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Urban vision – a static destination or a dynamic process?

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Abstract

Globalization forces cities and areas to compete with each other to attract talented and motivated inhabitants. In an attempt to differentiate in the competitive market, city officials are creating urban visions by collaborating with a variety of stakeholders. However, every stakeholder perceives the visions differently, and the implementation processes are slow. The capability to update the vision can decrease the uncertainty in the success of the overall implemented solution. Therefore, this paper strives to increase understanding of the processes behind areal vision creation and investigates the effects to the resulting area. The paper presents a single intrinsic case study and takes a qualitative approach by analyzing nine thematic interviews on Suurpelto case in Espoo, Finland. The interviewees represent different stakeholders of both vision building and implementation phases and of both private and public sector. The case represents a situation where economical recession radically changed the operational environment and an essential stakeholder backed up from the project during the operational process changing the dynamics and the implementation potential of the original vision. The results indicate that trust between all the stakeholders throughout the vision and implementation phases is essential for succeeding in a project but also a means of gaining trust of the inhabitants. For the practitioners, this implies that more attention should be paid on trust building issues between the different stakeholders throughout the vision building process in order to create trustworthy environments for the potential inhabitants, businesses and other prospects. Potential future research could focus on analyzing the vision progress in a more detailed manner, especially from the perspective of inhabitants of the area.

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1. Introduction

Multiple scholars argue that nations, regions, cities and districts are increasingly competing each other in attracting talented, engaged international inhabitants to gain economical competitive advantage (Wadhwa et al. 2008; Douglass et al. 2011, Eskelä 2014). Universities are seen as focal players in attracting the talents (Lester & Sotarauta 2007; Musterd & Kovács 2013, Eskelä 2014) but even more importantly, the global talents are wanted to stay and live in, and engage with the regions (Stachowiak et al 2013, Eskelä 2014). In an attempt to attract talented individuals, cities and regions are collaborating with multiple instances to create appealing strategies and visions (Staffans & Merikoski 2011, Ståhle et al. 2004).

However, every stakeholder involved tends to perceive visions in a different manner, the implementation processes last long and the on-going organizational changes challenge the vision creation processes. Also the networks that create visions for areas are becoming increasingly complex i.e. in forms of Public-Private-People Partnerships (4P) (Lemmetty et al. 2005, Majamaa 2008, Staffans & Väyrynen 2009). According to Väyrynen (2010), “the problem faced in 4P-networks is the difficulty in proceeding from vision to successful implementation, when the actors of the network change during the long-lasting process and, in the interim, the operational environment may be transformed in many respects”.

Existing body of knowledge on areal vision processes mainly focus on either the beginning or the outcome of the vision processes. Long-term research that would follow an urban vision process for larger districts over time and analyze the evolution of the vision until the outcome has not been conducted much. Therefore, this paper aims to increase understanding on areal vision creation processes and how they impact the resulting areas. The research question is: How does the areal vision creation process affect the resulting area?

In an attempt to increase understanding on the complex stakeholder relations and the interconnectedness of strategic and operational levels of vision implementation, this study takes an inductive qualitative approach focusing on one case in Suurpelto area in the City of Espoo, Finland. Nine interviews have been conducted with different stakeholders involved both in the vision building and implementation processes.

The paper is structured under four main sections: Literature overview outlines existing studies on urban vision process; Methodology explains the employed methodology and analysis; Section of results describes the main findings; and Discussion section reflects on the findings.

2. Literature overview on urban vision process

According to Ståhle et al. (2004), a vision can be perceived in two ways that differ in the ways they approach the nature of change: either as a stable picture of the future that directs planning and actions from a status quo towards a new status quo, or as a continuous process that reacts to a constantly evolving state of change. Multiple scholars (ie. Nykänen et al 2007, Riihimäki & Vanhatalo 2006, Staffans & Merikoski 2011) also define vision as a tool and call for concrete criteria based on which planning can be directed.

A vision process has an important role in facilitating discussion between multiple organizations that aim to implement their own strategies and visions (Ståhle et al 2004). According to Worthington and Bouwman (2012), communication as one part of urban development, concerns promotional activities and interaction with others. They also point out that by communications, a brand and a collective image can be built, but identity is built by individuals.

In an attempt to reach a common direction and language through the vision process, the focus should be in finding the common ground between the different visions of multiple stakeholders involved in areal development. A vision that is reached through linking general aims with the common ground defined by local stakeholders helps in defining concrete focus areas and aims for planning. In addition, it has a role in engaging the stakeholders with the areal transformation process and its aims. (Staffans & Merikoski 2011) The vision also has a role in connecting the views of different stakeholders. Connectivity can be seen as a capability to connect the physical environment, and different communities. In other words, connectivity occurs across and in different levels and layers, and vision can be transcribed from illustrative descriptions to physical and social networks. (Worthington and Bouwman 2012) Väyrynen (2010) considers potential of enhancing the competitiveness of cities through networked planning and

implementation processes that would empower its citizens.

Even though Riihimäki and Vanhatalo (2006) consider vision an outcome, they see it as a result of a democratic process between multiple stakeholders. Therefore, they argue, visions tend to be too general and vague to provide valid instructions for planning and development. Worthington and Bouwman (2012) emphasise collaboration as a capability to collaborate both informally and formally. Two key phenomena related to collaboration are complexity and diversity. Collaboration should not be seen as restrictive practices, but rather as a set of process of creatively balancing between conflicting and mutual interests. It is about working across different scales, interests, functions and cultures with the aim of building up community spirit.

A vision can be thus seen as one goal of the collaboration but it is also a mean of governance. Worthington and Bouwman (2012) argue that successful control and governance requires a balance between creating and reinforcing vision and mission, and then managing the process of change through combination of regulatory controls and behavior. A forward-looking attitude in management can be achieved through a common direction, principles and rules.

In her dissertation, Väyrynen (2010) explores four approaches to urban development and tests them in four case studies, one of which is the Suurpelto case. In the end, she suggests five process design principles: “1. The process is committed to common goals throughout the network, 2. Ideas are systematically processed and developed through interorganisational learning, 3. The coherence of the process is secured, 4. Collaboration within the network is encouraged, and 5. The network is committed to long-term quality in the realisation of its goals”. She also points out that as the nature of the network in urban development is constant change, “the commitment to common goals has to be additionally attained through well-timed regulatory measures”. Worthington and Bouwman (2012) state that change is a natural phenomenon caused by development, but the essence in organizational settings is in reacting to the change. Accordingly, changing occurs both physically and perceptually and it is more about changing a mindset than physical alterations per se. Built environment can be altered in order to empower the organizational structure either by large or through multiple small-scale changes.

Table 1. Concluding two urban vision streams (Stähle et al. 2004) according to the literature overview

Urban Vision characteristics	
Stable statement	Dynamic process
Tool	Communication
Sets criteria	Links and connects
Outcome of a democratic process	Collaboration
Standards	Change
Management Principle	Learning
Common goal	Long-term

An urban vision can be perceived through two basic lenses: it is either a stable statement or it is an object of a dynamic process for different stakeholders to communicate, collaborate and learn. The characteristics of an urban vision are summarized in Table 1. Based on the literature overview, this piece of research focuses on understanding the process rather than analyzing a stable vision statement per se.

3. Methodology

3.1. Approach

This study takes a qualitative, inductive approach to a single intrinsic case as described by Stake (1995). Accordingly, this approach is not undertaken because of its generalizability, but rather its particularity and ordinariness – because the case itself is of interest. By so doing, general transferability of the results is acknowledged to be low. Rather than taking multiple case studies in different contexts under exploration, we decided to follow up the vision and implementation process of Suurpelto district in Espoo (Väyrynen 2010) even

further as an intrinsic case – its environmental and socio-political dynamics have changed radically over time leading to an unclear setting and mismatch between the strategic vision and the operational activities.

3.2. Case description

Suurpelto is a district located in the city of Espoo, southern Finland. In terms of transportation and traffic, it lies near the crossing of two large high ways: Ring Road II and Helsinki-Turku motorway. Suurpelto area totals to 325 hectares, of which 89 hectares will be dedicated to parks. According to plans, a million square metres will be built. The number of inhabitants were estimated in 2010 to reach 10 000 by 2025, and several thousand workplaces were planned to accommodate the office blocks situated in the vicinity of Ring Road II. (Väyrynen 2010)

The areal planning and visioning of the district date back to late 1990s. The preparation for local master plans were announced in 1999 and the objectives were approved in 2000 (Lemmetty 2005). After the first vision was built in 2002-2003 it has been reformulated twice. The local master plan was approved by the city board in 2005 and the detailed plans for the first two quarters by the city council in 2006. (Väyrynen 2010). In 2014, the two quarters are the only ones that have been implemented, three detailed plan processes are under development and two under planning. The construction sites of first apartment houses were commenced in summer 2009, but the construction activity has not been as intense as was originally planned.

According to Väyrynen (2010), the key actors who have been involved in the development of vision for Suurpelto district include, in addition to the city of Espoo, a variety of partners: e.g. private landowners, their lawyers and architects, and the residential developers Asuntosäätiö Foundation and VVO, several private companies, Espoo-Vantaa Institute of Technology, Helsinki University of Technology, and VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland. The main motivation of developing Suurpelto area from the aspect of the city of Espoo has been to increase the competitiveness of the home city for Nokia's headquarters, willing to ensure its capability of attracting the 'creative class' (Florida 2002) by "offering an attractive living environment with all the services required by international experts" (Väyrynen 2010). Väyrynen (2010) also identified four novel mechanisms used in Suurpelto planning, visioning and implementation phases: Design Manual, three untraditional actors and networks, six novel practices and processes, and extensive citizen participation.

However, as probably the most relevant point regarding the competitiveness and city attractiveness, Väyrynen (2010) points out that already from 2002, in an attempt to promote the new district, voluntary participatory collaboration was triggered with the citizens most actively by Asuntosäätiö, which arranged monthly events with the local neighborhoods. In addition to events, City of Espoo also arranged internet surveys and several meetings for information and discussion purposes. This was probably the largest single reason why the plans for the first two quarters were not appealed in 2006. (Väyrynen 2010)

3.3. Interview methodology

This study extends an existing case study the data collection of which was conducted in 2004-2009 (Väyrynen 2010). Her data included 63 semi-structured thematic interviews and 130 participants in three-day simulation workshops. This was used as secondary data and primary data include 9 thematic interviews conducted for our research in 2014.

Our interviews cover different stakeholder perspectives from private and public sectors, the interviewees representing different phases of vision creation and implementation. The interviewees include six representatives from the city of Espoo, three representatives from 2 residential developers and a city planning consultant. The interviews have been complemented by action research -based data that has been gathered by participating in Suurpelto marketing board meetings, and by analyzing vision documents and other alike archival data.

3.4. Analyses

The studies made by Väyrynen (2004–2009) were supported by our interview data providing a basis for our understanding of the vision phases 1 and 2. However, our interviews also extend further indicating a third vision phase. The main points of the analysis are summarized in Table 2.

The nine conducted interviews were analyzed without formal lenses and the themes were let to emerge from the data. Several themes emerged, but as the most crucial finding, the evolving nature of the vision became evident. The vision and its reachability have evolved radically over time due to changes in the operational environment of organizations and their networks. Therefore, different organizations on different planning and implementation levels seem to perceive and implement the visions differently. Thus, this study only focuses on reporting the change of Suurpelto's vision and implementation processes over time. Building on the two-stream frame of the literature overview, we identified several mechanisms that reflect actors' perceptions of the urban vision as a stable statement and as a dynamic process.

Table 2. The main categories of the analysis

Period of time	2002-2003	2006-2008	2010-2014
Phase of vision	Vision I: Before accepted plan, all the stakeholders collaborate.	Vision II: After accepted detailed plans I and II, operational environment changes. Nokia as one of the key business providers in Espoo exits the planning.	Vision III: The original plan is not valid due to a key player exit, themes of the vision are still maintained. Residents begin implementing their own visions.
Vision statement	"A distinctive garden city for the information age where housing, work, learning, leisure and services are combined in a novel way. The traditional borderlines between different functions will be blurred, and interaction between the public and private sectors will be encouraged." (Suurpelto strategy 2003) (Väyrynen 2010)	"Will grow to an innovative environment for living, education and business life, being also successful in the international competition to attract companies and R&D institutions" (Espoo Strategy 2006-2008) (Väyrynen 2010)	"Otaniemi - Keilaniemi - Tapiola - Suurpelto -entity will be developed as a diverse centre of science, arts and economy (T3) and as a garden-like residential area" & "Brand the district, attract active people, focus on the community, identify leading individuals and orchestrate active collaboration and meetings on the grass-roots level" (Espoo Strategy 2010-2013) & (ACSI 2010) (Interviews)
Characteristics of vision as a stable statement			
Tools	Town plan, plans for neighborhood and quarter areas and design manual	Implementation begins according to criteria of decided plan.	New plan for the center of Suurpelto area with thematic inspiration of vision. The quality requirements of built environment are continuously taken into account.
Decision making focus	Decisions on land use contracts	Decisions on the continuation of the metro line in metropolitan area in general: Suurpelto not on the route.	Yet, no decisions have been made on the future of the central area and all stakeholders are waiting for the decisions.
Plans and requirements	Plan accepted by diverse stakeholders.	The infrastructure of streets and traffic completed prior to the building construction.	Mismatch between the goals of the plans and cost structure occurred.
Characteristics of vision as a dynamic process			
Actors	The collaboration with future and neighbouring residents begins. Project director coordinates the implementation.	Exit of a focal player, Nokia, potential residents might be lost The City of Espoo, Asuntosäätiö and VVO found a marketing company for the area.	The first inhabitants move to Suurpelto. Ownership of the marketing company changes, role shifts towards marketing and service company.
Collaboration	A vision is created in a multi-disciplinary team. A collaboration agreement between Nokia, Asuntosäätiö and the City of Espoo	Construction companies collaborate in harmonizing the street scene on the first built street. Collaboration between the contractors: suction waste system is created.	The association of residents is founded. Collaboration with the local residents and firms: developing the district.
Communication	Information shifts between and within the teams.	Launching the district, marketing begins.	Linking different interests and experimenting generated ideas in the district e.g. info walls in the residential houses.

Learning	Learning about the region from the residents and the stakeholders.	Developing the idea for Opinmäki Campus - School as a learning neighbourhood.	Engaging the inhabitants to the urban development through KOULII project.
			Enabling experiments: Temporary experiments such as cultivation boxes.
			Taking risks and allowing the residents to use the info pavilion e.g. pop-up cafeteria entrepreneur.

Three major step stones of change can be identified on the strategic level of vision building: First, the original vision building process that began in late 1990's; Second, the exit of a focal player in business right before the building phase began in 2007. Third, seemingly because the original vision seemed impossible to be reached because of the exit of a focal player, the Suurpelto vision was merged to a larger vision of T3 area, and more responsibility was given to the inhabitants of the area.

Three levels of actors can be identified from different phases of vision process. Strategic level has included multiple instances over time but has been mainly driven by Espoo City. The tactical level can be seen to consist of diverse stakeholders from development to construction. The operational level of the vision and implementation process can be mainly seen to be driven by residents of the district and other active individuals. Various smaller and larger experiments, research and development projects have affected all three levels.

4. Results

According to the analysis, the characteristics and individual stakeholder perceptions of the vision varied over the vision process. The stable characteristics are based on the fixed decisions of developing the green field area. The change to the vision as a stable statement is done by reacting to a conflict or an issue that occurs. When perceived as a process, the vision is changed on the go and proactively according to the instant situation and followed up thereafter. The process perception can be characterized by constant collaboration, communication and learning over time. The urban vision characteristics in the Suurpelto case are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Suurpelto vision characteristics from the aspects of vision as a stable statement and a dynamic process

Urban Vision characteristics	
Stable statement	Dynamic process
Ready made and fixed	Grass-roots experiments
Evolves slowly step by step	Evolves dynamically and constantly
Steady themes	Continuous iteration
Limited amount of key players	Players change over time
Strong defined common goal	Instant reaction to changes in operational environment
Building up regional image	Building up regional identity

As pointed out by Staffans and Merikoski (2011) it seems that the first vision of Suurpelto was built on common ground where the stakeholders' own objectives were brought together. The vision process also connected the different views of stakeholders and formed a goal that seemed reachable at that time. In addition, the vision process also included implementation plans for the vision - it was not only planned what should be done but also how to do it. In the words of Worthington and Bouwman (2012) the connectivity between illustrative descriptions and physical and social networks was taken into account in different applications. To give some examples: the project director coordinates the whole chain from strategic to operational level, land use agreements include functional objectives, development plans go through a quality assurance process and Suurpelto Marketing Ltd. takes care of the marketing and promoting of the area but also functions as service company.

As engaging to a common vision provides that the stakeholders can implement their own strategies and visions (Stähle et al. 2004) the common vision need to be recognized by the stakeholders. In the beginning of the Suurpelto

vision process in early 2000, the stakeholders did agree on the common vision. However, the exit of the main business partner brought out the differences between the city and the constructors when it comes to time perspectives and objectives. If the city development department evaluates its operations once a year, the constructors evaluate their outcome every quarter. This means that the city has more time to wait for better options or economical situation than the constructors. Even though the city of Espoo strives to improve the business opportunities in the area, it cannot do it by any means but it needs to take care of the holistic view of the areal development. The goal of the city is to build up good living environment whereas roughly said the constructors' main aim is to initiate and complete projects - finalize a product and sell it. These aspects have seemingly directed the players towards their own directions away from the shared vision.

According to the analysis, the stakeholders on different levels perceive the vision differently over time. On the strategic level, the vision has been mainly considered as a stable vision that is renewed every three to four years because of radical events that require reaction. The last vision has included the act of handing the ownership over to the operational level. The tactical level including the contractors and the other actors who build the region, seem to perceive the vision as a stable statement from the point onwards where contracts have been written. The operational grass-roots level including the inhabitants seem to perceive it as a stable statement before they make the buying decision but as a dynamic process after the point of moving to the district.

Not only has the ownership of the vision evolved over time, but also the role of each actor in regards to implementation. The first vision was made in collaboration with multiple stakeholders, the second vision was conducted mainly by the city of Espoo and the third vision has seemingly floated without an actual owner as no decisions have been made on the strategic level on the future of the district. At the same time, the residents have taken an increasing amount of grass-roots level actions with the help of Suurpelto project director and Suurpelto Marketing Ltd. This has resulted in the founding of small local services, such as pop-up cafeteria and group exercise classes, and community building activities such as urban farming and organizing a variety of events for the residents. The vision on the strategic level which was owned by the city seems to thus be steadily losing its meaning, and the ownership is little by little taken over by the residents on the operational level where small experiments take place. The phenomenon is illustrated in Figure 1.

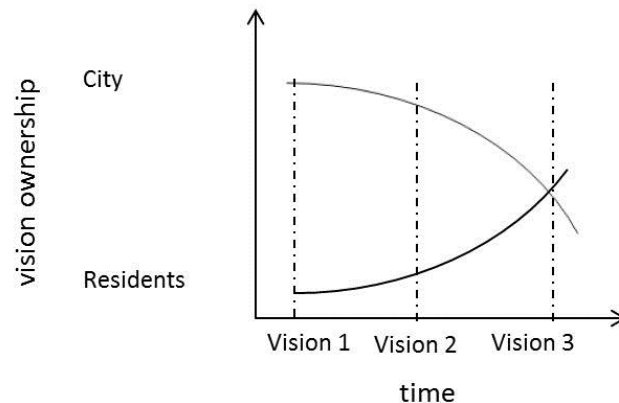


Fig 1. Vision ownership fluctuates over time

During the vision and implementation processes Suurpelto has been evolving from a concept and a brand towards a concrete neighborhood with inhabitants. It was the brand that the first players agreed on, and their plans were made according to that. Due to the big changes in the operational environment - the exit of focal player and the long lasting economic recession - it became clear that the original vision of a mixed-use area vanished into thin air. It led to a gap growing between reality and vision, and more precisely, a residential district and a concept. It is mainly the constructors who are dealing with the consequences of this gap, as they perceive it as a lack of credibility on two

levels: first, an unrealized brand and second, contradicting resident behavior with that of the objectives of the district. In reducing the impacts of the lack of credibility, the communication and trust building between the city and the constructors is essential.

The inhabitants were not interviewed for the study but considering the amount of grass-roots projects and processes taking place in the area, it can be claimed that the residents have adapted the original vision of Suurpelto as part of the building material of their regional identity. In addition, through these small experiments the residents also develop the vision. One example representing this process is the expression of the district's desired development made by the association of residents by using social media as a media for communication. They see the sense of community, safety, taking care of the parks and public areas and sensible services as important values and targets to be aimed at when taking the future development actions. Thus, the role of the residents in the visioning process has seemingly turned from being the object of the vision into being a subject. We suggest that this turn is a result of the long lasting aim to build trust and promote the participation of the residents in developing their neighbourhood. Despite the top-down managed participation in the beginning, also resident-led activities have emerged in Suurpelto, which has finally led to inhabitants bringing their own objectives to the visioning process.

5. Conclusions

This paper aimed to increase understanding on areal vision building processes and how they influence the resulting areas. Multiple stakeholders can accept a vision of a city district if they succeed in finding common ground and building trust between the actors. The results of the extensively studied intrinsic Suurpelto case indicate that different stakeholders involved in the visioning and implementation phases on different organizational levels perceive the vision differently over time: either as a stable statement or a dynamic process. The objectives of a vision become set when a detailed plan is accepted making the vision stable. In case the common vision is not kept alive, the interpretations and diverse perceptions of vision emerge during the implementation process. Even though a stable vision can seem stiff it can also be the means of building the district as planned and form the phrases for marketing.

However, a vision can also be seen as an ever-evolving dynamic process that seems to increase its importance when people inhabit the district. A vision as a dynamic process is open for different ways of implementation and it leaves room for possible changes in the operational environment. The residents can find their own ways of implementing the vision if they are empowered to do that. Acknowledging the different perceptions of a vision over time and paying attention to the issues of trust building throughout the vision process are in the core of succeeding in implementation of urban visions in a increasingly complex, uncertain, highly competitive world.

This piece of research provides an overview of a long-term vision process of urban development. The results suggest that when building a competitive urban district, engaging the builders, inhabitants and other areal prospects through trust is essential. Therefore, the decision makers, city officials and other practitioners should pay more attention to the vision building processes over time, not only in the beginning or in the end of the process. They should proactively follow the development of the vision over time, understand how changes in the operational environment affect the realism of implementing the vision, and react to changes accordingly. The stable and process characteristics of the vision must be kept in balance. The stable vision can be used in building the image of the district. The dynamic vision process adds the constructive elements for development of regional identity layer on top of the stable vision.

This case study is mainly limited because of its context-dependency: it is a unique, intrinsic case, which is why the transformability of the results is most likely low. On the other hand, its extensive nature provides deep understanding on the case itself. However, no residents were interviewed which weakens the reliability of the results.

At least four further research streams can be identified: extending this study by resident interviews, replicating this study in another context, comparing this study with other alike studies, and validating the findings of this study by multiple case studies.

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