Making things irreversible. Object stabilization in urban planning and design

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ABSTRACT

Based on a detailed reconstruction of the planning process of a controversial major building in the Dutch city of Groningen, we develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for studying object formation and stabilisation. We argue that the many forms of resistance against the object itself triggered a variety of counter-strategies of object formation. We make a distinction between sites, paths and techniques of object formation. To study object formation in more detail we distinguish three techniques: reification, solidification and codification. The techniques of object formation are accompanied by three techniques that produce a relative stability of the object, that increases its irreversibility, the likelihood of object survival: objectification, naturalisation and institutionalisation. We conclude that complete irreversibility is an illusion in governance and planning processes.

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1. Introduction

According to Nigel Thrift the spatial turn in Geography 'has proved to be a move of extraordinary consequence because it questions categories like 'material', 'life' and 'intelligence' through an emphasis on the unremitting materiality of a world where there are no pre-existing objects' (Thrift, 2006). His words echo those of Michel Foucault who in 1969 claimed 'the object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of light. It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations' (Foucault, 1972: 44–45). In line with these quotes we will articulate a non-foundational theoretical and conceptual framework, which is firmly rooted in Foucault's oeuvre, for studying object formation in a planning and governance context. Acknowledging that 'nothing is necessarily fixed' we are 'looking for (...) [techniques] that might lead to relative stability' (Law, 2009) of an object, that increase its irreversibility.

We develop the framework by means of a detailed reconstruction of the discursive activity surrounding a controversial plan for a major cultural centre, destined to be a new icon for the city, in the Dutch city of Groningen (cf. Flyvbjerg, 1998). For 12 years, the intention of the local government has been to redesign the eastern side of this square (Gemeente Groningen, 2009; Duineveld, 2011). Over the years, the most important and most controversial element of this plan proved to be the Groninger Forum. Different designs emerged over the years, but the one that was chosen (see below for the procedure) is a ten storey building, 45 m high, with an angular, modern appearance, pierced in such a way that it looks like a keyhole (see: Groninger Forum, 2011b). In order to make room for the Groninger Forum some post-war buildings on the east side of the market would need to be demolished. The Forum would command a second square, adjoining and connecting with the Big Market (Grote Markt), but in order to make it work, the eastern facade of the Market would have to be pushed forward, effectively shrinking the historic square (see Groningerforum.nl, 2011a). This aspect of the plan, as much as the Forum building itself, triggered resistance among a majority of citizens residents and political parties. Nevertheless it came ever closer to implementation (Duineveld, 2011).

The variety of actors and strategies in Groningen, the lavish media and political attention, as well as the richness of the applied expertise make this an excellent case for the study of object formation (Duineveld and Van Assche, 2011). The many forms of resistance against this object itself triggered a variety of counter-strategies of object formation. This pallet of strategies renders the case significant for the study of object formation elsewhere, as it renders it useful for the analysis of design-governance relations and implementation studies. The analysis of such processes

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can explain why some plans are implemented and others are not, why some objects become enacted as 'real' and others disappear from the realm of the real, after a short life in the limelight (cf. Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Latour, 1999; Law, 2004).

We will argue, in our analysis of planning and design amidst civic resistance, that several techniques can be distinguished that make an object increasingly irreversible, and thus 'real' in its implications. After the outline of our theoretical and conceptual framework, we will describe the origin of the ideas and designs in Groningen in detail. We will then describe the process and expound on a number of specific techniques that can contribute to irreversibility. We will subsequently relate these techniques to our theoretical framework, and refine it.

2. Method

In order to map out the policy and planning environment in Groningen, and to reconstruct the trajectory of conceptualisation, negotiation, design and promotion of the urban reconstruction project, we combined personal observations and discourse analysis. For the discourse analysis, we relied on interviews, policy documents, plans, scale models and local media. We conducted 30 in-depth interviews with administrators, architects, people working in Groningen's cultural sector and other stakeholders of the Forum plans (Duineveld, 2011). We also spoke with 25 other residents of the city, people without any involvement with the project or with planning in general. Over the course of the study (summer and fall 2010, early 2011 and early 2012), we spent a total of 4 weeks in Groningen so we could follow the discussions up close. Our presence enabled direct observation of all the sites and the urban fabric. Part of the interviews as well as many conversations in informal settings (pubs, libraries, shops and one or two clubs) took place on site. We triangulated observation and interviews with reports, plans, newspaper articles and books we could find, sources directly and indirectly pertaining to this plan. We published a booklet (Duineveld, 2011) and made a movie (Duineveld and Eerkes, 2011b) to present some of the outcomes of our study, which received considerable attention and triggered responses in the local press, on blogs, websites and in personal emails (see Duineveld, 2011 for an overview). The flood of comments on and critiques of the movie and the report brought the discursive coalitions, evolutions and fault lines in sharper focus, and helped us to nuance some of our initial findings.

2.1. Object formation and stabilisation

Based on the works of Foucault (Foucault, 1972, 1994a, 1979, 1998) and strengthened by Actor-Network Theory (Mol, 2002; Law, 2004, 2009; Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Latour, 1999), the discussions on the spatial/material turn in Geography (Thrift, 2006; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Hinchliffe, 2007; Whatmore, 2006) and the works on power in planning and governance studies (Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 1998, 2002; Flyvbjerg and Richardson, 2002; Hillier, 2002; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005; Van Assche et al., 2012), we will outline a conceptual framework to study the process of object formation and stabilisation in governance practices.

Following Foucault we define power as: 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them (...)' (Foucault, 1998: 92). Power is operative everywhere and that is exerted from various positions (Foucault, 1998: 93). Contrary to its everyday use, power is neither good nor evil. It can have both oppressive and creative conse-

quences. It produces some discourses, realities, knowledge and values and pushes others into the background (Foucault, 1998, 1994c). This relational conceptualisation of power leaves no room for hegemonic ways of conceptualising power. Since power relations can constantly change, the whole idea of a pre-established stable hegemonic system should be abandoned (Rose, 2002). This implies that 'domination and resistance are conceptually the same. Every enactment emanating from social life is a force' (Rose, 2002, cf. Foucault, 1998: 96).

In addition, for Foucault '[p]ower relations are both intentional and non-subjective. (...) [T]here is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives' (Foucault, 1998: 94) Yet, on the level of the subject or organisation it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make a distinction between intentional and unintentional power techniques and we will not attempt to do so (Bourdieu, 1988). Intentions are often ascribed afterwards to events, which are then reframed to be intentional (Fuchs, 2001). So we will 'not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality; neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society (and makes it function)' (Foucault, 1998: 95).

In line with Foucault, many authors have studied the process of object formation and applied his perspective to various practices and domains of object formation, such as laboratories, hospitals, local economies and nature conservation policies (Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Mol, 2002; MacKenzie and Muniesa, 2007; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Whatmore, 2006; Abrahamsson, 2010; Hicks and Beaudry, 2010). In these studies, facts, truths and objects are thought to be constructed (or: produced, created, enacted, formed) in complex interactions between humans, sites, texts and instruments. In the Foucault-based actor-network theories (ANT) of Law (2004) and Mol (2002), an object does not precede but is the result of practices in which it is produced (cf. Thrift, 2006). In this line of reasoning Mol makes a distinction between the construction or formation of objects and the enactment thereof: 'The term 'construction' was used to get across the view that objects have no fixed and given identities, but gradually come into being. During their unstable childhoods their identities tend to be highly contested, volatile, open to transformation. But once they have grown up objects are taken to be stabilized' (Mol, 2002: 42). Enactment means that an object is only real when it enacted as real in actual practices, in constant interactions between humans and non-humans (Hinchliffe, 2007). 'Enactment and practice never stop, and realities depend upon their continued crafting – perhaps by people, but more often (...) in a combination of people, techniques, texts, architectural arrangements, and natural phenomena (which are themselves being enacted and re-enacted)' (Law, 2004).

2.2. Modes of object formation

We make a distinction between sites, paths and techniques of object formation (or enactment, in Mol's terms). In our analysis we focus on the techniques and we will therefore classify them more precisely. Sites of object formation refers to what Foucault calls 'the surfaces of emergence': the contexts, surroundings or environments in which objects are formed and enhanced (Foucault, 1972: 41, cf. Mol, 2002). Each site can have unique knowledge/power relations, influencing the formation of objects (Law, 2004). Informal settings such as conversations and parties can be sites and so can formal settings such as bureaucratic organisations and academic contexts. In our society, some sites function as authorities of object formation, like universities. These sites are more influential in the object formation process than others (Foucault, 1972: 41–42, Foucault, 1979, 1994b).