Pursuing transit-oriented development: Implementation through institutional change, learning and innovation

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“读万卷书不如行万里路，行万里路不如阅人无数，阅人无数不如名师指路，名师指路不如自己去悟...”

“TO TRAVEL THOUSANDS OF MILES IS BETTER THAN TO READ THOUSANDS OF BOOKS, TO DISCUSS WITH OTHERS IS BETTER THAN TRAVELING THOUSANDS OF MILES, HAVING AN EXPERT TEACH AND GUIDE YOU IS BETTER THAN DISCUSSING WITH MANY OTHERS, TO SEEK SELF ENLIGHTENMENT IS BETTER THAN HAVING AN EXPERT TEACHING YOU.”

COMMON SAYING REGARDING CHINESE EPISTEMOLOGY, ORIGINS ATTRIBUTED IN PART TO 董其昌 DONG QI CHANG (1555 - 1636); A LATE MING DYNASTY PAINTER, SCHOLAR, CALLIGRAPHER, AND ART THEORIST.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin with a confession; I do not possess a driver license and have never saw the need for one until I moved to the Netherlands. Growing up in Singapore, I have taken the ease and comfort of travelling by public transportation for granted. My perceptions were sharply readjusted once I moved to the Netherlands. Cycling, which was previously purely recreational, became a major mode of travel. The proximity and access to stations (trains, metro, trams or buses) became a major concern. The reliability of transit and their schedules were suddenly crucial to my daily life. Granted that both countries differ greatly in distances and scale, yet for the first time in my adult life I felt my movements restricted. How and why land use and transport policies could differ in different cities became a source of fascination.

This was however, not the sole motivation for this dissertation. It was by happy coincidence that I stumbled onto the interface of mobility and land use planning. Traffic and logistic flows were important when I was a practicing architect and urban designer. The site location with its traffic in and outflows was the first drawing made usually. The confrontation of how people and goods move through the urban fabric became increasingly conspicuous as I graduated from interior and architectural design to the urban block and eventually to regional and metropolitan strategic planning. This became incredibly clear when I researched 24/7 environments and metropolitan regions for my master thesis at TU Delft. I continued researching regional land use planning, accessibility and economic functions after my graduation which was where I was first introduced to the research at the University of Amsterdam on accessibility (or rather mobility) and land use planning.

When the chance came for this research, I jumped at it. The research set-up ticked all the right boxes. I wanted a chance to scale up into planning and engage with spatial strategies from political and sociological approaches in addition to the urban design angle. The object of study, station area development at a network level, fitted well with my interests on urban space and accessibility on the regional scale. The research did have an attractive offer to look and learn from foreign cases as well.

However, the biggest selling point of this research project was that it was practice-oriented and not (only) sitting-behind-a-desk-in-an-ivory-tower type of research. In short, this research allowed me to combine my fascination for urban space, how to navigate through it, comparing different urban regions and their policies with engagement with practitioners plus a chance to travel.

SS Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
As stated in the epigraph; the research, travel and discussions were crucial to my dissertation in this four year journey. However, the crux here is about learning. The research evolved from pure policy comparison to how and what to learn from. I became fascinated by the cognitive dissonance in planning practice.

When I interviewed for the position, I stated that I just wanted a chance to read and do research. This is a typical case of ‘be-careful-what-you-wish-for’. This dissertation gradually became a process of learning; learning about the vast literature around these subjects, learning about my own interests and limitations but also about support systems that one requires to learn. It really does take a village and therefore the following groups and individuals must be duly acknowledged.

The research and dissertation would have not been possible without my promotors, Luca Bertolini and Leonie Janssen-Jansen. Luca and Leonie are two halves that make my research whole. Luca is the authority on all things regarding mobility (particularly, transit-oriented development) while Leonie is the authority on all things regarding institutions (particularly, institutional change). Together, their discussions and arguments have balanced out this dissertation.

As the leading authority on land use and mobility research in the Netherlands, this research was Luca’s brainchild.

I am grateful that he has allowed me the opportunity to carry it out with my own input and variations. His take on combining practice and academia is a source of inspiration on both the personal and professional level. He has an uncanny ability to discern the important parts within my drivel while recognising that I needed to work through it independently. He has been deserving called the ‘super promotor’ by previous candidates and I wholeheartedly agree.

Leonie has been a true inspiration for me as my co-promotor, mentor and friend. She has demonstrated the prowess of her intellect and ethical integrity while persevering with grace in the academic world. Her constant encouragement has been crucial to this dissertation as are the enjoyable and fruitful writing sessions at her beautiful home with the occasional company of her lovely sons, pets and husband. I owe my academic writing to her efforts.

Of course, the research would not have been possible without the support of the research consortium and our partners. Here, I would like to thank Frank Bruinsma (VU Amsterdam), Bart van der Heijden (Gemeente Amsterdam), Hans Koster (VU), Jorn Matthijsse (Stadsregio Arnhem Nijmegen), Harry van Noord (NS), Cees-Jan Pen (Platform31), Piet Rietveld (VU), Huibert Verdoold (Prov. Gelderland), Nicole van der Waard (Movares) and Constance Winnips (Stadsregio Amsterdam) for sharing their time, network and knowledge in Dutch.
planning in the numerous research meetings. These meetings would not have been possible without Nick Smit, our program manager extraordinaire. He is the logistic and communication centre of the entire project.

I have travelled to numerous regions around the world (and in the Netherlands) for this research. On further reflection, it seems almost appropriate that most of my thinking and writing has taken place in trains, station areas, airports or mid-flight. I have been graciously hosted by Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia; Portland State University in Portland, Oregon; TransLink in Vancouver, B.C and Aalborg University in Copenhagen.

These international networks are one of the most valuable outputs from these four years. My appreciation goes out to Carey Curtis, Sarah Iannarone, Stephan Nieweler and Andre Valderrama for making my visits possible. I apologise for not being able to name all of those who have contributed to this research individually. I have therefore compiled a list (see Appendix: Network) of all those who have contributed in some way to my research.

My colleagues in the Urban Planning group in Amsterdam have also played a formative role in my research process and I would like to thank them for their comments, suggestions and discussions. I have been able to learn more about Dutch planning from experienced colleagues such as Roel te Brugge, Stan Majoor and Willem Salet, than I could hope to glean from the existing literature. In particular, I would like to thank Sebastian Dembski for putting up with our chatter, reading my articles meticulously and discussing institutional change with me tirelessly. I would like to thank David Evers, Henk de Feijter, Marcel Heemskerk, Richard Ronald, Karin Pfeffer and Jochem de Vries for ensuring that my educational responsibilities were both enjoyable and possible. My research would not have been possible without the management support from Barbara Lawa, financial management from Puikang Chan and the organisational abilities of Marian Hamann, Lisette van Dam, Guida Morais e Castro Ermida and the venerable Marianne Heelsbergen.

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My fellow PhD candidates and roommates who have been the source of much intellectual, political and at times, trivial debate deserve my thanks as well. I have learnt much from them as we suffer through our dissertations and have spent many a wonderful afternoon with them while I was in Amsterdam. Els Beukers, Anita Blessing, Doreen Chen, Paul Chorus, Guowen Dai, Jan Duffhues, Bas Hissink Muller, Enrica Papa, Koen Raats, Federico Savini, Andrew Switzer, Caroline Uittenbroek and Rick Vermeulen are some of the most fun and generous individuals I have had the pleasure of working and sharing knowledge (and food) with.

The path to self-enlightenment is never easy and is not possible without the following important individuals who have shaped or are shaping this part of my path. I have had to fortune to share my journey with friends who are either fellow enthusiasts for urban space, Dutch policy or are fellow sufferers (foreign PhD candidates in the Netherlands) themselves. My thanks goes out to Alex, Akkelies, Astor, Birgit, Diana, Doreen, Jan. S, Marcelo, Michiel, Piter, and Taneha for sharing dinners and different perspectives.

Pursuing a PhD is an arduous process and one can get lost sitting behind a computer daily. An important lesson learnt here is the benefit of having an occupational health and safety manager of the Labrador Retriever variant. Paddy has made sure that I had a warm and comfortable footrest while working from home and that I took frequent breaks away from the computer for a walk outside.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for their love and support of my foray into the abstract and ‘unreal’ world of academia. My parents, Kwang Long and Mui Yong, instilled in me a passion for learning, exploring and analysing the world (from halfway across the world). They have also decided to turn a blind eye to the fact that I am still studying instead of getting a ‘real’ job. I lay the blame at their feet for teaching us that there are only two things to invest in in life; real estate and education. Given the current volatile real estate market, I have decided to go for the latter.

My brothers, Willy, Tony and Nixon, have thankfully supported my decision with great enthusiasm even though they are not sure what exactly I am researching. I am also indebted to Geert and Jeanne, the parents of my partner, who lovingly taught me the Dutch language and culture while suffering my interrogations on their potential proclivity for public transport and knooppuntontwikkeling.

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