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Structure and imagination of the 21st-century city: the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation

[Dembski, S. (submitted)]

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are witnessing the emergence of a new urban configuration, marked by enlarged scale, polycentrism and strong cities. The settled institutions of the 'old' city, with its hierarchical, centripetal development model, are challenged time and again through spatial dynamics. They prove rather reluctant to change and tend to reproduce the city of the past. This article offers a sociological-institutional approach to analyse how the institutions of the 'old' city are challenged, looking at the role of symbolic markers in planning strategies as an explanation for the institutional activation of the city of the 21st century. The analysis of the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation in the UK, where the settled institutions have been challenged by a conurbation-wide investment strategy of a private sector company, provides the empirical material to discover the mechanisms.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are witnessing the emergence of a new urban configuration in European cities, a process that had set in much earlier in North America (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Anas et al., 1998; Hall and Pain, 2006; Phelps and Wood, 2011; Soja, 2000). The functional city stretches far beyond the administrative boundaries of cities and conventional forms of city-regional governance. What distinguishes the current round of urban transformation is not so much the continuous process of urban extension, but the transformation of the city and the 'periphery' itself. The city of the 21st century is highly fragmented due to functional specialisation and spatial segregation. The centripetal model of urban development has given way to a more poly-nuclear form with a varied urban hierarchy, despite the resurgence of many central cities over the last decade or so (Parkinson et al., 2006). The distinction between town and countryside, which tended to dominate our spatial thinking, has become blurred, leaving cities with large transitions zones that form a spatial in-between (Gallent and Andersson, 2007; Sieverts, 2003). In some cases, the increased scale of cities has led to the collision of once independent metropolitan areas, prompting new urban dynamics in the spatial in-between (Champion, 2001; Lang and Knox, 2009).

While socio-spatial patterns have changed dramatically, most urban policies tend to reproduce the image of the 'old' city of the 20th century. Planners and policymakers have paid little attention to the spatial in-between of the vast urban landscapes. They rather emphasise powerful concepts and policies intended to guard and reproduce the prevailing idea of compact cities, independent of changing spatial dynamics. There is an interest in the new city but policy initiatives stimulating cooperation are still few and far between. Many cities have established some forms of cooperation with their immediate neighbours, usually labelled in policy as the city-region, but have difficulties organising themselves at a higher level of scale and adapting to the changing urban form (Evers and de Vries, 2012; Janssen-Jansen and Hutton, 2011; Lefèvre, 2010; Salet et al., 2003).

The argument is straightforward: settled institutions prove very strong in reacting to interventions aiming to change perceptions of the contemporary metropolis. In order to take effect in initiating a changed understanding of cities, planning strategies require symbolic markers that are institutionally grounded in the social-spatial dynamics and institutional thought. This article offers a sociological-institutional approach to analyse how the institutions of the 'old' city are challenged, and pays particular attention to the role of symbolic markers in the institutional activation of new planning strategies for the city of the 21st century. Here symbolic markers refer to a series of artefacts, images or tropes that convey a message, such as spatial imagery and metaphors, iconic architecture, landmarks and artistic performances. In so doing, the article links symbolic markers with institutional thought. In a concrete instance of institutional innovation through policy, the article demonstrates that cities usually remain within the traditional image of the city.

The urbanised zone of the Manchester and Liverpool city-regions provides an excellent case study to analyse how institutions react to attempts to adapt to the emerging conurbation. Recently a private sector company has made an effort to break up the governance impasse between the two major cities in the North West. By employing a series of symbolic markers—powerful (planning) imagery and flagship projects—it is trying to attract buy-in from a variety of actors so as to stage an economic growth agenda across the two city-regions. To anticipate my conclusions, the symbolic markers of the private-sector company and local authorities, particularly Manchester, have not fully met. The local authorities have difficulties organising themselves at the scale the private sector company is operating and have retreated into their established city-regional habitats—assisted by central government policies. The findings are

based on interviews with planners, policymakers, politicians and academics undertaken in the beginning of 2011 (i.e. after the abolition of regional institutions had been announced).

The remainder of this article is as follows. In the theoretical framework I briefly outline the institutional approach to link spatial imagination to structure. The next section provides the context of the case study, starting with the presentation of existing spatial evidence on the emergence of a Manchester–Liverpool conurbation, in order to be able to set the imagination off against real urban dynamics (see the argument in Harding, 2007), and briefly introduces recent changes in English regional planning, which are essential for the understanding of the case. Next, the planning initiative is introduced and its symbolic markers are identified. Subsequently, the institutionalisation of the concept during the turbulent period of suspended regional institutions is outlined. We then analyse why the symbolisation of Atlantic Gateway did not fully succeed in activating a new way of thinking for the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation. In the conclusion, some general issues that constrain a stronger anchoring in the mindset of stakeholders are identified.

Changing cities and institutional change

The 20th century was the era of city-regions, following the common interpretation in many policies, which defines city-regions as the core city and its immediate surroundings (Parr, 2005, p. 564). At the beginning of the 21st century, there is a considerable body of literature that points to the emergence of new urban forms. The traditional concentric growth pattern with a clear hierarchy has given way to multifaceted forms of urban development. New employment hubs have emerged in the outskirts of cities, transforming the city-centred configurations of the previous century into new settings of urban polycentricism (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Anas et al., 1998; Hall and Pain, 2006; Phelps and Wood, 2011; Soja, 2000). For the US, Lang and Knox (2009, p. 794–799) predict that, in the very near future, once distinct city-regions will become economically integrated, with all sorts of activities emerging in the spatial in-between. We can observe at least three processes operating in parallel: first, continued urban extension; second, the transformation of the suburbs; and more recently the resurgence of central cities. These processes of spatial dispersion and polycentricism (Meijers and Burger, 2010) are more or less pronounced, depending on, for example, economic conditions and (planning) policies. The contemporary urban dynamics are not short of terminologies, but Geddes' proposition of 'conurbations' to terminologically grasp vast city

regions (Geddes, 1915, p. 34), still seems very appropriate for urban regions covering multiple larger and smaller urban cores.

For a variety of reasons, the city of the 21st century is not yet taken for granted in planning thinking, despite the abundance of studies pointing to changing cities. Cities, today, might be regarded as an 'out-dated entity' (Harrison, 2012, p. 1244; Parr, 2007), but for a variety of reasons the spatial in-between still tends to be ignored. There are often powerful planning concepts in place with a lasting legacy, such as compact cities policies or green belts. While concepts preventing sprawl are perfectly legitimate, they diverted our attention by obscuring the real changes occurring, pretending the city has not changed. Another important reason is urban politics. Phelps and Wood (2011, p. 2598) rightly observe a 'shifting centre of gravity', with new growth coalitions emerging in the urban fringe, while the core city remains a powerful factor. Territorial politics are still very much alive: new developments frequently result in conflicts between the core city and suburban local authorities, and only in some cases lead to new coalitions overcoming the centre-periphery dichotomy (Keil, 2011; Salet and Gualini, 2007; Savini, 2012). Moreover, the new meaning of cities has not yet been internalised and therefore the traditional mental map of the city prevails in our thinking. In sum, there are powerful institutions reproducing the city of the 20th century, but these are challenged in daily practices.

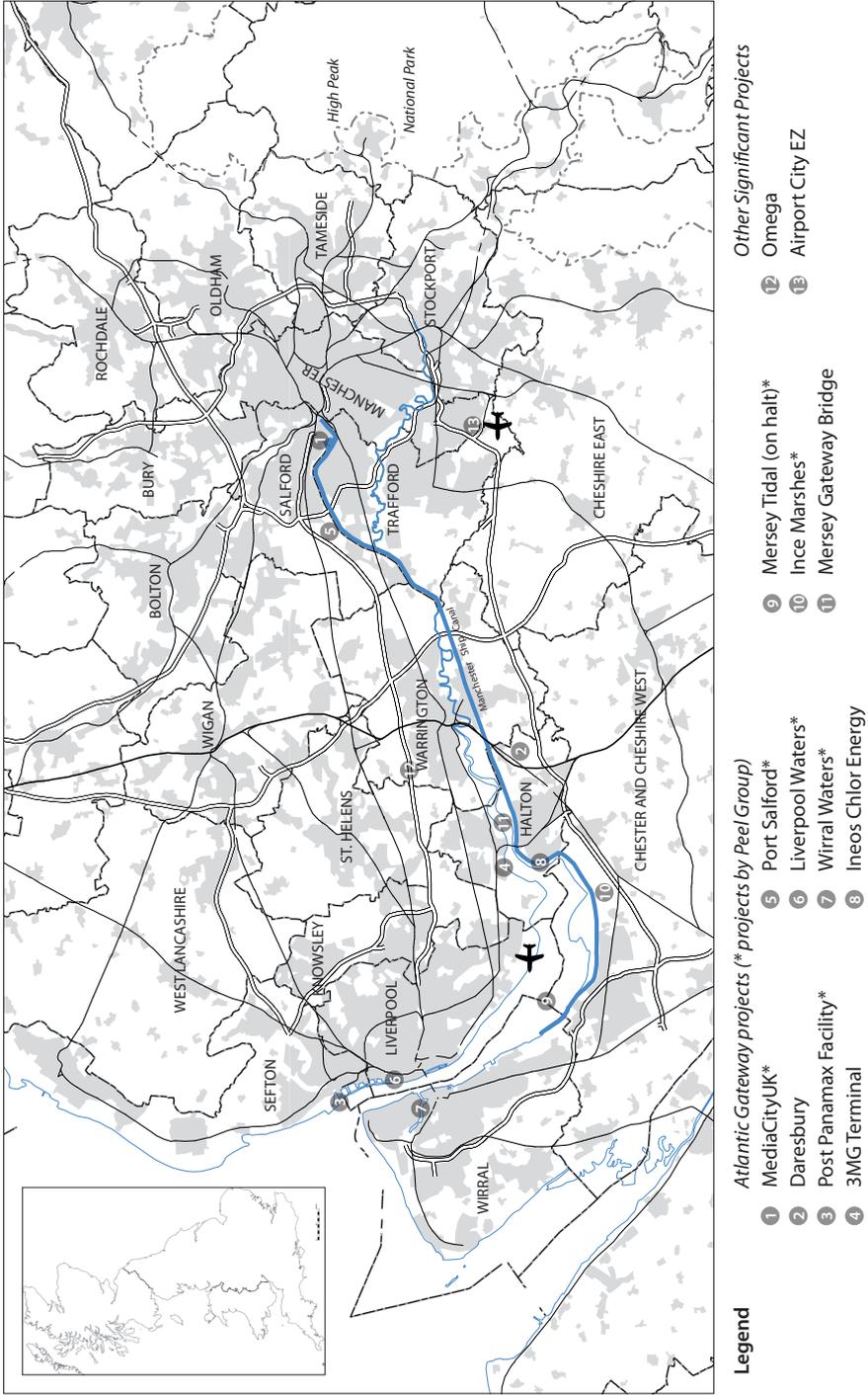
There is a wide interest in institutional change in planning, how it works and how it can be initiated (e.g. Buitelaar et al., 2007; Dembski and Salet, 2010; Gonzáles and Healey, 2005; Gualini, 2004; Moulaert and Mehmood, 2009; Salet, 2002; Verma, 2007). The institutional paradigm looks at how institutions shape and are shaped by actors within a defined action arena (Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995; Ostrom, 2005). Sociologically, institutions are defined as patterns of social rules and norms—including informal routines—that define normative patterns of expectation (Gonzáles and Healey, 2005). They constitute access to resources and power relations (i.e. asymmetries) between actors. Institutions are not taken for granted; they are dynamic and continuously evolving, yet usually durable in character (Salet, 2002). Their existence is proven in action and not on paper, or as Ostrom (2005, p. 824) puts it, we need to focus our analysis on 'rules-in-use' and not 'rules-in-form'. Another important feature of the sociological institutionalism is the internalisation of norms, rules and practices in the actors' mindset. Even rational goal-seeking behaviour is a result of institutional inscription. So-called 'frames of meaning' (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 947), which form a sort of internal compass for action, are

sustained by a cognitive-symbolic system. This is where spatial imagination via symbolic markers becomes a relevant element in institutional change.

By visually or rhetorically marking transformative processes, planners aim to place a certain area or process under a magnifying glass and, in so doing, institute new meaning (Dembski and Salet, 2010). We label these linguistic tropes and material artefacts that are employed to signify change ‘symbolic markers’. Paasi (2009) reminds us that region-building—the institutionalisation and thus internalisation of new spatial formations—is not only a matter of spatial-functional area (territory) and institutional form, but also of symbols. Besides naming, this involves the choice of ‘iconography’ that symbolises the existence of a region to the inside and the outside world (Paasi, 2009, p. 135). The 21st-century city needs to become part of the everyday knowledge of planners, policymakers and politicians, as well as the private sector and citizens in order to become a naturally accepted level of scale for (spatial) policies. Successful symbolic markers are able to imprint new meaning, that is, creating a mental construct—frame of meaning—that changes our perception of the city (Goffman, 1974). Thus, symbolic markers play an important role in planning, and that is why strategies for change often use them as a vehicle for mobilising a variety of actors.

Not every symbolic marker becomes so powerful as to structure action and become norm setting by itself. A common misconception in planning theory and practice, in particular among institutional designers, is that new institutions only need to be created to have a structuring effect. This is often the case with the call for administrative restructuring or all-encompassing master plans. There the restructuring or plan becomes an end rather than a means. However, the transformative potential of symbolic markers is not so much in the imagination itself, but in the embedding of meaning in wider processes and arenas. It is here that the imagination for a different future acquires real meaning. In order to have effect, symbols need to be inculcated as being real (Bourdieu, 1991). Spatial imaginations are not detached from power struggles on the ground. The world is pre-conditioned by all sorts of vested interests, social norms and existing power asymmetries. If imagination ignores these social structures, it will fail. In order to be successful, imagination needs to link up with the objective interests of actors and meet the cultural norms; otherwise initiatives for change may face institutional inertia. This is the case with so many planning strategies that went against powerful social dynamics. Powerful planning concepts serve the needs of powerful coalitions and have ‘landed’ in the actors’ mindset, which justified their existence.

Figure 5.1 Key projects in the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation (Map: Ordnance Survey)



Analytically, the paper considers the relationship of symbolic markers and institutions to explain the institutionalisation of the 21st-century city in policy practice. In order to do so, we need to take into account three interrelated processes of space formation through socio-economic dynamics, formal institutions and symbolisation that are important to researching the imagination of the 21st-century city (institutionalisation). We therefore start with empirical evidence of an emerging functional Manchester–Liverpool conurbation. We then analyse the formal institutional conditions that define the context for the case study. Having outlined the functional-territorial and the institutional ‘shape(s)’ in the conurbation, the study analyses the symbolic markers used to signify the emergence of the ‘new’ conurbation that challenge the status quo. The main focus is on the institutionalisation process, that is, the formal establishment of the strategy and the institutional embedding of symbolic markers in the mindset of various actors.

Spatial and institutional dynamics: Liverpool, Manchester and the spatial in-between

We now turn to the discussion of the Liverpool–Manchester conurbation, also often referred to as the Mersey Belt, in the North West of England (Figure 1). This densely populated area, including Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Halton and Warrington unitary authorities, and northern Cheshire, is home to about 4.5 million inhabitants. Although the relationship between Liverpool and Manchester has been characterised as symbiotic, the dominating picture is one of competition and deeply rooted rivalry (Harding et al., 2004). The Manchester Ship Canal plays a crucial role in the mythology of the relation. Built by Manchester businessmen in the late 19th century to bypass the Port of Liverpool and avoid its port charges, Manchester became a seaport that was accessible to ocean-going ships. The two main centres, Manchester and Liverpool, are 50 kilometres apart, connected by the River Mersey and the Manchester Ship Canal. The main transport axes linking the North West with London, the West Coast Main Line and the M6, intersect the Liverpool–Manchester corridor halfway. What are the socio-spatial dynamics in this region, and, more importantly, in which direction do they point?

From the 1930s onwards, both cities faced severe economic crisis, resulting in heavy population decline (Table 5.1), exacerbated by central government’s post-war decentralisation policy (Hall et al., 1973). In the North West a series of new towns was realised, including Skelmersdale (1961), Runcorn (1964), Warrington (1968) and Central Lancashire (1970), to relieve the core cities of

their housing problems. All of them were actually built outside Merseyside and Greater Manchester. With the economic crisis unfolding in the 1970s, the new towns sucked (working) population away from the already suffering urban areas. Furthermore, population moved into Cheshire and North Wales. Only recently, the central cities have undergone an urban renaissance. Quite remarkably, Manchester grew by more than 100,000 inhabitants in the decade since 2001, and also Liverpool stopped its decline (Table 5.1). From the 1990s onwards, Manchester's significant transformation started, often referred to as the 'Manchester miracle' (Harding et al., 2010). Liverpool lagged behind, due to its militant leadership in the 1980s and early 1990s, and only started to catch up in the 2000s (Cocks, 2009; Harding et al., 2004). Manchester is undoubtedly the capital of the North with a buoyant economy, while Liverpool's recovery is still fragile (Centre for Cities, 2011).

Despite the core cities' recovery, economic growth is not exclusively realised in there. Important strategic regional sites that have been identified in the *Regional Economic Strategy* are located in the corridor between the two cities, such as Daresbury in Halton, and Omega in Warrington (Wray, 2011). Manchester Airport, the busiest airport in the UK outside London, grew as an important economic hub at the southernmost edge of Greater Manchester, located on the East-West axis (M56) that serves northern Cheshire. Warrington

Table 5.1 Population figures of the Mersey Belt, 1931–2011 (Source: *A Vision of Britain Through Time* based on Census Data, <http://visionofbritain.org.uk>)

	1931	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Liverpool	*856	791	746	610	504	452	°439	466
Merseyside (without Liverpool)	°653	824	924	*1,017	999	951	923	915
Halton	°65	79	87	96	122	125	118	*126
Liverpool City Region (with Halton)	1,574	1,693	*1,757	1,723	1,625	1,529	°1,480	°1,506
Warrington	°120	155	159	163	167	185	191	*202
Cheshire (County)	°396	471	534	606	633	656	674	*700
Manchester	*766	703	662	544	438	405	°393	503
Greater Manchester (without Manchester)	°1,956	2,000	2,087	*2,188	2,138	2,132	2,090	2,131
Greater Manchester	2,722	2,700	2,749	2,731	2,575	2,537	°2,484	2,629

* / ° = highest/lowest population (1931–2011)

is one of the most buoyant towns in the UK (Centre for Cities, 2011), because of excellent connections with the two cities and London as well as the airports. The two former new towns, Warrington and Runcorn, have remaining capacity to accommodate development.

There is a clear trend towards more polycentrism, both within and across city regions (Green, 2008; Hincks, 2012; MIER, 2009; Rees and Harding, 2010). On the basis of census data from 1981 and 2001, Green (2008) found that there is significant and increasing functional poly-centricity on the basis of live-work patterns. Manchester and Liverpool are identified as a functional urban ‘region of two halves’ (Green, 2008, p. 230). It also reveals a clear separation with Leeds city region, which clearly owes to the natural boundary formed by the Pennines (a low mountain range) and Peak District National Park. Obviously, the majority of commuting takes place within a more limited area: both Merseyside and Greater Manchester are subdivided into several travel-to-work areas, though Manchester is clearly the most important and extensive area extending deep into Cheshire. Interestingly, the in-between area with Warrington and Wigan is rather self-contained (MIER, 2009; ONS, 2007). Manchester and, to a lesser degree, Liverpool are clearly the most important employment hubs, but not the only ones. Yet another study acknowledges the “higher level of labour market interaction found between the areas focused upon Manchester and Liverpool compared to any other pair of urban hubs in the North” (The Northern Way, 2008, §2.1.6).

The Mersey Belt was addressed as a planning space as early as the 1973 *Strategic Plan for the North West*, and reappeared in consecutive planning documents, but only for a brief period of roughly a decade starting in the late 1990s there was a firmly institutionalised regional level in the Northwest, the so-called ‘troika’ consisting of the business-led Northwest Development Agency (NWDA), the indirectly elected North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) and the Government Office for the North West (GO-NW), Central Government’s extended arm into the regions. However, the coordination was problematic, due to an institutional mismatch of resources and competences (Pearce and Ayres, 2006). There were two regional planning documents coexisting, the Regional Economic Strategy and the Regional Spatial Strategy, continuing with the tradition of disintegrated spatial planning and economic development (Bianconi et al., 2006, p. 318). The scheduled Single Regional Strategy that would combine these documents remained at the issues stage because in its first few months in office the Coalition Government effectively announced the end of regional institutions and hence regional

planning. These were the unstable institutional coordinates, caused by frequently changing policy paradigms, during which new planning initiatives for the Mersey Belt took shape.

Already before the abolition of regional institutions the focus of Central Government definitively shifted towards city-regions (Harding et al., 2006; Harrison, 2012; Newman, 2009). In particular Manchester anticipated on the change of government policy by proactively developing city-regional government institutions (Harding et al., 2010, p. 985). Manchester had set up the *Manchester Independent Economic Review* to build the case to Central Government for becoming city-region pilot with devolved powers. On 1 April 2011, finally, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has been established by a parliamentary order. The coherence and leadership of Greater Manchester is extremely strong. It was the only metropolitan council that has continued some form of collaboration since its abolition in 1986 (Harding et al., 2010; Hebbert and Deas, 2000). More recently, Liverpool City Region, is developing city-regional institutions, building on the work of the informal The Mersey Partnership. Its weaker coherence dates back to the performance of Liverpool's militant Labour administration in the 1980s (Cocks, 2009; Harding et al., 2004). Warrington and Cheshire, while being in the catchment area of both city-regions, have resisted attempts to become incorporated. This sub- or city-regional orientation is also expressed in the various forms of collaboration that have succeeded the RDAs. In the North West, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, and Cheshire and Warrington each form a Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), Central Government's new delivery vehicles formed by groups of local authorities and business leaders (HM Government, 2010). LEPs have a much lighter institutional form without any structural government funding, tapping from a new Regional Growth Fund, which is, however, much less sourced (£1.4 billion over three years) than the RDAs (cf. Pearce and Ayres, 2009, p. 544).

The cities have stood back to back for a long time. Attempts to make the local authorities in the Mersey Belt, and in particular Manchester and Liverpool, work together, have proven fruitless so far. A Concordat signed by Liverpool and Manchester in 2001 which forges stronger links between them was described as a defeat of Manchester over Liverpool (*The Independent*, 2001) and this brief period of collaboration fizzled away in no time. The two cities remained fundamentally opposed, despite the attempts of NDWA of bringing them together. This status quo was to be challenged by a remarkable proposal of a private sector individual.

The urban transformation has brought about a varied economic landscape with two main centres and multiple sub-centres. In particular the spatial in-between, with Warrington as the most important node, is functionally integrated in both. While we can observe the recovery of the core cities, with Manchester clearly leading the way, growth is not limited to the central cities only: the conurbation as a whole is growing, in particular southern Greater Manchester, Warrington, and Cheshire. Despite these spatial shifts, there is no clear policy for the poly-nuclear urban landscape that is emerging in England and in the North West in particular. Furthermore, regional policy-making is faced with quite unstable institutional coordinates through frequently changing paradigms, as demonstrated by the lively debate on regionalism and city-regions in England fuelled by the frequency of institutional change initiated by Central Government over the last two decades or so (e.g. Allmendinger and Houghton, 2007; Bianconi et al., 2006; Harding, 2007; Harrisson, 2012; Morgan, 2007; Newman, 2009; Pearce and Ayres, 2006). With the recent round of institutional change, the focus on (narrowly defined) city-regions seems to get the upper hand. For the North West the abolition of regional structures implies that there is no regional authority (nor strongly developed practices of regional governance) covering both cities and their hinterlands.

Bridging the divide: a Thames Gateway for the North

Imagine someone offers to invest £50 billion in your region. This is not one of the typical emails including an untrustworthy financial proposition that arrive daily in our spam boxes but the serious proposal of Peel Holdings, a leading property and transport company in the UK, for the Liverpool–Manchester area. In September 2008 Peel Holdings presented *Ocean Gateway* to more than 100 business leaders—highly symbolically—on a chartered ferry travelling the Manchester Ship Canal. *Ocean Gateway* is Peel's vision for the next 50 years and involves a £50 billion investment strategy for the Manchester Ship Canal corridor, bringing together the Liverpool and Manchester city-regions. Not by coincidence, their landholdings concentrate in this area. By announcing such a massive strategic investment proposal they were forcing the public sector to respond, otherwise a private sector developer will define the regional agenda, without being accountable. Led by the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) it has given rise to a broader process of rethinking the Ship Canal corridor under the name Atlantic Gateway indeed, but it is also challenging the established institutions of two 'isolated' city-regions.

Peel describes itself as one of Britain's leading infrastructure, transport and real estate companies, based in Manchester (though actually located in the Trafford Centre, a huge out-of-town shopping mall in Trafford). It has major landholdings in the North West (about 28,000 acres), stretching from the Mersey Estuary into the heart of Manchester, among which the most important are the Manchester Ship Canal and Mersey Docks and Harbour Company. In a way, it is an old-fashioned company; family owned and still led by its founder, Mr John Whittaker. He is known as a shrewd entrepreneur, who is extremely persistent and often years ahead of the market. The company is known for taking a long-term perspective and has a track record of being able to deliver large projects in a region where this is not taken for granted. Yet it is also known as extremely entrepreneurial, driven by the bottom line.

Ocean Gateway is a regional investment strategy for the corridor encompassing the Manchester and Liverpool city-regions and the spatial in-between. The proposal includes 50 projects that are entirely drawn from their own portfolio, some of which are being realised independent of the concept. They are grouped along three thematic lines (Peel, 2009):

- > *Transport and logistics.* One very powerful marker is the notion of 'Super-Port', which is marked as 'low carbon green corridor' integrating various modalities into a single logistics concept. In particular it wants to make better use of the massively underutilised Ship Canal. It involves key projects such as Liverpool Seaport extension, Port Salford and the improvement of Liverpool Airport.
- > *Communities and regeneration.* Within this strand Peel groups a series of flagship developments, large-scale urban projects, and some smaller housing and business schemes. Most prominent are the £10 billion waterfront developments Wirral and Liverpool Waters on either side of the Mersey, and Media City UK in Salford. Each scheme on its own is of national significance.
- > *Sustainable resources.* The third theme involves large-scale investments in renewable energy and waste projects (e.g. Mersey Tidal Power, Ince Marshes Waste Management Facilities). Yet it also includes green infrastructure projects, in particular the powerful image of an Ocean Gateway Regional Park inspired by Emscher Park in the Ruhr, Germany, and Thames Gateway Parklands, UK.

Though it might not have been a regional strategy, it was presented as one, very much supported by planning arguments. Certainly in its appearance, it does not differ much from typical planning documents by public authorities.

When Ocean Gateway was launched a common reaction was: “It’s too Peel?”. The NWDA took up the gauntlet to build a strategy around Ocean Gateway that would do justice to a much wider agenda than that of a private company only. It commissioned some consultancy to work out Ocean Gateway into something of a regional concept. The NWDA mainly reformulated the evidence base of Ocean Gateway and broadened the concept, as it had to go through a political process in the context of the North West region. Ocean Gateway became *Atlantic Gateway* and was launched in March 2010. Branded as the Thames Gateway of the North, it sets out a framework for becoming a “low carbon, sustainable, economic growth zone of international importance” (NWDA, 2010a, p. 6). Though the reason for the existence of Atlantic Gateway is Peel, the document does not refer to the property company. Despite not being mentioned, Peel can be found everywhere in the document. Among the projects that join immediate priority for action, more than half are by Peel (NWDA, 2010a, p. 5). Atlantic Gateway has a slightly wider geography, in particular including Chester and northern Cheshire, whereas Ocean Gateway was clearly focused on Peel’s land-holdings along the Ship Canal. The central themes of Ocean Gateway have been reshuffled without shifting the general direction, that is logistics, sustainable infrastructure and regeneration, with one exception: housing has been removed from the strategy. It also has been enriched by a number of regional strategic sites (see Wray, 2011), most notably Daresbury Science and Innovation Campus in Halton, one of the sites of Government’s dipolar approach to science and innovation policy (the other being Harwell in Oxfordshire). Atlantic Gateway was a form of institutionalisation of Ocean Gateway: it located the concept of a private sector company in the public realm.

Parallel to and independently from Atlantic Gateway the *Adapting the Landscape* study emerged within the NWDA, which only later became integrated as a sub-strategy in the Atlantic Gateway framework (NWDA, 2010b). Peel’s proposal of a regional park in Ocean Gateway gave the regional environmental planners a hook to commission a landscape strategy, after failed earlier attempts to locate the idea of a regional park system within the Regional Economic Strategy of the NWDA. The study was advanced in close cooperation with the Mersey Basin Campaign, Natural England, Homes and Community Agency, and Peel Holdings. It has been deliberately developed without asking local authorities, simply because of the risk that Manchester might refuse the strategy a priori. Peel recognised the importance of the quality of the environment for their ambitions and therefore regarded *Adapting the Landscape* a very important contribution. As Peel’s respondent put it: “you won’t attract the right

kind of companies employing significant numbers of people, unless you can convince the executives and their families that it was okay to live in this area". The study works very much with economic arguments: green infrastructure as important asset for the quality of life in urban regions to attract talent. It is a landscape-driven study, which takes the spatial in-between—the Mersey River and the Ship Canal—as starting point and connecting element. The study has not yet reached the stage of tangible symbolic markers. It lists some exemplary, existing projects that could become symbolic markers (e.g. the art feature *The Dream* in St Helens). Although it deals with a different set of problems, it is strongly connected with the growth agenda of Atlantic Gateway.

The challenge of dealing with an unusual proposal

In the aftermath of the 2010 UK elections and government's announcement to wind down regional institutions, a period of institutional uncertainty started. Atlantic Gateway became disrupted and organisationally dislocated. When Government invited local authorities and businesses to submit bids for LEPs, Peel, to everyone's surprise, submitted a bid for an Atlantic Gateway LEP, which would sit alongside the other three sub-regional LEPs (Peel, 2010). It is basically a delivery strategy of Atlantic Gateway, including a proposal for a community environment fund that captures 1 per cent of all developments to fund green infrastructure projects. Peel was afraid of the repercussions from the abolition of regional institutions, in particular the NWDA:

All that we were trying to say was that a lot of work and effort went into creating the Atlantic Gateway; let's not lose it as local authorities retrench to their local administrative boundaries. We thought as a region for successive strategies, everyone really got into that and could see the value of thinking regionally and thinking big, [...] but now LEPs come out, rather than carry on thinking big they return to think about local authority areas again. It seems to us really regressive. (Director, Peel)

Although Peel withdrew the bid a few days later after protests of the other LEP consortia in the Gateway area, it had the desired effect, namely acknowledgement of Central Government. While the previous Labour Government had stood at the sidelines, leaving Atlantic Gateway to the regional institutions, the subsequent Coalition Government supports it at the highest levels. This is important since government is responsible for planning applications. Liverpool and Wirral Waters, for instance, were amongst the first Enterprise Zones, which implies eased planning regulations and tax discounts, a status that was granted to Daresbury some month later, too. Peel has been in close

contact with senior figures in government about Atlantic Gateway. The Prime Minister himself, David Cameron, visited Wirral Waters and was pictured with Peel's strategic planning director, Peter Nears (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 2011).

Having put down this strong marker of an Atlantic Gateway LEP, regional leaders could not ignore Atlantic Gateway as a concept and let it wither away together with the closure of the NWDA. A working group agreed on a set of key projects in line with the Atlantic Gateway strategy that required regional coordination: Daresbury Science & Innovation Campus, port logistics, rail infrastructure and renewable energy schemes. The other projects are dealt with by the respective LEP and the city-regions. Not by coincidence Peel installed representatives on two of the three LEPs—only the Greater Manchester LEP is 'Peel-free'—to make sure that Atlantic Gateway is sufficiently recognised. Two boards will be responsible to carry the ideas further: the Atlantic Gateway Partnership Board has been installed by regional leaders to discuss strategic issues at the Atlantic Gateway geography and to ensure the delivery of key projects, while the Adapting the Landscape Working Group will define meaningful projects for the community environment fund initiated by Peel.

In spite of the institutional dynamics caused by the abolition of regional structures, a remarkable process has been set in. Atlantic Gateway is acknowledged by leading figures in Government, the region has established a special delivery vehicle in the form of the Atlantic Gateway Partnership Board, and many of the projects are embedded in the LEP and city-region strategies. There is a strategic vacuum at the regional level through the abolition of regional institutions that has not yet been filled by informal governance arenas. Peel is the only party that currently operates at the regional level, while Government is not in the position anymore to carry out regional planning or even wanting to do so. The two cities have retreated into their city-regions. It is still too early to tell whether Atlantic Gateway will work in terms of leading to new spatial practices across the Mersey corridor and the internalisation of a new Atlantic Gateway geography. Thus far, it remains an alliance of convenience, dictated by Peel rather than a regional dialogue driven by a joint agenda.

Symbolic markers for collective action?

Reframing the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation as Atlantic Gateway through a private sector company, employing a series of symbolic markers, challenged the institutional landscape. It implied rethinking the meaning of city-region in the North West. The opportunity for a new understanding was complicated through the institutional dynamics that were caused by the Gov-

ernment abolishing regional institutions. However, the reasons for the reluctance of some stakeholders cannot be reduced to the change in government structures. What we see so far is a company pursuing its plans, but no collective action. Why did the symbolising efforts for an emerging spatial corridor not result in a joint strategy?

Ocean Gateway is an umbrella marker to signify the revival of the North West. It was deliberately framed as a ‘Thames Gateway of the North’, referring to the national development programme in Greater London and the South East, to point out the sheer scale of the project which it even exceeds in terms of investment volume. The Manchester Ship Canal is presented as a crucial link between the two city-regions, in particular as a low carbon transport axis. The narrative is underpinned by bold projects in the field of logistics, urban development and environmental technologies. Atlantic Gateway shared similar symbolic meaning, but was more of a political compromise including some regional priorities beyond the property companies’ projects. The environmental dimension takes a prominent position. Not only in the idea of a low carbon economy, a widely shared policy goal across the conurbation, but also in the transformation of the landscape into an economic asset. The idea of a regional park was a strong image in the presentation of Peel’s Ocean Gateway and in the *Adapting the Landscape* study.

Peel’s Ocean Gateway was a strategy intended to provoke a reaction among local and regional authorities, seeking public sector buy-in for quicker planning permissions for their projects.

There is a belief that if you could understand the combined value of all these investments and all these complementary activities and deliver that under one umbrella, you could make your case for government for support way necessary for planning arguments; it would provide the strategic narrative to justify planning decisions for these kinds of initiatives. [...] So we have brought forward Ocean Gateway and now Atlantic Gateway to get Government to support the idea of specific infrastructure and other investments in this area. (Director, Peel)

Once Atlantic Gateway was agreed as a public sector strategy, the main intention was to group local authorities behind the concept. But it also served as a document that Peel could wave to Chinese investors, demonstrating investment volume and government support—both essential requirements for them. *Adapting the Landscape* and the community environment fund was directed towards environmental bodies such as the Land Trust or the Community Forests.

The symbolisation of the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation is driven by Peel and, until its closure, by the NWDA. Bringing together Liverpool and Manchester had been on the NWDA's agenda from day one (Senior officer, NWDA). It had a compelling logic, because the two cities form the heavily urbanised zone of the North West that is the engine of the regional economy. The NWDA was crucial in installing Ocean Gateway in the public realm; otherwise the concept would have remained a private sector initiative. Nonetheless, a large share of the symbolic markers still originates from Peel. The Coalition government is very much in favour of private sector led development and proves its support for Atlantic Gateway at various occasions, but rather than creating another 'Thames Gateway', that is a national project controlled by Parliament, it handles planning application on a one-to-one basis and de facto accepts the property developer's concept as a regional plan. Moreover, it abolished regional institutions, promoting the self-organising capacity of local authorities and the private sector in LEPs instead.

Ocean Gateway and subsequently Atlantic Gateway, created a lot of excitement, but not only positive. The proposal can certainly be seen as a frame to link the properties of Peel and maximise the value of their landholdings. The level of support by local authorities varied, depending on the number of schemes planned within their boroughs. In general terms, Liverpool City Region is more inclined towards the concept than Greater Manchester. It desperately needs investment, which Peel is going to deliver. The waterfront developments Wirral and Liverpool Waters account for £10 billion and will be able to put Liverpool back on the map. Liverpool Waters is a flagship for the shift from a cultural city towards a city that also has a real economy. That allows them to overlook that Peel was imposing its plans upon Liverpool City Council. The port logistics projects in the Mersey estuary will strengthen Merseyside's gateway function and promise the rebirth of Liverpool as leading port.

The strongest opposition stems from Manchester City Council and, to a lesser degree, Greater Manchester. Manchester City Council has been furiously against Ocean Gateway and symbolically stayed away when Atlantic Gateway was launched. It is not without certain irony that Manchester City Council sold the Ship Canal to Peel in 1991, which lies at the very root of Ocean Gateway. Manchester had set up the Manchester Independent Economic Review to prove that public money is better spent in the city-regions (and preferably in Greater Manchester) than in the countryside. So, they fought tooth and nail against the idea of a corridor, because this could mean more businesses and houses in Warrington and the like. They emphatical-

ly stressed the link with Leeds city region, which by most interviewees was considered as a red herring to annoy Liverpool. Thus Manchester offered its *modus operandum*, that is the successful collaboration within Greater Manchester, as a better alternative to Atlantic Gateway.

Atlantic Gateway did not fully reflect the existing power relations. Manchester has not been sufficiently taken on board by Peel and the NWDA. They felt slightly undervalued as growth engine of the national economy and indicated a regional imbalance in the Atlantic Gateway framework: “Whilst Manchester city region accounts for the large majority of the predicted growth, the majority of the projects lie outside of Manchester” (AGMA, 2010, §5.2). In addition, it seems that Peel tried to drive a wedge between Manchester and Salford, two important boroughs for the political coherence of Greater Manchester. Salford profits highly from Peel’s investments. For instance, with the support of the NWDA, Peel managed to persuade the BBC to come to the North West and locate in the £650 million project Media City UK at Salford Quays, which also involved the transfer of existing BBC offices from Manchester. This has not done much good to the already tense relationship between Peel and Manchester City Council, in particular between John Whitaker, the chairman of Peel, and Sir Howard Bernstein, the chief executive and architect of Manchester’s renaissance. For instance, Peel had openly agitated against Manchester’s intended congestion charge before a referendum—with success. Nonetheless, the internal coherence of Greater Manchester is one of the strongest institutions that no one sacrifices. Salford certainly did not want to risk open disagreement with Manchester City Council.

In conclusion, the symbolic markers for the emerging conurbation have not become internalised at the conurbation level yet. Property developer Peel managed to get some political buy-in by bringing policy issues to the fore that matter to the region, such as a low carbon economy, regional park development, and not the least bold projects. In return, their projects were integrated into local and sub-regional planning frameworks. However, Ocean Gateway has not become a collective vision, but remains mainly the bold investment strategy of a property and logistics company. It was developed and presented by Peel without prior consultation of local authorities. The partnership approach Peel propagates contrasts with the way the company interacts with local authorities. In terms of legitimacy, Peel’s overriding business interest is problematic in itself. Atlantic Gateway did not change this sufficiently. The strongest public actor, Manchester City Council, is still reluctant and was somewhat left out by Peel and the NWDA: to some extent, Atlantic Gateway

is more a symbol for the renaissance of Liverpool as a port city than an integrated Liverpool–Manchester strategy. To complicate matters further, Manchester’s attitude towards regional policies, in particular when originating from Peel, is not very open-minded. Manchester’s stronghold is still working through unchallenged political leadership, underlined by an economic success story, so that there is minimal space for a spatial narrative parallel to Greater Manchester. In the turbulent period after the announced closure of the NWDA the unstable institutional conditions were not in favour of regional planning either. City-regionalism in its old guise—understood as a city and a tightly bounded ring of local authorities—is rather strengthened. Central Government made no attempts to encourage public-private coproduction at the conurbation level, but champions the entrepreneur.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of a recent strategic planning initiative for the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation utilising strong symbolic markers this article reveals the difficulties of institutionalising the city of the 21st century with its smooth transitions between centre and periphery in the mindset of policy-makers and politicians. The theoretical model started with the premise that symbolic markers for institutional change, in this case to transform the institution of the city and how it is constituted, require institutional embeddedness through the internalisation into the human mindset of actors. It is in the daily practices of these actors (private, public and civic) that the new meaning is validated and reproduced. Developing symbolic markers for today’s poly-nuclear urban landscape, when its meaning is not yet fully crystallised, poses a challenge because there are strong institutional forces reproducing established patterns. The cities have difficulties to reconcile themselves in new governance arenas and define appropriate projects for a new urban agenda, in particular when there is heavy inter-city competition and no incentives for strategic planning at this emerging level of scale.

The one-sided origin of the symbolic markers and the selectiveness of the encoded message often reflect the limited scope of the coalition that reproduces symbolic meaning. That implies that the symbolisation, and accordingly internalisation of meaning, remains within a limited group of stakeholders, set off against alternative spatial narratives. The internalisation of the symbolic meaning—an urban configuration with a varied hierarchy—then competes with the established institutions of the often tightly bounded city-region or the ideal of the ‘old’ compact city or affluent small towns and communities in

the countryside that define themselves as antipode to the large urban cores. These established institutions have a variety of symbolic markers at hand that are oriented towards social relations of the past. Rather than resulting in collective action, it leads to confrontation. Successful symbolic markers for change manage to reconstruct current institutional meaning by identifying symbolic markers that highlight change without resulting in contestation. It therefore requires markers that—at least in combination—go beyond narrow agendas of a select group of players.

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