How one tree can change the future of a neighbourhood: The process behind the creation of the Boerenhof Park as an example for tactical urban planning

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the process behind the making of the Boerenhof Park on an urban Waiting Space in Ghent (Belgium) is discussed. We are highlighting how in this case 'tactical urbanism' actions, such as planting a tree, turned out to have a long-term impact and as such can inform a 'tactical urban planning' approach. Through a learning by reflection method, the Boerenhof Park case has been re-analysed using a conceptual framework built up around the concepts of 'scratch', 'scar' and 'score'. The focus was on discerning the transgressional elements for moving from short-term interventions to long-term change. Three key aspects are brought to light: the incremental approach, a desire-driven program, and a transversal collaboration. We argue that these are key aspects for the operationalisation of a tactical urban planning approach.

1. Introduction

"To start and plant a first tree was just a small trigger, the spark the inhabitants needed to start and go ahead. As a (political) anti-parking statement the tree is planted in the middle of the planned parking zone, blocking future car circulation." − fragment of the Scratch, Scar, Score logbook (Van Reusel, 2014).

On March 23, 2014, a small but very symbolic tree was planted on the vacant and bare terrain of the Boerenhof. This act triggered a series of self-organised, bottom-up actions and events that eventually altered the future of the Boerenhof. The planting of the tree was done by a group of dedicated neighbours and represented a critical moment in their resistance against the planned redevelopment of the site. This tangible action initiated a transversal (Petrescu, 2005), incremental and desire-driven process that gradually accumulated into the creation of a collective neighbourhood park instead of the officially planned parking lot.

The civic contestation against the government's plans for the Boerenhof-site is exemplary for the complex context Western-European spatial planners, designers and managers need to deal with today. On a spatial level it is no longer possible, nor desired to plan an area starting from a blank page. Previous projects and visions have left traces one above the other. The results may be visible and obvious structures and constructions, but they can also be less obvious, like historical connotations or a symbolic meaning assigned to a place (Rémy and Voyé, 1981). On a social level the world has also become more complex. Today's city dwellers come from very diverse backgrounds (Geldof, 2013; Blommaert, 2013; Vertovec, 2007) and since communication is no longer hindered by distance, people can at the same time be part of a multiplicity of conversations with interlocutors from all over the world (Manzini, 2015). Finally, on a programmatic level, these divers users are, each from their own background, imposing different demands on the space surrounding them. And besides providing answers, scientific and technological developments have also brought up many new questions, sometimes causing the feeling that our ignorance is bigger than our knowledge (Callon et al., 2009). As a result, people are confronted with pressing social, economic and ecological issues, that due to their transcending scale and complexity seem intractable (Murray, 2009). In parallel with − or as a reaction against − this globalising trend, small and local grounds are more and more appreciated (Schumacher, 1973; Castells, 1996; Osman et al., 2014). What could be called 'cosmopolitan localism' (Sachs, 1992) thus combines a multiplicity of cultures and scales for spatial professionals to deal with.

In this complex context, the conventional urban planning approaches and instruments are becoming inadequate to guide the processes of urbanisation and urban transformation (Corboz, 1992; UNHABITAT, 2009:11; Balducci et al., 2011; Oswalt et al., 2013). This situation has brought into the spotlight and enhanced, the emergence of a plurality of experiments with alternative approaches (Centrum voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling, 2013; De Smet, 2013; BRAL vzw, 2015a,b). Quite recently the term 'tactical urbanism' was brought forward in

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literature to indicate a more flexible, participative and innovative approach to shaping urban spaces (Street Plans Collaborative and NextGen, 2011; Street Plans Collaborative, 2012; Ecosistema Urbano, 2011; Zeiger, 2013; De Smet, 2015; Lydon and Garcia, 2015). In this paper, the process behind the creation of the Boerenhof Park on the Boerenhof-site in Ghent (Belgium) is presented as an example of tactical urbanism. In line with other authors, we are arguing that cases like this can inspire the development of a renewed approach to spatial planning, development and management (Müller et al., 2008; Urhahn Urban Design, 2010; Street Plans Collaborative, 2012; Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving and Urhahn Urban Design, 2012; Bergevoet and Van Tuijl, 2013; Oswalt et al., 2013; Rosa and Weiland, 2013; Lydon and Garcia, 2015). In the field of urban studies such cases are however usually dealt with in a descriptive and reflective manner (Street Plans Collaborative and NextGen, 2011; Street Plans Collaborative, 2012; Ferguson, 2014; Fabian and Samson, 2016; Prudic-Hartl, 2016). A translation from case-studies to planning theory is needed. Key lessons should be synthesized, abstracted, and articulated from on-the-field experiences. In this paper, we are first presenting a conceptual framework to analyse the case at hand. Based on this analysis we are then trying to discern possible characteristics of a renewed approach to spatial planning, development and management, that we are proposing to call 'tactical urban planning'.

2. Background

In the 19th-century urban planning was adopted in Western Europe as a state function and a technical activity to be carried out by trained experts. Since the 1960s there has however been a growing unwillingness on the part of communities to passively accept the planning decisions of politicians and technocrats impacting on their living environments (UNHABITAT, 2009). Amongst others through the work of Jane Jacobs (1961), voices started to rise against the modernist ways of planning the city and for a more humane approach. As spatial professionals realised that participation of society is indeed important and necessary several attempts were made at formulating answers to this. In 1965 Paul Davidoff for example introduced his ideas on 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning' and several authors – like Healey, Forester, Innes, Hoch and Baum – started to work on what would later be called 'communicative and collaborative planning theory' (Healey, 1997). Later Margret Crawford (2007) developed her ideas on 'everyday urbanism'. And in Europe the idea of 'strategic spatial planning' was developed, with the aim of increasing the flexibility of the planning process and creating the possibility to include market parties. However, a gap remains between theory and practice, as official initiatives aiming at increasing public participation in spatial planning processes, often turn out to either merely consultative or instrumental. As a result, participants can rarely have a real influence in the decision-making process (UNHABITAT, 2009). New ways of state-society engagement need to be searched for that go beyond formal participation processes or (organised) confrontation (UNHABITAT, 2009).

In recent years, aiming at answering this need, ideas on Do-It-Yourself, self-organisation and Actor Network Theory are being introduced into planning theory (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). These are giving rise to, amongst others, a concept that we propose to call 'tactical urban planning'.

The term 'tactical urban planning' is closely linked to the notion of 'tactical urbanism' (Street Plans Collaborative and NextGen, 2011; Street Plans Collaborative, 2012; Ecosistema Urbano, 2011, Zeiger, 2013; De Smet, 2015; Lydon and Garcia, 2015), that was introduced around 2010 and is defined as follows:

> Tactical Urbanism is a city, organizational, and/or citizen-led approach to neighbourhood building using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions intended to catalyse long-term change. (Lydon, 2014)

As tactical urbanism seems to allow for more flexible, participative and innovative solutions (De Smet, 2015), this explorative an iterative approach − initially arising from the bottom-up − is nowadays more and more drawing the attention of the professional spatial planning world. Conventional urban planners, developers and managers are looking to learn from this bottom-up approach to develop a renewed approach to spatial planning, development and management. We are proposing to call this emerging renewed approach 'tactical urban planning', as it aims at uniting two ways of handling: a tactical approach in the short term and a more strategic approach on the long term.

A significant difference with the ideas from the 1960s and 1970s is that tactical urban planning is assigning a fundamentally different role to spatial professionals. Whereas the previous approaches − although they were arguing for equality and sharing of power − were still placing spatial professionals at the heart of the spatial planning, design and management processes, tactical urban planning implies a dynamic collaboration between spatial professionals and a multiplicity of other actors. These other actors (which can for example be inhabitants, professionals from other fields, civil servants, politicians, …) are considered equally important, as all of them are mere participants in the development of their urban environment.

3. Research question

The practice of such a tactical urban planning approach, however, still needs to be developed. To move from tactical urbanism to tactical urban planning we need to understand the conditions under which a link can be established between the current hierarchical top-down and bottom-up and what crucial moments and actors are for making transitions happen between short-term interventions (tactics) and long-term change (strategy). This can inform us on what the main characteristics of tactical urban planning are, that will form the basis for the operationalisation of this approach. As tactical urban planning wants to deal with complexity and is based on Do-It-Yourself, self-organisation and actor-coalitions, to answer this question we will have to carefully look at what is going on in the field. A framework needs be developed to investigate critical cases and learn from them.

4. Method

In this paper, we are proposing such a conceptual framework and using it to analyse a critical case of tactical urbanism that had a long-term impact. Using a learning through reflection method (Costa and Kallick, 2008; Di Stefano et al., 2016) we are then trying to discern possible characteristics of tactical urban planning that become apparent in this case.

4.1. The case

The case that is analysed is very familiar to the authors, as it has been the subject of an action research conducted by the authors, in the position of student (Hanne Van Reusel) and supervisor (Aurelie De Smet) in the framework of a master's thesis in architecture at the KUL Faculty of Architecture. The initial goal of this master's thesis, was to explore and rethink the role of the architect and the user in an urban design process. During the project, that took place from February till June 2014, the potential of temporary use of Waiting Spaces (Faraone and Sarti, 2008; Studio Urban Catalyst, 2012; De Smet, 2013) was used to empower the local community in their search to imagine, explore and construct a more sustainable future for Boerenhof-site, an urban wasteland awaiting redevelopment.

Looking back at the case it becomes clear that it meets the description of tactical urbanism. The process behind the making of the Boerenhof Park was indeed a citizen-led approach to neighbourhood building using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions intended