Community innovators: 'shock troops' of the new order or safety brake in the era of 'fast policy'?

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1. Introduction

Starting in 2011 both the Western World and Middle East witnessed a number of significant civic unrest events coupled with a call for societal changes. The events, albeit distinct and embedded within their own socio-economic and political processes, had one thing in common. They were events taking place in cities, where dwellers of the urbanized areas took to the streets to voice their political concerns and trying, more or less successfully, to progress their revolutionary agendas (Sassen 2011, Harvey 2012). In this paper I would argue that these radical manifestations of the events express only part of the broader undercurrent of change that emerges in the wake of economic and political challenges. What captures less attention by media and more by theoretical debate is the return of urban civic society pursuing more 'self-management' (to borrow the Lefebvrian term) of urban matters. These ideas are expressed as new concepts that could be framed in the terms of radical innovation. What changed is that many of these debates, previously occurring at fringes of the mainstream debates, permeated into common discourse. Such change provides an opportunity to question the existing nature of 'urban policy innovation' and potential changes to its nature.

The understanding of the key issues of the debates is useful in situating the 'fast planning' paradigm, discussed as the topic of the 48th ISOCARP Congress, within this emerging shift. In that sense, the term 'fast planning' needs to be unpacked and placed against the broader issue of political direction of change. More importantly, we question how and by whom these 'fast' changes are being pursued.

In the paper I will refer to both the theoretical context of the debate as well as recent developments in Europe, including Poland. The Polish case is an apt example as it was a country which witnessed rapid introduction of both local governance and market economy, through rapid, 'shock therapies' and the introduction of 'designer capitalism' (Stark 1992). As these quickly paced changes brought specific consequences to urban areas - rising inequality, uneven patterns of development and structural challenges, these changes are met with coordinated mobilization of progressive urban movements and activities of promoters.

2. Framing of the discussion on 'fast planning' in the context of bottom-up innovation

Before discussing in further detail it is important to identify the key issues in the debate on the proposed paradigm of 'fast planning' and its relation *vis-à-vis* the issue of political change and its urban dimension.

Firstly, the term 'fast planning' needs to be situated and framed more precisely as it potentially already has an associated meaning. 'Fast planning' could be understood as a type of policy aimed at rapid implementation of market-oriented development policies. Such speeding up of development through 'fast policy regimes' (Peck 2002), deregulation and retrenchment of public policy would be a part of continuous tactics aiming at mobilizing the urban space into the service of capital accumulation (Harvey 2005, Peck et al. 2005, Peck et al. 2010) as it is argued later. Demarcation of what could be understood as fast change,

should therefore not be considered merely as a question relating to techniques of planning or policy making but more fundamentally, through examination of the directions which the fast policy is leading to. This aspect is relevant as social mobilization can take different turns, not only along the lines of social democratic agenda as suggested here, but also through conservative urban movements, pro-market think tanks or wealthy urban elites pursuing support for market urban policies (Svwyngedouw 2005). The fact that policy transfer, diffusion and setting, is also embedded in a broader context of public and expert discourses, local institutional arrangements and political power (Peck 2011), underpins the assumptions and findings of this paper.

The demand for change occurred at a specific time in many Western societies, where dominant directions of economic development of the cities were challenged significantly through the 2009 financial crisis. The demand for change, expressed vividly by newly mobilized movements such as Occupy, occurred in the backdrop of increasing social polarization, concerns over the health of Western economies and the diminishing wealth of low and middle income families.

Apart from being the right time for discussion, the capacity to discuss alternatives also enabled wider debate on urban issues. After all, the concepts of mobilization of citizens to fight for the 'right to the city' or access to provision of social services are not new, as in the West they were discussed by Marxist scholars in the seventies (Lefevbre 1996, Castells 1979). At the time of the Occupy protests, urban movements gathered increased sophistication in mobilization and communication, which ensured that the messages of the seemingly remote protests and postulates were carried far beyond their immediate constituencies (both physically and in terms of the social or political background of the debate). These processes, described by Castells in his work on networked society (Castells 2000, 2007), played out both as gathering on the streets and heated debates online. Although the street captured most of the attention, the debates occurred in other channels. Public debate on issues raised by protesters entered the mainstream public media, the Internet and academia. The other aspect is mobilization of the movements on the fundamental issues such as inequality, criticism of market practices or political disfranchisement, the demands for change were manifested openly in the 'heartlands' of the free market friendly societies. Protests such as Occupy or the rise in activity of various urban movements is possible because the capacity to organize and act is already in place.

It should be stressed here that the identification of the issue of interactions between 'fast planning' and state be discussed in the context of both institutional embedding of the 'fast changes' and its broader social context (Peck 2010). The most efficient bottom driven initiatives, political or economic, occur in a mutual relationship between 'innovators' and public mechanisms - institutions, political arrangements and broader discourse that enable change to happen. Governments and public institutions can play a role here, as illustrated later with the case of Poland. Even when facing fiscal retrenchment and cutbacks in the wake of financial austerity measures, the institutions of the State are not withering away. The State, by commanding financial and administrative resources as well as political support can substantially influence by supporting or suppressing 'fast' deployment of new ideas.

In this context, the changing nature of social engagement, challenges the technocratic notions of 'participation' as simply the issue of techniques of brokering the consensus, seeking the counsel or approval of the community. With growing emancipation of urban residents and more fundamental criticism of existing mechanisms of representative democracy or market mechanisms as inadequate - urban planning may be faced with more pressure to become more open towards alternative concepts of managing the city.

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3. Unpacking 'Fast planning', Fast policies and institutionalized 'innovation'

Discussion of the 'fast planning' paradigm requires more precise definition of this concept, especially in the context of changes to urban economies in the last two decades as well as the rapid transformations of urban space under the conditions of contemporary market economies.

This discussion occurs at the end of the *long duree* of 'market friendly' urban policies. Since the end of the seventies Western cities were facing a significant shift in development policies, which turned their policy into more market-oriented and private sector driven directions. The change was paired with the rise of both the so-called urban entrepreneurship aimed at attracting private sector investment (Hubbard and Hall 1998, Harvey 1989, Jessop 1997) as well as the increasing role of urban space in economic growth. The 'fast planning' mechanisms were mobilized to deliver new urban spaces and to change the way how the urban policy is formulated. Thus both physical form of the city and its functioning was aligned with the processes of flexible accumulation of capital (Harvey 1989).) The most visible and ubiquitous manifestations of these policies were large scale real estate projects transforming spaces of the inner cities. Other less conspicuous examples involved the cases of privatization of urban services and the increasing role of private financing in securing the resources for urban development. The rise of so-called FIRE industry (finance, insurance, real estate), together with increasing financialization of urban economies to support its operations, could be attributed to the urban change. These mechanisms were pioneered in countries with liberal traditions - United States and Western Europe to then proliferate worldwide through mechanisms of rapid policy transfers, discussed in detail below.

In response to these shifts in urban economy, planning and governance were evolving to facilitate and smoothen the commodification of urban space, urban 'competitiveness' and 'quick fix' to increasing challenges brought about by fiscal constraints and deindustrialization of Western economies. Even if these efforts were specific to particular local legal and administrative contexts, they often shared many similarities. Such policies include deployment of special planning mechanisms or planning laws, aimed at acceleration of development by removing obstacles from the investment process. Deregulation of public control over development through relaxation of planning controls or mechanisms of deliberation would be one of more obvious examples of policies aimed at 'speeding up' development.

The policies were paired with expanding flexible governance of the urban growth. New institutions such as various urban development agencies were entrusted with land and development controls to facilitate swift delivery of new developments. In these joint public and private developments various powers vested in local institutions were pressed into the service of the markets. In case of the European urban regeneration projects, right to use of compulsory purchase property could be used to acquire and prepare the land for new urban megaprojects (Minton A. 2009, Swyngedouw et al. 2002). Also public resources such as land or money, through various forms of subsidies, would be used to match or balance the costs of the private sector. These tactics were identified almost three decades ago, with theoretical (Harvey 1989, Hall and Hubbard 1999) and substantial empirical (Svyngedouw et al. 2002) research highlighting aspects such as attempts to replicate or build upon successful policies implemented by other cities facing changes in urban economies. In that sense, 'fast planning' is not a new paradigm, but a relatively old one. What differs is the fact that these practices are constantly and dynamically replicated, rejuvenated and modified as they are still 'borrowed' or implemented in new, localized contexts (Brenner et. al. 2009).

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Still, the policy innovation in that context is limited as it operates within particular ideological, political and institutional environments that are largely responsible for mediating policy transfers and framing its general direction.

The topic of policy transfer attracted a substantial amount of research recently, particularly as a part of competitive market-oriented strategies (see Peck 2011 for a summary of this debate). What matters most, is the setting of this exchange. The policy learning process is not simply a technocratic, rational process where decision makers and their administration deliberate in isolation to pursue the most successful policies from their peers. It is also rarely true that policies, especially concepts of 'neoliberal' urban strategies, are simply unilaterally imposed by multinational institutions, the OECD, World Bank or IMF specialists to be executed by the national and local governments. Nor it is true that fast policy making is detached from local institutional realities. On the contrary, as Peck notes '*Mobile institutional designs, best-practice models, and fast policies are not, in some metaphorical sense, molecules circulating within an extraterrestrial space, 'touching down' or 'getting picked up' by earth-bound policy actors; rather, they occupy the same earthly domains as the policy-makers themselves, as creatures and creations of grounded processes of institutional reproduction, regimes of discursive framing, and contours of political power.'* (Peck 2011, p 20).

Further analysis of the recent academic writing on the topic (Peck 2011, Theodore et al. 2012) indicates that the recent views reveal policy making as a more sophisticated process. As noted above the policy making process is largely a diffused process with many actors influencing the outcomes. The nature of exchange is increasingly networked, with not only institutional participants taking part in the process, but also broader set of policy making environment?, acting in cooperation. This often include institutions and providing advice and 'independent' expert evidence base for policy making - including various think-tanks, corporate consulting companies, influencers and mediators, expert advisors and organizations. These networks cooperate with each other in setting up the tone for discussion on policy.

There are many examples that illustrate these approaches in practice of dissemination of advice on best-practice. In the latest discussions on formulation of a new urban policy, the Polish government relied on reports prepared in cooperation with OECD (OECD 2011). Equally, the highly publicized annual report of PriceWaterhouseCoopers on the state of the Polish cities was officially endorsed by the Ministry of Regional Development and co-authored by the network of mayors of largest cities (the Union of Polish Metropolises). The document detailed the infrastructural investment needs that were required to match the 'developmental gap' between Poland and Western European cities'. The report details a set of funding mechanisms based on the use of advanced financial engineering, backed by private investments as a potential advice to the local actors and national policy makers (PWC 2012).

The other important mechanism is embedding of the policy in particular discourse on the city that guides the conversations on the directions of potential changes and ensures the consistency of the proposed changes, despite the quick tempo of their deployment. Moreover policy making is becoming a *socialized* process. It can be argued that the narrative of market-driven policies aimed at fostering 'urban competitiveness', at least in the West, dominated debates of both policy makers and urban managers. In the context of post-transition countries such as Poland, these debates where brought through rapid development of home-made capitalism affecting all aspects of urban life. The 'competitive' and developmental agenda was reinforced by actions of both national level institutions as well as broader 'popular' support of these tactics by other actors - national and local politicians, business elites, urban boosters or supporters subscribing to the developmental agenda. At the local level, the city is also the place where these mechanisms can be contested.

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4. Community leaders and urban movements - new turn in debate on governance and 'policy innovation'?

Perhaps the biggest achievement of the Occupy movement was to put issues such as income disparity, rising inequality and social polarization again in the vocabulary of public debates in countries considered as originators and supporters of 'neoliberal' policies. The efficacy and long-lasting effect of the movement outside the United States or the United Kingdom may be limited, although other parts of the World witnessed similar waves of protests including Spain, Chile and Israel. Many of these failed to produce a lasting political momentum on their own or as with Tahrir Square the political actions through the voting booth (Khalil 2012). What the protests did though was to enable, what Sassen calls, 'the powerless to make history' (Sassen 2011) giving space and time to rally and voice the dissent (Tarrow 2011).

What probably matters the most, is what Hardt and Negri called in their analysis of the protests as the 'lack -- or failure -- of mechanisms of political representation'. What they describe as the inadequacy of existing systems to engage with their constituencies, by the traditional means of electoral politics (Castells 2007) and polls (Hardt Negri 2011). As it can be argued such problems persist at the local level, when processes of urban development both participated in creating conditions of the financial crisis as well as created strong self-reinforcing mechanism of managing urban growth.

The inadequacy of communication and political representation as well as its changing dynamics provided a fertile ground for discussions on providing alternatives to the existing state of affairs. In his analysis of societal changes under the new technologies of communication Castells identifies the relationship between new ways of organizing under the transformative social agendas and customized, horizontal and individualized communication on supporting the growth social movements. More importantly he identified the role of transformative ideas in helping the mobilization of these collective efforts (Castells 2007). In the case of urban issues a joint narrative was provided through the rejuvenated debate on the much discussed concept of the 'Right to the City' (Lefevbre 1996, Harvey 2008). Harvey aptly interpreted both the increasing role of cities in ensuring the growth of global capitalism and the need to increase control through civic counter power. In his essay on the right to the city he wrote '*the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon <u>the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization</u>'* (Harvey 2008). In Harvey's words a *'working slogan and a political ideal'* the right acts as a direction for action.

In the context of Poland, referenced here, the reaction to pressing urban issues and deficiencies of local governments to sufficiently address them became a rally point for a growing number of bottom-up social movements. What differentiates this development as a recent phenomenon is the urban dimension of these action. In fact, the members of the Polish 'movements' distanced themselves from the existing organizational and social structures such as non-governmental organizations, professional institutions, think-tanks or other various short-term organizations formed 'for the cause' (Mergler 2011). Perhaps the best description of the members of these movements could be described as 'concerned citizens', as many of them grew organically from various grass-roots community movements that emerged in major Polish cities. The unique factor was that the movements managed to form national ties and a coherent agenda on taking action in shaping the urban environment. The members of the movement, initially gathering approx. 50 organizations, converged nationally in June 2011. The formulated collective demands, so-called 'Theses on the City' (KRM 2011) almost exclusively contained postulates that referred to an urban agenda. Amongst them more fundamental demands for social equity and the 'right to the city' were

put side by side with calls to address purely urban issues: to stem the sprawl of cities, give support to more coherent and joint metropolitan governance or align policy with the objectives of the Leipzig Charter. The apolitical character (in the sense of traditional, mainstream partisan politics) of the declaration   reveals the nature of engagement in urban matters as well as the all encompassing nature of the movements. Indeed the control over urban space, as theoretized by Lefevbre and many others (Harvey 2008, 2012, Nawratek 2011), became intrinsically a political issue. The very substance of these claims also matters, as the accumulating effects of the liberal urbanization and *laissez faire* approach of local governments to urban growth in the specific context of post-socialist development gave rise to many of these claims.

5. Engaging with radical planning tactics in post-2009 world

The fundamental issue is still how to engage with the alternative discourses in the planning of cities. It is tempting to highlight policies and solutions to 'fix' the deficiency of citizen's engagement or political representation. The recurring postulates of urban movements however, let alone the Polish manifesto, refer to general and foundational issues (KRM 2011). Some of the proposals do refer to tangible policy mechanisms that can be implemented and have potentially transformative, long-term potential. These practices include elements of 'fast' policy making, through adaptation of international practices. The circulation of these was negotiated and adopted through mechanisms of local governance, social activism and alternative discourses on governance.

In considering proposals of practices it is important to see them as a component of more substantial long-term claims to change the nature of urban policy, as well as they are grounded in particular sets of values. An analysis of some examples of such actions illustrates how the mechanisms of mobilization and cooperation enable the practices to enter the mainstream debates. I am summarizing two recent Polish examples of 'participatory budgeting' and proposed legal changes to the system of local governance (the draft Komorowski 'Act on Strengthening of the Public Participation in Local Governments, Cooperation of Gminas, Poviats and Voivodships and Changes of Other Acts, 2011) as examples of practices that were created in the spirit of concepts such as the 'right to the city' or right to radically rebuild the way the city operates.

A participatory budget, a solution pioneered in Brazilian Porto Allegre, was one of the mechanisms that was recently implemented in a few larger Polish cities as a pilot scheme. Initially, in Poland the concepts were associated either with anarchist ideas of radical self-governance (Górski 2007) or environmental concepts of sustainable cities (Gerwin 2010). The key idea of this strategy is to allocate an amount of the municipal budget to be distributed according to popular vote. In Sopot, city residents deliberate and submit their proposals on how to allocate the money. The vote was also open to the municipal departments.

Initially, the budget was pioneered in Sopot, a small coastal town in the north of the country, in May 2011. The second city to adopt this solution was Lodz, which in May 2012 voted the resolution to implement the mechanism in 2014. In Poznan, a large city with strong local activism, the participatory budgeting was discussed but the Council did not succeed to enact the mechanism after substantial opposition from the Mayor and members of the ruling majority. In lieu of these mechanisms, the alliance of local activists - 'My Poznaniacy' organized events to discuss and educate residents on the budgetary issues and lobby for the adjustments, voted through Councilors that were in opposition.

The initial results of budgeting efforts in cities opting for participatory budgeting were relatively small, but promising in terms of long-term involvement. In the scale of financial results - the authorities did not allocate more than 8% of the investment budget to be decided

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in the vote. In Sopot the authorities allocated less than 7 mln. PLN (approximately €1.69 mln.) to spend, which resulted in a relatively minor scale of investment on improvements to urban space. Still, it must be said that in case of Poznan, the discussion on the budget took place at a time when the city came under severe financial stress, expressed by the growing budget deficit, cause by previous investment policy (Mergler 2012). The urban debate on the civic budget became a travesty, when discussion on civic participation became a 'deliberative' debate on the implementation of austerity cuts. The political effects of the success of the budgeting exercises were more tangible, in cases where the city council and city officials became more accustomed with the solution and granted the necessary political support to the concept. In Sopot, the capacity building both by the members of urban movements and the local authority was an important part of this effort. In Poznan preparation of the proposal to test the participatory budget was preceded by discussions between a coalition of local non-governmental organizations, activists and members of the social movements, including members of local anarchist groups (Mergler 2012) before submitting the proposals to the local governments. In Sopot the involvement of local activists was crucial in mobilizing, educating and setting the proposals to be debated by the city Councilors.

Mobilization of the community groups was not only needed to put the proposal on the vote but also to ensure the stewardship and its long-term continuity over the initiative. The members of the movements, engaged in the preparation of the budgeting proposals, recruited from the local community groups. It also must be said that in Sopot and Poznan the initial proposal were strongly opposed by Mayors offices, which were seen as the move to undermine the authority of this institution. On the other hand, the budgeting exercise became a well-publicized case that made its way to the public debate. When the leading figures of the Polish culture negotiated with the Office of Prime Minister the agreement on increasing the public funding for art in May 2011 - the Pact for Culture, the use of participatory budgeting as a tool in determining the spending priorities was included in one of the clauses of the document.

The gains made by the activist groups are however fragile and are often met with opposition from the local political elites, lobbying for stalling significant changes to the system. The conundrum is illustrated by recent attempts to substantially expand the mechanisms of citizens control in local governments through the comprehensive law reform by the proposed 'Act on Strengthening the Public Participation...'.

One of the intentions of the Act was to formalize various practices, implemented by the local governments as a national law. Amongst the key proposals that would be enacted by the proposed law were mechanisms such as mandatory minimum public participation standards, requirements for public hearings when local laws are debated, a mechanism of formal public inquiry, rules on citizen-led legislative initiatives, simplified regulations on forming civic associations that were eligible for public financial support, mechanisms of local funding for civic initiatives or establishment of local citizens forums (FDP, 2011). The major benefit of such decision would be to standardize and guarantee the practices that otherwise were developed more organically in various cities. Since its establishment in 1990 the system of Polish local governments was based on the principle of strong independence of policy making. Many municipalities developed their own successful participatory mechanisms such as auxiliary, citizen-led borough councils (Gdansk) or comprehensive system of citizen advisory committees (Warsaw), inscribed in municipal charter of laws. Still these mechanisms depended on local traditions of policy making and many of the municipalities had limited experience with their implementation. In that sense the act would guarantee equal access to a wide variety of participatory tools to citizens of every municipality in Poland.

Whilst the Act was hardly a revolutionary move in the context of more advanced Western democracies, yet pro-participatory provisions of the proposal were met with substantial push back from the representatives of the local governments and their respective organizations.

Amongst them, the lobby of city Mayors the Union of Polish Metropolises, lodged a well publicized critique of the Act, stating that current practice in fact was going against the concept of self-governance, limiting the ability to define the local practices to suit local experience in policy making (UMP, 2011). The opposition of the local administration quashed the project as in March 2012 the President declared that he is not going to pursue the proposed reform.

The failure of the proposed push for modernization, illustrates that the local administration still maintain their *status quo* in framing the discussion on participatory mechanisms and can successfully maintain the hold on how the processes are enacted. The decision to stall the de-evolution of local power may come at the cost of a growing gap between the formalized decision making and the informal, radial arenas of policy making and innovation. In other words – it may result in closing down the access to potential solutions for betterment of city policies. In the worst case, the local institutions may find themselves woefully out of synch with new concepts of politics where urban policies are discussed through horizontal civic networks, local activist forums and other alternative channels of communication creating a frustrating *lose-lose* scenario for both of the involved parties.

The issue of coercion of 'radical' planning into the service of the capital and established 'status quo' inevitably rises in debates on enacting the change, especially when met with *realpolitik* of governmental institutions or municipal business actors. Critical thinkers, such as Marcuse identify a whole gamut of actions that range from technical efficiency improvements and 'liberal reforms' - processes that don't substantially challenge power relations to genuine 'transformative' claims (Marcuse 2012). What perhaps is important is the fact that many of the proposals include many of these aspects. As the promoters of the participatory budgeting, say, is to grow the 'culture of democracy' (Gerwin 2011). Also, as it was in the case of both Poznan and national level policy - the attempts to radically accelerate the changes will be met with local realities, legacies of careless public investment policies and significant vested financial and political interests.

When it comes to the 'fast planning' paradigm, especially to concepts of 'speeding up' or 'streamlining' local government, the potential efforts could possibly be interpreted as integration of the mechanisms that enable more seamless social control over the decision making and sharing of the responsibility of decision making. The examples of practices summarized above were attempts to adjust the structures of local self governance to act accordingly to the concepts of citizen-led governance and increased transparency of decision making. One could argue that these attempts do not allow an avoidance of the problems of 'Janus-faced' side of governance-outside-government (Swyngedouw 2004). In such case the accountability of the civic engagement may be questioned as more powerful elites could use such methods to press for creation of more *entrepreneurial* urban policy agenda. The current or proposed practices alone do not guarantee that, what probably does are the civic structures of engagement - community activist networks and urban movements, which may provide necessary 'checks and balances' for the traditional mechanisms of representative urban democracy.

6. Conclusions - fast planning of what kind of future? Role of community leaders and planners

The dilemmas summarized in this paper have implications for planning practice as planners become engaged in discussions on the effects of recent economic challenges as well as ideas on how to face their consequences. It can be argued that the 'fast planning' paradigm is not a radically new concept as similar tactics were implemented in pushing for market-oriented development policies and acceleration of particular types of urban development strategies. These policies are distributed through channels of communication and mutual learning that are set up in particular ideological and setting that ensures that these policies

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are market oriented and primarily 'business friendly' policies. In the post-2008 world it is perhaps worth to ask if there are viable alternatives to the models replicated in the West through the last three decades and more recently permeating into the non-Western cities.

As local governments and their planning agencies may be increasingly faced with demands to engage with 'radical' planning concepts it is also worth asking how the process is integrated in practice. It is tempting to try to conjure a positivist, easy to define set of solutions. Perhaps instead the best, 'fast' advice would be to become more open towards the idea of embedding alternative discourses, and their concepts in the day to day practice of institutions. The details of such cooperation as in the case of participatory budgets emerge through local, discursive practices first. Indeed, cities act as laboratories of new practices.

In Poland the activists remain 'at arms length' with government structures but remain actively involved in monitoring, commenting and engaging in their activities. Ultimately, these claims are less and less focused on local matters as they increasingly contain serious transformative proposals that apply to all cities. To be truly effective these proposals still need an institutional context to develop successfully and be able to efficiently affect the strategic management of cities.

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