Manufacturing the creative city: Symbols and politics of Amsterdam North

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Abstract

Experimentation and urban innovation are becoming central references in the discourses of local politicians and urban policymakers aiming to trigger spatial change in times of austerity. Emerging electoral parties and political groups frequently make use of symbolic references to advocate new urban agendas, especially when urban change has high socio-political impacts. This paper explores the relation between political change and spatial interventions by examining how symbols are used to carry out post-industrial urban development. Amsterdam North, once a historical stronghold of the Labor electorate, is today the living laboratory for liberal-progressive parties. Despite initial political dissent against transformation in the area, the planning approach employed in the redevelopment of North currently inspires a new urban agenda for the city. Looking at symbolic acts, languages and objects, we explain how this political change was conveyed through symbols that link past images of manufacturing industry and human labor to emerging narratives of creative urbanism and entrepreneurialism.

Keywords: Urban development; Creative urbanism; Urban politics; Symbols; Amsterdam

The water, the tough-looking industrial buildings, the docks, and the sheer scale in general, now form an inspiring décor, from which more and more urban dwellers and modern economic sectors borrow their identity'.[1]

1 Introduction

Many western cities have undergone a substantial metamorphosis over the past decades. The first era of urban projects that targeted industrial waterfront and vacant land was characterized by large-scale plans and responded to the demands of the service economy with mono-functional developments (Salet & Gualini, 2007; Fainstein, 2008). Recent urban interventions seem instead to propose a more adaptive approach, attempting to appreciate locally embedded ideas and actively engage citizens in projects (Moulaert, MacCallum, Hillier, & Vicari, 2009; Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Iveson, 2013). One reason for this change in approach is due to the failure of many large-scale urban projects to produce urbanity as a result of a lack of engagement with local communities (Gualini & Majoor, 2007; Majoor, 2009). Today planning approaches seem to be more sensitive to the issue of spatial quality and embody new discourses of civic engagement and grassroots entrepreneurialism. Moreover, current reforms of planning systems are politically put forward as a more appropriate method in light of the lack of public funding offered by local governments in times of austerity (McFarlane, 2012; Peck, 2012b). In Europe, a new wave of urban development concepts stress the importance of co-opting local capacities for urban growth and making planning more responsive to local demands (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012; Raco & Street, 2012). These new views often embrace the positive role of the creativity, innovation and political engagement of citizens (Peck, 2012a; Uitermark, 2014).

Experimental approaches to planning reflect a changed political landscape within cities. The urban restructuring of cities in the 1980s and 1990s was driven by powerful and growing development industries, which managed to trim down political antagonism under the narrative of urban investment and global competition (Fainstein, 1994; Savitch & Kantor, 2002). These interventions were carried out through the authoritative power of the state, enforced by legal means and powerful bureaucracies (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002). Today, under conditions of austerity, local authorities and planning agents deliberately adopt new strategies to boost spatial interventions that are built on softer instruments in light of scarcer resources (Savini, 2012). Instruments of persuasion and consensus building are thus preferred to legal reform, and are often mobilized to pursue unpopular measures (Uitermark, 2014).

Storytelling, drama and metaphors seem to be primary tools for planners and politicians (Van Hulst, 2012; Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016; Fischer, 2003). These communicative approaches put framing processes at their center in order to address conflict between different actors (Schön & Rein, 1994). Symbols, evocative narratives and images of place are used to bridge different views of the city and align agendas around a shared goal. Symbolic means of communication are employed by politicians to convey complex meaning and communicate new ideas of place to inhabitants and local communities in times of transition (Yanow, 1993). Politicians and planners have always made use of different forms of spatial imaginations and

representations of the past and future in order to convince the public (Edelman, 1964). The display of symbols is thus important for both the strengthening of old meanings and the production of new meanings of place (Yanow, 1996).

Because of their centrality in the framing of policies, understanding how symbols are mobilized in urban development practice helps to grasp why urban agendas are carried out in localities where they are likely to be highly contested. To do so, it is important to problematize the political dimension of the use of symbols in agendas of spatial, social and economic change. Yet, while this issue is central in planning studies, there is hardly any analysis that problematizes symbols in relation to politics (Campbell, 2001; for an example see Sakizlioglu &and Uitermark, [2014]). This article proposes an empirical investigation of the political dynamics of urban change through an analysis of symbolic framing of spatial interventions. Through a historical view of a single case study, we explore how symbols are mobilized by elected coalitions to support agendas of spatial transformation. We show that, to bring forth transformation agendas, symbolic acts, languages and objects semantically link images of the past with future imaginations of urban change.

The political mobilization of symbols is explored through the continual transformation of the Northern IJ Bank in Amsterdam over the past two decades. Once the location of shipbuilding and other heavy industries, this area has evolved into a hotspot for the creative sector since the 1990s and has been subject to active urban redevelopment since the 2000s. Today, this area best exemplifies the legacy of Amsterdam's creative turn (Peck, 2012a). Our analysis is based on an extensive study of the area through semi-structured interviews with politicians, planners and representatives of business and civil society, as well as an extensive documentary analysis of spatial plans, policies and media reports.

We will first offer a framework for empirical analysis. In our view, symbols play a key role in addressing the dialectic between political—electoral change and socio-spatial change of places. We focus on the use of symbols as instruments to mark transformative agendas of a specific place, which in turn are likely to change the constituency of a location. Second, we provide a sketch of the Amsterdam political and electoral dynamic, arguing that urban policies today reflect the agenda of emerging liberal-progressive political groups. These groups employ discourses of civic entrepreneurialism and smart growth. Lastly, we present a two decade long view of Amsterdam North, in order to show how symbolic objects, languages and acts have created a fertile ground for these new urban narratives to proliferate.

2.2 Politics, symbols and planning: an analytical framework for empirical analysis

The dialectic between political dynamics and socio-spatial change concerns the mutual relation between institutional structures and individual-collective agency (Giddens, 1984). On the one hand, spatial change does affect political landscapes, as politics in representative democracies reflect the organization of spatial, social and economic demands within particular places. On the other hand, politicians do not only passively respond to social trends, but also actively shape them by driving forward transformative agendas. These policies change the socio-economic condition of city politics and lead to new constituencies (Savini, 2014). Urban agendas, especially when controversial, are carried out through means of inspirational and evocative narratives, or symbolic instruments able to mobilize popular consensus. Symbols operate then as active factors that shape the mutual relation between political dynamics and social change.

Planning and spatial interventions have a particular position in this dialectic. The urban fabric reflects particular political dynamics, and policies simultaneously affect the socio-economic conditions of urban areas (Zukin, 1991). The strategies of political (and economic) agents to shape urban agendas and interventions have been a central object of study for urban political research for over two decades (MacLeod & Jones, 2011; Ward et al., 2011). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was demonstrated that choices in economic and spatial change for deindustrializing locations reflect internal changes in the constellations of political actors in power (Harding, 1997; DiGaetano & Strom, 2003). Urban regime theory in particular has related spatial policy change with the internal dynamics of coalition building, which takes place through tactics of social mobilization and power consolidation to organize consensus around particular policy goals (Stone, 1989; Savitch & Kantor, 2002; Pierre, 2014; Stone, 2008). These studies show that politicians often make use of evocative narratives and symbolic means in order to strengthen this consensus, especially around transformative agendas (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001). Symbolic acts, objects and language are actively mobilized to build legitimacy when proposed policies are controversial.

The consensus building function of symbols is crucial when policies aimed at stimulating urban change are likely to raise dissent towards coalitions in power. In pursuing experimental policies, the risk to destabilize and generate dissatisfaction can be higher than the advantages, especially when they require reorganization of a large set of regulations and bureaucracies (Hirschmann, 1970; Taylor, 2013). These risks are higher in municipalities or districts undergoing economic restructuring, where economic resources might be scarcer or where the social costs of spatial change might be higher (Oliver & Ha, 2007; Gofen, Bresler-Gonen, & Golan-Hoss, 2014). Mahoney and Thelen (2010) have demonstrated that under these conditions politicians tend to adopt communicative tactics that, while maintaining the meaning of institutions for their constituencies, strategically manipulate their functioning. These tactics build on inspiring narratives and evocative imaginaries that refer to the past of the place in order to portray new policy agendas that build on the legacy of that location. The way in which politicians mobilize symbols in practice explains why and how spatial change occurs under conditions of uncertainty. This is particularly evident in countries with a tradition of proactive planning, such as The Netherlands, where agendas can be supported by politically sponsored and publicly financed spatial interventions (Hemel, 2010).

In practice, all sorts of communicative devices can be used to convey messages concerning the future of a place, including metaphors, spatial imagery, stories, iconic architecture and other landmarks. All these devices can carry symbolic meanings that help to mobilize individuals towards imaginative ideas of city futures. Cities are full of material symbols linked to political visions or ideologies, such as street names, existing buildings, and monuments, which remind inhabitants of the past of a place (Nas P J, 2011). In planning, communicative approaches recognize that language can be seductive and manipulative (Throgmorton, 1993) and it warns that politically engaged planners could instrumentally use this language to implement their goals (Healey, 2006; Fischer & Forester, 1993). Symbols build on institutionalized visions of urban places to enhance the continuity of new imaginations with familiar meanings of the past. They therefore have the ability to carry past meanings throughout time, while simultaneously generating new meaning in support of transformational policy agendas (Yanow, 1996). For example, based on the work of Castoriadis (1987), Kaika argues that iconic architecture 'is not only a means

of *expressing/signifying* existing elite power, but also as one of the most effective means for *instituting* new social relations' (2011: 970, emphasis in original). In order to achieve this, Dembski and Salet (2010) state that symbols need to link to recognizable social values of place, while at the same time projecting those values into images of the future.

The capacity of symbols to link past and future is very important in periods of socio-economic transition. They can strengthen the link between existent political visions and emerging ideas for the purpose of seducing constituencies, local inhabitants, other politicians and market actors in support of risky agendas. In analyzing the political use of symbols, Yanow (1993, 2000) suggests to look at three types of symbolic artifacts: language, objects and acts. The language of planning is widely known for its abundant use of evocative narratives and metaphors as a way to support spatial interventions. Planners, for example, have framed urban regions by using evocative metaphors (e.g. Randstad, Flemish Diamond and Pearl River Delta), labeling new developments as eco-cities or advertising business clusters as the next Silicon Valley (on the latter, see Hospers, Sautet, and Desrochers (2009)).

Secondly, symbolic objects are perhaps the most frequently used element by planners. Cities are in fact constellations of physical artifacts that carry symbolic meaning. Politicians often propose the construction of iconic architecture to establish landmarks, abstract those artifacts to convey a certain political narrative at the time. Examples are the louver glass pyramid in Paris, sponsored by François Mitterrand, the Freedom Tower in New York City and the recently proposed Cycle Superhighways by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson. These objects represent particular coalitions of politicians, architects, local groups and citizens (Vicario & Martínez Monje, 2003). In the global competition between cities, symbolic objects are also important signifiers of urban transformation and express emerging political power relations (Kaika, 2011). Physical artifacts also include organizational constructions such as the establishment of a special purpose agency or a special think-tank to govern certain urban problems.

Thirdly, symbolic meaning is carried through acts. While somewhat less evident in a planning context, acts are pervasive and highly effective in conveying new agendas, especially against political dissent. These are rituals, like public hearings or town meetings, which are choreographically used to mobilize consensus around policies. Planners often make use of policy events such as symposia, conferences or urban safaris to show undergoing change in an area. Drama, storytelling and theatrical acts are today key communicative tools for carrying out spatial interventions, enabling communication with citizens and highlighting the urgency of certain policy objectives (see Hajer and Uitermark (2008); and Rannila and Loivaranta (2015)).

Potentially, any urban artifact, language or act can become a symbol, because 'all language, objects and acts are *potential* carriers of meaning, open to interpretation' (Yanow, 1996: 9, emphasis added). The making of symbols is a complex object of study in semiotics. The making of symbols is a complex object of study in semiotics, which we will not delve into further in this paper. Yet, following Keane (2003: 423), "a semiotic analysis of the social power of things would thus demand an account of the semiotic ideologies and their discursive regimentation that enter into or are excluded from the processes by which things become objects". Accordingly, focus on symbols while analyzing policy-making processes requires a look at the selective use of narratives, objects and acts to convey the meaning of a specific place as well as over the whole city. Symbols provide a decontextualized meaning of place, a future-oriented understanding of the city, which is materialized through spatial artifacts, landmarks and narrations of place. Symbols build on indexes and icons, but provide a meaning that goes beyond specific places or objects (Keane, 2003); in sum, indexes explicitly link to socio-spatial objects (e.g. a crane representing heavy industrial activities) and icons express common semblances with particular historical periods (e.g. a particular building as an icon of an architectural movement). Symbols add a further level of abstraction, as they extrapolate imaginaries from concrete artifact to build a wider image of the future of a city. As such, they are highly political. While building on concrete spatial practices, symbols can be used to communicate new forms of urbanity and alternative city futures to a broader public.

Because of their inspirational capacity, we argue that symbols should be investigated in relation to political trends. Through language, acts and objects they convey agendas that shift power relations to a wider scale. Yet, the construction of symbols occurs through concrete spatial interventions. We show that political change in Amsterdam is driven by symbolic politics, carried out through tactical acts and artifacts of space, which is today changing the political landscape of the city.

3.3 The political transition of Amsterdam

Amsterdam has undergone dramatic spatial and political change in the last decade. (Savini, Boterman, van Gent, & Majoor, 2016); the city has adapted to the spatial requirements of a post-industrial society and current local political elites are extensively referring to narratives of creativity, social entrepreneurialism and organic development to institutionalize a new approach to urban growth. Amsterdam was the paradigm of a social-democratic city, characterized by a strong local welfare state. This was epitomized in the high share of social-rented housing, reaching 55% in the early 1990s (Van Gent, 2013). The urban crisis of the 1970s and 1980s was responded to by a 'national urban growth coalition' (Terhorst & Van de Ven, 1995), which aimed at boosting the ailing economy of the central cities in the Netherlands. Amsterdam, like so many other cities, experienced population decline and increased social problems. During this period, the political landscape of Amsterdam began to move towards a peculiar combination of traditional social-democratic and increasingly neoliberal policies (Uitermark, 2009; Engelen & Musterd, 2010).

Elected officials in Amsterdam embarked on a new course, aiming to attract businesses and retaining middle-class households. Initially the focus was primarily on big multinationals and banking, which were attracted by a business-friendly tax climate. Later the focus shifted towards the creative industries, partly because of the decline of the city as an international financial center (Engelen & Musterd, 2010). Peck (2012a) has extensively documented the focus of policy on the creative sector in conjunction with the hype surrounding Florida's creative class. Today, the municipality heavily invests in talent and the highly skilled knowledge economy, with policies that promote incubators for artists, ateliers, and offices for small and medium enterprises. These policies have also stimulated several actions to promote the reuse of former wastelands and to further densify inner city neighborhoods. The city center itself, due to the preservation of the built environment, became the

playing field for urban (mass) tourism and gentrification processes (Terhorst & Van de Ven, 2003). Housing development increasingly focuses on the owner-occupied sector and substantial parts of the social housing stock in inner city neighborhoods are being sold off to middle-class households. In Amsterdam policy discourse, this is referred to as the 'rolling-out'[2] of the city center, which while claiming a renewed centrality of outer areas, is regarded as a state-led gentrification strategy in disguise (Van Gent, 2013).

This social, economic and spatial transition has been led by a complex, and gradual, mutation of the city's political landscape, which combines a weakening of consolidated Labor parties and the emergence of new political movements. Urban narratives of liberal progressivism support this political transition, which mythicize civic entrepreneurialism, individual action and self-organized urban change as new approaches to urban growth and prosperity. For quite some time the change in the political landscape has only been partially reflected in the electoral turnout, however the last two local elections were a blow to the post-war dominance of the Labor Party (PvdA). Since 1946, the PvdA posited the mayor and was the largest party in municipal elections until 2014. For the first time in post-war history, the Labor Party is no longer the largest party and is left out of the municipal government (Table 1).[3] Typically for the consensus-oriented Dutch political system, the Labor Party relied on smaller factions to form a governing coalition, but dominated the executive board. Since the 1990s, Green-Left (GroenLinks) formed the 'natural' partner in municipal politics.[4] A coalition led by the liberal-democratic Democrats-66 (D66), with the conservative-liberal VVD and the Socialist Party as junior partners now forms the new city government.

Table 1 Council election results of Amsterdam in percentages (in brackets number of seats), 1974–2014 (Source: O + S Amsterdam, Kiesraad).

alt-text: Table 1

	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
Labor Party (PvdA)	35.4 (17)	38.5 (19)	33.5 (17)	43.8 (21)	26.1 (12)	26.3 (14)	28.0 (15)	28.6 (15)	39.4 (20)	29.3 (15)	18.4 (10)
Conservative-Liberals (VVD)	16.5 (8)	15.1 (7)	20.6 (10)	15.0 (7)	14.1 (7)	16.0 (8)	18.5 (9)	18.0 (9)	16.2 (8)	16.9 (8)	11.2 (6)
Green-Left (GL)[a]	26.4 (12)	18.9 (8)	22.8 (10)	13.3 (6)	15.4 (7)	12.6 (6)	14.8 (7)	13.0 (6)	13.7 (7)	15.1 (7)	10.8 (6)
Social-Liberals (D66)	2.1 (1)	7.8 (3)	5.0 (2)	6.4 (3)	18.2 (9)	15.9 (8)	8.4 (4)	7.2 (3)	4.1 (2)	14.8 (7)	26.8 (14)
Socialist Party (SP)	–	–	–	(0)[c]	0.7 (0)	2.2 (1)	7.1 (3)	7.7 (4)	13.4 (6)	7.3 (3)	11.2 (6)
Christian Democrats (CDA)	14.5 (7)	17.2 (8)	13.8 (6)	12.7 (6)	11.3 (5)	7.4 (3)	6.2 (3)	7.9 (4)	4.2 (2)	3.3 (2)	2.8 (1)
Others[b]	5.2 (0)	2.6 (0)	4.3 (0)	9.0 (2)	14.0 (5)	19.6 (5)	17.0 (4)	17.6 (4)	9.1 (0)	13.3 (3)	18.8 (2)
Total seats	45	45	45	45	45	45	45	45	45	45	45

[a] Before 1990, votes for the three of the parties which should later form *GroenLinks* have been counted (CPN, PSP and PPR). The EVP votes are counted under 'Others'.

[b] Throughout the years there were a number of political parties who made it into the municipal council, but none of them ever became part of the municipal government. Nationalist parties were only influential between 1986 and 1994, with four seats for the Centrum Democrats in 1994.

[c] The SP votes are counted under 'Others'.

This electoral analysis sketches a transition from historical social-democratic values of housing production and labor-oriented welfare, to a post-materialist city that highly valorizes creativity, urbanity and civic engagement at the neighborhood level (De Voogd, 2011).[5] These new values make use of narratives of urban prosperity with a reformist agenda oriented to creative economies, knowledge industries and spatial qualities. These elements today justify aggressive practices of state-led in gentrification (Uitermark, 2009; Van Gent, 2013).

Symbols, rhetoric, and new discourses have played an important role in enabling this change in the long social-democratic tradition of Amsterdam planning. This becomes even more evident when looking at how spatial policies have conveyed and sustained political change in specific neighborhoods. Amsterdam's Northern IJ Bank is one of the largest current transformation zones in the municipality. Here, the mobilization of symbolic languages, objects and acts was crucial in enabling the transition from a locus of conservative labor into a hotspot of creative progressivism. This area is today described as a laboratory for experimental spatial policies and is a breeding ground for emerging electoral demands. Located in the Amsterdam North district, the Northern IJ Banks were a historical stronghold of Labor based coalitions, which combined leftist parties and industrial elites represented by conservative-liberal VVD. Since the early 2000s, North is instead undergoing substantial physical, social and political transformation, and recently, a national TV show epitomized this transition as: 'Amsterdam North: From Point of Waste to the Place-to-be'.[6] How is such a transformation possible without too much political contestation?

To understand the post-industrial transition of North, we first sketch out the political discussions that have emerged since the late 1990s and the electoral complications surrounding it. Second, we scrutinize the symbolic language, acts and objects that have been mobilized to change the meaning of North in the face of these discussions. We show that in connecting this new meaning to its industrial past, planners and local political elites have successfully turned North into a frontrunner in creative urbanism.

4.4 The politics of conservation in Amsterdam North (1980–2002)

The rise of North as a new creative hotspot in Amsterdam is surprising due to its historical and physical detachment from the rest of the city. For many Amsterdammers, North was not a part of Amsterdam; in fact it has been described as the 'Siberia of Amsterdam' and the lack of liveliness in the area was even described in a song by Drukwerk with the refrain "I get so bored in North" (*Ik verveel me zo in Noord*).[7] Originally an impoverished and thinly populated rural area, North developed into the most important industrial area, in particular, shipbuilding and petro-chemical industries, of Amsterdam over the course of the twentieth century. Workers were housed in specific housing projects near production sites. North has been a traditional catchment area for Social Democratic Party, with consolidated labor unions. The area was a distinct part of Amsterdam where functions that were deemed undesirable could be located. The physical detachment from the city center combined with limited accessibility (accessed only by ferry) contributed to strengthen a general feeling of neglect in the area since the late 1990s.

With the industrial crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, the major shipyards started to close and the seaport moved further to the west of the city. Because of the amount of vacant land, Amsterdam's waterfront became a focal point for the central planning department. Between the late 1980s and early 2000s however, the elected city coalitions focused on the development of the southern side of the IJ River. In those years, a stable Labor Party fostered a policy of extensive housing delivery within the municipal boundaries, combined with a policy of business development along main transport nodes (Kahn & van der Plas, 1999). In North, housing and business were politically insulated from post-industrial development.

Although North was neglected in the political agenda, its vacant locations became popular with squatters and artists. In the late 1990s, despite the high vacancy rate of buildings and increasing unemployment, Amsterdam North was not yet a location for urban renaissance. Several plans consequently failed to reach popular and political consensus, as large-scale investments in brownfields and consequent socio-economic changes were too risky in the eyes of the elected Labor coalition. In 1988, a first plan for the area (*Nota Tien kilometer Noordelijke IJ-oever*) identified two scenarios: one in which North maintained its village-like structure and remained separated from Amsterdam, and one with a more urban future (Donkers, 2013: 169) that juxtaposed images of transforming the North into a mixed-use urban area with ideas of conservation. Both these views entailed a too high political risk for the consolidated majority at the district and municipal level. Fearing a loss of work and risk of marginalization, local communities expressed dissent through practices of NIMBYism and resistance via voluntary associations against incoming plans. In the 1990s the city-elected government considered the area a strategic reserve, carefully showing attention for the increasing socio-spatial urgencies in North, but disengaging from intervention. The municipal structure plans of 1991 and 1996 continued to neglect North as a transformation area, focusing on the southern side of the city instead. Strategic plans from that time show Amsterdam's urban future as pinned over a 'southern lob' of residential and business development, projecting towards the larger regional centers in the south, and thus oriented inward towards the Randstad.

The lack of political urgency in North reflected important geo-political considerations at the time, and was not only consequential to geo-economic considerations. Amsterdam North was, up until seven years ago, a stronghold of the PvdA, the residing party in the government, and thus had a large weight in city electoral turnouts. A transformative agenda was reportedly seen as erosive of the labor constituency within city politics (Dijkink & Mamadouh, 2003). The administrative reform of 1994 had given more political power to the districts and established direct elections of district governments, with North being the largest district in the city. Strong with its political legitimacy, the elected district government began undertaking autonomous actions for redeveloping the area by taking distance from the city and national Labor coalition. In the late 1990s Amsterdam North started *Noordwaarts*! (Northwards!), a series of public meetings wherein the future of the district was discussed. These meetings gained high attention within city media. This symbolic act was the first, and perhaps more theatrical, attempt to put North back on the development map of Amsterdam. Initiated by the local district government, the series of public meetings brought together many squatters, active architects and visionary planners to discuss the development potential of the area. In 2001, the district took the political initiative to draft an ambitious development plan (Panorama Noord, 2001), which aimed at breaking with the idea of North as backside of the city (Van der Tol, 2002).

Also named 'future vision of North', *Noordwaarts*! was highly criticized by local media and engaged participants. In 2000, the city newspaper declared that 'in practice, it is a badly directed form of public relation, where the outcome is already fixed in advance'.[8] In fact, municipal politicians had other priorities, such as extensive housing provision in the Eastern areas, international connectivity through high-speed railways, and inner city urban renewal (Kahn & van der Plas, 1999). City officials remained unimpressed by the Northern IJ Banks until the Royal Dutch Shell, located in North, approached the municipality to restructure its Amsterdam operations. In 2000, the Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool* titled 'Shell shows Stadig [planning alderman at the time] where North lies'.[9] The risk of losing another 1,200 jobs in North triggered the attention of both city and district politicians. In 2002, the municipality of Amsterdam reached an agreement with Shell and ING Real Estate on the development of the 20 ha Shell site for €141 million, the biggest land transaction ever made by the municipality of Amsterdam.

Despite these economic opportunities, the political coalitions embedded in the area did not find consensus over a possible agenda of spatial and economic change. On the one hand, city officials and district politicians from the Labor Party started a debate regarding the future of the area. Several plans were proposed (Panorama Noord, 2001 and the 2003 master plan for the Northern IJ Bank *Terug aan het IJ*) in order to envisage a post-industrial transition. All these plans shared a similar approach, emphasizing the importance of mixing new economies and housing in order to provide better local services and valorize vacant land. These plans, perceived as too ambitious and too risky both economically and politically by politicians at the time, never found, support in city politics and the local electorate. More importantly, a transformative agenda triggered internal conflicts within local parties.[10] More progressive factions of the Labor party active at the district level,

started to conflict with more conservative factions concerned with the priority to maintain an electoral basin for the moderate left in Amsterdam North. The socio-economic change of North was perceived as having important effects on the socio-political landscape of the area. Policy proposals were therefore never accepted by Labor coalitions in Amsterdam North, representing the industry-based identity of their constituencies. In the 2002 elections, local communities expressed their dissent and fear towards urban change. *Leefbaar Noord*, a populist local party linked to the national *Leefbaar* movement, gained considerably in the district elections (see Table 2), giving a voice to this discontent and leveraging NIMBY sentiment by the electorate. They proposed ideas of maintenance and conservation instead of the overambitious plans of the former coalition led by the Labor party.[11] They eventually took over and posed the district mayor, after an internal row in the Labor Party. Following the promises made in their campaign, they and slowed down any plan for the area.

Table 2 District council election results of Amsterdam-North in percentages (in brackets number of seats), 1994–2014 (Source: O_+_S Amsterdam).

alt-text: Table 2

	1994[a]	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
Labor Party (PvdA)	(10)	28.8 (10)	25.0 (8)	39.4 (13)	28.1 (10)	22.4 (3)
Conservative-Liberals (VVD)	(6)	16.7 (6)	14.0 (4)	10.9 (3)	14.8 (5)	7.4 (1)
Green-Left (GL)	(4)	10.1 (3)	9.4 (3)	8.8 (3)	13.0 (4)	9.4 (1)
Social-Liberals (D66)	(5)	4.4 (1)	4.0 (1)	2.0 (0)	8.2 (2)	17.2 (3)
Socialist Party (SP)	(3)	9.7 (3)	7.9 (2)	14.2 (4)	8.6 (3)	15.9 (2)
Christian Democrats (CDA)	(3)	7.3 (2)	9.0 (3)	6.7 (2)	5.6 (1)	3.6 (0)
Liveable North (*Leefbaar Noord*)	–	–	17.6 (5)	7.8 (2)	8.4 (2)	–
Issues Party North (*Belangen Partij Noord*)	(5)	11.3 (4)	6.9 (2)	4.1 (1)	4.7 (1)	4.4 (1)
Others	(1)	11.7 (2)	6.1 (1)	6.2 (0)	8.6 (1)	19.7 (2)
Total seats	37	31	29	29	29	13

[a] No percentages available for 1994.

5.5 Symbols and narrations in the organic transformation of Amsterdam North (2002–present)

The loss of power of the Labor Party in North in 2003 was a turning point in the planning and political strategy for the development of the Northern IJ Bank of Amsterdam. After losing the leadership of the district council, the Labor Party understood that the development of the north needed to addressed in a different way, more oriented to compromise. The party regrouped and a year later took over again the leadership. The concern for losing further consensus led the local social-democratic coalition to pursue a new approach, which gave the possibility of enhancing the urgency of spatial change in North. This approach was hinged on targeted spatial interventions, legitimated through symbolic images of the future, but built on images of past industrial production. By emphasizing continuity with the past, it was possible to lessen the political risks that radical change would entail, while inspiring public consensus for a developmental agenda.

From 2006 onwards, the most progressive wing of the Labor Party in North have matched with the rise of a green-left faction in the city. These new electoral movements propose alternative urban policies, oriented to spatial transition, place qualities, community engagement and less on urban renewal. They further call for emerging economies and a saner urban environment appealing to young middle-class families (De Voogd, 2012). This moderate view laid the groundwork for a new discourse of transformation, which stressed the need for change, yet in a fashion that could valorize the current condition of the place and its original character. The first symbolic act to this new approach was the *Project Bureau Noordwaarts*, a political artifact, which represented an institutional compromise between the local interests and an emerging city policy. *Noordwaarts*, which had the same name of the explorative discussions from ten years earlier, became the first public partnership between the city and the district, chaired by the city alderman and the district mayor. It was portrayed as a 'consensus government', or a special management unit for Amsterdam North to achieve consensual decisions. The value of this project bureau was political and technical. On the one hand, it allowed for the tailored management of North in line with city agendas of development, while on the other, provided a platform for local groups, stakeholders and politicians to directly propose spatial interventions.

Local planners label the development approach used in North as 'organic'. Today it serves as a benchmark for the whole city (PBL and Urhahn Urban Design, 2012).[12] Local politicians use the term organic in characterizing development to emphasize the natural change of an area, free of directive intervention. In political terms, it reflects a constellation of active civic groups, market actors and reformist politicians claiming for a more self-organized and entrepreneurial city. However,

this current approach shows a combination of publicly sponsored landmark interventions, symbolic actions from both developers and municipality, and small-scale civic led projects aimed at triggering spatial change. In North, this approach also reveals careful reference to the industrial past of the area. Current interventions mythicize the history of the place and revise it for future ideas. Manufacture is linked to creativity, knowledge and innovation, and the future is associated to the idea of spatial production and place making. The future of Amsterdam North is epitomized as 'current' in an article from a major national newspaper entitled 'The future of North is now'.[13] A new discourse of civic entrepreneurialism and do-it-yourself urbanism, which began in North, resonates today in key political debates in the city. Today, many creatives, start-ups, activists and progressive politicians, come together in cultural institutions of the city to sketch manifestos inspired by the idea of self-organized city-making, where citizens are identified as city-makers (*Agenda Stadmakers*, see Franke, Niemans, and Soeterbroek (2014)).[14]
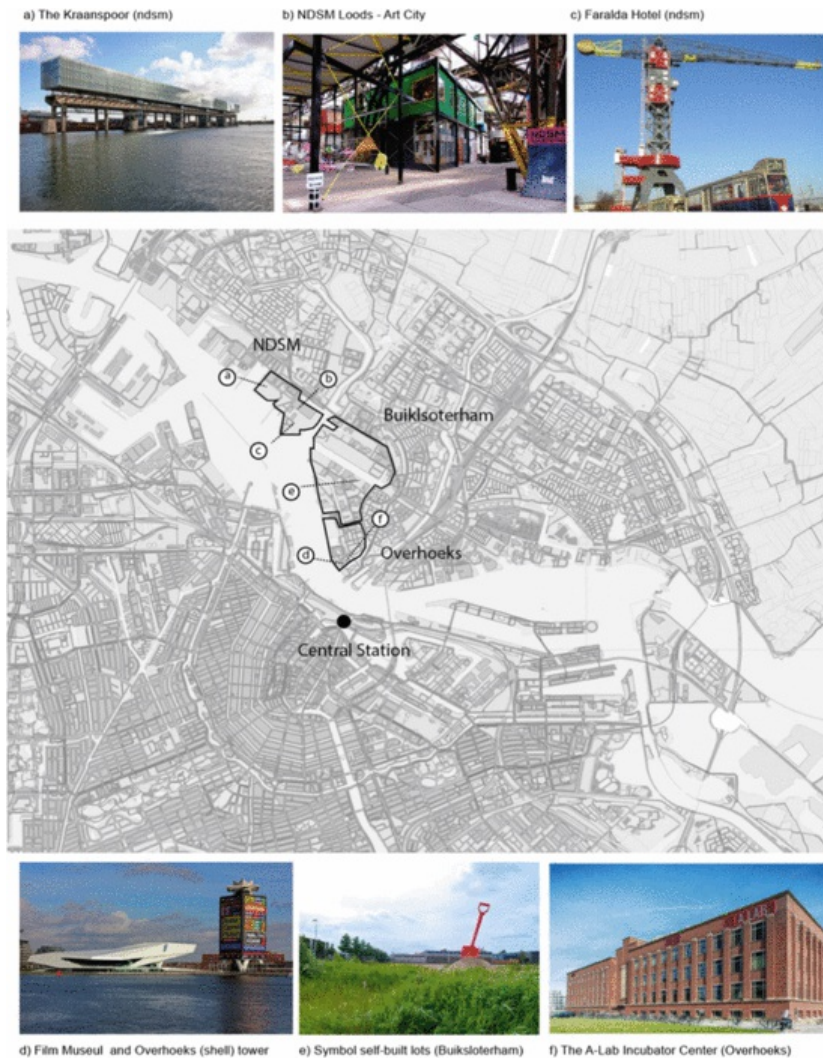
The NDSM area, where since the 1990s artists and squatters had resided in order to establish a breeding place of urban sub-culture, formed the starting point for a strategy of experimental transformation led by the Noordwaarts project bureau. In the late 1990s, the open competition initiated by the district council for the NDSM-wharf was won by the artist collective *Kinetisch Noord* (Kinetic North). The group's name was in itself a symbolic object, recalling the urgency of spatial transition, movement, and dynamism in an area of vacancy and decay. In 2001 the municipality established a new ferry connecting NDSM with the central station, and invested in projects that would reuse existent landmark buildings. The original canteen of the shipyard was transformed into a restaurant open to the public and was named 'IJ Canteen', recalling the original use and identity of the place in relation to its location on the river IJ. Filled with images portraying the former community of workers, the interior recalls those who lived and worked in NDSM over the last century. In the same year the district signed a contract with a developer with the intention to stimulate the reuse of spaces for new economies while preserving the past image of the area. The company Mediawerf (Media-wharf) symbolically joins 'media' and 'yard' with its name to propose the potential that a shipyard can have for the knowledge economy. The marketing materials proposed by NDSM show a collection of harbor reuse throughout the world, combining new fashions, lifestyles and spatial designs for knowledge workers.[15]

The settling of MTV Europe in 2006 in NDSM was welcomed as a new symbol for the renaissance of North. MTV was the first major creative firm to settle in the area, and the company is frequently asked by developers to argue for the potential of the particular spatial atmosphere in the place, which combines decaying structures with vital new usages. While visiting the derelict area of NDSM, the MTV network manager stated: 'we feel at home in the rough atmosphere of this area'.[16] At the same time, Mediawarf, the development corporation, specifically points out in the national financial newspaper that 'MTV must indeed function as flying wheel' and that the company is 'representative of the type of companies that are wanted in the area'.[17] Another example of symbolic object is the Kraanspoor, a 10,000 square meter office building built on an existing crane rail. Described as the 'eye-catcher' in the area, it is an icon of industrial times which signifies a new architectural approach to development, a symbol of the 'interaction between industrial heritage and state-of-the-Art architecture'.[18] The building is today associated with the architectural and aesthetic opportunities of North and is inspiring other industrial heritage renovations in the whole city. The NDSM crane builds on a similar imaginary: a luxury three-room hotel (*Faralda Hotel*). Built on a crane, this is perhaps the most disembodied example of reuse from the industrial North (Fig.1). Yet, the crane is portrayed by media as the symbol of the contemporary renaissance of the derelict and industrial atmosphere of North, portrayed by some as the 'Eiffel tower of Amsterdam'.[19] This is today the main landmark for the area, symbolizing the value of industrial heritage for incoming visitors and markets. Symbolic languages are also pervasively used to promote NDSM. Both the land developer and the city use the ward to narrate the notion of the 'self-made city', while local stakeholders promote a *self-made future laboratory*, an online platform for discussion. These symbolic languages associate the history of manufacturing and the value of hard work with images of creativity. In doing so, they project the past into a vision of the future. This is an outspoken narrative strategy aimed at attracting creative classes to stimulate and self-transform vacant land.

The Overhoeks area, located closer to the central station, is the most evident example of how the use of symbolic objects and languages can convey a new agenda of urban renaissance despite the high socio-political impact of the interventions on existing neighborhoods. Today, the municipal project office portrays Overhoeks as the 'main entry' to North, and proposes a total of 2200 luxury housing units. The project is radically different from the existing environment of the area with a low share of social housing (20%) compared with 55% of Amsterdam, and the 90% of the surrounding neighborhood. It also includes the 'Strip', with high-rise towers up to 100 m. In the recent years, the city adapted a strategy oriented to place re-branding in order to advance such an ambitious program. Noordwaarts made use of three symbolic objects to redefine the economic and productive value of the area: the reuse of the Overhoeks tower, the A-Lab and a landmark museum. The first is portrait by the city as the new image of North; an old office headquarters turned into a culture-based hotel with a 24-hour discotheque. Emphasizing the branding capacity of industrial heritage, the current developer of the tower declares that 'it would be fantastic, as the daily visitors could photograph the tower as the Hollywood letters'.[20] The second object is a breeding place for creative start-ups related to high-end 3D printing and design. The A-Lab is portrayed as an icon of the productive vitality of the industrial North, as well as an example of economic change. The incubator has kept the name of the building, the Shell-Lab and on its webpage embeds the values of futurology, virtual reality and knowledge in the imaginary of past industrial research. Lastly, the film museum, an iconic architectural piece, functions as a symbol to increase the cultural value of the area. Politically, it worked as a symbolic investment to calm initial oppositions against development in North by civic groups. For quite some time, the citizen's association ANGSAW lobbied for a careful cultural valorization of Overhoeks against the original plans of intense residential development.

The Buiksloterham area, between Overhoeks and NDSM is a brownfield with some active industry and is presented today as the living laboratory of the new city (see Fig. 1). Here, an organic approach entails a careful combination of urban fabrics, industrial production, knowledge economy and housing. The city alderman uses the motto 'mix to the max' to describe the redevelopment, which serves as a benchmark for national and international development projects. The organic approach consists of combining industrial locations with housing and offices in order to promote living-labs discussions of alternative energy consumption and waste reuse, and for the purpose of engaging citizen and small entrepreneur to find innovative solutions. Symbolic terminologies like *The hackable city*, a recently proposed interactive research platform in North, combine references to smart technology, emergent urbanism, self-organization and creative production.[21] A giant shovel installed by the district government around new housing developments symbolizes this narrative of self-organized and manufactured urban change. In the area, the patchwork of self-built houses, incubators, companies and social activities is supported by a narrative of bottom-up urban metamorphosis and of gradual and socially embedded urban change. Today, Buiksloterham is described as 'the green utopia' and is used to evocate the meaning that this area has for an alternative future

for the city of Amsterdam as a whole and beyond.[22]

a) The Kraanspoor (ndsm) b) NDSM Loods - Art City c) Faralda Hotel (ndsm)

NDSM

Buiklsoterham

Overhoeks

Central Station

d) Film Museul and Overhoeks (shell) tower e) Symbol self-built lots (Buiksloterham) f) The A-Lab Incubator Center (Overhoeks)

Figure 1.Fig. 1 Amsterdam North projects, with the three main intervention areas NDSM, Buiksloterham, and Overhoeks, and a selection of the symbolic markers.

Source: Mediamatic, Municipality of Amsterdam, 2015 and Wikipedia.

alt-text: Fig. 1

6.6 Reflection

Experimentation and creative innovation, among others, are central images aimed at triggering urban change in times of austerity and weak real-estate investment in the discourses of politicians. Symbolic objects, artifacts and narratives are extensively used to motivate these transformative agendas in light of the political and social effects that they can have on the city. In this paper we showed that, first, there is a double relation between trends in the urban political landscape and spatial interventions in concrete places. New socio-economic conditions of urban areas do reflect more structural trends in city politics, which in turn strengthen agendas for urban change. Second, we argued that the construction, use and mobilization of symbolic elements are key drivers in this dialectic between politics and place making. Symbols convey abstracted narratives of new urban futures and therefore can build consensus around transformative urban agendas. They are

active factors in stimulating urban change and are complementary to exogenous economic change. Symbols play an active political role in that they selectively convey particular images of the city. Third, by examining the particular case of Amsterdam North, we demonstrated that political change in the city builds on selective symbolic interventions. These spatial interventions can carry new meanings of place and support narratives of urban growth. They do so by mobilizing symbolic objects, acts and languages to substantiate agendas and build popular consensus.

The current political landscape of Amsterdam supports a new development agenda for the city. This agenda is revolves around urban imaginaries that are pervaded by references to creation, knowledge production, self-organized civic engagement and manufactured urban space. Emerging political parties tap into these images and combine them with rhetoric centered on internationalism, individualism, and entrepreneurialism. These emerging ideologies of liberal progressivism are however set out in continuity with the social democratic past of the city. As we showed, spatial interventions in North underline a symbolic link between the present and the past, between the industrial and the informational, between the manufactured city and the self-made city. This has provided solid ground for politicians to build support for an agenda of socio-spatial transition.

In Amsterdam, these narrations are grounded in a constellation of practices, artifacts, acts and languages used in planning. Amsterdam North, the main industrial motor of the twentieth-century city serves today as the center of the creative economy. Here, symbolic objects, acts and narratives have built consensus around the transformation of the area despite initial resistance by elected coalitions. For a decade now, a transformative agenda combines symbolic references to the past with imaginative and evocative images of future evolution. This narrative compromise between conservation and transformation has fuelled a political strategy that managed a difficult, and politically contested, transition. The mobilized symbols connect images of shipbuilding, manufacturing, and labor to the added value of creative economies and the active involvement of the creative class. Today, the creative city policy of North is rarely discussed. The electoral turnouts are a representation of the socio-political effects that this transition has had on the constituency of the area. The erosion of traditional leftist and liberal parties has left space for Green-Left and moderate-liberals, which feed into a discourse of alternative, engaged and socially entrepreneurial urban development.

Although not frequent in the literature, a combined analysis of political-electoral dynamics, symbols and urban interventions allows the reaching of important theoretical and policy considerations for urban change. First, it suggests that in times of austerity and socio-economic transition, narratives, storytelling and dramaturgy are important elements that trigger development. They are complementary to financial and legal means. Symbols have a strong inspirational capacity for bottom-up initiatives in light of a weaker state. Secondly, this empirical paper suggests that planning cannot disengage from electoral politics. Political parties respond to emerging social demands and constituencies, while also actively affecting their electorate through rhetorical images of place. If disembodied from electoral trends, planning might lose its evocative capacity and its capacity to stimulate new urban imaginaries. Third, and most importantly, this paper explicitly warns that the construction of symbolic meaning is a selective and instrumental process. The established inhabitants of North are currently faced with rapid gentrification and rising housing prices. A look at the electoral trends displays the politically conflicting character of spatial transitions. This conflict takes place (though not exclusively) through selective symbolic narrations of place that reflect different political views on the city. Through a careful understanding and mobilization of symbols, it is possible to valorize these different views of place in order to reach a better appreciation of the history and tradition of urban areas.

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Footnotes

[1] Strategic Plan Amsterdam 2040, Municipality of Amsterdam 2011: 60, translated by the authors.

[2] Municipality of Amsterdam, Strategic Plan (Structuurvisie) Amsterdam 2040.

[3] The current mayor, Mr. Eberhard van der Laan is still from the PvdA. A Dutch mayor chairs the municipal government, but statutory powers are mainly in the field of maintaining public order.

[4] GroenLinks is the result of a merger of several leftist and Christian parties, of which some had been in the municipal council before.

[5] The interpretation of local election results requires some caution, because it might be related to the dissatisfaction towards national parties. Both the VVD and the Labor Party were part of the national government and lost significantly.

[6] 'Amsterdam Noord: van afvoerputje naar place to be', *Een Vandaag*, 29 April 2013.

[7] 'Trek de grachtengordel door! Vergeten Amsterdam-Noord', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 17 February 2000.

[8] 'Neoliberale benadering van de toekomst van de stad', *Het Parool*, 8 March 2000.

[9] 'Shell wijst Stadig waar Noord ligt', *Het Parool*, 22 December 2000.

[10] Interview with member of the Labor Party at the district level (March 2009) and at the city level (April 2009)

[11] 'Nog een keer jaren chaos? Leefbaar Noord nog woest over ontijdige aftocht', *Het Parool*, 16 February 2006.

[12] The term was already used to emphasize the natural evolution of the place (interview with project leader, 2013) and is today highly recurrent in Amsterdam planning circles at the municipality (see also http://www.zefhemel.nl/?p=6485 and http://www.nul20.nl/issue57/2vdp_1).

[13] 'De toekomst in Noord is nu', *De Volkskrant*, 24 November 2010.

[14] Pakhuis de Zwijger, a center hosted in a former warehouse on the Southern IJ Bank, is today at the forefront of this debate. Under the broad agenda of 'city-makers' (*Agenda Stadmakers*) they link new political parties, professionals and engaged citizens into a debate on social entrepreneurialism, do-it-yourself and self-organized urbanism.

[15] For an impression see the website of the developer: http://www.biesterbos.nl/#/over-biesterbos.

[16] Nieuwe creatieven op de oude NDSM-werf, *Het Parool*, 26 November 2005.

[17] Jong en hip strijkt neer op oude werf, *Het Financieele Dagblad*, 9 June 2005.

[18] http://www.ndsm.nl/gebouw/kraanspoor/.

[19] http://www.bndestem.nl/algemeen/cultuur/eiffeltoren-amsterdam-terug-op-zijn-post-1.4062851.

[20] 'Shelltoren is een wilde droom die uitkomt', *Het Parool*, 6 October 2012,

[21] The 'Hackable Metropolis' is a research project conducted in cooperation with locally organized citizens platforms and companies active in the field of energy and sustainable urbanism.

[22] 'Buiksloterham als groen utopia', *Het Parool*, 5 March 2015.

Queries and Answers

Query:

Ref. "Mediamatic, Municipality of Amsterdam, 2015 " is cited in text but not provided in the reference list. Please provide it in the reference list or delete the citation from the text.

Answer: Use this caption Fig.1 Amsterdam North projects, with the three main intervention areas NDSM, Buiksloterham and Overhoeks and a selection of the symbolic markers. Source: Wikipedia creative commons and authors.

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The citation "Healey, 2007" has been changed to "Healey, 2006" to match the author name/date in the reference list. Please check if the change is fine in this occurrence and modify the subsequent occurrences, if necessary.

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Answer: Ok

Query:

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Answer: It is not a citation, it is the name of the plan proposed. Please change thus into (2001, Panorama Noord)

Query:

Ref. "Panorama Noord, 2001 " is cited in text but not provided in the reference list. Please provide it in the reference list or delete the citation from the text.

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Please note that Fig. 1 was not cited in the text. Please check if the suggested citation is appropriate, and correct if necessary.

Answer: Please remove from here. I added fig.1 above (see addition in the text).