Symbolic markers and institutional innovation in transforming urban spaces

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Introduction: the planning potential of symbolic markers

In the late 1980s, the Emscher Park International Building Exhibition (IBA) in the German Ruhr Area set a new example for the restructuring of old-industrialised regions. An urban zone stretching 70 kilometres across one of the world's most heavily industrialised areas was reframed as a park, while the Emscher zone of the Ruhr Area was probably more realistically described as a continuous brownfield (Sack, 1999). The brownfield became a park, whilst in real spatial terms little had changed: the urban structure, the buildings and the landscape remained largely the same, and unemployment figures continued to stay at alarmingly high levels. Yet, the Ruhr Area became the destination of many planners and policymakers. Emscher Park is known as a planning success story. Not only did it develop a metaphor for the urbanised zone, it also incorporated a whole series of little and not so little projects that gave body to the idea of a park: the re-use of industrial heritage as cultural locations or as sites of the new economy, artworks and landmarks on mine heaps as recreation destinations, and also innovative housing projects for new communities. They all marked the transition from a dirty, heavily industrialised region into a region marked by culture, green space, and a modernised economy.

Another example. The urbanist Wolfgang Christ (2009) mobilises the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles as an example for the power of images, which in this case condenses the paradigm of a metropolis unbound. The Olympic locations were scattered within a radius of 100 miles throughout the L.A. metropolitan area. Yet, through a low-budget urban design concept, using temporary installations and some guidelines for the design of the various locations, some form of recognisable unity was created: "The resulting visual network of landmarks and their presence, both in the urban environment as well as in the urban media, helped condense a 1,000 square kilometre city of labyrinthine complexity into a comprehensible urban figure that everyone could relate to" (Christ, 2009: 97).

These are but two examples of strategies that through visualisation have placed an urban region under a magnifying glass and managed to accelerate the materialisation of the 'metropolis unbound' and a 'park city' in the mindset of the people. They raised awareness of their existence and at least in the Ruhr Area this seems to have resulted in real change through consecutive

policies following the end of the IBA in 1999. These are rather soft strategies that tried to appeal to the human mind rather than to some technical rationality. And even more interestingly, they directed our attention to a type of city that was until then rarely brought to the fore, a city that has little in common with the figure of a city in the landscape.

Making the city-region visible

The paradigm of the European city has guided planning over the last decades, while autonomous socio-spatial processes have produced a very different spatial pattern. It has been alternatively described as *Zwischenstadt*, *Netzstadt*, *métapolis*, postsuburbia, etc. (Ascher, 1995; Sieverts, 1997; Baccini and Oswald, 1998; Phelps et al., 2010), not to mention the long list of North American concepts to grasp the evolving form of cities. The new periphery that emerged at the edges of the historic core cities has long been neglected due to the dominant ideal of the compact city. Functional specialisation has led to an urban pattern that is best perceived as a mosaic: extremely heterogeneous at the regional level, and often highly homogenous at the local level. Since regulatory regimes are much less restrictive, the urban periphery offers the potential for unexpected developments where contrasting functions surprisingly sometimes find one another, leading to new regional hot spots. With the ever sprawling built-up area, the functional city nowadays extends far beyond established administrative boundaries. Established strategies of administrative reform to cope with the enlarged scale of cities prove incapable of keeping pace with spatial development. Regarding the fluid boundaries of urban functions and the changing urban hierarchy within urban regions, it is questionable whether cities can be grasped in terms of (administrative) boundaries at all. The new urban form is embryonic and it is questionable whether we are observing something completely new at all or just another step in urbanisation (Phelps et al., 2010). While this is a relevant question, we are interested here in emerging planning strategies that pay attention to the emerging soft spaces within city-region formation (e.g. Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Davy, 2004; Stein and Schultz, 2008).

This new metropolitan agenda implies changing the perception of the urban periphery and integrating it not only functionally but also mentally in the urban fabric. This is a huge challenge since establishing new interpretations of the contemporary city in general, and the urban periphery in particular, is an affront to established institutions, such as the compact city, the distinction of city and suburb, or town and countryside. This challenge is even greater since,

generally speaking, the urbanised landscape, except for some idyllic places that have been absorbed by urban growth, brings up negative associations. Yet, the periphery has been much more dynamic over the past decades than the historic urban core (Bontje and Burdack, 2005; Lang, 2003; Phelps et al., 2010).

The focus of the research is on the linguistic tropes, performative displays and physical artefacts, in short symbolic markers, that are employed in planning strategies to highlight the new meaning of the periphery and internalise it in the human mindset, ranging from planners to citizens. In planning theory and practice, there is a strong belief in the communicative power of symbolic markers as seductive vehicles to mobilise all sort of actors and they are used abundantly. Yet there is also an equally strong dissatisfaction with the implementation of plans and projects despite seductive symbolic markers (Albrechts, 2001; Faludi, 1996; Hajer and Sijmons, 2006; Hajer and Zonneveld, 2000; Healey, 2004; Throgmorton, 1993; Van Eten & Roe, 2000; Zonneveld and Verwest, 2005).

We are not interested in contributing to the wide array of symbolic language in planning by presenting improved designs for symbolic markers. Other fields (urban design, architecture, linguistics) are better equipped with the necessary techniques. Rather, the contribution of this thesis lies in the guidelines to reflect on how symbolic markers may accelerate and highlight transformation processes. The aim of this book is theoretical insight but also practical knowledge for better planning. How do such strategies work and how can they become more effective and lead to collective action?

Symbols

The concept of symbols and symbolic markers play a crucial role in the research and I will therefore shortly elaborate on their meaning. First of all, symbols and symbolic markers are used interchangeably, though in fact, I tend to speak more about symbols in a theoretical sense and about symbolic markers in relation to planning practice. Symbolic research is concerned with "aspects of meaning production and consumption as a function of social processes" (Gottdiener, 1997: 8). Symbols in planning, and the symbolic layer in general, are underdeveloped in theory (Tewdwr-Jones, 2011: 24). The concept of symbol is strongly related to semiotics, which is about the study of signs. It is based on the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who independently from one another, invented semiology/semiotics. While semiotic research is strongly rooted in linguistics, it has also proven extremely fruitful in the study of urban environments (Broadbent et al.,

1980; Gottdiener, 1997; Meier and Reijndorp, 2012; Nas, 1998; Nas et al., 2006). A sign is something that stands for something else that lies outside. It is formed through the duality of a *signifier* and *signified*. The first refers to a word, figure or object, while the latter refers to the culturally prescribed meaning attached to it. The signifier is a mediator, which conveys meaning (Barthes, 1964: 109; Gottdiener, 1997: 5). The crux of 'sign' as well as competing terminologies like 'symbol' or 'icon' is, as Roland Barthes (1964: 103), one of the founding fathers of modern semiology, remarks: "tous nécessairement à une *relation* entre deux *relata*", they have in common that they express a relationship between a visible object and meaning.

The sociologist Mark Gottdiener (1997: 8-9) remarks that the kind of signs or symbols that are of interest for researching symbolic meaning, are more than simple signs, because they do not simply denote an object, but refer to concepts or ideas that are embedded in a social context. For de Saussure, symbols implied motivation (Barthes, 1964: 105). And this is actually why the term symbol is very suitable for this research. Symbols are open to interpretation (whereas signs are not—at least in the shared cultural context of a language) depending on someone's position. In a similar vein, Nas renders the referential character of a symbol that is multi-interpretable essential (Nas, 1998: 546).

Symbols take on a variety of forms and functions (Nas et al., 2006: 8). *Material symbols* include flagship projects, landmarks, architecture, or monuments and statues. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is the paradigm of a symbolic marker, as are the World Trade Center and the attacks on it in New York, but also the numerous art landmarks installed in the Emscher Park in the Ruhr (e.g. the Tetraeder in Bottrop and the sculptures of Richard Serra) or the Angel of the North and Another Place both by Antony Gormley. *Iconic symbols*, according to Nas et al. are persons that are tied to a place (Elvis to Memphis, Tennessee), though the term has become common usage in architecture (Sklair, 2006) and is sometimes used as a synonym for symbol (Alexander, 2008; Barthes, 1964). *Behavioural symbols* refer to all kind of rituals and (temporary) events, such as the Commonwealth Games as a symbolic event for the renaissance of Manchester. *Discursive symbols* involve a wide range of representational forms of a place in literature, film, art, and myth producing and reproducing a city's image (e.g. Woody Allen's *Manhattan* and many more of his movies representing New York). Planning narratives and images are those discursive symbols we are concerned with, again thinking of Emscher Park, the abundant Dutch planning imagery employed by national planning over the past decades: Delta Metropolis, Randstad and Green

Heart, and many more (Lambregts and Zonneveld, 2004; Van Duinen, 2004; Zonneveld and Verwest, 2005).

While symbols play a crucial role in the research on the institutional activation of the 21st-century city, we are also interested in the analysis of planning agency and structural conditions. Under the label urban symbolic ecology the Dutch anthropologist Peter Nas and colleagues have analysed "the social production of symbols in the urban arena as well as the resulting distribution patterns and underlying mechanisms" (Nas, 1998). Symbols can be imposed by powerful actors, e.g. colonialism, but also emerge bottum-up, which may lead to conflicts (Nas et al., 2006: 4). Symbols are related to institutions at the level of society or below and to power structure (Nas et al., 2006: 3; Friedland and Alford, 1991). In this PhD thesis the research focus is on production through collective action and therefore on institutions. Hence it required institutional theory to do the work on the analysis of the process of symbolic production.

Institutions and symbolic markers

The working hypothesis of this thesis considers the relation between communicative devices in strategic planning and institutions to be a field of inquiry that could produce new insights on why plans succeed or fail to mobilise. Symbolic markers refer to institutional patterns and, in the context of planning strategies for a different understanding of the city, often confronts these patterns. For instance, the Green Heart, at least in the past, symbolised the separation between town and countryside or in Dutch planners' terminology red and green—one of the strong institutions guiding Dutch urban policy in the past decades (Van Eten and Roe, 2000). Inspired by the work of Bourdieu, who rejected the focus on language as such because it excludes social processes, our argument is that successful symbolic communication in planning rests upon the embedding of meaning in existing institutions (Bourdieu, 1991).

Taking the institutional perspective implies looking beyond the planning subject into the dynamic relationship between planning and institutions. Planning does not only occur within an institutional context but is also a constitutive part of this context (Gualini, 2001; Salet, 2000). We are interested in how planners reflect and build upon existing institutional norms in the development of symbolic markers so as to bring about a new understanding of cities. How does planning take into account the social dynamics in its symbolic efforts? Institutional norms may be neglected or acknowledged in planning; yet planning may affect the mutual expectations established by institutions.

Thus planning operates as a very part of this complex pattern of institutions, usually with the ambition to achieve some form of collective action.

One of the key challenges in symbolising changing cities is the durable nature of institutions. Institutions establish codes of behaviour implying sanctions to those deviating. Thus, reproducing established institutional meaning is much easier than contradicting it. However, this is exactly what strategies for change usually aim to do! A basic assumption underlying the research is that institutional change is a process that can be accelerated or slowed down. This requires a search for institutional approaches that treat institutions as dynamic in nature.

The objectives of this PhD thesis are twofold. First, it aims to establish a research method that enables us to analyse symbolic markers in planning strategies for a dynamic socio-spatial and institutional context and test this in a number of case studies. Second, it tries to find answers why symbolic markers work (or not) and the role of planning in changing perceptions. It wonders how to improve planning strategies that employ symbolic markers to establish a new understanding of changing cities.

Research design and methods

This thesis is an attempt to construct a theoretical model and a research strategy to be tested in some practices of planning. The research strategy is therefore neither purely inductive nor deductive as we do not start with established theories on how symbolic markers in planning work—this is part of the theoretical ambition of the thesis—or collect data to establish generalised findings from the observed patterns. In the present research, a theoretical model is developed with which practices of planning will be analysed. Blaikie (2000) has labelled this the *retroductive* strategy. Therefore eight methodological steps have been developed as a method for institutional research on symbolic markers in planning.

The research uses mainly qualitative data: desk research, analysis of primary data and interviews. Interviews with stakeholders were an important source to get insights into the motives of stakeholders. Interview partners have been selected by scanning policy documents and the Internet for organisations and individuals that were involved in or rejected the project. They were approached by email with an invitation letter and a short background of the research project. Interviews have been digitally recorded, transcribed and stored by the researcher. In order to enable respondents to talk freely, interviewees have been assured confidentiality, implying a private interview that will not be quoted without permission. Usually for each case study, an

exploratory interview has been held in order to get an overview of the subject matter. In addition, information provided by interviewees has been further confirmed by other sources. The findings, wrapped up in a scientific article, have been sent back to check the case description and test the validity of the findings. In addition to the interviews, policy documents, background studies, newspaper articles and websites have been screened. While for instance policy documents clearly formulate the objectives, interviews are more suitable to document the process and the issues at stakes. Newspaper articles as weblogs might give a good deal of information on the reception of a policy. The documentation of the cases differed to a considerable degree, both in numbers as in detail.

The research will be conducted as a *multiple-case study* with three cases (Bryman, 2008; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2009). A case study is commonly defined as a "single, bounded entity, studied in detail, with a variety of methods, over an extended period" (Blaikie, 2000: 215; see also Gerring, 2007). Yin (2009: 18) additionally emphasises the "in-depth character within a real-life context", because both phenomenon and context are studied at the same time (as opposed to the experiment, which separates the two, or the survey with its limitations to analyse context). Only the case study method allows for a holistic analysis in order to provide full understanding of the causal mechanisms of why symbols may enlarge social meaning (Gerring, 2007). Only a case study format is able to provide us with the necessary depth of information to understand the mechanisms of how the meanings to which symbolic markers refer, lead to mobilisation or not and also to acknowledge the specific social contexts of planning strategies. Doing case study research requests defining the case or the unit of analysis in terms of time and activity (Blaikie, 2000: 216) or place (Ragin, 1992: 5). Here, planning strategies form the unit of analysis: the spatial scope of a strategy as articulated in planning documents, the lifespan of the planning strategy from the emergence of an idea to its realisation and the actors or 'stakeholders' involved.

The number of case studies is chosen for two reasons. First, we have to compromise between the available research time and costs and the amount of new information that can be gathered by an additional case study. The explorative nature of this research generally suggests the selection of more than one case. This enables us to verify the mechanisms through more than one case. The second reason is the comparative nature of the research. The selection of cases in different countries enables us to compare the role of symbols in planning frames in different institutional contexts or planning cultures.

In addition the case studies are multi-level case studies. We will look at the whole at the regional level and some exemplary projects on a local level. Several scholars have argued that there is no advantage in finding a typical case unless the theoretical framework is sufficiently developed to identify the processes the researcher is looking for. More important is the relevance of the case studied: others should be able to relate their 'problem' to the one in question and be able to draw conclusions (Blaikie, 2000: 222). The case studies contain sufficient evidence to make the case that institutional embedding of symbolic markers is an important issue in order to achieve social mobilisation in favour of the planning strategy. According to Flyvbjerg (2001: Ch. 6) case study research is able to produce context-dependent knowledge, may contribute to theory building, has its own rigor and procedures and therefore produces results that are no less biased than in qualitative methods. By finding comparable results (or mechanisms) from heterogeneous sites (Blaikie, 2000: 255) we attempt to advance theory on the use of symbolic markers in planning.

Case selection

In the many textbooks on research design and methodology (Blaikie 2000; Gerring, 2007), the case study selection features as one of the most important points in the research process. On which variables do the case studies differ, while actually much is unknown? A success story at first sight might have to deal with many more complications under the surface and failed project may belatedly turn into a success story once the action groups and/or debates on cost overruns have calmed down, as is the case with so many large-scale (infrastructure) projects. Once realised, people get used to the new situation and even start appreciating it.

Researching the effects of planning processes poses one major difficulty. The effects become often only visible many years after implementation. In particular if we look at the symbolisation of new meanings and the long-lasting institutionalisation process that is required. That poses a dilemma: planning processes that have been initiated many years ago are often no longer cutting-edge and may be out-dated. In addition, we face a very simple but crucial problem, because key figures of planning are difficult to trace, memory has faded, and documents are more difficult to obtain. Thus instead of looking at symbolic efficacy, I will concentrate on the mobilisation during the planning process. Claims as to whether a planning process has achieved the broad ambitions of providing new meaning will not be measured, rather its likelihood will be assessed by looking at the mobilisation of key actors.

In order to come to a preliminary case selection, a number of planning practices have been explored that would meet the following criteria:

> The first criterion is a strategy in which the use of symbolic markers for a different understanding of urban space stands out, a strategy that is innovative in the sense that it does not reproduce what is established planning practice. The focus is on the internal making of the city-region and not merely marketing or place branding strategies. The planning strategies should also include significant investment, as an indicator of the seriousness with which the strategy is taken forward.

> Second, the planning strategy is launched in a metropolitan environment, facing typical challenges of contemporary urban transformation. This regards, for instance, social and spatial fragmentation, specialisation and polarisation, the redefinition of urban and rural areas, and changes in the relation between centre and periphery, i.e. the transformation of urban hierarchy.

> Third, the main interest is in processes at the scale of the urban region and cross- boundary strategies. That implies that a coherent approach at the level of the metropolitan environment (however defined) is requested to look at the transformation of the wider city-region in which we are interested. This may still result in the analysis of local projects and their symbolic markers, but the link with the urban transformation at the metropolitan level is crucial.

> Finally, the planning strategies need to be in an advanced stage of discourse formation, preferably already implementing or having completed subprojects, in order to have reached public discourse. On the other hand, strategies must not date back too much, so that it is still possible to research the process of symbol identification.

This proved more much difficult than expected. There were few recent examples of metropolitan strategies, partly because it took a long time until the factual signs of disintegration of the compact city have been sufficiently acknowledged so that it resulted in new policies. The IBA Emscher Park is a landmark strategy in this respect, but it dates back to the late 1980s and becomes more like a historical research. It has also been subject of numerous studies, though none focussing on the symbolic makers. Thames Gateway has been thoroughly analysed, too, and others you come to known only when you made your selection. Like the *homo economicus* has imperfect market information, our knowledge of suitable planning strategies is limited. Some have used less pronounced symbolic makers than initially as-

sumed. Another problem of case study research is that new variables come to the fore during research.

In the end, the following three planning strategies have been selected across urban areas in Europe as case studies to look into the symbolisation of the new metropolis:

> *Project Mainport Development Rotterdam* in the Rotterdam Rijnmond (pop. 1.2 million), the Netherlands. The main planning frame aims at extending the Rotterdam Seaport into the North Sea and, at the same time, increasing the liveability within the region. This framework has been agreed on in the late 1990s by a broad coalition of the National Government, the Rotterdam City Region, the Municipality of Rotterdam, private sector, and environmental organisations, with €300 million being reserved for the improvement in quality of life. Many individual projects have entered the implementation phase and some have even been completed.

> *Regionale 2010* in the Cologne/Bonn Region (pop. 3.1 million), Germany. The Regionale programme of the *Land* Government of North Rhine-Westphalia stimulates experiments of region building through innovative projects. While the programme is not specifically targeted at cities and their environs, the 2010 edition was truly metropolitan. It has an investment volume of about €200 million. The Cologne/Bonn Region prospers and therefore experiences development pressures in the urban periphery that threaten spatial quality. One of the main ambitions of the Regionale programme is to raise the regional particularities as part of regional identity formation.

> *Atlantic Gateway* in the Manchester and Liverpool city-regions (pop. 4.5 million), United Kingdom. The Atlantic Gateway, interestingly, originates and has been adapted from an initiative of a private sector company. Starting in 2008 under the title *Ocean Gateway*, it is a large-scale investment strategy (£50 billion) for the urbanised zone in the North West of England, consisting of Manchester and Liverpool and the spatial in-between. It reconceptualises the two rivalling but well-connected city-regions of Manchester and Liverpool as a single entity (the Gateway) and includes a series of flagship projects.

Structure of the book

This PhD dissertation is based on a series of articles published in or submitted to international peer-reviewed journals. The articles have been adapted as far as it concerns the style and layout, but no major textual adaptations have been made. Therefore, each chapter presents a conclusive argument on

its own. Nonetheless, it quite resembles a traditional book since it involves three case studies that rest on the same theoretical foundation and brings the lines together in the final chapter.

Chapter two, which has been published in *Environment and Planning A* (with Willem Salet), outlines the theoretical foundations of the PhD thesis. Here we elaborate on the magic that can unfold through symbolic action and how and when it may institute new meaning. We argue that symbolic markers are subject to evolving institutional conditions. They need to be embedded in a wider cultural system and pay attention to the social structures in order to have an effect. Successful symbolic markers are able to connect what is to what will be and in so doing, effectuate new institutional meaning. The article provides steps for institutional research into symbolic markers in planning that are applied in the three case studies that follow.

Chapter three, published in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, presents the case study of the Rotterdam Rijnmond, which has been subject to a major investment into the quality of life in the framework of the extension of Rotterdam seaport (Maasvlakte 2) with a focus on the whole city-region. Three exemplary projects have been studied with respect to the institutionalisation of the city-region in the mindset of regional stakeholders via symbolic markers. It shows the difference in the work of symbolic markers that are culturally embedded and those that are imposed upon a local community.

Chapter four, which is currently under review at an international academic journal, looks into two transformational projects in the urban periphery of the Cologne/Bonn Region that were both part of the Regionale 2010. We can compare the different attempts to mobilise the private sector to become part of a coalition of place making under apparently similar conditions: the leadership of the Regionale 2010 Agency and the presence of large private sector companies that need to be mobilised. In this chapter, particular attention is paid to the power asymmetries between public and private sector.

Chapter five is currently under review at an international academic journal, too. In the third case study of the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation, the roles between public and private sector have almost changed. We look into the attempt of a private sector company to put the conurbation on the map, bringing together the two city-regions and their hinterlands. In so doing it challenges the institutional landscape. Here we observe how a private sector company strategically pushes forward its business interests, trying to align them with a broader regional agenda.

Chapter six, co-authored by Willem Salet, is scheduled for a special issue to be submitted to a leading journal in the field in the framework of the author seminar 'Explaining metropolitan transformation: politics, functions, symbols' that will be held on 24–25 January 2013 in Amsterdam. It reviews the three case studies, concluding that planning strategies for change and their symbolic markers still enter the trap of planners' centrism, that is, the planning subject takes its ideas as starting point. Therefore approaches often remain embryonic and are bereft of collective action. What is striking is that often nobody seems to enforce collective action, which seems an ideal task reserved for higher tiers of government. We furthermore observe that once symbolic markers are launched, they lack further inculcation of meaning, and thus miss an important dimension of institutionalisation.

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