.*, 2008; Goulding, 2004; Goulding, 2006; Peacock, 2001).

From a broader public management perspective, we are interested in the strategic response of public libraries to a particular challenge, that is, the formation of so-called public networks aiming for the future development and innovation of cities. By joining forces with other public and private partners, urban governments are trying to achieve



their future development goals in a more efficient, effective and successful way (Bevir and Richards, 2009; Sorensen and Torfing, 2007; Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; O'Toole and Meier, 2004). As such, these networks lead to the formation of important strategic partnerships. In view of this particular public management challenge, we want to know how do public libraries and their strategic plans relate to these emerging networks aiming for the future development and innovation of cities? What is the specific nature of their role within these networks and how does this influence their own strategic plans and decision making? Because of the strategic connotations we are inclined to talk about the identification of strategic role(s) for public libraries in urban development. When public libraries succeed in defining these strategic roles, they can join these urban networks which offer them simultaneously new opportunities to realize their own, more specific strategic goals and plans. Joining forces often implies joining strategic interests and opening new roads to achieve associated strategic goals for all partners involved.

As the present literature on strategic management in public libraries does not yet provide answers to our previously mentioned research questions, we have organized an explorative case-study research in nine Flemish and Dutch public libraries. Being the subject of city innovation projects, their strategic role within networks aiming for the future development and innovation of Flemish and Dutch cities becomes apparent. On the basis of the explorative research results, we can identify one generic and three more specific strategic roles for public libraries. This paper starts with the description of the explorative case-study design. Thereafter, we describe the so-called generic strategic role, followed by the three specific strategic roles identified within the nine Flemish and Dutch public libraries. As will be explained later, it concerns the role of what we call an "urban landmark", an "area-oriented herald" and a "target group patron".

### **An explorative case-study design**

Although there exists a lot of scientific research and literature on public strategic management and networks, publications on the strategic contribution of public libraries to urban development are scarce if not lacking. As such, our research design is clearly explorative in nature and the use of a qualitative research method is therefore appropriate. Considering an additional ambition in the long run to develop a kind of descriptive theory on alternative strategic roles for public libraries, we choose for the particular qualitative research method of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Charmaz, 2006). Thus, the coding and categorizing of collected data will eventually lead to the construction of a theoretical framework that enables Flemish and Dutch public libraries to examine, describe and depict their strategic roles in a (more) systematic and comprehensive way. Likewise, the theoretical framework will enable academic researchers to improve their network-related understanding of urban development in general and of the specific strategic role of public libraries in particular.

The explorative research project is realized in five Flemish (i.e. Antwerp, Genk, Ghent, Ostend and Roeselare) and four Dutch (i.e. Amsterdam, The Hague, Delft and Roosendaal) public libraries. Initially we made a list of all Flemish and Dutch public libraries involved in city innovation projects focusing on the building of (re)new(ed) public libraries for the future. This inventory was made together with the experts of

two public library platforms, namely LOCUS (i.e. the Flemish Policy Research Center for Libraries, Culture, Community Centers and Local Cultural Policy) and the Association of Public Libraries in the Netherlands. Within this inventory we then distinguished different types of public libraries in terms of size (i.e. situated in a big or small city), scope (i.e. confronted with different urban needs and challenges) and aspirations (i.e. responding to different policy-related ambitions). This was again realized together with the experts of the previously mentioned public library platforms. To guarantee a “rich” exploration (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Charmaz, 2006). we finally selected a set of nine public libraries that varied in size, scope and aspirations.

The data-collection is based on several half-structured interviews held with approximately 20 top management policy makers of these public libraries (i.e. directors, ex-directors, coordinators) and of the urban governments involved (i.e. civil servants, project leaders). The limited time-span and budget of the research project prevents a more extensive amount of interviews with, for instance, middle management functions and political policy makers. Notwithstanding these limitations, the half-structured interviews held with the top management policy makers already generate some interesting insights. In addition to the half-structured interviews, the data-collection also includes the consultation of approximately 15 websites and 30 strategy-related policy documents (e.g. strategic plans, conceptual notes, internal reports and minutes of meetings).

For the data-collection itself we do not use a structured questionnaire but a half-structured checklist. The specific nature of this checklist is determined by open questions relating to the future challenges and core functions of public libraries within an urban setting. As such, the questions are associated with rather fundamental and identity-related policy issues, such as:

- the location (i.e. Where is the public library situated and why? What are the specific features of this urban location? What is the significance or importance of this urban location?);
- the architectural design (i.e. What is the general concept of the architectural design and what are the specific features of the associated construction or building? Why is this concept chosen and how does this relate to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?);
- the infrastructural facilities (i.e. What is the general concept of the interior design and what are the specific features of the associated spaces, infrastructure, furniture and decoration? Why is this concept chosen and how does this relate to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?);
- the collection (i.e. What kind of information and documentation can be obtained or consulted by means of different information carriers and devices like books, magazines, and multi-media? What determines the specific nature of the collection and how does this relate to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?);
- the public services or activities beside the lending of books (i.e. What kind of other activities and initiatives beside lending books take place in the public library? Why do these activities and initiatives take place and how do they relate to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?); and



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- the necessary staff competences of public libraries (i.e. What characterizes the profile of – future – staff members of the public library in terms of needed knowledge, attitudes and competences? Why is this profile needed and how does this relate to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?).

Additionally, a few process-related policy issues are taken into consideration, such as:

- the historical or phase-wise evolution of the public library (i.e. is this a complete new public library or an already existing one? When did the public library come into existence and what kind of subsequent changes took place in response to what kind of factors or incidents? How do these factors and incidents relate to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?);
- the decision-making partners within the city innovation project and their interests (i.e. Who is involved in the city innovation project and what are their specific needs and wishes towards the – future – public library? What are their respective “power positions” and to what extent do they actually influence the design and/or realization of the city innovation project? How do these needs, wishes and influential interventions relate to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?); and
- special policy domains involved (i.e. What does the design and realization of the public library imply in terms of financial, project, strategic, organization, communication and participation management? What are the major points of attention and how are they related to the size, scope and aspirations of the city?).

Finally also a limited amount of information on the specific profile, characteristics and evolution of the city itself is collected. Taken together, all of this information is directly related to the strategic plans of the public libraries involved.

The data-analysis is realized by one junior and one senior researcher. By joining forces they control and master the data-analysis in a more stable, reliable and professional way. The coding is not realized by means of a specific qualitative research software (e.g. Nvivo or Atlas ti). Instead, the coding is realized by means of hand-written research notes, digital memos (e.g. Word documents), coding lists and visual schemes (e.g. drawings in Power Point). As such, the transparency and traceability of the research results is guaranteed. The data-analysis leads to the development of nine “initial” case-studies. In qualitative research new data-gathering is often used to further elaborate and fine-tune the initial research findings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Charmaz, 2006). Therefore we organized two extra focus group debates amongst the interviewed policy makers on the one hand and additional feedback session with a Flemish and Dutch library expert on the other hand, to further elaborate the initial case-studies into nine more “mature” case-studies. Subsequently, these elaborated case-studies are discussed thoroughly and fine-tuned once again on two public library conferences. This results in nine rather “complete” case-studies.

By gradually coding, elaborating and fine-tuning the research results throughout the nine case-studies, the data-analysis finally leads to the inductive detection of so-called patterns or interrelated choices made throughout the entire set of policy issues. Different patterns are assumed to be referring to different kinds of strategic roles. Some patterns are generic in nature because they appear in all nine public



libraries. In this way they led to the identification of what we call the generic strategic role of Flemish and Dutch public libraries within their urban environment. Other patterns are more diverse and unique because they only appear in some of the nine public libraries. We depict the nature of the uniqueness ex-post by means of three metaphors, namely the strategic role of “urban landmark”, of “area-oriented herald” and of “target group patron”. These three patterns lead to the identification of three so-called specific strategic roles. It is important to mention that the specific strategic roles are often combined with the previously mentioned generic strategic role. By doing so, the public libraries clearly differentiate themselves on a “second” level: on the first level they have a very similar or generic profile, but on a second or additional level they choose for different strategic options matching specific local priorities. Thus, the overall strategic profile of the Flemish and Dutch public libraries is quite differentiated.

### ***A generic strategic role in urban development***

In this paragraph we summarize the similar or generic choices and decisions made by all nine public libraries in respect to the previously described identity and process-related policy issues (see explorative case-study design). As such, we will identify what we ourselves call the generic strategic role of these public libraries.

Let us start with the first generic choice relating to the policy issue of the architectural design. In contrast to the image of a “closed bookcase”, all nine public libraries choose explicitly for an open architectural design. Such an open design involves the presence of large surfaces or “walls” of transparent glass connecting the public library intensively to the adjoining urban surrounding. Such a transparent architectural design underlines the overall ambition of inviting every passing citizen, an ambition that strongly fits to the new core function of a true city forum for social interaction (see introduction).

A second, somewhat related generic choice concerns the infrastructural design. It is clear that all nine public libraries choose for the use of so-called flexible library zones. As such, public libraries do not only make use of different zones serving different needs (e.g. a conference room, an exhibition space, a cafeteria, a working spot, a study area), but also of changeable and adjustable walls and library furniture to (re)shape (e.g. enlarge, reduce) these zones according to changing needs. Additionally, all nine public libraries prefer the combination of a more lively, easy accessible or market-wise entrance (e.g. first floor) and a more intimate and quite accommodation area (e.g. second-floor). Another feature of the generic infrastructural design concerns the use of ICT. All nine public libraries invest heavily in digital equipment and facilities (e.g. PCs, digital databases, new media). This increased ICT engagement corresponds directly to the new core function of information dissemination and knowledge development (see introduction).

When considering the generic choices of the library collection, all nine public libraries focus on the presence of different information carriers (e.g. books, journals, CD-Roms, films, computer games), different information topics (e.g. education, literature, leisure) and different audiences. In relation to the latter, the involved Flemish and Dutch public libraries often use four criteria to identify relevant audience categories: the age (i.e. young, old), the physical condition (i.e. physically abled, disabled and/or visually handicapped), the social position (i.e. non-deprived or deprived) and the language competences (i.e. native, non-native and/or illiterate). Thus,

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all nine public libraries try to meet the different demands of a typical, multicultural and heterogeneous urban population. In some way this facilitates a divers and probably also a more democratic distribution of information and associated power within city development. All urban audiences have free access to vital information on different topics, stocked in different types of information carriers. In this way they can become well-informed, active and presumably also (more) involved or empowered in the future urban society.

A fourth generic choice concerns the additional public services or activities that public libraries provide beside “just” lending books. In view of the new core functions of knowledge development, cultural participation and social contacts (see introduction), the nine public libraries provide a large variety of social and community-oriented services. On the one hand there are the so-called intermediate platform services. Thus, public libraries put their location and infrastructure at the disposal of individual and/or collective third parties such as departments of urban governments, schools, art societies, private associations and neighborhood organizations. On the other hand there are the so-called education services. As such, public libraries support and/or organize initiatives improving individual competences and knowledge building (e.g. languages, ICT, social skills). Considering the explicit involvement of other third parties (e.g. educational institutions, volunteer organizations), these education services emphasize perhaps the most the increasing involvement of public libraries in urban networks.

A final content-related generic choice relates to the skills and competences of the library staff. All nine public libraries emphasize the importance of rendering a professional service, meaning a more pro-active, customer-oriented and demand-driven service. Compelled by this new focus, the library lending activities are often automated in favor of information help-desk activities. The implications for the needed skills and competences are considerable. Beside the typical library competences (e.g. collection management, inventory skills), additional competences in communication, marketing and teaching are necessary. As such, the present and future library staff will probably form important human junctions or “hubs” within urban society. They will literally connect and disconnect urban citizens.

Beside the generic content-related decisions, also some generic process-related choices can be identified. On the one hand, all nine city innovation projects engage a complex and heterogeneous set of public and private actors to determine the future role of the public library involved (e.g. different departments of urban government, social profit organizations, real estate organizations). Each of these actors has its own interests and preferences, which often complicates a turbulent first conceptual phase of the library city innovation project. Nonetheless, such an extensive consultation of urban actors and stakeholders is considered to be self-evident in the network-wise approach of the city innovation project. Interesting however is the fact that Flemish and Dutch urban governments do not always take the lead in these networks. Especially within the Dutch case-studies this is not self-evident (e.g. the minor role of urban government within the DOK Delft city innovation project). Different point of views concerning the size or dominance of the (new) strategic role clearly lead to different degrees of urban policy involvement. Further research into this specific topic could be very interesting and recommendable. On the other hand, several generic choices relate to the management process of the city innovation project and of the

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public libraries involved. These choices mostly relate to financial management (e.g. the financial accountability towards external financial funders, the complex financial management of European funds), project management (e.g. the lack of needed project management competences, the quest for workable management formulas and flexible juridical constructions), communication and participation management (e.g. the involvement of citizens), strategic management (e.g. the embedding of the public library project in an overall strategic plan for the city) and organization management (e.g. the use of formal coordination platforms and decision platforms).

### ***Specific strategic roles in urban development***

As mentioned earlier, we do not only identify a common generic strategic role for all nine public libraries, but also several more specific strategic roles that only occur in some of the public libraries involved. In general we identified three specific strategic roles.

Before summarizing the choices corresponding to each specific strategic role, we will first summarize the essential features of each strategic role using characterizing metaphors. These metaphors do not already exist in literature, but were inductively developed by ourselves. The inspiration is twofold. On the one hand they refer implicitly to important nowadays policy themes of Flemish and Dutch urban governments. As such, they correspond to an already existing political reality. On the other hand, these metaphors try to capture essentially different kinds of strategic identities.

The first metaphor is that of a so-called “urban landmark”. When being an urban landmark, the public library reinforces the overall profile, image and identity of the city (“the public library as our new cathedral”). In our research project four public libraries clearly emphasize the strategic role of urban landmark. Ghent and Delft reinforce the image of “knowledge city”, Genk “a young and identity building city” and Amsterdam “a prestigious capital city”.

The second metaphor is that of a so-called “area-oriented herald”. When being an area-oriented herald, the public library supports the (re)innovation and (re)development of certain areas or neighborhoods within the city (“the library as a partner and local representative of urban government”). In our research project two public libraries emphasize the strategic role of area-oriented herald, namely Antwerp and The Hague. The first located its central library at the “De Coninck plein”, a former impoverished neighborhood near the central station of the city. The latter invested in tailor-made branch libraries that each fit the specific features of different neighborhoods all over the city.

The third and last metaphor is that of an so-called “target-group patron”. According to this specific strategic role public libraries protect and/or support certain, mostly vulnerable target groups within urban society (“the public library as liaison or personal coach of urban citizens with special social, cultural, informational and knowledge needs”). On the basis of the collected data target groups concern for instance children, (isolated) senior citizens, migrants and citizens with a language and/or social deprivation. In our research project three public libraries emphasize the strategic role of target group patron, namely Ostend, Roeselare and Roosendaal. Respectively they focus on socially deprived and elderly urban citizens (i.e. Ostend) and on young or junior urban citizens (Roeselare and Roosendaal).

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### *Public libraries as “urban landmarks”*

A first specific choice or decision made by urban landmarks concerns the location. On the basis of the collected data, urban landmarks clearly emphasize a very central, outstanding and eye-catching location such as an administrative, cultural or mobility junction (e.g. the city hall, the cultural center of town, the central railway station). The public library is one of the major “attractions” within this impressive and overwhelming urban scenery. To increase the attractiveness of the location, a lot of urban landmarks prefer the concept of a so-called urban site approach. Thus, the location of the public library assures additional access to other private and/or public providers of urban services, including urban local government. Another preference or choice relates to the nearness of an impressive urban square (e.g. Genk and Amsterdam). Such an extensive, neighboring public area supports the inviting character of the public library, a very important point of attention for urban landmarks.

A second, clearly related specific choice concerns the architectural design. Urban landmarks choose for completely new buildings (e.g. Genk and Amsterdam) or for thoroughly renovated premises (e.g. the public library of Ghent is located in the former circus Mahy, the public library of Delft is located in a former department store). What is important however is the choice of an impressive, prestigious and eye-catching construction, often designed by famous and/or internationally known architects such as the French architect Claude Vasconi for the public library of Genk and Jo Coenen for the public library of Amsterdam. They provide an imposing and even city-exceeding reputation to the public library what is obviously very important for an urban landmark. In this way, the public library is one of the many prestigious buildings that depicts the skyline of the city.

A third specific choice relates to the infrastructural design. Because of their prestigious image, urban landmarks emphasize the presence of trendy and designer-like arrangements (e.g. furniture, wall decoration, lighting equipment). Additionally, the entrance and/or first floor reflects the identity of a grand urban forum. Thus, the central atrium of the public library of Genk is for instance connected to the neighboring central city square with an identical paving stone emphasizing the pivoting position of the public library on this city square. A second point of attention is the use of ICT. Urban landmarks prefer the use of very sophisticated and high-tech ICT. The DOK library of Delft for instance has invested a lot in touch screen facilities, Wii-consoles, supersonic music “bowls” and up-to-date game computers. Also the explicit profile of being a testing center for multi-media research projects of the technical University of Delft supports the overall image of urban knowledge landmark. This trendy and high-tech infrastructural design aligns with the previously mentioned prestigious buildings that however guarantee free public access to and the development of ICT and high-tech telecommunication networks.

Urban landmarks also make specific choices in relation to the library collection. It is clear that they pay a lot of attention to a more market-wise approach of the collection needs and preferences. Thus, the public library of Ghent for instance makes a distinction between the following profiles of library visitors: the hop-in visitor preferring the presence of newspapers, journals and of easy-to-consult information, the media-sensitive visitor preferring file-wise information on trendy topics, the specialist visitor preferring specialized and elaborate collections or data-bases and the what we





would like to call the zen visitor, preferring especially a quiet, enjoyable place to read, relax and recover from the daily urban rat-race. As such, the public library collection clearly tries to connect the very diverse human-customer-networks within an urban surrounding to an ever-diverse set of information carriers. Secondly, a lot of urban landmarks also offer a unique “gadget” in their library collection such as, for instance, the presence of a music studio (e.g. Genk), a high-tech media collection (e.g. Ghent) and an extensive gaming collection (e.g. Delft). This gadget reinforces the unique and attractive identity of the urban landmark.

As far as the specific choices of additional public services or activities are concerned, urban landmarks are highly in favor of unique, eye-catching and media-sensitive events. The action radius often exceeds the city territory and attracts visitors from a much wider region. Thus, the public library of Amsterdam, for instance, disposes its infrastructure to five Dutch radio stations for their so-called OBA[1] live broadcastings on social, cultural and political topics. The public library of Amsterdam literally enlarges its initial role to that of a media or broadcasting institution, often far beyond the territory of the city itself.

Finally, urban landmarks also make some specific process-related choices. On the basis of the four case-studies, urban landmarks seem to involve public and private partners exceeding the urban territory. Thus, they do not only negotiate intensively with local urban governments but also with regional, federal and European governments. Additionally, the profile of their private partners is also more international and prestigious. When it comes to the importance of management processes, urban landmarks seem to pay a lot of attention to financial management (i.e. additional financial funding), project management (i.e. flexible juridical constructions) and strategic management (i.e. the explicit embedding of the public library project in the overall strategic plan for the city). As such urban landmarks also invest heavily in strategic networks connecting both local and global actors. Long-term policy networks and like-wise financial networks seem to enforce the sustainability of these strategic networks.

#### *Public libraries as “area-oriented heralds”*

Area-oriented heralds make specific choices concerning the location. In contrast to their urban landmark colleagues, they prefer a central location within a specific neighborhood or urban area that is the focal point of urban re-development. Thus, the central library of Permeke (Antwerp) is for instance situated at the “De Coninck plein”, an urban area that up until the 1970s was known for its trendy and luxurious retailer stores. Afterwards, the Permeke neighborhood experienced a period of serious decay and impoverishment. The desolated retail stores gave shelter to a growing amount of homeless and deprived urban citizens. The central square itself became the scene of riots, drugs-dealing and prostitution. Building the public library provided the neighborhood with new oxygen. To intensify the overall effects, the encompassing concept of a local or neighborhood site approach is emphasized. In contrast to urban landmarks, area-oriented heralds share this type of site with public and private partners focusing in particular on the re-development of the immediate neighborhood. An additional location-related choice of an area-oriented herald concerns the use of a de-concentrated network of library branches throughout the entire city. As such, each urban quarter disposes of its own library branch fitting entirely to the local needs of its



neighboring citizens. This option is for instance taken by the public library of The Hague. According to the specific opportunities of each urban quarter, every library branch is embedded in a site giving residence to other key agents of this specific urban quarter. Thus, the library branch “Schilderswijk” is located next to a local school, the library branch “Morgenstond wijk” next to a local urban government office and the library branch of the “Ypenburg wijk” next to a local shopping mall. By doing so, the area-oriented heralds are particularly interested in guaranteeing a tailor-made access of urban society in all urban neighborhoods, also the more deprived and isolated urban areas.

When considering the architectural design, area-oriented heralds not only choose for a completely new residency but also – and preferably – for premises with an important local history or significance. Of course, the latter depends on the availability of such premises. Thus, the public library of Antwerp is, for instance, located in a former Ford-garage of the illustrious Permeke family. A second choice concerns the emphasis on a tailor-made architectural design. Thus, each library branch of the public library of The Hague, for instance, is characterized by its own design fitting the specific profile of its urban quarter. As such, the so-called library branch “Moerwijk” situated in an urban quarter inhabited by primarily senior citizens, is located in a typical modernistic building of the 1950s, emphasizing a so-called living-room concept that supports easy conversations and cocooning. In contrast, the library branch of the very trendy and yuppi “Venixwijk” is embedded in the central shopping mall.

In accordance to the architectural design, the infrastructural design also emphasizes an explicit tailor-made approach. Thus, area-oriented heralds adapt their library zones (see generic strategic profile) to the specific needs and desires of the neighboring inhabitants. As such, it is obvious that the infrastructure of a cosy living-room concept is quite different from that of a trendy store concept.

Also the choices made in relation to the library collection are influenced by the same, tailor-made considerations. According to the specific needs of the neighborhood, collections can differ significantly between the different library branches involved. Thus, the living room concept in The Hague clearly provides a collection for re-creative use. As such it includes more newspapers, CD-roms, films, games, e-books and even sheet music. On the contrary, library branches situated in the socially deprived urban quarters of The Hague dispose of a collection with more multicultural and education-oriented information. By doing so, the library collection of area-oriented heralds is focused on the specific human networks of different neighborhoods within the urban society. Additionally, this neighborhood focus is also related to the presence of public and community-related spaces for the stimulation of neighborhood-related face-to-face contacts. The relevant scale is clearly that of individual neighborhoods, not that of the entire city.

Finally, the nature of the additional public services or activities is also influenced by the overall tailor-made preference of area-oriented heralds. Once again this is done in accordance to the specific profile of the urban quarter(s) involved. Thus, the public library of Permeke, for instance, organizes several events that meet the specific cultural demands of the multi-cultural inhabitants of the “De Coninck plein”, being in particular the local African and Chinese community of Antwerp.

When considering the specific process-related points of attention, area-oriented heralds emphasize a well-considered selection of neighborhood-oriented partners.

Obviously, they prefer partners with a similar local re-development focus like themselves. Another point of attention is the management process of participation and communication. As neighboring inhabitants are frequently consulted, this demands for extra activities and efforts. This is, for instance, the case in the Antwerp public library where neighboring citizens have been involved in the exploitation of the library cafeteria. This focus on participation and communication seems to relate to the concern for a democratic access of urban society in all urban neighborhoods, also in the more deprived ones. Area oriented participation makes the entire city presumably more open and accessible.

*Public libraries as “target group patrons”*

As long as the location of the public library is easily accessible for the members of their target groups, target group patrons seem to pay limited attention to the specific features of the library location. When target group patrons, for instance, focus on socio-economic vulnerable citizens, the near presence of cheap public transportation means is important. After all, it is not obvious that socio-economically deprived citizens living in various parts of town, have easy access to other private and more expensive transportation means to visit the public library. The location of target group patrons is like their area-oriented colleagues clearly focused on reinforcing and repairing “weak spots” or even interruptions in the overall urban network. But, in contrast to their area-oriented colleagues, these weak spots or interruptions are however target group specific, not area or neighborhood specific. Additionally, and like their urban landmark and area-oriented herald colleagues, target group patrons make use of a particular site concept, being a site with other organizations that facilitate, support and help the same specific target groups.

Although the specific features of the architectural design do not seem to be that important, target group patrons pay a lot of attention to the specific characteristics of the infrastructural design. In this way, the members of their target groups really have to feel themselves at home or at ease in the public library. So in the creation of public and community-related spaces for the stimulation of face-to-face contacts and also the exchange or circulation of knowledge, target group reflections are taken explicitly into consideration. In Roeselare, for instance, a lot of attention is paid to the presence of flexible library zones and ICT-learning devices facilitating the creation of an attractive, future-oriented and innovative learning environment for children and schools. The public library of Roosendaal encounters a similar challenge. In the old mansion connected to the central library building, little children can explore the mysterious world of books and information by means of a storyteller room, a creepy room, a middle-age room, a do-and-act room, a lecture room, a comic strip room and a labyrinth. The public library of Ostend prefers a very simple and easy-to-use infrastructure with a lot of de-concentrated information desks, so that deprived and isolated senior citizens consider the library as a kind of second home. Especially the market-wise entrance hall and its homelike facilities seem to fulfill this particular ambition. According to the library personnel, this area has become a popular hot-spot for senior citizens to gather in the morning and read their favorite journals or magazines and have a social conversation. For elderly people, public libraries seem to be more attractive – quiet, safe? – than, for instance, pubs and public parks.



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As to be expected, the library collection and the additional public services or activities of target group patrons are also directly influenced by the needs and wishes of their particular target groups. Thus, the public library of Ostend has a large amount of books for visually disabled readers, whereas the public libraries of Roeselare and Roosendaal have an extensive collection of educational and youth literature. When target group patrons support socio-economically deprived citizens experiencing difficulties in entering cultural institutions like public libraries, several tailor-made introduction and support activities are also developed. This is often realized together with professional partners who are familiar with the particular needs, wishes and problems of the target group involved. In Ostend for instance, the public library has elaborated a special project called “Zandletters” together with the organization Linc, to remedy the digital illiteracy of deprived urban citizens.

Finally, target group patrons make a few specific process-related decisions. As to be expected, they work intensively together with professional partners focusing on the support, coaching and help of the same target groups. As such, they share and develop the necessary knowledge and skills to adequately fulfill these target group oriented functions. Additionally and like their area-oriented colleagues, a lot of attention is paid to the communication and participation process. Tailor-made approaches are needed to attract and retain the members of their target group from all over town. In order to do this successfully, a consistent integration of all target group related services is advisable. Target group patrons often take such an integration-oriented initiative or at least support the formation of target group related platforms. This participation focus seems to relate to the concern for a democratic access of urban society to specific types of urban citizens, also the more deprived or isolates ones.

## Conclusions

Separately, the different policy issues and associated strategic choices of our case-study research align with the existing literature on strategic management in public libraries (Buchanan and Cousins, 2012; Kostagiolas *et al.*, 2009; Zhixian, 2008; Pacios, 2007; Jones, 2006). In combination, however, they present new and alternative perspectives for public libraries to broaden their strategic management focus and to meet the challenge of joining public networks aiming for the future development of cities. In this way, the research results enrich the existing literature on strategic management and planning for public libraries. They open up new horizons, for public libraries themselves, as well as for academic researchers investigating them.

In this concluding paragraph, we would like to add two critical reflections concerning the fundamental nature of these identified strategic roles in urban development.

First, we discovered that public libraries certainly can play an important role in the future development of Flemish and Dutch cities, but this strategic role is not necessarily homogeneous or uniform in nature. Beside the generic strategic role, additional and more specific strategic roles occur. Consequently, the identification of strategic roles of public libraries in urban development clearly demands a complex, subtle and differentiated approach. This is rather new for the traditionally homogeneous strategic approach of “the” future public library and “the” strategic plan to encounter future challenges. Not all public libraries choose a similar strategic



reaction to the same challenge of emerging networks aiming for the future development and innovation of cities.

Second, when the identified generic and specific strategic roles of the Flemish and Dutch public libraries are embedded in city innovation projects, they definitely become part of a broader network focusing on the overall future urban development. But, the question remains: to what extent is their complex, subtle and differentiated network contribution explicitly seen, observed and recognized as such? Are other partners and local governments in particular fully aware of their broad contribution in terms of information dissemination, knowledge development, cultural participation, social platform, image building (i.e. urban landmark), urban quarter (re)development (i.e. area-oriented heralds) and target group support? On the contrary, on the basis of our explorative case-study research we have experienced that this is not at all self-evident. It was the research project itself that seemed to stimulate or even initiate a debate on the strategic contribution of public libraries in urban development networks, not an already existing urban awareness, platform, policy or even plan. In this way we are inclined to emphasize the overall need to stimulate and organize a more explicit and focussed debate on the strategic contributions of public libraries in Flemish and Dutch cities to future urban development. Only then, can a more visible and possibly effective and appreciated strategic role in urban development be guaranteed.

#### Note

1. OBA stands for "Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam" (Public Library of Amsterdam).

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