Mobilities, Politics, and the Future: Critical geographies of green urbanism

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Urban studies, as an interdisciplinary field, is defined, to a great degree, by critical analyses at the nexus of economic development, urbanization, and urban life. For reasons that hardly need explanation or justification, environmental change and its governance are increasingly central to these analyses. Rosol et al (this issue) argue that the “new environmental governance regimes” that frame the politics of urban and environmental change are growth-oriented, neo-managerial, driven by narrow notions of ‘best practices,’ socially and spatially selective, and post-democratic. Echoing and extending While et al’s (2004) argument, they suggest that appeals to greenness, sustainability, and resilience under hegemonic governance regimes tend to act in the service of economic development, whether by promising magical synergies between profit-making and environmentalism or by legitimizing and excusing business as usual.

Yet, as While et al (2004) and others have shown, studies of urban environmental governance are most effective when they explore the specific contexts and conditions, logics and antinomies of environmental governance in cities and urbanized regions. This involves attention to innovation (and claims about innovation) in urban development and urban governance. In turn, it involves a focus on politics and, in that regard, critical analyses of the contemporary condition must pay attention to how social movements identify opportunities to advocate for more just and truly sustainable futures. I will explore these themes by first discussing both urban governance and also innovation. I will then spend more time engaging with questions of policy mobilities, definitions of success and failure, and the character of (post-)politics. I will conclude by considering the question of contemporary inter-urban ‘referencescapes’ and how these must be approached as intertwined spatialities and temporalities. After all, urban environmental governance and attempts to design a ‘green urbanism,’ for want of a better term, is nothing if not about struggles over the past, the present, and the future of specific places in wider global contexts.

Governance and innovation

From new masterplanned cities (Chang, 2017, Rapoport and Hult, 2017) to imaginatively repurposed urban infrastructure (Lang and Rothenberg, 2017), the papers in this theme issue underscore the role that innovative technologies and designs play in contemporary urban development. Relatedly, they emphasize the role that innovation in governance and policy-making is central to the workings of urban environmental governance regimes. Furthermore, the politics of these regimes involves attempts to define and promote certain models and schemes as innovative. For Jessop (1997, 31, following Schumpeter), innovation in urban governance entails an “entrepreneurial concern to create ‘new combinations’ of ... factors which will further urban and regional competitiveness.” These new combinations reflect,
necessitate, and legitimate new forms of policy-making. These include innovations that tend toward technicization and depoliticization, which, as Peter North, Alex Nurse, and Tom Barker (this issue) suggest, might promote empowerment through agonistic political engagement.

Much contemporary governance and policy-making is defined not only by the very real imperatives of environmental change, then, but also by the competitive pressure policy-makers feel to innovate in, or at least keep up with, the latest trends and ‘hot’ ideas in their field (McCann and Ward, 2010). As Jessop and Sum (2000, 2292) have argued, urban elites are compelled to constantly ‘narrate’ their own innovativeness through “the articulation of diverse economic, political and sociocultural narratives ... [that] seek to give meaning to current problems by construing them in terms of past failures and future possibilities.” This neoliberal compulsion toward competitive innovation is epitomized by appeals to the competitive suffix ‘-est,’ as in ‘greenest.’ Cities like Vancouver, for example, narrate their innovations in planning and urban design not simply in terms of a quest for ‘greenness’ but, rather, as part of a global competition to be ‘greenest.’ Planning, urban design, and policy-making, more generally, thus involves the search for innovative ‘best practices’ that are viewed simultaneously and paradoxically as opportunities for connection and sharing among like-minded actors and institutions, on the one hand, and spurs for competition, on the other (McCann, 2013).

Urban built environments are the product of labour, then, but so are the policies that govern them. Thus, as McFarlane (2009, 562) argues, we must pay “attention to the labour of assembling and reassembling sociomaterial practices [e.g., buildings, infrastructures, policies, or governance innovations] that are diffuse, tangled and contingent.” The labour involved in innovation is intellectual, practical, and political. It entails persuasive story-telling, attempts to make the incommensurable commensurable, metric-making and market-making, the deployment of comparative technologies, and contests about data, details, and expertise. It is, experimental, combinative, and circulatory. Indeed, the “ascendancy of systematic ‘experimentality’ in policy formation” is something Peck and Theodore (2015, 225) have noted and, as Bulkeley & Broto (2013, 372) put it, “... experiments are ... a critical means through which governing is accomplished” (see also Evans, 2016). Experiments encourage policy actors (experimenters) to assemble new, innovative combinations of existing policies as much as engineers, architects, and designers create new combinations of materials as they innovate in the production of buildings, infrastructures, neighborhoods, and cities.

**Mobility, success, and politics: The contested production of green urbanism**

The contributions to this theme issue provide valuable insights into the contemporary character of urban development and governance as institutions and actors seek out innovative ways to address environmental crises in and through urbanization. Their value lies in their global scope perspective (from England to China, the cases articulate the local with wider circulations of ideas about, and models for, addressing global climate change). They are also valuable in their critical approach, which emphasize and problematize the interests involved in, and the politics of, contemporary green development and green urbanism. The meaning of ‘green’ in these
phrases is clearly up for grabs. Many themes emerge from a collection of papers and which ones emerge most strongly depends on the reader. I will draw out three themes that resonated most strongly for me.

Mobilizations, ideas, and the vagaries of implementation

A great deal has been written over the last decade on policy mobilities – the circulation of policy models among actors and localities (for a review, see Temenos and McCann, 2013). The papers in this special issue both draw upon and also contribute to attempts to trace and conceptualize the various forms of global policy circulation that have been pointed to in the policy mobilities literature. One concern with the term ‘policy mobilities’ or similar terms like ‘travelling policy’ can be the tendency to narrowly define what is moving in terms of formal, written policies or, as public policies, emerging from and circulating through state institutions. There is a great deal of merit in this sort of focus, but this theme issue underlines the need to think beyond policy, in its narrow formal sense, when approaching the circulation of models of green urban development and governance. In one way or another, all the papers in this issue emphasize that often ideas are what are moved from place to place. Moreover, it is clear that the formulation and mobilization of innovative ideas about green development and green governance happens both in, but also crucially beyond, the formal institutions of governance – in the private sector (Bok and Coe, 2017), among social movements, and in academia.

A key question in a number of the papers is: what exactly moves when urban policy actors seek to define new regimes of environmental governance? A related question is: what impact do these mobilizations have on local decision-making, development, and design? I-Chun Catherine Chang’s contribution and that of Elizabeth Rapoport and Anna Hult are particularly forthright on the issue of what moves. They suggest that, not only do models of eco- or green developments move from place to place, but that planners (from state institutions and the private sector), government officials, and private consultants also move. They do so along with various materials, including ‘technical objects,’ like masterplans and blueprints, that are generated through the trans-local planning of new developments, neighbourhoods, and cities, as Chang puts it. This is also evident in Steve Lang and Julia Rothenberg’s detailed discussion of the planning and building of New York’s High Line park. The multiplicity of what is moving suggests the need to avoid simply thinking about policies moving in a narrow sense and instead thinking about ideas moving.

Yet, at the same time, it is also crucial to emphasize that ideas develop, move, and have effect in and through institutions, social practices, and systems of governance. In that regard, it is no surprise that the papers emphasize how mobilizing ideas for green urbanism is very much an industry, exhibiting many of the imperatives and imperfections of other industries, including a strong profit-motive, the imprint of state regulation and facilitation, market-making strategies, and failure as a constitutive part of innovation (Baker et al, 2016). Moreover, it is important to pay attention to the link, where it actually exists, between ideas, models, and even written, approved, and adopted policies, on the one hand, and implementation, on the other. Rapoport
and Hult’s account of the Swedish planning firms’ engagement with Chinese development projects highlights two ways in which the gap between plan and implementation can be insurmountable. On the one hand, as an industry, green urban planning must successfully enroll the appropriate investment streams to realize plans on the ground. This is rarely straightforward. On the other, and perhaps more interesting from the perspective of studies of urban policy-making, Rapoport and Hult argue that the Chinese partners may never have intended to build out the master plans at all. Rather, they argue, “The Swedish firms were hired for two main purposes—to produce plans and images to attract further investment and so that local planners and firms could learn from their expertise” (Rapoport and Hult, 26).

What moves multiple and complex, but so is the question of exactly why certain resources are moved and gathered into a plan, design, or policy.

Framing success and failure

The Sino-Swedish case raises questions about success and failure that run through all the papers in this theme issue, in one way or another, and that are increasingly central to discussions around the conceptualization of policy mobilities and policy-making. What success and failure mean in the context of innovative designs and strategies and mobile models is not simple or straightforward and, certainly, the definition of both is tied up with the interests of those who can harness what might be called ‘definitional power.’ The ‘success’ and ‘failure’ of a design, development, or governance strategy does not only beg the question, ‘for whom?’ It also emphasizes that success and failure are relationally produced – what success means and for whom develops and is narrated in terms of particular constructions of failure and vice versa. This is not to say that the difference between success and failure is unimportant in the context of attempts to effectively address the causes and consequences of environmental change in and through cities. Yet, as the papers in this issue make clear, success and failure cannot be taken for granted but, must, instead, be approached critically through theoretically-informed empirical investigation (McCann and Ward, 2015).

Chang’s analysis provides a nuanced approach to policy failure. For her, “a model may not be successful in its implementation but remains successful in its mobility” (5). Yet, clearly, as Rapoport and Hult show, the definition of success is complex, since policy-making involves numerous actors, partners, and interests (see also Wells 2014). Failure for some interests – not converting a plan or model into a development on the ground, for example – may be success for others if their goal for a planning process exceeds simply converting blueprints into green developments. Moreover, these contributions also show that models and stated goals of planning, design, and development processes are always subject to adjustment and ‘gaming’ (or “calculative strategizing,” as Chang (19) puts it). Expectations and goals are often revised and, perhaps more importantly, discursively re-framed in the face of the realities of rising costs, changing state priorities, evidence from elsewhere, and so on.

The framing of success, failure, and sustainability is also crucial in governance, of course. Anneleen Kenis & Matthias Lievens (2017) detail the central importance of representations of
Leuven as a sustainable city through a local government-led process to make it carbon neutral in the future. North et al, in their discussion of Liverpool, also note the importance of defining visions, targets, and framing agendas for action in cities and urban regions if the harmful effects of climate change are to be mitigated. In both Leuven and Liverpool the success, or otherwise, of progressive visions of alternative policies and development models seem to have been “edited out” (North et al, 29) of high-level discussions and public statements. This would appear to be a failure on the part of these movements and an example of the ways that political and business elites are able to ‘game’ the governance regimes that they have long controlled and developed. Yet, both sets of authors argue that, indeed, elites are able to tamp down, or marginalize, opposition by framing debates in technical terms or making appeals for consensus, etc. According to what one might call ‘first generation’ post-political literatures in geography and urban studies, this maneuver leaves only acquiescence or outright disruptive opposition as the most likely political options. Nonetheless, the authors also contend that their analyses reveal hope for alternative articulations of problems and for the formulation of truly green and just urban futures through agonistic, conflictual engagement across markedly differing perspectives.

The politics of green urbanism

A central concern of all the papers in this theme issue is the ongoing struggle between entrenched growth coalitions and profit-oriented development interests who seek to harness green urbanism for profit, on the one hand, and those espousing visions of what Lang and Rothenberg call ‘a robust version of sustainability that is more about ecology, community and social needs than economic growth’ (17), on the other. The character of Rosol et al’s ‘new environmental governance regimes’ will, as the contributions show, be defined in a pre-existing, but not necessarily deterministic, context of power relations and political negotiations and struggles. It is impossible to discuss policy mobility, policy-making, or the character of urbanism without positioning considerations of power and the political at the heart of the analysis.

Not surprisingly, then, discussions of the politics of green urbanism and environmental governance revolve around the role of the state, at various scales, in shaping the future of cities. Whether in the decision to redevelop New York’s High Line into a park and to set it to work in service of the redevelopment of its surrounding neighbourhood, or in Chinese efforts to develop eco-cities, or in Belgian and English debates over how best to reduce carbon emissions and promote green urbanism, formal institutions of the state are crucial to the development, circulation, and legitimation of what Chang (6) calls ‘mainstream’ development models. These include local planning, engineering, and legal departments as well as regional and national agencies charged with facilitating sustainable development and transitions while, maintaining opportunities for economic growth. Chang and Rapoport and Hult note that eco-cities in China, despite their stuttering attempts to shape a viable model, are seen by the national government as a priority in need of a national exemplar. This, of course, involves coordination with regional and local states, just as it does in places like Liverpool, where local attempts to make policy to reduce carbon emissions had to coordinate with changing national indicators and targets.
Furthermore, in New York, the role of the local state, with its control over zoning and its use of Transferrable Development Rights (TDR), was crucial to the development of the High Line Park and the gentrification of its surrounding district, as Lang and Rothenberg explain.

On the one hand, these development orthodoxies are facilitated and advanced by technical mechanisms of the state, like TDR, and legitimated through often-constrained forms of participatory decision-making. On the other hand, they are challenged through various forms of political action. Some of the groups and movements that offer these challenges do so by working with, or within, state institutions, using formal political strategies. Others operate outside of these structures or, more commonly, maneuver in and beyond the state. Travelling policy ideas and innovations can challenge established development-oriented orthodoxies, upon their arrival in new contexts. North et al refer to the importance of new ideas for social movements that articulate alternative visions within political processes defined by agonistic conflict. Yet, other contributions, like Chang’s and Rapoport and Hult’s, show that new ideas may also be generated in the state and private sector and may often be solicited by state actors and local growth-oriented elites who are looking for ways to change local governance and development regimes in pursuit of their own profit-oriented sustainability fixes. While ideas move, how they move, for whom, and with what effects, cannot be simply read off of the networks or the narratives provided by those transfer agents involved in moving them. Equally important to understanding the character and political potential of policy mobilities is the careful analysis of politics in specific localities and across related regional and national scales.

This politics is, at least in part, a politics of expertise – specialized knowledge developed from certain positions within and outside institutions and legitimated by appeals to certain forms of authenticity, credentials, and experience. In turn, the politics of expertise is a politics of representation. As Kenis and Lievens argue, plans and other policies articulate specific interested representations of cities, urban development, appropriate actors, and effective practices necessary to enact change. Both their paper and also North et al’s argue that space exists within contemporary urban politics to engage in the definition of these representations and to challenge hegemonic assumptions about what representations are appropriate. All the papers in the theme issue address the power relations associated with expertise in policy-making. In one register, the professional expertise of international consultancy firms engaged with the expert knowledge of development and planning officials at various scales of the Chinese state, with varied results. This engagement involves clear strategies for constraining choice, agenda setting, managing expectations, and facilitating the co-production of plans involving consultants and clients, as Rapoport and Hult note. In another register, the examples of Leuven, Liverpool, and New York show evidence of how the politics of policy-making is defined by struggles over evidence, truth, and the territorial scope of actions, consequences, and responsibilities. Finally, the role of academics and their particular form of expert, credentialled knowledge, as well as their position within public and private institutions, is evident in the Leuven and Liverpool cases, although in different ways. As North et al suggest, academics can engage with the production of policy, but their case shows that engagement brings its own tensions and limitations even as it provides opportunities for the co-production of knowledge and action through a form of community based research.
Spatial and temporal reference points in the politics of green urbanism

*Here comes the future and you can’t run from it ...*

— Billy Bragg, *Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards*

In the preceding sections, I have drawn on the papers in this theme issue to highlight three elements of contemporary green urbanism and the formulation of ‘new environmental governance regimes’ in cities and urban regions. My focus on the mobilization of ideas, on the question of success and failure in the development of innovative urbanisms, and on the crucial centrality of the political in these debates speaks to some key concerns in contemporary literatures on urban policy. In what remains, I will briefly point to one other theme that runs through the others, but is worthy of further discussion, particularly in a theme issue on the relationship between cities and climate change.

The strategic use of reference points is a political strategy used to frame problems and persuade policy-makers and the general population of the benefits of certain solutions. These references are both spatial and also temporal. The policy mobilities literature and the related literature on inter-referencing have been particularly interested in this sort of narrative framing of evidence (e.g., McCann et al 2013). New York City and, particularly PlaNYC, acted as a reference point for Liverpool when local elites demanded a model that would combine attention to sustainability with continuing economic competitiveness, while Singapore’s public housing planning was a particular touchstone in the Chinese eco-city development process. These references fit within the widespread practice of defining certain policy approaches in terms of the cities in which they were developed, or with which they are most strongly identified for one reason or another – the Barcelona model, Vancouverism, etc. This ‘referencescape’ is always an ideologically constrained social, spatial, and temporal formation that serves certain interests over others, for better or worse. Chang’s paper adds to our understanding of spatial referencing and its relationship to the politics of policy-making because it provides insight into global South-South inter-referencing in the context of Chinese eco-city development. As she explains, the failure of the Dongtan experiment justified a shift in Chinese attention away from reference points in, and expertise and models from, the global North to the Singapore model. Rapoport and Hult add to this story by highlighting the strong agency on the Chinese end of the relationship with the European consultants as they worked to co-produce plans for eco-cities. The global South, then, is a generator of policy models and, when referencing places in the global North for the purposes of adopting models, the South is far from passive.

Yet, the most important point here – due to the relative lack of attention to it in the literature – is that reference to places elsewhere is only part of what is going on in the politics of urban environmental governance. These spatial references are intertwined with concerns about the future (for a wider discussion, see Anderson 2010). When urban actors reference
places elsewhere, it is not because they don’t see resources and capacities of shaping futures in what they have close to hand, but the ‘extrospective impulse’ indicates a parallel belief that elements of the future are somewhere else – to be avoided (not all futures are desirable) or to be emulated. Planning and development are, by definition, future-oriented and appeals to innovation – to the new – in design and policy-making emphasize the temporal aspects of environmental governance regimes.

Yet, the politics of urban development are frequently defined by the strategic narrations of how places used to be, how they are now, and how they might be in the future (McCann, 2003). Current debates about cities’ role in mitigating climate change certainly revolve around fears and pessimism about, as well as hopes and optimism for, the future. Kenis and Lievens make a fascinating contribution in this regard through their conceptualization of temporal referencing and framing in Leuven. They show that approach to policy-making, governance, development, and design that emphasizes time as well as space helps us avoid methodological ‘presentism’ (Jacobs and Lees 2013) and, moreover, it usefully centres political struggle and negotiation in our analyses of policy. The Leuven case clearly shows the power of framing the future in apolitical terms, just as certain ideas and expertise from the past are invoked in depoliticized form to justify present hegemonic practices. Temporal referencing and framing are evident, in one way or another, in all the contributions. For example, there are revisionist histories about past experiments, in the Chinese case, or the powerful appeals to the inevitability of neighbourhood redevelopment framing discussion around the fate of the High Line in New York. North et al and Kenis & Lievens insist that there remain opportunities for social movements and community activists of one kind or another to be involved in generating innovative ideas about, and shaping sustainable and socially just urban futures. Billy Bragg is correct, then, that one cannot run from the future. The key political goal, as he would surely agree, is to make a future worth running toward.
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