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### New relational understandings of city building

*Reading the city through dynamic landscapes of spatial governance*

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# **NEW RELATIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF CITY BUILDING:**

## **READING THE CITY THROUGH DYNAMIC LANDSCAPES OF SPATIAL GOVERNANCE**

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### **Abstract**

In this think piece I will take you on a journey to share my approach to reading contemporary city building, which is increasingly chaotic, fragmented, and complex. Spatial governance, in my understanding, refers to the collective efforts to coordinate and structure the dynamic institutional activities of a variety of actors that aim to organise the built environment. Urban planning is one of these efforts, though not the only one. Therefore, in this article, I will visualise spatial governance as a dynamic landscape which accommodates multi-actor, multi-scalar, multi-loci and multi-temporal regulatory activities related to the uncertainties, opportunities, and crises of the market. Reading dynamic landscapes of spatial governance requires an understanding of regulatory efforts as they refer to the relational behaviour of state, market, and community actors. This approach, to linking regulatory efforts to relational behaviour, in my view, gives us new opportunities to provide comprehensive understandings of how cities develop under market-driven conditions.

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## 1. Introduction

*“Although government agencies play an important role in affecting the physical environment, the main progenitor of changes in physical form within London and New York is the private real-estate development industry. Examination of real-estate investment decisions reveals the ways in which urban redevelopment is channelled at the same time by broad political and economic imperatives and by the industry’s own specific modus operandi” (Fainstein, 2001, p.4).*

Seeing urban planning as spatial governance provides an understanding of urban development as a product of the collaborative efforts of state, market, and community actors. Susan Fainstein’s influential book *The City Builders* provided a new window in the mid 1990s through which to view the roles of the property industry in spatial governance. In my understanding, spatial governance refers to the collective efforts to coordinate and structure the chaotic and complex institutional activities of a variety of actors that aim to organise the built environment. Urban planning is one of those institutional efforts, though not the only one. Ever since the publication of *The City Builders*, numerous planning, geography and urban studies scholars have researched and published on the conditions and challenges of neoliberal city building, and its consequences for the urban built environment, urban communities, and spatial governance institutions. Entrepreneurial governance, opportunity-driven urban development, and property-led planning have been utilized in academic scholarship to explain this complex multi-actor planning process, which is influenced by the neoliberal political economic ideology (Harvey, 1989; Turok, 1992; Taşan-Kok, 2004, 2010; Baeten, 2012; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013; Van Loon et al., 2019).

In this article I share my views on new, relational approaches, to reading the city through dynamic landscapes of spatial governance and to comprehend their underlying institutional infrastructures. I have argued in my work that spatial governance practices have moved away from trying to rigidly define and control spatial development, to become flexible and strategic mechanisms that enable the collection of spatial developments in cities within the framework of hybrid neoliberal institutional transformations (Taşan-Kok and Baeten, 2011; Taşan-Kok, 2015; Taşan-Kok et al., 2019). These cityscapes, which emerged in different time frames, were realised by variegated actor networks, and structured by institutions that encompassed specific policy and planning practices at various scales of public administration, contained multi-actor, multi-scalar, multi-loci and multi-temporal activities, and formed pockets of micro-regulation practices (Taşan-Kok et al., 2018, p.373). Urban development is exercised and institutionalised through these multiple regulation practices, which are scattered throughout cities in diverse forms of urban development projects. Recent work, has shown that these uncoordinated and contradictory institutional relations link public and private actors in city building, forming a complex and chaotic landscape of regulations, actors, and relations (Taşan-Kok and Özogul, 2021). Within this framework, the dynamic landscape of governance refers to specific urban policies and planning environments which accumulate and structure these pockets of micro-regulation practices that contain multiple institutional landscapes within multiple spheres in terms of involved actors, scales of institutional hierarchy, locus, and time.

The dynamic practice of governance contains complexifying and diversifying relationships between public and private sector actors and urban society, and is regulated through bundles of decisions institutionalized over different time frames and in diverse forms. These practices are performed as joint activities by decentralized municipal authorities, semi-public agencies, private sector actors, citizens, and community groups. Understanding these evolving spatial governance dynamics requires new approaches, not only because of the difficulties involved in comprehending these increasingly complexifying relations, but also because their financialization blurs the responsibilities of those diverse actors that are involved in city building and the consequences of their actions (Weber, 2002; Robinson and Attuyer, 2021), making the city a fiscal derivative (Pacewicz, 2016, p.264) and services like housing yet another asset class (van Loon and Aalbers, 2017, p.221).

Taking an actor-oriented perspective, it is possible to understand that the diversity and dynamism of multiple actors makes it difficult to create a comprehensive, consistent, and continuous strategy in cities at a macro level. The increasing complexity of these disjointed modes of governance exacerbated existing uneven power dynamics and created equally complex societal responses (Jessop, 1997). This diversity and dynamism in governance can be observed, comprehended and better controlled if we read the underlying institutional infrastructure of city building through relational understandings of the actors and regulations. This requires understanding the diversity of actors and decoding the bundles of relations.

What are the outcomes of hybrid neoliberal institutional transformations for city building? How can we read contemporary cities through dynamic landscapes of spatial governance? and How do relational approaches help to disentangle dynamic landscapes of spatial governance? In my recent research and publications, I have sought answers to these questions, which I share in this reflective article.

## 2. What are the Outcomes of Hybrid Neoliberal Institutional Transformations for City Building?

The neoliberalisation of social, economic and political processes during the late capitalist era pervades urban development, planning, and governance discourses and practices, and has pushed them in a market-oriented direction. Supporting the accumulation process of global capital flows, neoliberal political economic ideology manifests itself as a prevailing pattern of market-oriented regulatory restructuring (Peck et al., 2009, p.51). During this era, entrepreneurial decisions and the actions of a wide range of actors have replaced managerial public-sector decisions in the production of the built environment. Two major dynamics have taken place that influence the governance of cities. First, increasingly footloose and mobile capital, which seeks and settles in profitable locations, has become more hyperactive (Swyngedouw, 1989; Sassen, 2011). The results of this hyperactivity have been acknowledged as financialisation in recent years, and describe the penetration and increasing influence of financial markets into new areas of the state, economy and society (Ryan-Collins, 2019; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017). Secondly, and due to the regulatory restructurings enabled by neoliberalisation, welfare states have changed through massive *decentralization and rescaling* attempts. I see these two trends as the main reason behind the major institutional transformations that have taken place in the governance and planning of cities today (Taşan-Kok and Baeten, 2011). However, neoliberalism does not produce identical (economic, political or spatial) top-down transformations at once, but impose hybrid neoliberal institutional transformations, which are place-, territory- and scale-specific institutional transformations (Taşan-Kok, 2015).

During the late capitalist era these fragmented regulatory efforts became more dynamic than ever as they were driven by opportunities which emerge at scattered locations throughout the city, over different time frames, negotiated through diverse actors, and regulated at a variety of scales of public administration. The piecemeal spatial developments, which are produced as an outcome of these opportunities, are containers of pockets of micro regulation practices. Spatial governance, is thus not, just a static administrative activity. Behind every cityscape there are a set of regulations and actors scattered through time and space. Therefore, I envision spatial governance as a dynamic landscape, which accommodates these multi-actor, multi-scalar, multi-loci and multi-temporal regulatory pockets that also contain the uncertainties, opportunities and crises of the market. This dynamic landscape of governance is also quite fragmented, but before talking about that I want to linger a little longer on why this market dependency emerged. Hybrid neoliberal transformations, thus, refer to the complex and localised processes associated with trajectories of change and intertwined contingent events initiated by the circulation and accumulation of capital in contemporary cities (Taşan-Kok, 2015). As Peck et al. (2009) argue, they lead to the fragmented spread of neoliberal economic policies.

Following variegated paths, traditional welfare states have been radically transformed since the end of the 1980s, when governments began to withdraw from service provision and increasingly implemented market-friendly policies. The changing role of the state in urban development resulted in the decentralisation of public service responsibilities and finance to local governments. The state selectively became involved in urban development through the financing of infrastructure, or mega projects within the framework of a competitiveness agenda (Raco, 2013). Local governments today, even in stronger welfarist countries like The Netherlands, are in a position to seek new fiscal channels to provide public services; especially by involving private sector finance. Moreover, state-market-citizen relations are reconfigured within this framework, changing the roles and responsibilities of public and private sector actors and residents in urban development, and decentralizing service provisions (Taşan-Kok and Korthals Altes, 2012; Eraydin and Taşan-Kok, 2014).

Competition to accommodate the unprecedented mobility of global capital on the one hand and rescaling state responsibilities and capacities on the other, has resulted in market dependency, power sharing and a fragmentation of authority in urban governance systems. These dynamics suggest that the dominant governance style in cities today is entrepreneurial, or close to what Pierre (1999) defines as pro-growth

governance, which is characterised by close public-private sector interactions. Entrepreneurial governance refers to the deregulation of state control to enable close interactions to emerge through the dismantling of welfare programs, downsizing public services, and the privatisation and promotion of international capital investment in cities. In this market oriented system, both individuals and bottom-up community initiatives have also begun to establish more direct relationships with decision-makers; confirming what Swyngedouw (2005) defined as participatory, inclusive, and horizontally networked relations between socio-cultural, political, and business elites. These entrepreneurial governance dynamics cause distortions in local processes of urban development, and they motivate and accommodate piecemeal spatial developments throughout the city.

The market dependency of urban development took a new turn following the 2008 financial crisis as more global institutional investment actors and financial sectors began to dominate actor landscapes in spatial governance. The 2019 Covid 19 crisis showed that, as a consequence of financialisation and market dependency, even health-related transformations in cities have consequences for urban development trends, and that they are influenced by the changing preferences of market actors. For example, during the Covid 19 crisis large residential transactions took place, and residential investments were defined by the market parties as the most resilient asset classes or safe heaven of investments, while sectors that required face to face interaction (like retail) were hit hardest. New trends such as repositioning retail and office spaces as residential property projects are highlighted by property investors in relation to this shift of interest<sup>1</sup>. Based on these estimations and trends, market actors will define new investment strategies, which have a direct impact on urban development. It may also be seen that, from a Marxian point of view, these developments are part of the capital accumulation processes in cities. If we look at the development of large cities in Europe today from this point of view, we can see how capital accumulation processes are scattered in urban space in the form of large-scale development projects following diverse crises periods (Taşan-Kok et al., 2021). I now turn my attention to the outcomes of these hybrid neoliberal institutional formations in cities by focusing on the dynamic landscapes of spatial governance that they display.

### **3. How Can We Read Contemporary Cities Through Dynamic Landscapes of Spatial Governance?**

Taking an actor-oriented perspective, I observe that institutionalized relations, whether formed by formal or informal regimes of private sector networks, bottom-up social initiatives, or uninstitutional social movements, create new ways of policy and plan making that shape cities. They shape the dynamic landscapes of spatial governance through the complex institutional processes that they accommodate. It follows, that governance of the diversity of regulatory activities that exist is a key challenge. Spatial governance today contains various instruments which regulate the relationships which exist between an increasing number of actors, making the governance process a patch-work. Fragmented governance dynamics and spatial activities shape the spatial organisation of cities by untangling dynamic mini regimes which contain complex and diverse actor relationships. Cities, thus, are shaped by collections of fragmented decisions, and operationalized through micro-regulation practices which involve a diversity of actors in complex and dynamic governance arrangements. Within this framework I turn my attention to the scattered landscapes of actors that form pockets of micro regulation practices.

The roots of trying to understand these practices go back to the theoretical discussions framed by regime theory (Stone, 1993), in which power is argued to be fragmented through collaborative arrangements between local governments and private actors (Mossberger and Stoker, 2001). Institutional efforts to deal with the fragmentation of spatial governance and the consequences of the same, are not only critically reflected upon by existent scholarly literature, but also require further study (Healey, 1997; Le Galès, 1998; Blokland et al., 2015; Pessoa et al., 2015; Özogul, 2019; Taşan-Kok and Özogul, 2021). Despite increasing flexibility to accommodate these developments in the planning of cities, there is also a very concrete (and even rigid) dimension in plan making and governance, which accommodates the contractual, legal and regulatory instruments (Raco, 2013; Janssen-Jansen and van der Veen, 2016; Taşan-Kok et al., 2018). This form of governance is multi-actor and takes place at multiple scales, in reflective and pragmatic forms.

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1 REFI Europe Webinar, 23-04-2020 (<https://welcome.refi.global/events>)

These scattered regulatory environments are difficult to comprehensively regulate, and attempts to synchronize them have been disparaged by critical scholars as neoliberal instrumentalizations that lead to exclusionary practices (Bengs, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2005; Purcell, 2009). The universal norms and values that set the fundamental goal of urban planning (namely, safeguarding the public interest), have splintered into more measurable, concrete and fragmented sets of accountability mechanisms which are defined (and redefined) by each project. These mechanisms fall into the definition of technologies of governing, and have been criticised as being rationalities and tactics of governance within the framework of the Foucauldian notion of governmentality (Swyngedouw, 2005). This adds to the complexity of governance and makes overall accountability of the public sector vague as there are multiple concrete instruments to hold involved parties accountable.

This form of institutionalisation is usually dependent on one-to-one deals, as well as negotiation and consensus building between actors, regulated through a set of legal documents and instruments. These context-dependent activities take place in highly opportunity driven contexts in which public and private sector actors as well as interest groups interactively produce a diversity of instruments to ensure their performance, responsibilities and accountability mechanisms (Taşan-Kok et al., 2018). Contracts are the most common form of these instruments. Critical scholarly work on the new forms of welfare and service provision that have arisen through privatisation and contractualism argue that, in this form of urban development, the public sector's accountability to citizens decreases due to private sector involvement (Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Raco, 2013; Bracci et al., 2015; Healey, 2015; Mazzucato, 2015). Operationalizing this idea based on comparative research conducted in Brazil, the UK, and The Netherlands provided empirical evidence that the boundaries of the roles and responsibilities are blurred due to the complexity and multi-scalar diversity of fragmented instruments used in this form of regulation (Taşan-Kok et al., 2018).

The consequences of hybrid neoliberal institutional transformations include flexible macro strategies, constantly changing visions, and reflective planning strategies that are not capable of controlling, forming, or shaping scattered city building activities by several actors. While market-dependency creates or adds to systematic problems such as affordable housing crises at the macro level, the solutions produced by local development policies, spatial planning instruments, and agencies are increasingly ineffective in dealing with the problems. Therefore, in my opinion, we need to look deeper into the dynamics that cause institutional fragmentation and better understand the diverse actors and regulatory frameworks involved. A research project (WHIG-What is Governed in Cities: Residential Investment Landscapes and the Governance and Regulation of Housing Production<sup>2</sup>) that has been running in Amsterdam, London, and Paris, has conceptualized these scattered institutional infrastructures as fragmented governance architectures (Taşan-Kok and Özogul, 2021). The findings suggest that they illuminate divergent public sector regulation of market activities, intra-organisational discrepancies, and fuzzy narratives in policy interventions that are tied to specific spatial interventions in cities (ibid.). Reading these fragmented governance architectures requires recognition of diverse public, private and community actors, their relational positions to each other, and their behaviour in relation to spatial regulations.

#### **4. How Do Relational Approaches Help to Disentangle Dynamic Landscapes of Spatial Governance?**

If we turn our attention back to the scattered landscape of actors, we can see that larger governance dynamics are performed through the actions and decisions of a diversity of actors. Understanding this complexity, both in terms of institutional dynamics and actor landscapes, would enable linkages to be created between disconnected pockets of micro-regulation practices. Relational approaches provide new tools, and ways to comprehend dynamically changing actor landscapes. They can also be seen as a way to move beyond fixed and static theorizations of place, space, and scale (Ward, 2010). In sociology, a relational approach entails dynamic networks of social relationships and interactions between actors (Crossley, 2010). Relational approaches can be seen as very important tools for disentangling the dynamic actor landscapes that exist in spatial governance. Institutions differently influence the identities, perceptions, and preferences of actors; in exchange, actors shape institutions to better suit their interests (Geels, 2005, 2020).

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2 [www.whatisgovernedincities.eu](http://www.whatisgovernedincities.eu)

While urban planning and governance dynamics have incorporated new actors into the arena of governing, new social relationships between city governments and new sets of local and international actors have also begun to be involved in the production and management of cities. In many cases, municipal governments are among a multitude of actors competing for access to resources and control of agendas. Urban land and property markets are the number one source of these fiscal channels, although, this form of market-dependent development also makes cities prone to the crises of the capitalist economy. However, as argued by emerging literature (Adams and Tiesdell, 2010, 2012; Campbell et al., 2013; Özogul and Taşan-Kok, 2020), the diversity within the property industry, as well as the roles of, and relationships between actors, and their identities and knowledge, are largely unknown within planning and governance literature.

Exploring and disentangling these actors and their relationships requires new, multidimensional approaches and research methods to read actor landscapes through a more comprehensive understanding (Özogul and Taşan-Kok, 2020). It nevertheless remains the case that this field, at the intersectionalities of planning and property market dynamics, actors, and institutions requires more research, new cases, and comparative study if it is to be further understood.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Looking at dynamic actor landscapes, this paper has argued that it is not enough to know which actors are involved in complex networks of governance relationships. We need to see actors' changing positions and behaviours in relation to the institutions (regulatory instruments, norms, formal or informal rules, and so on) that regulate these relations. Emerging scholarly work calls for a more sophisticated understanding of the diversity of actors and their changing institutional positions and relationships if we are to comprehend the pressures and priorities of property industry actors (Campbell et al., 2013; Özogul and Taşan-Kok, 2020). Moreover, there is an increasing recognition brought by neoinstitutional approaches as to the need to further develop understandings of regulations in relation to actor behaviour (Scott, 1995). However, and especially in planning scholarship, there are only a limited number of studies linking these spheres of action in order to understand the roles of regulations in relation to actor behaviour in creating disconnected pockets of micro-regulation practices in city building. Local learning practices and accumulated knowledge in both spheres only partly reflect literature. We therefore need more studies to utilize this line of neoinstitutional thinking in spatial governance if we are to understand the relationship between actors' behavior and urban regulation.

My work, especially during the last decade, has focused on understanding the way we regulate, govern and produce cities by disentangling actor landscapes. There is still a lot of work to do in this field. Recent experiences with large data sets that contain market transactions have added a new layer of knowledge to existent understanding. We need new ways to combine qualitative and quantitative research, new approaches to map actor landscapes, more interdisciplinary understandings of regulations and property markets, and new ways to read cities through relative positions of actors. This could respond to the suggestion of Campbell et al. (2013, p.53) : "... to step aside from standard analysis, to probe more deeply into the lessons that can be drawn from the case study, not about the dominance of neoliberal discourses but about the choices that were overlooked and the questions that were not asked or perceived would not be heard". To respond to overlooked choices and questions, we need to disentangle the dynamic landscapes of spatial governance from a fresh viewpoint that is supported by new research methods which enable us to comprehend actor landscapes through new relational, temporal, multi-scalar, and multi-dimensional lenses.

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