EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study focuses on research challenges related to the ‘urban century’. The pivotal role of cities has stimulated competitive strategies among cities in the ‘New Urban World’. The ‘New Urban World’ refers to the persistent rise in the share of the world population that lives in urban areas, be it in a geographically concentrated form (e.g. cities) or a deconcentrated but functionally connected form (e.g. metropolitan areas, polynuclear spatial patterns). The ‘New Urban World’ does not display a homogeneous and stable settlement pattern, but rather a spiky landscape. This megatrend offers various great opportunities for urban development, but at the same time puts enormous pressure on our urban areas by also inducing negative externalities, such as pollution, congestion, security issues and social degradation.

The general aim of our study is: An assessment of the characteristics and drivers of multi-actor urban systems in a competitive spatial-economic environment, with a view to a comparative evaluation of their performance. This formulation means that our research is instrumental in nature. It serves to develop or apply appropriate – novel and existing – quantitative research tools for evaluating the competitiveness of urban actors or urban systems in the ‘New Urban World’, on the basis of well-defined performance criteria. A series of applied modelling studies on the ‘New Urban World’ is presented in this study, analysed by several quantitative research tools, in order to provide an operational basis for the assessment aim of our study. Different methods are used in different cases. All these tools – and their combinations – are essential in identifying, measuring, explaining and comparing (input and output) performance indicators describing the actors’ economic achievement.

Five applied modelling studies are presented in this dissertation. They start from a global-macro perspective, move then on to an urban-meso approach and finish with an entrepreneurial-micro perspective (see Figure 1). All these studies aim to offer new conceptual and empirical insights into the relationships between the actors’ or cities’ performance profile and the drivers of urban development. Most of these studies focus on the urban situation in the Netherlands. In combination with the use of advanced management techniques, viz. strategic performance management (SPM), the assessment of the performance of various actors is based on a wide range of analytical approaches, such as geoscience-based tools, self-organizing mapping (SOM) tools, multi-criteria analysis (MCA) techniques, or data envelopment analysis (DEA) methods.
The wealth of research findings brings to light that the urban space economy is a multidimensional dynamic phenomenon with many characteristics of a complex economic, social and cultural nature. Cities are evolving systems driven by a multiplicity of actors and stakeholders. It goes without saying that cities have many ‘faces’; they are not uniform or identical. Hence, there is no one single unambiguous assessment tool. Our study focuses on assessment methods for urban systems, against the background of the Dutch reality. Although the Netherlands obviously has its own peculiarities, it seems plausible that the urban dynamics in the Netherlands does not follow a unique pathway, but shows many similarities to the development of urban systems elsewhere, certainly in OECD countries. It is, therefore, not too daring to say that many findings and conclusions also have validity for other countries. The aim of our study is achieved by introducing various advanced assessment tools and combinations thereof. Assessment is apparently not a single instrumental approach, but needs tools that are tailor-made for specific cases.

From the variety of studies, it is evident that the current urbanization is an irreversible megatrend, with unprecedented research and policy challenges. Issues of place and space will become increasingly interwoven, not only in the developed world, but also – and even more so – in developing
and emerging economies. Our viewpoints and findings on the assessment aim of our study can be summarized in five general observations:

- **Cities are powerful economic vehicles** to ensure continued economic growth, especially in a period of economic recession;
- **Creative classes** in cities may be an important condition for innovative development, but there are more important elements (such as the educational suprastructure, the connectivity infrastructure, cultural heritage);
- The **monitoring** of urban development – through systematically collected databases and benchmarking systems – is a critical vehicle for strategic urban policy in a competitive global urban environment;
- **Flexible governance and focused amenity and land use policy** are necessary to keep cities – or more generally, metropolitan areas – alive as engines of economic growth.

Our research on the ‘New Urban World’ has clearly demonstrated that agglomeration benefits are partly economic in nature, but also partly social, cultural or technological. To exploit such benefits, innovative urban strategies are necessary to lay the future foundations for modern cities that are sustainable, inclusive and competitive. This new perspective on the future of our planet clearly originates from the cornerstones of the ‘New Urban World’. The policy and research challenges for modern cities are vast, but proactive policy may find support in the following quotation: ‘The city is not only the place where growth occurs, but also the engine of growth itself’ (Duranton 2000, p.291-292).

With more people on our planet living in cities, there is a need to look at the economic geography of our world from a broad urban systems angle. The ‘New Urban World’ needs to develop a world perspective and to transcend a local basis.

**Reference**