Limits to social innovation. Shifts in Flemish strategic projects towards market oriented approaches

Grenzen aan sociale innovatie. Verschuivingen in Vlaamse strategische projecten naar marktgerichte benaderingen

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Introduction

All over Europe, urban policy more and more makes use of large-scale urban projects to implement urban strategies and plans. The number of urban projects for railway station areas, waterfronts, brownfields, etc. that are reported in architects’ and developers magazines and discussed in scientific literature has been rising since three decades (Burgers and Vranken, 2006; Couch et al., 2003, Direction du ministère de l’Equipement et de l’association A3 Collectif, 2002; Loeckx, 2006; Loeckx, 2009; Ministerie van Vrom, 2006; Robert and Sykes, 2004; Salet and Gualini, 2006; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). However, these projects have been criticized for enhancing gentrification and social exclusion (Bornstein, 2007; Debruyne et al., 2008; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Loopmans, 2006; Moulaert et al., 2003; Saey, 2001). According to Moulaert, Rodriguez, Swyngedouw and others, the evolution towards a project oriented approach is part and parcel of a new (property and market oriented) economic policy (NEP) that has been developing especially since the 1980s and 1990s (Moulaert, Rodriguez and Swyngedouw, 2003). Tendencies of deregulation, privatization, flexibilization of the labour market and spatial decentralization are the important characteristics. This is expressed in a new urban policy (NUP) favouring new urban coalitions. It is based on a shift from a social towards an economic policy, the support of enterprises, selective deregulation and city marketing. Large scale urban development projects embody this policy and thus the underlying neoliberal processes of globalization. Planning through projects replaces the classical policy
tools of the post-war fordist era. Consequently, many projects are said to be prestigious projects, characterized by: a lack of democratic control, limited accessibility of arena’s, social exclusion and gentrification, infringement of redistributive mechanisms, financing of private developments by public means, subordination of the project programme to the demands of the property market.

In reaction to these critiques, theories for alternative local development and social innovation are constructed (Drewe et al., 2008; Fontan and Klein, 2004; MacCallum et al., 2008; Moulaert, 2000; Moulaert et al., 2005a; Moulaert et al., 2010; Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005c; Nussbaumer and Moulaert, 2004). These are complementary to the (post) Keynesian redistribution policy and the neo-classic (neo-liberal) vision on globalisation, liberalization and the New Economic and Urban Policy. An alternative local development should not be oriented towards economic growth and market expansion. On the contrary, economic growth should rather be directed towards the innovation of existing networks, to community development and to the satisfaction of the basic needs of groups of citizens deprived of a minimum income, housing, access to quality education and the benefits of the information society. Socially innovative projects should aim at a sustainable transformation of local social networks and an improvement of the level of development of all, including underprivileged groups.

The question then is whether international market-oriented tendencies show in urban development and strategic projects in the Flemish region. Is the tendency towards urban development through property-led projects also visible in the Flemish region? Or, are there indeed alternatives of sustainable and socially responsible development under construction? To address these questions, I use Moulaert and Nussbaumer’s (2005a, 2005c) model on the concept of social innovation to compare two Flemish strategic projects, one which seems more property-led, another that claims to be more socially innovative. Although I highlight how the theory of social innovation supports critical questions regarding spatial development, the paper mainly has an empirical focus showing the need of a critical research agenda on shifts in Flemish spatial planning and development.

**Strategic projects and social innovation**

Since alternative local development is based upon the idea that development should also satisfy the basic needs of the most marginal groups of population, this needs a broader conception of basic needs than a minimum consumption level. This is a rupture with the orthodox approach to development. In this respect, alternative local development is socially innovative in at least two senses (Moulaert et al., 2005c; Moulaert, 2009; Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005b). First, from a sociological point of view, it means innovation in the relations between individuals and between groups. This is fundamentally different from technical innovation. The second meaning of social innovation reinforces the first: it is the sense of social economy and also of social work. The challenge is here to satisfy the basic needs of groups of citizens deprived of a minimum income, housing, access to quality education, and to the benefits of the information society. The combination of both readings of social innovation stresses the importance of the creation of bottom-up structures for participation, decision-making and production.
The concept of social innovation has been further developed following critiques on economistic views on territorial innovation (Moulaert, Martinelli and Swyngedouw, 2005a; Moulaert et al., 2005b; Moulaert et al., 2005c; Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005a). Based on their analysis of territorial innovation models (Moulaert and Sekia, 2003), Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2005a) develop 4 dimensions of social innovation and the way they can be analyzed. In the next sections these 4 dimensions – transformation of and in social networks, mechanisms of collective decision making (governance), collective learning, community culture are elaborated following Moulaert and Nussbaumer, applied to the case-studies and connected to the way strategic projects transform a given area.

For the first dimension we assume that a successful strategic project realises a sustainable renewal of the social networks connected to an area. “Sustainable” implies that a range of networks profit from the renewal and that a balance is created between public, civil and private stakes. Elements in this dimension that according to Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2005a) should be observed are: what actors from diverse spheres from the community are involved; what is the diversity of involved logics and agenda's from different actors and their organisations; does the project realise a broad social development (ecologic, social, human, business) or does it correspond to one (dominant) logic; are new institutions being created; have existing power relations been changed and in what sense; have opposing powers been created or mobilised.

For the dimension of “governance” we assume that in a successful strategic project different modes of governance occur at the same time and are integrated. The decision making mechanisms of a multitude of stakeholders should get a proper place in the process. Elements in this dimension that should be observed are: what are the concerning collective decision making mechanisms or modes of governance (public, civil, private); does communication and cooperation between different actors and organisations occur; how are the governance networks coordinated; what are the (new) roles of the public sector; are different forms of capital (ecologic, social, human, business) being developed; do decision making mechanisms lead to action and implementation.

For the third dimension we assume that the implementation of a strategic project is a collective learning process. Due to this social process in a successful project different forms and systems of knowledge connected to different kinds of actors are mobilised, and different forms of knowledge are developed in different ways. According to Moulaert and Nussbaumer, elements that should be observed are: what kinds of learning occur during the planning process (rational, learning by doing, etc.); does the learning process contribute to ways of social and personal emancipation; what activities contribute to the learning process (research, art, intuition, etc.); is knowledge monopolized or widely spread; what other kinds of development of experience occur (creative activities, communication, social events, etc.).

For the dimension “community culture” we follow Moulaert and Nussbaumer assuming that a successful strategic project contributes to a new balance between different subcultures and their logics of existence. Because of that, a communicative strategy of integration is necessary, in which different subcultures develop a common language, a system of communication and compromises between their different stakes. Therefore different visions on the economic, social and cultural needs should get a chance. This asks for limitations on the influence of dominant visions and practices.
In order to test the previous, we apply the explained dimensions of social innovation to the cases of the redevelopment of the railway station area in Leuven and to neighbourhood regeneration in the “Schipperskwartier” (red light district) in Antwerpen.

**Social innovation and the redevelopment of the train station area in the city of Leuven**

The analysis of this case-study was done on the basis of access to the archive of the responsible project team, books, publications, press articles, interviews with the general project manager, the responsible alderman, three members of the project team and a responsible member of the city administration.

**Context**

The history of the strategic project in the train station area in the city of Leuven goes back to the decline at the end of the 1980s of the canal area north of the train station area (the “Vaartkom”) and north of the inner city. Problems were abandoned buildings, degeneration of stock, loss of employment and mobility problems. Decline of the “Vaartkom” followed a long period of economic growth and densification until the end of the 1960s (stimulated by the growth of the brewery “Stella Artois” and its subcontractors) and a period of degradation in the 1970s and 1980s. Suburbanization, increase in scale and industrial decline had caused migration of businesses to neighbouring municipalities, growth of car mobility and congestion, shifts and change of scale on the land of “Stella Artois”, decreased use of the canal and railroad, reorganization of the railroad system and vacancy of former railroad land.

The issues at stake and the corresponding population loss and economic decline of the city of Leuven were acknowledged by the city council. In 1989, the council asked a leading professor and his team of the architecture, planning and design department of the University of Leuven to develop possible solutions. This resulted in the first development plan for the “Vaartkom” area in 1990. Subsequently the attention shifted to a much larger area between the highway in the north and an outgoing city road in the south. For this area the team again made a development plan and a number of draft land use plans. The area comprised different subsectors (industrial areas and unused railway yards in the north, de “Vaartkom” area, the railway station area, the backside of the railway station area and the empty railway depots to the east).

Despite the existence of the development plan and the land use plans nothing much changed. Therefore the city council and especially the mayor – both had changed after the elections in 1994 – decided to concentrate on the railway station area in order to realise a concrete project as soon as possible. In 1995 a project organization led by a project manager with extensive competences and resources was created in cooperation with the Belgian railroad company, the Flemish bus company and the Flemish administration for roads and mobility. This resulted in 2000 in the first realizations: a road tunnel under the station square, renovation of the square, new bus station including offices, pedestrian tunnel under the railway, renewal of the city ring road. After 2000, other projects were realized: an office building for the provincial government at the south end of the railway station area and the covering of the rail platforms, office
buildings between the railway station and the provincial office building, a housing project on the railway depot area. Still others are under construction or in preparation although the project management structure has changed. The first projects were completely publicly financed. Parts of the more recent projects are private.

Parallel to this process, societal evolutions have influenced the project in Leuven and vice versa. In the considered period especially the restructuring/semi-privatization of the railroad company (related to the liberalization of the European market), the realization of the high speed train network (id.), the growth of the “Stella Artois” brewery first into Interbrew and then into the global company Inbev (now second brewery group in the world) and the growing political attention towards urban policy in the Flemish region and in Europe played an important role.

Figure 1. The train station area in Leuven.
works, the bus company, designers, processmanager, consultancy firms). Private interests were represented by Euro-immmostat/Eurostation, the semi-private developer of the railway company. Due to the European liberalization this company was created as part of the semi-privatized railway company, to fully valorize the railway company’s land and compensate the losses in other departments. For a long time Eurostation has tried to maximize the commercial area in the project. Other large private players in Leuven feeding the antagonism are the Farmers’ union bank influencing the development between train station and provincial building and the building density in the corresponding land use plan, and Inbev safeguarding its interests by influencing the new mobility structure and land use plans and by gentrifying a former workers neighbourhood in the area. Finally, local shop owners belonging to the alderman’s constituency and reacting against the rise of new shopping centres outside the city centre, closely followed up the project through their professional organization, the chamber of commerce, the press and individual contacts.

**Modes of governance**

An overview of the collective decision making mechanisms over a longer period would undoubtedly reveal a very complex set of mechanisms. In the period 1990-2000 we mainly see a shift towards a strong hierarchical approach that one could describe as “semi-public and development oriented”. In the first period (1990-1995) ideas were mainly explorative (esp. design oriented) and generic (in terms of land use plan and the establishment of public restrictions to future developments). After that a (public) management logic predominated, led by the mayor, the alderman and projectmanagers and supported by the mayor’s contacts and political party networks. Evidently also Eurostation as a semi-private company and oriented towards a strictly defined project, was part of the latter. Civil decision making mechanisms were hardly present, except those of the shop-owners. Resident groups were not represented in the decision arena. Instruments that were used – e.g. agreements between the public partners, between the public and semi-private partners, changes of the city land use plan, a change of the Flemish land use plan (1998), land exchange, financial calculations and agreements on costs and benefits, direct control on building permits, etc. – illustrate the hierarchical development oriented process, resembling private decision making and inhibiting the integration of civil, public and private decision making mechanisms.

**Collective learning**

In the period 1990-2000 there has been a collective learning process especially between 1995 and 2000. During that period content and process developed in parallel in a highly focused project. Designs were used as input for deliberation, deliberation influenced designs. Before this period, the designs were not translated nor used into concrete negotiations around specific problems. The same is true for the draft land use plans that were created between 1992 and 1995, detached from any political process. However after 1995, the learning process was very focused and stayed within a limited group of mayor, alderman, experts and representatives of the directly involved actors. This group of actors has turned into a learning organization, given the repetition of the approach in other projects in Leuven, in other projects of Eurostation, in other projects of the designers involved, but excluded other actors, inhibited a broader emancipatory process
and mobilised specific (mostly design and management) knowledge systems. City council, city administration, residents, associations, interest groups, unions were hardly involved. The existing mode of municipal governance dominated by the mayor wasn’t changed.

Community culture

On the level of the project and its immediate surroundings, the project replaced former empty railway land (without links to the area around it) with mainly offices and administrative functions (again with limited links to the area around it). Neither before, nor after there is a real balance between neighbouring subcultures nor a rich diversity of visions on the economic, social and cultural needs in the area, compared to the subcultures of workers, employers, commerce, political parties that existed in the 1960s. The project rather expresses a middle class and management oriented perspective on urban development. The rising immigration of high income and highly trained people, a narrowing down of employment to research and services, a substantial rise of the land and real estate prices and a decreased diversity of subcultures in Leuven are symptomatic for this. It also shows in the change of the image of the railway station area in the city, also reinforced by the other projects around the area, and the perception of Leuven as a very active and successful city in the Flemish region.

Social innovation and the regeneration of the “Schipperskwartier” (red light district) in the city of Antwerp

The analysis of this case-study was done on the basis of full access to the archive of the responsible project team, access to files and interview transcriptions of a PhD research, books, publications, press articles, websites and interviews with the prostitution consultant and the project manager in the city administration and with the former mayor. More in depth research by the author based on a much larger diversity of sources is reported in (Van den Broeck, 2010; Van den Broeck, 2011).

Context

Like the train station area project in Leuven, the regeneration of the “Schipperskwartier” in the city of Antwerp has a long history. The area is part of the inner city of Antwerp and is located between the historic centre in the south, the oldest docks in the north, the quayside in the west and the inner city university area in the east.

In the 1960s the “Schipperskwartier” used to be a small-scale harbour-connected living and working area, close to the quayside and the old docks. Prostitution was embedded in the networks connected to harbour activities and mixed in a popular living and night life area. The mixture of different functions became more and more difficult in the 1980s and 1990s due to the globalization of prostitution and human trafficking, the growth of the Antwerp harbour towards the north, the concentration of illegal second-hand shops, traffic and garbage problems, increasing violence, etc. In the second half of the 1980s the activist group Payoke strongly reacted against human trafficking and bad working conditions of prostitutes. Between 1994 and 1997 the newly elected city government
reacted by closing down prostitution buildings in the area near to the city hall and pushing prostitution and the connected criminal activities further north. The issue became subject of a public debate, reinforced by the rise of the extreme right party.

From 1997 onwards, the city government – with the aid of external experts – developed a specific prostitution policy (and plan). Starting point was to keep prostitution in the city but to concentrate it in a limited area of 3 streets and to close down criminal activities. For this purpose specific instruments were developed. The idea was implemented as planned in 2000 and 2001. From 2001 the city government started a range of other actions that were complementary to the former: renovation of a small number of buildings, the building and management of a prostitution health centre and a community centre. In 2002 a neighbourhood development plan incorporated the prostitution policy in an integrated approach for a larger area. Financed by the Belgian government new actions were implemented: the renewal of ten residential streets, subsidizing housing renovations, moving a police station to the prostitution area, realization of two larger housing projects, etc.

Figure 2. The “Schipperskwartier” from the sky.

Renewal of social networks

Conclusions on this dimension of social innovation are rather positive. The process in the “Schipperskwartier” balances different public, civil and private interests. Although parts of the process have been rather top-down, many actors have had their input. On the public side, the former mayor and her cabinet have had a strong influence in the process – especially in safeguarding the interests of the prostitutes. Also, many city departments (social affairs, urban development, safety, tourism, cleansing department, etc.), the police, the office of the public prosecutor and the Antwerp district authority (sub-city level) played an important role. On the civil side a strong activist reaction from Payoke...
lobbying for the rights of prostitutes, initiated the transformation process and created the grounds for the election of the founder of this group as alderman. The input of the private sector is a bit ambiguous itself. The city deliberately excluded the prostitution house owners and pimps as private investors from parts of the process, in order to control speculation and exploitation while prostitution as a profession has kept its ambiguous position throughout the process. Later the private sector has been involved as contractors for the implementation of the different projects. Recently public–private partnerships have been created for the implementation of two larger projects in the area. And lastly, individual house-owners are moving in and making use of the incentives by the city to invest in renovation of houses and shops. Thus, the cooperation between Payoke, the mayor and her cabinet, the city’s social department, the police and the public prosecutor, initiated a broad development process, fundamentally changed the social networks in the “Schipperskwartier” and transformed former power relations. Recently there is a danger of gentrification by new residents filling in the vacant buildings and new regeneration projects.

Modes of governance

Regarding this dimension there is a variegated analysis to make. Before 1997, debate and decision-making are expressed in the social and political activities of Payoke (stressing the need for emancipation of the prostitutes), the search for the right policy in the heterogenous city council, repressive police actions (closing down of prostitution houses, actions against criminal activities, regular control of prostitutes) and in criminal networks (pimps, Eastern-European gangs, illegal trade). In this period especially Payoke took action socially and politically as well as the mayor and her cabinet within their own political competences (head of police, safety, prevention) together with police and public prosecutor. Between 1998 and 2001 the prostitution policy plan was approved by the city council and within the city a strong cooperation between the major and her cabinet, the administration for social affairs, the city’s prostitution official and the police emerged. From 2002, the administration for urban planning became involved, which cooperated with several other city administrations. This was stimulated by setting up a neighbourhood development process coordinated by the prostitution official and the urban planning department as project managers. Decision-making was now concentrated within the bench of aldermen of whom many were present in the steering group meetings. After the different projects got on track, the implementation happened more and more on an executive and administrative level. The process thus showed a shift from a rich diversity of decision making mechanisms before 1999, towards a more closed off public-led process in the 2000s.

Collective learning

During the regeneration of the “Schipperskwartier” the learning process is impressive especially in the 1990s. The actions of Payoke, the search of the new mayor for new policies and the cooperation between mayor, police and public prosecutor enabled a compromise between social policies and public safety policies, leading to the improvement of the working conditions, health position and security of the prostitutes. This stage of the process therefore proved to be an open-ended one, which fundamentally changed existing institutions and discourses regulating prostitution in the
“Schipperskwartier”. From 1997 new knowledge systems were introduced, stimulating professionalisation of the public approach, involving more public actors and decreasing the civil actor’s impact. Expert knowledge (social and juridical) was introduced, decisions on how to approach the issue were made and implemented. From 2002, the introduction of city administration knowledge in process management and urban planning further professionalized the process and made it less open-ended and less emancipatory. Learning occurred especially within the different administrations that cooperated in the different projects. Events, cultural projects, meetings, expositions, publications were used as means to incorporate former and new residents in this public rationality. In this period the city’s knowledge on property management increased by setting up a semi-autonomous development agency that bought and renovated a number of houses in the area. This decreased the potential for the prostitutes’ personal and social emancipation, ended the focus on delivering psycho-social support to prostitutes and stopped the attempts to force the Flemish government to change the law on prostitution.

Community culture

It is quite clear that the “Schipperskwartier” project has changed the existing institutions and balance in the area. More important, there are strong indications that in the 1990s and early 2000s a new balance was created without completely replacing the former networks, although many people have left the area during at least thirty years of physical and social degeneration. New subcultures include the new prostitution area, former residents and shops, new residents and shops, businesses at the edge of the area, passers-by. More recently there are questions on the possibility of gentrification by new residents, especially due to the planning and realisation of two larger housing projects. The prostitution policy in itself, “cleaning up” a large part of the “Schipperskwartier”, is claimed to be part of this process. Questions thus remain on whether the embeddedness of a compromise between social policies and public safety policies in the prostitution policy and its “zone of tolerance” and the presence of a substantial amount of social housing, can stop the initiated process of gentrification.

Conclusions

Regarding the critique on the exclusionary “New Urban Policy” and the plea for socially innovative practices, the analysis of two urban strategic projects in the Flemish region firstly shows how social innovation through urban development is possible. Especially in the 1990s, in the Antwerp “Schipperskwartier” activist approaches succeeded in initiating a transformation of social (power) relations and a process of socio-institutional change. The project confronted the power of pimps and prostitution house owners exploiting prostitutes and safeguarded the interests of the prostitutes by allocating an area for prostitution, and by improving their safety, health, quality of the buildings and working-conditions. These interests were embedded in a compromise of social policies and public safety policies. The project integrated a considerable diversity in decision-making mechanisms of various actors and mobilised a range of knowledge systems in a process of collective learning. Public investments have been extensive but private investments have been stimulated (private renovations) and even forced (prostitute house owners) early in the process.
On the other hand the case of the Leuven train station area shows how project management approaches connected to the “New Urban Policy” have been introduced in the Flemish context. The project is strongly influenced by the privatization of the Belgian railway company due to European market oriented policies. Private developers have profited from large public investments upgrading the area and have oriented their programmes towards profitable functions like upmarket offices, leisure and commercial space and apartments. The project has been strictly managed, which left little room for community development, the creation of social capital, the integration of civil decision-making or broader collective learning. Rather surprisingly, similar tendencies in the “Schipperskwartier” case study became apparent in recent episodes. After a process of social innovation initiated in the 1990s, we see in the 2000s the rich diversity of the governance configuration and its decision making mechanisms shifting towards a purely public-led professionalized process later giving way to a predominant private input. The project then focused on two large scale housing and office projects for new middle and high income residents and offices contributing to gentrification in the area. It stopped trying to realize emancipation processes among the prostitutes and to change the Belgian law on prostitution.

The analysis of both cases thus shows how the social innovation perspective supports a critical analysis of spatial planning and development practices in the Flemish region and how the latter react to international market, property and management oriented approaches. However, from a social innovation perspective, we also see how projects can make a difference in the way they embody and therefore shape macro-structural trends. Flagship projects like the Leuven case and its coalition between the mayor and the property agency of the privatized railway company, tend to confirm (inter) national property and market oriented processes geared towards profit maximisation and social exclusion. Alternative projects like the Antwerp “Schipperskwartier” – although as we have seen influenced by these processes as well – at least question those trends by putting community development at the heart of the project. Indeed, the early compromise between social policies protecting prostitutes and public safety policies buffered international market-oriented trends, even long after the actual compromise was realised. The (institutional) dynamics of this interplay should and can be explored further. To do this we need to further develop a critical research agenda on the current shifts in Flemish spatial planning and development.

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ABSTRACTS

According to recent analyses, many strategic projects are part of a “New Urban Policy” favouring private developments and enhancing gentrification and social exclusion. Alternative projects should be more transformative, integrated and emancipatory. In order to test these claims for the Flemish region, I use Moulaert and Nussbaumer’s model (2005a) on the concept of social innovation to evaluate the socio-spatial innovation capacity of two Flemish strategic projects. The analysis suggests that social innovation is possible but that Flemish strategic projects are strongly affected by market, property and management oriented approaches.

Volgens recente analyses zijn vele strategische projecten onderdeel van een “Nieuw Stedelijk Beleid”, dat private ontwikkeling, sociale verdringing en exclusie bevordert. Alternatieve projecten zouden meer transformatief, geïntegreerd en emancipatorisch moeten zijn. Om deze uitspraken te testen voor de Vlaamse situatie, gebruikt dit artikel een model van Moulaert en...
Nussbaumer’s (2005a) concept van sociale innovatie en evalueert daarmee de sociaal-ruimtelijke innovatiecapaciteit van twee Vlaamse strategische projecten. De analyse suggereert dat sociale innovatie mogelijk is, maar dat Vlaamse strategische projecten sterk beïnvloed worden door markt-, eigendoms- en managementgerichte benaderingen.

INDEX

**Keywords:** social innovation, strategic project, Flemish spatial planning and development

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