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## Manufacturing the creative city: Symbols and politics of Amsterdam North

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### ABSTRACT

Experimentation and urban innovation are becoming central references in the discourses of local politicians and urban policymakers aiming to trigger spatial change in times of austerity. Emerging electoral parties and political groups frequently make use of symbolic references to advocate new urban agendas, especially when urban change has high socio-political impacts. This paper explores the relation between political change and spatial interventions by examining how symbols are used to carry out post-industrial urban development. Amsterdam North, once a historical stronghold of the Labor electorate, is today the living laboratory for liberal-progressive parties. Despite initial political dissent against transformation in the area, the planning approach employed in the redevelopment of North currently inspires a new urban agenda for the city. Looking at symbolic acts, languages and objects, we explain how this political change was conveyed through symbols that link past images of manufacturing industry and human labor to emerging narratives of creative urbanism and entrepreneurialism.

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*The water, the tough-looking industrial buildings, the docks, and the sheer scale in general, now form an inspiring décor, from which more and more urban dwellers and modern economic sectors borrow their identity'.<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

Many western cities have undergone a substantial metamorphosis over the past decades. The first era of urban projects that targeted industrial waterfront and vacant land was characterized by large-scale plans and responded to the demands of the service economy with mono-functional developments (Salet & Gualini, 2007; Fainstein, 2008). Recent urban interventions seem instead to propose a more adaptive approach, attempting to appreciate locally embedded ideas and actively engage citizens in projects (Moulaert, MacCallum, Hillier, & Vicari, 2009; Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Iveson, 2013). One reason for this change in approach is due to the failure of many large-scale urban projects to produce urbanity as a result of a lack of engagement with local communities (Gualini & Majoor, 2007; Majoor, 2009). Today planning approaches seem to be more sensitive to the issue of spatial quality and embody new discourses of civic engagement and grassroots entrepreneurialism. Moreover, current reforms of planning systems are politically put forward as a more appropriate method in light of the lack of

public funding offered by local governments in times of austerity (McFarlane, 2012; Peck, 2012b). In Europe, a new wave of urban development concepts stress the importance of co-opting local capacities for urban growth and making planning more responsive to local demands (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012; Raco & Street, 2012). These new views often embrace the positive role of the creativity, innovation and political engagement of citizens (Peck, 2012a; Uitermark, 2014).

Experimental approaches to planning reflect a changed political landscape within cities. The urban restructuring of cities in the 1980s and 1990s was driven by powerful and growing development industries, which managed to trim down political antagonism under the narrative of urban investment and global competition (Fainstein, 1994; Savitch & Kantor, 2002). These interventions were carried out through the authoritative power of the state, enforced by legal means and powerful bureaucracies (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002). Today, under conditions of austerity, local authorities and planning agents deliberately adopt new strategies to boost spatial interventions that are built on softer instruments in light of scarcer resources (Savini, 2012). Instruments of persuasion and consensus building are thus preferred to legal reform, and are often mobilized to pursue unpopular measures (Uitermark, 2014).

Storytelling, drama and metaphors seem to be primary tools for planners and politicians (Van Hulst, 2012; Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016; Fischer, 2003). These communicative approaches put framing processes at their center in order to address conflict between different actors (Schön & Rein, 1994). Symbols, evocative narratives and images of place are used to bridge different views of the city and align agendas around a shared goal. Symbolic means of communication are employed by politicians to convey complex meaning and communicate new ideas

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic Plan Amsterdam 2040, Municipality of Amsterdam 2011: 60, translated by the authors.

of place to inhabitants and local communities in times of transition (Yanow, 1993). Politicians and planners have always made use of different forms of spatial imaginations and representations of the past and future in order to convince the public (Edelman, 1964). The display of symbols is thus important for both the strengthening of old meanings and the production of new meanings of place (Yanow, 1996).

Because of their centrality in the framing of policies, understanding how symbols are mobilized in urban development practice helps to grasp why urban agendas are carried out in localities where they are likely to be highly contested. To do so, it is important to problematize the political dimension of the use of symbols in agendas of spatial, social and economic change. Yet, while this issue is central in planning studies, there is hardly any analysis that problematizes symbols in relation to politics (Campbell, 2001; for an example see Sakizlioglu and Uitermark (2014)). This article proposes an empirical investigation of the political dynamics of urban change through an analysis of symbolic framing of spatial interventions. Through a historical view of a single case study, we explore how symbols are mobilized by elected coalitions to support agendas of spatial transformation. We show that, to bring forth transformation agendas, symbolic acts, languages and objects semantically link images of the past with future imaginations of urban change.

The political mobilization of symbols is explored through the continual transformation of the Northern IJ Bank in Amsterdam over the past two decades. Once the location of shipbuilding and other heavy industries, this area has evolved into a hotspot for the creative sector since the 1990s and has been subject to active urban redevelopment since the 2000s. Today, this area best exemplifies the legacy of Amsterdam's creative turn (Peck, 2012a). Our analysis is based on an extensive study of the area through semi-structured interviews with politicians, planners and representatives of business and civil society, as well as an extensive documentary analysis of spatial plans, policies and media reports.

We will first offer a framework for empirical analysis. In our view, symbols play a key role in addressing the dialectic between political-electoral change and socio-spatial change of places. We focus on the use of symbols as instruments to mark transformative agendas of a specific place, which in turn are likely to change the constituency of a location. Second, we provide a sketch of the Amsterdam political and electoral dynamic, arguing that urban policies today reflect the agenda of emerging liberal-progressive political groups. These groups employ discourses of civic entrepreneurialism and smart growth. Lastly, we present a two decade long view of Amsterdam North, in order to show how symbolic objects, languages and acts have created a fertile ground for these new urban narratives to proliferate.

## 2. Politics, symbols and planning: an analytical framework for empirical analysis

The dialectic between political dynamics and socio-spatial change concerns the mutual relation between institutional structures and individual-collective agency (Giddens, 1984). On the one hand, spatial change does affect political landscapes, as politics in representative democracies reflect the organization of spatial, social and economic demands within particular places. On the other hand, politicians do not only passively respond to social trends, but also actively shape them by driving forward transformative agendas. These policies change the socio-economic condition of city politics and lead to new constituencies (Savini, 2014). Urban agendas, especially when controversial, are carried out through means of inspirational and evocative narratives, or symbolic instruments able to mobilize popular consensus. Symbols operate then as active factors that shape the mutual relation between political dynamics and social change.

Planning and spatial interventions have a particular position in this dialectic. The urban fabric reflects particular political dynamics, and policies simultaneously affect the socio-economic conditions of urban areas

(Zukin, 1991). The strategies of political (and economic) agents to shape urban agendas and interventions have been a central object of study for urban political research for over two decades (MacLeod & Jones, 2011; Ward et al., 2011). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was demonstrated that choices in economic and spatial change for deindustrializing locations reflect internal changes in the constellations of political actors in power (Harding, 1997; DiGaetano & Strom, 2003). Urban regime theory in particular has related spatial policy change with the internal dynamics of coalition building, which takes place through tactics of social mobilization and power consolidation to organize consensus around particular policy goals (Stone, 1989; Savitch & Kantor, 2002; Pierre, 2014; Stone, 2008). These studies show that politicians often make use of evocative narratives and symbolic means in order to strengthen this consensus, especially around transformative agendas (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001). Symbolic acts, objects and language are actively mobilized to build legitimacy when proposed policies are controversial.

The consensus building function of symbols is crucial when policies aimed at stimulating urban change are likely to raise dissent towards coalitions in power. In pursuing experimental policies, the risk to destabilize and generate dissatisfaction can be higher than the advantages, especially when they require reorganization of a large set of regulations and bureaucracies (Hirschmann, 1970; Taylor, 2013). These risks are higher in municipalities or districts undergoing economic restructuring, where economic resources might be scarcer or where the social costs of spatial change might be higher (Oliver & Ha, 2007; Gofen, Bresler-Gonen, & Golan-Hoss, 2014). Mahoney and Thelen (2010) have demonstrated that under these conditions politicians tend to adopt communicative tactics that, while maintaining the meaning of institutions for their constituencies, strategically manipulate their functioning. These tactics build on inspiring narratives and evocative imaginaries that refer to the past of the place in order to portray new policy agendas that build on the legacy of that location. The way in which politicians mobilize symbols in practice explains why and how spatial change occurs under conditions of uncertainty. This is particularly evident in countries with a tradition of proactive planning, such as The Netherlands, where agendas can be supported by politically sponsored and publicly financed spatial interventions (Hemel, 2010).

In practice, all sorts of communicative devices can be used to convey messages concerning the future of a place, including metaphors, spatial imagery, stories, iconic architecture and other landmarks. All these devices can carry symbolic meanings that help to mobilize individuals towards imaginative ideas of city futures. Cities are full of material symbols linked to political visions or ideologies, such as street names, existing buildings, and monuments, which remind inhabitants of the past of a place (Nas P J, 2011). In planning, communicative approaches recognize that language can be seductive and manipulative (Throgmorton, 1993) and it warns that politically engaged planners could instrumentally use this language to implement their goals (Healey, 2006; Fischer & Forester, 1993). Symbols build on institutionalized visions of urban places to enhance the continuity of new imaginations with familiar meanings of the past. They therefore have the ability to carry past meanings throughout time, while simultaneously generating new meaning in support of transformational policy agendas (Yanow, 1996). For example, based on the work of Castoriadis (1987), Kaika argues that iconic architecture 'is not only a means of expressing/signifying existing elite power, but also as one of the most effective means for instituting new social relations' (2011: 970, emphasis in original). In order to achieve this, Dembski and Salet (2010) state that symbols need to link to recognizable social values of place, while at the same time projecting those values into images of the future.

The capacity of symbols to link past and future is very important in periods of socio-economic transition. They can strengthen the link between existent political visions and emerging ideas for the purpose of seducing constituencies, local inhabitants, other politicians and market actors in support of risky agendas. In analyzing the political use of

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