Chapter 9
Constructing Metropolitan Imaginaries: Who Does This and Why?

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> *Put bluntly: it is never the spatial form that acts, but rather social actors who, embedded in particular (multidimensional) spatial forms and make use of particular (multidimensional) forms, act. The relevance of a particular spatial form … can be measured only from the perspective of the engaged actors* (Mayer 2008, p. 416).

Abstract A growing variety of actors has been producing imaginaries of metropolitan regions corresponding to their interests. The cast has been opened up from planners, academics, and local–regional–national state actors to international actors, think tanks, and management consultancies, leading to a greater variety of sometimes short-lived, competing imaginaries. The chapter aims to interrogate the motivations of the social actors actively involved in constructing the vision(s) over time. We use various examples of the European Union, German national spatial visions, Atlantic Gateway in the UK, the megaregions concept, and an expert competition the metropolitan region of Helsinki. We argue that creating spatial imaginaries is not a primary realm for planners, thus on the one hand less transported by plans or even cartographic representations of a metropolitan region and on the other hand less comprehensive as some of them follow a single purpose such as justifying infrastructure investment.

Keywords Spatial imaginary · Actors · Interest · Metropolitan regions · Metropolitan imaginaries

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9.1 Introduction: Spatial Imaginaries—By Whom, for Whom?

Over the past forty years, there has been no shortage of social actors keen to put forward their vision for how metropolitan regions should be conceived. Metropolitanisation has brought with it a growing cast of actors who, because they have a vested interest in how metropolitan regions are imagined, are increasingly playing a far more active role in ensuring the form that a metropolitan region takes is one which enables them to preserve and maximise their essential interests. From a relatively narrow cast comprising planners, academics, and local–regional–national state actors, today's roll-call of actors includes international actors, think tanks, management consultancies, philanthropies, and even 'celebrity' urbanists.

More actors mean a greater variety of perspectives and, not surprisingly, more competing interests result in more competing imaginaries. This perpetual invention of competing imaginaries also derives from imaginaries being created explicitly as an alternative, a reaction to other spatial imaginaries and serving as an attempt to open another perspective on spatial relations and ways to organise space. Yet, documenting what the latest spatial imaginary is, analysing how it is represented cartographically, and describing what it represents discursively is only ever a starting point for the analysis. A better understanding of the frailty and relevance of spatial imaginaries can only be gained by interrogating the motivations of the social actors actively involved in constructing the vision(s) under investigation and revealing how social actors attempt to deconstruct other visions to maintain their own vision. It should also be asked for whom a new imaginary of a metropolitan region becomes meaningful.

9.2 Periodising the Role of Social Actors in the Evolving Spatiality of Metropolitan Imaginaries

> In the 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s, national governments used to support backward regions, but in the new, post-1980s competitive context they feel the need to place their bet on the strongest regional horses … Almost all national government endorse these new trends in regional economic policy. For electoral reasons, some are obliged to continue to give some support to backward regions, but their real concern remains the improvement of the strong regions. Surprising, European regional policy (although favouring the regions as such) ignores this trend and continues to give support to economically disadvantaged regions. (Salet et al. 2003, p. 12)

In this quotation, we see the era of spatial Keynesianism being definitively associated with a single actor—national government. Second, a global trend is identified with the shift from protectionist spatial Keynesianism to the competitive context of neoliberalism. Notwithstanding this, third, the transition to new forms of competitive regional economic policy takes on nationally specific forms, thus highlighting how national government maintains a—or even, the—key role in orchestrating metropoli-

tan development. Allied to this, fourth, the degree to which social actors orchestrate regional policy towards strong metropolitan regions vis-a-vis economically disadvantaged regions is tempered by the need to preserve their own essential interests. And finally, fifth, actors at different spatial scales are just as likely to adopt different positions despite the perception of a global trend towards a particular approach to imagining metropolitan regions.

The aim of this section, therefore, is to periodise the role of social actors in the evolving spatiality of metropolitan imaginaries. More than this, our interest is in detailing how, in different periods, some social actors can be considered dominant while others are variously emergent, newly dominant, or residual in importance. We begin with spatial Keynesianism.

The dominant actor orchestrating metropolitan development in the period of spatial Keynesianism was the national government. Adopting an interventionist approach, the primary motivation in post-war period was managing uneven development via redistributive policies. The managerial practices of the central state were principally focussed on the collective provision of services, and albeit local, municipal, and regional government were important actors they were evidently subordinated to central state regulatory control. France's DATAR (*Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'action régionale*—Land Development and Regional Action Delegation) in 1963, Britain's Regional Economic Planning Boards and Councils in 1964, and the Dutch RPD (*Rjksplanologische Dienst*—National Planning Service) in 1966 emerged as the textbook examples of government-sponsored institutions whose operations were tightly controlled by the central government and whose role was ostensibly to implement top-down policies. One important consequence of this *modus operandi* was that the key actors in planning and governing metropolitan regions in the era of spatial Keynesianism had a shared understanding that the standard territorial region was *the* spatial imaginary through which metropolitan regions—their development and problems—were represented. Indeed, the 1960s and 1970s saw countless regional and subregional planning documents produced by these institutions in response to the necessity for the central state to find solutions for managing population growth, urban expansion, and growing spatial inequality.

From the early 1970s and the onset of globalisation, local and municipal government became increasingly involved in economic development activity directly related to production and investment, positively encouraged by national governments to complement their own attempts to improve economic competitiveness. This was the first signs of the gradual shift away from the 'managerial' approach which typified post-war spatial Keynesianism and towards the 'entrepreneurial' approach synonymous with the emergent neoliberal tendencies of the 1970s and 1980s. Entrepreneurialism was significant because not only did it bring with it a changing approach from state actors, but also it brought non-state actors to the fore. The 1970s and 1980s were, after all, the era of coalition building.

Urban growth coalitions had their roots in the USA and came to reflect the pre-eminence of market-led approaches and growth objectives in metropolitan planning and policy. It was this growth consensus that not only captivated state actors—central governments and municipal governments were all too aware of the importance

of ensuring their metropolitan regions were competitive in the restructured global economy—but united them with other non-state actors who had a shared interest in promoting economic growth. Growth coalitions (also known as 'growth machines') signalled the coming together of diverse actors—ranging from local and municipal government to business, real estate, construction and utility companies, local media—who all recognised that they stood to make significant gains if growth resulted in land use intensification and the impact this would have on local land values. At one level, entrepreneurialism in the 1980s reveals the growing influence of the commercial sector in convening metropolitan growth politics. But crucially, at another level, this pluralist coalition of actors now set about producing their own spatial imaginaries to promote their pro-growth aspirations. One important consequence of this was that coalitions began to overcome the city–suburb rivalries that dogged metropolitan regions in the managerial phase. And perhaps most significant of all, the 1980s was the era of localism, and what growth coalitions and regime theory highlighted was the endogenous, bottom-up nature of this new entrepreneurial approach to imagining metropolitan development.

By the 1990s, the new regionalism had brought different forms of the coalition to the fore, namely Chambers of Commerce and Regional Development Agencies. Best thought of as regionally scaled growth coalitions, both are quasi-autonomous non-governmental institutions: Chambers of Commerce operating as a form of business network charged with promoting the interests of those member businesses in their region and often achieved by lobbying locally, nationally, and internationally to ensure laws that are passed and policies that are implemented are favourable to business; Regional Development Agencies operating as public–private partnerships charged with the pro-growth purpose of development—primarily economic—by improving business efficiency, investment, competitiveness, employment and skills, and with an eye on sustainable development.

In most cases, the geographical basis on which these institutions operated was predetermined and bore the legacy of spatial Keynesian state territoriality. There was, in many cases, no debate over the spatial logic of regions (and other subnational territorial units) being mobilised in the implementation of new regionalist-inspired institutions, policies, and planning styles. And this all comes back to agency because the principal actor responsible for putting new regionalism thinking into action was the state. For, despite, all the rhetoric of new regionalist approaches enabling regional institutions to be quasi-autonomous, business-led partnerships, implementing bottom-up policies, the reality was to lesser or greater extent depending on the national and local context, a reassertion by the state of their role as the primary orchestrators of economic development. Put bluntly: neoliberal globalisation posed a real and immediate threat to the state such that if metropolitan regions were the competitive territories *par excellence,* this was the ground on which the state could reassert its power by taking control of the growth agenda once more.

Into the 2000s and the key actors remain fairly constant, albeit the spatial scale at which attention was focused increasingly switched to the metropolitan or city-region scale. This owed much to the emergent role of international organisations such as UN-Habitat and the OECD. Ever since 1996 when HABITAT II (Second United

Nations Conference on Human Settlements—Istanbul) concluded that cities are the engines of global growth, urbanisation presents opportunities, there needs to be a stronger role for local authorities and recognition of the power of participation, and there has been momentum globally around the notion of a new urban agenda for sustainable economic development. Throughout the 2000s, accelerated urbanisation globally and the rise of city-regionalism further fuelled and reinvigorated this global commitment to sustainable urbanisation. By the time HABITAT III (United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development—Quito) concluded in 2016 having formally established a 'New Urban Agenda', and having identified four fundamental drivers of change, three of which are planning related. Noteworthy is how in the process of adopting the New Urban Agenda, the spatial imagination shifted significantly.

What we see in Table 9.1 is a reimagining of spatial and discursive framing of the global state of urbanisation, as well as the practices and tools for policy and intervention in planning and governing metropolitan regions for the next twenty years. In the three months of negotiations, a series of critical changes can clearly be observed. In their totality, what would be considered framings more akin to the legacy of spatial Keynesianism—the narrow focus on local–national partnerships (*who*), legislation (*how*), and ultimate emphasis on 'national' policy, development, and targets (*why*)—gave way to framings much more akin to neoliberal urbanism—the importance of multiple actors (*who*), multiscalar metagovernance (*how*), and steer towards inclusive and sustainable growth (*why*). Moreover, in the fourth driver, we see the other major development at this time which has seen 'managerialism' and 'entrepreneurialism' joined by a third pillar—'financialisation'.

But this is only part of the story. For what Table 9.1 masks is the compromise which actors clearly made, because inserted immediately before the reimagining, of how urban and territorial development would be planned and governed was the following:

> [We commit ourselves to] *recognize the leading role of national governments*, as appropriate, in the definition and implementation of inclusive and effective urban policies and *legislation* for sustainable urban development (UN-Habitat 2016b, paragraph 15b emphasis added).

In this one brief example, we get to see the challenges of aligning the different interests and perspectives of the engaged actors, and the impact this has on the evolving spatial imaginaries and/or for metropolitan regions. As Barnett and Parnell (2016, 89) note, the New Urban Agenda—and approval alongside it of an explicitly 'urban' Sustainable Development Goal—is

> a product of what one might call a fluid alliance of interests and organizations that generated a coherent pro-urban discourse through which to assert the importance of cities in future development policy agendas.

Very much allied to this, the period of city-regional orthodoxy has revealed further polarisation in the perceived role of the state as an engaged actor in imagining metropolitan futures. If the entrepreneurial approaches of 1980s and 1990s brought forward the idea that the state's role was being weakened by the emergent power of

Table 9.1 Tracing the evolving spatiality in establishing the New Urban Agenda

	Revised Zero Draft of the NUA (UN-Habitat 2016a: Paragraph 11b) June 2016	Final Agreed Draft of the NUA (UN-Habitat 2016b, Paragraph 15c) September 2016
1.	"Developing and implementing ~~national~~ urban policies within a renewed local–national partnership building integrated ~~national~~ systems of cities and human settlements, towards the achievement of ~~national~~ development targets"	"**Developing and implementing urban policies at the appropriate level, including in local–national and multi-stakeholder partnerships**, building integrated systems of cities and human settlements and **promotingcooperation among all levels of government** to enable the achievement of sustainable integrated urban development"
2.	"Strengthening urban ~~legislation~~, providing predictability and order in the urban development plans to enable social and economic ~~performance~~ and wealth creation"	"Strengthening urban **governance**, with sound institutions and mechanisms that empower and included urban stakeholders, **as well as appropriate checks and balances** , providing predictability and coherence in the urban development plan to enable **social inclusion, sustained, inclusive and sustainable** economic **growth** and **environmental protection**"
3.	"Reinvigorate urban and territorial planning in order to optimise the spatial dimension of the urban form and deliver the urban advantage"	"Reinvigorating **long-term and integrated** urban and territorial planning and design in order to optimise the spatial dimension of the urban form and deliver the positive outcomes of urbanisation"
4.	"Supporting effective financing frameworks, enabling strengthened municipal finance and local fiscal systems in order to create, sustain, and share the value generated by sustainable urban development"	"Supporting effective, **innovative, and sustainable** financing **frameworks and instruments** enabling strengthened municipal finance and local fiscal systems in order to create, sustain, and share the value generated by sustainable urban development **in an inclusive manner**"

Notes ~~superscript~~ denotes key deleted words and phrasing; **bold** denotes key additional or replacement words or phrasing

private interests, the 2000s has witnessed not only the rise of international organisations as powerful actors, but a whole suite of other actors—including consultants, think tanks, and academics—with a growing interest in orchestrating the planning and governance of metropolitan regions. Yet, for all that there has been a ratcheting up of the predominant neoliberal discourse championing the superiority of entrepreneurial forms of responsive local and regional governance vis-à-vis the withering away of top-down state orchestrated regionalism, the orthodoxy that says city-regionalism is 'increasingly free from the regulatory supervision on the part of nation-states' (Scott 2001, p. 4) and not an 'effect of initiatives flowing out from central government' (ibid., p. 21) overstates the decline of state territoriality. Examples such as that above reveal how a partial reading of the 'New Urban Agenda' can marshal

evidence to this effect, and a closer reading reveals how, *pace* Mayer (2008), the state is becoming embedded in new spatial forms and making use of these forms to act.

As of the 2010s, there has been a growing emphasis on new spatial imaginaries at the mega or multi-city regional scale, and with it the emergence of new powerful actors. The rise of transmetropolitan spatial imaginaries—taken to mean those comprising more than one metropolitan region—is today being linked to the capitalist imperative for supply chain expansion and the emergence of infrastructure alliances (Wachsmuth 2017). Infrastructure alliances are to all intents and purposes the latest incarnation of growth coalitions, albeit at a much larger spatial scale and with different power geometries among the multiple stakeholders involved in metropolitan growth politics. If land use intensification proved the uniting force for actors in the 1980s formation of local growth coalitions, agglomeration economics and common labour markets provided the uniting logic for metropolitan-scaled, city-regional growth coalitions through the 2000s, supply chain expansion is emerging as a powerful uniting force for metropolitan regions who otherwise compete for investment and talent. We see this evidently in how metropolitan elites have been captivated by the need to invest in high-speed rail, but also the importance attached to logistics which is giving private sector interests in these industries a greater interest in mobilising a new generation of transmetropolitan spatial imaginaries.

The role of social actors in the evolving spatiality of metropolitan imaginaries can thus be characterised by several broad trends, namely

- an emphasis on coalitions comprising multiple stakeholders—operating at different spatial scales and from across public, private, and civil society—rather than central government determining the evolving spatiality of metropolitan regions,
- an emphasis on how different actors mobilise different metropolitan spatial imaginaries to preserve their essential interests, which means with more actors comes more competing imaginaries
- an emphasis on the discursive framing of spatial imaginaries from an economic growth 'at all costs' mantra to the more holistic goal of sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and environmental protection
- an emphasis on shifts from managerialism, to entrepreneurialism, to financialisation, in the mechanisms by which actors are approaching the pursuit of metropolitan development through spatial imaginaries.

9.3 Multiple Visions, Multiple Actors

In this section, we have selected five contrasting cases to illustrate the role of social actors in the evolving spatiality of metropolitan imaginaries. We begin by taking the example of the European Union which as an international organisation has been playing a crucial role in renewing urban and regional spatial imaginaries as part of its integration project. We use this example to demonstrate the restructuring of state-led

territoriality, before moving on to further discuss the case of Germany which was introduced in the previous chapter. Picking up the story from the point at which the discursive framing of metropolitan region picked up pace in the early 2000s, this case reveals how the evolving spatiality of Germany's *Leitbilder* came to reflect the visible outcome of the power politics at play between the lobbying group who represent the eleven European metropolitan regions and their equivalent who champion the importance of cross-border metropolitan regions. Our third illustrative case takes a very different perspective by focusing on the recent appearance in England of a metropolitan imaginary covering Liverpool-Manchester that is both indicative of business regionalism and multi-city regionalism. The imagination of a private investment group, Atlantic Gateway offers insights into the motivations of private companies engaging in constructing and mobilising new metropolitan imaginaries. We then take a concept in the form of 'megaregions' to account for how and why different groups of actors continually bring back certain concepts, at certain times and in certain spaces and places, to pursue their interests. Finally, we look at regional design competitions at the metropolitan level as a case with a strong expert involvement in the search for new ways to imagine those metropolitan regions, introducing new languages and spatial concepts, especially for the suburban space.

9.3.1 European Union

The European Union (EU) has, since its inception, played a crucial role in renewing urban and regional spatial imaginaries as part of its integration project. While the idea of a 'Europe of regions' can be clearly understood as the outcome of state rescaling and assigning new meanings to territories, the urban dimension of the EU agenda was a response to the effects of capitalist restructuring taking place in major urban areas in post-war Europe. Indeed, the European Community's first interest in conceptualising the emergence of a metropolitan-regional dimension could be detected in the late 1960s, when under Jacque Cros, the *Directoraat-Generaal Regionaal Beleid en Stadsontwikkeling* (Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy—DG REGIO) started funding research on spatial scenarios. The studies conducted by Franco Archibugi in those years—and alimenting the exploratory work of the new DG (Grazi 2007)—unveiled the emergence of large urban areas in different member states, as well as an overall phenomenon of metropolisation sweeping across member states and generating effects of concentration and economic unbalances.

In a way, the overall EU integration project has allowed the opportunity to read at a transnational level and in interrelated ways the emergence of a metropolitan or regional-urban dimension. This is evident in the conceptualisation of a European megalopolis by the Council of Europe—Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT) at their meeting in 1970, which was generative of transnational imaginaries based on concentration and agglomeration effects (see Harrison et al. 2020, Fig. 8.2 and the EU Pentagon for a more recent example).

By the early 1970s, urban regions centred on small- and medium-sized cities had come to the fore as the alternative to monocentric agglomerations. This was to prove the antecedent to the community's belief that the development of polycentric regions was a more preferable scenario that the previously held megalopolis-agglomeration scenario. This contraposition fed the debate that was generated by the European Spatial Development Perspective in the subsequent two decades, but it is only following the 2007 Lisbon Treaty and the introduction of territorial cohesion as a key challenge of the EU (2009) that a number of EU promoted initiatives have more explicitly focused on the metropolitan/regional dimension. Studies promoted by European spatial planning observation network (ESPON), alongside projects such as URBACT and INTERREG, have really emphasised the regional/metropolitan dimension in EU policy-making circles (Zimmermann 2020).

Even though the *Europe 2020 Strategy* did not 'specifically take metropolitan regions and areas into account' (METREX 2014), the efforts of ESPON, Joint Research Committee (JRC) and EUROSTAT have further developed a metropolitan imaginary. The importance of this cannot be underestimated, with authors such as Lang and Török (2017, p. 9) highlighting that

> the promotion of metropolitan regions in functional as well as symbolic terms as well as the shifts in regional and urban policies … can be described as the consequence of Europeanisation of spatial policy within the EU linked to the growing dominance of the competitive discourse.

This said the strong interest in advancing a metropolitan dimension for EU policies, as read through consistent analytical efforts to extend and promote this in recent years, has gained far less traction in terms of direct identification of metropolitan regions as central actors or authorities in actual EU cohesion policies. This can be explained by the difficulty the EU faces when attempting to engage with the multiplicity and fragility of metropolitan government forms present across member states—for example, their different status and role in different member states as well as the various roles that cities, urban agglomerations, polycentric regions, small and medium cities play in those territories.

More interestingly, the recent promotion of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) has opened some space for initiatives of experimentation with metropolitan institutions. ITI allow the construction of a territorial geography beyond administrative boundaries, where the starting for metropolitan governance is no longer space and territory but practical policy problems. In the case of Poland, for example, ITI have been used to enhance metropolitan governance. This is a significant trend because it creates space for the transfer of the metropolitan dimension from the analytic-interpretative sphere to a more explicit normative and policy dimension. As a matter of fact, metropolitan associations such as the European metropolitan authorities and (METREX) network of European metropolitan regions and areas have again clearly expressed their desire to have a more central role in current debates over the design and implementation of EU Cohesion Policy post-2020 (EMA 2017) in ways very similar to the role United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) has played as an umbrella organisation for cities, local and regional governments, and municipal asso-

ciations on a world scale when influencing the framing of the New Urban Agenda to have a stronger metropolitan-regional dimension.

9.3.2 Germany

In the 1990s and 2000s, Germany was gripped by a major geoeconomic challenge: how to respond politically to the growing importance of urbanisation and global economic integration without an archetypal global city. In Europe, while the UK has London and France has Paris, and globally, the USA has New York, Japan has Tokyo, and China has Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong, by contrast Germany has a more balanced horizontal urban system. This is critical in explaining why the European metropolitan region discourse emerged where it did (Germany), when it did (the early 1990s), and how it took the form it did (based on eleven metropolitan regions).

The spatial imaginary of eleven metropolitan regions was a strategic response by the Federal State to highlight how, despite not having a global city per se, Germany did possess cities which were well positioned within European circuits of capital and could be considered emerging, aspiring, or potential global cities. Despite emphasising their 'superior' strategic importance in maintaining Germany and Europe's competitiveness, the Federal State attempted to make this neoliberal urban policy complementary with spatial Keynesian ideals by arguing that EMR 'contribute significantly to the potential, and funding for a spatial balance in Germany' (BMBau 1993, p. 6).

Fuelled in part by the establishment in 2001 of *Initiativkreis Europäische Metropolregionen* (European metropolitan region initiative—IKM) to lobby Federal ministers about the 'special features' that EMR possess and how, because they are 'indispensable', they should be 'distinguish[ed] from other conurbations' in policy (IKM 2003, p. 12), there was a growing sense of unease among many actors that the neoliberal urban policy ideals exemplified in the EMR initiative contradicted rather than complemented the Federal State's other stated goal of spatially balanced growth. Under pressure from urban elites to continue promoting the strategic importance of metropolitan regions and facing similar pressures from non-urban elites to ensure this was not as the expense of rural-peripheral areas, the spatial imaginary mobilised in *Leitbild 2006* (Harrison et al. 2020, Fig. 8.3a) is driven by a desire to establish political consensus. Representing a 'necessary adjustment' of planning policy to changing conditions, the result was 'theoretically contradictory, empirically vague and conceptually fragile' according to Hesse and Leick (2013, p. 343) because achieving political consensus required a move away from the singular logic for imagining metropolitan regions as agglomerations to a far more complex, decidedly messy, landscape of overlapping, competing and contradictory metropolitan (and other spatial) imaginaries.

No sooner had this revised and versatile metropolitan imaginary been launched than the Federal State found itself reacting to the demands of another group of actors.

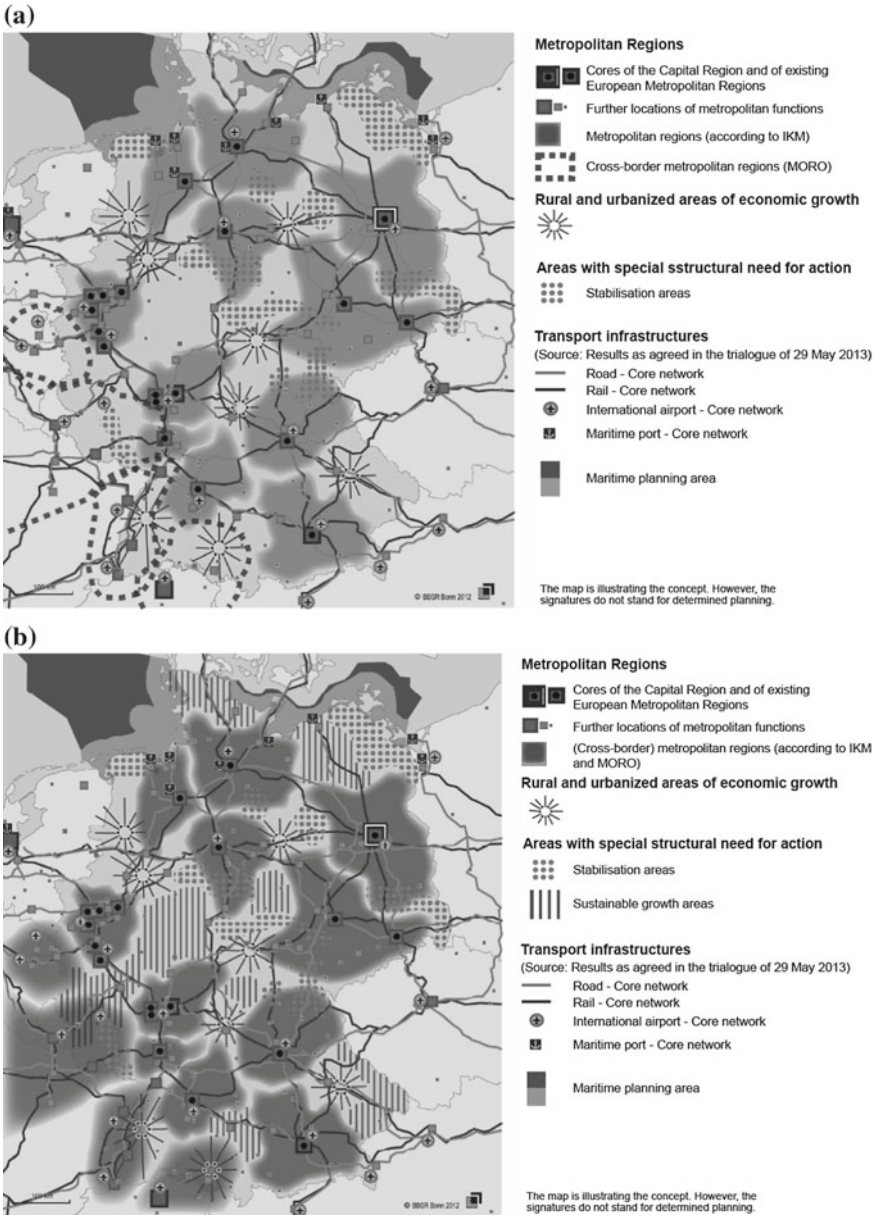

Fig. 9.1 **a** Metropolitan Germany: Leitbilder 2013 Draft A (*Source* BBSR 2012, p. 143), **b** Metropolitan Germany: Leitbilder 2013 Draft B (*Source* BBSR 2012, p. 143)

This time the political pressure was being applied via the *Initiativkreis Metropolitane Grenzregionen* (Metropolitan Border Regions Initiative Group—IMeG):

> IMeG shares the aim of the metropolitan regions in Germany … [but] emphatically demands that these [border] regions be included in the federal concepts (IMeG 2013, p. 7)

The result of this political lobbying was two interim drafts of a further revised metropolitan imaginary for Germany including the new imaginary of cross-border metropolitan regions. In Fig. 9.1a, cross-border metropolitan regions (as defined by IMeG) are imagined as distinct from European metropolitan regions (as defined by IKM); whereas, in Fig. 9.1b they are imagined (according to IKM and IMeG) as identical. That the finally agreed metropolitan imaginary which appeared in Leitbild 2013 attempted to identify these four cross-border metropolitan regions as complementary—simultaneously distinct yet identical—only serves to reinforce how metropolitan spatial imaginaries are always the product of intense negotiation and resultant compromise (Harrison and Growe 2014a, b).

9.3.3 Atlantic Gateway

Atlantic Gateway is an exemplar of business orchestrated regionalism and its growing influence on metropolitan development. Launched by The Peel Group in 2008, Atlantic Gateway is a private sector-led growth strategy for the connected growth between the Liverpool and Manchester metropolitan regions. What is significant about Peel's involvement in Atlantic Gateway is that it amounts to de facto metropolitan governance by the private sector, and it provides an example of how actors are increasingly inventing metropolitan spatial imaginaries in their own interests. But to understand Atlantic Gateway as a scaled up metropolitan imaginary, we must first know who Peel are, how they arrived at Atlantic Gateway, and why they mobilised this imaginary when and where they did.

Peel started out as a land and property development company in the 1970s. Investing in cheap development land in former industrial areas between Liverpool and Manchester, Peel delivered a series of flagship redevelopment projects—most notably the Trafford Centre retail park (current market value £2.3 billion) and Salford Quays, which is home to MediaCityUK—which enabled the company to generate significant returns on their investment through rent, onward selling, or other investments leading to land use intensification and pushing up the value of their land and property holdings. At this time, Peel's modus operandi was clearly indicative of urban entrepreneurialism in action and aligned with what growth coalitions pursued from the 1970s onwards.

This path continued through the 1990s and on into the 2000s when Peel became the developer of choice for the Northwest Regional Development Agency. This owed much to the realisation that Peel owned much of the land and assets that the development agency depended on to deliver their strategy. Throughout the 2000s, the NWDA-Peel axis of power grew stronger and at the time Peel launched Atlantic

Gateway; this became more clearly visible when the then Deputy Chair of Peel, first became a Board Member (2007) and subsequently Chair (2009) of the NWDA (while retaining a non-Executive Director role with Peel), and the outgoing Chair of the NWDA joined Peel.

Triggering Peel to launch Atlantic Gateway was a combination of factors. Part had to do with shifts in the global political economy surrounding the 2008/9 financial crisis and ensuing calls for greater private sector involvement in fuelling the economic recovery. Yet, this fails to account for why business regionalism has emerged in some places and not others. For the most part, this has to do with firm and place-specific factors. In the case of Atlantic Gateway, Peel are much more place-dependent than other companies of their size owing to the proximity of their major assets along a 50-kilometre metropolitan corridor. Moreover, Peel's corporate expansion evidently relied on gaining influence over others (Ward and Swyngedouw 2018).

Regionally, Peel are seeking to influence local planning decisions. Moving from delivering multi-million-pound development schemes in the 1990s and 2000s, Peel's forward-looking strategy to 2050 involves delivering multi-billion-pound development schemes. During the 1990s, Peel became embroiled in one of the longest disputes in British planning over their plans to build the £650 million Trafford Centre retail park. Scarred by this, Peel's Chairman John Whitaker made no secret that their principal motivation was to use the Atlantic Gateway imaginary to convince the NWDA to establish a special purpose planning vehicle that allowed Peel to overcome individual local authority objections to their plans. Nationally, while Peel own the assets they do not own or have significant influence over the connecting infrastructure (principally road and rail). Allied to this, Peel's £6.6 billion of assets is tied up, meaning although asset rich, they remain cash poor. What this means is that Peel are heavily reliant on national and international investment to unlock the full potential of their sites. Atlantic Gateway therefore represents an exemplar of how spatial imaginaries are always examples of tactical regionalism.

Tactical regionalism is significant because in the case of Peel the spatial imaginary that is Atlantic Gateway has evolved for them to gain influence. As noted, Peel in the 1970s and 1980s were property developers in the spirit of urban growth coalitions, in the 1990s, they aligned to be the principal developer for the regional development agency, and in the 2000s, Atlantic Gateway emerged as a regional growth corridor but to gain the support of state actors quickly changed to become a city-region initiative. Mapping on to the periodisation of spatial imaginaries, it is noteworthy how the 2010s has seen Atlantic Gateway morph into a multi-city scaled metropolitan-regional imaginary. Behind this spatial transformation was a compromise. To gain support for Atlantic Gateway, Peel were pressed into ensuring that it became a 'more than Peel' initiative. To this end, Peel began to work with other firms, most notably their biggest local competitor in logistics—Stobarts. Albeit direct competitors, the two firms could unite around the importance of supply chain expansion, and it was this tactical regionalism which saw Atlantic Gateway switch from a city-regional imaginary to a multi-city-regional imaginary (Harrison 2014).

9.3.4 Megaregions

Megaregions are a key spatial imaginary because through the lens of periodisation, they have emerged as a truly global metropolitan imaginary in the early part of this century. Mobilised by actors convinced that there is a geoeconomic logic by which agglomeration economies are the sole route to competitiveness, growth and therefore development, and megaregions amount to metropolitan regions on steroids given the scaling up of what is being imagined. In many cases, actors imagine megaregions of the magnitude of 10–20 million inhabitants plus, spanning hundreds of kilometres, and often transnational. But this is not the first-time actors have mobilised megaregions as an important metropolitan spatial imaginary (Harrison and Hoyler 2015).

While most people identify the megaregion concept with Jean Gottmann, it is Patrick Geddes who should be credited with first mobilising mega-scale metropolitan imaginaries. In his 1915 book *Cities in Evolution,* Geddes mobilises the same spatial vocabulary—'megalopolis'—and illustrative case—New York–Boston—as Gottmann but is overlooked because for Geddes and his successors (notably Lewis Mumford) megaregions portrayed a vulgar image of metropolitan expansion. In this way, the spatial image of a megaregion was mobilised to advance their own essential interests for promoting smaller, simpler cities as leading to a healthier and happier type of social development. By contrast, Gottmann popularised the notion of transmetropolitan landscapes among metropolitan elites from the 1950s onwards in the USA with his utopian modernist image of metropolitan expansion as socially progressive.

It is this emphasis on spatial imaginaries *for a purpose* which is key to our understanding. In modern times, we can point to the group of French geographers who in a report to DATAR used a very simple but highly effective megaregion imaginary—Europe's 'blue banana'—to warn public authorities in Paris of the danger if Paris specifically and France, more generally, were marginalised because of its economic insularity in a more integrated Europe (RECLUS 1989). In the 2000s, the Regional Planning Association (RPA) in the USA used the spatial imagery of megaregions to launch their *America 2050* campaign. The purpose was not megaregion per se but using the spatial imaginary of megaregions to lobby actors—notably the US Department of Transport—for investment in high-speed rail (RPA 2006). Likewise, the international development focus of UN-Habitat led them to construct a very particular discursive framing around the development opportunities megaregions afford the Global South when, in their *State of the World's Cities 2010-11* report, despite their map identifying megaregions globally, the narrative excluded the many located in North America and Europe and chose only to draw attention to the select few in Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa. And in countries such as the UK, mega- or multi-city imaginaries such as the *Northern Way* and *Northern Powerhouse* have been consistently invented and mobilised by central government when it has been politically expedient and necessary to present a discursive counterweight image to London's metropolitan growth (Lee 2017).

9.3.5 Expert Competitions

Greater Helsinki Vision 2050 affords an example where a new spatial imaginary for the metropolitan region was created with strong involvement and visioning by external experts. Launched in 2006 by Greater Helsinki's fourteen municipalities, in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment and Finnish Association of Architects, an open competition inviting actors to imagine the future of the metropolitan region produced 109 entries of which nine were selected for an award (Ache 2011).

The brief for the expert teams was to develop a spatial imaginary for how (and where) to accommodate Greater Helsinki's projected population growth until 2050. Organising an idea's competition was a bottom-up initiative from the municipalities but situated in the context of national pressure to establish some kind of metropolitan growth management. This in turn had been triggered by international organisations, namely a 2003 OECD Territorial Review stressing the need for a better coordinated metropolitan region given the insufficient size of the city of Helsinki alone to be internationally competitive, as well as a 2006 report from the European Environment Agency criticising the Helsinki region as a negative example of uncontrolled sprawl.

Design competitions are a common technique to generate high-quality ideas in architecture and urbanism, but the innovative element in case of *Greater Helsinki Vision 2050* has been to upscale it to a whole metropolitan region. This approach of allowing several external expert teams to create alternative imaginaries has since been used by other metropolitan regions such as Paris (*Atelier International du Grand Paris 2008* which consulted with ten selected teams), Zürich (*Metrobild 2011* which was derived from a workshop with three invited teams), and the Ruhr region (*Ideenwettbewerb Zukunft Metropole Ruhr 2013* was a competition with five selected teams).

Expert visioning by multiple teams has proved a helpful instrument for a metropolitan region that does not have a strong tradition of city-regional cooperation in spatial development. The function of experts is to bring new ideas as a starting point for opening the local debate to external influence and depoliticising the process. The idea, in principle, means to some extent starting on a blank page with a set of 'new' alternative imaginaries. But crucially, when analysing the motivation behind inviting experts in, it is imperative to first understand what kind of 'old' imaginary or 'lock-in' the initiators are seeking to overcome (e.g. overcoming entrenched local allegiances) as much as what they are hoping to achieve (e.g. envious eyes cast towards other metropolitan regions, external approval of what they are already doing).

One thing which is for sure is that bringing in external experts results in a different process for constructing and mobilising spatial imaginaries. In many cases, external teams have very limited local knowledge, while the condensed format of in-place workshops leads to focusing on general principles and framings for how to organise space instead of entering into the more conflictual detailed issues surrounding everyday issues when putting theory into practice. While the degree of local knowledge is highly uneven in each example—in Zürich there was a high-level of local knowledge

because all of the expert teams have design studios based in the city, in the Ruhr all teams mixed with domestic and international partners and there were excursions and interim discussion with regional actors, while in Helsinki it was low because it was an open international competition with no on-site workshop—in all three examples the expert involvement was only a first step in a much longer process. In each case, external expert involvement linked the local visioning process to the international debates. Undeniable is how this favours the travelling of the latest in-vogue concepts and imaginaries fashionable among urbanists in the initial phase of capturing the imagination. But crucially, an expert competition does not replace the political process of negotiating a shared vision of future development. In the Ruhr area, the expert involvement was one of the elements of a 'regional dialogue' started in 2011 to accompany the preparation of a regional plan by the metropolitan organisation *Regionalverband Ruhr*. By contrast, in the case of Helsinki, a metropolitan organisation has not emerged at that scale yet despite national pressure. Indeed, it could be argued that the soft instrument of the idea's competition was a means to prevent government interference in the form of legislation.

9.4 Conclusion: The Fear of Being Overlooked

Spatial imaginaries are mobilised to influence metropolitan development to some extent. They are not emerging out of the blue, but are shaped, supported, challenged, and modified over time by different actors. The nation state has traditionally been the key actor constructing spatial imaginaries for its territory and continues to be an essential player (Kübler and Lefèvre 2018). Even though the national dimension has lost some of its relevance with globalisation and the emergence of larger,transnational imaginaries, differences in the national urban systems (size of cities, distance of urban nodes) persist and influence the way metropolitan regions are conceptualised. At the same time, international institutions such as the European Union, OECD and UN-Habitat are seeking to establish uniform definitions for metropolitan regions and using quantitative measurements. Local institutions and cities are on the one hand lobbying to be on the map in fear of otherwise being overlooked when it comes to structural investments. On the other hand, they produce spatial imaginaries to create a shared understanding of the territory as a basis for cooperation, sometimes with input from external experts. Planners in public administrations, planning associations or agencies are in many cases seeking to produce spatial imaginaries of metropolitan regions transcending administrative borders by conceptual or analytical means. But not only public actors use imaginaries to conceptualise space and guide policies. In some cases, such as Atlantic Gateway, private actors or coalitions of actors can be very successful in putting an imaginary on the agenda. Business communities, for example, in different countries, have played a crucial role in supporting the production of regional imaginaries: having to compete on an international dimension, many of them are asking or have lobbied for governance frameworks able to reduce and at the same time deal with complexity and uncertainty.

Expert knowledge either called in by public actors in the form of contracts and competitions or unsolicited can contribute to conceptualise the relevant societal and political challenges behind processes of regional urbanisation. In this respect 'seeing like a metropolis', misquoting Magnusson (2011) and more recently Amin and Thrift (2017), is still an open and problematic issue. Despite this, there is a growing awareness in many contexts of the need and/or desire to take the task of constructing metropolitan imaginaries outside of local politics which can give academic experts a role as mediators between the different competing stakeholders. The offset of this is that the 'expert view' can be used to legitimate certain actions.

Notwithstanding this multitude of actors, there is a growing consensus among those actors as to their interests in mobilising metropolitan spatial imaginaries. This can be economic with the consistency of the 'growth at all costs' mantra that accompanies many accounts of metropolitan regions focusing more on their global positioning than on the relation between core city and hinterland. It can also be institutional, as evidenced by the growing popularity of particular policies, ideas or models for planning and governance (e.g. the metropolitan mayoral model). In this case, the spatial representation of the metropolitan region depends on the actors willing to cooperate, e.g. the municipalities involved in a metropolitan institution or planning association. The spatial dimension of a metropolitan region is constructed according to the lenses of the actors looking at it, not necessarily in line with the functionally interrelated space or the sense of belonging of the citizens (Fedeli et al. 2020).

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