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# Polycentricity as spatial imaginary: the case of Helsinki City Plan

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## ABSTRACT

The paper analyses with a case study the use of a widely applied normative concept of polycentricity as spatial imaginary. The case study of Helsinki City Plan and the conflict over its city-boulevard scheme draws on qualitative content analysis of planning documents and expert interviews. It demonstrates the instrumental role of multiple interpretations of polycentricity in tension-ridden metropolitan and city-regional spatial planning. The conflict reveals how the conceptual ambiguity of polycentricity and the institutional vagueness of city-regional planning have together enabled advancing contradictory political aims under their guise. In conclusion, the paper emphasizes the persuasive performativity and fluidity of polycentricity as a spatial imaginary in multi-scalar planning settings.

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structure

## Introduction

In the future, Helsinki will be an urban, rapidly growing rail transport network city with expanding central areas coupled with other developing centres. Commuter trains and the metro will offer fast rail connections between the central areas and other parts of Helsinki. The light rail network will complement this traffic system, making it a highly efficient network. The city will be concentrated along the transverse traffic routes, the expanding centres and in what are currently highway-like areas (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2013c, p. 5)

The City of Helsinki, the capital of Finland, adopted an ambitious new local master plan in 2016 outlining general directions for its land use. With the plan, entitled ‘City Plan’, the City prepares to grow as a polycentric network city, served by rail transport. The key interventions to obtain the strategic goal are the light rail network, ‘urbanising’ sub-centres, and the transformation of all arterial highways into street-like city-boulevards within the outer frame of Ring Road 1. The target of the Helsinki City Plan seemingly aligns with the goal of the city region of Greater Helsinki to develop its urban structure as polycentric, to which all of its 14 municipalities, Helsinki included, have pronounced their commitment in statutory regional and non-statutory city-regional land use plans. However, various state,

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regional, and local actors have criticized the city-boulevards in the course of the planning process for working against the city-regional, as well as regional, goal of polycentricity. This criticism culminated in early 2018, when the Regional Administrative Court made its ruling based on appeals filed against the plan. The Court overruled four out of seven city-boulevards proposed in the Helsinki City Plan on the basis of their negative impacts on the fluency of regional and national transport. This ruling brought to the surface a hidden conflict: while the actors at different governmental levels had agreed on the overall strategy of polycentric development of Greater Helsinki, there actually was no agreement among them on *what kind* of polycentric development this should entail in the concrete terms of urban structure and system.

In this study, we aim to make sense of the process that led to the surfacing of this conflict. The city region of Greater Helsinki does not exist in any formal sense, as there is no sole administrative body or statutory plan to govern it. It is generally considered as an entity somewhat covering the functional urban region and being constituted of 14 municipalities that co-operate primarily on a voluntary basis. We intend to reveal that the weak institutionalization of city-regional planning in Greater Helsinki has afforded strategic leeway to individual municipalities in the city region to forward their own land use interests under the seemingly shared imaginary of polycentricity. Such leeway has also been enabled by the vagueness of the concept of polycentricity, which has been detected in previous studies (e.g. Davoudi, 2003; Rauhut, 2017; Schmitt, 2013; Shaw & Sykes, 2004; van Meeteren, Poorthuis, Derudder, & Witlox, 2016). While there is abundant research on the manifold conceptualisations of polycentricity (e.g. Meijers, 2008; van Meeteren et al., 2016), what has remained empirically understudied is the intentional use of the conceptual vagueness of polycentricity as a strategic tool in generating joint coordination and political legitimacy at the city-regional level (cf. Bergsli & Harvold, 2017; Schmitt, 2013). To analyse this, we associate polycentricity with the concept of 'spatial imaginary' (e.g. Davoudi et al., 2018). We chose the concept as an analytical frame as it captures the nature of polycentricity both as a planning concept and as a planning space, and, further, as a concept affording multiple interpretations and legitimizing material practices.

In this article, we will first present the concept of spatial imaginary and examine the concept of polycentricity as a spatial imaginary, in connection to its various definitions given in spatial planning and geographical research. Then we will introduce the case: the Helsinki City Plan and the conflict over its city-boulevard scheme. By drawing on qualitative content analysis of planning documents and expert interviews, we aim to explain the conflict through the different and – as we aim to reveal – discordant interpretations of polycentricity that operationalize it as a planning goal at different planning scales. Without referring to city-regional polycentricity directly (ESPON 1.1.1, 2005), the Helsinki City Plan imposes a certain city-regional structure. It presents an interpretation of polycentricity, which co-aligns, to a degree, with the functional interpretation of polycentricity at the city-regional scale. On the other hand, regarding morphological interpretation, the boulevardisation idea in the plan advances (city-)regional monocentricity, not polycentricity. With these city-regional implications of the Helsinki City Plan, the different city-regional interpretations of polycentricity reveal their discordance and an underlying conflict on the favoured urban structure and system between the actors mobilizing them.

We argue that the soft governance of Helsinki city-regional planning has enabled, until now, the use of polycentricity as a pacifying spatial imaginary, rather than an integrative planning strategy (e.g. Humer, 2018; Schmitt, 2013; Shaw & Sykes, 2004). As such, its different interpretations have concealed a non-agreement on the pursued city-regional structure and system. The case thus addresses both conceptual ambiguities and institutional voids related to the uses of the concept of polycentricity, for the analysis of which the concept of spatial imaginary provides a novel approach. We aim to contribute to the academic discussion on spatial imaginaries by drawing attention to the persuasive performativity and varied uses of polycentricity as a fluid spatial imaginary in tension-ridden metropolitan and city-regional planning.

## Spatial imaginaries

Spatial planning concepts contain and perform specific spatial imaginaries (Davoudi et al., 2018, p. 97). Although spatial imaginaries retain many incarnations, for example, in geographical imagination (Said, 1978), socio-political theory (Anderson, 1983; Castoriadis, 1987; Taylor, 2004), and cultural political economy (Sum & Jessop, 2013), they can be defined as selective ‘mental maps’ into complex spatial reality (Jessop, 2012, p. 17), which give sense to, enable, and legitimise collective spatial practices. Imaginaries are operationalized and propagated, for example, through texts, stories, and images (Davoudi et al., 2018, p. 101).

Spatial imaginaries are both descriptive and prescriptive. In their selective representation and discursive construction of spatial phenomena, spatial imaginaries frontstage some spatial issues, thus supplanting alternative or competing imaginaries (Boudreau, 2007; Olesen, 2017; Sum & Jessop, 2013). They either assign distinct characteristics to a place or base on ‘idealised models’, which contain and convey guidelines for action (Golubchikov, 2010; Watkins, 2015). As such, spatial imaginaries become materialized as certain normative politics and practices of spatial planning, which reproduce and reinforce them (Baker & Ruming, 2015; Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2017; Wetzstein, 2013). In this regard, many authors have highlighted their performative role in constructing spaces and spatial relations (e.g. Baker & Ruming, 2015; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Watkins, 2015). As Jessop (2012, p. 17) has summarized, imaginaries, and the spatial planning concepts that carry them, guide present and future (non-)decisions and (in-)actions and play a performative role, when intense expectations unfold to mobilize resources, produce incentives, and justify certain actions in preference to other ones.

Imaginaries are collectively held broad conceptual frameworks of representation and interpretation, and as such, cannot be reduced to interests of certain groups or works of individual imagination (Davoudi et al., 2018). Hincks, Deas, and Haughton (2017, p. 4) emphasize that the appeal of imaginaries to policymaking rests largely on their imprecision and fluidity. Imaginaries allow policymakers to construct particular readings of a problem and to propose appropriate solutions depending on their own viewpoints and material interests. Consequently, they enable arguments for many different political views and interests, thereby interlinking even adversarial interest groups (Sum & Jessop, 2013; Wetzstein, 2013). It has been shown that the employment of existing imaginaries, or the construction of new ones, can help actors to negotiate complex and contested

issues, securing agreement on ways of moving forward and generating joint meaning and action (Boudreau, 2007; Vigar, Graham, & Healey, 2005; Wetzstein, 2013). Discursive and material coalitions can thus emerge around resonating imaginaries (Hincks et al., 2017; Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008; Wetzstein, 2013).

However, for the purpose of our study, it is important to emphasize that the enactment of flexible imaginaries can also induce disagreement and contestation (Jonas, 2014; Levy & Spicer, 2013). On the one hand, there always exists a plurality of competing interpretations of spatial imaginaries, operating at different scales and expressing different spatial logics; and problems occur in making these complementary (Harrison & Growe, 2014). On the other hand, because an imaginary does not have a fixed meaning (Davoudi et al., 2018; Vigar et al., 2005), its new situational readings may create mutually discordant interpretations of its meaning, leading to failures in policy coordination (cf. van Duinen, 2013). Drawing on Laclau's and Lacan's theoretical work on empty signifiers, Gunder and Hillier (2009) argue that this is because planning concepts are inherently open to different significations of meaning depending on the discourses they are attached to, thus encapsulating various meanings under a single term. Such concepts may temporarily gain a fixed meaning and perform crystallisation points in a specific discourse, but also overflow with different interpretations (Laclau, 2015; cf. Kooij, van Assche, & Legendijk, 2014). Imaginaries may thus become fuzzy and depoliticized in their self-evident but ambiguous merit (Davoudi et al., 2018, p. 98; Olesen & Richardson, 2011). As such, imaginaries may guarantee only surface agreements without providing guidelines for action (Brand & Gaffikin, 2007) and disguise actual policy interests promoted under a seemingly unifying imaginary (Healey, 2007, p. 232). As we later in this article aim to reveal, in the city-regional planning and local master planning of Helsinki, polycentricity served as a seemingly unifying spatial imaginary.

### Polycentricity as spatial imaginary

The concept of polycentricity has gained widespread currency in planning and spatial development strategies (e.g. Davoudi, 2003; Kloosterman & Musterd, 2001; van Meeteren et al., 2016; Waterhout, Zonneveld, & Meijers, 2005). The interest in polycentricity links with city-regional development, following the observation that city regions increasingly often display polycentric characteristics (Lambregts, 2009). They have resulted from growth and outflow of activities from the urban cores, which have clustered to sub-centres due to agglomerative economic forces, or from integration of historically distinct cities, to benefit from economies of scale (Kloosterman & Musterd, 2001; Meijers, 2007; Parr, 2004). On the other hand, polycentricity has not emerged only as a concept used for describing the changing internal spatial organization and regionalization of growing urban areas (e.g. Batten, 1995; Graham & Marvin, 2001; Sieverts, 2003), but also as a normative concept for spatial planning at various scales (Davoudi, 2003), promoted not least by the European Union (e.g. ESPON 1.1.1, 2005). Indeed, this conceptual ambivalence is a key characteristic of polycentricity when used as a spatial imaginary. Polycentricity as a normative concept refers to active encouragement of polycentric spatial development as a policy objective. However, polycentric spatial development involves numerous and varying definitions (e.g. Davoudi, 2003; Lambregts, 2009; van Meeteren et al., 2016). These are operationalized through images and textual planning practice. In our case

study, we are interested in how the spatial imaginary of polycentricity is interpreted in planning texts at different planning scales.

In a literal sense ‘polycentric’ merely denotes that a spatial entity consists of multiple centres, while not specifying how many or what kind of centres there are or whether and how they are connected (Schmitt, 2013). Beyond this, there are many different definitions of polycentricity. A *morphological definition* of a polycentric area is the crudest, indicating the presence of multiple centres in a given area, as well as their equal sizes and spacing. Complementarily to the previous, a *functional definition* requires networking between the centres, emphasizing their multidirectional connections and flow patterns (Burger & Meijers, 2012, p. 1128; Green, 2007). These emerge when the centres become functionally differentiated, which leads to their specialization and complementarity (Kloosterman & Musterd, 2001, pp. 626–627; Meijers, 2007). Functional polycentricity is informed by and closely relates to the network city theory and concept (e.g. Camagni & Capello, 2004).

The concept of polycentricity is also *scale-sensitive*, as it can be applied to describe and prescribe polycentric development in an intra-urban scale, inter-urban scale, inter-regional scale, or further macro scales. In reference to different scales, polycentricity describes different kinds of polycentric structures and deals varyingly with policy goals attached to its promotion, such as counteracting urban sprawl, reducing regional disparities and increasing competitiveness (Davoudi, 2003; Schmitt, 2013). As Hall (2003, p. 199) aptly notes ‘What is monocentric at one level can be polycentric at another.’ In practical terms, this means that a particular measure may, for instance, support polycentricity at the inter-regional level, undermine it at the inter-urban level and again support it at the intra-urban level (Eskelinen & Fritsch, 2009, p. 608). However, while applicable at different scales, polycentricity is *not* hierarchically scalable. Jessop, Brenner, and Jones (2008) argue that the structuring principle of polycentricity, applied to any place, is network. Because any field of operation contains only one structuring principle, network and scale become contradictory. Therefore, in reference to different scales, the interpretations of polycentricity can include discordant meanings and strategic goals – e.g. polycentric Helsinki in a monocentric Greater Helsinki city region, or monocentric Helsinki in a polycentric Greater Helsinki city region.

In addition to conceptualizing polycentricity in morphological or functional terms, or by its scalar qualities, it can also denote *relational polycentricity*, indicating a strategic, political, or institutional definition of polycentricity (Giffinger & Suitner, 2015; Halbert, 2008; Meijers, Hoogerbrugge, & Cardoso, 2018). According to Giffinger and Suitner (2015, p. 1174), this type of polycentricity emerges from political-institutional relations and strategic networking between municipalities. Giffinger and Suitner further argue that both morphological and functional polycentricity can serve as a basis for strategic-relational cooperation, however, requiring cognitive envisioning and processual understanding of the layers of polycentric development. Thus, relational polycentricity as a spatial imaginary emphasizes soft network-based governance forms and spaces (e.g. Albrechts, 2001; Parr, 2004; Schmitt, 2013).

Identifying and establishing an appropriate mode of governance that would correspond to the layers of the polycentric metropolitan or city-regional system has remained a challenge (e.g. Kloosterman & Musterd, 2001; van Houtum & Lagendijk, 2001). Creating soft city-regional governance arrangements alongside the existing ‘hard’ institutional local and regional authorities may lead to the generation of a city-regional ‘institutional void’, in



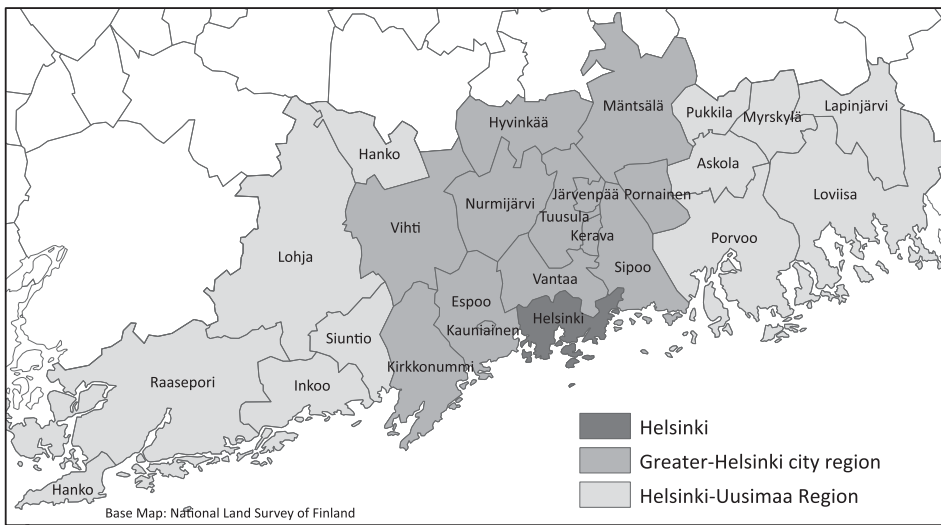
Hajer's terms (Hajer, 2003; see also Salet, 2018). Such a void may open up strategic room for manoeuvre to individual municipalities for pushing their own self-regarded land use interests behind the guise of a shared city-regional spatial imaginary (Hytönen et al., 2016). The fluidity of the spatial imaginary of polycentricity may then be utilized in such manoeuvres (cf. Jensen & Richardson, 2003). However, the imaginary might also bring different actors together, and it has provided an integrative strategy for many city regions of Europe (e.g. Oliveira & Hersperger, 2018; Shaw & Sykes, 2004), for example, for reaching densification and competitiveness goals (Schmitt, 2013). Similarly, polycentricity has successfully been used as an integrative concept at inter-city (Meijers et al., 2018) and national levels (Humer, 2018).

### *Polycentric Greater Helsinki*

The city region of Greater Helsinki does not exist in any formal sense, because it does not have an administrative body responsible over its governance. In functional and morphological terms, Greater Helsinki has been perceived as the only properly polycentric city region in Finland (Joutsiniemi, 2010; Vasanen, 2012; Ylä-Anttila, 2010). When defined 'bottom-up', based on statistical and GIS-analysis of work – and shopping-related commuting, it appears as a functional urban region, spawning 100 km around Helsinki, with around 1.5 million inhabitants and 700,000 jobs (2010) (Söderström, 2014, p. 98). The municipalities of Helsinki, Vantaa, Espoo and Kauniainen form the core area of the functional urban region, including around 65 percent of its inhabitants and 78 percent of jobs. The core area has strong functional ties and a distinctive structure of sub-centres. Vasanen (2012) claims that the core area is polycentric more in functional than morphological terms, with the city centre of Helsinki dominating with its strong regional role. Yet, the number and status of the sub-centres has increased, especially in their role as job agglomerations, which the increase in commuter traffic echoes (Söderström, 2014, p. 106, 156; Vasanen, 2012, p. 3636). The functional polycentricity does not expand beyond the core area. The broader functional urban region is orientated towards it, utilizing rail, bus, and car accessibility (Suomen Ympäristökeskus, 2012).

Establishing a mode of governance that would correspond to the layers of polycentric city-regional system has remained a challenge in Greater Helsinki. The Finnish governance system consists of the national government, 18 regions, and around 300 local authorities. Consequently, a sole administrative body does not govern the Greater Helsinki city region which, with its 14 local authorities, forms a part of the broader Helsinki-Uusimaa region (Figure 1). The responsibility of land use planning lies, accordingly, with the regional and local level, and the statutory land use planning system involves three planning levels in a hierarchically binding order: regional land use plan, local master plan and local detailed plan (local authorities may also draft a joint local master plan). These plans are defined in content and process by planning legislation (Land Use and Building Act, 1999/132, 1999) and need to comply with the National Land Use Objectives (Valtioneuvosto, 2017), which define objectives for land use in the whole country. Planning at the city-regional level, in turn, bases on voluntary co-operation of local governments. The 14 municipalities of Greater Helsinki have jointly drafted non-statutory city-regional plans since 2011. Currently, they are implementing the MASU 2050 –Land Use Plan of Greater Helsinki (Helsingin Seudun Maankäyttösunnitelma, 2015), which operates alongside the statutory Regional





**Figure 1.** Location of the City of Helsinki, City region of Greater Helsinki and Helsinki-Uusimaa region.

Land Use Plan for the Helsinki-Uusimaa Region (Uudenmaan liitto, 2014). To enforce the implementation of the MASU 2050 –plan, the Central Government has signed a letter of intent with the municipalities, concerning the sharing of investments and responsibilities namely in major transport projects and the supply of subsidized housing.

In the Finnish planning system, local governments have a strong political autonomy and legal-institutional role in determining their land use policies. The verbal National Land Use Objectives are rather superficial and the regional land use plans have tended to be reactive to local governments' land use aspirations, although in the planning system, they are superior to local level plans (e.g. Puustinen & Hirvonen, 2006; Sairinen, 2009, p. 277). Furthermore, the steering capacities of voluntary city-regional plans, such as the MASU 2050 –plan, have been questioned, in the face of continuing inter-municipal competition on investments and tax-payers (citizen and corporate taxes) (Hytönen et al., 2016; Mäntysalo, Kangasoja, & Kanninen, 2015, pp. 170–171).

Contrary to city-regional land use planning, which lacks a joint city-regional planning authority, there is a joint city-regional authority responsible for public transport, the Helsinki Regional Transport Authority (HSL). Its members include the nine municipalities of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Kauniainen, Kerava, Kirkkonummi, Sipoo, Siuntio, and Tuusula, which have defined joint objectives in the Helsinki Region Transport Plan (HLJ –plan) (HSL, 2015).

### The case of Helsinki City Plan

In this section, we introduce the case of Helsinki City Plan 2016. First, we present the content of the plan and the assessments of its city-regional impacts, which led to critical statements towards the plan as well as appeals to the Regional Administrative Court and to its consequent ruling. Subsequently, we analyse the unfolding of the conflict by identifying different interpretations of the imaginary of polycentricity in planning documents. The

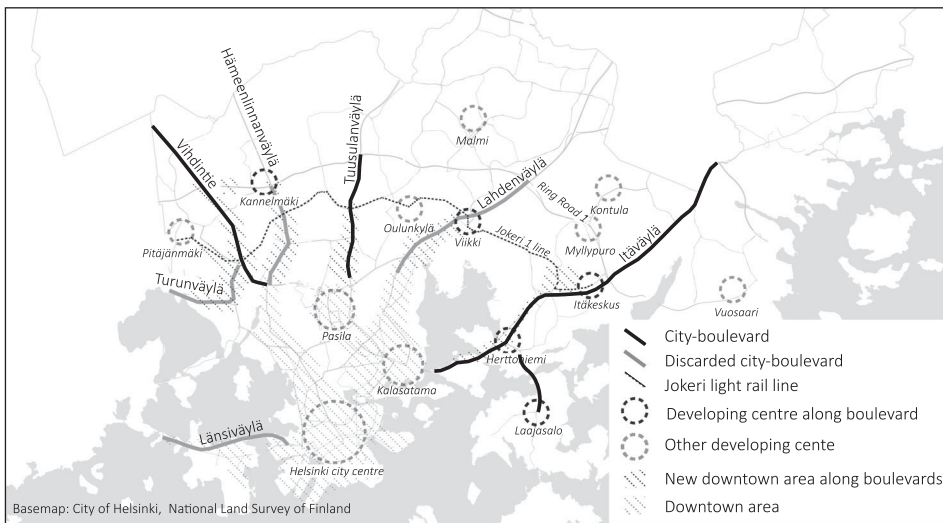
approach is motivated by previous studies (e.g. Hincks et al., 2017; Vigar et al., 2005; Wetzstein, 2013), which have found fluid spatial imaginaries to consolidate different interpretations, prone to diverse interests and discursive contexts. The interpretations are identified through content analysis of the key planning documents guiding spatial planning of the city and the city region of Greater Helsinki: National Land Use Objectives, Regional Land Use Plan for Helsinki-Uusimaa 2014, MASU 2050 –plan, HLJ –plan, and Helsinki City Plan 2016. The interpretations refer varyingly to the key elements of the spatial imaginary of polycentricity outlined in the previous section: structure (functional/morphological), scale, and normative policy goals. Finally, we reveal the discordance of interpretations, and the city-regional spatial structure they imply, through the analysis of statements made on the Helsinki City Plan. We relate this discordance to the emergent relational imaginary of polycentric network governance.

Alongside planning documents, the empirical data that we use in our analysis consist of the Regional Administrative Court's decision report, and 25 official statements on the plan by the other municipalities of the region, regional actors, and ministries of the central government. In our reflections on the document analysis, we draw on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with experts and academics working with issues related to spatial planning in Greater Helsinki. The interviewed experts and academics included nine senior researchers employed by universities, research institutes, and private consultancies, as well as three civil servants from the Ministry of Environment, which is the Finnish ministry in charge of land use planning issues. The interviews were conducted in August–September 2016, recorded, and fully transcribed. The direct quotes are translations by the authors and not linked to the names of the interviewees, to ensure anonymity.

### *Helsinki City Plan and its city-regional impacts*

The City of Helsinki adopted the new Helsinki City Plan in 2016, replacing the previous plan from 2002. With the plan, Helsinki prepares for its growth by 252,000 inhabitants by 2050 (636,576 inhabitants in 2017). To enable this growth, the Helsinki City Plan delivers the vision and urban structure of rail-based 'network city' (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2016, p. 12, 16). According to the vision document (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2013c, pp. 70–78), the urban structure of rail-based 'network city' is to be achieved with (1) outward expansion of central Helsinki; and (2) turning sub-urban centres into a centre network, connected by efficient rail transport.

The outward expansion of central Helsinki is pursued by increasing the efficiency of land use along all arterial highways within Ring Road 1, by transforming them into urban spaces. This so-called 'boulevardisation' of the highway arteries involves reducing car lanes and driving speed on the roads, as well as adding light rail (or possibly metro) lines and biking lanes onto them, and densifying the urban structure alongside them. One third of the planned new housing volume (for 80,000 inhabitants) is located in the areas to be boulevardised (Figure 2). In this regard, the city-boulevards are primarily a land-use development initiative to expand central Helsinki. They are expected to respond to increasing and unforeseen demand for urban living, generate economic agglomeration benefits, and increase attractiveness and competitiveness of central Helsinki. They are aimed to remove the barrier effect of highways, thus connecting previously isolated neighbourhoods and opening up new land reserves for extensive infill



**Figure 2.** The ratified and non-ratified city-boulevards, new downtown areas along them, and developing centres both along and adjacent to the city-boulevards.

development for the needs of the growing city (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2013b, 2013c, pp. 70–71, 2016, pp. 20–32).

The city-boulevards are also a transport solution; a key element in the building of the rail-based network city for supporting sustainable urban structure (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2013c, p. 10). While radial public transport connections are improved with the light rail lines along the city-boulevards, the transversal connections are to be improved with the so-called 'Jokeri 1' and 'Jokeri 2' light rail lines, which intersect with the city-boulevards. Thus, these improvements contribute to creating a networked rail transport system (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2016, p. 22, 54–55, 60). According to the City Board (Helsinki Region Administrative Court 2018, p. 83), the city-boulevards create preconditions for developing the suburban centres into a multi-centre network (see City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2016, p. 105). The city-boulevards would improve their accessibility and create possibilities for developing sub-centres at the nodes of rail transport, particularly where the Jokeri 1 line meets the city-boulevards, such as in Itäkeskus, Käpylä, and Viikki (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2016, p. 22, 54–55, 60). The sub-centres are to be developed as distinctive towns with abundant urban amenities. This is intended to enable an urban lifestyle also outside the conventional downtown area and improve accessibility of services by non-motorized transport. When well-connected sub-centres develop and central areas expand, the relative functional importance of the current downtown core decreases. However, the expanding central Helsinki should remain as the main centre of the polycentric metropolitan area (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2016, p. 16).

As part of the planning process, the city-boulevards were subject to a number of impact assessments. On the one hand, they were approached as an initiative with the most potential for managing the growth of Helsinki in a sustainable manner, and with the most significant impacts to its urban structure and transport system (City Planning Department of

Helsinki, 2015, 2016). According to the assessments, the city-boulevards would enable increasing the supply of much demanded urban housing and business spaces in well-accessible locations close to downtown Helsinki, as well as improve the accessibility by non-motorized transport in Helsinki, especially in the inner areas enveloped by Ring Road 1 (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; City Planning Department of Helsinki and HSL, 2015). On the other hand, the city-boulevards were assessed to reduce the motorized traffic flow capacity of the arterial roads by 50 percent. The decreased capacity would likely congest the traffic within and beyond the city-boulevards and increase the travel times to downtown Helsinki by cars and buses from the other parts of the city region and the rest of the country, reducing its accessibility. Furthermore, while the city-boulevards were assessed to enable densification of the urban structure inward from Ring Road 1, the assessed impacts on the urban structure outward from it might be reverse (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2013a, 2015).

The assessments of regional and national impacts of city-boulevards motivated local, regional, and national actors to submit non-supportive official statements during the statutory hearing period of the plan proposal (Land Use and Building Act 2000, §62). Although the City of Helsinki issued a more comprehensive city-regional evaluation of city-boulevards as a result, the final Helsinki City Plan report concluded that the city-boulevards would not remarkably impact transport, in terms of increased travel times or congestion. Consequently the city-boulevards were left almost unchanged in the revised plan (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2016). The local authorities have a strong autonomy in local master planning in Finland, leaving stakeholders unable to enforce changes to the plan during the planning process. As in this case Helsinki did not make notable revisions to the plan, the Finnish Transport Agency and the regional state agency Uusimaa Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, resorted to appeal to the Regional Administrative Court against Helsinki's decision of approval of the Helsinki City Plan. The appeal argued that four city-boulevards did not meet up their status as regional and national traffic routes – the status which they are given in the superior and statutory Regional Land Use Plan for Helsinki-Uusimaa. The regional plan requires unrestricted motorized traffic flow capacity for these arteries. Based on the appeal, the Court overruled these four city-boulevards. Although the City of Helsinki appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court on the Regional Administrative Court's overruling of the four city-boulevards, the ruling was maintained. The Helsinki City Plan was ratified in December 2018, excluding the areas overruled by the Regional Administrative Court.

### *Different interpretations of the imaginary of polycentricity*

The polycentric and networked city region has emerged as a spatial imaginary in national, regional and city-regional statutory and non-statutory plans that portray common intent for the development of Greater Helsinki. All these plans and guidelines make either explicit or implicit reference to polycentricity as a city-regional planning goal (cf. Schmitt, 2013). In general, to reflect and manage the emerging spatial structure of the city region, the plans endorse a well-functioning and densified structure, which is polycentric and founded around a network of public transport connections. However, interpretations of polycentricity presented in the planning documents vary, emphasizing either *spatial*

*balance* (the morphologically balanced polycentric spatial structure) or *sustainable transport* (the functionally networked rail-based transport system).

*Regional and city-regional spatial balance interpretation.* The Regional Land Use Plan for Helsinki-Uusimaa (Uudenmaanliitto, 2014) and the MASU 2050 –plan (Helsingin Seudun Maankäyttösuunnitelma, 2015) take a morphologically balanced polycentric spatial structure as a planning goal at regional and city-regional scales. They stipulate that spatial planning should promote balanced spatial structure around a network of existing centres for avoiding a core–periphery distinction and for combating urban sprawl. For example, MASU 2050 –plan envisions that Greater Helsinki will develop as a functional and attractive metropolitan area, in which a dense urban core and a surrounding network of distinctive centres form an integrated spatial structure. Both plans emphasize densification of existing centres and development located along rail and bus transit corridors. MASU 2050 –plan concretizes the densification goal with allocation of 80 percent of new housing to the core areas around the Helsinki city centre, to areas along the three main railway lines and to existing municipal centres served by bus transport. The regional land use plan concretizes the aim to densify urban areas along rail and bus corridors by defining a hierarchical centre network. In the core area, the plan recognizes a network of well-connected sub-centres, the role of which is seen to increase. The development of municipal centres outside the core area is seen to contribute to a more balanced regional spatial structure and equal accessibility of services and jobs in the whole region.

*City-regional sustainable transport interpretation.* The other city-regional planning goal, referred primarily in the HLJ –plan (HSL, 2015) and the National Land Use Objectives, is the development of a network-like transport system for fostering the use of sustainable transport modes, contributing positively to functional accessibility and competitiveness of the city region, and combating urban sprawl with simultaneous densification. The previous National Land Use Objectives (Valtioneuvosto, 2008), updated in 2017 (Valtioneuvosto, 2017), instructed spatial planning to pursue a well-functioning spatial structure, which is ‘polycentric, networked, and founded around good transport connections’. In Greater Helsinki, the urban structure should develop around public transport, especially rail transport, for decreasing car dependency. The HLJ –plan takes a similar stand. With the main objective to increase the use of sustainable transport modes and to reduce traffic overall, the plan envisions a networked transport system, based on strong and expanding rail connections, complemented with bus transport. Public transport nodes of the network emerge as important areas and possibly even as new hubs, where walkability and urbanity should be encouraged.

A city-regional imaginary of polycentricity has appeared attractive to the municipalities of Greater Helsinki, which have pronounced their commitment to the implementation of city-regional plans. While the thematic of polycentricity is only emerging as an issue in the outer fringe municipalities, the three most populous municipalities in the core area, Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa, have adopted polycentricity as an explicit planning objective. At first glance, the Helsinki City Plan also seems to align with the interpretations of spatial balance and sustainable transport, as its objective is to develop a functionally connected multi-centre structure. However, when interpreting polycentricity, the Helsinki City Plan refers to developing a sustainable transport network only within Helsinki’s municipal borders. It aims at developing a local multi-centre structure, where central Helsinki,

however, is to grow as the most important centre of the metropolitan area. In the Helsinki City Plan, polycentricity is interpreted as a means to *increasing urban attractiveness and sustainability* (Table 1).

In Helsinki's *urban attractiveness and sustainability interpretation*, polycentricity refers to a growing network of urban mixed-use centres connected by sustainable rail transport. Increasing functional connectivity and complementarity of densifying centres, accessible by sustainable transport modes, would improve service delivery and reduce car dependency in the growing city-region. The light rail system along radial city-boulevards and orbital routes would contribute to increased functional polycentricity. Furthermore, the multicentre structure would provide more opportunities for much-demanded urban living, which is viewed to increase the attractiveness of urban areas of Helsinki. Although a network of distinctive and complementary sub-centres would have a role in generating attractive spaces for urban living, such urbanity is mostly to be achieved by expanding central Helsinki with city-boulevards. This is aimed to foster the development of central Helsinki as the most competitive centre of the city-region and the whole country, and assist in utilising untapped agglomeration benefits (City Planning Department of Helsinki, 2013c, pp. 10–13, 2016).

**Table 1.** Interpretations of polycentricity.

Interpretation	Scale	Structure	Policy objective	Plans
Spatial balance	Regional, City-regional	Morphological polycentricity	Balanced network of distinctive centres to promote cohesive regional structure for avoiding core-periphery distinction and for combatting sprawl. Evenly distributed services improve equal accessibility of services, which improves living environment and competitiveness, and decreases car-use. Development of existing centres prioritized.	Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Plan, MASU 2050 – plan
Sustainable transport	City-regional	Functional polycentricity	Comprehensive and mainly rail-based public transport network, which connects densified centres for promotion of sustainable transport modes and combatting urban sprawl. Radial and especially orbital connections and transport nodes will be developed, to create a functional network.	National Land Use Objectives, HLJ – plan
Urban attractiveness and sustainability	Local	Functional polycentricity, Morphological monocentricity	Network of mixed-use centres abundant with urban amenities respond to the demand of more urban lifestyle, and thus increase attractiveness. The centres are well-connected with public transport thus counteracting sprawling tendencies. In functional terms, new rail transport lines create a network and improve connectivity, which decreases the importance of the city centre. In morphological terms, monocentricity of the urban structure is promoted with expansion of central Helsinki.	Helsinki City Plan



### *Discordant interpretations concealing spatial politics*

The official statements on the Helsinki City Plan by state, regional, city-regional and neighbouring municipal actors widely supported Helsinki's overall objective of 'network city'. The densification of land use, prioritization of non-motorized transport forms over the car, and improvement of orbital connections that the network city entails were also supported. Thus, at the local scale, Helsinki's interpretation of polycentricity *co-aligns with the city-regional sustainable transport interpretation of polycentricity*.

On the other hand, the *(city-)regional spatial balance interpretation* was mobilized in the negative statements on the plan. As the statement of the City of Järvenpää (2016) exemplifies: 'Helsinki [city region] is a single functional labour market area, which should be developed as a balanced entity. The goal could be a polycentric network of urban areas, connected by rapid public transport.' The statements raised the concern that with the focus on creating a more urban structure and reducing the accessibility of central Helsinki by motorized transport with boulevardisation, the Helsinki City Plan would over-emphasize the city-regional role of Helsinki and its central areas. Especially the fringe municipalities were concerned that reduced accessibility due to boulevardisation would negatively affect the attractiveness of centres in parts of the region served by motorized traffic, thus hampering the development of a balanced polycentric city-regional structure. In their view, hindering bus-based city-regional transport with boulevardisation would also involve a risk of turning bus-served areas to even more car-based and sprawled than today. Similarly, the regional and national actors emphasized the importance of finding solutions for safeguarding also regional and national bus transport in the functional labour market area, alongside rail.

With its view on polycentricity, Helsinki bypasses the city-regional scale, as an expert interviewee notes: 'Helsinki views polycentricity only through its own city structure, which is the now expanding urban centre and sub-centres that are now labelled as urban centres. So, "urban" is the main theme'. The expert interviewees confirmed that as a result of boulevardisation, the core of Helsinki would grow in morphological terms. Thus, even at the local, and particularly city-regional scale, the plan arguably fosters a traditional monocentric morphological structure, rather than a polycentric one.

In my opinion, the aim is to expand Helsinki's city centre, which is the main centre of the city region. If city-boulevards are a tool for its expansion and densification, it means that Helsinki city region will as a result obtain a larger main centre, both morphologically and functionally. The boulevards may increase the service and transport role of some sub-centres, but I do not see a great impact on the polycentric structure. (Expert interviewee)

In fact, with the city-boulevards, Helsinki wants to keep a lot of the (city-regional) growth to itself. (Expert interviewee)

In functional terms, Helsinki's interpretation of polycentricity as urban attractiveness and sustainability, and the local rail-based and networked multi-centre structure it entails, somewhat coincides with the city-regional interpretation of polycentricity as sustainable transport. The plan fosters sustainable transport at the local scale. However, this interpretation conceals that with boulevardisation Helsinki, at the same time, fosters *monocentricity in morphological terms* at the city-regional scale, and even within its municipal borders. This clearly counters the morphological city-regional interpretation of polycentricity as spatial balance.



The implications of Helsinki City Plan on the city-regional urban structure and system reveal that the ostensibly conforming city-regional interpretations of polycentricity are mutually discordant. The sustainable transport interpretation, based on principles of densification and prioritization of rail-based public transport, implies a less morphologically balanced city-regional structure. The achievement of spatial balance, in turn, would require both rail- and bus- (and car-) based accessibility. Beneath the discordant interpretations lies the key conflict on the city-regional structure and the distribution of growth and tax income between the municipalities. With Helsinki City Plan, Helsinki aims to capture much of this city-regional growth (Table 2).

The municipalities' competition over growth and tax income explains their support of either the more evenly growth-distributing spatial balance interpretation (morphological (city-)regional polycentricity) or the more selective (rail corridors) sustainable transport interpretation (functional city-regional polycentricity), according to their relative connectivity to the city-regional transport network.

(...) there is a conflict. (...) the expansion of the inner city creates supply of housing and jobs in the best location (in the region). For not all regional actors this is an optimal solution, as it weakens their accessibility and growth potential. (Expert interviewee)

### **Relational polycentricity: overcoming spatial politics?**

In the city region of Greater Helsinki, the institutional landscape fragments into several municipalities. Whereas city-regional land use planning is based on voluntary cooperation between the municipalities, transport planning in the city region is organized through a joint authority, the HSL, which has drafted the HLJ –plan. Therefore, the interviewees saw that although a polycentric planning strategy has emerged, and has its strength in integrating transport and land use planning, the municipality-led land use planning and sub-regionally organized transport planning have created a conflict.

On the institutional level, there is a problem, which became now apparent in the interaction between the Helsinki City Plan and the HLJ –plan. HSL has emerged as a strong transport planning and service provision organisation. It is able to draft regional transport plans, which are politically accepted in the city region and truly guide the transport investments and projects. However, on the side of land use planning, there are the Regional Council and regional plan but they do not really guide planning in the core area (Helsinki, Espoo, Kauniainen, Vantaa), only in (...) the rest of the region. There is local master planning but a counterpart of city-regional transport planning is missing. (...) The mismatch between city-regional transport planning and municipal land use planning creates constant conflicts. (...) The municipal and regional administrative structure has a strong influence (on the conflict around the boulevards). (Expert interviewee)

**Table 2.** City-regional urban structure and system implied by the interpretations of polycentricity.

	Prioritized mode of transport	Distribution of growth
Spatial balance	Multiple	Evenly distributed
Sustainable transport	Rail	Concentration in centres served by rail
Urban attractiveness and sustainability	Rail	Helsinki-focused, concentration in centres served by rail transport in Helsinki

As a result of this discrepancy, the planning documents that guide city-regional development do not portray a single vision of a polycentric public transport-based structure, let alone means to achieve it. The National Land Use Objectives (Valtioneuvosto, 2008) and the HLJ-Plan envision a spatial and centre structure based on rail transport. On the other hand, the Regional Land Use Plan for Helsinki-Uusimaa and the MASU 2050 –plan promote (city-)regional structure built around *both* bus and rail corridors, enabling thus development of a broader array of centres. According to the expert interviewees, polycentricity as a strategy has emerged as a pacifying goal between the municipalities bound to their own agendas and territorial spaces. The interpretative flexibility of polycentricity has been utilized to reach a compromise that all centres important for each municipality are dedicated with a similar status, without analysing or weighing their functional role in the city-regional polycentric structure. The institutional void of ‘soft’ city-regional governance and imaginary of polycentricity is thus filled with municipality-driven land use motives. The institutional void of the city region is hereby met with the conceptual void of polycentricity. The imaginary of polycentricity hides the municipalities’ lack of consensus on the pursued morphological and functional structure of the city region.

The polycentric network-based city-region is conceptually very vague. If one carefully scrutinises, for example, the MASU 2050 and HLJ –plans, one can see a clear difference in their priorities. The HLJ –plan takes a clear position for the development of centres connected by rail; they should develop as the primary city-regional centres. On the contrary, the MASU 2050 –plan establishes rail-based centres and rural municipalities’ main centres as equally important, although there has not been courage to state this explicitly. (...) In my opinion, political correctness has led to this. (...) The main urban areas of each municipality have received a centre status, which is not dependent on their functional role (...) This is because the starting point is that there needs to be a structure which everybody can accept (...) The Helsinki City Plan then pursues the plan to prioritise the rail-based centres. (...) In this sense, the polycentric network-based city is a clever term; everyone can interpret it in their own way. (Expert interviewee).

The city-boulevards are not included in the voluntary city-regional and statutory regional plans. The related planning processes would have been the proper forums for discussing such a transport and land use initiative that unavoidably has major regional implications, as the statements and interviewees unanimously noted. The City of Helsinki, however, did not bring its boulevardisation idea to these forums. Thus, with the Helsinki City Plan, Helsinki tried to use strategically not only the fluidity of the imaginary of polycentricity but also the institutional void of relational polycentricity to pursue its interests. However, in the end, the Regional Administrative Court overruled the city-boulevards on the basis of their failure to fulfil their role as national and regional roads, a status given to them in the superior, statutory Regional Land Use Plan for Helsinki-Uusimaa. As outlined in the National Land Use Objectives (Valtioneuvosto, 2008), the national road status of the highway arteries requires that they serve the nationally well-functioning and balanced road network, meaning a good access to the city centre of Helsinki by motorized transport, including freight and long-distance buses. Finally, counterintuitively, the city-boulevards were overruled, not only because of their discordance with the functional or morphological views of the polycentric city region, but also because of their discordance with the state-level monocentric view of the national spatial structure.

## Conclusion

Polycentricity has recently gained popularity as a strategic planning concept in metropolitan and city regions, and is frequently associated with goals of sustainability, cohesiveness and competitiveness (e.g. Davoudi, 2003; Schmitt, 2013). We argue that at least some of this popularity can be explained by examining polycentricity as a spatial imaginary.

Being a spatial imaginary, polycentricity may find support especially in institutionally fragmented city regions, as our case study exemplifies. In its fluidity, the imaginary is persuasive in affording the coexistence of different interpretations. Although polycentricity might serve in developing an integrative strategy, the many interpretations may also be used strategically to avoid conflicts and enable surface agreements (cf. Brand & Gaffikin, 2007), which are then conducted in soft and networked city-regional governance – which in itself follows the relational imaginary of polycentric governance. Underneath these surface agreements, diverging policy goals may be pursued in different arenas, choosing to fill the spatial imaginary of polycentricity with such content that is best suited for each goal. The spatial imaginary of polycentricity thereby masks the political goals that have brought it into being.

However, if the goals are mutually contradictory, the implementation of one of them at the others' expense eventually reveals the discordance of the interpretations under the imaginary of polycentricity – as is the case with the Helsinki City Plan. In our analysis of the Helsinki City Plan case data, we identified three interpretations of polycentricity: (city-)regional spatial balance, city-regional sustainable transport, and urban attractiveness and sustainability. In view of polycentricity, each implies different functional and morphological planning choices, when 'brought to the ground'. When viewed from its city-regional implications, the urban attractiveness and sustainability interpretation somewhat co-aligns in functional terms with the sustainable transport interpretation – but, in morphological terms, it contradicts with the spatial balance interpretation. By pursuing spatially the urban attractiveness and sustainability interpretation, the Helsinki City Plan revealed the discordance of (city-)regional interpretations, with regard to prioritized transport modes and distribution of growth.

In our case, the spatial imaginary of polycentricity served in maintaining the status quo of two city-regional interpretations of polycentricity, and underneath them the inter-municipal competition for investments and 'good' tax-payers in the growing city region. Thus, the ambiguity of the spatial imaginary of polycentricity served in preventing the formation of a properly strategic city-regional policy on what kind of spatial structure and system to aim for, and what kind of political choices it would mean. With the institutional 'rules of the game' (cf. Salet, 2018) missing in the city-regional realm, strategic room for such indecisiveness was kept open for the municipalities. This status quo was broken by the Helsinki City Plan that fostered the urban attractiveness and sustainability interpretation, in concrete functional and morphological terms – with repercussions on city-regional, regional and further national scales. However, with its ruling against the city-boulevards, the Regional Administrative Court finally resorted to the basic institutional rule of the Finnish land use planning system: the hierarchy of statutory planning levels.

The case study resonates with some earlier findings (e.g. Jessop et al., 2008) of difficulties in using network-based normative concepts in multi-scalar and hierarchical planning settings. However, our study is not critical to the concept of polycentricity as such. Instead, we hope to have raised critical awareness on the multiple and even contradictory political

goals it lends itself to when used as an indeterminate spatial imaginary in institutionally vague arenas of ‘soft’ spatial governance.

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