

# Social Urban Identity Formation and Local Government

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the issue of whether city governments could or should be engaged in (social) urban identity formation. From a functional angle, social urban identity formation can help to gain loyalty and pro-social and environmental behaviour. Earlier and current research on urban identity and urban development in three quite different cities, Rotterdam, Szczecin, and Tirana, informs our reflection. The city cases are described in terms of urban development and social urban identity. The paper concludes that social urban identity formation can be helpful in cities, but there is a risk of political control over urban symbols and narratives. Topics for future research are identified.

## Keywords

Urban Identity, Identity Formation, Rotterdam, Tirana, Szczecin

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## 1. Introduction

Urban identity is a collective identity, something that is shared by citizens. They share feelings and thought, they share urban space, events, histories and memories, landmarks, perhaps the pride of a football club, assumptions about what others think of the city, et cetera. While the individual says “I am”, the collective (a city, a neighbourhood, an organization) says “we are”, this is who we are, and that’s our story (Brekhus, 2020: pp. 63-64). Collective identity discussion is the discourse on “who we are”, and “who we are not”. The concept of urban identity as a social (collective) identity goes back to the work of Tajfel and Turner (1979) who explained their premise that individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity. The creation of group identities (like urban identity) involves both

the categorization of one's "in-group" with regard to an "out-group" and the tendency to view one's own group with a positive bias vis-à-vis the out-group. The result is identification with a collective, depersonalized identity based on group membership and imbued with positive aspects (Islam, 2014). Positive in-group bias (sometimes called "urban chauvinism") is linked to the practice that an in-group assumes a self-relevant role, where the person defines him/herself through the group. Urban identity is more than a group identity with a territorial dimension; it is a category *per se*.

Individuals and collectives may or may not reflect on their identity. Some individuals and groups just "do their thing" and construct their identity without much thoughtfulness. Others deliberately go through a process of formulating answers to the question "who am I". The same holds for collectives. When asked, people in a collective have a story to tell about "who we are" and what makes them part of "we". Most citizens have a story about their city, what the city means to them and what makes their city and its people distinctive from others. These stories are not the same for all citizens, in cities (and other collectives), collective identity is fragmented and often contested rather than unified, reflecting different social groups and interests (Mah, 2014). An individual wants to be recognized for who he or she is and finds ways to express this identity through communication and actions. The same holds for collectives. "I am" and "we are" point to the existential levels of individuals and collectives. Identity, just like the concept of authenticity, is also functional. Constructed identities serve people and groups to gain an advantage, ranging from people feeling better about themselves, to parties' commercial and political benefits.

The concept of urban identity is defined in different ways. Peng et al. (2020: p. 1) write "Place identity is a versatile concept upon which many psychological theories of human-environment relations are built". Peng et al. (2020: p. 2) also state "... these intricate debates on the analytical interactions between place, people, and place identity make the meanings of place identity even more confusing". (Urban) identity is a broad concept. Identity is seen in this paper as a socially constructed, changing, and time-bound concept. It is a complex and fluid process. Urban identity is seen as a category in "collective identity".

Often, urban identity is used functionally for urbanism/place-making, but deliberate social identity formation is still rather uncommon. One would expect that a collective like an organization or city government wants its organization or its city to be cohesive and recognized for what it is and stands for. But for local governments and city leaders, this is not the case; most of them do not consciously work on identity formation. Local governments are concerned with strategies and perhaps a vision of the city's future, but only a few are engaged in deliberate identity construction. A relevant question is whether local government should aspire to engage in identity construction. Research on the (potential) role of local government in urban identity formation is limited, except for the topic of identity in relation to place-making and city promotion (Peng et al.,

2020). Literature on the topic contains reports from consultants and practitioners; Scheffler et al. (2009), NeT-TOPIC (2009), and EESC (2016) describe positive experiences in EU-supported programmes. Cheshmehzangi (2020) writes extensively on urban identity but mainly from urbanism and place-making perspective and sees intervention opportunities in urban identity formation (branding and marketing), urban identity restoration (a culture-led approach, restoring urban pride, reviving the local economy and realizing an urban identity), in urban identity enhancement (physically, socially as promoting a sense of place, economically) and in urban identity exportation/importation as a learning process. Cheshmehzangi (2020) focuses on place-making, the issue of fostering social identity receives less attention.

In this paper, we reflect on the question of whether city governments could or should work with the social identity question of “who we are and who we want to be”. We adopt a functional angle towards urban identity, which means that identity formation serves a goal. We will look at the urban context and the implicit and explicit roles of local government in identity formation in three European cities; Rotterdam (the Netherlands), Szczecin (Poland), and Tirana (Albania). All three cities have been going through momentous economic, social, and cultural changes. The city of Rotterdam has been changing from an industrial port city to a service economy and became a “super diverse” city. Szczecin has gone through a transformation from a German industrial city destroyed in 1945 to a Polish port city that is now trying to reinvent itself, after the transitions in 1990’s and economic crisis. Tirana experienced a period of urban social and political chaos and rapid population growth after 1990, and now aspires to be a modern European capital city. These developments are sketched in the description of the cases, and a discussion of urban identity formation of local authorities is offered.

In the remainder of this paper, we start with a brief theoretical review, and then follow a description of the three case studies and a discussion of the findings. In the conclusions, we will return to the question of whether the local government could or should engage in urban identity formation, and, to end some topics for identity research are submitted.

## 2. Theoretical Frame

In a globalizing world, attention to the topic of urban identity has grown (Scanlon & Gifford, 2017; Lewicka, 2011; Sandholz, 2017). Lewicka (2008, 2011) states that a place is considered to be a meaningful location. However, exactly what kind of meaning transforms a location into a place, and how meaning is developed, has been a subject of debate among researchers. Urban identity is a broad concept and various definitions have been proposed, from angles like environmental psychology, geography, place-making and place branding. Notions used include place identity, sense of place, image of a place, etc. Urban identity is sometimes seen as the sense of place related to urban form and context (Evans et

al., 2011), to the cultural landscape of a city. However, places by themselves have no identity, identity is a quality in the minds of people, and it is a collective attribution.

The concept of (social) urban identity refers to ideas of belonging, attachment, affiliation and community (Belanche et al., 2017). From a cultural landscape perspective, Bell and De-Shalit (2011: p. xii) suggest; “More and more people experience a growing sense of cosmopolitanism, but they also want to feel unique. Cities, we think, allow for a combination of both cosmopolitanism and a sense of community rooted in particularity”. This particularity, the distinctiveness, is a key element of urban identity. Urban identity always contains an element of distinctiveness (Cheshmehzangi, 2015, 2020) because identity is related to others; an identity is chosen, constructed, in relation to identities of others. In the city, identity (“who we are, where we stand”) is linked to a city image (“how we want others to look at us”). The latter is in the realm of creating an image for outsiders, often strategic impression management or marketing. Different actors construct different visions of an urban identity; identity is not an agreed-by-all phenomenon.

The field of urban identity has various contributions from architecture and cultural landscape sciences, discussing relationships between cultural landscapes, urban heritage and people (place identity of a place), and from social sciences like environmental psychology and cultural geography, discussing urban identity from the perspective of people’s experiences and linking urban identity to place attachment and various behaviours (people’s place identity). People’s place identity and the place identity of a place overlap but are different. Both concepts embody subjective or emotional bonds between man and the physical place. People’s place identity is part of individuals’ personalities related to places that are significant in the formation of their identities. Place identity of a place is the personality of the place. This personality is, on most occasions, ascribed by people to the place where they live or that they care about (Peng et al., 2020).

Urban identity is a work in permanent progress. The development of measures for social urban identity is in a very early stage (Belanche et al., 2017). Expressing one’s own identity as an individual is not easy and explaining how place is related to this individual identity is challenging for most people. Indeed, how interaction between collective (urban) identity and individual identity exactly works, is hard to unravel. At urban level, identity research implies deciphering the collective sense that citizens make of their city’s identity. However, people do not think and communicate in terms of urban identity, they have thoughts, memories, feelings (place attachment for example), tell stories and the sum of all this related to the city, in social interaction, contributes to urban identity formation.

Filep et al. (2014) argue that narratives are the means of interaction; the key is to discover which stories are being told (and which are not) and to understand how those stories (narratives, visuals) provide the context for socio-cultural

identities. A relevant question is whose stories are told, who needs identity, why, and how it is used. We can borrow from scholars dealing with the topic of “authenticity”. The concepts of urban (place) identity and authenticity are interwoven (Piazzoni, 2019). Regarding the concept of authenticity, Zukin (2010) suggests that individuals and social groups construct concepts of authenticity to support their own values, beliefs and identities and respectively gain advantage from it. Authenticity is an important part of social life, but authenticity is a social accomplishment, an interactive performance, or a narrative claim, not a core essence (Brekhus, 2020). Identity on the other hand, is a basic cognitive mechanism that people use to sort themselves, individually and collectively (Jenkins, 2014). Authenticity is performed to support identity. Authenticity and identity are socially constructed concepts that can be used to gain advantages. A relevant question is how constructions of urban identity help to gain advantages. For local governments, an obvious answer lies in the field of city marketing, a strategic and creative process of image-making. But identity construction can be much more than a (polished) picture for the outside world; it can be a profound exercise with significant, meaningful internal dimensions. It may lead to more cohesion, loyalty and pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours (Belanche et al., 2017).

### 3. Research and Cases

During the last few years, the researchers undertook different studies in the broad field of urban identity and place attachment. In Rotterdam various aspects of the city’s “hybrid” urban identity were studied (Nientied, 2018) and current research is on new urban tourism (Nientied 2021) and on the use of authenticity related to urban renewal and gentrification. In Tirana ongoing work is on the identity of cultural landscapes and on place attachment (Nientied et al., 2019). In Szczecin research was done in 2019 on the perceived peripherality aspect of collective identity that citizens express. In all three cases, document and social media analysis was carried out. Next to street interviews and discussion with experts, in Szczecin also a Facebook poll was done, in Tirana also a large-scale survey on place attachment (Nientied et al., 2019) and a street opinion taking on attitudes towards communist memorial the Pyramid (Nientied & Janku, 2019). In **Table 1**, we give an overview of recent and current research activities.

Our study is not a systematic study in which well-defined concepts are applied in different cases. The concept of urban identity is ambiguous; the real world is complex and dynamic. Research done in the three cities had diverging emphases because of leading themes in the three cities (e.g. modernization in Tirana), but the studies had sufficient overlap. The present paper benefits from our reflection on research carried out, and earlier findings could be confirmed or slightly adjusted. Investigating the current online identity approach of local government was carried out by the researchers in 2021.

**Table 1.** Research.

City	Research on	Outputs
Rotterdam	- Authenticity and gentrification in urban renewal	Ongoing Nientied (2018)
	- Urban identity	Nientied (2021),
	- Urban tourism	Nientied and Toto (2020)
Szczecin	- Urban identity and peripherality	Nientied and Stachowiak-Bongwa (2019)
	- Modern cultural architecture	Ongoing
Tirana	- Emergent urbanism, city of everyday life	Dhamo (2021)
	- Place attachment	Nientied et al. (2019)
	- Memorial places, urban memory	Nientied and Janku (2019)
	- Urban identity, modernization	Nientied and Aliaj (2019)
	- Urban planning and urban management	Dhamo and Aliaj, various

### 3.1. Rotterdam

Rotterdam has about 620,000 residents and this number is slowly growing. Rotterdam is the main city of the Rotterdam region (Rijnmond), which has about 1.1 million people. Rotterdam's port is Europe's biggest port. At the beginning of WWII, in 1940, Rotterdam was bombed by German forces and the city lost its historical core. After WWII, Rotterdam underwent a substantial physical transformation, and an extensive redevelopment program was initiated. During the post-war reconstruction period, the city centre was turned into a modern district. Other large cities in the Netherlands have a historic core, Rotterdam has a modern core. A new city centre was realized in a modernist way, i.e., separation of functions (residential, retail, offices) and emphasis on traffic infrastructure. After WWII, important developments in other parts of the city have been implemented, especially greenfield residential development for the growing labour force needed for the port activities. The development of new port areas made Rotterdam the world's largest port back in 1962 and Rotterdam kept that status till 2004, when Shanghai took over the first position. The nature of harbour work changed, from mainly manual labour before WWII, to mostly highly skilled professional work nowadays. Traditional industries disappeared. The number of people needed to handle all cargo decreased due to the automation. Engineers, IT professionals, planners, specialists in logistics, economists, etc. are the new professions in the harbour. In the city proper, located at some 30 km from the sea, only smaller boats can be seen, plus some bigger cruise ships.

With the shift from harbour activities to the shore and the loss of port industries, Rotterdam started to redevelop derelict harbour areas in the city, to integrate "water and city" (wet and dry, as it is called). McCarthy (1998) concludes that local politics in Rotterdam in the 1970's and 1980's were characterized by

pragmatism, illustrated by the willingness of the municipality to engage in public-private partnership arrangements for development. Modernism was pragmatic indeed, there was no “grand vision”, no visionary mayor or president. On the contrary, Rotterdam needed a new functioning centre, housing for the labour force, better infrastructure for economic development, etc. While the first decades after WWII were for reconstruction of the centre, expansion through greenfield development and expansion of the port, from the 1970’s onwards, the urban, economic and cultural climate of the city changed. A new urban plan opted for a more compact city, with mixed land-use and taller buildings. In 1970 the Medical Faculty was the first building over hundred meters and many more buildings followed. Rotterdam came to be recognized as a progressive city in terms of architecture and waterfront development, with high-rise residential and office development and special architectural designs. Like in other European post-industrial port cities, the urban economy has changed in Rotterdam. Unemployment in Rotterdam is still a bit higher compared to other Dutch cities—mainly because of the mismatch between labour market demands and education and skills levels. The municipality tries to stimulate the creative economy, through giving support to education, subsidies and place-making, with some success. In the decades after WWII, working-class housing received priority in Rotterdam. Higher-income groups settled in suburbs and surrounding municipalities. Rotterdam’s ambition during the last three decades has been to attract more middle- and higher-income groups, and a conscious policy of gentrification has been followed till the present day. Gentrification resulted in more spatial segregation between western allochthonous and autochthonous groups in middle- and higher-income areas and an overrepresentation of non-western allochthonous groups in the social housing sector.

In 2016, the Municipality celebrated “75 years of reconstruction of the city”, a cultural manifestation with more than 100 projects and 75 stories shared by citizens from all corners and all walks of life (Nientied, 2018). The programme was meant to be a celebratory and collective dialogue about the city and its future. The issue of post war reconstruction and collective memory was discussed, and it was recognized that many newcomers to the city, are not part of this collective memory. In 2017, the municipality implemented the program, the story of the city, with “Rotterdam in 2037” as a lead theme. It has been a mass participation project, in which more than 9000 people were involved. Veldacademie (2017) carried out extensive field work and interviewed many people, from different walks of life. They show that Rotterdam’s citizens want a positive future, with work, a nice environment, good education, a say in decision making, and so on. In terms of contents and policy issues, there were no surprises: people want good things for the city, for their neighbourhood and for themselves and their children. The significance of the programme “The story of the city” has been the mass participation, the feelgood about Rotterdam. In terms of urban identity, not too much can be deducted from this programme. Through the programmes “75



years Reconstruction of the city” and “The story of the city”, this view of Rotterdam’s DNA has been shared with the public. Whether the public remembers much of these stories can be questioned. The programmes and their manifestations, portray the city in a rather harmonious and future orientated manner. Indeed, the stories of citizens, entrepreneur and visitors, are positive, there is no reporting of what social dropouts think about special care, what right wing citizens think about migrants and mosques, which patterns can be found regarding the city’s criminality, etc.

Rotterdam’s identity has been a collective story of a working class and entrepreneurial port city that was reconstructed after it was severely damaged during WWII. Rotterdam has been known as a harbour city, with an open, no-nonsense, “roll up the sleeves” working culture. “Harbour” and “reconstruction” have been the two key elements in Rotterdam’s urban identity. However, urban identity, as it is pictured in this fashion, is becoming partial and superficial, but images of identity are persistent. In 2014, Rotterdam’s local government developed a new narrative of the “DNA” of Rotterdam. The aim was to give a clear profile of the city, assuming that this enhances the willingness of people and organizations to cooperate for a better city. The DNA narrative has three key words: 1) international, 2) entrepreneurial, and 3) edgy (raw). A pay-off for the city was developed; “Rotterdam. Make it Happen”, were referring to entrepreneurship and innovation, in all fields. This pay-off replaced the old slogan “Rotterdam World Port City”. For city branding purposes, the pay-off “Make It Happen” sounds good for visitors and business and for residents too. Significant is that the word “world port” has been deleted; the port is not the decisive factor for the aspired city image any more. For branding purposes, Rotterdam wants to show that it is more than a port city and wants to highlight its entrepreneurial character, focus on sustainability and culture, a city for all “do-ers”. The latter word is also used for branding tourism, Rotterdam wants to attract “do-rists”, visitors who engage in culture, innovation, congresses, study, etc., rather than the tourists looking for the urban gaze. This serves Rotterdam’s development objectives (Nientied & Toto, 2020).

### 3.2. Szczecin

Szczecin is a regional capital with about 400.000 inhabitants, located in the North-West of Poland close to the border with Germany. It is a city that was German till 1945 and became a Polish city after WWII, when Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed in Yalta on changing the borders of Poland and replacing millions of people. The city was heavily bombed during WWII and a long time of rebuilding followed during Poland’s communist 1945-1990 period. After WWII, the first Mayor decided not to reconstruct according to the historical layout (like other destructed “new Polish” cities of Wroclaw and Gdansk did, and the old Polish city of Warsaw too), but to opt for modern development and replace waterfront buildings by the highway connecting Szczecin with the in-



dustrial city of Police. This decision was not dictated only by pragmatism and a modern approach to spatial planning. Due to the uncertainties regarding the final delineation of the Polish-German border, for years after the end of the war Szczecin was treated as a resource base of free construction materials and bricks for rebuilding the capital and other cities perceived as “more Polish” and therefore more investment worthy. In this period, the buildings unvoluntarily abandoned by the defeated enemy were not recognized by Polish pioneers moving into the city from various parts of Poland and present USSR as a stable place of their own. The local government’s efforts focused then on establishing a feeling of a national rather than local identity, through the actions like renaming the streets, replacing German symbols and monuments by Polish ones, and stressing the historical Slavic origin of the town. Some decisions taken in that political environment proved to be controversial, like the separation of the city from its river. The previously vibrant economic and social heart of the city became a deserted, unimportant area (Musekamp, 2010). Major urban development took place in the 1960’s to 1970’s (industry) and 1980’s (housing). During the transformation to a market economy, the maritime industry of Szczecin collapsed, and Szczecin lost significance as a port city.

Szczecin feels peripheral, far away from Warsaw (and “Warsaw” indeed considers Szczecin to be far away). On the map Szczecin is close to Berlin, but there is (still to-day) a cultural border between Poland and Germany. Cross-border co-operation is limited, also due to the fear of the Polish people that Germans will buy houses and land and “take over” the region of West Pomerania. In Poland, Szczecin feels a lack of recognition. Perceptions like “we do not matter in Poland” have gotten under the skin and have become part of the urban identity of the city. An element of the urban identity of Szczecin is a collective perception in terms “the others, esp. the decision makers in Warsaw, do not recognize us for what we have built, our role in the struggle against communism. We are behind, a far corner of Poland”. These sentiments and the lack of a clear identity building process are (among many) motives that hamper the development of Szczecin. Szczecin is a city that lags behind, is seen as a provincial big town by its inhabitants (and the outside world), as “Poland B” as it is called. PWC (2011: p. 10) concluded “Today, Szczecin’s main challenge and opportunity is its geographic location. The city seems to be very distant from the rest of the country, both literally, in terms of transportation, as well as psychologically. Relying on the fact that Szczecin is located close to Berlin may be deceptive because the tourists and investors, who visit Germany, also find Szczecin to be a very distant city which is located across the border. In such situation, the location, which, paradoxically, should be the city’s main attribute, is its considerable challenge”.

Important is the period when Szczecin was governed by Mayor Jurczyk, a previous employee in the shipyard and a head of Strike Committee in 1980, later a head of Solidarity Union for the Western Region. He was chosen as mayor in 1998-2000, and 2002-2006. One of his main objectives was the protection of the

Polish market against foreign capital, which led for example to breaking off a signed agreement with a German developer; the city had to pay over €1 mln as a penalty. That period is described by many as “a time of decline”, a period of economic stagnation. The closing of the shipyard in 2008 caused a loss of 4.500 jobs, excl. all dependent industries and services (Terelak, 2017). This came on top of many other factories closed earlier during the economic transformation and influenced the city negatively (described by some as “the death of the city”). Cities like Gdansk and Wroclaw that also have a German past, rebuilt their inner city in traditional style, and now attract many visitors. Szczecin’s tourism is still rather modest. The new private enterprises developed on the territory of the previous shipyard operate well (contrary to the state-owned shipyard) but are not promoting themselves in the region. Their presence is not really acknowledged and does not psychologically compensate for the loss of the legendary shipyard, with its history of the Solidarity Union. The shipyard, together with its historical legacy of the unions fighting against the communism provided a bonding experience for the citizens, profiled the city as an industrial centre and was an important component of the collective identity. Currently, Szczecin does not have a clear economic profile anymore; Szczecin tries to reposition itself and move from an industrial city to a logistical, business and service centre. Compared to other larger and intermediate cities, Szczecin is not found to be very attractive for new business, although Amazon opened a major distribution centre outside Szczecin close to the highway and German border. The role of higher education and research in Szczecin’s urban life is limited. Collaboration between knowledge centres and government and the private and civic sectors is at an early stage. Szczecin has a small incubator/start-up scene which is now growing.

A 2015 study (Terelak, 2017) found that almost 69% of working population agreed that over the years Szczecin became more provincial, and that only 36% declared they would like to continue living in Szczecin, with overrepresentation of people with higher education wanting to live elsewhere. A social media questionnaire of the researchers employed in 2019, resulted in reactions about the economy (marginalization by central government); politics (no influential lobbyist); lack of local activities (insufficient promotion); historical legacy (1970 and Solidarity claimed by Gdansk while Szczecin played a critical role too) and urban development (a city without central square as most Polish cities have, Szczecin is like a city without a heart). The collective thinking has been that Szczecin is “Poland B” and moving to a collective frame like “Szczecin can become Poland A” is a big step, that probably needs visionary leadership.

After 2006, local governments have been more pragmatic. Redevelopment plans were proposed a cultural-led strategy and a rather vague future vision for the year 2050, called Floating Gardens was formulated in 2008. The redevelopment projects are paying off now and can be considered as positive signs that impact the people of Szczecin (Sochacka & Rzeszutarska-Pałka, 2021). The organization of the Tall Ships Race finals, the Sea Days, and other social events

gain recognition, and the revitalization of the waterfront, new infrastructure, café's, bars, green areas, small architecture etc. is appreciated. And next to maintaining its legacy of architecture, after 2000 the city undertook new development like the Solidarity Plaza and the impressive Dialogue Centre Przelomy, that won the 2016 European Prize for Public Space, jointly with the Filharmonia, that was built on the site where the "Konzerthaus" had once stood, and became winner of the 2015 EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture, Mies Van Der Rohe Award. The construction of another piece of modern architecture aiming on becoming a new iconic waterfront attraction, Morskie Centrum Nauki (Maritime Science Centre), will be completed in 2022. These urban development interventions begin to influence the self-image of Szczecin's citizens; on the one hand they lead to appreciation expressed by the international awards and increased tourism, on the other hand they improve the overall quality of life and add to local pride. A study of [Sochacka and Rzeszotarska-Pałka \(2021\)](#) analysed the new cultural projects from an urbanscape approach and showed that the level of social acceptance for the flagship cultural developments was high.

A question such as "who are we, what is our identity" was not asked soon after the transition in 1990. Since about the year 2000, the question of urban identity has surfaced ([Wojtkun, 2009](#)). On social media, groups studying and discussing memory details of the past (after 1945), of the early settlers and where they lived, are very popular. The same in Gdansk, also a city that became home to a new population after the war [Liskowacki \(2012\)](#). "And we come to see that it is not the case at all that Szczecin is a puzzle to Poland simply because Poland has not studied its own history and geography sufficiently and does not like puzzles. The problem is more profound. For years Szczecin was a puzzle to itself. Even today it is still not sure of itself. Of its *raison d'être*. Of its place on the country's map, in the country's history, and in its plans." Szczecin developed an urban identity of the city in the periphery, an unknown place in Polish national identity. Szczecin is not found attractive by Polish people; they find it far away, a city outside the core. Szczecin's important role in the Solidarity development in the 1980's, was overshadowed by "the face" of Lech Walesa of the Solidarity movement in Gdansk. Szczecin does not have much "high" culture as a port city, it lacks specialized science, it does not have a national football champion. Szczecin people feel undervalued by Poland and believe that the remainder of Poland knows that Szczecin is a part of the country, but it is distant, a bit different and not very significant. Visiting urban professionals and Szczecin professionals who have worked elsewhere, see a city with other eyes, as a city with positive features and opportunities, as a pleasant city with space and a lot of green, with the river as a special feature and Szczecin. In short, a city with potential.

Szczecin would benefit from discussing its past, current and aspired identity. Changing the perception of Szczecin by its citizens and by the outside world through carefully designed processes of civic discussions and through promotion, would be advantageous. The development of a creative economy is a main

task ahead (Markiewicz, 2014). Investments in objects which provide a chance for Szczecin to become more attractive culturally (the Philharmonic Hall, Museum of Dialogue and waterfront developments) are steps in a good direction. The organization of big events (the Tall Ship Race for example) is equally important. Investment in knowledge and creative industries looks a priority - the value of Szczecin's universities is not captured, neither by local government nor by business. Since recently, local government applies a more positive tone regarding Szczecin's development, revised its website and added an English version. Municipal communication is clearly much more active nowadays. Further research on the topic of Szczecin's identity is needed. Large scale polls would give more information and can also help raising awareness of the citizens about their collective self-perception. Separately, a comparison with Gdansk and Wroclaw, former German cities that were reconstructed but experienced more positive developments, would be useful.

### 3.3. Tirana

Tirana is the capital of Albania and has about 800.000 people. After the collapse of a harsh isolationist regime of then poor Albania, a process of post-communist change started in 1991. Albania's society went through a series of dramatic social, political and economic events. Tirana was a focal point in these developments. Kiosks were built in central green areas or public spaces and along main roads, with or without permission. Informal housing emerged as a result of the massive migration from rural areas to the capital in Tirana's periphery at a large scale on agricultural land that was transformed into urban land. Gradually kiosks and improvised houses consolidated into more solid structures of concrete and bricks. This process was fuelled by the remittances of emigrants abroad, as approximately 20% of Albanian inhabitants emigrated in the 1990s.

Tirana developed quickly and chaotically. For most of politicians and the public, this was considered a positive sign of transformation and energy coming from people, businesses and the new capitalist system (Aliaj et al., 2009; Dhamo, 2021). Signs and symbols of the communist past, such as the monuments of Albania's dictator Enver Hoxha, statues of Lenin and Stalin, ideological slogans, symbols like stars, etc, were removed and former communist administrative buildings got new functions. Institutionally speaking, the 1990s were chaotic. Financial pyramid schemes led to major civic unrest. The lack of functioning political and economic institutions and the lack of a properly established banking system, made people invest in construction, as housing, as bricks were considered safer than banks. Tirana was an example of "the wild east". The construction boom and poor planning led to an expansion and densification of the city centre, often at the cost of public space.

During the period 2000-2011, Edi Rama was mayor of Tirana. He took as a first major action the clearance of informal developments and kiosks in the city centre and opening up the main roads and public spaces of the inner city. Also

most of the facades along main streets were vividly coloured, an eye-catching and cheap intervention. This gave a new impression of the city, promoting a new urban culture. But it was a top-down programme and touched the facades, and not the problems behind the facades. Although this programme gave some hope, especially to young people, communities were not involved, and the actions were not sustainable in a longer run. Questionable was that all Rama's interventions took place without a development vision or any city plans. Rama entered national politics in 2011. He became leader of the Socialist Party and in 2013 Prime Minister. In 2021 he entered his third term. Rama kept a strong control over the decision-making in the city. Tirana as the country's capital had always been treated in a preferential way, but conflicting politics have caused a stir. When political parties in power in Tirana and on central level, the budget increases and governance is easier, but till 2015 this was not the case.

City plans of Tirana were purposely delayed and the absence of plans was pragmatically exploited by politicians. At least four attempts to make a comprehensive city plan failed because the draft plans were not approved. Only in 2018 an urban plan was approved, when both the mayor of Tirana and the Prime Minister were from the same political party. The 2018 plan benefits some specific interest groups. On the one hand Tirana's social and cultural life is being enriched; Tirana receives more tourists and is promoted as a new European capital, and as "capital of youth". On the other hand, the planning process, permissions and developments are concentrated in the hands of few public administrators that have close connections with private developers. The latter are also often important actors in other strategic fields like politics, media, energy and communication, thus forming new elite of "oligarchic" nature, as it is called in Albania. The result is that most of the new strategic public investments and services in the city and in public space are concentrated in areas with high land values, mainly for new high-density development in implementation schemes via "pseudo" PPP (public private partnership) formulas ("tower-PPP phenomena" as they are called in Tirana). This model excludes smaller and medium business and communities. Little attention has been paid to the transparency of decision making and to historic and cultural dimensions of urban development. Several clashes with people have taken place, like the case of the "restructuring" of City Park, the demolition of the historic national stadium, and especially the demolition of national historic theatre and the redevelopment of the main city centre. New public buildings and private sector development go with refurbishing central public spaces like the main city square, as supporting public space for the new high-rise developments. Outside the city centre, public space is often in poor conditions.

Pojani (2018), Pojani and Maci (2015) and Dharmo et al. (2016) describe that since 1920s up to date, successive governments have been trying to impose their own urban design visions towards a "grand" city centre as a symbol of their power. This was always done through denial and subsequent demolition of pre-

decessors'-built heritage, thus resulting in an eclectic cultural landscape in the city centre. During post-communist years, authorities made several attempts to redevelop a contemporary "grand" vision and make use of it, but all efforts failed and resulted in political quarrels (Dhamo et al., 2016). The reasons for such outcome lay in the unstable nature of institutions, as well as the chaotic nature of development of Albania's transition to a market economy. The governments have been very active in "forgetting the past". New modern landmarks and a lot of high-rise towers, glass malls and offices have been constructed. In Tirana, the renovated central square is meant to be a focal point (Nientied & Aliaj, 2019). Upmarket dwellings, retail, offices and a new stadium now dominate the city centre.

With national and local government firmly in the hands of the Socialist Party since 2017, and with a clique of oligarchs as mentioned, urban identity formation is induced by those in powers, and not by middle classes, the cultural and creative sectors, universities, or others. The message of those in power is that Tirana as a new European capital is developed, and that the government is working hard to solve all problems. In 2018/9 a large scale study on place attachment was conducted (Nientied et al., 2019), and over 300 respondents in different areas were asked, next to questions on place connection and attachment, about their favourite place in the capital. Place attachment is quite positive, for motives like safety of the neighbourhood and close to work and family, a feeling is that Tirana is the prime city, bigger and better than all other Albanian cities. It is true, Tirana is bigger, has more cultural and educational opportunities and larger companies have their main offices in Tirana. And, with a remark on the chaotic and dynamic character, that is the story shared of "who we are" to outsiders. But within the city, sentiments are divided, often politicized. Top-down governance and a lack of public participation play a role.

#### 4. Discussion

The three cities discussed have been going through challenging periods: system changes from socialism to democracy and market economies in the Szczecin's and Tirana, post-industrial port city changes for Rotterdam and Szczecin, and an explosive migration to Tirana as capital city. The cities experienced discontinuities, and in a way, the three cities had the challenge to reinvent themselves. In **Table 2**, we summarize main pointers of the three case study cities.

Regarding the functional approach to identity formation, it was suggested that Rotterdam's use of identity and authenticity is embedded in its urban policies and its vision of the future of the city. It is translated to an internal and external marketing approach, a conscious approach of local government to create a social urban identity by stressing the diversity ("everybody counts") and by stressing the city's positive characteristics, its uniqueness and distinctiveness. The city benefits if citizens recognize this image, in fact identify themselves with this image and enhance feelings of loyalty, if the city attracts the wanted entrepreneurial

**Table 2.** Key points.

Item/City	Rotterdam	Szczecin	Tirana
Urban context	Transforming post-industrial port city, multiculturalism, greening the economy, creative industries.	Former German city turned Polish after 1945, during and after socialist period, post-industrial port city.	Transformation after a harsh communist period, rapid population growth in 1990-2010, “wild-east” urban development
Authenticity and memory	Essential element of being unique, reconstruction city, postmodern port city	German till 1945, troubled history, shipyard memories.	Communism disregarded, modernization, real-estate driven development.
Current identity approach of local government	Careful communication, “Make it happen” new narrative for external and internal branding	Implicit, port city, stress on peripherality is a faraway part of Poland. Now emerging self-esteem.	Planning “reinvented”, explicit focus on modernization, Europeanization, primate city in the Albanian region.
Local government online	Intensive, all social media, modern entrepreneurial city, unique features, participate in Rotterdam	Modest online presence, with (now) positive mood. Space, green, water, economic chances.	Modest online presence. Colourful, modern, lively, transforming, hospitable. Mayor as key person.
Perceived functionality, identity building	Entrepreneurial city, politics of inclusion/exclusion	“We suffer from history, are not accountable” Now a more positive tone.	New European capital, power to political circle. Inviting people and investments.

firms and visitors. The authorities stress topics like social inclusion, “clean, whole and safe” city, “we are all Rotterdammers”, creativity and innovation. Thereby authorities translate the broad political agendas of local government.

In Szczecin, for a long time the memories and the nostalgia of the shipyard were maintained as a key element of the city’s identity. For a long time, Szczecin felt a victim of history, not supported by national policy makers, like an orphan city in the North-west corner of Poland. Szczecin’s preference for a low-profile peripheral city served political ends; local authorities could not really be held responsible for the city’s shortcomings because history, location and “Warsaw” were the big problems. But slowly this mentality is changing, with new eye-catching urban developments and a more positive image to attract visitors and new economic development. An identity discussion is not (yet) organized by local authorities, and this could be helpful to deal with the past and look forward. Void the stilted expression, “One of us (R. B. G.) thanks...” Instead, try “R. B. G. thanks”. Do NOT put sponsor acknowledgements in the unnumbered footnote on the first page, but at here.

As primate city of the Albanian-speaking region, Tirana never lacked self-esteem, and through real-estate-led urban development local governments have been working on their ambition to turn Tirana into new European capital. This process is without involving the public and with limited respect for history and urban heritage. Top-down planning was “reinvented” (after the communist period) in the new neo-liberal market economy and the relative progress of what is



locally called the “stabilo-cracy”. Tirana’s aspired identity of a modern European capital serves political, economic, and social goals. Albania wants to enter the EU and Tirana as capital should therefore be its visiting card. This process is real estate driven, so developers gain. In return, they sustain the ruling political elite. Given the level of corruption in Albania, it is likely that public officials gain too.

In Rotterdam, attention is paid to identity formation. Big participatory processes were organized in 2017. The result was not a clear definition - this can hardly be expected given the many different views of people and organizations -, but a broad narrative. Szczecin and Tirana have policy aims and in different manners long-term visions of the cities’ futures, but their local governments do not pay explicit attention to the cities’ identities. They don’t see the need to do so. In the current political cultures in Poland and Albania, power and contraposition are more prominent than cohesion of the city’s population and collaboration between different (political) groups.

## 5. Conclusion and Further Research

The purpose as set out at the beginning of this paper was a reflection on the question of whether the local government could, or should, engage in fostering urban identity. Our answer to the question is affirmative: local government can engage in fostering urban identity and can influence the values of citizens, which in turn could lead to social and pro-environmental behaviour. Democratic maturity and broad participation are requirements for fostering urban identity, because imposing values are unlikely to work (as former socialist countries know quite well). This answer can be seen as a premise for future research. It is not a clear-cut answer based on our present study simply because the concepts used are ambiguous and the real world is complex and dynamic. Moreover, our research was limited, it is not a systematic study but rather a reflection on three studies conducted last two years.

### 5.1. Deliberate Identity Construction

In larger for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, the definition of identity in terms of mission, vision, values, aspired culture and behaviour of the organization’s members, and the like is common practice. Albeit that it is not always consistent and sometimes merely window dressing. With increasing complexity in an organization’s environment, and increasing internal complexities, rule-based operation is not adequate to achieve the organization. Companies work on underlying values. Identity construction is done to clarify to all stakeholders what the organization stands for and how it wants to develop. Cities differ from organizations, but there are commonalities, like competition for investment and visitors, and loyalty and pro-social behaviour. Local governments develop policies for a better city in the future, undertake place-making activities, and develop a marketing slogan for communication (Cheshmehzangi, 2020). But the question of “who we are” is not easily taken up. Perhaps because a certain maturity of dem-

ocratic practices is needed, it cannot be achieved within one political local government mandate. Notionally, a reflection on this question of “who we are” could give meaning and uniqueness to citizens and outsiders. “What is our story, who we are, where we are heading” can function as a collective story, as social glue that connects and binds the inhabitants, and leads to a certain behaviour (social, pro-environmental, etc.). But there are many questions to be answered; the topic of local government identity construction beyond place-making and city marketing requires and deserves further consideration and research.

## 5.2. Identity Formation as Political Act

A question is who should lead identity formation and how it should be carried out. In Rotterdam, local government could coordinate and given the multiparty coalitions and the tradition of broad participation existent in the Netherlands, this worked out well. But in Poland and especially Albania, where political situations are different, this requires more consideration. Local governments may use identity formation as a process to gain more symbolic and political control. We may refer to the case of Skopje, where a nationalist (central) government in collaboration with Skopje’s local government imposed a new national narrative of identity and materialized its views in rather peculiar urban redevelopment (Aliaj & Nientied, 2020). After the elections, the next government was faced with unwanted urban development, inherited high debts and a narrative to be remedied. Reflection is needed at this point; urban identity formation is functional, but it can be highly political. Moreover, there may be sentiments about the past socialist identity narratives. Overcoming such obstacles requires transparency and broad participation.

## 5.3. A Functional Approach to Urban Identity

For the development of urban identity research, functional and practice-oriented approaches are useful. City governments have sensible questions like: “how would an urban identity study or process help us, how will it benefit the city, what is the added value beyond city marketing or our strategy?” Such questions need an answer in practical terms, for example how identity formation can be linked to the behavioural change of citizens, like pro-environmental action. Experiences of cities working on urban identity formation will lead to better practical and academic insights into the nature of urban identity, and to the development of methods and tools for urban identity research. A comparison with the concept of organizational culture and with the practices of organizational identity construction could be useful.

## 5.4. Identity Online and Social Influencers

Rotterdam architecture videos, Szczecin tourist movies, and content on Tirana as a vibrant city, figure on social media such as Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram. Citizens, visitors, and social influencers create lively pages about the three

cities that attract attention. Local governments contribute as well; Rotterdam municipality tries to influence for example tourism with the program of “dor-ist”, do (as a tourist/visitor as the local do), expected to influence who is (not) visiting the city. How urban social influencing works, and how it relates to urban identity, is still unexplored. The first research is published (Van Eldik et al., 2019), but more insight is wanted.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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