

The post-metropolitan gaze?¹

Peter Ache

Department of Geography,
Planning, and Environment,
Institute of Management
Research, Radboud University,
Nijmegen, The Netherlands,
p.ache@fm.ru.nl

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Post-metropolis

In my own interpretation, the search for form or materiality of the urban might be misleading; not least in terms of the metropolitan spaces (Ache, 2011). We have seen until the end of the 2010s many publications which were busy reflecting on the large urban regions (Neuman and Hull, 2009), trying to develop theoretical tools to grasp the differences and similarities

of 'the' city versus the 'city region' or 'metropolitan' spaces. Edward Soja's book (2000) on the post-metropolis epitomises that clearly, with his several scenarios regarding potential development outcomes; in my own interpretation, the 'carceral city' is probably the closest scenario when discussing current affairs of urban metropolitan development. A fairly recent contribution to the debate, generating quite many comments, was formulated by Brenner and Schmid (2015) with the hypothesis of a planetary

An outsiders look at spatial planning in Italy witnessed a remarkable exercise with the ratification of the so called 'Delrio law' in 2014 and, subsequently, the formation of fourteen metropolitan cities. A process, reaching in principle back to the 1990ies and having the intention to reform the constitutional set-up of the state, reached a conclusion. A bright step towards the modernisation of state administration, attempting to produce better and more appropriate institutions for the growing city regions in Italy, which are at the complex target of that exercise. A consortium of Italian university scholars from various universities (Balducci et al., 2017) embarked during the same period on a

project which has the intention to provide a better understanding of metropolitan city regions, some of them forming the spatial layer of the new institutions. Understanding the complex structures and processes behind modern metropolitan city regions is the ambition, ultimately also improving the capacity to steer and manage development processes.

This short paper attempts to contribute to the addressed discussions by outlining three perspectives: It will first reflect on relevant issues following from a global debate on the urban millennium and on planetary urbanisation (UN, 2014, Brenner and Schmid, 2015). Second, results of an ongoing research project on urban futures and vision making processes, anticipating urban futures, will be presented. And finally, a brief conclusion will be drawn, critically acclaiming the need to embrace the future by making visions that explore unknowable novelty, which are experimental, and which open political horizons instead of closing them. That is, the post-metropolitan gaze cannot remain an analytical one; it needs essentially and urgently also to be one that steps forward to action.

urbanism or urbanization. The central claim is, that the urban is a basic condition of current societies. It is planetary, as the urban has indeed become a worldwide condition in which all aspects of social, economic, political and environmental relations are enmeshed, across

places, territories and scales, crosscutting any number of long-entrenched geographical divisions. In their account, Brenner and Schmid (2015, i.p. pages 165ff, 176ff) formulate seven theses² interpreting the urban, from which two deserve particular attention for a second argument proposed in this paper, related to the anticipation of urban futures: The urban needs to be understood as a process and not as a universal form, settlement type or bounded unit; the 'materiality' is secondary, at least in terms of cities or city regions, not to speak of metropolitan spaces. And, more relevant for the context of the discussion here, 'the urban is a collective project in which the potentials generated through urbanisation are appropriated and contested'. The first aspect relates to the urban being "produced through collective action, negotiation, imagination, experimentation and struggle". The latter aspect reflects again on the procedural dimensions but adds a future perspective: the "urban society is thus never an achieved condition, but offers an open horizon in relation to which concrete struggles over the urban are waged" (Brenner and Schmid, 2015, 178). The latter dimension introduces actually a 'utopian' gesture, creating the space, literally, for striving individuals (Bloch, 1985 [1954])³.

If we cannot imagine, then we cannot manage.

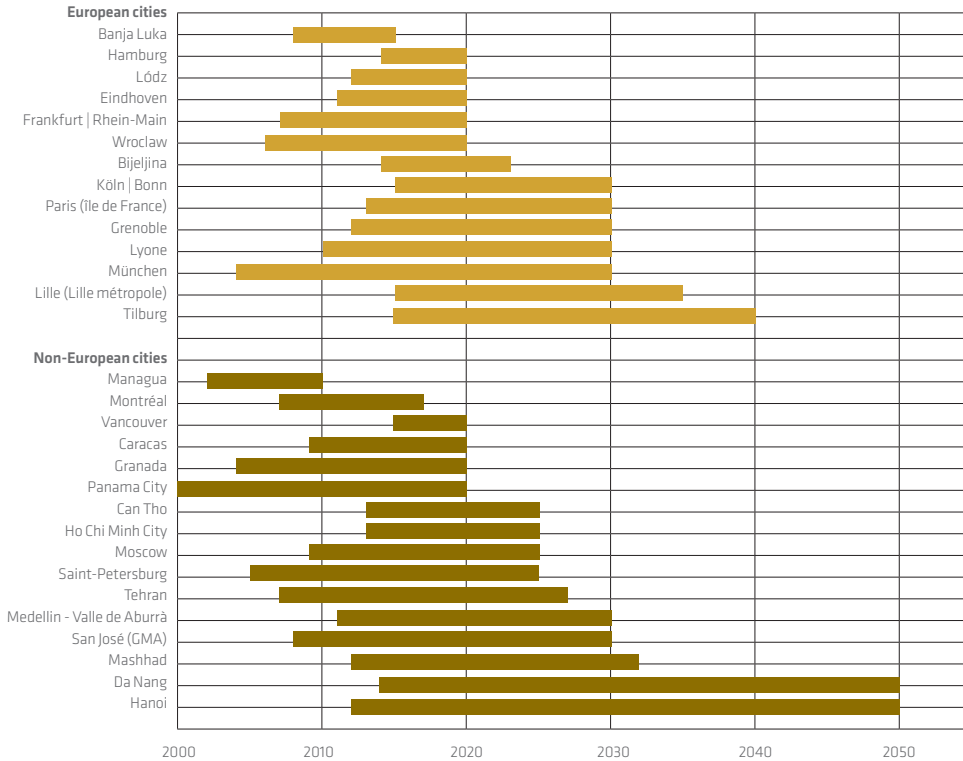
Planning and Urban Futures

Discussing and designing urban futures is a standard in the professional field (see f.i. Hall, 2002), either as combination of new technologies (like in the case of the SMART cities) or as general societal phenomenon (as with Brenner and Schmid). What has changed today is the complexity and scale of the metropolitan city region, and its multiple intersections with virtual and actual flows of globalization. The complexity and scale has clouded our ability to construct an image of the new metropolitan regions and has direct consequences for the ability to govern these units. In short: If we cannot imagine, then we cannot manage (Ache, 2011, reversing a statement made by Neuman and Hull, 2009).

The difficulty to imagine does not necessarily mean the end of anticipating urban futures. We quoted Brenner and Schmid (2015) in their view of the urban being produced through collective action, negotiation, imagination, experimentation (and struggle). With a view to

the anticipation of urban futures, a property of the urban are the two dimensions of structure and agency, that allow the urban society collectively to develop the potential embedded in the process of urbanisation. The multitude of built forms but also the variety of collectives appropriating the urban provides a capacity to anticipate. Adding a hypothesis, it only does so fully, if that collective also pays attention to the *Möglichkeitssinn* (sense of possibilities, following R. Musil's 'Man without Quality') and, more over in our preferred view, through agonistic processes (see final section). This sense of possibilities is present in the element of experimentation, in particular modernity has seen many urban experiments, which tried to produce concrete (literally and figuratively speaking) utopias as test fields (Hall, 2002 (3), Wakeman, 2016). At the moment, a very attractive field for 'experimentation' relates to the smart city idea (Vanolo, 2014 provides an excellent critique).

This brings us to a final conceptual element, which is 'future' and its relation to the current. Our analysis of vision documents tries to explore politico-administrative processes in urban contexts, in the words of Brenner and Schmid (2015) as an interplay of different 'collectives'; we obviously pay particular attention to 'classic' collectives, like experts and politicians or administrators, negotiating about the future in vision making processes. A



Time horizons (sorted by most extensive horizon)

Fig. 1
Source: Author based on sample documents (sorted by most extensive time horizon)

vision making exercise can be seen as creating a presence of future expectations. These future expectations are formulated as 'ideas'; they literally foresee the future. In principle, having a vision includes having an idea or being able to see. Both aspects are very central elements to urban planning. In that way, the intrinsic property of the system, anticipating on the basis of experiments and rational attempts to construct future states of the system in response to changing environments, also connects to the aspect of foreseeing the changing environment.

Visions of Urban Future(s)

Building on Ache (2017) we continued analysing vision documents not only for the thirty European metropolitan cities in the original sample, but also for more European and international metropolitan spaces. One part of this document analysis looked into the periods required for the production of the documents in the sample, and compared this to the chosen future time horizons. Combining the publication dates, which ranged from 2000 to 2015, with process information or starting points for the documents, an average estimate can be established regarding time consumed

and time foreseen. Actors and experts in the cities and regions have been working for about three years on the documents, as such. Producing a vision or strategy documents is time consuming and resource intensive effort.

The relation between time and general effort put into a vision document and the defined future horizons is of course an interesting aspect. Figure 1 provides an overview based on a different sample than the thirty EU examples from the first batch, showing most advanced horizons for 2050. Compared with the publication dates definitely more than one generation ahead, with a generation considered to last around twenty-five to thirty years. The analysis looked also into the average 'run-time' of the documents, which amounts to slightly more than seventeen years; actually not much different from classic master plans. Put differently, vision documents operate with a time horizon between a half and a full generation. We did not go into details yet, like assessing the actual implementation time required for the formulated ambitions. In some cases, follow-up processes are indicated but the actual state can only be established on a case-by-case base. The documents neither provide much information about interim checkpoints or other moments of reflection; in a way the vision is formulated and ends at the same 'time', a kind of instant future.

However, with a view to the general handling of time and a discussion of the future horizon, does it matter to speak about 2020-2035-2050 in a vision document? On the basis of our current document analysis, which leaves out the expectations and perceptions of actors who work with the vision, time and time horizons are essentially abstract units, where the future is 'just' a projection and the current, like for instance the aspect of achieved quality of life, provides a stencil. In a way, the chosen material or ethic normative dimensions of the visions are very common sense and less challenging. This is visible when searching for ideas of a deeper or radical ambition; there are no ideas outside boxes, neither radical narratives nor really disruptive elements which would call for a different development horizon. The visioning is done in rather small and measured steps, using real life benchmarks.

Conflict free metropolitan development?

The research briefly documented in this paper starts with a hypothesis: 'vision making creates a momentum for managing complex metropolitan spaces'. The analysis of by now almost one hundred documents reveals, that metropolitan spaces are the objects of visioning processes and strategy formation. High-flyer examples like Paris join the 'everyday' of vision making outside prominent examples featuring in the media. No matter which locality or exact planning system, planning practice works

To create an alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of the unknowable novelty

Harvey, 2012

on or with vision making, mostly in informal and non-binding ways. Surprisingly, vision making produces quite heavy documents of at times several hundred pages; it is also a demanding exercise, asking for time and effort of large groups of stakeholders and actors. To create a momentum in the management of metropolitan spaces, this process should be looked at more seriously, not only as a practice but also in academic reflection. Ideally, we progress beyond seeing it just as hegemonic project (Gleeson, 2012, McCann, 2001) and return to Burnham, challenging us to conceive visions of the urban, that 'stir the blood' of people.

Concrete visions with concrete futures are the standard, at least when looking at the analysed documents; challenging and ambitious speculative visions on futures are

rarely attempted. Vision making, at least in its documented form, reveals a consensual view, "a gospel of shared worldviews operating with actual currencies from e.g. smart city debates, comprehensive sustainability, or global challenges" (Ache, 2017) Those shared consensual world views can be problematic, at least when remaining unchallenged, as is known from path dependency in regional innovation discourses (Ache, 2000a, Ache, 2000b). The ambition should be to create real transformative capacity for which an element is needed, that creates friction, takes actors outside comfort zones and established boxes, and that provides at least the potential for a radically different future (Albrechts, 2015).

Discussion and Appeal

Turning towards a discussion of before outlined findings, visions, as expressed in the documents of our analysis, are rather a repetition of the 'real' (Pinder, 2013). They are certainly not experiments in what Lefebvre would call 'dialectical utopianism'. The first missing element is that of 'strife' (Pløger, 2004), referring to Mouffe's theory of agonism (Mouffe, 2000). Strife, or refined approaches towards conflict, is not visible from the final products. Following Pløger's analysis (Pløger, 2004) the visions, and most likely the processes, are focusing on consensus, characterised by a deeply ingrained governmentality: actors have learned and

continue learning to be 'good' visionaries (Ploger, 2004, refers to 'good' democrats, p81). Participation focuses on the elimination of conflict and consensus is the norm set for the process; vision becomes a normalizing discourse (Ploger, 2004, p80, refers here to Huxley, 2002). Compared with that, we need instead to move away from that realist consensus solving and fully embrace co-creative attitude of adversaries, searching for strife.

In that spirit, vision processes should rather challenge the 'closing of political horizons'. Based on Lefebvres work, Pinder (2013) provides six propositions to get there: we should uncover the desires and dreams that underpin conceptions of urbanism today; we should... transduce from given real's to possible's; we should focus on everyday life and its critique (with a reference to Ernst Bloch and his 'concrete utopia'); experiments and invention is significant; and finally, "demanding the impossible is as realistic as necessary" (Pinder, 2013, p43).

With that, we reach a very important point: vision exercises that attempt to define future development are often seen as simply 'utopistic', in the sense of being non-consequential and producing a feel-good-moment. The aspect of being non-consequential is certainly there in public and expert opinion. However, reformulating another claim of Lefebvre, there is a 'right to utopianism', and vision making creates 'moments of experiments in dialectical utopianism'. What is needed is, quoting Harvey (2012), "to create an alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of the unknowable novelty". A post-metropolitan vision is necessarily a vision of multiplicity, diversity, and creativity – continuously in search of unknowable novelty.

Note

¹Part of the empirical material was published before in *Territorio* (180, 2017)

²Brenner and Schmid (2015) provide seven theses: (1) the urban and urbanisation are theoretical categories, not empirical objects; (2) the urban is a process, not a universal form, settlement type or bound unit; (3) urbanisation involves three mutually constitutive

moments – concentrated urbanisation, extended urbanisation and differential urbanisation; (4) the fabric or urbanisation is multidimensional; (5) urbanisation has become planetary; (6) urbanisation unfolds through variegated patterns and pathways of uneven spatial development; (7) the urban is a collective project in which the potentials

generated through urbanisation are appropriated and contested. I refer to thesis 2 and 7.

³Bloch (1985, preface, own translation) formulates a human condition regarding that: "Primarily, every human lives by striving for the future, the past comes later, and the real present is almost not there at all".

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