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From concrete to abstract regional planning strategies in North West England: building and legitimizing discourses and mobilizing actors for spatial transformation?

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ABSTRACT

This study questions if abstract regional planning strategies are fit to respond to changing societal and political conditions. We compare regional planning strategy making in North West England. Findings suggest that abstract strategies are more effective in building than managing transformative discourses. Results show that: (I) transformative discourses need to be built around manageable regional socio-spatial and spatial-economic disparities; (II) policy entrepreneurs should be targeted with equal consideration for power and counterpower; and (III) the regional planning authority should have access to specific funding schemes. It is our ultimate aim to re-energize strategic regional planning debates in England and beyond.

Introduction

The limitations of local governments and regional planning authorities in taking forward their comprehensive plans drove them to incorporate a more strategic approach to their spatial planning processes (Denhardt, 1985; Nadin et al., 2020). This strategic turn in spatial planning helped save comprehensive plans in a critical period when they were under political pressure to prove 'useful' (Poister & Streib, 2005). Hence, governments have used approaches such as visioning and multi-actor collaboration, alongside land-use zoning, in a deliberative planning process to encourage more coordinated and strategic oriented actions to shape spatial development and transformation (Palka et al., 2020). In this context, strategic spatial planning, understood here as a response to the complexity of spatial developments reflecting a shift towards territory-based governance configurations (Oliveira & Hersperger, 2018), assume a pivotal role, primarily at the urban regional level. The strategic spatial planning process can be defined as 'mediating between the respective claims on space of the state, market, and community around three considerations: stakeholder involvement, policy integration, and implementation'

(Ziafati Bafarasat, 2015, p. 132), and is intended to support cities and urbanized regions prioritize between their many spatial policies and projects (Healey, 2007). Here we define projects, as being strategic in nature, entailing goals of regional development and tacking spatial inequalities (cf. Pagliarin et al., 2020). These are typically large-scale spatial development enterprises, working as fast-track plan-implementation approaches to ensure that spatial transformation happens on the ground in key strategic domains (Hersperger et al., 2019; Salet, 2007). These key domains often involve the regeneration of outdated industrial or transportation facilities supporting urban densification (Oliveira & Hersperger, 2018), urban renewals of deprived neighbourhoods (Fainstein, 2008), waterfront renewal (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019) and improvements to transport infrastructures (Rius-Ulldemolins & Gisbert, 2019).

Strategic spatial plan-implementation through projects gained a regional relevance in recent years (Granqvist et al., 2020). This is partly because of the increasing context of economic globalization and the growing importance of regions and city-regions in anchoring and nurturing nodes of dense economic, social and political activity (Etherington & Jones, 2009). Strategic spatial plans or strategic regional plans often incorporate concrete, well-defined goals, albeit with a rather limited set of priorities or focus on key planning issues and specific plan-implementation directives. In line with Albrechts and Balducci (2017) and Olesen and Richardson (2012), we define 'concrete regional planning strategies' as those strategies that have a clearly defined spatial focus and are embraced by a set of binding measures having physical or material effects on the ground. They serve as a long-term instrument that provides strategic direction for future spatial development (Kiessling & Pütz, 2020). Examples of these concrete measures supporting the strategy include brownfield redevelopment, regional parks and ecologically oriented mobility patterns which, together, shape and frame spatial transformation towards sustainability (cf. Olesen & Metzger, 2017; Oliveira & Hersperger, 2018; Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016).

Conversely, 'abstract regional planning strategies' are often more difficult to grasp in terms of their effectiveness in supporting spatial transformation. Abstract strategies entail a simple spatial ordering, often distant from the spatial context; yet abstract strategies have the potential to work as a starting point for later-defined concrete strategies, thus providing a basis for structural change (Fedeli, 2017) and spatial transformation (Healey, 2003). In line the work of Davoudi et al. (2018), we put forward a definition of abstract regional planning strategies as a form of spatial imaginary. They enforce discourses and are focused on responding to changing societal and political conditions. Therefore, adding to the various features of spatial imaginaries discussed by Davoudi et al. (2018), and more specifically in a regional context by Macleod and Jones (2007), we seek to emphasise the importance of paying attention to how abstract regional planning strategies gain effectiveness in enabling real spatial transformation. Furthermore, Albrechts and Balducci (2017, p. 15) underline that 'There is ample evidence that in many strategic plans the often more abstract discourse is turned into something more tangible and is redefined into a more familiar vocabulary of statutory planning'. However, spatial planning literature has seldom explored the real potential for spatial transformation of abstract regional planning strategies.

One possible way to do this is through a comparison with concrete regional planning strategies. However, there are many ways to explore this gap. We have chosen here to do

it through discourse analysis and the overall legitimization of the narratives linked to such planning discourses, the mobilization of actors, including policy entrepreneurs and formulation of strategic projects. In doing so, we follow the conceptualization and methodological procedures adopted by Beel et al. (2020) on the creation of The North Wales Growth Deal. The definition put forward by Davoudi and colleagues (2020) is also relevant as it underlines that, within spatial regional planning, the abstracted value of spatial imaginaries enact representations of places of 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow'. In this line of thought, Healey (2007) stresses that the meaning of strategy making has changed from designing concrete spatial strategies to building discourses and narratives. This lies at the heart of a school of thought on strategic spatial planning which Ziafati Bafarasat (2015) terms transformative strategy formulation. Some planning scholars support a statutory status for such regional planning strategies in order to increase their prospects of making real change on the ground and supporting an overall spatial transformation (e.g. Baker & Wong, 2013; Boddy & Hickman, 2013; Gallent et al., 2013). Meanwhile, other academics, reinforce the mobilizing power of planning discourses leading to projects without reliance on legally binding documents or concrete regional planning strategies (Albrechts, 2001; Albrechts & Van den Broeck, 2004; Van Duinen, 2013). Their examples, however, tend to come from contexts in which institutional thickness facilitates what Faludi (2001) describes as 'shaping the minds of actors involved in spatial development' (p. 664). In the United States (US), for instance, the legitimacy of local government stems from a societal belief in local autonomy and democratic self-government, while sovereign national governments are legitimized by their constitutional powers. In contrast, regional authorities such as councils of governments, metropolitan planning organizations, joint planning districts, among others, are at a systematic disadvantage compared with local or central government entities that possess long-established legal or constitutional authority, allowing them to deliver services directly to citizens (Taylor, 2019; Ziafati Bafarasar, 2018). Taylor (2019) provides further reflections on legitimizing discourses through a comparison of the post-war development of regional planning authorities in the US, specifically in Minneapolis–St Paul (commonly known as the Twin Cities), Minnesota, and Portland, Oregon. In the United Kingdom, until recently, the emphasis has been on the more traditional forms of land use planning introduced by the Town and Country Planning Act (1947). Over the last decade, as the ideas associated with spatial planning have been debated at European level, they have become more widely disseminated across the United Kingdom (UK) and, in particular, in England (Atkinson, 2010).

Embracing in this paper these fragmented contexts of spatial strategy making, as in England (Bryson & Slotterback, 2016), two critical research question remain unexplored: '*Can abstract regional planning strategies address socio-spatial and spatial-economic disparities?*' and '*To what extent are abstract regional planning strategies able to mobilize actors and thus legitimize discourses?*'. The next section reviews strategic regional planning processes in England in order to prepare the ground for the subsequent section explaining the case study selection (of North West of England region), data collection and analysis. The abstract nature of the *Regional Planning Guidance for the North West* 1996 (GONW, 1996) is the backbone of our historical analysis. We then present our empirical findings under three core sub-headings: (i) building discourses around

regional planning strategies in North West England, (ii) legitimizing regional planning discourses and (iii) mobilizing actors around regional planning strategies.

Regional planning strategies in England in light of periodical political shifts

In England, the strategic approach to spatial planning was embedded in regional planning during the 1960s (Denhardt, 1985; Sartorio, 2005). At the regional level, the core topic of territorial disparities rendered the strategic turn more controversial (Glasson, 1992; Hall, 2002). However, advocates of this turn justified it by the mistrust of addressees of a regional plan whose diverse political, parochial and organizational interests arguably drive them to conflict over the misuse of 'bendable' content (Lloyd & Rowan-Robinson, 1988). Some argue that it is this prospect of 'bend-ability', which widens participation in, and consumption of, a strategy (e.g. Abdallah & Langley, 2014). Others oppose this view by giving credit for such engagement to more robust content and predictable impacts (Margerum, 2002; Roberts, 1996). Nevertheless, analyses of Anglo-American evidence suggest that the strategic spatial planning approach offloaded contentious decisions from the central and local levels to regional planning (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Hager, 2012; Richardson, 1981). However, at the regional level, strategy makers often have far less power in comparison to ministers, senior civil servants, local politicians and business representatives. Regional planning strategies in England have not usually had a statutory status (Alden, 2006) but their specific directives on territorial cohesion were a cause of concern by some local governments signing up to them in the light of support by international organizations and central government institutions (Glasson & Marshall, 2007; Norris, 2001). Even where strategy makers sought to embrace wide-ranging inputs from strategy addressees and stakeholders, it still proved tough to engage them in making choices that could be disadvantageous to their individual local or sectoral objectives or limit their future options (Wannop, 2013).

Concrete regional planning strategies have, therefore, had an unsteady position in England. This is reflected in several publications analysing their regretful demise or welcoming their return with emphasis on the need for stronger central commitment, wider input in strategy making, improvement in the review system and alike (e.g. Dimitriou & Thompson, 2007; Hardill et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2002; Swain et al., 2013). In the 1980s, after two decades of regional experimentation under Labour governments, Margaret Thatcher's administration officially declared the *extinction* of strategic planning in England (Hall, 2007). However, in 1990, the new Conservative government of John Major took a cautious step to support strategic regional planning in order to stimulate inward investment in lagging behind regions and responding to the upsurge of interest in socio-environmental dimensions of development after the 1987 Brundtland Commission's report (Baker et al., 1999; Glasson & Marshall, 2007; Redclift, 2005; Robinson, 2004). Regional planning conferences were organized and further invited to prepare advisory pieces to be submitted to the Secretary of the State, who would then consider and issue the advice for each region in terms of Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006; Pearce & Ayres, 2006).

Amid the preparation of RPGs, the European Union's (EU) establishment in 1993, with an emphasis on territorial cohesion through its structural funds and political processes, marked a 'policy window' to pursue socio-spatial objectives at the regional level. For Kingdon (1995/2013), 'policy windows' are an opportunity for pushing one's proposals; their efficacy depends on the favourable conditions to impetus a given subject higher on the policy agenda. Kingdon states clearly that – policy windows are open for only a while, and then they close. In the UK, the publication of *Sustainable Development: The United Kingdom Strategy* by the government in 1994 made Britain the first EU member to prepare such a strategy (Russel, 2007). During these times, planners at the regional level mainly worked on producing advice or advisory reports. This created a tendency among them to prepare loosely worded and abstract contents in the first round of RPG, including in the North West, and this was followed by considerable scholarly criticism for having done too little when several policy windows were opened in a short period (e.g. Baker et al., 1999; Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006; Haughton & Counsell, 2004). For example, Kitchen (1999) argued that 'these broad generalities, although not unhelpful, actually meant that the guidance had little impact … The issue, of course, is whether strategic guidance at the regional scale should be as unimportant as this' (p. 6).

Mounting pressure from planning academics and professionals for concrete, more robust strategies (e.g. Roberts, 1996) coupled with the election of a New Labour administration in 1997 provided the context for a gradual return to a more concrete, decision-making model. In the first step taken in this direction, the newly established Regional Assemblies (RAs) were entrusted with preparing a second generation of RPGs that exhibited more specificity, incorporating new housing figures and locations and a Regional Transport Strategy (Glasson & Marshall, 2007; Ziafati Bafarasat & Baker, 2016). Draft strategies were examined by the central government and then published by the Government Offices (GOs). Regional Economic Strategies (RES) were also introduced; these were prepared, issued and part-delivered by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) (Pearce & Ayres, 2009). RDAs were established for all the English regions through the Regional Development Agency Act 1998 (Shields & Wray, 2019). These quangos were appointed and funded by the government to promote inward investment and assist in reducing economic disparities, with the latter often playing a secondary role (Hall, 2007; Pearce & Ayres, 2009). The *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act* of 2004 (HM Government, 2004) formalized and extended the earlier evolution of regional planning processes and strategy outputs, replacing RPGs with Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) which, for the first time, now had a statutory status and an explicit sub-regional remit, but still needed to be delivered by others (Baker & Wong, 2013; ODPM, 2004). Although the RSS was not uniform across the country in terms of level of detail or approach, conflicts between the regional planning bodies and some localities over the more concrete aspects of the new RSS, especially around expected housing numbers within local authorities, erupted to the extent that a number of them resulted in high profile court cases (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Haughton et al., 2010). The 2010-elected Coalition government subsequently blamed RSS for its interventionist attitude and abolished it along with the RES and the associated institutions under a 'localist' agenda with an increased focus on the local community (Gallent et al., 2013; Hickson, 2013).

Case study selection and research methodology

These processes of regional strategy making in England in the early 1990s is therefore an appropriate starting point for the aims of this study, incorporating the culminating in 1996 with the publication of the first regional planning guidance document for the North West of England: *Regional Planning Guidance for the North West* (GONW, 1996) which, as already mentioned and in common with the first round of RPG in many regions, was a rather vague and generalized document, lacking policy specificity – in other words, an abstract regional strategy in the context of this paper. Scholarly accounts in the early 1990s point to the North West of England as a region faced by rooted socio-spatial and spatial-economic disparities. Demands to develop regional spatial strategies were in high demand to address some of these disparities (Burch & Holliday, 1993; Glasson, 1992). Disparities such as housing accessibility, quality of public transportation networks and a lack of public services availability had not been overcome in the decades of the 1960s and1970s, even though regional strategy making under the classic decision-making model had been in place. Back in the 1970s, scholars such as Nuttall and Batty (1970), Mercer and Powell (1972) and Rodgers (1975) urged the North West Joint Planning Team through the *Strategic Plan for the North West* (NWJPT, 1974) to tackle these disparities. By the 1990s, these issues still remained largely unsolved, and the first still provided a focus for the region's five sub-divisions [i.e. Cumbria, Cheshire, Lancashire, and the two metropolitan areas of Manchester and Liverpool or Merseyside].

Altogether, this context justifies the North West of England as a suitable case study area for this paper. The abstract nature of the *Regional Planning Guidance for the North West* 1996 (GONW, 1996) therefore constitutes the centrepiece of our historical analysis. In addition, the following plans were also content analysed for the purpose of this study: The draft of the second Regional Planning Guidance for the North West (henceforth also as for the region) (RPG) (GONW, 2002); the second RPG (GONW, 2003); the draft of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for the region (NWRA, 2006); the final RSS (GONW, 2008); the first Regional Economic Strategy (RES) for the region (NWDA, 2000); and the second RES (NWDA, 2006). We also discuss the results of 28 in-depth retrospective interviews with regional planners, civil servants, local authorities (including politicians and planning officers), and interest groups affiliated with regional planning authorities and local governments in the North West of England region. The interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2015. Five of the overall 28 interviewees were randomly selected and contacted in 2019 by the authors for an updated view of their preliminary insights. In the next section of the paper we discuss the results of the document analysis and interviews under three analytical dimensions of regional planning: building discourses; the legitimization of such discourses; and the mobilization of actors.

Building discourses around regional planning strategies in North West of England region

The advice that the Government Office for the North West submitted to the Secretary of State in 1994 was entitled *Greener Growth* (GONW, 1996). As a Memorandum by the

Government Office highlighted (see House of Commons, 1998), this title implied the central problem around which the document was constructed. The resultant RPG initially discusses a systematic degeneration in the physical, economic and socio-environmental assets of the region. The decline of its industries deserves a focus: 'The North West was one of the world's first industrial regions … but over the last few decades it has experienced steady decline, relative to UK and European averages, in output, employment, incomes and population. There is a legacy of unemployment, industrial dereliction, pollution and outdated surface and underground infrastructure' (GONW, 1996, pp. 3–4). Whereas the document praises economic regeneration policies for encouraging significant private sector investment in the manufacturing sector, it suggests 'the extent of derelict and underused land and the quality of the existing housing stock remains a particularly acute problem in the North West' (GONW, 1996, p. 5). This suggested that economic regeneration had not yet reached the level to stimulate other aspects of regeneration. The main priorities therefore conveyed only modest action on other socio-environmental aspects in line with the further expansion of viable employment activities. In its subsequent section, the RPG supports this message by suggesting that regeneration should be 'founded' in the expansion and diversification of industrial activities (GONW, 1996).

The RPG strategy considers continued economic decline or 'degeneration' as a transmissible phenomenon across political geographies that requires action at similar scales under new partnerships (GONW, 1996). It suggests five '*Priority Regeneration Areas*' that, in effect, form two integrated territories with innovative boundaries (GONW, 1996) (Figure 1). These Areas provide a loose spatial direction in which to explore regeneration solutions from regional employment sites (in the flexible range of 8–50 hectares) to complementary measures such as infrastructure improvement, social assistance and housing repair and renewal. Housing renewal is, however, advised to be kept to a minimum as significant renewal is seen to be inconsistent with a genuine partnership approach to regeneration that involves more than just the urban cores and business voices. The Areas cover parts of all sub-regional representations of the North West in strategy making and leave almost no scope for political contestation in that respect (GONW, 1996).

The terminology of the strategy is usually consistent with its objective, legal status and addressees. One of the interviewees involved in the making of the first RPG noted: '*we always reminded ourselves that we were addressing people in high positions … We spent much time to work out what and how much to say in order to make impact from a humble and safe position*'. There is, however, a noticeable exception. A main mechanism advised in the strategy to support regeneration is the preservation of Green Belt boundaries. In this regard, the strategy departs from principles of conditional discourse (Van Eemeren, 2018; Van Eemeren et al., 2015). Drawing from Van Eemeren's (2018) argumentation theory, conditional discourse reflects the argumentation that stakeholders or decision-makers have at their disposal for reaching a decision aligned with their own benefit. This argumentation will often entail offers, counter-offers and conditional promises such as 'If you allow X, we will do Y' or conditional threats such as 'No Y before you do X'. Argumentation arises in response to, or in anticipation of, a difference of opinion, whether this difference of opinion is real or merely imagined (Van Eemeren et al., 2014). For example, when advising against the interests of some key actors, the
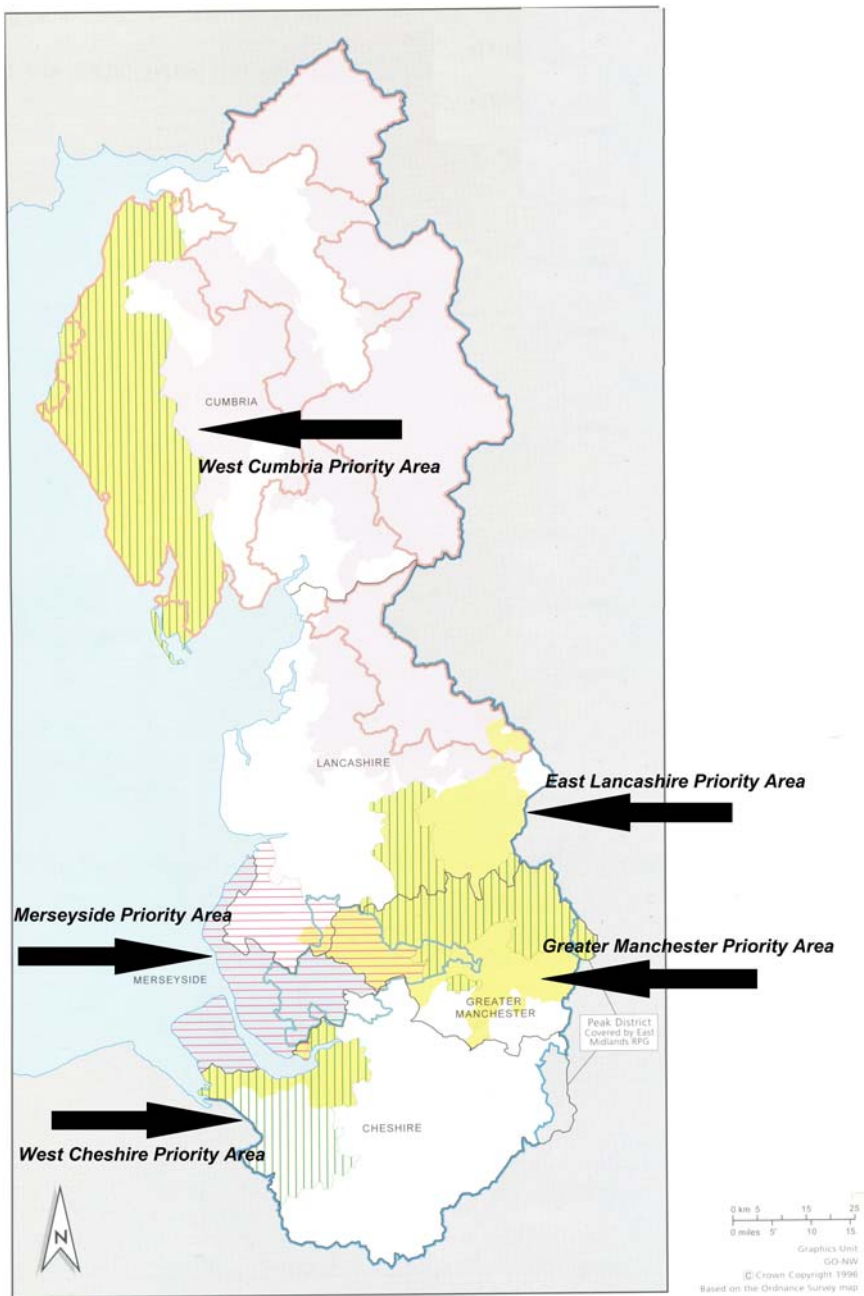
Figure 1. Priority Regeneration Areas in the first RPG for the North West (Source of the original map: GONW, 1996, p. 28).

Government Office for the North West suggested that 'in Greater Manchester additional households are expected to be accommodated without incursion into the Green Belt; pressure on the Green Belt in Cheshire will continue to be resisted' (GONW, 1996, p. 7). This could potentially prompt some key regional actors with an economic interest

in housing to hijack, from the early stages, the discourse of the strategy on physical regeneration so that they could make a profit through large scale renewal projects. Our interview results evidence a high political status for the strategy at that time in terms of a pathway towards sustainable development. Therefore, every message in the strategy had important discourse implications for consumers with various intentions.

Analysing discourses involving the first RPG thus seems to indicate the following main points. First, degeneration was portrayed as a systematic problem across North West England. Secondly, regeneration should be holistic, although economic regeneration has priority and underlies other aspects. Thirdly, in terms of physical regeneration, housing renewal is seen as less preferable and less consistent with the partnerships approaches that are needed to deal with systematic and transmissible decline. Fourthly, there are five broad areas identified, with innovative and often cross-neighbouring boundaries, in which regeneration solutions need to be figured out.

Legitimizing regional planning discourses

The first Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) built its discourses with intelligent opportunism of the policy windows that were opened just before and amid its preparation. At the same time that the first national sustainable development framework was published for the country, a regional strategy, *Greener Growth* (GONW, 1996), was submitted to the government. Throughout this document, the term 'sustainable' was applied 22 times to describe large-scale regeneration projects. The strategy was also effective in a quick reaction to the introduction of EU structural funds by indicating how the Priority Regeneration Areas connected the zones covered in the region (GONW, 1996). Therefore, the type of regeneration that the first RPG promoted was reflected as being consistent with high level politics and encompassing similar initiatives. A Civil servant interviewee stressed that '*in those days, and I assume it is still the case, if you wanted to get funding, two basic questions were: "how is your scheme of national importance" and "how does it help complement or, more importantly, conclude others"*'.

However, the scale of intended change implied that regional spatial strategies needed to move beyond drawing on existing policy windows; there was also a need to push for the creation of new ones through rationality, voices of expertise and altruism (Reyes, 2011). However, this second, and perhaps more important, element of legitimation was instead carried out by strategy clients (other actors) rather than the strategy authors, partly because '*the Regional Assembly did not have enough resources for significant pieces of research*' (Civic representative interviewee). As a result, when the RDA's first RES for the region was published in 2000, it supported the Priority Regeneration Areas of the first RPG but distorted the holistic component of the discourse by reflecting it in terms of coordination of physical regeneration. The RES set out an intention to assess the need for housing renewal across the Priority Regeneration Areas (NWDA, 2000). Beyond the initial intentions of the Regional Planning body, between 1999 and 2001, a coalition of housing organizations (that, along with the RDA and Core Cities Group, led the campaign) commissioned the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) at the University of Birmingham (UK), which had national reputation for 'social' planning, to establish the discourse of property-led regeneration (Webb, 2010).

In 2001, the findings of the research *Changing Housing Markets and Urban Regeneration in the M62 Corridor* (which runs through the major cities in the two northern regions of North West and Yorkshire and the Humber) were published (Nevin et al., 2001). The findings derived from this research, which was subsequently extended to other regions, evidence an urgent need for the creation of sub-regional Housing Market Renewal (HMR) Areas (Cole & Nevin, 2004). The researchers that were involved made a submission to the HM Treasury's Comprehensive Spending Review in the same year (Nevin, 2001). The research reflected holistic regeneration as coordination within the HMR agenda which, for example, would be tenure blind (see Cole & Nevin, 2004; Nevin et al., 2001).

In 2002, the regional planning authority (GONW), which had just lost out to the campaign in respect of major opportunity for the legitimation of the original, more social oriented, discourse, made another attempt for discourse correction in the draft of the second RPG13 which, for example, said: 'in all areas, redevelopment may provide opportunities for a wider mix of tenures and housing choice' (GONW, 2002, p. 55). In 2003, the government launched nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders in the three northern regions as well as in the West Midlands and East Midlands (ODPM, 2003). The scheme recognized the need for social mixing through the diversification of housing types and tenures in the intervention areas to make sure that: 'problems are tackled permanently and not just displaced or deferred' (ODPM, 2003, p. 24). Some civil servants interviewed argued that although discourse corrections by the regional planning authority were not effective in re-engaging with its original track, they did have some effect on the Pathfinders scheme in that, although property-led, it was required to take into account social considerations.

Four Pathfinders were designated in the North West (Figure 2), mostly reflecting the Priority Regeneration Areas of the first RPG with the exclusion of West Cheshire and West Cumbria (NAO, 2007). They marked a significant shift in regeneration policy that had previously been focused on neighbourhoods (Leather & Nevin, 2013). They involved sub-regional partnerships to govern the process and administer the funds. Pathfinder partnerships involved local authorities, RDAs, housing organizations, the private sector, GOs and some others without the presence of regional planning bodies (NAO, 2007). It was within this context that the second RPG for the North West was published in 2003 (GONW, 2003). In the year before its publication, the level of detail within the strategy was increased and its language was tightened. For example, the strategy suggested: 'in all areas redevelopment *should* provide opportunities for a wider mix of tenures and housing choice' (GONW, 2003, p. 67: italics our emphasis) whereas, just one year before that, the draft of the strategy had only used the word, '*may*' (see above: GONW, 2002, p. 55). The strategy retained the Priority Regeneration Areas from its predecessor and interestingly did not reflect the Pathfinders in its main diagram (see GONW, 2003, p. 199).

In this context, the Regional Assembly then got involved in the promotion of a statutory and more detailed concrete regional planning strategies. A former regional planner interviewed, for example, noted that: '*we needed change … we were at the forefront of negotiations with the government for the RSS*'. The Draft North West Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), which was published in 2006, was loaded with concrete integrative content in terms of procedures, responsibilities and locations. In this context, Pathfinders
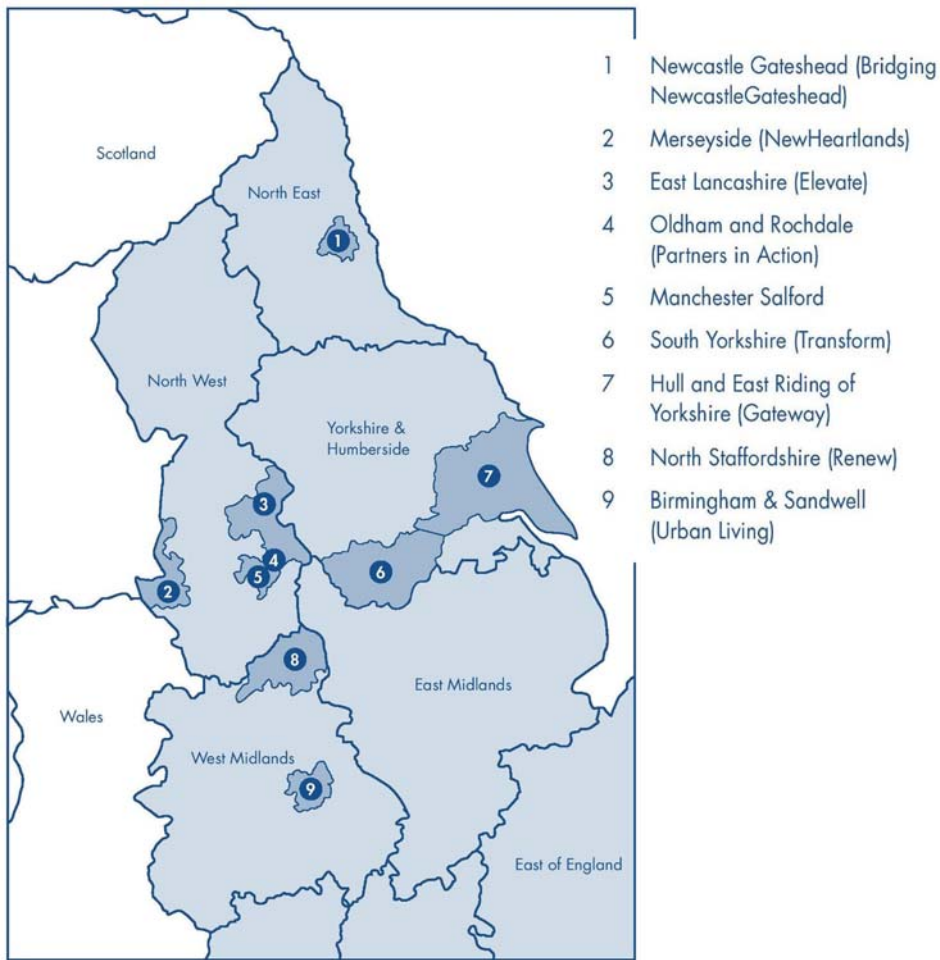
Figure 2. Locations of the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders (Source: NAO, 2007, p. 5).

were now included in the main diagram of the draft and final documents. The final RSS document also incorporated the Priority Regeneration Areas that had been suggested in the first RPG but were not now covered by the Pathfinders (see Figure 3). By that time, however, some high profile local community backlashes against what was seen as population and tenure restructuring of low-income areas had started to surface (Allen, 2008) and strategic planning took part of the blame for outcomes that had taken place against its original intentions. Thus, in the abolition of regional plans and institutions, the 2010-elected government not only reflected the increasing frictions between localities and the more 'concrete' and interventionist RSS but also pointed to the Pathfinders which, in the words of the Minister for Housing and Local Government, 'were often resented by local communities and created as many problems as they solved' (Wilson, 2013, p. 5).

Mobilizing actors around regional planning strategies

The initial RPG does not make any exclusive references to those who might lead the application and delivery of its discourses as it was considered that such references could undermine collective ownership of the strategy and neutralize its counter-power over those so referred. A former regional planner interviewed, noted: '*we wanted leaders to emerge from negotiations in which we had an indirect role … we needed to keep a distance and avoid giving any support that would confine us in the future*'.
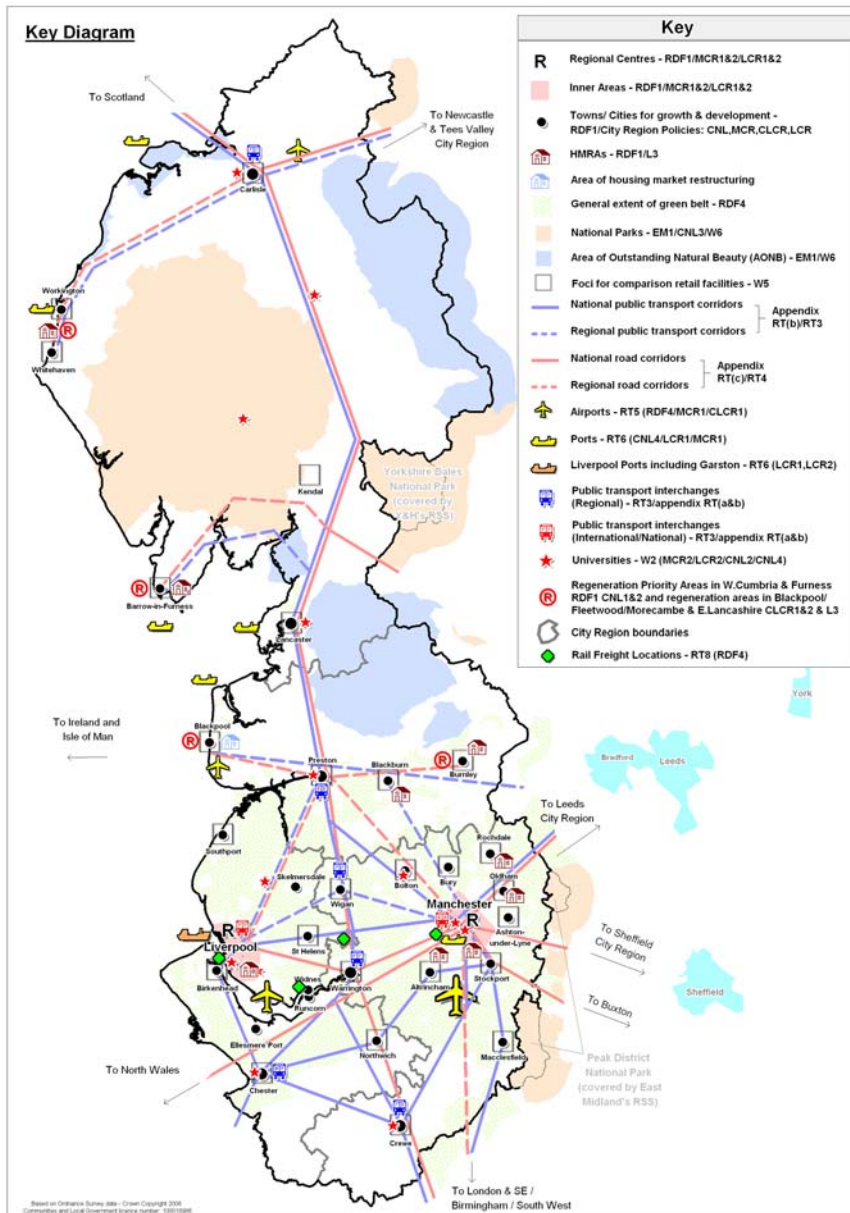

Figure 3. North West Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) Key Diagram (Source: GONW, 2008, p. 21).

However, stakeholders such as housing organizations and the RDA were in effect ruled out and local governments were left to take coherent action on economic and physical regeneration. Political leaders from Manchester and Liverpool, whose constituencies were among the worst hit by urban decline and had strong links with central government, came forward and started a discussion with the RPG team about ways in which political momentum for the subsequent steps could be gained. This is what we call 'targeting policy entrepreneurs'. A second round of discussion took place in 1995. This was the last one, although there were subsequent informal meetings in which most other localities were not present. An interviewee, a local politician from Lancashire, explained the reason for this as follows:

> in the second round, the two main cities suggested that a political lobby of similar metropolitan cores from several regions would be more helpful to the ambitious agenda on the table. Regional planners and people from other areas in the region started to worry about a reconstruction orientation … the two cities could not get such consensus from other areas within the region which valued their weaker population but did not want to take in the poor from bigger cities.

Shortly afterwards, Manchester and Liverpool reached out to Newcastle, Bristol, Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham and Sheffield and established the Core Cities Group in 1995 with its headquarters in Manchester (Quilley, 2000; Tallon, 2010).

The Core Cities Group was an 'unwanted client' for the strategy makers because its fuzzy and trans-regional platform could shield it against pressure from discourse corrections that would affect local government partnerships within the region. In 1998, the Regional Assembly started preparing the second RPG for the region with a stronger emphasis on a broadly conceived vision of regeneration (Baker et al., 1999). The over-application of integrative terminologies in this strategy under the new 'spatial' planning banner was observed by the study participants to be a measure of discourse correction in reaction to the more selective and physical-led distortion of the regeneration discourse underway by the Core Cities Group. Contrary to Forester's earlier work (e.g. Forester, 1989), which is more concerned with analysing the systematic distortions in communication from an abstract reference point of perfect speech as developed by Habermas (Habermas, 1984), discourse distortion here refers to governance arrangements such as alliances or joint decision-making by stakeholders adding new elements to previously defined urban regeneration policies. Discourse distortions, therefore, involve structural forces such as inequalities of income and wealth and more individual factors such as the pursuit of power (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Van Assche et al., 2014). Discourse correction means aligning ongoing discourses; for example, those on urban regeneration, with the original discourse involving strategies and spatial transformation. Discourse correction is thus about overcoming discourse distortions and does not necessarily come about as a result of learning processes as conceptualized by Habermas (Habermas, 1984), but, rather, is more the result of new coalitions of stakeholders acting as strategy makers. In 1999, the Group published *Core Cities: Key Centres for Regeneration* – the report of a study that the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies at Newcastle University carried out for the Group (Charles et al., 1999). In the same year, the Regional Assembly issued the North West's *Action for Sustainability*, which addressed a wide audience of decision-makers, including elected members and

those in the public, private and voluntary sectors (James & Donaldson, 2001). In response to discourse corrections by the then permanent and specialized planning team at the Regional Assembly, Manchester and Liverpool City Councils further extended their regeneration campaign by engaging with the RDA whose view of regeneration was similar to that of the Core Cities Group (see Taylor et al., 2010). The RDA, in turn, involved housing organizations in the campaign, creating a complex web of powerful actors over which the Regional Assembly ultimately had far less influence.

Synthesis and conclusions: the role of abstract regional strategies in the North West of England

In summary, the empirical evidence presented above from the North West of England region suggests that abstract regional planning strategies, such as Greener Growth (NWRA, 2006) can support regional spatial transformation and encourage greater integration of what would otherwise have stayed as separate sectoral strategy areas by drawing in a measure of collective ownership amongst regional leaders and stakeholders. However, it would appear that such abstract strategies are subject to the following potentials and limitations in bringing about real spatial transformations resolving uneven development and socio-spatial inequalities.

- Abstract strategies may have better success in building discourses than subsequently managing them. Their capacity in building persuasive discourses relates to the fact that they can draw on real, fundamental issues without stirring the frictions that a concrete strategy would encounter in framing issues that it would need to offer particular solutions that might then disadvantage certain actors and weaken levels of support.
- Managing discourses in the face of competing politico-economic interests requires a democratic standing or dynamic network power to enable linking discourses with certain actors, policies and investments.
- However, the North West Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) ultimately lacked such a democratic status and its network of local periphery-socio-environmental actors lost stewardship of their original regeneration discourse as new interests distorted the narrative through targeted evidence-building and political issue-making for their own objectives.
- Despite the fact that the North West RPG lost its narrative to more powerful networks, some core elements of its original problem framing remained influential in the course of the later distorted actualization of regeneration.

In this paper, we have sought to understand the extent to which abstract regional planning strategies, which fall within Davoudi et al. (2018) conceptualization of spatial imaginaries, are able to address regional constraints and support real spatial transformation. Abstract regional planning strategies are deeply held, collective understandings of socio-spatial relations that are performed by, give sense to, make possible and change collective socio-spatial practices. This highlighted the production of abstract strategies within a context of policy divergence and change, devolution processes (MacKinnon, 2015) and city-regional deals (Beel et al., 2018). Our empirical investigation in the North West of England region analysed such spatial strategy making processes under the three activities

of building discourses around regional planning strategies, legitimizing regional planning discourses and mobilizing actors around regional planning strategies.

To revisit the critical research questions previously highlighted, '*Can abstract regional planning strategies address socio-spatial and spatial-economic disparities?*'. One mistake observed in discourse building in the case study was a departure from the principles of conditional discourse when advising against the interests of some key figures. The exercise involves socio-spatial objectives and thus has to incorporate such advice, but it should avoid early triggers of potential hijack and misuse when discourses have not gained enough strength yet. For example, as seen in the North West, an overall suggestion that green belts should be protected, coupled with a recommendation that housing renewal be kept to a minimum, created a high possibility for an early distortion of the renewal element by private property interests. Here, the pressures of the housing sector should have been channelled to where there is more clarity and regulation, implying that green belts should have been conditioned on factors such as future demand appraisal at the local level. Another conclusion is that, although problems around which discourses are built need to be systematically addressed, there is a limit to the scope of such problems without undermining the involvement of actors or what we term as targeting policy entrepreneurs. These conclusions stretch further than Albrechts and Van den Broeck (2004) postulations on how often 'discourse structuration' and its subsequent institutionalization (for example, as abstract strategies) become 'as relevant as' strategic plans. Our findings reinforce the idea that discourse structuration around abstract planning strategies can become eventually more important than concrete regional planning strategies. In this way, new discourses may become embedded in the governance settings, norms, attitudes and practices, thus providing a basis for structural change or spatial transformation. Recent research stresses that the failure of concrete strategies in addressing prime socio, economic and ecological issues has led to the rise of populist and anti-democratic political discourses and politics (Colomb & Tomaney, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose & Sandall, 2008). This paper contributes to reinforcing the value of abstract strategies in shaping overall spatial development and thus in counteracting new discourses on social policy and infrastructure requirements promoted by nationalist parties with clear consequences for society (cf. Nadin et al., 2020).

Secondly, '*To what extent are abstract regional planning strategies fit to mobilize actors and thus legitimize discourses?* When regional disparities are in hand, such as those around housing affordability and accessibility, the existence of large parcels of brownfield land and deprived neighbourhoods awaiting regeneration actors' involvement, there is a need to take into account more power than counter-power. Policy entrepreneurs can be targeted whose personal success depends on the superiority of the interests that they represent, and this becomes an inherent conflict with the socio-spatial objectives of the original regional spatial strategies. Even where these actors engage their wider networks, initially to provide momentum for genuine strategy discourses, they take subsequent alliances outside the influence of the original strategy makers for discourse correction. This will create more scope for discourse distortion in collaboration as the new actors become 'unwanted clients' for the original strategy makers. As seen in the North West, alliances between such actors can have far more agency than strategy makers to commission credible research in order to legitimize distorted discourses (i.e. supporting newer abstract regional planning strategies) instead of the original ones (i.e. aligned with concrete

regional planning strategies). In the case study, this worked to the extent that the unwanted clients of the strategy were on the Board of implementation partnerships whereas the strategic planning authority was not; indeed, the latter was not ultimately felt to be a key party at all! These results complement Oliveira and Hersperger's (2019) findings of research focussing on strategic spatial plan making across selected urban regions of Western Europe. These authors stress that, in UK urban regions, strategy-making processes are characterized by negotiations unfolding between regional governmental authorities and private interest groups; for instance, to decide on domains such as within transportation infrastructure including park-and-ride facilities, new bus routes or details of a regional light rail system.

Discourse legitimation beyond intelligent opportunism in drawing on existing policy cracks requires the strategic planning authority to have access to a designated research budget. Discussions on the legitimacy and transparency of strategic plans are paramount to establishing an in-depth understanding of today's strategic planning practice (Mäntysalo et al., 2011). Such a resource would enable reflection on rationality, voices of expertise and altruism to widen policy cracks or create new ones, giving more flexibility to strategic planning to act as a proactive agent for change. Although, in this study, the strategic planning authority did not have the financial means to do so, the commissioning of research institutions by those seeking to replace the original discourse with a distorted one, took into account two main considerations. First, the credibility of the institution in relation to the original discourse. Secondly, strong vertical networks between the institution and government departments. In this context, this paper thus reinforces the findings of Oliveira and Hersperger (2018) who argue that it is necessary to secure greater transparency and legitimacy of strategic spatial planning processes, including strategy making and implementation.

Strategy making recognizes the need for a significant, often radical, transformative spatial change. Processes of change can obviously be activated unintentionally, incrementally or through organizationally distributed bottom-up processes (Concilio, 2010). Findings from our case study area, the North West of England region, complements these views and further reflects a mixed story of the effectiveness of abstract strategic spatial planning for spatial transformation involving housing, greenbelt conservation and large-urban regeneration projects. However, the shortcomings observed, for example, in terms of adjustment to complex power dynamics in the course of strategy steering are not, perhaps, very difficult to overcome either. For this to happen, three conditions are essential. First, discourses have to be built around manageable and realistic regional disparities. Secondly, policy entrepreneurs need to be targeted with equal considerations of power and likely counter-power. Thirdly, the strategic planning authority needs to have access sufficient research budgets to evidence their strategies and counter alternative discourse distortions.

These conclusions make theoretical and practical inferences about the role of abstract regional planning strategies in supporting spatial transformation through discourses, participation and projects. These implications also reinforce MacKinnon's (2020) recommendations for policy makers on how to reinvigorate the Northern Powerhouse (NPh) – another abstract and long-term strategy with potential importance as a spatial imaginary for the future economic development of the North of England, launched by then Chancellor George Osborne in 2014. It is our ultimate aim to re-energize strategic

planning debates at the regional level in England and beyond, as Harrison et al. (2020) are calling for, but by placing emphasis on the role and potential benefits of such abstract planning strategies. Such re-energisation is arguably even more important in the context of the potential planning implications of current political divergent processes such as the United Kingdom's departure from the EU ('BREXIT') and the recent findings of the UK2070 Commission, an independent inquiry into city and regional inequalities in the UK. As a result, there are re-emerging pressures for territorial politics at the regional, or cross-regional, scale at which debates around difficult-to-address inequalities and the pressing need for, and means to achieve, 'levelling-up' are surfacing. The Commission has highlighted a series of principles (UK2070 Commission, 2020, p. 71) to guide the choice of the most appropriate regional configuration in England which might be based on the emerging networks of trans-regional powerhouses, combined authorities and unitary regional councils. Although the final geography of such devolution is still opaque, a new regional framework is advocated to facilitate common strategic approaches to address regional issues and reference is made to four pan-regional partnership areas (North, Midlands, South West, South East) (UK2070 Commission, 2020, p. 72). The nature and form of any such regional or pan-regional strategies is, as yet, unspecified. However, the potential transformational impacts of abstract strategies, as highlighted in this paper, should not be overlooked. Future studies assessing the performance of abstract regional spatial strategies in generating projects in regions with fragmented institutional contexts, both within the UK and beyond, could best advance these findings.

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