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The transformative potential of institutions: how symbolic markers can institute new social meaning in changing cities

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Planners use symbolic markers in order to frame processes of urban change and to mobilise actors. How can we explain the fact that in some cases the symbolisation of new urban spaces manages to enhance and enlarge the meaning of social change while in other cases the symbolic markers remain powerless and might even have a reverse effect? The authors doubt whether the sophistication of symbolic markers as such has much impact. The explanation for the success or failure of symbolic communication is sought within the framework of institutional embedding. This conceptual paper attempts to elaborate institutions' transformative potential through their use of symbols. To this end, it undertakes a reappraisal of institutional thought in order to conceptualise institutional transformation, the establishment of a conceptual linkage between the transformative potential of institutions and symbolic markers, and the design of an operational model of research for the institutional investigation of symbols in the planning of changing cities.

Introduction: the rationale

Changes in social, economic, and spatial patterns of urban regions over recent decades have led to polymorphic urban landscapes and new perceptions of city-regional spaces. Cities are evolving physically and functionally through external interactions into dispersed and multinuclear urban configurations that are quite distinct from the traditional urban hierarchy. With processes of urban transformation still unfolding, new perceptions of coherence and identity at the city-regional level have not yet crystallised. Many urban regions are reevaluating quality-of-life issues (economic, social, cultural, and environmental qualities) in the unsettled and fragmentary context of the emergent landscapes. These initiatives are part of a wider 'cultural turn' in planning, understood as planning that makes reference to the cultural sense of a place (Montgomery, 1990). We define culture as shared codes of meaning or common sense. Cultural symbols are the objects, projects, metaphors, and so on that refer to a certain way of life (Geertz, 1975; Keesing, 1974; Swidler, 1986).

An increasing range of stakeholders, from planners and urban designers to private sector developers and civic groups, are marking processes of change in symbolic ways in order to profile the ongoing transformation of cities. A variety of symbolic expressions is generated to accentuate the transition processes, such as the shaping of highly visible landmarks and design objects, the use of linguistic tropes (in particular metaphors) in strategic frames of planning, the expression of cultural markers in marketing strategies, the highlighting of new public spaces, the occurrence of major urban manifestations and public events, and so on. The initiatives intend to enhance the social meaning (ie to amplify or magnify its meaning and create something more than is now apparent) of the transforming spaces in day-to-day perception by employing symbolic markers of change. Metaphors of planning and design (such as the Pearl River Delta symbolising the coherence of the metropolitan region of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou or the Flemish Diamond symbolising the polycentric city network in Flanders) and cultural landmarks (such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Futuroscope in Poitiers, or the endless reproduction of 'silicon valleys' and their 'silicon babes') illustrate the symbolically loaded processes of transformation. In practice, however, such meaning often fails to materialise (Zonneveld and Verwest, 2005). Actual urban and regional development appears to be far more selective than the abundant use of symbolic expressions. Although the Pearl River Delta suggests coherence, it manifests as mission impossible. The Flemish Diamond remains a promising idea in the minds of planners but has little effect on policy making. The industrial port city of Bilbao has not yet turned into a cultural city, Poitiers has not yet become a centre of technology, and genuine silicon valleys are few and far between (Albrechts and Lievois, 2004; González, 2006; Yeh and Xu, 2008). Despite sophisticated efforts, the symbolising of new urban spaces rarely manages to change perceptions. A prominent example is the International Building Exhibition Emscher Park in the Ruhr (Danielzyk and Wood, 2004; Kilper and Wood, 1995). Although some planning concepts, such as the London Green Belt or the Dutch Green Heart Metropolis (Faludi and van der Valk, 1994; Kühn, 2003), are regarded as successful (in terms of their own objectives), they have no transformational ambition—on the contrary, they aim at preservation.

The different outcomes lead us to the central question of the paper: Why in some cases does the symbolisation of new urban spaces strengthen social meaning while in other cases such symbols remain powerless and might even have the reverse effect? Communicative theories of planning give much atten-

tion to the symbolic means in processes of communication (e.g. Fischer and Forester, 1993; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Healey, 2007; Throgmorton, 1996). The interpretive strand in policy analysis has brought in new methods and a focus on discourse, narrative, and metaphor. Planning imagery is considered as the glue that holds together strategic frames of planning (Dühr, 2004; Faludi, 1996; Healey 2007). Interesting in these studies is the significance given to symbolic communication, the meaning of interpretative knowledge, and the important role of shared social values (Fischer, 2003: 11). In addition to these valuable insights, our research focuses on the transformative institutional conditions that enable effective mobilisation of social energy.

In planning practice it is widely believed that symbolic markers are somehow self-mobilising. Accordingly, when the desired impact fails to manifest, planners are most inclined to reexamine the symbolic marker itself. However, it is not in the symbolic means as such that we expect to find the potential for enlargement of social meaning. The power of enhancement does not lie in the compelling design of landmarks, in the linguistic subtleties of planning metaphors and other pearls of rhetoric, or in the imagination and visionary creativity of symbolic planning and design as such, however important and seductive these qualities may be. It is in the institutional embedding in the mental maps of humankind that the success or failure of symbolic communication lies. Institutional embedding makes people believe in the meaning of symbols in social interaction. It is a transformational process of recognising and expressing the meaning of social norms. By examining institutional embedding, we hope to explain the active conditions under which symbolic communication may work. The meaning of institutions is part and parcel of this discovery. Unfortunately, symbolic markers (umbrella themes, artist performances, landmarks, landscape, monuments, etc.) are too often detached from institutionalised practices.

By introducing the institutional perspective, however, we are confronted with a new problem. A great deal of research on institutions focuses on the path dependency and durable meaning of institutional norms. In planning practice and research, institutions are perceived as rusty old fixtures, which usually hinder the resolution of planning problems. They are limitations to action [see in particular the interactive and communicative approaches to planning (e.g. Fischer and Forester, 1993; Innes and Booher, 1999)]. Why then should institutions be used to underpin the dynamic change of urban spaces? Is institutional analysis not better equipped to explain the preservation of cities rather than their dynamic transformation? Here, conceptual innovation

will be necessary. We have to map the coordinates of institutional analysis and make them operational in order to explain the institutional enhancement of actual change. We are interested in the transformative potential of institutional analysis as a means of explaining the efficacy of symbols in dynamic practices of social interaction. This is the crux of our argument. Hence, we have to grasp the meaning of institutions in the active and evolving reproduction of social norms in daily practices of social interaction. Institutions are not carved in stone. Institutional innovation occurs by instituting new practices and meanings. The habituation of institutional norms has to be validated and reproduced in every new practical situation. This active process of ongoing affirmation and contestation may enhance a normative reflection in changing practices of social interaction.

The structure of this paper is as follows. As the transformative potential of institutions is not explored in most institutional analyses, we begin by explaining our specific position in institutional theory. We make explicit our particular paradigm by adapting the common typology of institutional analysis (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Immergut, 1998). Next, we link this particular approach with symbolic theory. Finally, we construct a research model that provides an operational methodology for an institutional investigation of symbolic markers in changing spaces. As an initial step, we briefly discuss the dynamic change of cities and the challenges it poses for spatial policy makers.

Challenges for planning in cities in transition

The current round of urban transformation contrasts with the traditional idea of centripetal urban expansion and decreasing density. This classic pattern of urbanisation began to show cracks in the early 1960s in North America. Friedmann and Miller (1965) were among the first to describe emergent forms of urbanisation in wide—nonhierarchical—urban fields, where urbanity is characterised in terms of accessibility of the most specialised urban functions from any spot in the region within a two-hour drive. Hardly two decades later, Fishman (1987) announced that suburbia had ceased to exist because of the decentralisation of all sorts of urban activity over the wide urban region (see also Baldassare, 1986). In the 1990s Garreau's much discussed *Edge City* (1991) convinced even the strongest sceptics that severe changes in urban patterns must have been under way for quite some time. This evolving geography amounts to a reversal of the regional balance. That has led Soja to speak of a process of "mass regional *urbanisation*" instead of *suburbanisation* (2000: 242, emphasis mine). In Europe urban containment policies mitigated these

developments (e.g. Faludi and van der Valk, 1994; Hall et al., 1973); nonetheless, these policies did not prevent the emergence of new urban patterns. However, it was only in the 1990s that new concepts of urbanisation were introduced in different European countries. In France Ascher (1995) discussed the emergence of *métapolis* as a large urban archipelago characterised by both globalisation and individualisation of social and economic tendencies. In Germany Sieverts (1997) was among the first to postulate that the traditional model of the European city was no longer dominant. He called on planners to adapt planning concepts in line with the new urban reality of *Zwischenstadt* (literally in-between city), instead of ignoring it and preserving the image of a compact city that no longer exists. *Zwischenstadt* refers to spaces that fit neither the image of the compact city and intact countryside nor the pattern of subordinated residential suburbs. And in the UK Buck et al. (2005) discussed the lack of coherence across social, economic, and institutional tendencies in changing cities. On both sides of the Atlantic this has led to new spatial patterns in which urban functions are much more dispersed throughout the urban region. Moreover, within the inner core of the postindustrial city, completely new landscapes have started to emerge (Zukin, 1995; Hutton, 2004; Gospodini, 2006).

These changing sociospatial patterns pose new planning challenges that cross institutionalised boundaries more often than in the past (Salet et al., 2003). Such spatial developments have led to problems in the administrative and cultural sphere. Most obvious is the fact that urban sprawl ignores administrative boundaries. The urban transformation requires far-reaching, problem-oriented forms of city-regional cooperation to deal with practical planning issues. Morphologically, the dichotomy between town and countryside has disappeared. The landscape has become citified and forms an urban patchwork within which green space is one of a series of functional islands. Urban activities are located in unexpected places: specialised urban activities near agriculture, offices at highway junctions, illegal settlements or temporary functions in locations waiting for development, and so on (Davy, 2004). Urban and regional designers define the need to qualify the *Zwischenstadt* (Bölling and Sieverts, 2004). The emerging urban landscape is perceived as a nonplace (Augé, 1995) without a deeply rooted (historical) meaning, which also yields the quest for new identity. The constitution of city space is a highly selective process, not only in space but also in time. There is a tendency towards juxtaposition of different social spaces (often nonplace bounded) within the proximity of physical urban regions (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Löw,

2008). This tendency has increased dramatically since Webber (1964) contemplated its embryonic forms in the 1960s. The fragmented city-regional archipelago requires some form of integration. This should also serve to increase the legitimacy of multiple institutional-administrative arrangements at the city-region level, in order to support planning interventions at the city-region scale and, in particular, interventions that serve the core city but do not take place on its territory and vice versa.

The transformation of cities is characterised by such a high level of variegation that it makes no sense to focus here on the specific empirical changes in particular regions. However, we can conclude in a very general way that a new phase of urbanisation has been entered, which is resulting in the increased specialisation and decentralisation of urban activities, abandoning the scheme of urban hierarchy and periphery, intermingling the cultural landscapes of town and countryside and bridging the far and the near aspects of urbanity in simultaneous forms of urban experience. Successful urban form always relates to changing social needs and activities. If we take this wise lesson provided by Lynch (1981) in *Good City Form* seriously, we may conclude that the emerging regional city understood as a city that goes beyond the traditional physical and social patterns and boundaries might be the appropriate city form for contemporary Western societies. Whether the perceptions of new urban space are heading in the same way is still highly uncertain. That is why we are interested in how processes of urban transformation are symbolised and how new symbols are made to serve as vehicles for the identification of new qualities of life in the urban region.

Reviewing the common typology of institutional paradigms

Institutional thought has an extremely rich and diversified history in the social sciences, which did not go unnoticed when scholars in several disciplines rediscovered, quite independently from each other, the potential of this wide paradigm at the end of the 1980s and began talking of a 'new institutionalism' (March and Olsen, 1989; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Not surprisingly, the institutional umbrella does not represent a unified body of thought (for an overview and typology see Hall and Taylor, 1996; Immergut, 1998). This urges us to define our specific position in this large field in order to conceptualise the transformational potential of institutional thinking and to apply this approach to the social efficacy of symbols in changing urban landscapes. Institutions are simply defined here as 'patterns of social rules'. What most institutional approaches have in common is that they aim to explain how social

rules enable collective action in a world of individual choices. The bridging of the individual and the collective dimension is a complex matter requiring careful analytical choices. Here different institutional paradigms make their own choices. We do not claim that one methodological solution is superior to another, but for our specific goal—to find methods of institutional transformation and to explain how symbols might enlarge social meaning—it is necessary to select a specific institutional paradigm. We selected our path by distinguishing two crucial dimensions of institutional analysis. The first is the position of institutions—whether they are perceived as external constraints or as being internalised in human agency. The second dimension concerns the validation of institutions—that is, whether institutions are perceived as existing ‘prior to action’ or whether they have to be validated ‘in action.’ For analytical purposes, we contrast the theoretical positions of the different schools (see Table 2.1 for an overview).

Institutions as external constraints or as internalised in human agency

The first dimension revolves around the choice between analysing institutions as external to human action (as external constraints) and as internalised in the mindset of humankind. Both options are applied widely in institutional theory. The analytical advantage of the external approach is the clear demarcation of institutional rules on the one hand and the choices of individuals on the other. It deals with individual choice and with an easily researchable set of external constraints to human action. The external approach is widely used in economic thought and in sociological methodological individualism. A well-known application is rational choice institutionalism. In this approach, institutions provide rules in order to reduce uncertainty in social (economic) exchange. In this context, institutions aim to solve collective action dilemmas—when the individual maximisation of benefits leads to collectively sub-optimal outcomes (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Immergut, 1998). Political science and institutional economics adapted the propositions of rational choice institutionalism because it reduces individual choice to means–end rationality and deduces social rules from this (as artificially considered) propositions. This is why real social conditions applicable to individual choices (e.g. research into the asymmetries of power) were introduced in these institutional approaches, as was the case in political and actor-centred institutionalism (Coleman, 1990; Ostrom, 1990; Scharpf, 1997). Political or actor-centred institutionalism examines how institutions affect the behaviour and strategies of the actors involved. From our point of view, these adaptations are interesting because of their in-

terest in institutional development and change. However, these political theories analyse institutional conditions as being external to the mindset of people in action. Individuals may change their preferred course of action because of the impact of external constraints. However, within these approaches, institutions are not internalised as patterns with their own thinking.

Considering our objective, the internalisation of institutional norms is crucial because we expect to find the explanation for social efficacy of symbols in terms of the intrinsic meaning that people attribute to them. Institutional symbols are “saying something of something”, as Geertz meaningfully suggested (1973: 448). For this reason, we deliberately select those institutional approaches in which the validation of institutional patterns of social rules lies within the internal mindset of actors. From this perspective, it is not out of strategic calculation (economic or political) but out of an assumed imperative that people act according to certain institutions. Institutions not only influence human behaviour but also basic preferences. An important element is the considerable importance of social legitimacy in explaining action: the logic of appropriateness ranks higher than efficiency (March and Olsen, 1989). People understand its essence, they think it is normal, and in a way they believe this is the social norm that should be retained in practices of interaction. Analytically, of course, this is a more complex approach as it is not so easy to investigate what is supposed to be internalised in the mindset of people and what is not. This leads us to cultural approaches of sociology and anthropology that consider symbol systems, social norms and their guidance function over action, in addition to formal rules and procedures (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Geertz, 1975; Hall and Taylor, 1996).

Institutions validated ‘prior to action’ or institutions validated ‘in action’

The second dimension concerns the validation of institutions. Inevitably, this touches on whether institutional change is possible from a theoretical standpoint. As ‘patterns of social rules’, institutions have evolved over time. A characteristic feature of institutional rules is their durable state, or at least a state of relative durability. Which kind of institutional approach, then, allows for institutions that are both internalised and dynamic? Some institutional approaches cannot sufficiently explain change (Helderman, 2007). Historical institutionalism emphasises the path dependency of processes (Pierson, 2000; Thelen, 1999)—that is the continuity of institutional change. This initial contradiction in terms (continuity and change) means that we can find in each institution the legacy of historical processes (Thelen, 1999: 382). Histori-

cal institutionalism has attracted attention in comparative politics because it integrates historical contingencies in the analyses. Unfortunately, this focus on historical continuity constitutes one of the weaknesses of historical institutionalism, since it lacks the capability to explain change (Thelen, 1999: 396). That is why some historical institutionalists focus on critical junctions in history (Mahoney, 2000; Thelen, 1999). Nonetheless, institutional innovation lies not in the fore of this theoretical strand. Rather, it is treated as historical particularity. In economic institutional theory, Pierson (2000) performs extensive calculations of the opportunity costs of changing historical trajectory.

Friedland and Alford criticised the distant or absent position of living society in institutional theory (1991: 236). This criticism may be directed not only at rational choice approaches but also at the determinism of some historical institutional approaches. In terms of investigating the social efficacy of institutional symbols in the dynamic context of urban transformation, we are not interested in historical continuity as such, which might explain the predominant hierarchical and compact perceptions of city form in the mental maps of urbanites and political rulers up until the recent past. We are interested in the current evolution of historical conditions, in the way that the social norms are reset in current times of change. The social meaning of institutions is never evident or fixated; it is always fluctuating, albeit usually in a rather gradual manner (Salet, 2002). We have to define institutions not just as patterns of social rules but as the ‘*chance* (or possibility)’ of validating patterns of social rules, following in this respect Weber’s (1922) habit of defining all institutional fabrics (even the state) as ‘the possibility’ of being validated as a certain institutional constellation. The point is that institutions continuously evolve and have to be confirmed repeatedly in everyday practices in order to acquire actual social meaning. Institutional validation is a situational, time-bounded and place-bounded validation of general codes, but institutional meaning is never evident. The meaning of institutional norms may be neglected, latent, or manifest; it may be openly contested in the case of conflicting institutions or interpreted in different ways by small or large numbers of norm holders under changing circumstances. These contextual conditions and changes constitute the rule, rather than the exception in ongoing social interaction. The fact that institutional norms usually change only gradually does not mean that they are nested and stabilised as one and the same determinant of action. Instead, it suggests that the prospect of all stakeholders changing their interpretation of the social norm at the same time is unlikely. However, social norms acquire real meaning only if they are validated again and again in ongoing practices of

social interaction. In the context of transforming cities, many people and political representatives will still adhere to the old institutional perception while, at the same time, changing practices institutionalise new emerging realities of institutional meaning. The establishment of symbols is a very delicate matter in this transformational context. Changing predominant perceptions of reality requires a very sound notion of existing social norms and symbols that have already evolved over time. Institutional innovation does not just mean turning the latch of the door. Rather, it is deliberate change.

Table 2.1 Typology of institutional approaches

	Externalised	Internalised
Prior to action	<i>Rational choice institutionalism, public choice, institutional economics</i>	<i>Historical institutionalism</i>
	Scientific field: Economics, sociology, public administration	Scientific field: Political science, comparative politics, political economy
	Authors: e.g. Buchanan and Tullock (1962), North (1990), Riker (1980), Williamson (1975)	Authors: e.g. Hall and Taylor (1996), Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003), Pierson (2000), Thelen (1999)
	Concepts: Collective action dilemma, methodological individualism, bounded rationality, transaction costs, homo economicus	Concepts: Path dependency, critical junctions in history, autonomous state
In action (situational)	<i>Political/actor-centred institutionalism</i>	<i>Sociological institutionalism</i>
	Scientific field: Policy analysis, public administration	Scientific field: Sociology, anthropology
	Authors: e.g. Coleman (1990), Mayntz and Scharpf (1995), Ostrom (1990), Scharpf (1997)	Authors: e.g. Berger and Luckmann (1966), Bourdieu (1977), Friedland and Alford (1991), Geertz (1973), March and Olsen (1989), Scott (1995), Swidler (1986)
	Concepts: Policy learning, political and actor theory, policy environment	Concepts: Institutional innovation, instituting, culture, social dispositions, legitimacy and appropriateness

All the strands have their strengths and weaknesses, which focus on specific problems. The requirements of the subject of our investigation (the social efficacy of symbolic markers in the context of changing cities) lead us clearly to the fourth quadrant. We make two crucial selections in defining our position

within institutional theory. First, we are interested in institutional approaches that investigate institutional norms as norms internalised in the mental maps of the norm holders instead of approaches that treat institutions as external constraints. This leads us to cultural and anthropological approaches in institutional theory. In the second place, we did not choose historical institutional theories that consider institutional norms as being established and nested prior to action. With respect to the subject of our research, we prefer to investigate the actual meaning of evolving institutional norms, which has to be established and validated time after time in new practical contexts.

Instituting social meaning

The process of institutionalisation is an ongoing process of normalisation, or 'habitualisation', as Berger and Luckmann (1966) used to refer to it. Within this process, the meaning of social codes usually changes gradually. These codes are encountered in many practical situations and acquire institutional depth when the 'reciprocity of expectations' grows among the norm holders (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 54). The typical expectations among actors and actions are shared. Usually, we do not even know when and where this institutional meaning came to life. Institutions are not created instantaneously but evolve over a long period (the process of institutionalisation). The process of historical evolution is essential for understanding an institution. This also goes for formal institutions. Legislation, for instance, while formalised through a distinct decree, takes shape gradually, within evolving patterns of social expectations. Moreover, the formal act of commencement must be followed by practices of validation in social interaction. Its real meaning changes over time. Typically, the role of institutions is to guide social behaviour through inherent codes of conduct. There are also sanctions that can be imposed by any holder of the social norm. However, the primary controlling role is in the reciprocal recognition of the social codes. Institutional knowledge is everyday knowledge. Sanctions are reserved for those who fail to recognise the presence of institutional norms (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 54–55).

The possibility of validating institutional meaning in processes of social change is experienced in daily practices—for example, in the use of language, in distinguishing lifestyles, or even in the preparation of dinner, as Douglas scrupulously demonstrates in her famous essay *Deciphering a meal* (1971), in which she analyses the preparation of food as a set of precoded messages. If food is a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the patterns of social relations being expressed (Douglas, 1971: 61). The daily use of language, the

experience of different lifestyles, or the preparation of food is considered a meeting place of actors equipped with socially structured resources and competences. The social structures are expressed and reproduced in every daily interaction. There is no determinism in this social structuring. As explained above, there exists only the possibility for institutional validation as part of the ongoing evolution of institutional meaning. However, as we do not want to interpret daily interactions as purely subjectivist and direct experiences, we have to dig a bit deeper into the meaning of social structure and social structuring.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus is very useful for this conceptual investigation. His aim is to develop a more dynamic theory, moving away from an understanding of the realism of the structure towards the production of this seemingly real structure. Practice is not a mechanical reaction, but neither does agency occur independently of the structure (Bourdieu, 1977: 73). Thus, practice is informed by structure. The crucial observation is that actors have ideas and judgments about their position in objective spaces that depend on their position in these spaces (Bourdieu, 1984: 169). The habitus is formed through durable dispositions. It is used to symbolise the dynamics of internalised normative patterns in a structural way. Bourdieu attempts to avoid the dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism. Although in subjectivism structures are reduced to visible interactions, in objectivism the individual action is deduced from the structure. Bourdieu compared the pursuit of an individual strategy to that of a card game (1977: 58). Here the outcome depends on the material capital (the cards) and the individual capacity to play. The cards are attributed a value and allow for a limited number of strategies. Thus, individual action is constrained insofar as the rules of the game have set the values of the cards. Then, the individual capacity comes into the game. These patterns have to be continually reconstructed in new practices. Institutional meaning has to be settled and resettled again and again. Bourdieu (1991) emphasises the active dimension of institutions by introducing the active verbal form of *instituting*, which is also inherent in the term 'inculcation'.

How institutional embedding can enlarge the social meaning of symbols

Armed with the institutional notions explored above, we return to the central question of the paper: why in some cases does the symbolisation of new urban spaces strengthen social meaning while in other cases such symbols remain powerless and might even have the reverse effect? To examine this question in more detail, we must first outline the meaning of 'symbols', after which we

will have to scrutinise the social efficacy of ‘enhancement of social meaning’ through the use of ‘symbolic markers.’ All this will be considered from the viewpoint of institutional explanation.

A symbol refers to something wider that is not to be found in the symbol itself (Nas et al., 2006). Culture, according to Geertz, is the “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (1973: 89). The function of symbolic forms is to express social meaning and the challenge is to analyse and to understand how symbolic forms organise perception in real situations (Geertz, 1973: 448). The specific diagnosis of cultural forms is a way of analysing the meaning of social interaction (diagnosing symptoms, ordering a system, deciphering codes of social interaction). In a famous study of cockfights in Bali, Geertz observed that the status hierarchy of the local society had been imposed onto the cockfight! The audience’s encouragement was meant not for the cocks but for their own affiliate group members (Geertz, 1973: 447). There is a plethora of cultural symbols that give meaning to social interaction and that make complete sense to those involved. This observation is highly pertinent to the analysis of institutional action. The complexity of institutions requires reaffirmation through symbolic objects or symbolic actions (fetishes, rituals), which function as techniques for remembering and reminding (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 71). In fact, institutions are symbolic systems. Concrete social practices serve not only to achieve certain ends but also to reproduce the symbolic system and, in so doing, make life meaningful (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 249). As Friedland and Alford state, “Political mobilization arises not only out of the organizational capacities of groups, but out of the violation of meanings, or disruption of the organizational conditions necessary for meaningful life, which they neglect” (1991: 251). Well-known institutions such as religion or land property are regarded as real only by those who believe in these institutions and their objectification in the symbolic universe (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Friedland and Alford, 1991: 249–251). Not every society, nor every group or individual person within society, shares the same institutions. Institutions, of course, are socially empowered but the processes of internalisation are crucial. Thus, institutional action is analysed from an individual but habitus-instigated perspective. Each institution has its own rituals that reclaim and reproduce it as long as people believe (or are told to believe) in the rituals as well as in the institution. Voting (as a symbol

for democracy) only makes sense if one believes in democracy. At the same time voting is a sign of the functioning of this institution (Friedland and Alford, 1991).

So far, we have argued that cultural symbols serve to organise perception in real situations, that they express meaning in social interaction, and that in order to perform these functions, symbols and symbol systems have to make sense in the eyes of the beholders. We also claimed that institutional symbols have their own rituals that reproduce social meaning. But how, precisely, can symbols enlarge social meaning? Institutional symbols unfold their social magic only if the meaning of the symbol is inculcated into, and is thus guaranteed by, the audience. Institutions are kept alive *and* in flux as institutional symbols confront people with social norms on a daily basis, including through expressing disapproval or sanctioning in case of misrecognition. There is an ongoing power struggle of (habitus-instigated) meaning construction on these playing fields in which people take very different positions in relation to power. The dominant language in a country expresses not the most refined subtleties of language but the ongoing power struggle of meaning construction. It is against this institutional background that Bourdieu studied the potential enhancement of social meaning through symbolic forms. Something that is crucial to the understanding of the enlargement of meaning is the *making of differences* in a world that is rather arbitrary: this involves creating discontinuity, and consecrating and legitimising the differences where continuity and arbitrariness seem to exist (Bourdieu, 1991). Rites of passage mark a solemn transgression of social meaning. The regular process of ageing, for instance, does not adequately signify the process of reaching adolescence or adulthood; it simply reflects the gradual continuity of ageing in a lifetime. However, making a solemn transgression by marking the differences between childhood and adolescence, adolescence and adulthood, and so on, and legitimising the differences, creates a completely different perception of social meaning. While the audience believes it is witnessing a passage, in actuality, the differences are consecrated. The rite is thus one not of passage but of *instituting*. Rites of institution consecrate an otherwise arbitrary boundary through an institutionalised process of encouragement and legitimisation. The imposition of a new social reality on a person or a region while in reality not much has changed is *social magic* that reveals the transformative power of institutions! In this respect the social magic of an 'amulet' does not differ from a 'master's degree' in the modern world. The symbolic efficacy of rites of institution is

in their power to impinge on reality by acting in line with its representation. The person is transformed in the first place through a representation that others create and through the way they act on this representation (that man is 'graded'). Simultaneously, this changes the image that people have of themselves and their consequent behaviour (you have to live according to your representation). This is how social magic manages to produce discontinuity out of continuity. Instituting an identity through symbols imposes a social essence. It tells you what is appropriate. The institution signifies this essence for all to behold! However, it must be real, and it must make sense to the beholders. "Become what you are': that is the principle behind the performative magic of all acts of institution" (Bourdieu, 1991: 122). Institutional action is accepted because the symbolic meaning is inculcated. Obviously, the Achilles heel of achieving this social magic lies in the possibility that the essential institutional condition is not met! Then, social mobilisation through symbols will stay powerless.

Processes of inculcation are an elementary feature of institutionalisation and cantake a variety of forms. Different groups of people share different social norms and thus have different practices. They appear to value those differences as markers of belonging and inclusion, and as a result, the differences appear to take on a degree of continuity and pattern over time. The institutionalisation of new city-regions does not differ in this respect from other symbolic meanings. Instituting a city-region of high technology is more than a matter of developing technology; it must be believed as a result of processes of inculcation, both in the inside world and in the outside world. Paasi has rightfully acknowledged that the imbedding of regional identity is a two-sided coin with an internal and an external dimension (Paasi, 1986). Those who impose norms have to be institutionally recognised as 'knowers' and thus transmitters of institutional knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 71). Here, too, the institutionalisation has two sides: the material practice and the symbolic markers or, according to Paasi (1986; 1991), the institutional shape of the region on the one hand and the symbolic shape on the other. The recognition of being different, from an outsider perspective is as important as the internal recognition of this difference (Paasi, 1986). The formation of regions is a continuous process in need of reproduction. Billig (1995) has demonstrated the powerful impact of the subconscious use of nationalism in the mobilisation and maintenance of the idea of the nation. It is not the particular moments but the everyday displaying of the flag that reminds people of whom they are and that mobilises a people at times when

this is needed. If regions are not reaffirmed through conscious and—even more important—unconscious processes of remembrance, their meaning and thus their mobilising effect might disappear (Paasi, 1986).

Institutional research methodology for symbols in the planning of change

What do the foregoing contemplations imply for symbolic markers used in planning strategies? Quite a lot if we look at the numerous attempts of cities and regions to reframe their image to transform areas. Planners, policy makers, and civic groups intervene and try to accelerate processes of institutional change. Planning, understood as organising collective action, aims at social mobilisation. It may be initiated by civic groups or by public sector officials in conflicting forms of collective action or in forms of cooperation. Within many projects and strategies, planning relies on the joint efforts of public sector agencies, as well as on political support, private investments, and citizen engagement. To mobilise these resources, highly symbolic interventions are created in the form of planning visions. This theoretical endeavour reminds us that the framing of places is a delicate matter. The fact that reality is socially constructed does not by any means imply that planners and policy makers can create whatever social reality they desire. Symbolic markers cannot be used in a voluntaristic manner. Institutional transformation is deliberate change. Symbols need to be conditioned in order to fulfil this elementary requirement. In planning, however, cultural symbols—planning metaphors, artist performances, landmarks, landscape architecture, monuments, and so on—are often used without adequately reflecting on their reference points of institutional meaning. Cultural symbols used by planners are often detached from institutionalised practices and, thus, are destined to fall on fallow ground rather than take root and develop a mobilising effect.

The crucial challenge remains: how can the efficacy of symbolic markers in accentuating change be researched empirically? We have developed methodological steps of institutional research into the social impact of symbolic markers in planning for change (see Box 2.1). The first two steps are concerned with the identification of the symbolic markers and their encoded messages. The following three steps (3, 4, and 5) deal with the field of power. On one side, there are the transmitters of symbols, that is, the coalition of proponents of a frame. On the other is the audience. Here we are interested in the social structure and how the key actors are positioned in relation to power. The central questions—which are to be answered in these three steps—asks who creates the symbol, and for whom is it created? Is the symbol genuine and is

Box 2.1 Institutional research strategy of symbolic markers in planning for change.

Step 1: the symbolic markers

Identification of expressive symbolic markers (e.g. linguistic markers such as metaphors and material symbolic markers such as landmarks, architectural icons, model projects, etc.)

Step 2: the encoded message

Diagnosis of the message encoded in the symbolic markers: what social patterns are symbolised in the codes? (Do they symbolise patterns of social relations in the past, do they symbolise patterns of social transformation, or is the past 'bent' towards a new future?)

Step 3: the subjective context

Identify who the symbolic markers are: who are the key persons or key groups that support the symbolic marking (some authoritative persons or groups are in a better position than others to act as plausible symbolisers).

Step 4: the objective context

What is the objective context that is reproduced? Analysis of social structure (e.g. via concept habitus or social capital). Are the symbols genuine? Do they represent the real, objective situation and also the judgments of people about their own position in objective spaces? Differences in positions of power are likely.

Step 5: the audience

Analyse the audience: who are addressed by the symbolic markers? (Is it the full community, or—more common—parts of it? Analyse the position of different groups.)

Step 6: the process of articulation

Analyse the process of upcoming symbols: their changes over time, the conflicting interpretations of different groups (including the audience), the role of the articulators and claim-makers.

Step 7: the internalisation of symbolic meaning

How do the symbolic markers enhance social meaning: the reproduction of institutions in new processes of symbolising, the inculcation of symbols, the habituation, the rites of institution, the canonising and consecrating of symbolic meaning, the solemn transgression, the making of discontinuity out of continuity.

Step 8: the sanctions

Analyse the sanctions. What are the sanctions in case of misrecognition of the encoded message of symbolic markers? Who are the sanctioners (the believers of the symbolic meaning are expected to act as the sanctioners)?

the transmitter institutionally legitimated? Step 6 adds a time component by analysing the changes in the definition of the symbolic markers over time. Here, the framing literature, for instance Benford and Snow (2000), provides useful guidelines for research. Step 7 focuses on the mechanisms that enforce certain symbolic meanings, while the last step concerns the potential sanctions for misbelievers.

Cultural meaning and its probing of symbolic markers is an active element of periods of transformation. Institutional change occurs through new practices that deviate from existing practices but do not ignore the evolved institutional meaning. In particular within conflictive transformation, the meeting of evolved appropriateness and the evolving of new appropriateness is manifest. New institutions arise through new cultural practices, which themselves become institutionalised. This may occur through gradual change. However, what Hajer (2003) once called the institutional void constitutes an outstanding opportunity for new cultural practices to emerge and institutionalise.

The art of planning is to find niches of underinstitutionalised space (social as well as spatial) that are not subject to institutional power struggles over the domination of the social norm. Not all spheres of human life are relevant to the scope of institutionalisation, and some norms may even 'deinstitutionalise' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 81). If relatively few institutions are shared, this is an indication of not a lack of institutions but rather the fact that they are shared only within specific groups. Such a society confronts a fragmented institutional order. In such cases, planning might be strengthened by referring to accepted institutionalised practices of particular groups or to the shared institution of society, in order to accelerate change. The dynamic transformation of cities yields many such spaces, for instance, the forgotten sites of industrial production, opencast pits, dilapidated housing estates and so on.

Conclusions

In this article we explored the idea that symbolisation of some new urban spaces generates enhanced social meaning, while this fails to appear in other places. In planning theory and practice, much attention is paid to the communicative expressions of the symbol itself. We expected to find an explanation for the social efficacy of symbols in order to enhance social meaning in institutional theory. This conceptual paper attempts to elaborate the transformative potential of institutions in the use of symbols. To this end, we undertook, respectively, a reappraisal of institutional thought in order to conceptualise

institutional transformation, the establishment of a conceptual linkage between the transformative potential of institutions and symbolic markers, and the design of an operational model of research for the institutional investigation of symbols in the planning of changing cities.

In our theoretical endeavour, we explored the potential of institutional theory as a tool for analysis of dynamic practices of change, wherein institutions are perceived as internalised patterns of human behaviour and the existence of institutional norms is continually validated in practical situations. This implies that institutional meaning is never fixed. Transforming social reality requires a sound notion of existing social norms and the norm holders. Institutional change is deliberate change. We thus argue that symbolic mediation is essential to the reaffirmation of institutional meaning. Symbols serve to organise perceptions; they refer to social relations, which are not legible in the symbol itself. We therefore reason that symbolic markers cannot be issued in a voluntaristic manner. The institutional meaning to which symbolic markers refer needs to be inculcated by the audience. Symbols work their social magic only when this essential institutional condition is met. Only then can symbolic markers enhance social meaning and institute new practices.

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