Symbolic markers and institutional innovation in transforming urban spaces

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Symbolising the future metropolis: conditions for successful institutional innovation

[Dembski, S. & W. Salet, contribution to a special issue edited by Willem Salet and Sebastian Dembski proposed to an international academic journal]

Symbolic markers (metaphors, spatial concepts, profiling landmarks, etc.) are widely employed in planning practices in order to organise focus and to mobilise social energies in line with a certain planning mission. Avoiding the risk of planning subjectivism, the authors adopt an institutional approach to understand the real meaning of symbols. The meaning of symbolic markers is investigated in three advanced cases of urban transformation: the Rotterdam Rijnmond, the Cologne/Bonn region and the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation. The analysis highlights the latent conflicts between grown institutions and the changing interpretations under new contextual conditions. The authors claim that isolated display of symbolic markers will not gain momentum for urban change; it is necessary to understand the underlying dilemmas of grown institutions and how these can be reconstructed.

Introduction

Symbolic markers are widely employed in planning practices in order to organise focus and to mobilise social energies in line with a certain planning mission. Examples of symbolic markers are abundant in urban planning, such as the use of linguistic tropes and metaphors, spatial concepts and the profiling with landmarks or expressions of iconic architecture (Throgmorton 1996; Eckstein, 2003; Gospodini, 2006; Healey, 2004; Oosterlynck et al. 2011; Salet and Gualini, 2007). The impact of symbolisation in social interaction and in processes of planning can hardly be overestimated (Fischer and Forester, 1993). Still, we take a cautious and critical position in analysing the meaning of symbols, being apprehensive of the implicit risks of planning subjectivism and the instrumental use of symbols that are introduced by planners in order to line up social action. Usually, the position of planners is not so central in processes of social change and the symbols that really count are often not invented by those who are planning or inducting processes of change. The inflation of instrumental symbolisation in practices of planning is increasingly belied by different and even opposing outcomes. For this reason, we adopt an institutional position in analysing the meaning and impact of symbolic markers in
planning processes. Thus, we hypothesise that the real meaning of symbolic markers, their credibility and salience, depends on the normative patterns and rules that condition the behaviour of the relevant participants.

Taking an institutional position is helpful in identifying the plausibility of symbolic markers. In cases of planning subjectivism or instrumentalism (for instance branding the future of a city as ‘entrepreneurial’, ‘creative’, or ‘sustainable’ without a serious connection to the real conditions of underlying social interaction) it is easy to unravel the mismatch between the symbolic markers and the underlying institutional conditions. If urban planners are planning the innovation of a city while neglecting the patterned norms and expectations of the citizens, it is not very likely that symbolic markers will mobilise social energies. Such symbolisation rather portrays the distance between planners and a community.

Conversely, we adopted the institutional perspective to investigate the meaning of symbolic markers in completely different processes: the experimental processes of urban change in which normative patterns and institutional rules are not yet been settled. We are interested in the processes of urban transformation. For more than a century, the patterns of urbanisation in Europe have been characterised by tendencies of ‘core-centric’ expansion, maintaining and even strengthening the central position of the urban core under the wide expansion of urban areas. Over the last two decades, however, patterns of urbanisation have become more complicated in decentralised and polycentric configurations creating new overlaps of ‘in-between cities’ and ‘post-suburban’ tapestries (Phelps and Wood, 2011; Musterd et al., 2006). The processes of urban transformation generate new city-regional challenges to mitigate the negative consequences of ecological and functional fragmentation and the social polarisation of the contemporary metropolis. Urban regions all over Europe are experimenting with strategies to address urban transformation and the potential role of symbolic markers is evident in the profiling of the directions of change.

Adopting an institutional approach to investigate the experimental processes of urban change brings in some puzzling intricacies. The structural change of city is recognised in urban research but institutional patterns have not yet been established with regards to the changing city: not in the legal institutions of urban governance nor in the expectations of citizens and their political representatives. On the contrary, all established institutions tend to conserve the city of the past making institutional path dependency a problem rather than asset for the explanation of change. For this reason, we need an explicit view on institutional
innovation to analyse the real meaning of the symbolisation of urban change. Inspired by Bourdieu, we adopt an active perception of institutional analysis—labelled via the concept of ‘instituting’—which assumes a permanent process of reconstruction of the meaning of institutions (reproduction, re-interpretation and permanent inculcation of social norms) (Bourdieu, 1991).

The statement of this paper is that new interpretation of institutions is needed to underpin the real meaning of symbolic markers of urban transformation and that the symbolic markers in turn help to further institute the social expectations of participants. Thus, the paper investigates how symbolic markers are institutionally embedded and how they condense new patterns of expectation. This exploration gives explicit attention to the latent conflicts between established institutions and the changing interpretations under new contextual conditions. We expect that symbolic markers paying tribute to historically evolved institutional meaning and simultaneously adding new interpretation under the changing circumstances, will give a more effective underpinning of symbolic markers than markings solely of abrupt change. These dilemmas of institutional interpretation are important to understand the meaning of symbolic markers. The isolated display of symbolic markers does not give a solid base to explain how urban strategies might gain momentum for collective action.

Our argument builds on the empirical findings in three advanced case studies in the Rotterdam Rijnmond, the Cologne/Bonn region and the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation that made an attempt to come to grips with the transforming urban landscape and to institute a new understanding of the future metropolis. For this sake, desk research has been conducted, and interviews have been undertaken with planners, policymakers, private sector parties, civic groups and academics (about 15 per case study).

The objective and subjective meaning of symbolic catalysers

In his seminal work *Frame Analysis* Erving Goffman makes a principal distinction between frames and framing (Goffmann, 1974). Framing is the act of communication in which agents (for instance planners) take an active role in symbolising reality, in order to catch an audience or to mobilise social action. It is an instrumental act, deliberately produced in order to catalyse processes toward a certain outcome. Planning, usually, is much interested in this active dimension of framing for the sake of desired states (Faludi, 1996; Salet and Gualini, 2007). Frame theory, however, is concerned with an objectivised qualification of the world under investigation. Frames are social constructs in reality that condition our way of thinking, whether they bring us to desired
outcomes or not. Reflecting on the meaning of symbolic markers, we have to be aware of the same duality of subjective and objectivised meaning. Symbolic markers are not just instruments of agents of change to catalyse processes of social action; they are not invented by planners for the sake of the act of planning. They play a pivotal role in the communication of meaning by making institutions visible and reminding us of whom we are and what we are (Alexander, 2004; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bourdieu, 1991; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Dembski and Salet, 2010; Nas, 2011). Being aware of the objectivised meaning of symbolic markers is extremely helpful, in particular in positions where an active role is expected.

Our interest is in symbolic markers in planning that highlight and accelerate an ongoing transformation. We argue that symbolic markers have indeed the potential to function as catalysts of change mobilising collective action, if they are perceived as authentic—thus reflect objectivised meaning—and if they are repeatedly displayed. The process of symbolisation can be perceived as a cultural performance, defined as the “process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (Alexander, 2004, p. 529). In a successful performance, the actor and the audience “share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the display” (Alexander, 2004, p. 527). Such symbolic performances strongly relate to the cultural context and the extent to which the underlying expectations are internalised (Alexander, 2004; Bourdieu, 1991).

Today’s plural societies greatly differ from those societies studied by early anthropologists and the predominance of ritual action in organising social life has disappeared. However, symbols in planning, ideally, are not displayed to change the world but to create a performative moment on certain elements. The challenge is thus to create with the help of symbolic markers a moment of coalescence within a fragmented society, providing salience for collective action, and thus a new understanding of the contemporary city (i.e. institutional innovation). To provide new meaning to the transforming urban landscape in cities requires symbolic markers and an encoded message that is perceived as real. This symbolic imposition is nothing else than a “well-founded delusion” (Bourdieu, 1991: 120) that works better if matching objective differences. Effective symbolic markers therefore cannot be randomly created but have to be embedded in the cultural context.

We have pointed out the problem that there are no established symbolic markers for institutional meaning that still has to evolve. Yet in each urban region there are many symbolic markers to be discovered that are deeply em-
bedded in the cultural context, often relating to history, and easily to activate. Such symbolic markers can challenge institutional meaning without resulting in confrontation. The risk is in symbolic markers that are perceived as alien. A key challenge is to mobilise symbolic markers that refer to what is known but at the same time are infused with new meaning. The search for potential symbolic markers needs to engage in the local culture and history to discover symbolic markers that have a coalescing potential and at the same time rejuvenate established institutional patterns. This process of institutional rejuvenation through the work of symbolic markers is not a one-time affair, but needs to be repeated continuously.

**Institutionalisation as reconstruction**

Institutions are defined in this article as patterns of social norms that guide, but do not determine, social interaction. Intrinsic to institutions is their general durability. Changing institutions upfront implies confrontation in which symbols are used to underline the positions (Swidler, 1986), yet it is not the smooth transition through collective action that many planning strategies aim at because conflicts easily lead to disturbance. For the institutional activation of the new city this requires recognition and reinterpretation of existing institutional norms.

Here, the distinction between construction and reconstruction is of importance. Construction is in line with a prescriptive design tradition that neglects the evolving character of institutions and ‘creates’ institutions that are potentially disembedded. They mainly represent ideas of a planning subject that are tried to win the approval of the planning object. The external imposition of institutions is a key mistake that leads to resistance as one may expect (Ostrom, 1999: 281). An actor then relies on elements of ‘power over’ rather than ‘power to’ (Stoker, 1995). Our research focuses on the internalisation of new social norms and not on the coercion of power to realise projects. The formalisation of social norms in regulation is the end of rule making process (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Buitelaar et al., 2011; Ostrom, 1990; Salet, 2002) but even then the establishment of rules is the beginning of their continuous reproduction of compliance. Ostrom therefore speaks of working rules or rules in use as opposed to rules in form (Ostrom 1990: 51).

Reconstruction builds upon new interpretations of existing institutions that question settled spatial practices. In this sense, institutional change becomes an endeavour to instil existing institutions with new meaning. It requires serious work in building a coalition for institutional change that also bears the conse-
quences. Ostrom reminds us that a unitary approach, whether state or mar-
ket, may prove less fruitful than self-organising behaviour (Ostrom, 1999: 278).
New social norms work better if these are supported and internalised by a large
group. It is the search for the fractures in the existing institutions that can be
broken open by embedding the institutional meaning of symbolic markers in
the action space. Institutionalisation is a process and not a finite state.

Symbolic markers for change in practices of planning

The case studies that have been selected represent fascinating experiments in
metropolitan regions across Europe that attempted to create new identity in
the post-industrial landscape of the urban periphery. The socio-economic,
political and cultural viability and coherence of urban regions is one of the
most challenging tasks of the new urban agenda. The perception of contem-
porary cities is still rooted in the old dichotomies of centre and periphery but
the actual changes do not wait. The cases are comparative in a sense that they
deal with the problems of a metropolitan setting, but it is rather the variety of
the planning strategies and national contexts that we can analyse attempts of
purposeful institutional innovation.

From our conceptual framework we distil indicators for successful sym-
bolisations. What kind of efforts did the planners undertake to discover insti-
tutional meaning in transformation? Therefore we shortly introduce the cases
and their ambition, that is, the established institutional order that is to be
challenged. Firstly, we examine the efforts with regards to the inculcation and
reminding of pattern norms. Secondly, we analyse the relationship between
the symbolic markers and the local culture and history. Thirdly, we look into
the symbolising actors: the encoded message, by whom, and for whom. Lastly,
we inspect the action space, whether relevant stakeholders have been taken
on board or were left out. Each strategy will shortly be introduced before the
analytical layers are addressed.

Quality of life for the Rotterdam Rijnmond

Rotterdam Rijnmond is a prototypical in-between space, strongly dominated by
the Port of Rotterdam that extends 40 kilometres from the city centre towards
the North Sea. The logistics and infrastructure works of the port contrast with
the surrounding villages that have been absorbed in several rounds of exten-
sion. The most recent extension of the seaport, the Maasvlakte 2, resulted in a
regional strategy for Rotterdam Rijnmond combining economic development
with liveability objectives under the umbrella of the national project Mainport
Development Rotterdam (Van Gils and Klijn, 2007). It involves an extra investment of €300 million into the regional quality of life, of which the major share is reserved for the development of 750 hectares of regional green space within a maximum distance of 15 kilometres to the city centre of Rotterdam. The single-most important project has been the transformation of Midden-IJsselmonde (600 hectares and €125 million investment), a rural polder landscape in the vicinity of Rotterdam, into a nature and recreation area. Instead of regional integration of the polder landscape it resulted in resistance (Dembski, 2012).

In 1993 the transformation of Midden-IJsselmonde became formalised, but it was only by linking it with the Maasvlakte 2 in 2000 that it was more than a wishful policy option. The plans lingered around in policy circuits for a while, until awareness grew in the local municipality where those plans had to be realised. National government proposed the transformation of the northern part into a recreation area with woodlands and the southern part into wetland nature, which involved the acquisition of all the land. Under the leadership of the Province of South-Holland the future of Midden-IJsselmonde took shape, while these plans had to be legally implemented by the municipality in a land-use plan. Implicitly the transformation implied the integration of Midden-IJsselmonde in the urban fabric, to see it as part of the city. In so doing, the understanding of the municipality as a place that functions independently from the core city was challenged. It resulted in fierce resistance and a long-lasting legal procedure that has only recently been settled. In the meantime, inhabitants and the municipality had jointly worked on an alternative plan that would seek the limits of the national policy guideline. For the environmental organisation this was an insufficient proposal.

Planners made little efforts to inculcate the transformation of Midden-IJsselmonde as integral part of the green infrastructure for the Rijnmond area in the beginning of the project and realised too late the need to identify positive symbolic markers. In the beginning it was regarded as a bureaucratic act by the Province and the main challenge was to secure government funding. The meaning of the future landscape became only tangible in a wide variety of images. The transformation was not seen enough as a process in which local politicians and inhabitants needed to be prepared. Only at later stage, when the resistance was already strong, the Province made an effort to become more visible and mobilise some local markers such as the care farm Buytenhof or organising some events in the polder.

The history and identity of the polder was strongly neglected in the first proposals for the landscape transformation. The discussion was very much
about the final picture (certain habitats such as tidal nature) and quantitative objectives (6 million visits) that were alienating, instead of taking the valued polder landscape as a starting point. As a result, the existing cultural landscape almost became a negative point of references in the planning images. The masses of Rotterdammers coming to visit the polders were vividly imagined. Every stakeholder communicated its visions except for the local level—the municipality did not have one and the inhabitants did not want anything to change. This became problematic as far as the national policy requested broad support, whereas these images resulted in the mobilisation of inhabitants counter to the transformation. The symbolic markers, as far as we can speak of them as such, were disconnected. No attempts were made to connect with existing local initiatives. Ironically, as a countermovement, new initiatives emerged that operate independently from the Province but are in line with the ambitions, such as farmers that invite the Rotterdammers and schools to visit the polder.

Figure 6.1 Albrandwaardse Variant. This plan emerged as an influential alternative to the top-down plans by the Province to sustain the agricultural sector within the margins set by national policy (Source: Gemeente Albrandswaard)
Although the Province of South-Holland is the project leader, the origin of the symbolisation is with the nature and recreation organisations. Environmental organisations were pushing for a substantial area in Rotterdam to be developed into new, preferably tidal, nature. This resulted in a policy agreement in the early 1990s that formed the basis of a *quid pro quo* between Rotterdam and environmental organisations. It was framed as an improvement of the quality of life of the environment of Rotterdam city-region. This vision for the polders was embraced by other public actors that wanted the port extension, and became finally a national policy objective as the decision-making shifted to the national level.

While it was regarded a part of a national project to the benefit of the Rijnmond area, the power of the local level (municipality, citizens, farmers) was underestimated. From the very beginning, it was considered on the regional level only. While environmental organisations have (legitimate) sectoral interests, the Province and the City-Region simply took those over. The ambition to commit stakeholders to a shared vision failed because of this narrow focus on a specific sector interest represented by environmental organisations. The Province as the project leader responsible for the implementation of national policy became ‘sandwiched’ between the environmental organisations requesting the quick realisation of their plans and the local community rejecting any kind of action. When local actors presented an alternative plan that would fulfil the national requirements. This plan, the ‘Albrandwaardse Variant’, would have also involved the acquisition of all land to prevent it from further urbanisation, but it also would have separated the ground speculators and other landowners from the citizenry. The Province hesitated to embrace it and, as a consequence, failed to mobilise those local actors willing to change. It is a missed opportunity, in particular considering the €125 million reserved only for this particular project.

*New urban spaces in the Cologne/Bonn region*

The ‘Regionale’ programme is the innovative policy of the German *Land* of North Rhine-Westphalia to stimulate regional cooperation and identity formation (Wachten, 2004). The idea of the programme was strongly inspired by the Emscher Park IBA, which followed a steered bottom-up philosophy of locally proposed projects that confirm to regionally agreed standards. The 2010 edition of the programme was organised by the Cologne/Bonn region, whose bid with the title ‘*Brückenschläge* (Bridging)’ had been accepted in 2002. A call for projects resulted in a series of projects—mainly submitted by local author-
ities—that were approved by a board of regional leaders. The metropolitan character of this edition came to the fore in the special attention that was paid to the urban periphery, in particular through the development of green infrastructure as a connecting element. One theme of the Regionale 2010 labelled ‘Gärten der Technik (Gardens of Technology)’ attracted our attention because it tried to change the meaning of active sites of production as an integral and attractive part of the city. Two Regionale projects in the periphery of Cologne have been analysed in detail: ‘Chemtech’ in Wesseling and ‘Terra Nova’ in the Rhenish Mining District (Dembski, forthcoming, a).

The first project, Chemtech, symbolised the resurgence of a somewhat neglected, industrial town that turns the perceived disadvantage of large-scale chemical conglomerates into a unique selling point. Wesseling, a medium-sized town on the Rhine halfway between Cologne and Bonn, is well known for its chemical-industrial complexes that constitute a spectacular skyline. While urban development had turned its back on these large complexes that form a hard edge, the project aimed for a realistic exposure to the chemical industries through their integration, physically but also mentally. To this

**Figure 6.2** Spatial concept of Chemtech emphasising the three North–South axes (A 555 motorway, tram line 16, and the Rhine promenade) and the connection between the station and the Rhine (Source: Regionale 2010 Agency)
end, the local municipality developed plans for an information centre about the chemical industry and its companies in Wesseling, the ‘Forum Chemtech’, which would be located in a ‘Chemistry Landscape Park’ at the redesigned waterfront. Additionally, it involved a series of minor symbolic markers scattered throughout the city at important entrance situations, such as platforms, information boards and little artworks, reminding the spectator on the vivid chemical legacy in Wesseling. While it is certainly an inspiring and innovative idea, the plans were abandoned due to strong resistance from the citizens and a lack of (financial) commitment by the chemical companies.

In the initial proposals, a series of in particular physical markers were included to inculcate the meaning of chemical town. However, they only existed on paper and none of those has been realised to date. The idea clearly builds upon a history as a chemical production site that started around 1880 and established the rise of Wesseling from a small village to an industrial town, which is home to the largest refinery of Germany. Thus, taking the chemical sector as the point of departure and building the town's image on these assets seemed like teaching a fish to swim. Yet, there is another story to be told. The incorporation into Cologne in 1975 that was successfully appealed against at court in 1976, gave rise to an urban development policy symbolically underlining the town's independence, which left Wesseling with an oversized, modernist town centre, with only a few parts of the original village remaining on the banks of the river Rhine. And it is this very place that the local authority considered the ideal place for the five-story glass tower hosting the Forum Chemtech, clashing with the idyllic image of a village on the Rhine that is no more. This became particularly manifest in the debate on a linden alley, a typical element of Rhine villages, to be cut down. The plans were strongly refused by citizens, who felt that the key symbolic marker clashed with the townscape and violated the remnants of the Rhine village.

The symbolisation of the chemical industries as integral part of the identity, unfortunately, remained a project of the municipality, supported by the Regionale 2010 Agency, though being critical about the approach of Wesseling. Several attempts have been made to commit the chemical sector, but the initiative was always taken by the municipality that came as a petitioner asking to support their plans. The companies welcomed the idea of Chemtech, but proved reluctant to guarantee financial contributions for a project with unclear benefits. Little energy has been spent to champion the civic domain and engage them in the symbolisation. The majority of the population was confronted with the results of the design competition that leaked to the press weeks in advance
of the scheduled presentation on a public event. Once the negative tone was set in the local press, Chemtech had little chance to thrive with such negative publicity. In the end, the municipal planners and the mayor stood alone and had to abandon the symbolisation of the chemical legacy in Wesseling.

The Terra Nova project, in contrast, is one of the success stories of the Regionale 2010. It has been realised on the territory of three local authorities in the Rhenish Mining District in the western periphery of Cologne, where lignite is excavated for energy production. Gigantic bucket wheel excavators and mega-power stations form impressive landmarks in a terrain that resembles a lunar landscape. The Regionale 2010 provided the framework to rethink the potential of the mining landscape in the future. A master plan with the inspiring title ‘Zukunftslandschaft Energie (Energy Landscape of the Future)’ sets out the strategy to create a spectacular, attractive landscape and to provide a long-term economic impulse for the time when extracting is completed in 2045. To this end former mining (infra)structures have been re-used for recreation purposes and the current operations of the energy landscape (lignite mining and energy production) are highlighted. For instance, a conveyor belt has been transformed into a ‘Speedway’ for recreationists, landscaping of an

Figure 6.3 The Speedway (left) and the Dune Landscape Glesch (right) are two examples of how the mining landscape has been staged (Photo: Regionale 2010 Agency)
overburden pile, or an information and exhibition centre with a panorama over the 400-metres crater has been built. The centrepiece of Terra Nova is an inter-municipal technology park with a focus on energy and agriculture around an innovative biogas plant producing natural gas. Introducing a new view on the mining landscape by accepting and presenting it, as opposed to the established practice of hiding the mining activities and re-cultivating the land into its pseudo-original state. Such a transformation is not self-evident in a region where the lignite mining operations have a severe impact on communities, such as resettlements and pollution.

Terra Nova aims to provide a new understanding of the active mining landscape as well as marking the energy competence as economic profile. This is done by reusing elements of the mining infrastructure for new purposes and staging inspiring places so as to remind inhabitants of past, present and future of their region. The new energy landscape becomes visible within activities that have emerged in the technology park in the field of future-oriented energy concepts. In so doing they build forth on the tradition of a meanwhile deeply rooted mining culture that is mobilised for the transformation into a post-mining landscape. The opencast mining method has caused severe scars in people's lives, while becoming a social fact that has enduringly changed a formerly agricultural area. It was therefore a crucial preamble in the design competition to realise an authentic landscape without creating a museum. Past and present structures (speedway, opencast mine) are made accessible, while the new energy landscape builds on the skills available in the region, in particular in the sphere of the energy company.

Initially, Terra Nova had very little ambitions in terms of symbolising change, until the qualification process broadened the project. The message is directed to the inhabitants and the market. Local and regional inhabitants are invited to experience the active brownfield landscape as the authentic landscape that it is: heavily marked yet with its own spectacular beauty. Terra Nova is understood as a gesture giving land back that has been inaccessible for decades. The economic component is directed towards the market, research institutes and the agricultural sector, though the latter was not convinced of Terra Nova (in particular the idea of energy plants), to point out the strengths of the area in the field of energy technology and production. While the coalition of local authorities, the county and RWE Power are united in this shared message to the outside world, Terra Nova has also an encoded message that works internally. The company aims to give a positive message to the region and demonstrates its responsibility to positively affect the acceptance for their
operations. For the municipalities, Terra Nova is a symbol for their regained planning strength and to take their future into their own hands in the regional power play of interests for the post-mining landscape.

Terra Nova has resulted in a collective action of actors that reflect very well the regional power landscape. Nothing goes without RWE (and nothing against). RWE Power realised the speedway and the Forum Terra Nova, continues to invest in R&D around the Niederaußem power plant (framed as Coal Innovation Centre), and is also a partner and potential investor in the technology park. Other important actors from agriculture and water management were contacted in an early phase to settle potential conflicts, in particular about the loss of agricultural land. The renowned Jülich Research Centre is an important actor within the region that has been won to underpin the energy landscape of the future. In particular citizens were consulted intensively from the very beginning. The embryonic coalition reflects the landscape of power, but new lines need to be set out to continue the process of inculcation.

_A Gateway for the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation_

In 2008 property developer Peel Group launched _Ocean Gateway_, an ambitious, long-term investment scheme worth £50 billion to develop the Manchester Ship Canal corridor comprising of the Manchester and Liverpool city-regions and the spatial in-between. The Peel Group is a leading infrastructure, transport and real estate company in the UK, with major assets and significant landholdings in the North West, such as the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company and the Manchester Ship Canal. _Ocean Gateway_ draws upon the companies’ portfolio of 50 projects in the field of transport and logistics, urban development, and the environment, such as the waterfront developments Liverpool and Wirral Waters, MediaCityUK in Salford, a proposal for an integrated transport and logistics concept including a new container terminal and an inter-modal freight terminal on the Ship Canal (‘SuperPort’), and even a regional park system. It was intended as an economic growth strategy bringing together the Manchester and Liverpool city-regions (Dembski, forthcoming, b).

Under the leadership of the Northwest Development Agency (NWDA) it has been further enhanced and renamed into _Atlantic Gateway_. In addition, an environmental study, _Adapting the Landscape_, was conducted that became part of the strategy (collaborative effort of quango’s, NWDA and Peel). However, _Ocean Gateway_, and subsequently _Atlantic Gateway_, was received as a mixed blessing, in particular in Greater Manchester. The strategy experienced a major setback when the newly elected Coalition Government
abolished regional institutions in favour of sub-regional Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). The Atlantic Gateway geography became sub-divided into three LEPs (Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and Cheshire & Warrington). By submitting a parallel bid to the Government for an Atlantic Gateway LEP, which was withdrawn shortly after, Peel prevented local authorities from retrenching in their boundaries. Regional leaders established an Atlantic Gateway Partnership Board, consisting of public and private actors, which has only recently established a draft working programme defining priorities for action (AGPB, 2012).

The efforts for the institutionalisation of Ocean Gateway mainly remain in the sphere of an abstract concept. In order to make Ocean Gateway known, Peel presented the concept on many occasions. They were closely involved in and supported initiatives that helped them, such as the Adapting the Landscape study of the NWDA. Once the regional institutions disappeared, they proposed an Atlantic Gateway LEP to further institutionalise the concept. The property developer made sure that Atlantic Gateway is sufficiently recognised. But on a more practical level as a daily experience, the Atlantic Gateway geography remains pretty invisible. It is dealt with at a very strategic level. Atlantic Gateway has a lot of stand-alone markers expressing its economic ambitions and it includes an integrated logistics strategy to physically connect the region, but it has few tangible markers that symbolise the Manchester and Liverpool city-regions as an integrated conurbation in the daily experience of inhabitants. This is recognised, but so far the plans on this matter such as an Atlantic Gateway Park are no more than vague ambitions.

Bringing together Liverpool and Manchester has a compelling logic since the cities are so close, but the dominant picture of their relation is a long history of competition (Chape and Wray, 2012). In the 18th and 19th century Liverpool was on the forefront of maritime trade and Manchester the world’s first industrial city. Liverpool thrived on the port taxes paid by the Manchester merchants. In reaction, Manchester built the Manchester Ship Canal, opening in 1894, to bypass the port of Liverpool and have direct access to the sea. While Manchester has clearly outpaced Liverpool after the industrial crisis, the rivalry continues for public investment. In the 1990s Liverpool tried to block the second runway of Manchester airport. The current debate on High Speed 2, in which Liverpool threatens to lose out against Manchester, is the coming struggle. In contrast, Peel stresses the Ship Canal corridor as a historic backbone of economic prosperity and joint assets. It also builds on Liverpool’s history as an international gateway. Peel’s own history is that of a company
that relentlessly pushes its interests, if necessary at odds with everyone else as the Trafford Centre demonstrates (Evers, 2008).

The main message of Atlantic Gateway is an economic rationale with an environmental touch. By joining forces, Liverpool and Manchester could unlock their potential for sustainable, low-carbon economic growth and balance the UK economy. In so doing, the old North–South divide is mobilised: rather than seeing one another as competitors, London and the South East is identified as the real threat for the North West economy. This message stems from Peel and has been embraced by the NWDA. Peel had massive economic agenda, and the NWDA finally had a strong partner with whom to realise its agenda of bringing the two cities together. On the one hand, Peel and the NWDA sought the support of partners within the region (local authorities, quango’s and private sector). Yet it also gives an important message to the outside world that the area is a place worthwhile investing in, and in particular to the national government to move the necessary levers. By presenting joint priorities, it hopes to convince the government to invest.

So, exceptionally, a private sector company was the key driver of this regional strategy, a position that it shared only briefly with the NWDA. Yet, the establishment of Atlantic Gateway as a concept did not go without complica-
tions, which is partly due to the developers’ bold approach and partly due to the extreme political coherence of Greater Manchester that puts its own agenda first (see also Chape and Wray, 2012). Ocean Gateway was developed without prior consultation or even input of public bodies. This only happened when the NWDA moulded Ocean Gateway into something of a concept. However, Manchester never bought into the regional agenda and additionally it did not feel sufficiently recognised as the driver of the regional economy in terms of substantive projects. Therefore, Manchester City Council opposed Atlantic Gateway from day one. Due to its strong political coherence, the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) did not fully embrace Atlantic Gateway, despite some advances to individual metropolitan boroughs by the developer. In particular from Salford, which profited tremendously from Peel’s investments, these approaches demanded careful manoeuvring, but it would nevertheless never break with Manchester. Central Government, despite having axed the development agency and thus Peel’s strongest ally, evolved as a crucial factor in sustaining Atlantic Gateway through the period of institutional uncertainty by a series of decisions around projects. Also the installation of LEPs as the new delivery vehicle for economic growth did not prove as disastrous as expected. With the LEPs, the private sector has a bigger say, and that seems to have an effect on the formulation of a working programme for regional priorities.

**The need of institutional innovation for successful symbolic markers**

Reflecting on the case studies, we note first of all that the cases represent the first generation of planning experiments that are responsive to the recent turn of enduring patterns of core-centric urbanisation. They are excellent cases to study the challenge of institutional innovation in response to the emerging forms of urbanisation. The selected planning experiments occur in a context of institutional void (Hajer, 2003) where the weight of grown institutions is still heavy and new norms are still embryonic. This tension became manifest in the four themes that were investigated:

- the efforts with regards to the profiling and inculcation of standards;
- how the symbolic markers relate to the local culture and history;
- the operations of the symbolising actors (the encoded message, by whom, and for whom);
- the configuration of the action space.

In Rotterdam Rijnmond a lot of efforts were taken to profile and inculcate new standards. The project had a high potential of ‘rurban’ innovation and it was also well funded. Still, the neglect of inhabited values and standards of the
local population and the missing link with local culture and history made the experiment extremely vulnerable. It became a classic stalemate between the regional and the local level, in which the provincial planners were primarily concerned with their own ideas. The symbolic markers turned into a problem rather than asset of the aimed innovation.

Also the case of Chemtech started with high innovative potential in the courageous attempt to improve the image of dirty industrial area; efforts were taken to profile and inculcate the new standards and to relate the symbolic markers explicitly to the local culture and history. The planning experiment, however, neglected the differentiation of grown cultural institutions of the local population and was not taken seriously by the industries because it revolved too much around the municipal planners. The ideas lacked embedding in a wider alliance for a change, beyond the Regionale 2010 Agency. The solitary movement of the municipality resulted in an unfortunate selection of symbolic markers that eventually even alienated the relevant stakeholders. The Terra Nova project, in contrary, demonstrated a successful coalescence of social energies. It managed to blend the emerging norms with established habits and standards, which were promoted and inculcated by the municipal planners but also by the other actors involved. Local culture and history were seriously considered in the symbolic markers, and by involving the different stakeholders in a joint mission the symbolic markers appeared to fall on fertile ground.

The case of the Liverpool–Manchester conurbation is an epic planning scheme that has to overcome the deeply rooted institutions of city centrism and a long history of internal rivalry. Peel spent a lot of energy in explaining and inculcating the new perspectives and standards, after an isolated start. Still, the symbolic markers did not reflect the meaning of local history and local culture. It did not reflect the routines of the involved cities. Instead it focused on the potential of a new regional future dominated by the commercial interest of the corporation. The private corporation was the initiator for this innovative regional perspective but despite their large resources of investment it proved difficult to get the unequivocal support of regional stakeholders. The property company worked with the regional and national government, but played games with the local authorities.

Considering the four experiments addressing urban transformation it appears to be extremely difficult to meet the requirements of our statement of institutional innovation (building the emerging standards on the richness of the grown standards to enable credibility and effectiveness of symbolic markers). In three of the four cases the innovative symbolic markers faced difficul-
ties to generate institutional innovation and even appear to alienate the first concerned categories of stakeholders. Only the Terra Nova case convincingly demonstrates the subtle operation of generating new social energies. The different efforts of inculcation can be seen in the two projects of the Regionale 2010. The coalition around the Terra Nova project was well aware of the need to communicate the meaning of the project and convince local actors, while the Chemtech plans were intended as a surprise for the inhabitants. In all other cases, the planning subject had to invest much energy to pour oil on troubled waters, which proved impossible in the Chemtech project.

The findings demonstrate that the configuration of the action space is key in the explanation of institutional innovation and creating plausible symbolic markers. While the configuration of the action space differs in each of the cases, with the exception of Terra Nova, all configurations have in common the primacy of one of the stakeholders. The case studies clearly demonstrate that dazzling innovative markers are losing their glow if they lack the different cultural and historical backgrounds of different stakeholders. It is the old hubris of planning subjectivism but in a new jacket of brand new planning experiments. The agency of centricism differs in the cases: it is the municipality in the Chemtech case, the Province of South Holland in the Rotterdam Rijnmond case and the Peel Corporation in the Liverpool–Manchester conurbation. Usually, governmental agencies are blamed for taking the attitude of planning centricism (Boelens, 2010; Boonstra and Boelens 2011; Hajer, 2011), but the UK case clearly demonstrates this flaw in private sector agencies as well. The problem is not just the lack of negotiation about policy targets, but more fundamentally, the lack of claiming institutional meaning by different stakeholders which is badly needed to embed solid innovation.

Configurations of action space are not determined; they are the ‘depending variables’ of planning experiments. The subtle relationships within this action space are the cement of institutional innovation. Our most striking observation in the three cases is that no agency appears to enforce collective action. The success of the Terra Nova experiment was based on a fine web of interrelationships underlying the instituting and the symbolic markers that was easily activated by the Regionale 2010 Agency. Yet the very same agency lacked the leverage to enforce collective action in the comparable Chemtech case, so that the configuration of the action space remained biased toward the municipality. The Regionale 2010 Agency had the power to request design competitions for better quality, but enforcing collective action came only second. With regards to the configuration of action space there is always potential to enable or
to facilitate intelligent alliances. Sometimes, central government is needed to solve enduring local stalemates. The Manchester–Liverpool case clearly demonstrates the manoeuvrability of network incentives. The Government, first through its regional development agency, strongly supported Peel’s agenda. Being aware of the large resources of the Peel corporation, Central Government openly took position for the entrepreneur but in so doing, became an active player instead of solely providing the necessary conditions. The process of institutional innovation and symbolic marking might have followed a different course if the Government had requested joint regional priorities instead of making opaque decisions on individual projects. Additionally, a series of government-induced changes of the institutional landscape resulted in different actor configurations in which the private sector had a larger say. In the case of Rotterdam, the national government spent €300 million almost unconditionally (being in effect extra compensation for nature deterioration beyond legal obligations). Collective action (broad support) was a formal precondition of the National Government, but the solution to improve the quality of life was defined in much detail beforehand. There was little space for manoeuvre for recombining local and regional ambitions in the symbolisation for a new green pearl in the Rijnmond area. As a consequence, farmers, citizens and the local authority felt left out.

**Conclusion**

In this article we looked for the conditions for the successful symbolisation of the new metropolis. Based on the empirical findings of the case studies, we found that the isolated display of symbolic markers might be a key factor as to why many strategies barely result in collective action. The initiators of a changed perception tried to change institutions upfront, whether it was the property developer Peel (driven by business interests), the Province of South-Holland with its green agenda, or the ambitious town of Wesseling. Private sector parties may fall into the trap of putting their own ideas in the centre in the same way that state actors have done. As long as symbolic markers for change and their institutional meaning are weakly embedded in the practices of a wider group of actors, they remain powerless or even trigger resistance. If the latter occurs, change becomes a symbolic struggle between the old and new institutional meaning. Whatever the outcome of this struggle, it is certainly not the smooth transition from within that planners had hoped for. Good symbolic markers challenge the established institutional order without confronting it!
To plan inter-subjectively requires serious efforts to actively search for institutional meaning that is on the verge of changing. Contrary to the widespread viewpoint that a stronger role for planning in defining agendas is needed, we argued for a refined perception of the planner’s role. The institutional activation of the new metropolis only proves successful if it includes a reflective dimension of institutional meaning in practice. Planners and policymakers are part of society and can place emphasis on certain developments such as the emergence of the new metropolis, but it is unlikely that they can prescribe it through an instrumental approach to institutional change. Rather, the inter-subjectivity in the configuration of the action space has to be enforced, or at least enabled. Coming to terms with the recombination of core and periphery requires institutional diversity in order to provide the broad basis for the emergence of new institutional meaning. Planning is an endeavour and has to engage with socio-economic processes rather than dictate the action of planning objects, in order to guide urban transformation!

References


