How do spatial imaginaries order city regional development?

Exploring the embedding of planning images in local planning cultures

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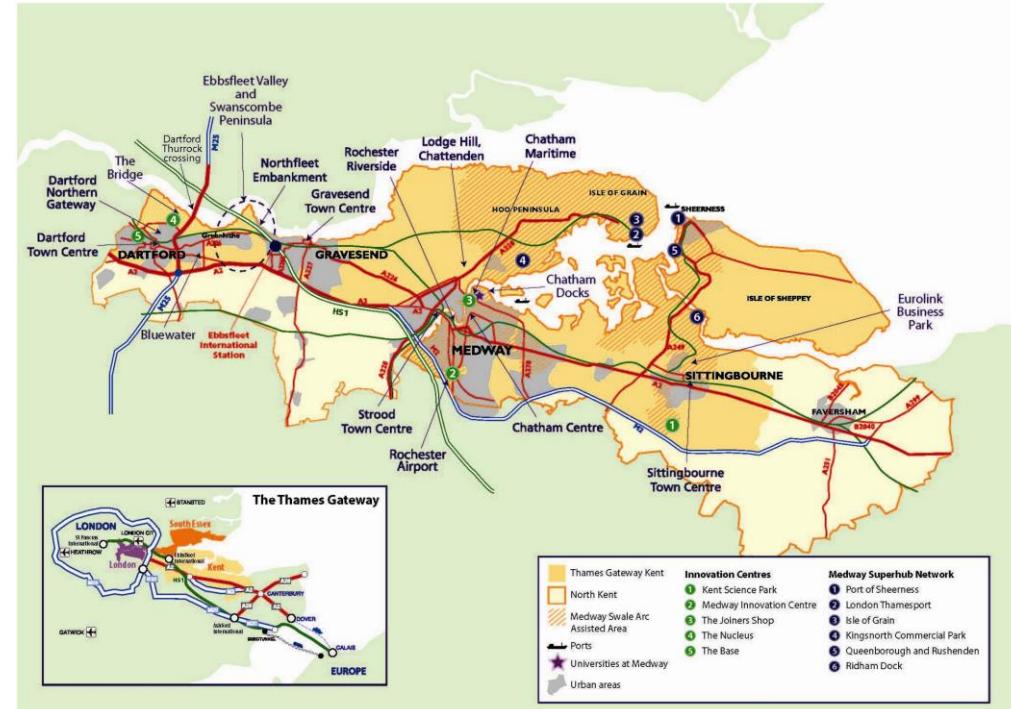- Spatial imaginaries and institutional change in planning
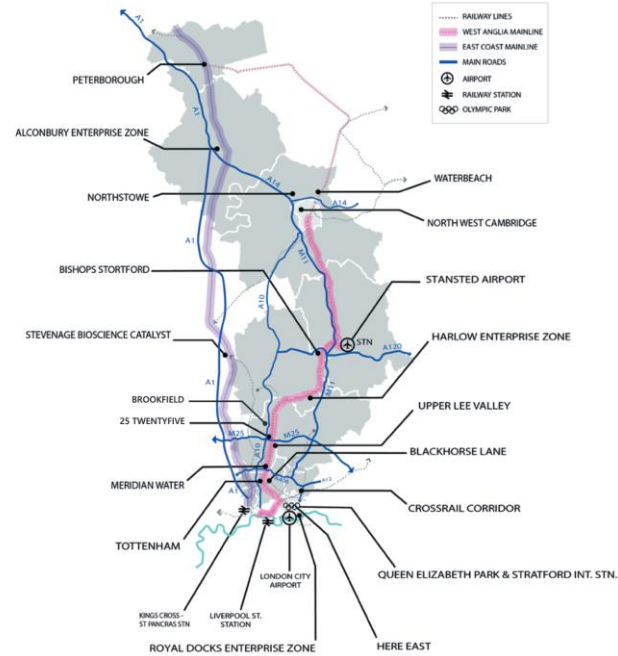- Conclusions

Spatial imaginaries in planning

- A selective interpretation of geography or a desired end point of social relations in space (Watkins, 2014)

- Selective readings of space in which particular features are accentuated or understated and certain borders maintained or ignored (Murdoch, 2006)

- Render policy metaphors and alternative urban-regional futures in visual form (Kunzmann, 1996)

- Term used in a similar way to 'spatial visions', 'spatial concepts', 'planning concepts'; spatial imaginaries can enter into planning concepts

Spatial imaginaries

Planning concepts

Institutions in planning

Institutions can be defined as 'systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions' (Hodgson, 2006, p. 2). Within planning we can differentiate between:

- Planning as an activity institutionalised into state and market

- Formal institutions of planning law and planning systems

- Planning organisations (commonly labelled planning institutions)

- Informal institutions such as values, conventions and shared conceptualisations

We can speak of 'institutionalisation' as the process by which planning enters into broader society but also of that by which policy discourses, **e.g. spatial imaginaries**, enter into planning practice

Planning cultures

A planning culture is 'the collective ethos and dominant attitudes of planners regarding the appropriate role of the state, market forces and civil society in influencing social outcomes' (Faludi, 2005: 442)

- The planning culture is the local milieu that supports planning activities and that frames the thought and action of planners

- Typically, the term planning culture describes the context within which planning takes place

- But Faludi (2005: 452) argues for the inclusion of the 'products of planning', including maps, icons, symbols, within planning culture

Institutionalisation and cultural embedding

Therefore policy discourses can enter into planning practice via either:

- **Institutionalisation** into plans and strategies, from where they directly influence decision-making

- **Cultural embedding**, from where they function as informal institutions

Spatial imaginaries are a form of policy discourse, framing issues by highlighting some aspects (e.g. ports) while downplaying others (e.g. borders)

The Métropole Européenne de Lille

MEL is the present incarnation of the Communauté Urbaine de Lille, originally designated in 1966 to address the difficulties of planning and governance for a polycentric area
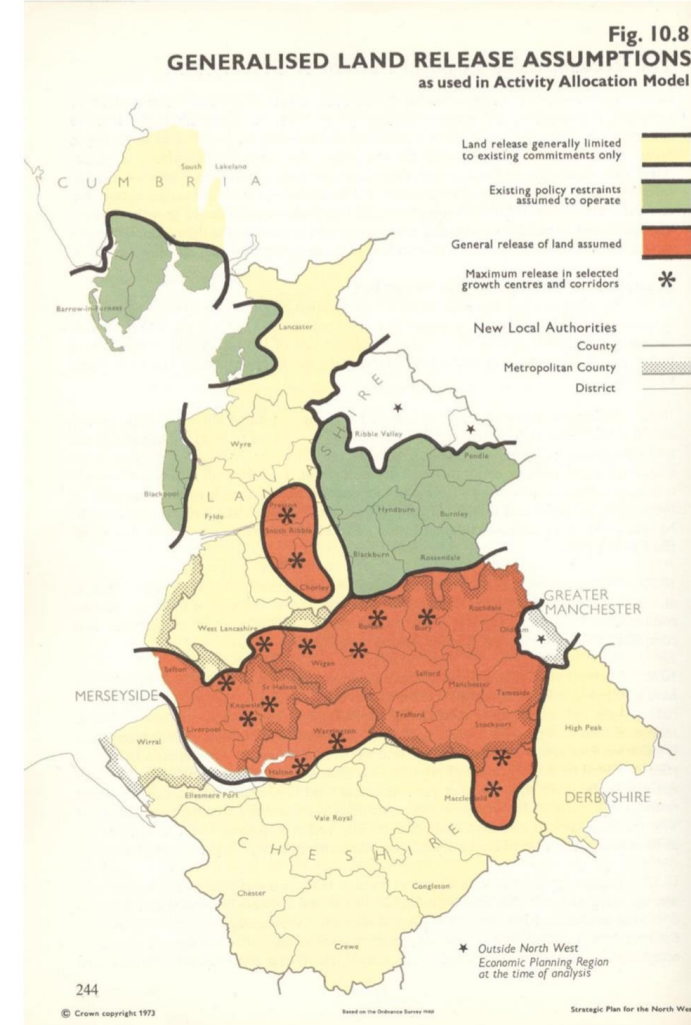
Factors supporting the stability of the MEL

Because it is an inter-municipal joint authority, rather than a directly elected municipal government, the MEL relies on top-down backing and bottom-up cooperation

- Longstanding national-level backing as a political geography

- Local level agreement in favour of a stronger strategic role (from early 1990s)

- Leadership, both in terms of its importance and that communes agreed on its necessity

- Local compact between centre and periphery investment (necessary especially for an indirectly elected inter-commune cooperative tier)

- Large-scale capital investments that are linked to the MEL as an area and a governance body
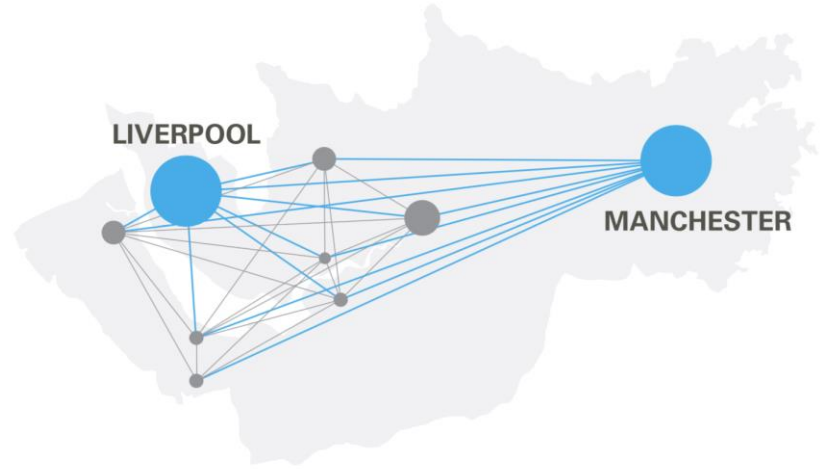
The Mersey Belt

A spatial imaginary linking Liverpool and Manchester, in NW England

- The Mersey Belt has been reproduced by planning organisations at different levels of formality over the course of almost 50 years

- It has never been part of, or given rise to, a formal planning institution over the area it describes

The Mersey Belt

Factors supporting the stability of the Mersey Belt

- Formal support from national government for the planning space of the Mersey Belt has been absent

- Likewise, the Mersey Belt's constituent local authorities and city regions have been unevenly enthusiastic

- Regional planning institutions, during those times when they have existed, have lent the Mersey Belt support

- Actor and institutional support within the region has been strong, and has continued over those eras during which regional planning has been weak

Spatial imaginaries and institutional change in planning

- This lack of stability and definition mixed with actor support has given it a flexibility and a persistence

- It has via this means influenced new spatial concepts in the region - subsequent imaginaries must engage with it before they can be institutionalised in plans and strategies

- Has it become embedded within the regional planning culture, as a 'product of planning' that has come to function as an informal institution?

Conclusions

- Planning spaces will naturally persist where they have become the dominant discourse, favoured by national and local policy actors (Healey, 2007)

- But where they lack the necessary buy-in from decision-makers in one institutional site, e.g. at the national level, they may still persist if they can mobilise a coalition of actors elsewhere

- Where this happens, they can go on to shape future spatial policy by becoming embedded within a planning culture, from there functioning as an informal institution, or social norm

- Spatial imaginaries that persist in this way may gain their durability through their malleability; they have never received sufficient approval in policy as to be strongly defined

- The durability and adaptability of the Mersey Belt are attributable to its institutional form as an informal structuring device for strategic planning thought within the region