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Accountability in urban regeneration partnerships: A role for design centers

Ramzi Farhat

Department of Urban and Regional Planning, California State Polytechnic University - Pomona, 3801 West Temple Avenue, Pomona, CA 91768, United States

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1. Introduction

Partnerships in urban development reflect the 'wicked' nature of regeneration efforts, often requiring attention to a range of investment and programmatic interdependencies. "Taxpayer revolts, tax and expenditure limits, cutbacks in federal grants, a deep recession, and the pervasive pall of public opprobrium for things governmental", to quote Peterson (1985, p. 34), are some of the challenges that have reinforced this trend. To this end, partnerships have achieved what Hodge and Greve (2007) describe as an 'iconic status' in urban administration. Partnerships in the context of the 'entrepreneurial city' have been associated with the delivery of large scale schemes, often involving significant attention to the civic design. Investments in waterfronts, streetscapes, and public plazas are some examples. As Goldstein and Mele (2016) have however recently pointed out, a large literature on partnerships focuses on questions of motivations and outcomes, while the 'inner workings' of these arrangements are yet to be fully explored. This paper contributes to this scholarship by highlighting the utility of analytic constructs derived from a broader literature on governance, most notably so from the field of public administration. In that literature, the study of approaches to task delegation and performance monitoring defines a research agenda on the relations between principals and their agents, and is particularly insightful of how the question of accountability should be approached in the design of regeneration partnerships.

In a study of the redevelopment of the waterfront at 'Canalside' and a former industrial district at 'Larkinville' in Buffalo (NY), this paper argues that structuring a role for design centers reinforces social accountability in regeneration partnerships with an emphasis on civic design. The next section presents an overview of partnerships and the question of accountability. Section 3 describes the redevelopment of Canalside and Larkinville, and the role of the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), and the Urban Design Group (UDP), the design centers. In Section 4, it is argued that a design center's value vis a vis a partnership is two-fold: centers reinforce government's leverage in securing private-sector partner agreement to public realm-improving regeneration schemes, while centers with design capacity reduce risks when governments cede control over the design of public environments through informal delegations. The paper concludes by arguing that the choosing of partners willing to involve a design center with a public mission and a culture of civil society stewardship are important factors in achieving partnership goals.

2. Partnerships and accountability revisited

Beauregard (1999) once described partnerships as 'historical chameleons', continuously adapting to institutional, funding, and development constraints. As cities prioritize place-making in efforts to promote competitive advantage (Gospodini, 2002), arrangements to regenerate key urban areas have proliferated. In broad strokes, the recourse to partnerships has been at times strategic, as applies to the 'growth coalitions' and 'urban regime' booster alliances that emerged to reinforce competitive economic positioning (Molotch, 1976; Stone, 1989), or otherwise programmatic, reacting to specific funding and development opportunities. As is evidenced by the history of cooperation spurred by federal government programs, older forms of programmatic partnerships, most notably those pertaining to the era of 'Urban Renewal', featured a defining role for government in funding and project definition. Trends have since tended in the direction of more collaborative partnerships characterized by a pooling of resources, more parity in decision-making, and a coordination of activities (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Bovaird, 2004; Schaeffer & Loveridge, 2002).

Partnerships have evolved over decades of policy experimentation.

E-mail address: rrfarhat@csupomona.edu.

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After Urban Renewal, the 'Model Cities' program popularized the coordination of physical and social development activities. The later 'Community Development Block Grant' program encouraged bottom-up sourced projects, while the 'Urban Development Assistance Grant' program incentivized resource (and risk) sharing, leading up to a contemporary landscape where dwindling resources and a culture of entrepreneurialism have magnified the recourse to regulatory and fiscal relief. So evolved, collaborative partnerships are distinguished from both general-scope booster alliances and arms-length contracting by capital, capacity, and programmatic resource and risk sharing (Sagalyn, 2007). Keeping to the U.S. context, this is often facilitated by the signing of state-sanctioned 'development agreements'. Although purely inter-governmental partnerships amongst public agencies have also come to assume larger roles in urban redevelopment, the risks involved in flagship efforts have meant that the involvement of a private-sector partner has become indispensable.

The historical record suggests that funding and scope are important criteria in determining project stewardship. From studies of European practice, we learn that weak local economic conditions may lead to 'grant coalitions' with state and national-level partners, often compromising the ability of local actors to exert influence (Bernt, 2009). When funds originate from supra-local sources but the risk is deemed great, adjustments are due. For example, industrial decline has created a market for adaptive reuse, where experienced developers apply their expertise to the challenging task of repackaging derelict sites (Storm, 2008). Private-sector parties that may be interested in legitimating controversial projects may similarly seek to empower a public-sector partner. On the question of scope, Gore (1991) and Stewart and Snape (1995) differentiate between enterprise (or 'facilitating') partnerships that 'catalyze' development opportunities, and development partnerships that shepherd a physical project through implementation. As with funding, development partnerships tend to have more private-sector stewardship.

2.1. The question of accountability

Accountability remains an important policy challenge in partnership design (Pongsiri, 2002; Grossi & Thomasson, 2015). In these arrangements, public bodies such as planning departments and redevelopment agencies ideally assume the burden of ensuring that developers promote and realize a broad civic mission. As Stewart (2005, p. 162) however succinctly states, "joint action and co-funding cloud the responsibilities and obligations of participant organizations in partnership." In the European studies cited above, we are cautioned about agenda-setting power 'drawn away from the local scale' (Bernt), the 'lack of involvement of local agents' in developer-lead initiatives (Storm), and questions about the 'role of community projects vis a vis commercial property' (Gore). It is here useful to invoke the distinction between vertical, horizontal, and societal accountability mechanisms. While traditional 'vertical' approaches feature answering to legislative bodies (and ultimately, the citizenry) through chains of authority, partnerships pose unique challenges. 'Chains of agency' may reflect a delegate's 'drift' from their principal (Miller, 2005). In lessons from the U.S., Erie, Kogan, and MacKenzie (2010) for example found that it is precisely this distance that has diluted accountability in their study of the performance of a redevelopment agency in downtown San Diego.

Horizontal approaches structure a role for governmental agencies, tasked with monitoring or auditing actions and performance. In partnerships, these arrangements may be constraining (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Because of this and since private entities might also be weary of exposing their business practices to public entities (McFarlane, 2007), tracking performance in 'critical' dimensions and structuring a role for the public in 'informal' monitoring have been suggested (Carter, 2000). However, monitoring may also be impractical if partnerships are designed to have an evolving mandate (Kort & Klijn, 2011). In response, approaches to insuring the alignment of interests between principal and agent that are made at the formation stages hold promise. These may include initial decisions on personnel, the delimitation of the private partners' jurisdiction, and more pertinently, the initial structuring of the partnership (Calvert, McCubbins, & Weingast, 1989; Crowder, 2007).

This question of alternative approaches has spurred a scholarship on 'social accountability', an approach which centers on the involvement of civil society actors. This is often critical where funding or scope considerations result in stewardship by distant actors (e.g. a central state) or when those actors with sectoral but no representative capacity (e.g. developers) obtain asymmetric leverage. Specifically, offering societal stakeholders avenues for meaningful participation is a particularly successful approach to effectuating social accountability (Grimes, 2013; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006). For example, Forrer, Kee, Newcomer, and Boyer (2010) deem an arrangement successful if it positively addresses the question: "Have all affected stakeholders and parties been involved in the decision-making process?" (ibid, pp. 480). The applied literature corroborates this link between social accountability and community participation. Where participation is meaningful, collaborative processes are more likely to meet project goals (Mayo & Taylor, 2001; Stewart, 2005). Mason (2007) highlights this finding in a study of a Vancouver partnership with a structured role for the City Community Development Project, a stakeholder advocacy group.

Historically, accountability deficits in urban regeneration have roots in the misalignment of the goals of the planning bureaucracy and local communities, especially after the technocratic turn of the modernist era. Alternatively, others have noted that projects were more successful when residents offered local insights into design solutions. In this 'pre-partnership' sense, societal accountability had been legitimated by both procedural and substantive considerations (Al-Kodmany, 2001). Recently, Velotti, Botti, and Vesci (2012) have described the benefits of a 'laboratory' model that allowed Italian urban regions to structure public engagement in partnerships for strategic visioning. Kort and Klijn (2011) have similarly found that urban partnerships whose primary mission is developing visioning-type plans were successful when they provided opportunities for meaningful participation amongst a wide array of stakeholders.

This qualitative study further explores this question of social accountability in the context of regeneration partnerships with a civic design component. Two regeneration partnerships featuring the involvement of design centers from Buffalo, NY, are taken as case studies. Though the 'Canalside' partnership is organized under state law and 'Larkinville' is more informal, both are collaborative partnerships that feature coordinated funding and decision-making between the city, private developers, and state entities. In studying the impact of design centers on social accountability in district visioning and plan-making, the qualitative study synthesizes findings from information collected through interviews with key civic actors, public-record partnership and audit reports, and project-specific reporting and commentary published in local newspapers and online media outlets. The study tracks district design over a 10-year span of the projects (2006–2016). In this, it has features of a quasi-experimental design that tracks events before and after the involvement of the centers.

3. Two partnerships in Buffalo, NY

Buffalo (NY) is a midsize city (240 thousand residents city) in eastern New York State. Historically, the growth of Buffalo was catalyzed by its location at the terminus of the Erie Canal linking Lake Erie (and the Midwest) to the Atlantic, which transformed it into a center notable for its brewing, steel, chemicals, and auto industries. If the inauguration of the St. Lawrence Seaway eliminated Buffalo's logistical advantage, the economic shocks of the 1970s accelerated its decline. While extensive suburbanization could be traced to well before the freeway era, it was the loss of city industrial jobs that finally disarticulated the metropolitan economy (Goldman, 1990). By 2010,