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New avenues for comprehensive planning in fragmented urban development

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PART III

In-depth case studies

4. **Between a rock and a hard place: investigating project managers' learning experiences in Amsterdam's fragmented landscape of property development**

This chapter has been submitted as a single-authored article to an international peer-reviewed journal.

Urban development increasingly occurs through fragmented city-building endeavours in which public sector actors interact and negotiate with private sector actors. This paper argues that learning constitutes an important means to establish linkages between these area-specific development formations. It equates a triple learning loop concept to change at different levels of spatial governance, and investigates whether and how learning experiences of public sector project managers working for the Municipality of Amsterdam travel beyond the project-scale. The analysis reveals the challenges faced by project managers operating in a context which on the one hand is characterised by flexibilization, institutional fragmentation and the accommodation of private sector interests, and on the other hand by a tightening regulatory framework in relation to the production of housing at the municipal level. The paper concludes by underscoring the importance of putting a human face on the intricacies and complexities of public sector actors' relations with private developers in property-driven development.

4.1 **Introduction**

Fragmented governance arrangements are underpinning urban development. With wider changes of the relationships between states and markets, public and private sector actors involved in urban development interact and negotiate in complex

area-specific development formations, which are increasingly property-driven (Tasan-Kok and Baeten, 2012; Healey, 2007; Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez, 2002). For public sector planners, this situation results in “deal making on a project-by-project basis” (Fainstein, 1994: 5), increased flexibility in overarching planning frameworks, as well as creating new positions as facilitators and negotiators in disconnected ‘pockets of micro-regulation’ (Tasan-Kok et al., 2019; Sehested, 2009). The concerns of planning scholars in this respect are spatially fragmented islands of property development (Baeten, 2012), connected to growing inequalities and the abandonment of values and ‘substance’ in urban development with the demise of strategic approaches. Consequently, the importance of linkages between events, functions and institutions is underscored to avoid planning turning into ‘a speculative process’ (Madanipour, 2010).

In this paper, I argue that learning constitutes an important means to create the possibility of establishing these linkages between fragmented property-driven development formations. Thus, I do not understand linkages as spatial mergers of development projects, but in a more abstract way as learning experiences that may link fragmented actions, practices and lessons learnt from concrete city-building endeavours and connect them with one another, as well as to overarching institutional structures guiding the future behaviour of actors. Multifaceted governance arrangements, uncertainty and divergent values of actors have revived discussions on so-called *wicked* problems which are both difficult to recognise and to solve due to their complexities (Rittel and Webber, 1973), but how public sector employees deal with these challenges is under-researched (Head, 2008). Thinking in terms of wicked problems in planning is useful to draw attention to learning beyond clear-cut solutions to concrete problems, to a wider skill set that contemporary planners need to acquire due to the unpredictability of social interactions and complex negotiations with private sector actors. Furthermore, and even though planning studies steadily incorporates and engages with notions of experimentation and learning by trial and error (Savini and Bertolini, 2019; Bulkeley, et al. 2018), it remains to be explored whether and how these learning practices are transmitted to established spatial governance procedures to acquire a degree of synchrony in groups of actions in urban development through the establishment of linkages.

Focusing on the City of Amsterdam, I illustrate the institutionally fragmented nature of property development due to regulatory and policy changes at different spatial scales. Local politics and the corresponding ambition of the Municipality of Amsterdam to build 50,000 new apartments by 2025 contribute to this fragmentation as it puts pressure on public sector employees to achieve the city’s spatial development objectives through a stronger emphasis on so-called transformation

projects, in which private sector actors take on leading roles (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2018a). Rooted in the Dutch planning tradition of strong state interference, active land policy and extensive public landownership, however, the Municipality's experience with private sector-driven property development projects is limited (*ibid.*). I focus on the experiences and reflections of public sector project managers of the Municipality of Amsterdam's Project Management Office (*Projectmanagementbureau*) and reveal how they actively learn from both concrete challenges emerging from interactions with private sector actors, and adapt their behaviour in line with the new conditions. The analysis reveals how local political changes coupled with rising land and property values boost the Municipality's confidence and result in less flexibility, stricter regulations and tighter policy objectives, in contrast to national government agendas that enhance and embrace private sector interests in urban development. For project managers, this leads to conflicting situations as the distance between municipal policy directions and development practices 'on the ground' is growing: the former rejects and even aims to return to more traditional ways of area development with the public sector in the lead, while the latter faces institutional pressures to implement policy objectives of housing production, requiring the adoption of new forms of cooperation and compromises with private developers and investors.

I operationalise the abstract notion of learning by referring to the concept of *learning loops* emanating from theories of learning (Armitage, 2008). In *single-loop learning*, actors develop alternative tactics to address concrete and context-specific challenges (*ibid.*): The novelty of dynamics and relationships between actors in transformation projects offers opportunities for project managers to experiment and construct their own manuals, but simultaneously triggers stress as they face unchartered territory in their everyday practices. *Double-loop learning* designates actor- instead of project-specific learning (*ibid.*). Approaching it in terms of project managers' self-reflection and adjustment of behaviour beyond project boundaries, I demonstrate the formal and informal channels through which changes in attitude and behaviour occur. Project managers especially highlighted the importance of soft skills, their professional attitude to compromise in negotiations and the formal trajectory training junior project managers in these respects.

Lastly, *triple-loop learning* draws "attention to the norms and protocols upon which single- and double-loop learning are predicated or governed" (*ibid.*: 87). Particularly since the 2008 economic crisis, a shift occurred towards private-sector and opportunity-driven forms of urban development in Amsterdam (Savini et al., 2016). Even though development practices exhibit greater dependence on private sector actors, at a policy and discursive level, recent years have been characterised by a

tightening regulatory framework concerning the production of housing. Through the deficiency in triple-loop learning, I argue that project managers are increasingly torn between the policy directions that the City is taking and the necessary actions in concrete development projects that require the accommodation of private developers and investors' interests.

The paper begins by tying together literature on property, planning and learning by focusing on social relations as their common denominator. Furthermore, I equate different levels of fragmented property-driven urban development with the triple learning loop concepts as a frame of analysis. It is followed by the methodology, in which I provide insights into the underlying research process. A demonstration of Amsterdam's fragmented property development landscape provides contextual information through the consecutive empirical analysis which is structured according to the three learning loops. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion, stressing the importance of putting a human face on the intricacies and complexities involved in public sectors actors' interaction with private sector actors in property-driven development.

4.2 Learning as linkage between property-driven development formations

Notions of learning have long played a fundamental role in planning. Faludi (2000), for instance, proposed to understand planning as a form of mutual learning altogether, and Friedmann (1971: 320) posed that "knowledge about the metropolis is revealed to us only in fragments", correspondingly requiring a more fluid and constantly evolving understanding of knowledge. In his 'epistemology of mutual learning', Friedmann (2017) points out the limits of expert knowledge and highlights the importance of inter-personal dialogue and face-to-face interaction between planners and other actors coming together in concrete undertakings. These factors are also crucial determinants in property-driven development, but the existing literature tends to focus on unequal power relationships between actors, being less vocal on specifying how it is dealing with new forms of inter-personal interaction. Adding this dimension, I particularly concentrate on how learning experiences emanating from these interactions 'travel' beyond the project scale to link fragmented development projects from a public sector perspective.

Despite its path-dependent and context-specific unfolding, scholars have documented how property development has become a major activity in urban development with strong repercussions on spatial governance arrangements and the positions and roles of actors within them (Tasan-Kok, 2010; Fainstein, 2008; Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez, 2002). In simple terms, property development

can be defined as “the assembly of finance, land, building materials, and labour to produce or improve buildings for occupation and investment purposes” (Turok, 1992: 362). Almost 25 years ago, Krueckenberg (1995) argued that property should be more centrally featured in planning studies. Fainstein’s (1994) work on ‘city builders’, in which she skilfully connected public and private sector actors’ relationships in terms of property investments into urban built environments in London and New York, was for a long time one of the few works explicitly linking property markets and public-sector planning practices. While property development gained more attention in relation to neoliberalising urban development processes and policy agendas, planning studies is criticised for its disregard of the heterogeneity of property industry actors (Campbell, Tait and Watkins, 2014), and of public sector planners’ active participation and role in the construction of property markets (Adams and Tiesdell, 2010).

In recent years, however, academic engagement with the intricate relations between property markets, planning practices and policy has been growing (Theurillat, Rerat and Crevoisier, 2015). According to Blomley (2017), the difficulty of connecting property and public sector regulation stems from the fact that much urban land is privately owned. In this respect, property represents “a complex of overlapping tenure rights – rights to enter, pass over, use, use the fruits of, exclude others from, build on, pass on to inheritors or sell land” (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017: 16). Public sector planning regulations thus allocates property rights as well as regulates and taxes land development (Jacobs and Paulsen, 2009). Thereby, public sectors intend to either reduce property market imbalances and their negative externalities, or achieve other objectives entirely through property tax revenues (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017).

The wider literature discerns different perspectives on actual property development processes, such as from political economy, Marxist or institutional stances (see Drane, 2013 for a useful overview). Institutional perspectives prove most beneficial to counter over-generalisations and black-and-white thinking on private sector involvement in urban development. They tend to approach property as a ‘bundle of relations’ capturing the intricate interplay and interactions between public and private sector actors (Blomley, 2017; Fainstein, 2008). Moreover, they offer alternative explanations to rational choice economics by treating social relationships, structures and processes as equally “important as their economic equivalents in ‘explaining’ property development” (Guy and Henneberry, 2002: 2399). The property development process is hence considered “a set of coordinating performances” (Needham, Segeren and Buitelaar, 2011: 163) in which “transactions, like social interactions are conditioned by humanly devised rules, norms and

regulations” (Adams and Tiesdell, 2010: 193). Planners participate and are involved in these interactions and negotiations, and embedded in wider economic and social contexts (*ibid.*).

Considering property as a bundle of relations also sheds light on the fragmentation of governance arrangements underlying contemporary urban development dynamics. In each property-driven development formation, which I term property-driven city-building endeavour, a specific set of public, private and even civil society actors and stakeholders come together and interact in decision-making processes (Figure 16). Thereby, public sector actors often take on facilitating and negotiating roles (Sehested, 2009; Fainstein, 2008; Campbell, 2006). Through the flexibilization of planning policy, these relations and negotiations lie at the heart of ‘pockets of micro-regulation’ which appear across the city (Tasan-Kok, et al., 2019) and further distance contemporary planning activity from notions of comprehensive spatial planning. An institutional perspective furthermore sheds light on the fact that city-building endeavours, regardless of their scattered appearance, are embedded in wider spatial governance which includes policies, regulations and institutions which guide and steer the interaction of actors in terms of established governance processes (Jessop, 2016; Healey, 2006; Figure 16).

This dynamic form of urban development leads to fragmentation, both real in terms of spatially disconnected property development islands responding to private sector interests (Baeten, 2012), and perceived in terms of the growing complexities making it challenging to retain a comprehensive overview of processes at hand (Tasan-Kok et al., 2019; Bodnar, 2001). Yet planning, according to Madanipour (2010: 194), finds itself in a unique position not only to induce “substantive transformation of spatial conditions” but also to establish ‘symbolic connectivity’ by “making, formalizing and expanding causal connections between events, functions and institutions.”

Learning can arguably play a fundamental role in this. Most learning theories model learning as collective processes since the opportunities to learn without interacting with others and being exposed to new ideas are limited (Wink, 2010). Hence, they share the focus on social relationships and interaction of the institutional perspectives on property development. The concept of triple loop learning stems from organisational theory (Hargrove, 2002) but is particularly compelling for governance studies as it “takes into account the different levels that provide guidance and stability in a social system” (Pahl-Wostl, 2009: 358) as well as its importance for “structural change in the governance regime as a whole” (*ibid.*). I equate the three differentiated learning loops with different levels in the property-driven development process (Figure 17).

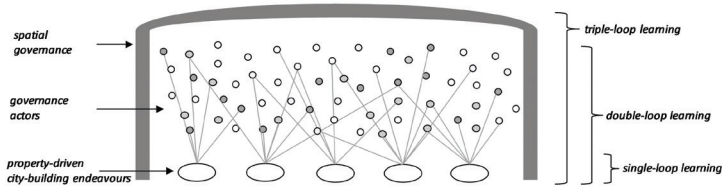


Figure 17. Connecting fragmented property-driven development to analytical levels of learning loops

Single-loop learning encompasses new actions, tasks and strategies to address and solve a concrete problem at hand. While it experimented with new measures and instruments, in single loop learning generally no doubt is cast on established routines and processes (ibid.). In *double-loop learning*, learning does not concentrate on a concrete problem at hand but leads to adjustments in behaviour and actions of actors. Thus, while strongly linked to single-loop learning, it extends to the sphere of government actors and moves beyond the project scale (Figure 17). It includes reflection processes on actors' own positions, and involves "the calling into question of guiding assumptions how goals can be achieved" (Pahl-Wostl, 2009: 359). In planning studies for instance, this level has been approached in terms of individual capacity building (Schmitt and Wiechmann, 2018) and critical self-reflection of planners (Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2016). With regards to property development, Adams and Tiesdel (2010) argue that planners should move beyond a shallow understanding of market dynamics, and acquire the ability to fundamentally challenge a property developer's financial calculations. However, unclear role divisions provide obstacles to capacity building (Heurkens and Hobma, 2014).

Transformation of the structural context and factors that determine the frame of reference is captured by *triple-loop learning*. Learning at this level results in critical reflections on overarching paradigms and structural constraints, and may lead to the inclusion of new actors and formation of new relationships as well as changes in overarching regulatory frameworks, norms and values (Pahl-Wostl, 2009). In planning studies, this level has been approached in terms of institutional learning, which "reflects upon the extent to which structures and routines have been installed and how this knowledge is managed and secured for future purposes" (Schmitt and Wiechmann, 2018: 28). Triple-loop learning is a continuation of, and rests on, single and double-loop learning, and corresponds to different levels of change highlighted by institutional theorists: "each level is more costly to change than the previous one" (North, 1990: 83; Ostrom, 1990). Bringing the discussion to an explicit focus on the three learning loops in property-driven city-building endeavours, the paper now turns to the Amsterdam context.

4.3 Methodology⁷

The analysis of this paper is twofold. First, I present the fragmentation of

Amsterdam's landscape of property development and illustrate my understanding of its fragmented nature. In the Amsterdam context, this fragmentation does not represent spatial disconnections between development projects as much as it does complexifying governance arrangements and sets of actors coming together in spatial decision-making processes, the so-called 'pockets of micro-regulation' (Tasan-Kok et al., 2019). My argumentation is based on an analysis of wider changes to the Dutch planning system as well as changes in regulatory frameworks, and an analysis of policy documents which were particularly focused on discourses related to the production of housing. Furthermore, in an interactive session with policymakers from social and spatial planning departments at the Municipality of Amsterdam in March 2019, preliminary observations on the fragmented governance landscape were discussed and confirmed. In the analysis, I address the underlying reasons that contribute to this fragmentation thematically, and utilise the term 'landscape' to designate important features in the patterns and processes of property development.

Second, I analyse public sector project managers' learning experiences from interacting with private developers. In the semi-structured interviews with nine project managers operating in property-driven development projects in Amsterdam (Table 4), the 'learning what' questions with regards to interacting with private sector actors were purposively left open. In line with considering property development a wicked challenge, the aim was to gain insight into this process without steering the interviewee into a pre-defined direction. Interviewees were approached based on purposive sampling on the basis of job descriptions, and interviews lasted on average 50 minutes. Four interviewees had a senior position meaning that they oversaw larger areas within the municipality which in turn were sub-divided into smaller project areas. Three interviewees worked as project managers responsible for one of these areas, and two worked as junior project managers in a project team (Table 4).

Furthermore, an important differentiation in the Amsterdam context, as well as for the argumentation of this paper, is made between the project area's focus, which was either area development or area transformation (Table 4). Area development captures the more traditional approach of Dutch active land policy, in which the municipalities prepare land for development, set up a policy framework and then sell or lease it to private developers in line with their policy objectives (Buitelaar, 2010). In area transformation, however, private sector actors initiate development and find themselves in a more influential position. The Municipality of Amsterdam itself describes area transformation as necessary to reach its housing ambitions in line with the policy objectives quoted above, but also considers it as challenging due

RESPOND- ENT NO.	POSITION	WORK EXPERIENCE (IN YEARS)	MAIN APPROACH IN IN PROJECT AREA
R1	Senior project manager	25	Development
R2	Senior project manager	12	Transformation
R3	Senior project manager	11	Development
R4	Senior project manager	27	Development
R5	Project manager	20	Transformation
R6	Project manager	20	Transformation
R7	Project manager	3	Transformation
R8	Junior project manager	4	Transformation
R9	Junior project manager	1.5	Transformation

Table 4. List of interviewees in the project management office

to its lack of experience in this respect as well as its weaker position and necessary deliberation with private sector actors (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2018a).

4.4 Amsterdam's fragmented landscape of property development

The Municipality of Amsterdam is located in the Province of North Holland, and is with 854,316 inhabitants in 2018, the largest city of the Netherlands. The political and discursive focus of property development strongly focuses on the production of housing. Housing prices are rising rapidly: between April and July 2018, apartments cost 450,000 euros on average, which is more than 5,000 euros per square metre, while the average price for the country lies at 283,000 (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2018a). Coupled with an expected population growth of approximately 15,000 people per year, Amsterdam faces an affordable housing crisis which has become strongly politicised. Housing was a key component of the municipal elections in 2018, and the coalition accord of the elected GROENLINKS/D66/PVDA/SP underscores the importance of a 'just city' connected to the housing market; the plan is to construct 50.000 new apartments by 2025. Reaching this objective, according to the Municipality, requires new forms of interaction with private sector actors (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2018a).

Urban development in Amsterdam has undergone a transition which can be linked to wider changes in the Dutch planning system. Overall, there has been a change from top-down public-sector led planning towards more flexible approaches embracing private sector interests in property development projects (Buitelaar, Galle, and Sorel, 2011). Even though Louw, Krabben and Priemus (2003) describe the traditional active land policy approach to development as entrepreneurial before the ascendance of influence of private sector actors, a wider shift occurred in relationships between public and private sector actors. Central government transfers

to local municipalities reduced in the 1980s and public-private partnerships were more actively utilised to finance particularly larger-scale urban redevelopment (Hendriks and Tops, 1999). In Amsterdam, extensive development schemes such as the South Axis or the IJ-bank development, started to reverse the logic of active land development with public sector planning following “private preferences for development” (Hoetjes, Bertolini and Le Clercq, 2006: 181).

It was not until 2008, however, that changes in practices were institutionalised in the new Spatial Planning Act (*Wet Ruimtelijke Ordening*) which determines the structure of the Dutch planning system. As the first substantial change since 1965, the major revision to the planning law replaced the hierarchical structure with spatial visions which are only binding on the level that develops them, aimed to simplify regulatory complexity and “stimulate a proactive, ‘hands-on’ and development-oriented planning” (Tasan-Kok et al., 2019: 10). The 2008 economic crisis put a hold on major redevelopment schemes, and in 2010 the national government enacted a Crisis and Recovery Act (*Crisis- en herstelwet*) to spur market activity and speed-up planning decisions following economic downturn. In Amsterdam, the crisis led to “a deep reform of its consolidated planning institutions, motivated by ideals of urban experimentalism and urban innovation” (Savini, 2017: 857), and development patterns of piecemeal approaches to curb financial risks.

Simultaneously, regulatory changes at the national level redefined the role of housing corporations, which after their development following WW2 had become a major investor in urban redevelopment (Andersen and Van Kempen, 2003). In 1995, the so-called process of bruting (‘grossing and balancing operation’) privatised housing associations. Financial independence from the government required housing corporations to “use their equity or build market-rate housing to compensate for the financial losses on the provision of rented social housing” (Buitelaar, 2010: 354) and turn their relationships with local administrations into being more business-like and based on negotiation (Conijn, 2005). Corporations sold parts of their housing stock and broadened their activities investing in “social projects, public-purpose buildings and commercial real estate” (Hoekstra, 2017: 3), but also became involved in land speculation (Aalbers, 2017). Scandals of mismanagement and fraud hit the headlines in 2010, and amendments to the Dutch housing law (*Woningwet*) in 2015 restricted their activities to the supply of affordable housing. In Amsterdam, the percentage of social housing units owned by housing corporations reduced from 50% in 2008 to 39% in 2018 (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2018b) and agreements have been made to slow down the process to give priority to middle-income and affordable housing (AFWC, 2018).

On the one hand, dependence on private sector actors continues and the national

government, for instance, actively promotes the housing and mortgage market as an investment opportunity (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2019). Financial losses through active land policy have sparked discussions on the usefulness of the approach (Heurkens and Hobma, 2014). Furthermore, in the country there is generally less municipal land available for housing development (Buitelaar, 2010). On the other hand, following the local elections in 2018, the 40-40-20 rule was introduced stipulating that new development projects have to include 40% social housing, 40% for middle-income groups and 20% for high-income groups. In addition, the homes must remain in the medium-priced segment for at least 25 years, and the rent increase has been limited. Therefore, even though the demand for rental properties is high, discussion emerges that in fact many potential construction sites remain unused as the heightened regulations make residential property unprofitable (Trappenburg and van Bockxmeer, 2019).

The complexity yet institutional fragmentation of Amsterdam's landscape of property development can be illustrated on the basis of housing projects alone. Figure 18 shows a map indicating the 1326 housing plans since 2012, which are either completed, under construction or where principle or investment decisions have been taken.

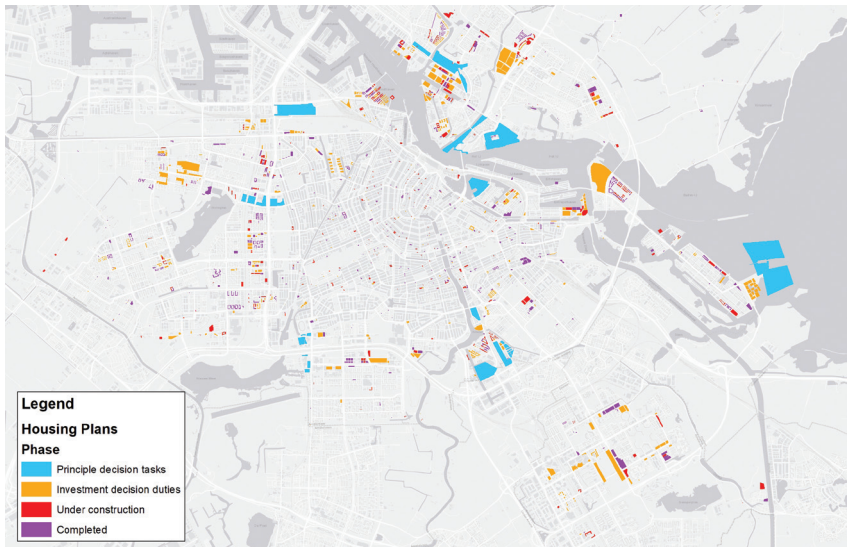


Figure 18. Housing Plans in Amsterdam since 2012. Created based on data, last updated 1 April 2019 from the Municipality of Amsterdam (2019a)

Each project area represents different city-building endeavours, in which diverse sets of actors form bundles of relations by negotiating and interacting in micro-regulation practices. The following analysis reveals how public sector project managers, who need to fulfil the municipality's policy objectives in terms of housing production in these projects, are caught between a rock and a hard place.

4.5 Property development at a crossroads: Incorporating new learning experiences or returning to old principles?

The Project Management Office (*Projectmanagementbureau*; abbreviation PMB) is subsumed under the cluster Space and Economy (*Economie en Ruimte*), one of the four major clusters of Amsterdam's local administration. Its approximately 480 employees are specialised in project, process and programme management addressing complex multidisciplinary and integrated projects in the social, physical and economic domains in collaboration with other municipal departments, districts and neighbourhoods, as well as other municipalities and the region (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2019b). The PMB does not develop policy independently, but project managers are internally hired to work under the direction of other divisions, with regards to property development the approximately 40 specialised planning project managers work under the leadership of the divisions of Land and Development (*Grond en Ontwikkeling*), and Space and Sustainability (*Ruimte en Duurzaamheid*), as they are most important in dealing with property and planning developments.

4.5.1 Single-loop learning in response to unchartered territory in transformation projects

The development of alternative strategies and tactics in the form of small, incremental changes in response to emerging challenges is encompassed by *single-loop learning* (Pahl-Wostl, 2009). In contrast to higher level learning loops, *single-loop learning* focuses on concrete solutions instead of behavioural adaption or the fundamental questioning of established procedures (ibid.). A main difference in the importance of *single-loop learning* within the Amsterdam context emerged between area development and transformation projects. Each development project by the PMB has a project manager who leads a multidisciplinary and multidivisional team that always includes one technical person responsible for technical questions pertaining the development, one urban planner or designer, and one person specialising on land prices and leasing (R8). Structures and procedures in area development were described as well established, and interviewees stated that unexpected events or occurrences occur rather seldom. As one interviewee explained, “you write down what you want”, organise a tender which explicates the

rules and standards of the developments and then select a developer, which requires no one-on-one or negotiations with developers before the start of a project (R4). Based on the tender, a developer is selected and a leasehold contract provided, and even though there remains some risk that the developer drops out or cannot fulfil an agreed obligation, the risk for the municipality remains rather manageable as it means that the developer is losing a fee that was paid at the beginning of the leasehold contract, and the whole procedure starts from the beginning (R1).

The situation, however, looks very different in area transformation projects, where interviewees saw unexpected things happening all the time (R5; R8). They explained how the property market is very dynamic and that there is a general lack of experience of collaborating with private sector actors in new constellations, which consecutively resulted in primarily “*learning-by-doing*” (R2; R3; R5; R7). The lack and fragmentation of landownership, for example, was considered as a major challenge in this respect, requiring interaction and the development of working relations between a variety of actors with different needs, interests and personalities, ranging from large private developers to public housing corporations as existing property or landowners (R8). R2 recalled a case, for instance, of repeatedly having conflicts with a specific housing corporation but passed it on in the administrative hierarchy where the issue would be put on the agenda and addressed with the help of a mediator. To address challenges emerging in negotiations with private sector actors directly and spontaneously, a “*4 eye principle*” is followed (R5). This means that a project manager never enters a negotiation alone, which was also considered as an instrument to prevent corruption and fraud (R5).

During negotiations, the inclusion of a representative of the Land and Development division of the municipality, which is ultimately responsible for the land lease in case of public landownership, was seen as crucial leverage (R6). In transformation projects, the main advantage for the municipality was considered a zoning plan that did not yet allow the designated or envisaged function, providing the municipality with influence despite lacking landownership (R6; R9). R3 drew a “*carrot and stick*” analogy in which desired rezoning could be utilised in negotiations and push for a fulfilment of the municipality’s policy objectives. When facing very concrete problems, interviewees reflected positively on the institutional channels at the PMB through which they could seek help and support. For instance, project managers are able to request an ‘InterVision’ which provides the feedback of other project managers external to a specific project development area looking for possible solutions in reference to a concrete problem (R4). Even more valued, however, were informal discussions with colleagues at weekly lunches or during coffee breaks, where information could be exchanged; though R2 admitted that in a hectic work

environment, sharing experiences does not always have priority.

In area transformation, no established manual and procedures exist but project managers stressed the value of trial-and-error, and testing out new ideas (R4; R5; R7; R9). The freedom was highly valued, and as R7 stated, “*it makes it fun, because your boss doesn’t know any better than you do what to do*” and R6 explained, “*sometimes we just do something, it is a best guess and check later if it works but there is no one from higher up that tells us what to do.*” This freedom, however, was also connected to a downside, namely the stress and pressure that is put on the project manager to fulfil policy objectives which were particularly addressed in relation to the ambitious housing production goals (R4; R6; R9). R7, for instance, described the ambition to build 50,000 houses by 2025 as enormous, and confessed: “*we are worried all the time because if we don’t pull this off, we have a big problem.*” Thus, *single-loop learning* in transformation projects occurs on a regular basis and is strongly connected to trial and error, and experimentation. In most projects, solutions to emerging problems fall back on mechanisms and tools of municipal control of land lease and zoning plans. When these conditions are not met, however, project managers exhibited a certain degree of insecurity.

4.5.2 Double-loop learning as institutional queries and critical self-reflection

In *double-loop learning*, actors develop alternatives in behaviour as well as more critically reflect on established procedures and their own positions (Pahl-Wostl, 2009). In fact, most interviewees saw an adjustment of their behaviour based on their experiences and face-to-face interaction with private developers. Again, the frequently highlighted learning-by-doing approach plays a fundamental part in this and is also reflected in the set-up of the PMB in terms of internal career trajectories. In general, the PMB only hires new project managers in junior positions, and through mentoring and annual performance reviews, including a detailed assessment of skills and the development of a personal trajectory and learning plan, they can progress to higher positions (R2). Furthermore, interviewees described a rather elaborate system of courses they are obligated to follow but can also choose on a voluntary basis to enhance their skills, though these skills were described as rather generic, such as stakeholder engagement and not specifically targeting interaction with private sector actors (R7).

A common thread in the conversations was that no form of education or course can prepare a project manager for real-life situations. A good project manager, according to interviewees, has to rely on gut feelings, intuition and instincts, assessing the body language or the personality of a developer in order to decide which strategy is best

to approach and negotiate (R1; R5). For instance, R5 elaborated on the hierarchical set-up within the municipality, which is known to private developers and who are hence not always taking project managers seriously if they are not operating at the top level. Therefore, R5 underscored that depending on the personality of the developer, it is crucial to make the municipality's position clear to be taken seriously, though 'strict' behaviour can only be practiced in a certain way, especially at the beginning of a project, flexibility is important. Those interviewees with 10 or more years of work experience reflected on the shift that occurred in terms of the importance of technical skills in the past, and soft or 'people'-based skills in the present in order to establish long-lasting relationships and connections between different parties in the development process (R2).

While age and years of work experience as project manager did not play a crucial role in differences in perception, the fact whether the project manager worked in a rather traditional area development or a transformation project appeared to be correlated to the reflection on their own position. Interviewees working in area transformation were more critical about the established procedures and institutions, and more strongly reflected on their own role as a negotiator instead of decision-makers. R4, for example, working in a traditional area development, made it clear that everyone has a main task, the municipality, the developers and all other parties involved in the process, stating that *"if everyone sticks to their core business, meaning, everyone knows what they are good at and what they are experienced at – for example, us as a municipality know what is best for a particular development, what is required, we make the guidelines for the project, etc. and the developers make the plans, it will be better as a whole."* R1 pointed out that if the municipality would listen to everything that people wanted, no housing would be built.

Interviewees who faced more challenges in their every-day work in transformation projects, on the other hand, admitted that the municipality sets so many goals and objectives which cannot always be met. R6 explained that the municipality is still trying to fit into their new role as facilitator instead of as decision-maker, and *"only slowly accepting that they are 'not god' anymore"*. R2 described his personal development in this respect as shifting from technical skills to the creation of long-lasting relationships which means giving up on average 50% of the initial demands made by the municipality in an actual transformation project. Similarly, R7 described her personal development trajectory of having become much more professionalised whereas in the beginning she was very optimistic and thought everything is possible. Simultaneously, the way of describing her 'professionalised' behaviour was not connected to frustration or a sense of defeat but simply as a different approach to working which requires a different skill set than in traditional area development.

A major problem in this respect was seen in the existing courses and training which transferred a skill set related to area development and did not catch up on adjusting to the new conditions though things were slowly starting to change (R6; R7). On the basis of the initiative of several project managers, the ‘learning house’ organisation within PMB with around 130 active people to develop, share and spread knowledge, for instance, formed a new group to exchange and share practices from transformation projects (R5). There was widespread consensus that the expertise of project managers needed to grow in relation to market-based and market-driven development initiatives, sharing for example instruments and mechanisms on how to get a public school financed within a private-led development without a tender procedure (R7; R9). Thus, *double-loop learning* in the PMB is encouraged through formal channels in terms of the development trajectory of junior project managers. The difference in self-reflection and adjustment of behaviour, moreover, is closely related to personal exposure to new forms of property-driven development. Project managers working in transformation projects provided critical evaluations of existing procedures and underscored the need for enhanced mechanisms to share learning experiences and support one another. Others, however, believed more firmly in traditional role divisions between public and private sector actors and favoured returning to old principles.

4.5.3 Rising land and property values as impediment to triple-loop learning

Triple-loop learning, culminating single- and double-loop learning, results in transformation of established procedures and routines, and may involve the implementation of new approaches in line with “corresponding efforts to change structural constraints” (Pahl-Wostl, 2009: 360). Interviewed project managers recognised the need for improvement and overarching change as “*the market moves fast and the policies are still ‘behind’*” (R4). At the same time, however, it was stressed that trying to follow the speed of the market is not desirable and instead suggested that the municipality should slow down, re-evaluate and develop a carefully thought-through long-term vision (R4). Being explicit about the need for improved learning and exchange of experience in transformation projects, reasons for their absence were ascribed to the municipality’s comfortable position. R2 explained that “*the municipality has a lot of money so they can also do a lot of things very carefully*” and R6 stated that “*more and more private parties want a piece of the cake.*”

The current situation where land and property prices were rising and the demand and interest of private sector actors in urban development was high, was contrasted to the situation a few years ago. R6, for instance, recalled that in the beginning of her current project briefly after the 2008 crisis hit, they were almost “*begging*” private

developers to build housing, which resulted in a lot of flexibility to accommodate private developers' interests. In contrast, now with a changing market situation, the municipality finds itself in a different position, which R6 saw for instance in demands that can be put on private sector actors. Similarly, the first contracts were very flexible and gave a lot of room to the private sector to make their own decisions, while now with increased market interest, regulations are becoming tighter.

Nonetheless, policy demands were often described as “*unworkable*” (R7), and the general difficulty of a project manager as having to combine the wide array of policies and regulations from different divisions that are applicable when it comes to property development projects (R9). Every week, according to R1, there are a lot of changes and new ideas but when you want to make “*housing production like a machinery*”, constant change is not good. With trust being a crucial element in the interactions between project managers and private sector actors, too much flexibility in terms of changes on behalf of the municipality was perceived as counter-productive to establish long-lasting relationships (R7; R8).

Regarding the question whether project managers' opinions are sought after in the policy development process, answers were very mixed. Two senior project managers (R2; R4) reflected positively on the consultation process and stated that there was some continuous dialogue. The rest, however, were more critical and stated for example that 90% of the time, they are simply informed and even if they are consulted, they doubt that actually anything is done with the provided input (R6). Measures to bridge the gap were highlighted, for instance by taking policymakers on field trips to the project areas to give them real insights from the actual work being done as “*the municipality should really learn how it works on the other side of the table*” (R7). Still, the “*gap between policy and reality is too big*” and it was suggested that policymakers participate in project management team meetings in order to be “*confronted with the practical reality of issues*” (R5).

R1, responsible for an area development project, gave the example of structural change based on learning experiences on the ground. He described how 20 years ago, it took a long time to discuss contracts with developers as land was leased to a developer, the municipality set up a contract and then the discussion started. With the introduction of the tender procedure (*bouwenvelop*), however, this negotiation would be cut shorter as the municipality clarified its objectives beforehand. He was confident with the approach and did not see it changing in the future. R7, in contrast, working in area transformation is hoping for a wider shift in the municipality and an increased sharing of practices, finding it difficult to work closely together with a private party and demanding all kinds of standards, and regulations such as the 40-40-20 rule to be upheld, but developers saying that it is not profitable enough: “So

we get a little bit discouraged. The most challenging part is that we, as municipality, try to fit into the new role but throw down a lot of standards” (R7). The project manager’s task was described as having to find the balance in a project so that alderpeople approve it, “but also to make the developers happy”. Triple-loop learning is the most difficult one to achieve and instead of incorporating experiences and transferring learning practices of project managers in transformation projects, it appears that the gap between policy and implementation within the local administration is widening.

4.6 Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I investigated public sector project managers’ learning experiences in Amsterdam’s fragmented landscape of property development. I adopted a learning-centred approach to the creation of linkages in fragmented urban development and revealed the challenges that project managers face in property development, which finds itself at a crossroads signified by two opposing processes: one going into a property-driven development direction and one intending to return to the local administration’s traditional strong position in urban development. Particularly the lack of *triple-loop learning* puts project managers into a challenging situation.

The purpose of my argument is not to advocate for structural change allowing for more flexibility and influence or to more fully embrace private sector interest in urban development. Rather, my intention is to highlight the complexities of dealing with property development dynamics within public administration, and particularly point out the challenges of project managers working on transformation projects, who find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Their dilemma is to fulfil spatial policy objectives involving compromises with private developers in a tightening regulatory and policy framework which makes the process more difficult and may even deter private sector actors engaging in housing production if they deem it not profitable enough. Both not delivering policy objectives, but also not upholding the municipal government’s standards, are not an option.

Showcasing the differences within the local administration up to the point of internal struggles and reflections of individual project managers involved in property-driven city-building endeavours is important. It acknowledges the wicked nature of property-driven development, acknowledges both struggles and efforts of public sector actors and puts a human face on them. The latter is particularly crucial in search of more nuanced analyses contrasting generalising assumptions such as bold statements that local administrations are either fully supporting or fighting against processes of neoliberalisation when it comes to planners’ new roles as facilitators of deal-making and negotiators with private sector actors.

The problems faced by project managers in Amsterdam also provides insight into the challenges of multi-level spatial governance. Even though planning in the Dutch system is decentralised, the example shows that property development is in fact strongly influenced by regulatory changes at the national level, which in the Dutch case increasingly orients itself towards accommodating private sector interests, for instance by actively recruiting international investors to invest in housing production and the Dutch mortgage market. These dynamics shape the conditions in Amsterdam, and require new insights and planning responses despite the local council taking a left-leaning stance and trying to regulate housing production by means of the 40-40-20 rule.

The learning loop concept proves beneficial in contributing to institutional perspectives on property development by highlighting the importance of knowledge transfer in social interaction in ‘bundles of relations’ and across ‘pockets of micro-regulation’ that increasingly shape urban development. *Single-loop learning* by project managers in Amsterdam furthermore underscore the importance of taking land, property and their relationship with public-sector planning interventions into account, despite theoretical discussions on the diminishing scope of city-planners in contemporary spatial governance. *Double-loop learning* experiences emphasise the importance of social and negotiating skills, as well as the struggles that planning practitioners face in their practices which often contradict planning thought’s normative objectives, and deserve more attention in planning education (Tasan-Kok and Oranje, 2018). Furthermore, both *single-* and *double-loop learning* revealed the importance of both formal and informal channels to exchange information and experiences for public sector planners to connect fragmented property-driven projects on a cognitive level.

While the general exchange of information within the PMB is well established, there is room for improvement especially when it comes to an explicit focus on learning in relation to inter-personal interaction with developers. While some project managers more prone to traditional ways of area development advocate for a return to the stricter regulations and a more influential position of the municipality in area development, others who have come to accept that conditions have changed and critically reflect on their own role and skills, highlighted the necessity of learning from new conditions. *Triple-loop learning* can be actively improved through targeted actions that bring policymakers and project managers together and addressing issues and concerns, considering a two-way stream between policy making and implementation.

The fragmentation of spatial governance calls for the development of new approaches and responses, in which the importance of learning and cognitive processes should

be explored further. With external conditions to local administrations changing at unpredictable and accelerated speed, the number of wicked challenges in planning is likely to increase. Clear-cut, blueprint solutions are almost impossible to develop, and therefore new tools and instruments need to be developed to create some form of linkages between fragmented and scattered development formations in an effort to avoid the negative consequences that may arise if a comprehensive vision of how a city develops is largely abolished.

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