Upscaling without innovation: taking the edge off grassroot initiatives with scaling-up in Amsterdam’s Anthropocene forest

Astrid Druijff & Maria Kaika

To cite this article: Astrid Druijff & Maria Kaika (2021) Upscaling without innovation: taking the edge off grassroot initiatives with scaling-up in Amsterdam’s Anthropocene forest, European Planning Studies, 29:12, 2184-2208, DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2021.1903839

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1903839
Upscaling without innovation: taking the edge off grassroots initiatives with scaling-up in Amsterdam’s Anthropocene forest

Astrid Druijff* and Maria Kaika*

Department of Geography, Planning and International Development (GPIO), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT
The article explores the extent to which the pressure to upscale grassroots planning initiatives can lead to the loss of their innovative potential. We advocate for the need to acknowledge the differentiated demands between community-involving pilot initiatives and grassroots initiatives when it comes to upscaling and argue that upscaling grassroots initiatives without loss of innovation takes more than just considering large-scale implementation right at the beginning of the initiative. Grounding our research on a grassroots artists and community initiative to transform a public space into an ‘Anthropocene Forest’ in Amsterdam, we show how current practices for scaling up grassroots initiatives are often more concerned with making grassroot actors and practices fit into existing planning institutions and practices, and less concerned with learning and reforming existing institutional practices. We contend that this currently dominant institutional approach to scaling up leads to a double loss: a loss of innovative characteristics of the grassroots initiatives themselves; and a loss of opportunities to imbue existing planning practices and institutions with new ideas and know-hows. The article explores potential ways out of this conundrum.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 August 2020
Revised 9 February 2021
Accepted 3 March 2021

KEYWORDS
Upscaling; artists as planners; anthropocene; grassroot initiatives; planning institutions

Introduction: the different types of upscaling and their differentiated needs.

This article explores the extent to which grassroots planning initiatives can maintain their progressive character and potential to innovate when faced with the desire or need to upscale. We draw upon the case of Amsterdam’s Anthropocene Forest at Landtong Nieuwe Meer, a bottom-up artists and community initiative for the transformation of a public space into an ‘Anthropocene Forest’. Focusing on the friction that emerged...
between grassroot actors and actors embedded in existing networks and planning institutions during efforts to scale-up this initiative, we examine to what extent the pressure to upscale grassroot planning initiatives can lead to the loss of their innovation potential or progressive\textsuperscript{2} character (Van den Broeck et al. 2019; Albrechts 2019; Fetner 2008; Htun and Weldon 2012).

In recent years, planning scholarship has paid significant attention to issues related to upscaling pilot top-down community-involving projects (Jowell 2003; Toogood 2015; Dijk, Kraker, and Hommels 2018; Doren et al. 2020). However, not sufficient attention is paid to issues related to upscaling bottom-up grassroot initiatives, and even less attention is paid to the differentiated needs between these two different types of upscaling (i.e. upscaling top-down projects and upscaling bottom-up grassroots initiatives). This article advocates the importance of distinguishing the different needs between these two different types of upscaling, and argues that upscaling grassroot initiatives without loss of innovation takes more than political commitment and strategic management (Mangham and Hanson 2010; Gilson and Schneider 2010) or early consideration of the requirements of large-scale implementation (Simmons, Fajans, and Ghiron 2011). We argue that current practices for scaling up grassroot initiatives are mainly geared around making grassroot actors and practices fit into existing planning institutions and practices, and less concerned with learning and reforming existing institutional practices. This, we argue, leads to a loss of opportunities for imbuing existing planning practices and institutions with new ideas and know-hows. It also often leads to a loss of significant elements of the progressive character of the original initiatives. The article explores potential ways out of this conundrum.

The research presented in this paper is based on a longitudinal analysis, including a real-time analysis of the early stages of developing Amsterdam’s Anthropocene Forest at Landtong Nieuwe Meer between 2016 and 2018. The data presented are drawn from field observations for a period of four months, followed by policy drafts and internal memos analysis, and eight in-depth interviews with a range of stakeholders within and outside the grassroots initiative: artists, planning experts, consultants and policy makers. The data have been interpreted and coded with Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS).

**Grassroot initiatives, commoning, and urban experiments, faced with the pressure to upscale**

Social and grassroots movements have historically been significant drivers of socio-environmental change through their demands for shifting priorities and power relations and for changing institutional and planning practices (Mayer 2009; McAdam 1999; Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001; Piven and Cloward 1977; Skocpol 2003). However, since the 1990s, the role of ‘the market’ as a key driver of urban change has been increasingly prioritized in official public discourse and operationalized and embedded in planning practice, mainly through public-private partnerships (Raco 2013; Tasan-Kok and Baeten 2012; Tasan-Kok, Atkinson, and Martins 2019). Over the past three decades western societies have been systematically outsourcing ‘urban innovation’ services to the markets under the unproven assumption that competitive markets will pursue innovative and ‘rational’ socioeconomic development through pursuing growth (Seyfang & Smith, 2007).
Indeed, as Peck, Theodore, and Brenner (2009) argue, the focus on market-driven socio-environmental innovation turned cities into sites of experimentation for place-marketing, enterprise zones, or for implementing smart technologies (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009) in the name of building some form of resilience against ever deteriorating socio-environmental conditions (Kaika 2017). However, in-depth analysis of market-driven urban experimentations, strongly query the ability of market-oriented practices to invoke urban environmental change, since the majority of these practices duplicate existing frameworks and policies (Christiaens, Moulaert, and Bosmans 2007; Seyfang and Smith 2007; Kaika 2017; Luke and Kaika 2019). By contrast, a wealth of older and more recent scholarship shows that change is more likely to emerge from community-based activities that question existing institutional arrangements and create space for experimentation with alternative systems of organization, production and consumption (Amenta and Elliott 2019).

In recent years, community-based approaches to city making have received significant attention and have been analysed and classified: self-organization, temporary, bottom-up, handmade, guerrilla, pop-up, insurgent, grassroots, or do-it-yourself urbanism (Van-Hoose and Savini 2017). Although many of these terms are ill defined – some even chaotic – ‘grassroots initiatives’ remains one of the most well defined terms with related operationalized practices. This term is defined by Seyfang and Smith (2007, 585) as ‘networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable urban development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved’. Despite the increasing importance of grassroots initiatives to instigate change, Seyfang and Smith (2017) argue that policy agendas in contemporary western societies often neglect such initiatives and their potential for innovation for sustainability, in favour of market-driven solutions.

With the dominance of market-led or PPP-led practices, grassroots initiatives often became side-tracked, or neglected. When institutions and existing stakeholder networks do take note and try to scale up and institutionalize grassroots initiatives, these efforts almost always start from the premise that grassroots initiatives have to change in order to be institutionalized, as they are by default inefficient, difficult to accommodate or embed in existing institutional frameworks, or simply incompatible with existing growth targets or rules and regulations (Boyer 2015).

This institutional bias towards grassroots initiatives, leaves grassroot actors between a rock and a hard place. If they wish to remain loyal to their principles and goals and to maintain their autonomy, they have to remain self-contained, localized ‘one-off experiments’ confined within protected spaces (niches), where they can keep away from pressures for growth, and from the control of existing institutional structures and market practices. If, by contrast they wish to upscale their experiments, they have to sacrifice their autonomy, leave their protected confined areas and embed themselves in institutionalized organizations and funding practices that will enable them to compete with prevailing market-driven practices (Schot and Geels 2008).

Within this framework, the ability of grassroots to scale up is directly related to their desire or ability to give up their autonomy and negotiate their interests against the interests of market and institutional stakeholders (Avelino and Wittmayer 2016). Avelino and Wittmayer (2016) introduce the multi-actor perspective for specifying shifting power relations between different categories of actors: state, market, community, non-profit.
sector. This perspective highlights how, more often than not, under current planning practices, agreements for urban redevelopment projects are reached in closed negotiations between municipal planners and private developers (Falleth, Hanssen, and Saglie 2010). This leaves grassroots initiatives at risk of permanent marginalization from such exclusionary urban policy processes (VanHoose and Savini 2017).

As Novy and Hammer’s (2007) research on Vienna exemplifies, decisions on allocation of funds that are crucial to maintaining grassroots initiatives, are often made by steering committees in which civil society is not represented. As a result, decisions about upscaling or even maintaining grassroots initiatives are made by only those stakeholders and actors who are already embedded in decision making bodies.

Nevertheless, while there is evidence on the considerable barriers that existing institutional configurations and practices place on maintaining or upscaling small-scale initiatives, research has also shown that it is in fact possible for grassroots initiatives to use existing institutional (planning) frameworks to reach their upscaling goals. Sager’s (2018) study shows how an intentional community in Trondheim, Norway used planning institutions strategically to build external support and establish a legal underpinning of the community’s end goal: the development of an autonomous eco-village. The village was declared an urban experimental zone after the community engaged in local policy making processes and lobbied for the introduction of a new zoning regulation category (Sager 2018).

Equally, VanHoose and Savini (2017) document how two communities formed respectively around a small skate park in London and a squatting initiative in Amsterdam, were able to connect with formal institutions and achieve advanced end goals because they chose to feature selective membership, maintain a clear common purpose and identity, and make strategic use of intermediaries and experts to create bridges to external (private and public) institutions and resources. Especially interesting in these particular case studies is how intermediaries and experts in planning and decision-making bodies supported activist groups by offering institutional knowledge that was not freely available to the community (VanHoose and Savini 2017). In the aforementioned cases, upscaling grassroots initiatives became possible only through turning them into a ‘private’ yet progressive ‘club’, which involved practices of exclusion and red-lining to access to the benefits of the initiative (VanHoose and Savini 2017; see also Velicu and Kaika 2017). The case studies mentioned earlier do not elaborate on the extent to which this type of ‘selective upscaling’ outcomes may be at odds with the initial goals of the grassroots movement for openness and inclusion of difference.

The importance of real time research methods: scientific significance of the Amsterdam Anthropocene forest case study

The research results presented in this article draws upon analysis of real time research data collection and engagement that took place during the efforts to upscale the Amsterdam Anthropocene forest grassroots initiative. This distinguishes this particular analysis from research which ‘ex post’ examines and assesses final outcomes of scaling up experiments. By researching in real time the process through which grassroot actors negotiated with institutional actors, we were able to generate new insight on the parameters that enable or impede scaling up grassroots urban development initiatives. Our approach
adds conceptual nuance and empirical grounding to Avelino and Wittmayer’s (2016) call to adopt a more elaborated actor perspective, in order to increase the understanding of the political implications of grassroots on the (dis)empowerment of multiple actors.

Landtong Nieuwe Meer (Figure 1) is a peninsula southwest of Amsterdam that separates the Nieuwe Meer lake from the Ringvaart canal. It is adjacent to a recreational park (De Oeverlanden) and is home to a marina and a complex of former military warehouses now inhabited by an artist community named Nieuw & Meer. The area is close to Schiphol Airport and is demarcated by two large motorways. The Landtong Nieuwe Meer peninsula is in fact land reclaimed in the nineteenth century from the former Haarlemmermeer and Spieringermeer lakes. The Dutch historically used flooding of low-lying areas as a military defence mechanism. Simultaneously with the reclamation works, four fortresses were built around the entire reclaimed area to strengthen its military defence function. One of them was located on the Landtong Nieuwe Meer peninsula. In the early twentieth century, when the Dutch artillery grew, the Nieuwe Meer fortress was extended, and a complex of warehouses, the ‘Magazijnen voor Bijzondere Opkomst’, were built for storage of ammunition (Figure 2) (Gemeente Amsterdam 2018).

Between 1934 and 1970 the municipality developed an artificial forest, called the ‘Amsterdamse Bos’, on the bankside opposite Landtong Nieuwe Meer. Its design was inspired by Ebenezer Howard’s garden city planning principles and its aim to counterbalance the rapid urbanization of Amsterdam’s south side. In addition, a new residential area was planned on the northwest side of the Nieuwe Meer lake, using sand extracted from the lake. These drastic interventions changed the composition of the soil around the outlines of the lake from peat to a mixture of soil types. This eventually resulted in

![Figure 1. Location of Landtong Nieuwe Meer in respect with the city of Amsterdam. Source: http://www.maps.amsterdam.nl/, edited by the authors.](http://www.maps.amsterdam.nl/)
the park-like green belt that characterizes the entire Landtong Nieuwe Meer area today (Figure 3) (Gemeente Amsterdam 2018).

The military warehouses continued to be occupied by the Dutch Ministry of Defense up until the 1980s. But after the 1980s they were left unused. That period coincided with a

Figure 2. The original military storage buildings. Source: Authors' collection.

Figure 3. The park-like green belt around Landtong Nieuwe Meer. Source: Authors’ collection.
serious housing crisis and the heydays of the squatters’ movement in Amsterdam (Owens 2016). It was within this historical and social context, that a group of artists and activists who were evicted from their squat in Amsterdam city centre squatted the military warehouses on Landtong Nieuwe Meer in 1988. The municipality had guaranteed cooperation if the community of artists would manage to find a decent relocation within Amsterdam territory. Six weeks after squatting the military warehouses, the Nieuw & Meer foundation was established. The squatting group of artists got legal ownership of the buildings in 1991 after paying 1 million guilders (454.000 euros) and has been residing there ever since. Nearly all disciplines within the visual and applied arts and crafts are practiced there: from painting to web design to construction of music instruments and steel structures (Nieuw & Meer 2018).

A complex institutional governance structure: caught in between policy frameworks

Since Landtong Nieuwe Meer is located on the intersection of a recreational zone, a canal, a lake, a busy infrastructural node, and a dense urban area, the peninsula is subject to a wide range of spatial acts and policies at different governmental levels (Table 1).

Landtong Nieuwe Meer is part of the National Ecological Network (‘Natuurnetwerk Nederland’), a policy framework to protect the Dutch flora and fauna. The provinces – in this case Noord-Holland – are responsible for enforcement. Any spatial intervention in the area needs to conform with the ‘no, unless- principle’. This translates into a total ban on all development that can have a negative impact on ecological features, unless there are strong societal interests at stake, or unless there is complete lack of alternatives.3

In addition, according to Noord-Holland’s Spatial Regulations, part of Landtong Nieuwe Meer is characterized as a ‘rural area’. New regional plans cannot suggest new development in designated ‘rural areas’ unless there is clear urgency (Gemeente Amsterdam 2016a). Apart from regions, Dutch municipalities also have non-legally binding instruments for spatial development. In this context, Landtong Nieuwe Meer is also subject to the zoning plan ‘Kop Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ enacted by the municipality of Amsterdam. Within the municipal structure, ‘Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ falls under the jurisdiction of Amsterdam Nieuw-West, one of the seven districts in the municipality of Amsterdam, each with their own governance committee. ‘Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy framework</th>
<th>Responsible government body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European Water Framework Directive</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Ecological Network</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Spatial Regulation</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legally binding zoning plan</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-legally binding instruments for spatial development</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Overview of policy frameworks and responsible government bodies. Source: Author’s design.
also affected by Nieuw-West’s policy documents regarding water management, nature reservation, housing, leisure and business parks (Stadsdeel Nieuw-West 2017).

On top of the complex national and local institutional frameworks that govern the area, the area is subjected to the regulations posed by the European Water Framework Directive (Kaika 2003). Nieuwe Meer lake is one of the city’s most important water basins, and of the requirements of the European Water Framework Directive is that local authorities continuously assess how spatial development affects the condition (quality and quantity) of water bodies (Gemeente Amsterdam 2016a). The persistent insufficiency in the quality of the Nieuwe Meer lake water (according to European standards) is a significant impediment to further development plans for the area (Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland 2012). In the Netherlands, water quality is monitored and managed by local government bodies called water boards. The Nieuwe Meer lake is under the control of two water boards: ‘Waterschap Amstel Gooi en Vecht’ and ‘Waterschap Rijnland’. Both water boards are responsible for regulating interventions that can impact the lake’s water system (Gemeente Amsterdam 2016a).

**Negotiating multiple levels of governance: from spatial activism to institutional planning**

Since their migration from Amsterdam city centre to the Landtong peninsula in 1988, the Nieuw & Meer artists foundation grew from around 40 squatters into a community of over 125 artists. In early 2000s, a subgroup of artists from the community launched the pamphlet ‘Knooppunt Nieuwe Meer’ – a reference to the nearby motorway junction – in recognition of the fact that Nieuw & Meer is no longer a confined artist sanctuary but in fact the centre of a dynamically growing artist community and urban environment. The group invited landscape architect Dirk Sijmons in 2008 to trigger a debate about the future development of the area, which gave the peninsula its nickname: ‘The eye of the storm’. A couple of years later, a consultant (henceforth referred to as consultant A) moved in with Nieuw & Meer to follow up on a future development plan, but no further action was taken to materialize this (Sculptor residing in the Nieuw & Meer community, interview 19-04-2018).

In 2015, a wake-up call came for the Nieuw & Meer foundation when the Rochdale housing corporation that owns the next door marina named ‘De Boekanier’ (Figure 4), applied for planning permission to transform the marina into a luxury hotel (Figure 5) (De Koning 2017). The planning application, which would require modification of the zoning plan for the area (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2016a), caused panic amongst the people of Nieuw & Meer. They foresaw forced relocation of their community if the hotel plans and modification of zoning were to be approved. A subgroup of artists within the community then decided to fight back by means of becoming competitive to the suggested hotel development plans. The planning consultant that had already moved in with the community a few years ago (consultant A) was recruited to help launch a counter planning proposal, which was published under the title: ‘Head of Landtong Nieuwe Meer: a peninsula of possibilities’. The key concept of this proposal was that Landtong Nieuwe Meer should become a twenty-first century city park. A playground for experiments that integrate ecology, technology, art and recreation (Hobijn et al. 2016).
While this proposal created some buzz and awareness amongst neighbours and the steering committee of the Amsterdam district Nieuw-West, the real rescue came in the guise of new policy: the municipality of Amsterdam introduced a ban on all new hotel

![Figure 4. De Boekanier as seen from above. On the right side of the marina lies broedplaats Nieuw & Meer. Source: Gemeente Amsterdam 2016b, 4.](image)

![Figure 5. Artist impression of the proposed hotel. Source: Gemeente Amsterdam 2016b, 26.](image)
developments in 2017 in response to the heated discussion against mass tourism in Amsterdam (Gemeente Amsterdam 2017). The plan for the luxurious resort on Landtong Nieuwe Meer was discarded, and Rochdale withdrew.

But the artist community could not rest. In order to prevent being side-tracked once again in the future by unforeseen development plans, consultant A stressed the importance of taking the artist community’s counterproposal for a city park to a higher level:

“We thought, like: the hotel is gone now, but that doesn’t mean this location will be able to continue doing what it’s been doing for the past 30 years. So, what’s the plan for the future?” (Consultant A, interview 22-03-2018).4

Consultant A recruited another external advisor (consultant B) to help professionalize the proposals put forward by the activist organization, to create support and attract funding for the proposed city park. Together with a couple of dedicated artists they established a task force for developing the proposal: the Landtonggroep. In early 2017, the first funding was approved by Impuls Fund for Creative Industries, a programme by the Dutch national government to create so-called Stadslabs or City Labs for urban projects that try to have a socio-environmental impact. ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ was born this way (Consultant B, interview 09-04-2018).

Part of the ‘Stadslab’ subsidy went to the development of the ‘bospont’ (forest ferry), a cultural creation made by Artist AB (anonymized pseudonym) who was responsible for most of the radical ideas in the counterproposal. The ‘bospont’ (Figure 6) is a ferry made from organic material that autonomously navigates between the peninsula and the dock of the Amsterdamse Bos, transporting people and sanitizing the water in the process (Hobijn et al. 2016). The technology was outsourced to two local schools. In summer

![Figure 6. Prototype of the bospont (forest ferry). Source: www.nieuwenmeer.nl](image)
2017, the first test round of the ‘bospont’ took place. The forest ferry became the show-piece and catalyst for the development of the spatial intervention initiative.

Subsequently, consultant B organized three public Stadslab meetings to which local residents, municipality and other organizations around the Amsterdamse Bos and Nieuwe Meer area were invited. Attracting people and organizations from outside the artist community was a conscious strategy, as consultant A explains: ‘… One of the things we strived for was that an increasing number of people and parties would join the initiative.’ (Consultant A, interview 22-03-2018).

While these meetings aimed at building a broad coalition to support the plan in general, the ‘Stadslab’ also worked on improving the details and viability of the contents of the original plan. Next to the forest ferry a number of creative ideas were piloted: ‘overdrijfeilanden’, islands that float around the Nieuwe Meer lake offering space for camping or barbecuing; ‘stadsgrotten’, decorated viaducts; and ‘klankfietspad’, a cycling path that produces sounds similar to sounds of percussion instruments such as chimes when bicycles pass over (Hobijn et al. 2016).

‘Via via’, a consultancy firm was invited to provide advice on how to turn these creative ideas into a profitable business model. Consultant C, who organized a financing workshop on behalf of the consultancy firm, doubts whether the workshop made a difference:

“I am a little critical, because I feel like the people over there are just muddling along. No hard feelings towards the artists, because they are extremely creative, but to turn creative ideas into concrete plans … They don’t seem to succeed in that. That’s why nothing is happening, really.” (Consultant C, interview 09-05-2018).

Meanwhile, urban planners of the municipality of Amsterdam had been working on new policy for the Nieuwe Meer area. In November 2017, the senior project manager of the municipality’s spatial development department started working out a sketch for the area named ‘Groot Amsterdamse Bos’. Advisory groups were formed around four themes: water & nature, sport & recreation, culture and economic development. Their task was to deliver an essay on the future of ‘Groot Amsterdamse Bos’ that would contribute to the final proposal for the city council. The senior project manager asked consultant A from ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ to become the president of the advisory group on culture (Senior project manager municipality, 08-05-2018).

Together with landscape architect Dirk Sijmons, who had already been involved with the community in 2008, and with input from local inhabitants and organizations, consultant A delivered an advisory report titled ‘The Anthropocene forest: contribution by the advisory group of culture’ to the municipality in March 2018. The report combines creative elements from the 2016 city park proposal with the philosophy of the Anthropocene. The report refers to the Anthropocene as the (officious) ecological era in which human activity impacts the living climate on planet earth. The report also states that ‘Groot Amsterdamse Bos’ exposes decades of human influence through its variety in landscapes and biotopes, which should be cherished by nature preservation (Sijmons and Saris 2018). The goals were ambitious:

“For us to make a new kind of green environment that holds the answers to present-day questions. If we are able to carry out this message firmly and convincingly, I think we
can create a strong coalition and that the executive board will give us a chance.” (Consultant A, interview 22-03-2018).

Meanwhile, the artists and consultants behind the ‘Stadslab’ became slightly agitated with the interference of the board members from the ‘Nieuw & Meer foundation’. In search for independence, Consultant A started a separate foundation in March 2018: ‘Landtong Nieuwe Meer foundation’.

“Nieuw & Meer cannot check everything the whole time. They [i.e. Stadslab] have to have the freedom to address Landtong from their own vision.” (Board member Nieuw & Meer foundation, interview 03-05-2018).

The objective of this new foundation was to try and influence the development plans for Groot Amsterdamse Bos. Shortly after a second subsidy from Impuls Fund for Creative Industries was approved to ‘Landtong Nieuwe Meer foundation’.

According to the advisory report ‘The Anthropocene forest’, the Nieuwe Meer area would become the décor of an ‘Anthropocene arts festival’ in 2019 to promote Groot Amsterdamse Bos and celebrate the 30-year anniversary of the Nieuw & Meer community. The area should also host a museum about the Anthropocene philosophy (Sijmons and Saris 2018).

At the March 2018 local elections, the inhabitants of Amsterdam chose a new city council headed by a green coalition. A new committee oversaw the final proposal for the role that the Anthropocene forest would play in the development plans for Groot Amsterdamse Bos (Senior project manager municipality, interview 08-05-2018).

The Anthropocene arts festival did not take place, but the ‘Landtong Nieuwe Meer foundation’ organized lectures on the Anthropocene philosophy to reattract attention to the peninsula. The 30-year anniversary of the community was celebrated in September 2018 during a festival curated by Nieuw & Meer artist Daniel Schwartz. By placing art installations on premises of nearby communities, the artists tried to attract visitors to the entire peninsula to show its accessibility and charm as an act of ‘place-making’ (Consultant B, interview 11-12-2020).

Despite high expectations from Amsterdam’s new green coalition governance, the new alderman did not give priority to the peninsula. Contacts between the Nieuw & Meer foundation and the municipality diluted (Consultant B, interview 11-12-2020). In June 2020, the municipality of Amsterdam presented a policy proposal called ‘Towards 100 years Amsterdamse Bos’. The policy proposal focuses on maintenance and a slight redesign of the current Amsterdamse Bos area. No development project is announced, nor does the policy proposal mention Landtong Nieuwe Meer or Anthropocene forest (Gemeente Amsterdam 2020).

Following up on the disappointing efforts to upscale, the artist community was back to introvert practices. One of the artists committed himself to single-handedly finding new solutions for sanitizing the polluted water of the Nieuwe Meer lake. Another small scale pilot, ‘Waterschap Rijnland’, one of the responsible water boards, granted a subsidy in 2019 to explore the practical viability of these solutions. Together with neighbouring community stakeholders, the foundation adopted this project as a ‘citizen science’ project that directly addresses the goals of the European Water Framework Directive (Consultant B, interview 11-12-2020).
All major events and entry of stakeholders in the case have been summarized in a timeline in Table 2.

**Stakeholders and actors; a situated mapping**

As part of the methodology of this research, we first asked all interviewees to draw a stakeholder map of ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’. These actors identified by interviewees varied depending on their own position within the process and the project. Despite the variation, the actors identified can be placed within two broad categories; actors who influence decision-making without having a strong personal interest in the outcome and actors whose personal or organizational interests are affected by the decisions made (Avelino and Wittmayer 2016).

Planning Consultants who were interviewed, identified two key categories of actors (Figures 7 and 8): community actors, who have a stake because of their embeddedness in the neighbourhood, and state actors who are institutionally involved. Interestingly, interviewees identified local businesses as community actors. Community stakeholders also include inhabitants from surrounding neighbourhoods, a nearby allotment garden association, environmental protection group ‘De Oeverlanden’, the Amsterdamse Bos support club and the owners of next-door marina De Boekanier.

The consultants indicated community actors as having personal interest but also a strong mutually interdependence with ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’. Stadslab’s developments affect the local community, but the engagement of the local community also affects the performance of the ‘Stadslab’ and help them generate solutions more pertinent to local needs. In addition, the more support ‘Stadslab’ gets from the local community and civil society, the more likely it is that elected city councillors will see this initiative favourably. From the category of actors who do not have strong personal or organizational interests, yet can and do nevertheless influence decisions, only the municipality was identified by the consultants as the government body having authority over development of Landtong Nieuwe Meer.

The development of Groot Amsterdamse Bos, however, involves a wider range of actors and stakeholders. For example, the Impuls Fund for the Creative Industry, who is the grant provider, was not mentioned by consultants.

The senior project manager of the municipality, drew up a much more complex stakeholder map (Figure 9). Whereas the consultants mainly identified local actors, the project manager identified influential stakeholders and actors holding administrative and economic power in relation to the project also at a regional or national level. These include Schiphol Airport and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water.

The full range of stakeholders identified by interviewees is visualized in Figure 10. The inner circle represents the peninsula, the middle circle the lake Nieuwe Meer and the outer circle depicts stakeholders related to the entire Groot Amsterdamse Bos development.

**Bottom-up meets top-down: opportunities and impediments to scaling up grassroot urban development**

The bottom-up initiative at ‘Landtong’ coalesced with top-down planning in 2017, when the municipal senior project manager started preparing a development proposal for
Table 2. Timeline of major events and entry of stakeholders in the Nieuw & Meer case. Source: Authors’ design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor groups</th>
<th>Key events and actors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Market</strong></td>
<td><strong>Rochdale</strong> The landowner nextdoor applies for planning permission to build a hotel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td><strong>City council</strong> The city council of Amsterdam votes for a hotel stop. Rochdale’s application is denied. <strong>City council</strong> Green Left wins the city council elections. Consultant A is retired Green Left politician. <strong>Municipality</strong> Policy planners are working on development plans for the peninsula area. The project manager invites consultant A to chair a civil advisory group. <strong>Municipality</strong> The municipality presents new policy, but the scope is reduced to Amsterdamse Bos. Landtong Nieuwe Meer is not mentioned, nor the Anthropocene Forest or outcomes from the civil advisory group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td><strong>Nieuw &amp; Meer foundation</strong> A group of artists squats a warehouse on a peninsula in The foundation obtains legal ownership of the buildings. The city of Amsterdam expands rapidly. Some artists foresee. <strong>Nieuw &amp; Meer foundation</strong> The community resists against hotel development and invites. <strong>Consultants</strong> Consultant A brings in consultant B to help scale up the proposal. <strong>Task force</strong> <strong>Landtong Nieuw Meer foundation</strong> The board of the Nieuw &amp; Meer foundation questions some of the decisions. <strong>Landtong Nieuw Meer foundation</strong> One of the external board members organises lectures on the Anthropocene. <strong>Landtong Nieuw Meer foundation</strong> The foundation continues to work on science-inspired solutions that resonate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor groups</th>
<th>Key events and actors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amsterdam. The group established Nieuw &amp; Meer foundation. and continues to grow into a community of 125 artists.</td>
<td>consultant A again to help launch a counter proposal: a public 'Anthropocene Forest'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultants A and B establish a task force with some of the artists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>made by the Stadslab. Consultant A establishes a separate foundation to reduce interference: the Landtong Nieuwe Meer foundation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The majority of board positions are held by outsiders from consultant A's professional network. Focus shifts from creative design-thinking to influencing municipal policymaking processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>philosphy to restore attention to Landtong Nieuwe Meer. Meanwhile, the artists start working on new science-inspired solutions for water sanitation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultant B attracts subsidies from the Dutch government. The task force continues to operate autonomously as Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer. Funding is still transferred to Nieuw &amp; Meer foundation's bank account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultant B attracts funding from one of the local water boards to work on water sanitation. Little resources are left to spend on consultancy fees. Consultant B leaves Landtong Nieuwe Meer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 7. Stakeholder map made by consultant B. Source: Interview 09-04-2018.

Figure 8. Stakeholder map made by consultant A. Source: Interview 22-03-2018.
Figure 9. Stakeholder map by senior project manager municipality of Amsterdam. Source: Interview 08-05-2020.

Figure 10. Stakeholder map based on documentary research and respondents’ input. Source: Authors’ design.
Groot Amsterdamse Bos for the city council. ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ were invited to introduce their own plans to the city council. The project manager formed four project groups to write a preparatory advice.

“The artist group Nieuw & Meer was involved, but not ‘in the lead’, to put it like that. (…) This way it was possible to have the artists play a role and to create a certain kind of freedom, so that they were not responsible, but not left out either.” (Senior project manager municipality, interview 08-05-2018).

Bringing in two professional consultants (Consultant A and Consultant B), helped the artists gain access to knowledge and social networks. Consultant A was a retired planning expert with broad experience in assisting creative initiatives through his consultancy company. Consultant A had a background in local politics and a broad professional network. This network seems to have been crucial for ‘Stadslab’: the project manager explains that he asked consultant A to be the chair of the culture group because the two of them had been working on a project together in the past.

“We had good experiences with that. I can get along with him well and I think he’s doing nice things with the Stadslab.” (Senior project manager municipality, interview 08-05-2018). When asked if he indeed feels like Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer enjoys the fruits of his networking history, consultant A confirms: “I know the game, yes. (…) Everyone still knows who I am, of course. And I know the shortcuts within the municipality.” (Consultant A, interview 22-03-2018).

Besides gaining access to administrative networks, acquiring financial resources was another necessary step for Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer in the process of upscaling. After getting two subsidies from the Impuls Fund for Creative Industries, the initiative needed further capital injections. Observations conducted during the Stadslab group meetings showed that artists frequently appeal to consultants for help on subsidies (observation 19-04-2018). Due to his expertise as a cultural heritage specialist, Consultant B could advise on a number of sources of subsidies, for some of which he used to be in the selection committee himself. When asked why it is best to have consultants complete the application procedure, consultant B explained:

“You have to speak the language of the grant provider, that’s very important. (…) Creative people have all kinds of fantastic ideas, but sometimes you lose them already after 5 min.” (Consultant B, interview 09-04-2018).

Apart from Consultant A, ‘Stadslab’ invited more influential planners to join their Executive Board: a well-known landscape architect, an architect, and a former politician for district Nieuw-West (Sculptor, interview 19-04-2018). ‘Stadslab’ also organized a number of broader public engagement activities, such as the workshop in Pakhuis de Zwijger on April 16th 2018, where consultant B focused his presentations on how vital PR is for success of grassroots initiatives:

“You need to be visible, so that important people know who you are”. This statement is supported by other attendees, one of whom added that it is usually best to have professionals do PR, since creative thinkers are not very capable of articulating abstract ideas (observation 16-04-2018).
Facilitating and impeding upscaling: shifting finances and positions of power

The roots of the ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ initiative lie in the Nieuw & Meer artistic community. It was within this community that the pioneering design of progressive spatial plans were born back in 2016: the forest ferry, the floating islands for camping or barbecuing; ‘the decorated viaducts; the loud cycling path. Before ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ became an independent foundation, any subsidies received were transferred to the Nieuw & Meer foundation’s general bank account. A designer who used to be involved in the initial task force explained how this structure led to conflict when the initiative scaled up:

“What you often see with alternative projects, is that as soon as it’s getting more professional, people are getting jumpy. Meeting minutes have to be taken, finances have to be controlled, et cetera.” (Designer, interview 14-05-2018).

When ‘Stadslab Landtong Nieuwe Meer’ became an independent foundation, Nieuw & Meer nominated a candidate from their Executive Board to also be member of the ‘Stadslab’ Board to safeguard the interests of the artists’ community. The architect we interviewed stressed that the ‘Stadslab’ has not yet drifted away from the artists’ concerns, but mentioned part of the community feared they would do so, in the near future (Board member Nieuw & Meer foundation, interview 03-05-2018).

In early 2018, when the scaling up efforts intensified, Consultant A proposed to establish an ‘Atelier of Permanent Temporality’ that would generate ideas for artistic projects and experiments that would then be assessed by a committee of independent experts and would receive further funding for implementation, if approved. The fact that similar projects had been successfully launched elsewhere in Amsterdam, (e.g. De Ceuvel), raised expectations that the municipality may adopt this concept (Sijmons and Saris 2018).

But the proposal for the ‘Atelier of Permanent Temporality’ was not well received by the artists. During the ‘Stadslab’ meeting in April, 2018 Artist AB expressed his frustrations about the fact that so much effort is being put into a concept made up by an external consultant in this stage of upscaling, while the original ideas do not seem to come off the ground. In his experience, in the process of upscaling the artists’ ideas had been ‘consumed’ for power play. The artist was frustrated to such an extent that he announced he would quit the initiative. Consultant A replied that without the external experts’ help, Artist AB would not have been able to work out ideas, because Artis AB was not capable himself to complete official procedures for funding (observation 19-04-2018). The sculptor later explains that more artists feel unhappy about the top-down curator concept, since this implies that artists should compete with ideas that would not have existed in the first place without their effort for the Landtong initiative (Sculptor, interview 09-04-2018).

When asked explicitly, how creative thinkers believe that they could maintain authenticity during a process of upscaling, the designer from Nieuw & Meer stressed the importance of being an entrepreneur on top of being an artist to promote one’s ideas. Since money is needed for the creative process and for the organization behind it, acquiring financial resources seems crucial for grassroots to secure opportunities for progressive development: ‘He who pays the piper, calls the tune’ (Sculptor interview 09-04-2018).
Consultants and artists alike felt there was not sufficient support for creative initiatives from the part of official institutions. The sculptor expressed her frustration about how the municipality romanticizes artists on the one hand, but on the other hand forgets that producing art is in fact a form of labour. Consultant A confirmed the same key issue, stating that funds award too little to cover all costs: although Landtong Nieuwe Meer is lucky enough to have a retired planning expert on board, the same level of support would be simply not possible for initiatives relying on external consultants who charge a full rate. ‘The government welcomes these initiatives with open arms, but the urge to help is limited’, consultant A concludes (Consultant A, interview 22-03-2018).

For an area like the Nieuwe Meer area, so popular amongst urban development lobbyists, upscaling an alternative grassroots initiative has many fights to fight. ‘I always say: there are bank-notes of 1.000 growing on the trees between Schiphol Airport and Amsterdam’, (senior project manager interview 08-05-2018). Consultant A (interview 22-03-2018) remarks that the question whether the municipality is able to avert development pressures and go for long-term effect instead of short-term money, will be the decisive factor.’

The fate of Landtong Nieuwe Meer initiative currently lies in the hands of the city council. Whilst awaiting the decision, two things are clear: the artist community agrees that acquiring financial resources is crucial to ensure opportunities for scaling up grassroots urban development. But the same community also believes that the upscaling process plays more in the interests of the great number of external actors involved (state, market, non-profit) than in the interests of the community of artists itself.

At this point, the fate of Landtong Nieuwe Meer is still in the hands of the municipality. The policy proposal for Amsterdamse Bos will be handed over to the city council in February 2021 to decide. Under Dutch law, procedures involving non-legally binding policy do not offer possibilities to object or appeal to such decisions (Gemeente Amsterdam 2021).

**Conclusion: the particularities and pitfalls related to upscaling grassroots initiatives**

This research explores to what extent grassroot planning initiatives can maintain their progressive character when faced with the need to upscale. We focused on the case of Landtong Nieuwe Meer, a grassroots initiative for the transformation of public space into an Anthropocene park by an artist community in Amsterdam. Through real time data collection during the process of upscaling we were able to observe the conflict and dilemmas that arose from this process of upscaling.

The efforts to scale up the Landtong Nieuwe Meer initiative confirmed Seyfang and Smith’s (2007) argument, that change towards sustainable urban development is likely to emerge from community-based activities, because they create space for experimentation with alternative systems of production and consumptions. The Landtong Nieuwe Meer artist community’s initiative for a water-sanitizing ferry and their community-empowering approach to urban planning were both innovative and progressive in the sense that they had the potential to empower local communities and fence off economic interests that pursued to redevelop the area as a tourist hub with a new hotel near an existing marina.
However, our research also revealed a number of serious difficulties and pitfalls that can characterize efforts to upscale grassroots initiatives. First, in this case, the scaling up process was not initiated because the community saw clear benefits in doing so. By contrast it was initiated as a defence mechanism; a response against a clear and present external threat to the community’s very existence by standard redevelopment practices (the hotel planning application). So scaling up acts as a defence mechanism.

Second, whilst scaling up, the community’s internal cohesion came under threat. The requirement to re-organize (e.g. set up a foundation), divert activities (e.g. towards putting together funding bids), and in general devise a communication and PR strategy to present to potential funders (in this case, the municipality) led to internal conflict and misgivings within the artist group.

Third, grassroots initiative thought originally that scaling up would be something that could be performed alongside their normal activities. But they soon realized it requires an enormous amount of additional resources both in terms of materials and in terms of human labour. When they realized they simply could not afford these resources, and sought external funding and help, they put by default their own principles and community spirit at risk.

Fourth, scaling up requires a particular type of expertise, organizational know how and PR tactics that most grassroots initiatives lack. The requirement to hire external consultants to assist with these requirements created further friction in the community, but at the same time helped enormously with operationalizing the process of upscaling.

Finally, scaling up takes a serious toll on the time and resources of grassroots actors. So, when there is no structural and sustained external support for upscaling, grassroots actors simply cease to do exactly the things that defined their actions as special and innovative in the first place. Grassroot actors are required to become managers without knowledge or expertise, while at the same time they take time away from doing the activities they are really good at doing, namely creating alternatives that can take planning to new radical directions for environmental and social change.

The Landtong case study presented here can be construed as a typical case study of efforts to upscale grassroots initiatives. But given that the upscaling of grassroots initiatives is so under-researched this case study lends itself for building up some principles regarding the specific needs of grassroots movements, when it comes to upscaling. We hope further research will bring more case studies in the discussion and that the research community can start building up a comparative analysis. What this case study shows clearly is that the needs of grassroots initiatives when it comes to upscaling are very different to the needs of a well-planned pilot project.

We argue that grassroot initiatives are worth pursuing upscaling given their often innovative character. However, they need the construction of a defence framework around them before any attempt for upscaling begins. This framework should include sustained and non-competitive funding flows, and a supportive network of institutional actors, who will try to learn from the initiative and help it grow and change existing frameworks; rather than try to fit the initiative into existing frameworks.

No doubt, grassroots initiatives can achieve upscaling through involving official planning institutions (VanHoose and Savini 2017). However, the case of Landtong Nieuwe Meer shows that in order to achieve this without losing track of the initiative’s original aims and goals, grassroots actors need to formulate clear end goals before pursuing
upscaling; This would help minimize the risk of losing coherence, or losing the initiative’s radical character altogether when negotiating further development and dissemination of their ideas and practices to a broader set of actors.

Notes

1. In the paper, we refer to progressive character of a movement as the potential to reform and change existing institutions and power relations towards a more equitable society. What drives progressive policy? Progressive policies are lines of state action that aid disadvantaged groups, promoting their equality and increasing fairness.

   These policies typically come at the expense of more powerful groups and include notably those that promote civil rights (Fetner 2008; Htun and Weldon 2012; McAdam 1999) and provide economic security and reduce poverty (Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001; Piven and Cloward 1977; Skocpol 1992). Progressive policies are typically opposed by business and other powerful organized interests, as they require higher taxation or greater regulation, or both (Amenta 1998). The fact that progressive policies ever happen at all is puzzling given that powerful interests typically win in policy battles (Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010) and have reasons to oppose progressive policies.

2. in this article, we define a grassroot or state intervention as “Progressive” when it advocates reform or change. Typically, a progressive initiative comes at the expense of more powerful groups (Fetner 2008; Htun and Weldon 2012; McAdam 1999) and provide economic security and reduce poverty (Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001; Piven and Cloward 1977; Skocpol 1992). Progressive policies are typically opposed by business and other powerful organized interests, as they require higher taxation or greater regulation, or both (Amenta 1998). The fact that progressive policies ever happen at all is puzzling given that powerful interests typically win in policy battles (Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010) and have reasons to oppose progressive policies.


4. All interviews have been conducted in Dutch. The authors translated quotes into English as literally as possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References


