

# Belgian and Dutch Cities: Collaborating to Compete Successfully



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## Introduction

On 28 November 2016, ULI Belgium and ULI Netherlands held an event on how Belgian and Dutch cities can collaborate to be competitive on a global scale. The event was part of the official programme of the State Visit of their Majesties the King Philippe and Queen Mathilde of Belgium to the Netherlands.

During the event, public and private sector specialists from the Netherlands, Belgium and across Europe exchanged best practices and inspiring ideas that demonstrated how innovation, densification, infrastructure, and social inclusion can make cities more competitive.

The event was attended by Their Majesties Queen Mathilde of Belgium and Queen Maxima of the Netherlands. It was moderated by Greg Clark CBE, ULI Europe Senior Fellow.

*“It is important to keep in mind that cooperation and collaboration isn’t an afterthought. It is the main success criterion on whether we can make smart cities and urban transformation into reality.”*

- Prof. Pieter Ballon,  
Director imec-SMIT,  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

## The Importance of Collaboration

ULI Netherlands Chairman Bob van der Zande (Director of Residential Markets, City of Amsterdam) and ULI Belgium Chairman Marnix Galle (Executive Chairman of the Board, Immobel) introduced the theme of competitive and collaborative cities.

Van der Zande emphasised that collaboration is the key to economic growth and harnessing human talent. He also noted that with Brexit on the way, now is the time for Belgian and Dutch cities to “join forces to become a world-class powerhouse in this part of the world.” Galle added that while collaborating with Belgian cities is sometimes a challenge due to complex municipal structures, he believes that Belgian and Dutch cities can and should work together for a mutual benefit.

## “Thinking without borders”

Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam Kajsa Ollongren gave opening remarks that emphasised the importance of adopting an international perspective to strengthen Belgium, the Netherlands, and Europe as a whole.

According to Ollongren, clinging to national sovereignty impedes progress. To compete effectively, she said, cities, countries, and regions should engage with the rest of the world. Ollongren predicted that universities and smart enterprises will lead the way in shaping the future, as they are able to “think without borders.” She also called on national and city governments to give innovators the space and the tools they need to thrive. She mentioned Amsterdam’s close agreements with other cities to create bridges between innovation hubs, helping start-ups such as Teamleader and Peerby open offices and make contacts with international counterparts.



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*“Globalisation is an opportunity, but it has to be done in a way that achieves social inclusion... Social inclusion is about creating an exciting mix where people want to be, and creating public spaces where people can meet.”*

- Bob van der Zande,  
Chair of ULI Netherlands and  
Director of Residential Markets,  
City of Amsterdam



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## How can European cities compete?

ULI Europe CEO Lisette van Doorn laid out the key themes of the day in her discussion of competitiveness in European cities. She said that while European cities cannot contend with cities in India and China on size, growth rate, or scale; they can still be competitive by focusing on four key areas: innovation, social inclusion, effective densification, and technology.

According to van Doorn, improving innovation capacity is crucial for cities that wish to diversify the local economy and attract jobs. In addition, prioritising social inclusion—such as affordable housing and the integration of migrants—can help foster vibrant, attractive communities.

Implementing effective densification can also lead to better connectivity, amenities, open spaces, and social interaction. Finally, harnessing the power of technology can help with efficient management of resources, making our cities greener and cleaner, and improving liveability.

Van Doorn also emphasised the importance of collaboration between European cities: “Our cities can focus on building complementary strengths, making them more attractive targets for international investment.”



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## “Coopetition”

Chris Choa, Vice President at AECOM, echoed van Doorn’s emphasis on cooperation in his presentation. He noted that unlike in the past, when cities could compete by being independent and dominant, today’s cities must work together to help each other succeed. Choa pointed to top global indices of cities—which consider factors such as cultural interaction and accessibility—as evidence of this trend toward cooperation. According to Choa, both Brussels and Amsterdam are extraordinary in their collaborative qualities. Both cities rank highly in terms of density, innovation, and digital entrepreneurship—all areas that require a cooperative approach.

Choa also discussed the growth of “megacities,” clusters of cities cooperating formally or informally to create cohesive regions. Examples of megacities include London/Oxford/Cambridge/Milton Keynes, Holland Metropole, and the Pearl River Delta in China. Choa predicts that more and more megacities will continue to emerge over the coming years.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Choa laid out a strategy for cities to become more collaborative and competitive. According to Choa, cities should specialise and understand their particular identity, focus on the next generation of wealth creators, embrace urban renewal, and anticipate major disruptors such as changes in technology or demographics. By taking these steps, cities can lay the groundwork to become

“coopetitive”: creating critical mass, driving interest, and developing and connecting with the rest of the world.

## Innovation Districts

Ian Mulcahey, Managing Director at Gensler, gave a presentation on how cities can embrace and encourage innovation. According to Mulcahey, the competitive nature of cities is changing the way we make things, the way we live, and the way we work. He described how innovation has ushered in a new industrial revolution and has created a new normal for real estate: “Companies that didn’t exist 15 years ago are now the biggest companies in the world. We are having to create new terminology, rules, and ways of handling expansion.”

This rapid rate of expansion has led to the rise of innovation clusters. Mulcahey discussed London, home to the most successful innovation cluster in Europe. According to Mulcahey, the cluster has grown exponentially and has fostered massive growth in employment. As the cluster has evolved, it has begun experimenting with transformative retail and leisure experiences in addition to its start-ups.



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Mulcahey also gave examples of how the innovation boom is impacting our use of the built environment. The infrastructure of industrial “monster” cities is now being repurposed—old industrial spaces have been transformed into technology hubs; silos have become apartments; factories have become art galleries. In addition, the hospitality sector is beginning to offer office and hotel hybrids to meet the needs of an increasingly globalised workforce.

According to Mulcahey, the creation of innovation districts involves a delicate balance between concrete planning and organic evolution. Planning barriers can suppress the creativity and spontaneity essential to the development of these districts. Mulcahey noted that one way around planning barriers is to create a “village within the city”—removing planning restrictions from specific areas in cities so that innovation districts can thrive.

## Panel Discussions

Two panel discussions explored how Belgian and Dutch cities can collaborate more effectively. Panellists were Prof. Pieter Ballon, Director imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel; Pieter de Crem, Secretary of State for Foreign Trade, Belgium; Carolien Gehrels, European Director of the Big Urban Client (BUC) programme, Arcadis; Peter Savelberg, Managing Director, TristateCity; and Bob van der Zande, Chair of ULI Netherlands and Director of Residential Markets for the City of Amsterdam.

Moderated by ULI Europe Senior Fellow Greg Clark, the panels touched on the cultural links, shared history, and importance of connectivity between Belgium and the Netherlands. Panellists explored how the two countries should work together to meet the global demand for advanced services, creativity, science, technology, new energy systems, and logistics.

Panellists discussed how cities in Belgium and the Netherlands can cooperate to increase existing advantages and become a single, combined team on an international stage. They noted the need for land use reform, catalytic projects, and common cultural initiatives. They also proposed that Belgium and the Netherlands share data more freely with one another and that both countries adopt the common goals of serving people, tackling inequality, and creating liveability.

*“We are heading for the future in which we will be living in a smart, digital environment. Inclusion is essential. There must be equal access to the most advanced knowledge.”*

- Pieter de Crem,  
Secretary of State for  
Foreign Trade, Belgium

*“Knowing what to centralise and what to de-centralise is important. You have to show your own residents what the impact of globalisation is for your own local economy. Does it bring jobs? Does it increase income for the middle class?”*

- Carolien Gehrels,  
European Director of the  
Big Urban Client (BUC)  
programme, Arcadis

*“We all should be very aware that we are engaged in the worldwide battle of the cities. There are 60-100 very big cities competing for the same bunch of foreign investors, and for same human talent. If we do not collaborate, we will not be visible.”*

- Peter Savelberg,  
Managing Director, TristateCity



## About ULI

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a non-profit research and education organisation supported by its members. Founded in Chicago in 1936, the institute now has almost 40,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service.

ULI has been active in Europe since the early 1990s and today has over 2,900 members across 27 countries. The Institute has a particularly strong presence in the major Europe real estate markets of the UK, Germany, France, and the Netherlands, but is also active in emerging markets such as Turkey and Poland.

## Join today

Members are the core of ULI and the strength of our organization. Since 1936, the organization has been defined by what our members contribute to their communities, each other, and the real estate industry. The shared wisdom and experience of our members is what makes ULI unique. Member leadership and expertise make it possible for ULI to offer what it is known for: the gold standard in quality programs and research, and the opportunity to make an impact on communities.

[europe.uli.org/join](http://europe.uli.org/join)

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