

## Düsseldorf's Identity and Its *Medienhafen*

2018

### 1. Introduction

Changes during the twentieth century, such as Second World War, the post-war years and active development of the economy in West Germany, influenced a lot the appearance of Düsseldorf, its architecture, and the life style of its citizens. The city, with a population of 639,407 residents, is located on an area of 217.41 km<sup>2</sup> and consists of 10 city districts with 50 city parts.

In 1946, Düsseldorf became the capital of the state North Rhine-Westphalia and a major trade and economic center. In 1971, *Messe Düsseldorf* opened as an international trade fair that attracts every year a lot of visitors from all over the world. With economic growth, changes of the architectural appearance of the city began, especially with regard to the Rhine promenade. In the 80's, there was built the TV tower, the port area was renovated, partially rebuilt, and is known nowadays as the city district *Medienhafen* (media harbor) (Brasack, 1999). Modern buildings as New Zollhof, Hotel Hyatt Regency, "Roggendorf-Haus", Colorium, etc. strongly transformed the face of the city.

But are these new buildings something unique, special, and typical only for Düsseldorf? Or will this city loses its identity? In informational urbanism, "loss of identity" is called a possible problem area of typical cities of the knowledge society (Barth et al., 2017). In this paper we will consider the question of a city's identity: What is it, its definition, and, finally, its role for the city and citizens: "The identity of the city bears on the identity of those living in it, and vice versa: the urban environment reflects human needs and values" (Haapala, 2003, p. 13).

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to understand what a city's identity in general is. According to Lynch, identity is "the extent to which a person can recognize or recall a place as being distinct from other places" (1984, p. 131). This is always something "exclusive and not reproducible" (Riza, Doratli, & Fasli, 2011, p. 294). Identity does not only mean the difference in location, climate, culture, history, but also the satisfaction of the residents and tourists with the quality of life – "feeling of well-being, fulfilment, or satisfaction" (Andrews, 2001, p. 202). This concept considers the satisfaction with such factors as security, healthcare, politics, environment, etc.

The identity is very important for the city in order to get attention and to be attractive for residents, tourists, businessmen, and big companies; to make it different from other cities. "Nearly every city has city branding on its agenda in order to redevelop its image" (Riza, Doratli, & Fasli, 2011, p. 294). Cities promote themselves: make videos, advertisements, create city symbols (Kavaratzis, 2005; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2007). In 2012, Düsseldorf ordered an advertising agency to create a logo for the city. The project that was confirmed by the city government cost 150,000 Euro. As a symbol for Düsseldorf an emoticon "smiling D" was chosen, a red letter D with a colon on the left side



Figure 1 Düsseldorf's new logo

on a white background. The colors were chosen not accidentally: red and white are not only the colors of the coat of arms of the city, but also are the colors of the football club Fortuna Düsseldorf.

According to Hankinson, there are “three approaches for promoting cities: cultural mega events, restoration and promoting heritage and the construction of iconic buildings” (2006, p. 240). Construction of new, unusual, iconic buildings is necessary to create a unique, identifiable image of the city. Düsseldorf is that attractive for the citizens and for the tourists not only because of its cultural heritage and regular trade shows, but also for the new district *Medienhafen*. *Medienhafen* is a small borough; its total area is 3.85 square km. It is situated on the right bank of the river Rhine, in the city district 3. The district has the lowest population density in the city – 116 residents (2016) and is used mostly for commercial purposes. There are located offices, restaurants, editorial offices, and a hotel.

Among them are three remarkable buildings by the American architect Frank Gehry. Their unusualness and extraordinariness turn them into a city landmark. „Iconic buildings are tools to communicate as status symbols of the city and attract visitors. Thus, visually attractive iconic buildings turn out to play a major role in promoting the city and its image“ (Riza, Doratli, & Fasli, 2011, p. 298).

## 2. The *Medienhafen*

### The New Zollhof



Figure 2 Gehry's New Zollhof Düsseldorf

The New Zollhof (*Der neue Zollhof*) was designed by Gehry in 1996-1998. Besides the buildings in Düsseldorf, Gehry was the creator of such architectural masterpieces as Dancing House in Prague, The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Gehry Tower in Hannover, the Vitra Design Museum Weil am Rhein, Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and many others. After the success of Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim the vitalization of an entire city based on one

spectacular building was called “the Bilbao effect” (Rybczynski, 2002). The complex New Zollhof was built in a deconstructivism style, an architectural movement in the 1980s that “encourages radical freedom of form and the open manifestation of complexity in a building rather than strict attention to functional concerns and conventional design elements (such as right angles or grids)” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Currently, there is located the “Art Center and Media Center of the Rhine Harbor”.

The New Zollhof consists of three buildings: a white northeast building with eight blocks and 3 to 13 floors; a red brick southwest building with eight blocks and 3 to 11 floors, and the building in the middle with the stainless steel facade consisting of four six floors blocks. The total area of the complex is 28,400 square meters. Here we see the distinctive characteristics of the deconstructivism style, namely asymmetry, twisted lines as well as curves, and dynamism. Merriam-Webster dictionary gives the following definition of deconstructivism style: “Deconstruction breaks down the parts of a piece so their organization appears disorganized and chaotic. Unexpected details and building materials tend to create a visual disorientation and disharmony.” Such buildings attract the attention of tourists and are remembered regardless of whether people like this style or not – and this is an important point of iconic buildings. They have “a great contribution to the identifiable image of a city

or place” (Jencks, 2005, p. 185) that can “indirectly influence the feeling of well-being and satisfaction of residents and visitors” (Riza, Doratli, & Fasli, 2011, p. 294).

### Hotel Hyatt Regency Düsseldorf



At the tip of the peninsula, there are located two twin towers, each 65 meters high: the office tower and the hotel Hyatt Regency Düsseldorf. The hotel is a part of the Hyatt Group with 777 properties in 54 countries and was opened in February 2011. A modern 19 floors building with

glass facade blends seamlessly with the overall appearance of the port. This style of high buildings reflecting the surface is very typical for the hotels of the Hyatt Group. Similar buildings can be seen for example in Xiamen and Fuzhou Cangshan (China), Cambridge (USA), and Ekaterinburg (Russia).

### The Rhine Tower



On the walkway of Rhine river between *Medienhafen* and *Altstadt* there is located the Rhine Tower. The 240.5 meter high TV Tower was built in 1979-1982. The tallest construction in the city is used not only for the transmission of radio and tv signals but also as an observation deck with a bar and a restaurant. The uniqueness of the tower is that it has a *Lichtzeitpegel* (light time level), which is the largest digital clock in the world. This clock shows the time with

62 light portholes: 39 vertically installed lights to show the time and 23 horizontally installed lamps to separate the “time lights” from each other. The advantageous location of the tower and the digital clock stand out the tower from a list of other similar constructions.

## 3. Discussion

Although just in Germany there are eight buildings by Gehry and more than 70 TV towers in different cities, Hyatt hotels can be found all over the world, in Düsseldorf this architectural ensemble looks organically, harmoniously and uniquely. This was achieved, because the concept of the redevelopment

of old docks in Düsseldorf was well thought out. Almost in the same style and same colors are built other buildings of the *Medienhafen*: The Düsseldorf City Gate, Kai Center, “Roggendorf House”, “Colorium”, etc. These new buildings are perfectly suited to the old port constructions like cranes, stairs, railway tracks helping the modern district to look very fashion and attractive. Riza, Doratli and Fasli suppose that “buildings should be designed with a consideration of contextual harmony, representing and respecting the character of that place” (2011, p. 299). The case of Düsseldorf shows a perfect example of how unusual buildings create a unique atmosphere and with it a new building block of identity of the city.

With globalization, in the second half of the twentieth century in the world appeared a new trend. With the new millennium, a further global development path follows, namely the transitioning towards knowledge society. These processes unite people from different countries and allow traveling and working almost without borders – and allow for constructing new city districts “in the knowledge and information age” as, for instance, Düsseldorf’s *Medienhafen* (Floeting, 2004). But apart from the obvious benefits, there are several disadvantages of globalization and knowledge society. One of them is the loss of identity. Nowadays in many cities of the world can be found a standard “set” of shops, hotels, cafes or restaurants. Therefore, cities often try to stand out, for example with the help of iconic buildings. Such buildings built by architects like Frank Gehry, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Piet Blom or Antonio Gaudí on the one hand, give the appearance of the city as originality; however, on the other hand, if there are too many similar buildings in the world, their uniqueness and singularity will be lost.

However, in the case of Düsseldorf, I believe that it is not right to talk about the loss of identity. According to Mercer (2018), a global consulting service that assesses the quality of life in different cities around the world, for several years in a row Düsseldorf is on the sixth place in the ranking of best cities in the world in terms of quality of life. The selection criteria include political and social environment, economic situation, medical and health considerations, schools and education, public services and transportation, natural environment, etc. Taking into account the organic and harmonious nature of the *Medienhafen* area as well as the high positions in the Mercer ranking it is possible to say that the identity of the city of Düsseldorf has not been lost but enriched.

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