Symbolic markers and institutional innovation in transforming urban spaces

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Making symbolic markers happen: the role of power asymmetries in the shaping of new urban places

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Many urban regions are experimenting with new planning strategies using symbolic markers in order to instil new meanings into the fluid, yet anonymous landscape of the urban fringe. This paper considers the specific institutional conditions needed to successfully engage in the symbolisation of these changing areas. It examines two attempts in the Cologne/Bonn region in Germany to change dominant planning practices. The analysis of the Chemtech project in the industrial town of Wesseling and the Terra Nova project in the lignite-mining district shows that policymakers need to take into account the prevailing power asymmetries and the intrinsic motives of stakeholders in order to successfully engage in the symbolisation of a different future.

Introduction

Symbolic markers are used abundantly in spatial planning strategies in order both to highlight on-going processes of urban transformation and to flesh out new concepts for future development. There are numerous examples of flagship development, iconic architecture, landmarks, arts, and planning imagery that seek to entice all sorts of stakeholders to engage in processes of institutional change (e.g. Albrechts, 2006; Faludi, 1996; Ghilardi, 2006, Healey, 2007a; Thierstein and Förster, 2008). While symbols are often perceived as self-mobilising, in practice they often face resistance or are shelved due to lack of commitment (and investment), despite the use of fashionable symbolic markers designed by prestigious offices. Institutional change is not to be taken lightly. Research suggests that the use of symbolic markers is somehow conditioned (e.g. Hajer, 2005; Miles, 2005; Van Dijk, 2011), but the question of why, when, and how symbolic markers work in the sense of marking transformation and leading to new spatial practices is not sufficiently addressed. Explanations for the success and failure of symbolic communication vary. Current planning theory puts a lot of emphasis on communicative processes and the interaction between select groups of stakeholders. Too often, the focus remains on the planners and their intentions to design a new spatial future. The intrinsic motives of stakeholders, the existing power asymmetries and in
particular the cultural mind-set of citizens tends to be neglected in contemporary planning theory. I will add to the existing body of planning theory by focussing more on the context of planning initiatives and looking at their embedding in institutionalised practices.

Recently there are signs of a nascent interest in planning and symbolically marking the ‘fragmented urban landscape’, which the German town planner Tom Sieverts has coined *Zwischenstadt* (Sieverts, 2003/1997). The term, which literally means in-between city, is a powerful metaphor for vast spaces that have emerged in urban regions over recent decades, and that fail to fit our aesthetic understanding of either town or countryside. This dynamic, multifunctional and untidy landscape forms the focus of this paper. It accommodates a variety of conflicting functions that do not fit in the compact city. While the emergence of the Zwischenstadt was largely neglected by urban planners until only recently, it now defines the cultural landscape of many urban agglomerations. Planning strategies for the fragmented urban landscape are the subject of a lively debate in Germany, frequently labelled ‘qualification of Zwischenstadt’. New planning strategies attempt to instil new meanings into this fluid, yet anonymous landscape. So far, these strategies are exploratory in character and policy responses are often very conventional indeed (Hauser, 2007; Sieverts et al., 2005; Sieverts, 2007; Salet, 2009; Young et al., 2011). This paper addresses strategies that do not simply ‘beautify’ these areas but develop images that highlight their contrasts. It is an enormous challenge to enhance the quality of the Zwischenstadt within the context of strong institutions that favour conventional planning concepts for the urban periphery.

In order to investigate how symbolic markers of institutional change are realised in the *Zwischenstadt*, the example of the Cologne/Bonn region in Germany is taken. With a population of about 3 million it is one of the major metropolitan areas in Germany. There are of course many more—and more marked—examples of symbolic planning, but what distinguishes the case of the Cologne/Bonn region is the explicit attempt to address the fragmented urban landscape. The Cologne/Bonn region has worked over a period of roughly ten years in the framework of the Regionale programme—the innovative policy initiative of the German Land of North Rhine-Westphalia to stimulate experiments of region building and to find innovative solutions for pressing spatial problems. The spatial quality of the urban fringe is one the main themes, both securing open space and finding new strategies for spaces whose beauty needs to be uncovered. In 2010–2011, the Cologne/Bonn region presented the results of its efforts over several years.
Two projects of the Regionale 2010 using symbolic markers to ‘qualify’ the Zwischenstadt will be investigated: ‘Chemtech’ in Wesseling aims to enrich the image of this industrial town, ‘Terra Nova’ in the lignite-mining district west of Cologne proclaims the transformation from a mining area into a future-oriented energy landscape. Both projects are situated in the urban periphery of Cologne and exemplify typical ‘Zwischenstadt’ spaces that defy the categories of town and countryside. The two projects seek to reshape the image of these anything but picturesque places by highlighting the existing and dynamic cultural landscape dominated by large conglomerates of chemical production, and mining and energy production respectively. Despite their apparent similarities, the two projects show rather different outcomes in terms of setting the course towards a new perception of space. Whereas Terra Nova is one of the showcases of the Regionale 2010, Chemtech did not get off the ground. Why did the symbolisation of change result in a stable coalition in the one case and not in the other?

The research findings are based on semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of various backgrounds conducted in 2010. Policy documents, newspaper articles (regional editions of the Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger and the Kölnische Rundschau), and grey literature complete the picture. Before delving into the case study material I outline the conceptual framework and elaborate how symbolic markers may impose new social meaning. The following section provides an overview on the broader context of the Regionale policy of North Rhine-Westphalia and the programme in the Cologne/Bonn Region. In the fourth and fifth section I present my analysis of the two cases and scrutinise the mechanisms that may lead to a changing perception of place by looking at the prevailing power asymmetries and the extent to which planning strategies recognise and reflect dominant concerns of stakeholders and citizens. Whereas one project failed to gain momentum, the other appeared more successful. I come back to this in the conclusions.

**Instituting new meaning via symbolic markers**

Symbolic markers play a crucial role in transformation processes, as signifiers of the new social meaning. They are employed by planners to attract our attention and convey the message of transformation. The strategies that attract our research interest are directed towards a different understanding of the urbanised landscape. This is not easy since the traditional images of town and countryside are deeply imprinted in the mind-set of citizens and politicians. Thus, changing the dominant meaning of a place requires institutional
innovation because it implies changing institutionalised practices. Recently, neo-institutionalist approaches, which take a social-constructivist stance, have taken hold in planning research, with an interest in institutional innovation in planning (Buitelaar et al., 2007; Gonzáles and Healey, 2005; Gualini, 2001; Healey, 1998, 2007b; Moroni, 2010; Neuman, 2010). Following Healey’s (2007b: 64-65) definition, institutions are formal and informal patterns of social norms and practices that structure interaction. Many attempts of institutional change run the risk of ‘planning voluntarism’: wishful thinking by planners that is disconnected from the real social dynamics and therefore neglects established expectations (Salet, 2008: 2343). Deliberately changing dominant social norms therefore requires sound institutional knowledge. Institutional change does not work by decree (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 54-55). There are social norms in practice, which have evolved over a long period of time. Thus institutionalising new spatial practices through visible symbolic markers becomes even more difficult, since it aims not just at reproduction but transformation of institutional meaning. The urban fringe is particularly interesting because of conflicting patterns of social norms.

Communicative and collaborative approaches to planning have paid a lot of attention to the ‘transformative goal of planning’ (Healey, 2007b). The so-called ‘communicative turn’ provided an important contribution to help planning theory overcome the rational paradigm. They broadened our view about planning by acknowledging argumentation and discourse, collaboration and consensus building, interactive strategic planning, and the importance of building institutional capacity through collaborative practices (Albrechts, 2006; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Healey, 1998; Innes and Booher, 2010). Planning and policy-making became increasingly “seen as practices embedded in an institutional field, defined by the interplay of a plurality of social practices set at different, varying, and coevolutive degrees of institutionalization” (Gualini, 2001: xiii). Planning is thus part of a wider institutionalisation process; yet it is not its defining feature. Communicative approaches, which tended to focus on discursive deliberation, received criticism on the neglect of power (e.g. Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; Salet, 2000). More recent approaches have reflected on the deficiencies with respect to power, which in turn has led for instance to the introduction of the work of Michel Foucault into planning theory (e.g. Sharp and Richardson, 2001). It remains that the focus is on collaborative practices by a select group of previously defined stakeholders and therefore tends to “privilege communication at the expense of its wider social and economic contexts” (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000: 333). It is largely about
optimising the planning process. “There is the same sense of searching for the right decision-rules—be they rational-comprehensive or rational-communi-
cative, universal or local. The assumption is that using the right decision-mak-
ing process will enable planning (however defined) to further its progressive,
even emancipatory, potential” (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000: 334). We might
call this a shift from planner centrism towards plan centrism. The institutional
conditions, that is, the reasons why a planning initiative may fall into fertile
grounds, are not taken into account.

In a fascinating case study of the Hoeksche Waard in the Netherlands
Hajer (2005) analyses how the plans for this rural area near to Rotterdam
have shifted over time and emphasises the important role of designs in finally
reaching a satisfactory plan after having met fierce resistance in the beginning.
Yet, while the inhabitants now value the outcomes and the policy deliber-
ation has added much to the improvements of the plans, one might wonder,
why it went wrong in the first place! Initially, the regional planners treated
the Hoeksche Waard as a tabula rasa and it was only after several rounds of
contestation and deliberation that a plan came to life which served the local
needs and acknowledged the unique cultural landscape of the island (Hajer,
2005: 639-641). In a similar vein, Miles (2005: 913) hints on the importance of
engaging with the local ‘sense of belonging’ and integrating the specific local
history into the future ambitions as conditions for iconic regeneration, and
Van Dijk (2011: 138) argues that only a planning design or story that fits the
community can become a powerful tool in shaping places.

Institutional transformation through symbolic markers is thus condi-
tioned. There is no automatism of symbolic markers in creating successful
symbolic performance (Alexander, 2004). In order to unfold their power to
institute new meaning (Bourdieu, 1991: 117) the meaning of symbolic markers
needs to be embedded in wider socio-economic practices. Institutionalisation
is a process during which social and cultural practices become normalised in
social interaction. The symbolic-cognitive dimension is activated through a
whole universe of ‘mnemotechnic aids’ through which humans are reminded
of existing institutional norms (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 71). In the case
of planning, symbolic markers are employed as such aids to highlight institu-
tional transformation. In order to take effect symbolic markers and their en-
coded message need to be embedded in institutional practices (Dembski and
Salet, 2010). This refers on the one hand to the socio-cultural mental maps.
People need to believe it is real or authentic (Alexander, 2004: 548). The sym-
pbolisation needs to connect with the particular place-specific characteristics.
That does not automatically imply that institutional innovation is impossible; rather it requires avoiding symbolic markers that will be perceived as alien and instead using markers that manage to connect that past with the future. On the other hand, the transformation has to be embedded in social practices. The symbolic markers and their encoded message need to be validated by social agents in practice. Therefore it has to match their internal compass, independent of whether the motive is following an economic or a cultural rationale. The important thing is to look at the origin of symbolisation: where does it come from? Is it purely technocratic or does it account for social dynamics in society (Boelens, 2009)?

The place shaping by means of symbolic markers has to take existing power asymmetries and the means of symbolic production into account. In order to become a powerful symbol, it needs actors that have access to the means of symbolic production. The wide literature on governance has highlighted the changing and increasingly complex and fragmented conditions of urban governance that limit the power of the state to govern (e.g. Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998). The new governance spaces are characterised by power asymmetries regarding the access to economic and political resources. Urban regime theory has highlighted the importance of organising economic resources and political support (Davis, 2002; Mollenkopf, 1992; Mossberger and Stoker, 2001; Stoker, 1995; Stone, 2006). In urban development, neither economic nor political resources are sufficient on their own. This mutual dependence has led to powerful coalitions between administrations and the private sector in order to pursue a joint agenda. Emphasis in the scientific debate has therefore shifted from ‘power over’ towards ‘power to’. Whereas ‘power over’ simply means imposing its will over others and those who succeed are powerful, ‘power to’ is concerned with the ability to achieve governance capacity. It assumes a mutual interdependence between the political and the economic sector and is oriented towards social production (Stone, 2006). These governance arrangements reproduce existing power asymmetries. Coalitions may include actors beyond local politics and the private sector. In the European context, higher levels of government or government agencies often play an important role in development coalitions. Also, there is increasing emphasis on the inclusion of civic society in urban development. In this research, the investigation is limited to the formation of stable governance arrangements to realise symbolic markers for change.

This poses the central question how in the two cases local municipalities seek to organise stable governance arrangements that enabled them to set on
a pathway towards new spatial practices via symbolic markers, and the underlying reasons for successful mobilisation of actors. The research is organised alongside two dimensions, that is, the prevailing power asymmetries as defined by the varying access to economic and political resources, and the embedding of symbolic markers in the institutionalised pattern of thought of various stakeholders and citizens. These two dimensions might provide an explanation for success or failure of realising change. In each case study I will therefore present the ambitions of each project and identify its key symbolic markers. Who is addressed by the symbolisation? Then, I will elaborate on the power asymmetries: the position of the public sector in relation to the private sector and how it was enticed to become a vital part of a coalition for change. Why did the symbolic markers appeal to them? Subsequently, I will look at how public support has been organised and provide an explanation for the way the public reacted to the symbolic markers and their message of change. But before going into the detailed analysis of the cases, the special policy context of both projects will be briefly introduced.

The ‘Regionale 2010’ in the Cologne/Bonn region

German regional policy knows quite a lot of experiments at the regional level to encourage new forms of territorial governance in response to processes of state rescaling, summarised under the label of ‘experimental regionalism’ (Gualini, 2004). The Regionale programme is only one strategy of a whole bundle of policies that try to stimulate regional cooperation by putting regions into competition for government rewards (Benz, 2004). The Regionale programme—the term is composed of the terms ‘region’ and ‘biennale’—has been introduced by the Land Government of North Rhine-Westphalia in 1997 as a strategic instrument of regional development, drawing on and motivated by the experiences with the Emscher Park International Building Exhibition in the Ruhr District (Wachten, 2004). Every two years it offers the opportunity for a region in North Rhine-Westphalia to develop a regional strategy and to translate it into innovative projects. These are prepared within a limited time frame and presented in the final year. The regions receive priority support via the existing funds of the Land for a limited period of time, including the obligatory co-financing by local governments or private parties (Wachten, 2004). The evaluations of each Regionale are generally very positive about the projects and the intensified intra-regional communication. However, there is some criticism on the mobilisation of civil society and the private sector, which falls shorter than wanted (MBV and ILS, 2006: 162).
The Cologne/Bonn region organised the Regionale edition of 2010, after the tender with the title *Brückenschläge* (Bridging) has been accepted by the Land government in 2002. The bid was prepared by the Region Köln/Bonn e. V. in close cooperation with local and regional partners. So far, the Cologne/Bonn region has not been famous for its regional collaboration. Only on a smaller scale Bonn has a strong tradition of cooperation with its immediate neighbours (Trommer, 2004). Rather, the application needs to be seen as a statement against the background of the discourse on the top-down formation of a European Metropolitan Region Rhine-Ruhr (Knapp et al., 2004; Blotevogel and Schulze, 2010). For the operational domain of the Regionale 2010, the independent Regionale 2010 Agency has been established to prepare and coordinate the process. The Regionale Board, which is composed of local, regional and *Land* representatives, covers the political realm. It decides whether or not a project gets the Regionale approval. In 2005, the Regionale

*Figure 4.1* Location of the Regionale 2010 projects Chemtech (black square) and Terra Nova (black circle) in the Cologne/Bonn region (Map: mdsCreative)
2010 invited both public sector and private/civic actors to suggest projects; although in fact it was mostly public authorities that submitted proposals. In principle, every idea could become a project, if it fulfilled the basic requirement of regional importance; basically this meant that the regional stakeholders could be convinced of its benefits for the region. All projects underwent a ‘qualification process’ in which the project is reformulated so that it meets quality standards. Once a project got the Regionale permit, it became subject to the usual procedures for funding applications of the Land.

The Regionale has ordered the numerous projects into six thematic groups (project families): Urbanism, Green, Rhine, Cultural Heritage, Gardens of Technology, and Non-Spatial Impulses for the Region (Figure 4.1). Some address more explicitly issues of the Zwischenstadt than others: the Gardens of Technology (Gärten der Technik) theme, for instance, combines sites of often mono-functional economic activity with education and recreation. Projects in this family try to facilitate a debate over the spatial qualities of the ‘active’ cultural landscape—be it intensive agriculture, lignite mining, chemical industries, or waste disposal—by making these places accessible and highlight their unique spatial and technological qualities. The Regionale 2010 has set up criteria for the selection and subsequently qualification of the projects. These should be realised in an authentic location where specialised and preferably innovative processes are going on. It was required that a ‘Garden of Technology’ must become accessible and informative, also via attractive design highlighting the exciting spatial environment. Lastly, a project should provide an impulse for future development of the location and connect with education. It is in this policy context that the two case studies are realised.

**Chemtech: re-inventing the chemistry town**

Wesseling on the Rhine is a medium-sized town with a population of approximately 35 000 halfway between Cologne and Bonn. Large industrial complexes of global chemical companies (Evonik Industries, LyondellBasell, and Shell), which together offer more than 5000 workplaces, constitute a strong spatial barrier (Figure 4.2). At night, the illuminated plants feature a spectacular panorama. Wesseling has been quite well off due to the generous benefits through the local business tax of the companies. In general, however, they contributed to the negative image of Wesseling as an industrial town. This image is fostered through a radical urban renewal policy in the 1970s that left the town with a modernist and oversized town centre. Thus, Wesseling is not the typical middle-class suburb but rather one of the ‘meaningless’ places so
typical of the *Zwischenstadt*. Thus far, urban development deliberately turned its back to the sites of the chemical industry. It was via the Regionale 2010 that Wesseling has devoted itself to this immense challenge of turning the negative image associated with the chemical industries into a positive feature of its identity. However, despite the clear connection with the chemical history the ambitious project fell flat.

The idea of ‘doing something’ with the chemical industries to present Wesseling in a more positive way has been uttered on a regular basis by local politicians. The main ambition is the improvement of the image of Wesseling through a realistic exposure to the chemical industries. Only by accepting that Wesseling is an industrial town, whose beauty one has to discover, and acting upon it, can Wesseling develop new self-esteem. By profiling Wesseling as a Town of Excellence in Chemistry (*Chemiekompetenzstadt*) the chemical industry should become the trademark of Wesseling. It was a signal towards the chemical industry that the town is proud of its entrepreneurs and not ashamed of the clearly visible installations dominating the townscape. The

![Chemical production sites in Wesseling](Source: Ralf Schuhmann, Regionale 2010 Agentur)
chemical sector, in turn, would profit from a strong location (better access to new recruits, strong economic cluster). Chemtech is tightly interwoven with two other Regionale projects in Wesseling: the Rhine waterfront and the regeneration of the town centre, which have been combined in a joint perspective for Wesseling (Stadt Wesseling and Regionale 2010 Agentur, 2007). This highly ambitious plan turned the existing urban development policy upside down. In the past Wesseling tried to uphold the image of a suburban town and to stick to its identity as a village on the Rhine. It was clear that in order to realise such an ambitious goal, the cooperation of the chemical sector would be essential.

The municipality of Wesseling in the Rhine-Erft-County seized the window of opportunity that has been offered via the Regionale programme. It planned to invest around €20 million in redressing the chemical legacy and upgrading the built environment. The Regionale 2010 Agency was delighted by this innovative and ambitious idea. Wesseling has been strongly involved in the Regionale 2010, with projects in four project families. The popular and ambitious mayor, Günter Ditgens, and the progressive urban planners working for the municipality have been the driving forces behind Chemtech and the overall Regionale process. The municipality used the Regionale programme in an instrumental way to distinguish itself and therefore refused a closer cooperation with a similar Regionale project just a few kilometres away, as was suggested by the Regionale 2010 Agency. The Chemergie project in Hürth-Knapsack was seen as competing with rather than complementary to Chemtech. Nonetheless, the Regionale 2010 Agency strongly supported the idea from the very beginning and encouraged the municipality in its ambitions.

The key symbolic marker is Forum Chemtech at the Rhine waterfront near the town centre (Figure 4.3). This building should become a place where Wesseling and the three companies could present themselves and provide insights on production processes, products and competences. It should function as extracurricular educational establishment, meeting point for the chemical industry, and tourist attraction. Integrated in the redesign of the waterfront it was the ambition to create a ‘Chemistry Landscape Park’, an authentic place with an excellent industrial panorama. Besides this concentrated interventions at the Rhine, markers such as information boards at the light-rail stations, observation platforms or signs try to catch attention and change the perception of the spectator at key points, which offer spectacular views. Furthermore it involves a series of activities to promote Wesseling as a Town of
Excellence in Chemistry, ranging from open days (or nights) of the chemical industry (which exist but are not yet integrated in a single event), bringing together local and regional education institutes with the chemical industries, summer schools, regional networking and branding activities (Regionale 2010 Agentur, 2009).

The chemical sector embraced the Chemtech idea. In particular the clear commitment of Wesseling to its legacy as a town with chemistry earned much approval among the three major chemical companies and their regional location-marketing organisation ChemCologne. They were also enticed by the idea of an educational network since this would improve the availability of new recruits. However, all three major companies are part of global players whose headquarters are outside the region and two underwent change of ownership in recent years. All sites are important production locations but, on the downside, no research and development or higher management functions are involved. In

![Figure 4.3](image_url)  
**Figure 4.3** Intervention space of Chemtech and the Regionale 2010 in Wesseling (Source: Regionale 2010 Agentur, 2009)
spite of the companies’ long-standing history in Wesseling there are no strong ties with the town. Above all, it was unclear what would exactly happen in the ‘Forum’ and how the companies could profit from it. Chemtech was regarded as a far-reaching project that would present Wesseling and the chemical sector in a new light, but its price was considered rather high. They were asked for a significant contribution to the Forum Chemtech (total costs about €2 million) and in particular to cover the operating costs (about €300 000 per annum). Funding for a key element leaned on the potential contributions of the private sector. With the financial crisis, the companies became even more reluctant to contribute financially to the project on a structural basis.

The reluctance of the chemical companies was aided with a clear vote of Wesseling’s citizens. The design for the Rhine waterfront and in particular the key symbolic marker was heavily criticised. The Forum Chemtech, a five-story glass tower as high as the church tower, was considered a too prominent symbolic marker for the chemical industry and the wrong place; paid by public money, without knowing exactly who will use this building. The jury, which included all Council groups, decided consciously for this powerful marker and ignored critical remarks that were voiced during a public hearing. Not only did the building equal the church tower in size, the park design also foresaw the cutting down of a lime tree avenue typical for Rhine villages. It represented the last part of Wesseling that has not been subject to the urban renewal of the 1970s. Here the still prevalent ideal of being a Rhine village clashed with the industrial pride the project was striving to activate. An action committee (Bürgerinitiative Rheinufer Wesseling) was formed to halt the plans for the Rhine waterfront and gained considerable support. This was helped by the fact that the results of the competition were kept undisclosed to present them a few weeks later at a town festival, but leaked despite the agreement of the political parties. As a consequence there was a lively debate in the local media on the plans in the six weeks between the jury’s decision and the presentation to the citizens. Due to this strong marker the other elements of Chemtech received very little attention. The Regionale 2010 became rather unpopular with some inhabitants, because they felt it was going to realise its own projects in Wesseling. What followed was a gradual demise of Chemtech. As a result of the strong protest the glass tower disappeared from the project proposal and the waterfront design was adapted several times—tree by tree.

The dispute about Chemtech had clear repercussions in the political sphere. The mayor, Günter Ditgens, who had pushed the project through, was over-
thrown in December 2008, when his party (the Christian-democratic CDU) did not nominate him as a candidate for the local elections. Now it became apparent that Chemtech was weakly rooted in the political realm, despite the fact that his party had approved all decisions concerning Chemtech in the town council (Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 2008), but exclusively identified with the mayor. As a consequence, Mr Ditgens distanced himself from Chemtech. Still, Mr Ditgens lost the elections and Chemtech its key leader. The increasing budget problems of the municipality through the financial crisis functioned all Regionale activities were questioned. In a town council meeting in 2009, Chemtech has been deferred indefinitely, despite financial concessions of the Land government. “Leave it as it is” is one of the slogans of the action committee (Figure 4.4). For the time being, this has become reality for the material symbolic markers of Chemtech.

The symbolic marking offered the ingredients for a transformation from an industrial town with a negative image into a town that presents its chemical tradition with new self-consciousness, but Chemtech collapsed like a house of cards. Chemtech leaned heavily on the unfulfilled contributions

Figure 4.4 Protest flyer: “Leave it as it is [in local dialect]! Wesseling has other problems!” (Source: Bürgerinitiative Rheinufer Wesseling)
of the chemical industry, which paid lip service but never announced a definitive commitment, while the municipality kept on pushing the idea independent of financial prospects. Chemtech has always been an initiative of the local authority and failed to activate the local responsibility of the private sector. The civic domain was not actively involved (e.g. the companies’ pensioners’ associations or the local historical society). The political realm did not object to the plans but it also did not back the mayor in a critical situation, which indicates weak political embedding. Once the design for the Rhine waterfront including the five-story glass tower caused a stir among citizens, there was no support base the municipality could fall back onto. The old institutions of ignoring the chemical legacy and pretending to be a typical town on the Rhine prevailed. While these two legacies could coexist in the past, these came into conflict at the Rhine waterfront. One could say that the misplaced symbolic marker overshadowed the rest of the project. The lack of embedding made reframing difficult though not impossible under these circumstances.

**Terra Nova: remaking the ‘active brown-field landscape’**

The northern Rhine-Erft-County in the urban periphery of Cologne is literally the powerhouse of the Rhineland. The lignite-fired power plants in the district account for 13% of Germany’s electricity production. Since almost a century, lignite mines operating in open-pits (Tagebau) are scattered over the region and have transformed the Rhenish Mining District into a lunar landscape. The Tagebau Hambach is the largest open-pit mine in Germany with a crater of 45km² and up to 450m deep. Gigantic bucket wheel excavators and mega power plants serve as distinct landmarks. Once a deposit is mined out, land rehabilitation begins and conceals the remnants of the mining activities according to long-term plans. This all happens in the commuter belt of Cologne. While lignite has brought welfare into this agricultural area, on the downside, thousands of people had to be resettled and large bio-habitats as well as highly productive arable land have been destroyed. The whole region is confronted with hydrological problems and dust particle emissions. In conjunction with intensive agriculture in an area with highly fertile ground, it can be easily anticipated that the region lacks a strong positive image. In the framework of the Regionale 2010 the municipalities of Bergheim (pop. 62 000), Bedburg (pop. 25 000) and Elsdorf (pop. 21 000) grasped the opportunity to address this active brownfield landscape. Although operations will continue for another three decades, there is a need
to think about the time after lignite mining. How can a group of three municipalities develop a new relationship towards this cultural landscape and modernise its economic profile in a region that is so strongly dominated by lignite mining?

Terra Nova finds its roots in the beginning of the 2000s. There were signs that due to a readjustment of the industrial land policy of the Land government a 215ha-large area reserved for large-scale industries in the Land Development Plan would become available for the municipalities, if they came up with a convincing concept. But it was only when the Rhine-Erft-County joined in that it developed into a project proposal for the Regionale 2010. This was mutually beneficial; the municipalities profited from the leading position of the Rhine-Erft-County in the Regionale 2010 (the county leader chairs the Regionale Board) and in return many projects would underline its leadership. When it was proposed as a Regionale project around the year 2005, it soon became clear that a simple inter-municipal technology park would be insufficient to fulfil the criteria of the Gardens of Technology project family. The contours of Terra Nova as presented below developed only much later through persistent and persuasive advocacy work of the Regionale 2010 Agency.

Terra Nova symbolically refers to the continuous making of new land through open-pit mining; yet, this time in a different manner. Whereas the conventional re-cultivation practice restores the landscape as if mining

![Figure 4.5 The Rhenish Mining District: bucket wheel excavator in the Tagebau Hambach (left) and the energy landscape with the Niederaußem Power Station in the back (right) (Source: Ralf Schuhmann/Regionale 2010 Agentur)](image)
did not take place, Terra Nova introduces a new perspective under the label ‘Energy Landscape of the Future’ (Zukunftslandschaft Energie). It aims to strengthen regional identity, develop a spectacular and attractive landscape by anticipating the spatial changes through the advancing mining activities, and provide a structural impulse for the region’s economy (Planungsverband Terra Nova et al., 2009). Terra Nova promotes a new understanding of the energy production landscape as authentic cultural landscape, which does not cover the tracks of mining but integrates the installations and structures into the future landscape. The current mining activities are presented as logical part of the identity in the guise of an open-air exhibition of active production processes. Now it is the time to set the course for the time after lignite mining by profiling the region as a strong location for energy production and research in order to anticipate structural change. It is also a step to take the future in own hands and regain full planning sovereignty (Planungshoheit) after decades of being governed by mining policy and commissions at higher levels. Terra Nova was about to change dominant practices and interfered in effective re-cultivation plans that had been carefully negotiated between the land claims of the agricultural sector, environmental organisations, the municipalities and other stakeholders. In order to realise such an ambitious project implied fostering an open-minded attitude to do things differently, mobilise all kind of actors and align investments of the mining company with the intentions of the local authorities.

These premises have been developed into a master plan that marks a change in dealing with the active brownfield landscape and establish an Energy Landscape of the Future. It involves a series of smaller and larger symbolic markers, visible and palpable items that simultaneously reminisce to the past and a new future. So-called Blue Boxes inform visitors at various places about the Energy Landscape of the Future. The master plan comprises of four building blocks that are spatially and conceptually integrated and symbolise the ‘new land’ that is to be emerging (Figure 4.6):

> The edge of the Tagebau Hambach will become a park (Time Park) with a promenade (Time Line) and a visitor centre designed in the form of a massive boulder (Forum Terra Nova). The ‘time’ metaphor is used because the Tagebau progresses along this edge and all steps of the metamorphosis through mining become visible here—a process of a mere century. Earth walls, which protect Elsdorf from dust particle emissions, have been opened up to allow for spectacular views into the pit and, once the groundwater has filled up the hole, over one of the largest lakes in Germany.
The conveyor belt has been used for the transportation of excavation material to refill the Tagebau Bergheim. After being dismantled, it has left a 14km-long, barrier-free track that is tucked away behind earth walls. Instead of levelling the land as determined by mining law the artificial topography will be kept as a reminder of the mining activities. Connecting all the other building blocks of Terra Nova the route will form an important green and leisure connection for the region.

The Inter-Municipal Competence Area involves a long-term strategy to establish a technology park with a focus on energy industry and agriculture. In the long run the municipalities strive for a combination of the know-how in energy production and agriculture, successively attracting companies in the energy sector through spatial proximity to innovation.

The Niederaußem power station will be further developed as Coal Innovation Centre. Building on the most efficient generating unit of the world that has been installed at Niederaußem in 2003, it clusters important research and development into future oriented technologies of RWE Power. It should become a significant information point, where research projects and pilot plants for sustainable electricity generation based on coal are presented to the wider public.

It has been clear to the public parties that the plans would be impossible to deliver without RWE Power (hereafter RWE), the most powerful actor of the region. As one interviewee has put it nicely: “The Bildregie (power over imagery) has always been in the hand of the actor with the largest excavator. To form the land, you need to get access to the actor with the largest machine” (my translation). The company is penetrating into almost all aspects of social life in the Rhenish Mining District. Lignite mining has been strongly backed by Land government, despite increasing environmental concerns. RWE has a large planning department and even runs economic development policies. Operations are planned decades ahead and negotiated in the Braunkohleausschuss (regional mining committee), from land acquisition and resettlements to land restoration, with limited influence for local authorities. Yet, the economic prosperity of the energy company rests upon a high acceptance in the population, into which it is willing to invest. That also involves proving itself as a very reliable partner for the municipalities; being always willing to listen to their problems and to think ahead on an informal basis. RWE committed itself to the project because it is important for them to have a positive message towards the region. The symbolisation of an energy landscape of the future including coal technology was obviously
appealing as well. Therefore RWE invests an extra €4.5 million and operates the Forum Terra Nova. Mining law imposes a lot of obligations on RWE to restore the landscape, which only had to be redirected: instead of levelling the conveyor belt RWE was landscaping it, which makes this element by and large cost-neutral. On top of that it also invests in pilots, amongst €10 million into a biogas plant on the new technology park (via its renewable energy branch). Nonetheless, the support of RWE is not unlimited and they only do what is in line with their corporate policy.

The idea of energy agriculture required the mobilisation of the agricultural sector, another powerful actor. The farms in the area are relatively profitable, with a long-standing tradition of cultivating sugar beets and grain on the highly fertile soils. There is no wider tendency of diversifying business models despite being part of a metropolitan region. The farmers in the area are reckoned particularly conservative and listen invariably to the market. The farmers, represented by their professional organisation (Landwirtschaftsverband), reacted with reserve to the idea of energy plants and were rather concerned over the loss of arable land through Terra Nova. The

**Figure 4.6** The master plan ‘Terra Nova—Energy Landscape of the Future’ (Source: Planungsverband Terra Nova and RWE Power AG. Design: bbz landschaftsarchitekten, Berlin; arch42, Berlin; Lohrberg stadtlandschaftsarchitektur, Stuttgart).
Chamber of Agriculture (Landwirtschaftskammer), a semi-public body with a different function that takes a broader view on agriculture, sympathised with the idea of Terra Nova, because there was some insecurity about the continuation of EU subsidies for sugar beets when the idea came up, and Terra Nova provided an alternative option for the sector. However, since formal planning instruments are unable to prescribe the type of crops the idea of energy agriculture is likely to remain a political wish, unless market conditions change.

The public and local politicians were intensively informed on the plans. The inclusion of RWE paid back in the process since it is very experienced in communication with local parties due to numerous resettlement projects. There were excursions with local political parties and associations. Results from workshops were immediately reconnected with the political realm. In addition, mining is deeply rooted in the identity of the region. Highlighting this history and delivering an exciting and attractive landscape was therefore no problem. Terra Nova brought them green space, and that is what they notice. It was opening up formerly inaccessible land that was almost entirely owned by RWE. The region has many environmental groups against lignite mining and electricity production, but green space could not be a cause for objections. Since the project was almost entirely paid for by external actors, RWE and the Land, it was perceived as a benefit for the area.

For the time being, the symbolic marking of an Energy Landscape of the Future, has succeeded to mobilise key stakeholders and has achieved important milestones. The conveyor belt opened for the public in 2010 and the construction works of Forum Terra Nova have been started. For the planning, development and exploitation of technology park the Terra Nova Partnership (Zweckverband) has been established in 2010 by the three municipalities and the county, with RWE in an advisory function. RWE and the Forschungszentrum Jülich established the joint research project Terra Nova Science on bioenergy. The reasons for the successful start of Terra Nova are twofold. First, the public authorities have been very aware of the existing power relations. They have managed to retrieve political power to design their future more independently not against but with RWE. It implied carefully manoeuvring in order to avoid affronting RWE on the one hand and carrying out their public relations on the other. Though the agricultural sector is not actively involved, arrangements have been made so that the plans can go through. Second, the energy theme as the subject matter of the symbolic marking clearly refers to the region’s identity, of which lignite mining is a defining feature. It is thus in-
ternalised in the mind-set of citizens and politicians. In addition, the benefits of green infrastructure and economic development policy were easy to convey to citizens. Whether the science park will flourish remains to be seen—many hopes still rest on RWE.

**Conclusion**

This paper looked at two cases of planning strategies that tried to organise stable governance arrangements in order to alter dominant spatial practices by means of symbolic markers. The public sector relies increasingly on external parties with access to resources and attempts to align them with the public interest. In order to create stable governance arrangements, policymakers need to take into account the prevailing power asymmetries and the intrinsic motives of stakeholders to engage in the symbolisation of a different future. Looking at the two dimensions of the prevailing power asymmetries, as defined by varying access to economic and political resources, and by the embedding of symbolic markers in the institutionalised pattern of thought of various stakeholders and citizens, the research provides a better understanding of processes of transforming the meaning of place. In both cases, the symbolisation connected with the vital heritage of the two places, trying to transform the predominant perceptions and impose a new understanding of these particular localities. The Chemtech approach, highlighting the qualities of the chemical town, failed to form a stable coalition and organise public support for its concern. The dominant institutional practices of keeping urban development and the chemical legacy at distance proved too powerful. The three municipalities of Terra Nova, in contrast, were quite successful in forming a stable yet small network to establish a new development path together with the dominant private sector company and the support of local politics. What were the reasons for the different outcomes and the different levels of support for efforts to symbolise a different future?

At first glance the power asymmetries appear to be similar. In both cases large conglomerates with a long-standing history have a large impact on the local economy and topography. It was difficult, though not impossible, to realise each project without the cooperation of the private sector. However, there are some crucial differences with respect to the position of the private sector between Chemtech and Terra Nova. The mutual interdependencies with the public sector are much stronger in the case of the energy company in Terra Nova, than they are with the chemical companies in Wesseling. RWE’s operations are place-bound by nature through the deposits but
also through the power stations and investments in research and development. The importance of maintaining a high level of acceptance for their activities makes it a problem owner. The Chemtech project, in contrast, was clearly rooted in the aspirations of the municipality (or the mayor) to reinvent the ‘chemistry town’. For the chemical companies Wesseling is an important production site, but their respective command centres are located elsewhere, and thus their community engagement is limited to small-scale activities. Their importance for the local tax base is already sufficient to receive the political support by the municipality that is necessary for their operations. The chemical industry was hesitant in providing the financial resources and the municipality did not have the means for a successful symbolic production. Thus the relationship was rather one-sided. Chemtech revealed a sort of planning voluntarism: nice ideas but unrealistic as a strategy for change.

Symbolic markers need to be embedded in the mind-sets of various actors. The instituting of a different perception of place via symbolic markers requires actors who adhere to the new spatial practice. Therefore, the message of symbolisation must not conflict with their internal compass. By again contrasting Chemtech and Terra Nova we encounter differences that help explain their outcomes. Overall, Chemtech was less connected with the various domains of stakeholders, which explains why the project came to a halt. Regarding the public sector, the fact that Terra Nova involved three municipalities plus the county created a kind of reciprocity that was missing in the Chemtech project to sustain it through a critical phase. The attempts to activate local responsibility of external entrepreneurs were not compelling. The motives of the private sector to participate differed considerably and so the chemical companies were not convinced enough by the benefits of the project for them, whereas for RWE the polishing of their image and the good relations with local authorities were sufficient. In both cases, civic groups were not actively involved in planning, whereby positive energy has been missed out. For citizens, Terra Nova had a positive message: it created recreational space on land that had long been inaccessible and channelled investment into economic development. In Chemtech the strong symbolic marker at the waterfront to serve the chemical legacy of Wesseling conflicted with the still strong image of the Rhine village. Thus it was civil society that brought Chemtech to a halt. This enabled the chemical companies and politicians to retreat with more ease. In conclusion, successful symbolisation rests upon the inclusion of key norm holders to impose new meaning as it were from inside out. Planning requires
sound knowledge of the intrinsic motives of private sector parties if they are to be mobilised. Using symbolic markers that are not embedded in the sense of place and the patterns of thought of various actors may pose a barrier to desired outcomes.

References


