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Coping with ambiguity: An urban megaproject ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Integrated urban megaprojects that attempt to (re-)develop parts of cities are complex affairs. The planners employed in them decide on large real estate, infrastructure and public space investments. The lengthy delivery trajectories of these projects undoubtedly result in emerging properties and changes in the social, political and spatial settings in which they are implemented. This ethnographic study focuses on the question how planners cope with this ambiguity in such non canonical practices. By immersion in the Amsterdam Zuidas urban megaproject for half a year, planners were observed in action. The ethnography reconstructs three episodes that represent typical interaction activities that they undertook to discuss progress of the project. The study shows how planners handle diverse types of ambiguity via different coping mechanism and reflects on the implications of these tactics for the project. It also discusses methods, potentials and pitfalls of ethnographic research in urban megaproject scholarship.

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'We ethnographers cannot help but lie, but in lying, we reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold.' (Fine, 1993: 290)

1. Introduction

In the last decades, urban megaprojects have been a central tool in strategies of political and economic elites to foster urban competitiveness (Del Cerro Santamaría, 2013). They can be analyzed as 'self-induced shocks' in the metropolitan landscape in their aim to physically and economically (re-)develop a particular site in the metropolitan area (Grabher & Thiel, 2015). Although a quintessence aspect is their localized transformation, they are undoubtedly connected to wider spatial and political scales. Urban megaprojects also have an important symbolic value to celebrate progress and competitiveness for city governments and economic elites, hence the importance of star architecture in these places (Ponzini & Nastasi, 2012; Sklair, 2006).

Diaz Orueta and Fainstein (2008) distinguish a contemporary generation of 'new megaprojects' that claim to balance physical, economic, social and sustainable goals. Although such inclusive rhetoric is visible in many current urban megaprojects (Carmona, 2009), conflicts about their finances, designs and impacts is widespread (Gualini, 2015; Healey, 2010). Urban megaprojects therefore occupy a peculiar position in urban planning practice:

beloved by most political and economic elites and infused by a strong rhetoric of progress but also contested and heavily criticized. This paper aims to add to the urban megaproject debate by focusing on their trajectory of delivery. We claim that we have to understand them in conjunction with a volatile and uncertain environment in which these long-term projects are shaped and implemented. By taking this more dynamic perspective the paper contributes both to planning literature that takes an empirical perspective on planners-in-action (Forester, 1989, 1999; Laws & Forester, 2015; Schön, 1983) as well as to an emerging stream of literature that focuses on the capacity of urban megaprojects to change and adapt and be more resilient in the face of changing conditions (Dimitriou, Ward, & Wright, 2013; Giezen, 2012; Majoor, 2015b).

By using an ethnographic approach, this paper aims for methodological innovation in planning studies since it explores the often scarcely accessible internal world of urban megaproject delivery. It creates 'thick descriptions' of how planners inside these projects cope with the classic dilemma of delivery of very concrete investments in public space, infrastructures and real estate, in a setting of contextual ambiguity. The goal of the paper is twofold: (1) by exploring how planners cope with the volatile and uncertain environment of urban megaproject delivery it reflects upon planning and organizational theories and enhances our understanding how urban megaprojects could better cope with issues of adaptability, resilience and change; and (2) by using ethnographic methods, and reflecting upon them, the paper aims to add insights to what extent ethnography as a method could enhance urban megaproject studies.

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The paper is structured in the following way. The next section deepens the concept of urban mega-project delivery from planning and organizational theories, with an emphasis on the ambiguous settings these projects face. Section three introduces ethnography as a research method to analyze urban megaproject planners coping with such settings. It shows the different sides of ethnography and the wide variety of methods and practices used within it. The next section introduces the case study of the Amsterdam Zuidas urban megaproject in the Netherlands and explains the ethnographic methods used. Section five presents the results of the ethnographic study, organized and analyzed via three 'episodes' of interaction that have been closely observed. The final section concludes how planners have coped with ambiguity in this case and reflects on the research methods and the prospects and limitations of ethnographic fieldwork for urban megaproject studies.

2. Ambiguity and urban megaproject delivery

Many academic overviews, political debates and media-discussions revolve around the question why urban megaproject delivery has often been so disappointing (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003; Fainstein, 2008; Majoer, 2011; Moulaert, Rodríguez, & Swyngedouw, 2003; Priemus, Flyvbjerg, & Van Wee, 2008). Although local circumstances differ and positive examples are identified as well (Healey, 2010), scholars have recognized almost consistent gaps between initial promises and the often disappointing financial, economic, spatial and political 'performance' of these projects. This can be both observed in infrastructure oriented megaprojects (tunnels, bridges, highways, rail projects) that are habitually more expensive to build, delayed in their delivery and underperforming in their objectives (Flyvbjerg, 2008, 2014) as well in more mixed urban megaprojects projects that aim to combine infrastructure with new housing, offices, retail, leisure and public spaces. In the latter type of projects, scholars have, next to cost overruns and closed decision making circles, frequently criticized their disappointing social, economic and ecological contributions. Rather than vibrant diverse urbanity they have signalled one sided architectures, elite-oriented programs and dead public spaces (Gualini & Majoer, 2007; Moulaert et al., 2003; Oosterlynck, Van den Broeck, Albrechts, Moulaert, & Verhetse, 2011). These gaps are often explained from a political rationale: the (powerful) initiators purposefully inflated the promised outcomes of projects to secure political and financial approval and pass a point of no return (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003). Useful recommendations are made, particularly by Flyvbjerg (2014), about how to prevent such processes, for example via reference class forecasting, and by much stronger outsider' scrutiny in the early phases of mega-project initiation, design and decision-making.

However, what is underdeveloped in these perspectives explaining major differences between initial promises, forecasts and plans, and eventual outcomes is the ambiguity these projects face in their phase of delivery. In line with Dimitriou et al. (2013) we claim that it is crucial to take a more dynamic perspective on urban megaproject realisation in which there is a focus on how political and economic parameters and actor-constellations evolve over the stages of a project delivery lifecycle. Rather than seeing them as an 'island', urban megaprojects should be understood in interaction with history and context (Engwall, 2003). Van Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk, (2008: 597) even conclude that looking from such a dynamic perspective into the struggle of their delivery, urban megaprojects are not "... widespread conspiracies against the public interest but are managed to the best of their abilities, by professional and civil servants in the context of very complex operations, paradoxes, uncertainties, influences and ambiguities which surround these projects".

Next to the analytical value of understanding urban megaproject delivery more in the context with its (changing) environment, such a perspective could also help to explore what dynamic capacities are needed within the governance and planning of urban megaprojects to be better capable of change and adaptation over their lifetime (Majoer, 2015b). It thereby connects urban megaproject literature to the emerging concept of resilience in planning literature (Davoudi & Porter, 2012; Folke, 2006; Raco & Street, 2012). Taking such a more dynamic perspective, focusing on the interaction between the object-in-the-making and its environment, we identify two basic ingredients that create ambiguity in urban megaproject delivery. These are (1) their governance complexity and (2) their long time spans of delivery.

2.1. Governance complexity and time

Urban megaprojects attempt to coordinate and integrate a diversity of real-estate and infrastructure investments in a specific site within a designated time-frame. In most Western urban contexts, these investments often come from different public and private actors; and due to their close vicinity and spatial integration, these actors are in a complex relationship of dependence and competition with each other (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003; Majoer, 2009; Oosterlynck et al., 2011; Salet & Gualini, 2007; Siemiatycki, 2013). We can distinguish related aspects of *internal* complexity: the complex technical, financial and political deals that are needed to coordinate and integrate different public and private investments in a particular spatial site, in interaction with *external* complexity: the involved actors are operating in a volatile and uncertain social, political, financial and economic environment full of government changes, technological developments and fluctuations in real estate markets and the different economic sectors connected to projects.

Analytically, in these often decade-long planning and intervention projects, the dimension of time and its impact on complexity seems to be insufficiently studied. It is time that "... produces an order of concomitance with distinct and emerging properties, as well as non-linear change" (De Roo, Hillier, & Van Wezemael, 2012: 2). Such changes can be in the economic, political, financial, technical and societal domains in which developments are shaped and delivered. From a perspective of planning, the most interesting aspects are the pressures that are expected to occur in the interactions between time and its connected uncertainty and the irrefutable process of creating fixed agreements (decisions, contracts) to realize built spaces (infrastructures, buildings, public spaces) that are so characteristic of these projects.

The importance of time and complexity in delivery of planned change has not been a new insight. Planning theorists and policy analysts have renewed their interest for complex implementation processes since the early 1970s as they rediscovered that this stage of planning processes is full of unexpected events and politics and far more complex than the simple execution of an agreed plan (Hillier & Healey, 2008). Classic studies by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) and Barrett and Fudge (1981) emphasized the micro-dynamics of implementation in complex policy situations. These studies have been one of the contributors to an improved understanding that policymaking and implementation processes are characterized by various kinds of uncertainties (information deficits) and ambiguities (multiple values, interpretations and intentions).

A recent example of the impact of time on urban megaproject delivery has been the 2007–2009 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (Enright, 2014; Holgersen, 2014; Oosterlynck & González, 2013). The GFC has impacted different financial pillars on which many projects relied. Important public and private investors had to completely reconsider investments. Previous financial models on

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