



Playing by the rules? Analysing incremental urban developments

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ABSTRACT

Current urban developments are often considered outdated and static, and the argument follows that they should become more adaptive. In this paper, we argue that existing urban development are already adaptive and incremental. Given this flexibility in urban development, understanding changes in the so-called ‘rules of the game’ which structure and change collective action, is increasingly relevant. Gaining such insights advances the ability of planners to deal with perceived spatial problems. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, to develop an analytical framework for scrutinizing changes in rules in incremental urban developments and second, to test the analytical framework in a real-life incremental urban development. Building on Ostrom’s IAD Framework we develop an analytical framework that makes a distinction between formal and informal rules, connects sets of rules, actors and interaction patterns and provides a comparative, longitudinal perspective. The case of the Navy Yard in Amsterdam, the Netherlands is used in order to test the framework’s application, proving the relevance of investigating how rules in urban development change.

1. Introduction

Rational comprehensive planning approaches are often criticized for preserving the underlying social and spatial order in collective action aimed at urban development, rather than challenging or changing it. Several scholars (e.g. Moroni, 2010; Albrechts and Balducci, 2013; Horelli et al., 2015; Albrechts, 2015; Boelens and de Roo, 2016) argue that there is a tenacious weakness in recognizing and dealing with uncertainty, dynamics and complexity in these approaches. Accordingly, new planning approaches including adaptive planning (Innes and Booher, 1999; Savini et al., 2014), self-organization (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; Partanen, 2015) or, particular to the Netherlands, ‘organic development strategies’¹; (Hajer, 2011; Rauws and de Roo, 2016) have been proposed. It has been claimed that these new planning approaches allow urban planning to move away from rational processes and plans with predefined outcomes (Hajer, 2011; Rauws and de Roo, 2016). These approaches, however, might not be so innovative. The idea of rational comprehensive planning is rooted in positivistic origins that had their primes in the 1960s and 1970s and have been criticized ever since (McLoughlin, 1969; Rittel and Webber, 1973; Janssen-Jansen and Lloyd, 2018). Many competing ideas have emerged in and influenced planning literature and practice. Though existing planning

practices still contain elements of rational comprehensive planning, current planning practices are more adaptive and incremental than is often assumed. Amidst shifts towards advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965), deliberative planning (Forester, 1987) and collaborative planning (Healey, 2003), urban planning has already witnessed *adaptive* (the ability to adjust to changing circumstances and demands) and *incremental* (the idea of small steps and gradual changes instead of taking long-term fixed jumps) approaches (Lindblom, 1959; Douvere and Ehler, 2009²; Atkinson, 2011; Savini, 2016).

Even in the Netherlands, with its tradition of a strongly controlled planning system, the reality has never matched this reasoning. Even the reference to the so-called national blueprint plans of the 1950s and 1960s can be refuted in this respect. Though the Netherlands is regularly praised for preserving policy steadiness, these national plans have only been partly realised and with many deviations, despite the strong financial steering from the Dutch government. This has been enabled by the embedded flexibility, decision-making power and responsibility for land use planning at the local level, which is fixed in the 1965 Dutch Planning Law³ (for a detailed overview see Janssen-Jansen, 2016b). In the early 1990s, urban development in the Netherlands was pushed towards the private sector and has become even more adaptive since, with continuous deregulation in the urban planning domain

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¹ ‘Organic development strategies’ is the direct translation of the Dutch *organische gebiedsontwikkeling*. Taking the definition literally it refers to spontaneous urban development.

² Douvere and Ehler (2009, p. 78) already refer to incremental as traditional: “The traditional and incremental, permit-by-permit approach has been enhanced by a comprehensive planning approach that lays out a vision to be developed for an area.”

³ The 1965 Dutch Planning law was revised in 2008.

(Halleux et al., 2012; Evers, 2015).

Rebelling against rational comprehensive thinking by proposing ‘new’ planning approaches ignores adaptive and incremental progress in planning and results in a tendency to relabel already existing planning approaches. Relabelling gives an impression of innovation and change, but does not automatically reflect such change in practice. Real change within collective action aiming for urban development occurs within the so-called ‘rules of the game’. Rules are paramount institutions that guide collective action based on laws, regulations,⁴ norms and habits. The game refers to action and interaction within and between rules in collective action (Ostrom, 2005, 2013). The eventual urban development should be the outcome of the game. Within these games, rules are continuously produced, adapted and evolving, resulting in much more adaptive and incremental planning practices than often perceived.

In this paper, we thus argue for a shift in attention from rebelling against rational comprehensive thinking and proposing so-called new alternatives to, instead, focusing on the rules of the game (hereafter rules) that structure and change collective action in planning practices. The focus on rules, and the change thereof, is particularly relevant because planning is vastly influenced and constrained by formal and informal rules (North, 1990; Salet, 2002; Alexander, 2005; Moroni, 2010; Kim, 2011; Janssen-Jansen, 2016a; Salet, 2018). The change of these rules can be understood as either a deliberate alteration of rules or as a co-evolutionary process (Ostrom, 2013; Janssen-Jansen, 2016a). Planning practices cannot function without agreed-upon rules in collective action, making the understanding of rules—and the changing thereof—essential. Such rules provide insight into the right to make decisions and to take, sanction or reward actions and their impact on collective action in planning practices.

Improved understanding of these ‘new’ planning approaches, such as the above-mentioned ‘organic development strategies’, or ‘incremental urban development’ as we coin these approaches in this paper, requires a thorough investigation of existing and changing rules. The *plans* in incremental urban developments do not contain urban design principles but instead guide the development by themes or wide-ranging guidelines, contrary to plans with detailed predefined outcomes. The *process* refers to a wide range of public, private, civic and societal actors who negotiate and coordinate every step of an urban development project within a given development framework.

Currently, a gap exists in the literature concerning the specific rules that actors use in governing incremental urban developments and the way these developments adapt to meet the continuously changing needs of urban societies. Further insight into the rules improves the way governments and other actors deal with perceived spatial (strategic) problems or collective action problems. Gaining insight into how incremental urban developments work, how and why actors interact in a certain way and how decisions are made requires a framework to enable a systematic and detailed analysis of the rules. Our proposed analytical framework theoretically stems from Ostrom’s Institutional Analysis Development framework (Ostrom, 2005). The aim of this paper is thus twofold: (1) to propose an analytical framework for scrutinizing changes in rules in incremental urban development and (2) to apply and test the analytical framework in a real-life case study of an incremental urban development project.

2. Towards an analytical framework

Institutions are widely discussed in planning literature (Friedmann, 1987; Innes, 1995; Alexander, 2005; Buitelaar et al., 2007; Salet forthcoming). Yet, it is widely acknowledged that rules are produced and adapted and thus evolve in new contexts (March and Olsen, 1989; Moroni, 2010; Van Assche et al., 2014; Healey, 2018; Salet,

forthcoming). Several definitions of rules exist. In this paper, we follow the work of Max Black (1962), as mentioned in Ostrom (2005), to clarify the meaning of rules. Black distinguishes four definitions of the term *rules*: they point to laws, regulations, instructions and precepts (norms). The notion that rules can be more than formal, legal regulations is important here. This paper thus considers rules as prescriptions concerning actions, interactions and outcomes (Ostrom and Basurto, 2011) following from both formal and informal aspects of laws, regulations, norms and habits. We argue that combining both formal and informal rules and different types of rules is essential for understanding planning practices. Together these rules enable and constrain the way actors interact and decisions are made.

Only a handful of studies explicitly focus on how rules, and changes thereof, affect and determine urban development (Kim, 2011; Tan, 2013). The work of Elinor Ostrom represents an important theoretical starting point for analysing and classifying rules (Ostrom, 1990, 2005, 2013; see also Polski and Ostrom, 1999; Crawford and Ostrom, 2005; Ostrom and Basurto, 2011). Ostrom’s Institutional Analysis Development (IAD) framework proposes a structure for a systematic and detailed analysis of rules within collective action. As planning is a matter of collective action structured by sets of rules, this framework provides important fundamentals for analysing rules and changes thereof⁵ (Ostrom, 1990, 2005, 2013; see also Polski and Ostrom, 1999; McGinnis, 2011; Van den Hurk et al., 2014). The IAD framework is centred around the *action arena* in which a certain activity (*action situation*) and the actors who are involved in the activity (*actors*) result in patterns of *interactions* and *outcomes* (Ostrom, 2005, 2013; see also Smajgl et al., 2009; McGinnis, 2011). The structure of the action arena and the patterns of interactions (in our paper ‘the game’, visualised in Fig. 1 by the grey square) are determined by *exogenous variables*, such as biophysical conditions, attributes of the community and rules (see Fig. 1). In this paper, we focus our attention on the rules which govern the IAD framework. Spatial urban development is the outcome of the interaction.

In order to deeply analyse institutional arrangements, we use Ostrom’s taxonomy based on the following seven sets of rules (Crawford and Ostrom, 2005; Ostrom and Basurto, 2011). First, *position rules* (R1) determine the roles actors are assigned to, including, for example, the owner or user. The position regulates to what extent actors are authorized to inform actions, select actions from a series of alternatives or make decisions (Ostrom, 2005). Secondly, *demarcation rules*⁶ (R2) regulate which actor is qualified to enter or leave a position. Demarcation rules determine the conditions that are required to enter or leave a position, such as experience, age, citizenship or membership in a certain organisation (Ostrom, 2005; Smajgl et al., 2009; Van den Hurk et al., 2014). Thirdly, *decision-making rules*⁷ (R3) determine how decisions are made and by whom. A decision-making rule determines, for example, to what extent decisions should be made by individual actors or by teams of actors (Ostrom, 2005; Smajgl et al., 2009). Fourthly, *choice rules* (R4) define which actors may or may not act in an action arena and how. For example, a choice rule specifies who may rent land or buildings or who may compose directives for an urban development. Fifthly, *information rules* (R5) refer to the amount and importance of information that is available to actors about the action situation and the other actors. Information rules specify actors’ goals, motives and strategies. Sixthly, *payoff rules* (R6) specify rewards or sanctions that are linked to certain actions taken or outcomes achieved. *Scope rules* (R7)

⁵ Initially, Ostrom applied her Institutional Analysis Development framework to analyse common pool resources (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, 2010; Ostrom and Basurto, 2011). More recently, the IAD framework has also been applied to other domains as planning and water management (Van der Cammen and De Klerk, 2012; Smajgl et al., 2009).

⁶ To prevent confusion within a planning context we refer to demarcation rules instead of boundary rules (Ostrom’s original term).

⁷ To prevent confusion within a planning context we refer to decision-making rules instead of aggregation rules (Ostrom’s original term).

⁴ Regulations in this regard refer to planning policy documents as land-use plans.

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