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Bossuyt, D.M.; Savini, F.

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Urban sustainability and political parties: Eco-development in Stockholm and Amsterdam

Daniël M Bossuyt and Federico Savini
University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract

In environmental planning practice, political parties tend to be perceived as marginal, unimportant or even dysfunctional. Although urban politicians are increasingly important in the formulation of strong sustainable policies, there is little research that explicitly and empirically looks at the role of elected officials in shaping policies for urban sustainability. This paper scrutinizes the role of parties in formulating urban agendas of sustainable development and in triggering projects of eco-district development in Amsterdam and Stockholm. It does so in order to show how parties play a multiplicity of roles: they mobilize voters through differentiated agendas, they organize the translation of agendas into interventions and act as power holders in the formulation of sustainable urban policies. Combining a post-political framework and classic work on electoral politics, we show how this dynamic occurs in practice. We empirically illustrate that the behavior of parties resonates with the insights of a post-political critique but they do not behave linearly and homogeneously in the 'policing' process. They show a complex combination of mobilizing, politicizing and depoliticizing tactics. Political parties are relevant to eco-development and should be problematized within contemporary urban research.

Keywords

Post-politics, party politics, sustainable development, port redevelopment, consensus

Introduction

This paper specifically addresses the role of political parties in the formulation of urban sustainable development agendas, building on evidence of eco-district development in Amsterdam and Stockholm. It does so aiming to sophisticate the ongoing debate on the depoliticization of sustainability in planning, showing how party politics organize consensus around environmental issues.

Corresponding author:
Daniël M Bossuyt, Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
Email: d.m.bossuyt@uva.nl

Sustainability is a rarely disputed objective of urban policy makers across the globe. While politicians might stress the urgency of tackling climate change, they often propose policies that weakly (if at all) address the fundamental socio-economic roots of the problem (Benson et al., 2016). There are numerous examples of spatial policies that are, explicitly or not, motivated by goals of sustainability, like spatial strategies of open space preservation, adjustment of building densities, transit-oriented development or mixed-use port redevelopment (Krueger and Buckingham, 2012). These examples show that sustainability can remain a volatile notion, often ambiguously and instrumentally defined depending on the political tactics of the stakeholders involved in the decision-making process. The pervasive, yet generalist, use of this concept by elected officials engenders a particular condition of urban politics, where powerful actors leverage on the evocative meaning of 'sustainability' to build consensus on narrow definitions of urban and social problems. This phenomenon has been epitomized as 'post-politics' (Swyngedouw, 2009, 2010), which entails the demise of ideological notions of urban change, the retreat of political debate on the socio-economic implications of sustainable policies and the emergence of a technical, implementation-oriented mode of governance. In this, 'the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats' (Žižek, 2000: 198).

Political parties have been central targets of post-political thought. Mouffe (2005: 1) has labeled partisan politics as a 'thing of the past', whereas Rancière (2000) refers to them as *police*: agents of exclusion of democratic deliberation. In writings on post-politics, party politics are not considered the key element of 'the political' sphere, instead taking place beyond formal politics and within societal dynamics of political confrontation, trans-legal actions and informality (Merrifield, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2010). Yet, while it is generally agreed that elected officials have a direct influence in setting urban development agendas, parties have been surprisingly overlooked in the empirical literature on planning and urban development (Campbell, 2001; Savini, 2014).

In planning studies, a growing body of literature has engaged with philosophical thoughts on post-politics to develop an effective critique of contemporary urban policymaking. Planning in particular is often criticized as an instrument of depoliticization that perpetuates spatial governance practices that are highly instrumentalist and problem-solving oriented, while being unreflective of the socio-political and economic roots of urban environmental problems (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Metzger et al., 2014; Raco, 2005; Raco and Lin, 2012). Drawing on post-foundationalist political theory[1] (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999, 2000; Žižek, 2000), this stream of critique urges us to critically view planning practice as a consensus-building process, avoiding the illusion that decision-making is the ultimate objective of planning. As an encompassing notion, sustainability is one of the most important fields in the post-political critique, being instrumentally mobilized to legitimize a variety of planning practices, such as smart urbanism or resilient cities, or to 'vaccinate' the addressee of these policies against the underlying social consequences (Kaika, 2017). Through its power and pervasiveness sustainability has today become one of the main vehicles to enable cross-national and cross-continental policy transfer (McCann and Ward, 2012).

The post-political critique of planning practice in the field of sustainability is relevant today because it warns of the risks inherent in the ubiquitous use of the concept for substantial questions of social justice (Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012). However, its applicability to complex policy making has been questioned for failing to offer alternative political frameworks or simplify the complexity of governance. Still, it remains important to engage with post-politics because of its potential for broadening our understanding of urban

political processes (Dikeç, 2017). Recent empirical works show that there is even more need of understanding how post-politicization manifest under different conditions and contexts (Bylund, 2012; Cochrane, 2010; Metzger et al., 2014; Parker and Street, 2015). In particular, despite the relevance that political parties have in the formulation of local, national and international policy agreements on agendas, adaptation and mitigation (Bulkeley et al., 2013), party politics remain inexplicitly addressed or are even considered irrelevant. On the one hand, post-political critics suggest that parties have a minor role in the political sphere. On the other hand, planners concerned with land development tend to consider parties irrelevant or even dysfunctional for a 'good' planning process. Disparately, as Fitzgerald and Lenhart (2016) have demonstrated, there are crucial feedback loops that enable learning between the sphere of elected officials and the field of land development. Political representatives, politicians and charismatic political leaders are far from passive carriers of sustainability ideas and play an active role in shaping and reproducing a popular imaginary of sustainable development (McCann, 2013). Although urban arenas are recognized by scholars as central fields of environmental concerns, party groups have mostly been studied from a national and international perspective, such as early green movements that have accessed politics since the mid-1990s. These works show that parties initially combined environmental agendas with issues of democratization and empowerment (see for example Faucher, 1999), but the increasing use of sustainability narratives across the political spectrum has changed existent green movements and requires new empirical research.

For this reason, in this paper, we look directly at these particular agents to contribute to this field of research. We argue that parties are ambiguous agents. On the one hand, they reproduce power-holding coalitions with an inherent conservatism, adopting a problem-oriented and instrumentalist use of sustainability. On the other hand, they are mobilizers of disagreement within formal decision-making processes when catering to new constituencies. This process is inherently problematic in practice, and as we show, parties tend to converge into general and overly consensus-driven urban policies. Finally, we plea for a broader scope in research on party policies in planning and sustainability.

To observe the behavior of parties in planning, we investigate two cases of seaport redevelopment into eco-districts in Amsterdam and Stockholm. This is motivated by our proposition that to grasp the process of (de)politicization, our examination of party politics must be grounded in daily decision-making on land use. The first case is the Royal Seaport in Stockholm, a well-known redevelopment of industrial ports into mixed-use urban zones in a city that has made sustainability an uncontested major agenda item over the last decade. The second case is the Haven-Stad in Amsterdam, also a seaport redevelopment into a mixed-use dense urban area in the west of the city. Amsterdam politicians are rapidly mobilizing ideas of sustainable growth and innovation but these policies are still not mature.

We first engage with the literature on post-politics and sustainability to profile the problematic behavior of party politics in urban development. Secondly, we build on classic works of political theory to conceptualize the ambiguous character of parties in holding power by building stable consensus while also mobilizing consensus to get new votes. Next, we will discuss the construction of sustainable agendas and consequently their operational effects on land development.

The post-political condition and urban sustainability

The notion of post-politics originates as a critique of the belief that a post-ideological and conflict-free era had emerged following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Fukuyama (2006)

infamously claimed the 'end of history' and argued that the adversarial confrontation between left and right could be considered a relic of the past. It was believed that with liberal democracy's triumph, politics could deal with managing the economy, working towards collective agendas and finding consensual win–win solutions through rational deliberation (Beck et al, 1994; Giddens, 1994).

This vision was dismissed by a strand of post-foundational political theorists (Mouffe, 2005, Rancière, 1999, 2000, 2001; Žižek, 2000). These authors problematize the idea of an inclusive consensus based on reason, arguing that 'every consensus is based on acts of exclusion' (Mouffe, 2005; 11). At the heart of this rejection lies a double conceptualization of 'politics' and 'the political' (*la* and *le politique* or *der Politik* and *dem Politisichen* (Marchart, 2007: 14). Politics refers to the 'set of practices through which an order is created', while the political refers to 'the dimension of antagonism constitutive of human societies' (Mouffe, 2005: 9). Politics refers to the exercise of power through institutions that create social order and day-to-day governmental routines. In contrast, the political refers to ever-present differences. The sheer contingency of any social order makes conflict the starting point for politics (Rancière, 1999: 16). Post-politics occurs when these differences are suppressed in the name of consensus (Mouffe, 2005: 5). For post-foundational political theorists, the liberal emphasis on individualism and belief in inclusive consensus have brought about a governing mentality perpetuated through the rejection of (irreducible) ideological divisions, a technocratic approach to politics and a moralization of conflict to bypass it. Since confrontation cannot unfold politically, the 'political' dimension will play out morally or culturally (Mouffe, 2005: 72). Confrontation is not defined in either left or right, but rather in being right or wrong.

Concepts such as sustainability are particularly prone to this condition because they appear uncontroversial and commonsensical at a first glance, providing goals to which many interests can subscribe. Swyngedouw (2010: 228) asserts that sustainability and sustainable urban development instigate a technical form of politics by limiting disagreement to choice of technology and details of implementation, rather than 'future socio-environmental possibilities'. His critique departs from a relativist conception of the 'environment', 'sustainability' or 'the people', terms that cannot be objectively determined. These terms are used as carriers for policy interventions that hardly convey a new socio-ecological order. Sustainability turns into another narrative of capitalism and it hardly questions the underlying socio-economic framework of power. In urban policies this is reflected by the total lack of public debate about forms of sustainable urban living oriented to objectives other than growth and progress, such as *degrowth* (Latouche, 2009). The consequence of this convergence is that political debate remains limited to technicalities rather than the underlying motivation of urban policies. 'Decision-making is increasingly considered to be a question of expert knowledge and not of political position' (Swyngedouw, 2010: 225).

Urban politicians appear to consider sustainability, sustainable urbanism or sustainable cities as self-evident norms (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007). In general, politicians deal in three different ways with the ambiguous nature of sustainable development (Connelly, 2007). The first is to ignore it altogether and present it as unproblematic but difficult to attain. This is the preferred approach by actors who want help from higher governments or to preserve the existent regime. The second is to acknowledge ambiguity, but to resolve it by explicitly with an operational interpretation, as is done in the Brundtland report (WCED 1987). This instrumentalization of socio-political issues is the first step to post-politics, and it is often conducted through hyper-specific and selective jargon that might not offer opportunities for creative and alternative forms of agency. The third way is to make the ambiguity explicit, in an axis of 'weak' versus 'strong sustainability' in order to camouflage a

political value and stage a process of political confrontation. In the circuit of deliberation and confrontation, different actors may identify different positions as real sustainability.

Post-political thought's main critique of current planning processes is that the deep and irresolvable tensions underlying (sustainable) spatial policies are not made explicit, are not discussed through open and discursive reasoning and are not problematized in terms of who wins and who loses. Instead, Campbell (1996) shows that planning is inherently conflictual because sustainability inevitably raises dilemmas of equity, environmental quality and economic growth. The redevelopment of an area within a poor municipality might pay for public amenities, but it might do so at the expense of existing economies (and their workers) or environmental quality. These developments, however, are rarely discussed along fundamental 'political' questions of what goal planning serves, how society should look in the future and who should decide so (Metzger et al., 2014). This silence on the dilemmas of sustainable development is problematic.

There are several examples of planning and urban policy in which debate on the trade-offs of urban change is foreclosed through narrow and evocative principles. Cases range from the British planning system (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012), Swedish parks (Bylund and Byerley, 2014), the regeneration of the London South Bank (Baeten, 2009), environmental movements in French middle-sized cities (Béal, 2012), Colorado's front range (Mitchell et al., 2015) and the expansion of Zaventem airport (Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010). All these practices have been labeled as post-political.

Despite the accuracy of this critique, it is still important to discuss, in depth, the political process of deliberation, particularly in the field of sustainable development. This is due to political optimism for the central role of political parties and elected officials in the building of regulatory and economic frameworks for sustainable urban development, especially at the urban scale (Barber, 2013). The question is thus not exclusively whether urban policies are characterized by a depoliticized understanding of sustainability, but how this depoliticization occurs when spatial plans are addressed in the formal circuit of parliamentary confrontation. While the depoliticization of large-scale urban development may be self-evident, it is important to investigate how parties are active agents of this process. Below we sketch a framework to understand how parties deal with the (de)politicization of spatial matters.

Political parties: Vote maximizers and power holders

Political parties act according to a vote-maximizing and power-holding logic, and the way in which they do so attends to the post-political critique. This critique holds that parties do not seek always disagreement within the sphere of institutionalized democracy. Their behavior is instead characterized by a dynamic balancing between politicization and depoliticization of social demands in the complex processes of coalition building and power holding. This occurs through setting up boundaries of political appropriateness, that establish what is legitimate or sensible and to be addressed within constitutional democracies (Rancière, 2000). According to a post-political critique, the role of parties has become that of closing debates for the sake of holding power and of organizing and sustaining institutionalized decision-making.

In political science, three distinct roles are attributed to parties that of gatekeeping, aggregation and mobilization of political demands. First, parties are gatekeepers of the democratic process by aggregating dispersed social demands into a coherent agenda (Sartori, 2005). Party politics is layered upon polities – communities of interest of volitional nature and which might change over time. This capacity to organize polities, as a geographically bounded and rather homogenous group of political demands, is the first

role of parties (Kaza, 2014). Second, parties are agents that reason and articulate these agendas against one another through deliberation. In doing so, they establish legitimate narratives of social change which in turn exclude others. Third, parties sensitize and nurture new political demands within particular polities through the mobilization of particular discourses and resources. This particular role of mobilizers in politics is considered crucial in the process of democratic decision-making. In the aggregation and translation of social demands into agendas, parties are generally expected to adjust their policy stances in order to maximize votes given a certain vote distribution among the polity (Downs, 1957).

The (unbalanced) combination of these roles – as gatekeepers of demands, translators and instrumental mobilizers of consensus for electoral purposes – lies at the core of the post-political critique of party politics, which points at the exclusive and selective nature of these three roles. As showed in many classic works on urban politics, parties have been active players in the consolidation of coalitions whose interest is to resist change and hold governing capacity rather that actively promote dissent and change (Kantor and Savitch, 2005; Stone, 1993). Parties appears therefore to formulate win–win situations for private business and other powerful interests, and inevitably exclude other types of narratives and demands rather than give voice to civic demands (Crouch, 2004; Savini & Dembski, 2016). Nonetheless, there are (a few) case studies that show that parties do mobilize the electorate strategically at specific times by deliberately advocating different policies, enlarging their claims, co-opting alternative views or stirring controversy against established economic coalitions (De Maesschalck, 2011; Savini, 2012, 2014; Flinders and Buller, 2006). The precise balance between the role of mobilizers and that of coalition builders deserves therefore careful analysis embedded in context.

In his work on modern democracies, Lindblom (1977) has demonstrated that parties tend to follow a double rationality. On the one hand, they might tend to enclose debate, narrowing it down to simple and general agendas through which grand coalitions can be formed and maintained over time. This process takes place as a 'mutual adjustment' between factions that inevitably will narrow down political differences. However, 'each party will also try to differentiate itself from the other and then try to persuade undecided voters to move their volitions in the direction of what the party proposes' (Lindblom 1977: 142). To differentiate and capture new demands, parties might strategically politicize particular issues. This dual behavior, according to Lindblom, favors convergence on major political issues, such as sustainable growth, but also promotes divergence on sub-issues, such as types of growth, the housing agenda or the growth of particular economic sectors over others.

This variegated view on partisan behavior inevitably calls for a careful empirical analysis of the techniques, styles and narratives through which parties shift from one role to the other. These features are likely to change across time and context, depending on the structuring of consensus, the reach of communication media and the overall legitimacy that parties have in the public debate. Pasotti (2010) for example demonstrates that political parties today rely less on their networks of decentered electoral agencies or patronage networks and more on the power of reach of popular media. They often make use of popular imaginaries, branding techniques and simple narratives to mobilize electorates across socio-political divisions. City branding is a prime tactic of electoral mobilization in order to sensitize and consolidate constituencies (Eshuis and Edwards, 2012). As Mössner (2016) empirically shows depoliticization is today intimately connected to a celebration of success, carried out through the consensual construction of 'best models'. Such narratives often build on a celebratory attitude 'best-practices' (Rosol et al, 2017), deployed both as tools to consolidate pre-constituted constituencies, to build coalitions

across cities and nations, and to persuade others of the efficacy of particular types of sustainable development (Béal and Pinson 2014).

The variety of instruments and tactics of electoral action warrants close empirical inquiry into how parties balance politicization and depoliticization as well as whether, and why, they instead abdicate to one of these distinctive roles. In practice, fearing the loss of electoral consensus, parties may deliberately avoid being accountable for problematic decisions, for example for those that may lead to loss of jobs in economic transition. Contrarily, non-incumbent parties may opt to politicize certain issues in order to capture emergent social demands to enlarge their constituency (Flinders and Buller, 2006). In the following, we show the specific narratives and political tactics deployed by parties in alternating between the goal of power consolidation for coalition building and the need of tactical differentiation to valorize differences and build new electoral consensus. It is this dialectic role that, in our opinion, makes it important to study parties in the process of consensus building around issues and with the possibility of mobilizing disagreement on others. It is important to discover the conditions under which parties pursue either role, or if they forsake differentiation altogether as post-political critiques argue. In the following section, we examine the behavior of the main parties in Stockholm and Amsterdam to detect how they frame agendas, issues and narratives in their respective port redevelopments.

Methodological note

The aim of this paper is not to demonstrate the validity of post-political theory, but to sophisticate its empirical complexity by looking at parties in the building of planning and development agendas. Both Amsterdam and Stockholm know strategic redevelopment projects in which sustainability plays a pronounced role and where projects show a complex and contested nexus of residential, industrial, tertiary and public spaces. It was expected that the ongoing nature of these projects would enable us to better grasp dimensions of consensus and conflict. Fieldwork took place between 2015 and 2016. Primary data consisted of expert interviews, council reports, electoral documents, and policy and planning documents. Secondary data consisted of newspaper articles and election results. Expert interviews were conducted with a total of 13 people in Stockholm and 10 in Amsterdam. Council reports on the relevant planning projects were collected and analyzed. Electoral documents consist of coalition agreements between 1998 and 2016 and party documents for elections between 1998 and 2016. Because of temporal constraints, the study was limited to the main parties in Amsterdam and Stockholm. For Amsterdam, these are the Labor Party (PvdA), the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Democrats 66 (D66), the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the Green-Left (GL). For Stockholm, we analyzed the Social Democratic Party (S), the Moderate Party (M), Christian Democrats (KD), Centre Party (CP), the Liberals (L), Green Party (MP) and the Left Party (V). Interviews were conducted to clarify the perspectives, opinions and language of key party members. All interviews have been coded in order to grasp the key issues discussed and the language used in presenting agenda issues. Interviewers were geared towards problematizing the timeline of the projects in relation to the different electoral turnouts at the administrative level and key council decisions.

Stockholm: Eco-district as a political strategy of party agreement

In Stockholm, we uncover the steady construction of a cross-partisan consensus over the rarely disputed issue of sustainable development. While environmental concerns were first

linked to social implications of deindustrialization, convergence over the development of an eco-district allowed the formation of a transversal agreement over an environmentally friendly land development agenda. However, this process unfolded intermittently, with incoming green parties and incumbent conservative factions combining strategies of electoral differentiation and convergence in different moments.

Stockholm's electoral landscape is marked by a decline in the traditional left's voter-base and an emerging environmental agenda (Gullberg and Lilja, 2008). In the past two decades, power has shifted between blocs in almost every election. Overall, the conservative-liberal bloc – *borgerliga* (M, FP, C) – has been stronger than the socialist bloc (S, V). In 1998, the conservative-liberal Moderate Party became the largest for the first time, marking the decline of the Social Democrats. The present-day sustainability agenda can be traced to the 1960 and 1970s, when environmental issues entered the political sphere (Gunnarsson-Östling et al., 2013). The social-liberal Centre Party was among the first parties to mobilize these issues, most notably in the elections of 1970 and 1973 when the party criticized the consequences of urbanization and the use of nuclear energy to solve Stockholm's energy problem (Sundström and Sundström, 2010). In the 1980s, the Centre Party gave way to the Stockholm Party, which had a strong background in the local environmental movement. The Stockholm Party expressed a more comprehensive, though localist, sustainability agenda, including the reduction of car traffic and preservation of green space. This role was taken over by the Green Party from the 1990s onwards. The green dimension in Stockholm politics transcends the socio-economic left-right divide (Lilja, 2011). Sustainability is emblematically combined with new urban growths. Support for 'the environment' or 'sustainability' has become common across the political landscape, as demonstrated by parties' electoral programs (Miljöpartiet de Gröna Stockholms Stad, 2014; Moderaterna, 2014; Socialdemokraterna, 2014). Environmental parties attempt to distinguish themselves by being critical on specific sensitive issues for electoral purposes, such as mobility, zero-energy building and green spaces.[2]

The strong partisan consensus on environmental issues rests on the idea that environmental issues are not ideological, but inadvertent external problems that can be fixed through adequate scientific knowledge. Such 'ecological modernist' thinking has been present since the 1970s, as demonstrated in Stockholm environmental action programs (*miljöhandlingsprogram*). First issued in 1976, these programs have since continuously rationalized and operationalized sustainability according to clearly defined goals, steps and indicators. The concept of 'environment' (*miljö*) was dominant in the 1960s and 1970s, but has since then been gradually replaced by the more comprehensive and complementary ideals of sustainability (*hållbarhet*) and sustainable development (*hållbar utveckling*). Since the 1990s, these latter terms have become a key element in Stockholm's strategy to be an attractive world-class city. As stated by the most recent strategic vision, titled 'Vision Stockholm 2030. A world-class Stockholm', the city believes that 'technical developments and economic growth create good conditions for an ecologically sustainable society' and that 'new technical innovations have solved many environmental problems' (City of Stockholm, 2007).

The two biggest parties, the Moderates and Social Democrats, both agree that urban development should accommodate growth with smart technical solutions that make sustainable economic growth possible. In debating Stockholm's environmental program for 2016–2019, a social-democratic council member states: 'sustainable construction is key to a growing city and a condition for continuing growth with as little environmental damage as possible' (Wanngård, 2016). All parties are in favor of the goal of sustainability and see it as an integral part of Stockholm's growth agenda. Operational definitions of sustainability

are generally avoided in partisan and policy documents as these might lead to zero-sum confrontations over its exact meaning.

The combination of sustainability, ecological modernism and urban entrepreneurialism is reflected in the 2010 comprehensive urban plan 'The Walkable City'. Ostensibly influenced by the conservative-liberal coalition that ruled the city between 2006 and 2014, the plan posits Stockholm's goal to become a globally competitive and attractive city.[3] In terms of land use policies, the plan sets out a further densification of the inner city, mixing of uses and redevelopment of industrial land. There is acknowledgment that technological solutions are key to achieving the city's ambitious environmental goals, such as being fossil fuel free by 2050. It showcases the persistence of ecological modernist and developmental thought: 'continued developments in environmental technology are crucial for the chances of achieving its climate goals' (City of Stockholm, 2010). Yet, it also combines these aims with new issues related to local quality of life, human scale and liberal ideas of private self-realization.

These plans posit sustainability as a transversal goal, hardly discussed in terms of socio-political implications, but deployed as a topic on which parties can converge. Debates arose within council deliberations when the desirability of particular interventions was discussed, such as car traffic or high-rise buildings. In the current coalition, there are tensions between the Social Democratic Party and Green Party on the issue of car traffic. The first strongly believes in cars as the dominant mode of transport and argues that improved car technologies (e.g. electric cars or even self-driving cars) will make it possible to continue future car use. However, the Green Party argues that technology alone cannot account and wants to reduce car traffic. A city council member for the Social Democratic Party argues: 'Some people in the Green Party are really conservative when it comes to technology. In about 20 years from now so, I think, [cars] will be environmentally friendly, much more than today'.[4] Similarly, the Centre Party sees densification through high-rise buildings as a key green strategy. The Green Party, however, sees high-rise buildings as an inherent threat to the Stockholm cityscape. These challenges are dealt with not in terms of content or ideology, but instead by portraying the Green Party as 'culturally conservative' or 'anti-urban'.[5] These narratives were geared to preempt possible alternative views on sustainability and were based on a discourse that would accuse any group attempting to deconstruct the determinist link between environmentalism and technology, between growth and sustainability, of anti-urban conservatism.

Debates on components of sustainability development particularly affected the practice of eco-profiled neighborhoods. The first was Hammarby Sjöstad, a brownfield redevelopment project that was eco-profiled as part of the city's 2004 Olympic bid. Although Stockholm never got the Olympics, construction of the eco-profiled neighborhood continued and its ecological allure provided a key justification for the expensive investments required. Hammarby Sjöstad became a flagship project for Stockholm's sustainable reputation and a showcase for Swedish eco-technology. The idea of an eco-district became a platform of convergence between parties and a way for the conservative factions to find points of agreement with the green-left. The Moderates realized that the neighborhood had great potential in terms of city marketing. In the past, conservatives had generally been positive towards environmental issues but had not readily embraced them to the same extent as other parties had.[6] The 2006 elections marked a change, as the conservatives started to fully embrace the sustainability agenda and environmental investments through eco-districts. On one hand, this allowed them to co-opt environmental critique. On the other hand, it allowed them to retouch electoral image and capture the votes of the green electorate. In response, the Green Party tried to create a distinction in the political sphere by

strategically restating sustainability goals. As the *borgerliga* coalition ceded to a socialist-green coalition (S, V, MP) in 2014, little discontinuity in terms of policies can be ascertained. Distinction has been more formal than substantial, performed through numerical effort, moving strategic deadlines, reformulating statistical evidence into new fashions, and stricter formulation of environmental goals, such as aiming to be a fossil fuel free city in 2040 rather than 2050.

Stockholm Royal Seaport: Planning for a 'world-class environmental district'

The Stockholm Royal Seaport displays a coupling of growth and sustainability ambitions, a strong belief in the capacity of technology to solve environmental issues, and Stockholm's priorities as a post-industrial knowledge economy, centered around innovative businesses over 'old' industrial functions such as oil and container shipping.

First known as the Värtan-Frihamen-Loudden area, it comprises a port area containing a ferry terminal, container terminal, oil depot, coal plant and gasworks. It was designated for redevelopment in the city's 1999 Comprehensive Plan (City of Stockholm, 1999). The port's physical proximity to the city center had rendered it a desirable strategic location to achieve the city's goals for city densification and expansion. The Seaport, much like its predecessor Hammarby Sjöstad, had been an 'ordinary' industrial land transformation project until the ruling conservative-liberal coalition decided in 2007 that the port should become an environmentally profiled area. It was subsequently coined the Stockholm Royal Seaport. The project sought to make space for 10,000 new homes and 30,000 new jobs. When the area was first designated for urban development, industrial activities were still ongoing. The strategic plan proposed a combination of housing and industrial activities. The ferry and container terminal were to stay through an extension of the Värtapiren, whereas the coal plant and oil depot would have to be relocated. Stockholm's Hamnar AB, the semi-private port authority that was the main user of the area, published a port vision in 2004. The vision proposed a change of port operations and component uses and was ultimately translated into a port strategy document (Malmsten, 2005). The strategy proposes redevelopment and relocation as a win–win situation. Valuable space in the port area would be freed up for housing. As for the port, relocating activities to Nynäshamn or Södertälje would make it possible for the port to expand physically, while ferry and cruise activities could be retained through an extension of the Värtapier.

Council discussions on the port strategy highlight the partisan consensus on the long-term agenda to redevelop and relocate the port. As a consequence, discussion and differentiation is mostly over numerical and technical affairs (City of Stockholm, 2001). For example, in their 2010 electoral program, the Social Democrats state that 'We want to put high environmental and climate goals for the city and we think that the *borgerliga* majority has had too low ambitions in their environmental efforts' (Social Democrats, 2010: 5). During the council debate on the port strategy, the left parties (V, MP) challenged the efficiency of the new location, signifying partisan focus on means over content. In the end, the 'strategically important' port strategy was unanimously approved by both the coalition and opposition (City of Stockholm, 2006).

Environmental concerns were on the agenda in discussions on the future of Stockholm's port, but not at the expense of economic functions as we see with the Loudden oil terminal. The decision to close down Loudden was made in 1998, fueled by the Stockholm Party who had a gatekeeper role in coalition talks. Nevertheless, a shutdown could not occur immediately because of oil contracts until at least 2011 and the need for a new location in

order to safeguard Stockholm's future energy provisions (Nilsson, 2007). It took until 2014 to find a solution, as neighboring municipalities had to be convinced to take over the oil terminal. Here, consultants and external professionals hired by the city's executive office played a key role in organizing consensus and agreement among the different stakeholders.

The decision to turn the Stockholm Royal Seaport into an environmentally profiled area was motivated by a political desire for a new flagship project to market Stockholm's green image, it is celebrated as a 'Hammarby Sjöstad 2.0'.[7] Emblematic of its flagship status, the project was selected to receive funding from the Clinton Climate Initiative (CCI).

The Royal Seaport does a great deal for Stockholm's sustainable reputation at face value. 'Dirty' industrial land is redeveloped, green space is saved and a showcase for state-of-the-art Swedish sustainable technology is built. The proximity of the Royal National City Park further cements this green image. The environmental profile was unanimously backed in the city council. Concerns in the debate were limited to the issue of follow-up on sustainability targets and whether the environmental profile was adopted in time to make a difference.[8] Points that had been raised before in an earlier policy evaluation of how Hammarby Sjöstad's environmental profile had impacted its performance with respect to sustainability (Brandt and Iverot and Brandt, 2011). Later debates would similarly discuss technicalities or the desirability and sustainability of particular tall building typologies (City of Stockholm, 2014).

An analysis of the political debates on the Seaport and its environmental profile reveals a strong consensus among parties on the qualities that contribute to desirable urban development: urbanity, mixed-use, compactness and densification (City of Stockholm, 2005, 2015, 2016). Sustainability is advocated as a goal that flows naturally from these qualities. A compact, dense, mixed district promotes public transport and walking (The Walkable City), it enables better energy efficiency and saves green space. Uniting these qualities in one coherent development accounts for the Seaport's wide political support. The desire to create mixed-use dense urban zones with an explicit environmental image sits well with various political interests as it presents a win–win scenario. It suggests that Stockholm can grow in an environmentally justified matter and it provides an incentive for developers to build denser and higher, thereby pushing up returns on existing land. In sum, coalition shifts have only marginally impacted the planning process of the Stockholm Royal Seaport. All political parties agreed on the main project goals of port relocation, redevelopment and freeing up space for housing and (knowledge) workspaces. As mentioned by the project leader of the Seaport project, the influence of the Green Party has been noticed slightly, as the project was forced to be more careful with regard to green space preservation.[9] The Green Party still shows a double position, being simultaneously in agreement with the general strategy of redevelopment of the area and in fundamental disagreement on specific technical issues with important socio-economic implications. While they point out at the risk of particular interventions, their impact on the composition of the coalition was found to be marginal.

From green sustainability to pragmatic consensus in Amsterdam

Amsterdam, a city with a strong tradition in social democracy and an emphasis on welfare policies, has in recent times transitioned towards a more liberal-progressive political landscape, manifested in an entrepreneurial urban growth agenda. Electorally speaking, this change is marked by the decline of the traditional left and the ascent of new political groups that claim liberal discourses of entrepreneurialism (Savini et al., 2016). Upcoming progressive liberal parties such as D66 and the Green-Left have challenged the Labor Party, traditionally the strongest party in Amsterdam. Electorally speaking, these parties specifically cater to 'urban' and 'progressive' values, signifying a transition from

traditional leftist values towards post-materialist individual principles. This transition culminated in the victory of the social liberals at the expense of the Labor Party in 2014. The Labor Party and conservative-liberal VVD have now started to embrace the urban values propagated by the progressive liberal parties. Urban strategies should be formulated around the needs and wants of a creative economy, facilitating international investment.

Today sustainability has become the fundamental piece of an agenda of creative urbanism (Peck, 2012), extending to ideals of smart development and socio-technical experimentation. Environmental sustainability is conceived as the provision of a clean and attractive living atmosphere, which in turn enhances the city's socio-economic attractiveness. The city's latest strategic plan highlights the coupling of economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability in its title 'Amsterdam 2040: Economisch Sterk en Duurzaam' (*Economically strong and sustainable*). The strategic plan exemplifies an agreement between the Green-Left and Labor parties on a sustainable agenda that would not harm economic priorities. The plan states, 'clean air, characteristic buildings and a clean, green public space are aspects through which the city can attract people and companies' (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2011).

The current attitude towards environmental problems in Amsterdam is a reflection of a political landscape that has converged towards a compromise for achieving growth, remains historically rooted in the success of ecological modernization discourse from the 1980s. This combines ideas of urgency and pragmatic coalition building around deregulation to be more socially inclusive (Hajer, 1995: 252). In the 1960s, environmental concerns were explicitly raised by counter-cultures and urban social movements. The port already proved to be a contentious issue in 1969, when local environmentalists successfully barred municipal land release to a carbon-disulfide plant. In those years, the Provo movement questioned urban power relations pointing at the combination of rising pollution levels, decreasing livability of the city and at the dominant role of the car. Although inspired by anarchic values, the Provo's had their first seat in the municipal city council by 1966 and since then it started a process of institutionalization. The Provo movement had strong ties with the PPR and PSP, both which would later merge into the current Green-Left. By the end of the 1970s, numerous alliances had been forged between political parties and environmental movements (Koopmans, 1992). Key members of Provo would later be incorporated in the Green-Left and Labor Party (Van Der Heijden, 1997).

Over the course of the late 1980s the environmental movement lost momentum in the urban area, overshadowed by a politics of urban renaissance, urban renewal and growth. After this period politicization of green issues in the 1970s, sustainability has only recently re-entered Amsterdam political agenda, following the Green-Left's ascent in the 1990s. The party's agenda incorporated environmental concerns, new forms of localism and affordable housing production in times of decentralization and national budget cuts. The Green-Left filled an electoral gap, left from the declining social democratic parties and socialist parties, whose constituencies were mostly in former industrial areas. The Green-Left captured the demands of the emergent creative, young, upwardly mobile middle-classes (Voogd, 2011). Sustainability emerged as an element of electoral differentiation (rather than insurgent politics, like in the 1960s) from existent policies, and hence, it initially clashed against consolidated interests on topical issues such as port redevelopment (Savini and Dembski, 2016).

Since the elections of 2014, a solid transversal coalition consisting of the conservative-liberal VVD, progressive-liberal D66 and the Socialist Party rules the city, taking over and expanding on the concept of sustainability. In the current *Coalitieakkord*, sustainability is used in relation to livability, green spaces, local participation, technological innovation and

education, new economies and creativity. It is conceptualized as a precondition for retaining a competitive edge in the interurban competition. 'Sustainability makes the city attractive, but also saves costs, creates jobs and stimulates business' (D66, SP, VVD, 2014). An alderman on sustainability was appointed to link different factions and respective constituencies around a sustainable agenda of pragmatic consensus where 'everyone wins'.

The transition from sustainability as an element of partisan differentiation to one of convergence is illustrated by the municipal council's Sustainability Agenda adopted in March 2015. This document, promoted by a liberal-progressive alderman and unanimously approved by the city council, illustrates a pragmatic but undefined approach to sustainability (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2015). Set against the previous work by the Green-Left, portrayed as the 'period of pilots and experiments',[10] this document aims at establishing a stable, practical and transversal agenda on sustainability. The content and direction of the plan is undisputed, even by the Green-Left, which has been a member of the opposition since 2014. The former alderman for urban development stated that 'it would be the strange if there was conflict, for the agenda is largely a continuation of past policy'.[11] Nevertheless, the numerical ambitions regarding CO_2 reduction and renewable energy are put into question. On the one hand, the agenda supports previous efforts to increase renewable production, pointing out the key regulatory problems of establishing windmills, recycling, energy efficiency and managing the big polluting facilities of the city without problematizing them (e.g. Schiphol Airport, the incinerator and the Port). On the other hand, it vaguely claims for a new circular economy of the city, functioning on the use of wasted resources and an entrepreneurial role of communities to achieve creative solutions. This combination of conservative and progressive, top-down and bottom-up actions, is characteristic of a slow compromise between different party components in the coalition agreement, emblematic in the cross-factional praise for the agenda's 'realism'.[12]

Haven-Stad: Transformation and contestation

The convergence of all factions over a single sustainability agenda is the result of a long process of negotiation and discussion on the specific socio-economic implications of major urban development projects. The Port of Amsterdam is a prime location for new sustainable construction and renewable energy facilities, but it is also an active basin for industrial interests and labor provision. Ambitions to densify and create a mixed urban district clash with existing economic functions, especially in the redevelopment area labeled as *Haven-Stad* (*Port-City*). Encompassing 650 hectares of port and industry within the A10 ring road, the area had been under scrutiny as a possible site for housing development as early as 2007. The zone was first labeled as a development site by the 2011 strategic vision 'Amsterdam 2040: Economisch Sterk en Duurzaam'. This introduced three future scenarios in which parts of the port would be redeveloped from a monofunctional industrial zone into a mixed-use urban zone, with room for housing, workspaces and port activities.

As elaborated upon by the city's 2013 Haven-Stad study, the first scenario departs from established norms for sound and noise and seeks to maintain these as a zoning limit indicating possible new housing development (Dienst Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2013). At this stage, there are about 34 different legal frameworks limiting housing developing in the area. The first scenario seeks to maintain these legal barriers, limiting new housing to 4000 units. The second scenario seeks to redefine these barriers towards the west, allowing the port to remain if it becomes cleaner and quieter and opening space for 13,000 units. In the third scenario, the ring road is presented as the new border between port and city, which would imply that all current port activities within the ring road would have to relocate to create a

new urban district of 19,000 housing units. The different scenarios have different consequences for housing production, industrial development and the regulatory frameworks that exist to protect industrial land usages. Between 2005 and 2010, the Green-Left Party, then a member of the ruling coalition, argued that the only way to allow for new urban spaces and protect environmental quality would be to resize and relocate industrial activities, a strategy that strongly aligned with the far-reaching third scenario. This was also the answer to an emerging constituency looking for new housing and living spaces close to the city and reflects a policy that prioritizes city inhabitants and reduces regional extension. The conservative-liberals (VVD) have conversely tended to sustain the first scenario, arguing for the importance of protecting medium and large entrepreneurs in the area and taking a more relaxed attitude towards housing construction in the green periphery of the city.

The socialist-green (PvdA; GL) coalition that ruled the city from 2006 to 2010 established the principle that sustainability is about both compact development and technological innovation, arguing that the port should densify on existing land rather than expand into neighboring green spaces and eventually reduce polluting (and space consuming) activities such as oil and chemical storage. The planning policy at the time stated that the port was 'running into various environmental limits. The consequence of further port growth should not be that we exceed those limits' (Port of Amsterdam, 2008). Surrounding municipalities in the region had similar positions, seeking to protect their green spaces (Port of Amsterdam, 2015).

This position quickly softened, as it was hard to protect in light of a non-growth port agenda. In 2010, we see a convergence of all parties in their acknowledgment of the ideal of the compact city as well as the goals of economic growth and sustainability. The consensus is illustrated by the 2010 electoral manifestos of Green-Left and VVD, which both cite sustainability, creativity and a compact city extensively (GroenLinks Amsterdam, 2010; VVD, 2014). However, underlying party differences remained on the issue of how to combine compactness and growth. For the Green-Left, the transformation of the port into a mixed-use urban zone requires a decrease of industrial activity. For the VVD, port transformation presented a threat to companies' economic interests and to the investment context of Amsterdam. Thus, the conservative-liberals argued that the balance between these ideals could be struck through technological innovation. Surprisingly, these issues became quite absent during elections. Political parties and voters tended to be interested in other issues, such as housing or overcrowdedness.[13] While VVD, a party traditionally representing the interests of port companies, stressed the importance of a 'diverse urban economy' (VVD, 2010) in 2010, such themes are absent from the 2014 VVD electoral program (VVD, 2014). Political debate on the Haven-Stad displayed a general consensus on the necessity of urban development and the construction of more housing. The crux of the debate remained the future condition of industrial activities, the economic added value of the port and the consequences for the environment (Amsterdam City Council, 2014). Parties acknowledged that intensification offered a solution to balancing environment, housing and industry – providing a technical solution that allowed the port to grow while preserving green space.[14]

The settling of these divergences came after the 2014 elections. Economic recovery after the credit crunch, the rising number of visitors and international businesses settling in the region as well as the boom in the housing market eased debates over the economic arm of port redevelopment. According to a representative of the VVD, even the conservative-liberals are slowly coming to terms with downscaling the role of polluting industries within the city's borders over the long term.[15] Amsterdam's political landscape displays a multi-party consensus based on a combination of different conceptions on sustainability,

reflected in the content of the Sustainability Agenda. Liberal factions, both conservative and progressive, point to the value of technological progress and innovative development, in which 'every euro spent on sustainability should be spent in the most effective way' as stated by representative Bosman (D66).[16] Socialist parties point to job opportunities in this sector, but most ideas regard energy efficiency for new housing, solar panels and reduced footprint of mobility. Sustainability is conceived as a pragmatic investment strategy that can be achieved through removal of 'unnecessary legal norms' (SP Amsterdam, 2015).

Despite gradual convergence on the agenda of sustainability, direct trade-offs between housing, environment and economy have occasionally sprung up and been subsequently dealt with through careful mediation processes. This is well illustrated by the example of the Covenant NDSM-Houthavens.[17] The NDSM and Houthavens are former port areas close to housing. Local companies in these areas had appealed against the city's urban development strategies, fearing that new housing would mean stricter environmental norms, driving up costs, and the municipality also wanted to retain this active industry. The conflict with these port companies was solved through a long mediation process, resulting in the Covenant Houthaven-NDSM-werf. In the covenant, the municipality promised to lay off development plans until 2028 and the companies in turn promised to do their best to reduce environmental pollution in terms of noise and smell. At the same time, the municipality funded innovative urbanism projects in the area, where new entrepreneurial activities could settle and make the area more attractive.

Conclusive reflection: Transversal agreements and micro-contestations

This paper engaged with the idea of post-politics in order to problematize and explore the behavior of political parties in constructing urban agendas for sustainable development. The development of eco-districts in Amsterdam and Stockholm shows similar patterns to elsewhere in Europe: urban redevelopment allows parties to construct their political agendas, to recursively depoliticize salient issues of socio-environmental and economic development and selectively mobilize others. Highlighting their complex profiles, this article aimed to empirically sophisticate the established critique of political parties. Depoliticization and politicization were tenses as non-linear tensions that are continuously balanced in the daily practice establishing agendas of urban development.

The analysis departed from the assumption that parties act according to multiple logics. On the one hand they are gatekeepers of consensus, defining the sensible and legitimate within institutional arenas. On the other hand, parties mobilize votes as to gain and organize constituencies. Parties are simultaneously power-holding agents, employing narratives that claim for best practices, brand existent conditions and build solid alliances with other parties. The balance between these roles is far from being stable nor symmetric. Instead, parties often tend to move toward roles of power holders and abdicate to their role of political sensitizers. They may do so unconsciously, as most Stockholm and Amsterdam party politicians interviewed for this research would argue that their role is to listen and cater to their voters. The results of both case studies reveal instead that multi-party convergence over a unanimously consensual sustainable growth agenda is the persistent outcome of the last 15 years. In contemporary political researches, political parties should neither be dismissed as irrelevant nor as predictable. Party politics are a key factor in shaping urban, regional and global agendas for environmental sustainability

We thus toke this particular vantage point to explore the multifaceted and contextual manifestations of a post-political condition of cities. Sustainability has become a key focal

point of urban politics in Amsterdam and Stockholm, as in many other cities. Versatile and evocative, 'sustainability' has been used to combine issues of housing, affordability, environmental quality and industrial production, all framed under the singular notion of a prosperous urban future. This is an urban ideal that finds large appeal among all political denominations. There are different ways in which issues might be balanced against each other, but parties appear to use the idea of sustainability in order to avoid making explicit the inherent contradictions of these types of development. The transversal agreement over sustainability is built on an ideology of ecological modernism and a constellation of micro-negotiations on the different trade-offs of development. These negotiations between parties find a breeding ground in the redevelopment of ports, as these spaces show evident clashes of urban-social activities and the obvious socio-economic costs of environmental transition. In these cases, parties are tactically framing problems not as issues between social costs and gains but rather as technological challenges. Nevertheless, direct zero-sum confrontations over the use of limited space necessitate negotiations over particular unavoidable trade-offs. In these cases, we discovered that parties deliberately rescale issues and delegate presumably technical actors to guide the process. This appears to be an intentional deferral of accountability, occurring as a defensive partisan strategy to cope with the risk of electoral power loss on issues of social relevance for the city.

This article shows that processes of politicization and depoliticization do not occur linearly in space and time. Depoliticization does not appear to be a straightforward process but is the complex result of a combination of actions by different electoral groups (as well as extra-electoral groups which were not the explicit focus of this study). Moments of politicization and conflict occur particularly when sustainability is placed in cities' agenda's. At times, parties cherry pick contentious issues, related to job loss, housing costs and living qualities, looking at the concrete effects of urban development. Yet, these moments have little impact on the broad long-term process of designing sustainable policies, which is pervaded by ideals of best practices and city branding. In Stockholm and Amsterdam, emerging constituencies have put forward environmental issues that have been captured by emergent political factions. Established notions of sustainability have been challenged by emerging parties, which have stressed the controversial nature of environmental and economic policies to increase their electoral base. In both cases, and all over Europe, the growing legitimacy of green parties from the 1990s onwards suggests that the environment has become an issue along which urban electoral cleavages could be redefined. Todays' diffusion of the environmental concern is also the result of the active mobilization of parties in urban (and national arenas). Even today we see the re-profiling of electoral groups along these environmental concerns (e.g. the green movement in Germany, the five stars movement in Italy).

In light of these complex political processes, our study urges urban scholars to firstly, engage closely with the notion of post-politics. This means that it is important to include not only insurgent practices of 'proper' politicization in our research agenda but also the inner dynamics of institutional policy making within the formal arenas of democracy. It is from the combination of these two dimensions of politics that interesting results can be achieved. Secondly, it warns urban scholars to look simultaneously *within* and *beyond* the urban scale. The limitation of the present case study is that it does not explain how political parties related to national and international politics. The tactics of local electorate mobilization may in fact be generated by considerations of national and international political movements. This is certainly the case in the current condition of Europe and United States, where national and inter-state party narratives are slowly adjusting political alliances at local levels. Ultimately, we urge urban planners looking at eco-development to contextualize

spatial interventions within the political and electoral context of cities. As we showed, political elites do have a key role in shaping the technicalities of zoning, real-estate development and infrastructural change. The way eco-development projects are framed within long-lasting urban agendas does affect the spatial outcomes of these projects.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

Notes

1. PGost-foundationalist political theory is a term coined by Marchart (2007).
2. Interview with alderman for environment (MP) (November 2015).
3. Interview with strategic planner of the City of Stockholm (November 2015).
4. Interview with city council member (S) (December 2015).
5. Interview with former alderman for built environment (CP) (December 2015).
6. Interview with former alderman for environment and real estate (M) (November 2015).
7. Interview Planner and Sustainability Coordinator from the City of Stockholm (November 2015).
8. Interview City Council Member (M) (January 2016); Interview City Council Member (S) (January 2016).
9. Interview with project leader of Stockholm Royal Seaport (November 2015).
10. Alderman of Amsterdam, Trouw, December 2014.
11. Groen RJ (GL) in Amsterdam Municipal Council Meeting (11 February 2015).
12. Amsterdam Municipal Council Meeting (11 February 2015).
13. Interview with official of the Port of Amsterdam (May 2016); Interview with Port Advisor of ORAM business network (May 2016).
14. Interview City Council Member (GL) (June 2016).
15. Interview City Council Member (VVD) (May 2016).
16. 70° Amendement van de raadsleden Toonk (VVD) en Bosman (D66) inzake de Agenda Duurzaamheid (duurzaamheidsrendement per euro) (Gemeenteblad afd. 1, nr. AH) introduced in Amsterdam City Council Meeting (11 February 2015).
17. The Houthavens represent a subarea of the Haven-Stad area.

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Daniël M Bossuyt is a PhD researcher at the Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies of the University of Amsterdam. In the past he has worked on the electoral dynamics of port redevelopment. Currently he researches regulation and the production of urban space in practices of self-build housing.

Federico Savini is an assistant professor at the Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies of the University of Amsterdam. He currently works on diverse set of urban topics: legal planning frameworks, institutional approaches to planning, financial characteristics of urban development and on the impact of technologies on policies of sustainable development.