



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Symbolic markers and institutional innovation in transforming urban spaces

Dembski, S.

Publication date
2012

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dembski, S. (2012). *Symbolic markers and institutional innovation in transforming urban spaces*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Symbolic markers and institutional innovation in transforming urban spaces

The current round of urban transformation with its blurring distinction of town and countryside and changing urban hierarchy has resulted in a need for modes of representation for the emerging city of the 21st century. Many urban regions therefore seek to identify the iconic objects and devices that could function as incarnations of a new metropolitan identity. A variety of such expressions, both material and immaterial, are employed in planning practices to organise focus and to mobilise social energies in line with a certain project mission, which I have labelled ‘symbolic markers’. Examples for symbolic markers range from spatial metaphors, iconic architecture, and landmarks to art performances.

This thesis argues that the true qualities of symbolic markers are in their social and cultural embeddedness in institutional practices. To this end, three cases of planning strategies in urban regions across Europe using symbolic markers have been investigated: the Rotterdam Rijnmond in the Netherlands, the Cologne/Bonn region in Germany, and the Manchester–Liverpool conurbation in the UK. All cases share a common link: they are fascinating experiments that address issues of the spatial in-between in contemporary urban regions facing similar challenges of socio-economic, political and cultural viability and coherence.

Three practices of symbolisation

In Rotterdam, the necessity for a seaport extension resulted in a regional agreement with a double objective: investments in the port economy and in the livability of the Rotterdam region. Under the label ‘Project Mainport Development Rotterdam’, a large variety of projects have been placed on the agenda. The most important one has been the realisation of new green infrastructure for the Rotterdam Rijnmond. This involved the transformation of an agricultural polder into a regional landscape park with wetland nature for the inhabitants of the city-region. Other spectacular projects consider the realisation of a green podium in the harbour on the Landtong Rozenburg, and the strengthening of a recreation hotspot near the new port extension, both emphasising recreation and nature in an authentic port landscape rich in contrasts.

In the Cologne/Bonn region two projects have been investigated that were launched in the framework of the 'Regionale 2010', a policy initiative of the Land of North Rhine-Westphalia to foster regional identity. The first one in Wesseling, attempted to exploit the large-scale chemical industries as a unique selling point by integrating these into urban development as a spectacular element of the townscape. The key symbolic marker was a spectacular exposition centre that highlights excellence in chemistry. In the other project in the lignite-mining district near Cologne, Terra Nova, a new panorama allowing for spectacular views into the open pit, a speedway in the landscape structure of a former conveyor belt and other landmarks present an effort of three local authorities to frame the energy landscape as a unique environment. The Coal Innovation Centre and an inter-municipal technology park symbolise an economic future building on the energy competence.

The third case study, Atlantic Gateway, originates from the plans of a private-sector company with major assets and landholdings in North West England. The Peel Group presented a £50bn investment strategy that reframes the two city-regions as 'Ocean Gateway', creating a growth opportunity to address the north-south divide rather than competing with one another. The proposal consists of an integrated multi-modal transport and logistics strategy called 'SuperPort', a series of flagship urban development projects, and environmental resources and energy projects, even including the proposal for a regional park system. This investment scheme evolved into a 'soft' regional strategy, renamed Atlantic Gateway.

Institutional innovation and symbolic markers

Institutional innovation is a key objective of these planning initiatives from both state and market actors. This research is about planning strategies that try to realise new understandings of the contemporary, poly-nuclear forms, the growing spatial-functional integration and the blurring distinction of town and countryside. The grown institutions, here simply understood as patterns of social norms, prove quite powerful in withstanding such attempts of innovation. Usually, institutions are relatively durable and only change gradually, but they are never static. In this thesis, planning practices were analysed, in which by means of symbolic markers, processes of institutional transformation were put under a magnifying glass with the aim to accelerate processes of change.

There is a large literature that stresses the importance of symbols as the expression of an existing institutional order, but also in periods of institutional change and conflict. Institutional change does not work by decree, but

requires efforts to actively institute the new meaning. The symbolic integration, both in the reaffirmation existing and in the formation of new (metropolitan) regions constitutes an important part. This symbolic dimension in the creation of coherence in urban regions is not always fully considered, but more and more urban designers and planners discover symbolic markers as an important instrument to highlight processes of urban transformation. Symbolic markers tend to work better if they are culturally and institutionally embedded. Obviously, this is a challenge in a context where neither the form of cities nor symbolic markers have fully crystallised.

This thesis offers a set of research steps with which to analyse processes of institutional change and the symbolic means employed. Such an institutional research strategy for symbolic markers starts with the identification of symbolic markers and the interpretation of the encoded message. In another step we have to look at the symbolisers and the objective context. The important question is to what extent the symbolisers are authorised and whether the symbolisation is a genuine interpretation of the institutional structure. Having analysed the 'acting' side of symbolisation, we need to look at the audience that is addressed and how their institutional position is taken into account. In many cases, the launch of symbolic markers leads to the adaptation of the proposed marker or even competing ones. In cases of advanced processes of symbolisation, it is important to look into the process of symbolic reproduction of institutions, including the sanctions for misrecognition of social norms.

Variety of experiences, common mistakes?

The three case studies have shown the diversity of planning strategies to come to grips with the emerging forms of cities. Each tried to address issues related to urban transformation in their own way. Few projects of symbolisation managed to lay the foundation for broad instant mobilisation. Almost everywhere, the proposition of the symbolic markers resulted in some frictions. In Wesseling, this meant the deathblow for the ambitious Chemtech project; yet even in the most harmonious case, the Terra Nova project, the symbolisation process was no linear movement.

Most cases lacked institutional diversity in the beginning. We can observe the old hubris of planning subjectivism in a new jacket of new planning experiments. Both state and market actors are prone to fall into the trap to put their own ideas first. The bold and unilateral presentation of a massive investment scheme by the private corporation caused outrage in (parts of) the public sector. The plans of the Province of South Holland to transform the agricultural

polder were greeted by fierce protests of the citizenry. A similar reaction occurred in Wesseling when the plans for the key symbolic marker became public. Only the Terra Nova project developed in a more dialogic situation. Thus, the initiating actor had to invest a lot of energy in explaining the symbolic markers.

The 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. Yet the very same agency lacked the leverage to enforce collective action in the Chemtech project. In the Manchester–Liverpool case the Government, being aware of the resources of the corporation, openly took position for the entrepreneur, but in so doing, became an active player instead of providing conditions: rather than requesting joint regional priorities it made opaque decisions on a project basis. In Rotterdam, the national government spent €300m almost unconditionally. The solution to improve the quality of life was defined in much detail beforehand, leaving little space for recombining local and regional ambitions in the symbolisation of a new green pearl in the Rijnmond.

Planning as a process of institutional discovery

At first sight, we might conclude that symbolic markers do not work. Nothing could be farther from truth. In the least they help us making visible a struggle between old and new institutional meaning or between stagnation and transformation. Such a confrontation brings about a reflection on the future, making an ongoing transformation visible. Whatever the outcome of this struggle, it is certainly not the smooth transition that planners might have hoped for. Yet, only if the institutional basis of symbolic markers is extremely weak institutional innovation is unlikely to materialise. The intended magnifying effect of planning strategies using symbolic markers requires endurance to find symbolic markers that are institutionally grounded.

The institutional activation of the new metropolis should be understood as a process of discovery, rather than instrumental design. It 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, I argue for a refined perception of the planner's role including a reflective dimension of institutional meaning in practice. 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!