Street-Level Democracy?

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Street-Level Democracy?

Urban professionals as participatory innovators in neighbourhood planning processes

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Abstract: In 2017 the municipality of Amsterdam launched a programme to combat a housing shortage and realise ambitious societal goals for 32 of its most deprived neighbourhoods. After decades of urban renewal projects, these areas still scored poorly on most socio-economic indicators. The programme aims to develop more affordable housing for low- and middle-income households, to revitalise the existing public spaces of these neighbourhoods and to improve the residents' socio-economic position. In addition, , the progressive municipal council installed in 2018 intends to democratise urban renewal processes with the aim of increasing community involvement.

The first phases of the urban renewal programme have now been completed and the 'street-level bureaucrats' involved adopted the democratization agenda. The focus has shifted to the challenges these bureaucrats face. To identify the key challenges confronting them during the participation process, 30 qualitative interviews were conducted. In partnership with the municipality, the AUAS also developed a community of learning with street-level bureaucrats who work in the designated neighbourhoods by organising monthly learning sessions. These

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street-level bureaucrats work at the nexus of new participatory ambitions and ossified municipal bureaucracies. They are constantly searching for shortcuts within planning procedures to ensure that citizens' needs and ideas are incorporated in the plans they develop. Their disruptive interventions potentially reveal effective pathways for democratic community-based development.

Keywords: street-level bureaucrats, deprived neighbourhood, disruptive interventions, urban renewal

Introduction

In 2008, a national urban renewal programme was launched in the Netherlands, aimed at revitalising the most deprived neighbourhoods across the country. The programme included seventeen neighbourhoods located in Amsterdam. In line with the planning paradigm of that time, project-based planning was used to combat socio-economic and spatial problems. These redevelopment projects were systematically monitored between 2008 and 2012, and this showed that the expected improvements had not played out as intended (Permentier, Kullberg and Van Noije, 2013; Koster and Van Ommeren, 2018).

In line with a decentralizing trend, a new national coalition government stopped national funding for local regeneration programmes in 2012. However, as most deprived neighbourhoods in Amsterdam were still suffering from socio-economic problems, the capital city presented its own local programme of urban renewal in 2017. This time, 32 deprived neighbourhoods in the city were designated as Developing Neighbourhoods ('Ontwikkelbuurten'). They are located in the districts of New-West, South-East and North ('Nieuw-West', 'Zuid-Oost' and 'Noord'), and also include the 17 neighbourhoods selected for

the national round of urban renewal in 2008. Four interbellum neighbourhoods within the city's ringways that were included in 2008 were excluded from the current programme. Consequently, the new programme mainly focuses on post-war neighbourhoods in the city's periphery (see figure 1).
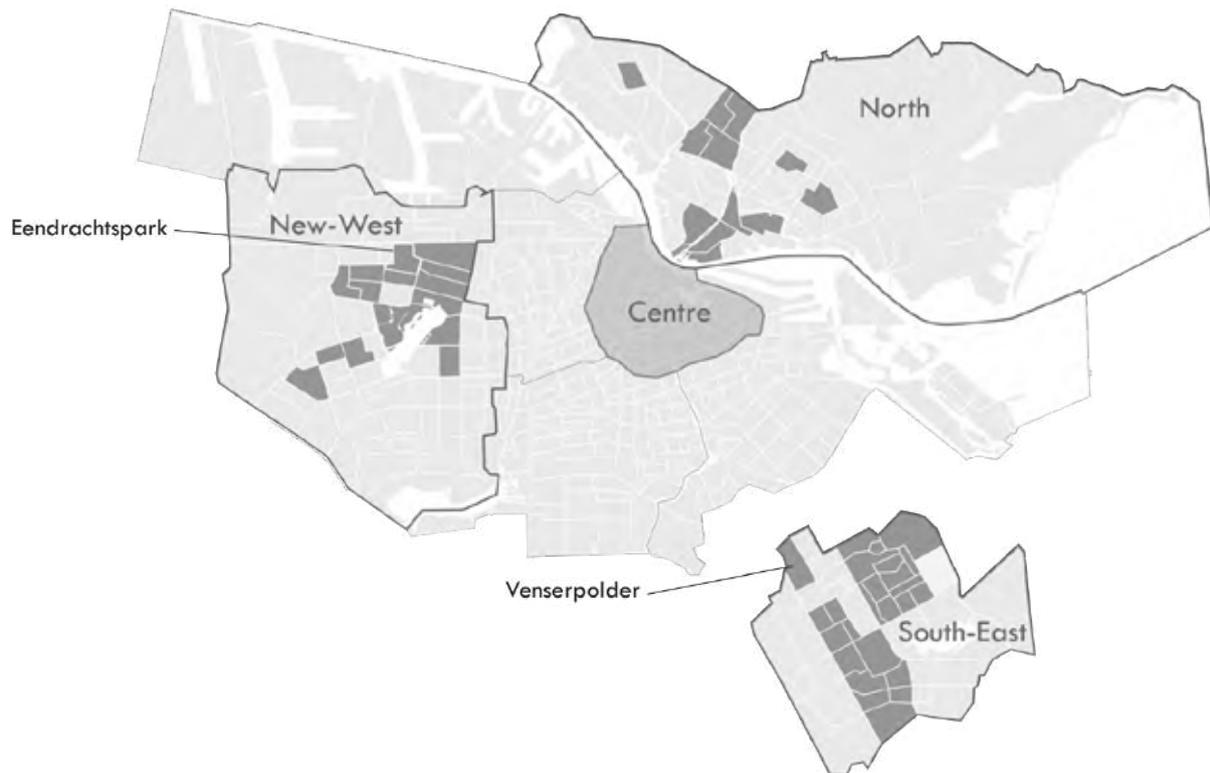
Figure 1 The 32 'Developing neighbourhoods' in Amsterdam.

In 2018, with the arrival of a new progressive municipal council, the Developing Neighbourhood policy was coupled with the city's new Democratization Agenda. It became an official policy goal to 'develop a new way of working in which Amsterdam's residents are involved in making and implementing policies (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2019). This new focus on 'democratization' is not unique to Amsterdam. Cities in the Netherlands and abroad increasingly aim to develop new forms of citizen participation via more direct forms of democracy. This can be seen both as a response to perceived public hostility and existing

representative policy-making as well as an attempt to mobilize citizens' perspectives and local knowledge, ideas and initiatives in creating more responsive policies (Tonkens et al. 2015).

This paper analyzes the intersection between the policy ambitions for more democratic planning and the practice of urban renewal processes. The shift towards more democratic planning is challenging for two main reasons. First, involving citizens with a weak socio-economic position is traditionally complex (Tonkens and Verhoeven, 2018; Oude Vrielink 2017, Bovens and Wille, 2017). Second, the democratization of existing (and strongly criticized) 'consultation' practices poses new challenges to local government officials (van Stokkom, 2006). It is unclear to what extent the intricate bureaucratic machinery can, and is willing to, open up to and implement politicians' ambitions in these complex neighbourhoods.

In this paper, we focus on the challenges facing local government officials involved in implementing the ambitions for democratic urban renewal. They are streel-level bureaucrats, operating at the nexus between ambitious policy goals and practical day-to-day reality. Based on their experiences, we investigate the current (im-)possibilities for democratic innovation in the practices of neighbourhood renewal.

Street-level Bureaucrats

Coined by Michael Lipsky in 1980, street-level bureaucrats (SLB) refers to (local) government officials who are in direct contact with citizens, working at the crossroads between government and the public (Lipsky, 1980; Brodkin, 2012). Lipsky's work highlights government officials as actors making tough choices, instead of portraying them as involuntary cogs in a bureaucratic machine. Viewing government officials as dynamic actors sheds new light on policy implementation. Lipsky and others have shown that SLBs often have a significant amount of

discretionary power when implementing policy, especially when that policy is both ambitious and vague (Brodkin, 2012, 2). Therefore, 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out (Lipsky, 1980, xiii). The effect that policy has on the street, is in effect, a compromise between policy-as-planned and the complexities of society. Using their discretionary power, SLBs constantly negotiate and re-negotiate that compromise.

When the ambitions for democratic urban renewal are viewed through the lens of street-level bureaucracy, it seems likely that the operationalization of these ambitions falls to the 'street-level planners' – the local government officials who engage with citizens to inform them of and improve plan-making. What does this mean for the intended transition towards democratic planning? We offer two hypotheses: one pessimistic, the other optimistic.

Lipsky demonstrates that SLBs often lack the time and resources to systematically implement policies as they were intended. Instead, they tend to develop so-called *coping strategies,* reducing policy ambitions to box-checking exercises. This effect is familiar to scholars of interactive and democratic planning (van Stokkom, 2006). However, transition theory suggests that discretion can also work differently. A more optimistic hypothesis is that the discretionary space resulting from the vagueness of democratization ambitions offers street-level planners new *niches* to experiment in: together with citizens, they can find *new ways of planning* that better fit with the changing landscape. These experiments with street-level planning might, in turn, disrupt and change the existing planning regime (Geels and Schot, 2007).

We will investigate both hypotheses in the context of planning practices in Amsterdam. The experiences of two 'street-level planners' are used to demonstrate the challenges SLBs face when they attempt to implement democratic planning policies in their urban renewal projects. What kind of strategies do they use to navigate the complexities of citizen-centred planning, and to translate citizens' ideas and interests into professional, sequential and hierarchical municipal planning processes? Are they only *coping* mechanisms that turn democratic planning into box-checking exercises, or do they carve out *niches* of innovative planning practice?

Method

Building on our empirical action research we reflect on the current urban renewal planning processes. Since 2017 the AUAS has collaborated closely with the municipality of Amsterdam to evaluate and innovate the participation processes of the 'Developing Neighbourhoods' programme. Initially, 30 qualitative interviews were conducted with practitioners who were active in 10 of the 32 Development Neighbourhoods. Using these interviews, we identified key challenges facing the practitioners from the three district of South-East, North and New-West Amsterdam (van Aanholt et al. 2019 and Spanjar 2019 et al.).

In the middle of 2018, the AUAS developed a community of learning to address these challenges. At least 15 civil servants participate in monthly thematic sessions. Most of them are street-level bureaucrats in the sense that they work directly with citizens. Based on these thematic sessions, the case studies for researching democratic planning are identified for further investigation. Using ethnographic methods, an in-depth analysis has been conducted in four projects. In these cases, AUAS researchers participated in the street-level planners' daily routine, for example, by attending participation meetings with residents, joining SLBs in the

daily round through their neighbourhood, and attending internal team meetings. Two of these case studies are presented here: the renewal of a public space in the Venserpolder neighbourhood in Amsterdam South-East, and the redesign of a park in the Eendrachtsbuurt neighbourhood in Amsterdam New-West (see figure 1 for their locations).

In both cases, the study's limitation in terms of scope and time makes it impossible to reach a definitive conslusion in relation to the hypotheses posited above. Yet the case studies can serve as a first exploration of these hypotheses. They can be considered as extreme cases for the democratization of planning: the redevelopment of existing neighbourhoods is complicated and is always accompanied by competing interests and positions, both between residents and other groups and between the municipality and citizens. Moreover, democratic redevelopment plans for deprived neighbourhoods are even more complex because they have to deal with a population that is notoriously difficult to reach and involve. Below, practitioners' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Learning by doing: two practitioners' stories

Case: Venserpolder

James is an assistant project manager for the Venserpolder neighbourhood in Amsterdam's South-East district (see figure 1). This district is dominated by Bijlmermeer, which was first conceived in the 1930s as a new, fully planned district that complied with the CIAM's Modernist principles Bijlmermeer was constructed between 1963 and 1975 and consisted at the time of high-rise flats organized in a characteristic hexagonal grid (Van Beveren, 2014). However, the high-rise dwellings proved to be less popular than expected. Even before the construction of all the planned flats had been completed, residents complained about the monotonous architecture, the eerie emptiness of the public space, and the lack of amenities.

Many of the new dwellings were left vacant. The promised metro line connecting Bijlmermeer to Amsterdam was not completed until 1977. By then, crime, drug use and poverty had risen dramatically. In response to the disappointment of Bijlmermeer, later parts of the South-East district were constructed according to a different planning philosophy. Venserpolder, constructed in the 1980s, is situated to the north of Bijlmermeer and is characterized by 5,000 low-rise apartments surrounding green courtyards and a mix of residential, traffic and work functions. In 2018, when the case study was carried out, it had 9,656 residents, one-third of whom were unemployed and live on benefits (compared to 18 per cent in Amsterdam, OIS, 2019). Venserpolder is one of the 32 neighbourhoods designated for urban renewal in the 'Developing neighbourhoods' programme.

In 2018, prior to making major investments public housing renewal, Amsterdam invested in improving public spaces in the Developing Neighbourhoods. James is employed by an external project management agency and he was contracted by the municipality to manage the urban renewal programme in this area. His task was to design easily implemented interventions in public spaces together with the residents of Venserpolder and the H-neighbourhood. The municipality emphasised that residents' involvement was essential, and that the interventions should be completed by the end of 2018. Faced with time constraints, James was unable to carry out all the essential participative processes with residents himself. Furthermore, he was unsure of the best approach for involving residents in quick-fire neighbourhood renewal. James decided to work together with two different partner organizations within his two designated neighbourhoods.

In Venserpolder, James decided to work with social design startup Plygrnd.city. Plygrnd.city takes an unorthodox, informal approach to participation, with roots in advertising, social work and street art. Instead of inviting residents to participation evenings, they placed a shipping container in a central location in the neighbourhood. Plygrnd.city offered passers-by a lounge

chair and a drink, and engaged them in conversation. In addition, design games and neighbourhood walks were organised from the container. In total, after one month, an estimated 400 residents were involved. The process resulted in a booklet containing 12 sketch designs based on residents' ideas for 'quick win' interventions in public spaces in Venserpolder. Because of the container's central location, the project reached residents whose challenging socio-economic status meant they probably would not have attended scheduled consultation meetings about urban renewal.

The project leader was satisfied with the pace and reach of participation. However, the unorthodox nature of the process also meant that the local government officials who are normally tasked with designing and maintaining public spaces were only marginally involved in the participation process. They were confronted with the fixed outcomes and not open to supporting the ideas developed by residents. Yet it was they who had to approve and develop the residents' ideas. James found that several of the ideas conflicted with sector-specific standardized regulations. For example, one of the ideas involved using street art to make a bicycle path safer. However, the municipal transport authority does not allow street art on bicycle paths and their expert pointed to reports that showed the negative effects of street art on traffic safety.

Another example is the placement of wooden picnic tables in a public space to facilitate spontaneous meetings between residents. This did not sit well with officials in the city's maintenance department, who objected that wood is a high-maintenance material and that the tables could be burned or stolen: 'they only wanted stainless steel'. James spent the next month in a series of meetings with local government officials to discuss the feasibility of the plans: he in effect became an advocate for the residents' ideas within the municipal organization. At this stage, residents themselves were no longer involved. Partly due to James's effective internal lobbying, most of the ideas were eventually approved, albeit in trimmed-down versions.

Reflecting on the process, the project leader remarks that it felt like a 'battle against the system': 'We have organized an alternative form of working with citizens – that was our mission. But for this way of working to become the new standard, the internal systems of the municipality also have to change. We need a way of working that isn't based on reluctance.' However, this example also points to the essential efforts of planners to align citizens' ideas at an early stage of the process with standardized rules and legislation.

Case: Eendrachtspark

Eendrachtspark is situated in Geuzenveld-Slotermeer, a neighbourhood that is part of Amsterdam's New-West district (see figure 1). Like Bijlmermeer, Geuzenveld-Slotermeer was first planned in the 1930s and constructed in the 1950s. Unlike Bijlmermeer, Geuzenveld is based on a 'garden city' plan: self-contained units of low-rise portico flats surrounding green courtyards, separated by green belts. The urban plan was a response to the chaotic, polluted and dense working-class residential areas in the city centre and it was the dominant planning paradigm at the time. Workers needed dwellings with daylight, (fresh) air, and space. As part of this philosophy, every neighbourhood in the new district needed its own park.

Similar to Bijlmermeer, the popularity of Geuzenveld-Slotermeer steadily declined in the decades after its construction. In 2018, it contained many of Amsterdam's poorest neighbourhoods - 14 of the 32 neighbourhoods designated as 'Developing Neighbourhoods' are situated in Geuzenveld-Slotermeer. Eendrachtspark borders on the Van Deyssel neighbourhood, which in 2018 had the lowest quality-of-life ranking in Amsterdam (OIS, 2018).

Peter is an Area Support worker for Geuzenveld's Area Support Team. The Area Support Team is the municipality's first point of contact for neighbourhood residents. Peter's tasks include

supporting citizen initiatives. Before he became an Area Support worker, he worked for the municipality's project management agency for two years. In early 2018, he was contacted by a resident who had a plan to renovate Eendrachtspark. The resident launched a campaign on a website intended for the aggregation of citizen initiatives: 'de Stem van Nieuw-West' (the voice of New-West). On this website, residents can propose ideas for their neighbourhood and vote on ideas submitted by others. The Nieuw-West district council is committed to discussing the most popular plan every month. The plan for the renewal of Eendrachtspark received 1,032, and the resident pitched his ideas to the district council in March 2018.

The council responded positively to the resident's plan and tasked Peter with investigating its feasibility. The 'Stem van Nieuw-West' website does not have its own budget. Peter therefore linked the plan to the Developing Neighbourhood's budget for improving public spaces: the same budget that paid for the interventions in Venserpolder mentioned above. This meant that funding was now available for the renovation of the park. However, the funding came with conditions: the park had to be redesigned in cooperation with local residents, and it had to be finished in 2018. Peter quickly discovered that no one at the city's planning department had time to work on the park at short notice. Their response, in Peter's own words, was: 'No request for capacity has been made in advance, so we cannot help you. We could help you in 2019'.

Instead, Peter decided to hire a local landscape designer, who was also a resident of the Eendrachtspark neighbourhood. Officially, this was not permitted: external design work must be assigned in open tenders. However, the park had to be finished in 2018, which left no time to put out a tender. Peter framed the assignment as 'participation advice' instead of as 'design'. This meant he could circumvent procedures and pay the designer from the Developing Neighbourhoods participation budget. The park re-design started in June 2018.

Peter and the local landscape designer quickly assembled a group of 18 'park ambassadors': residents who would take part in the park's renovation. The designer invited the park

ambassadors to his parkside apartment for three rounds of iterative feedback on his designs. Between rounds, Peter sent the plan to the municipality to check if it complied with regulations, and was advised that it did. Within two months, the designer submitted his definitive design to the municipal government. Peter noted that 'partly because he could do both participation and the design [the landscape designer] was able to work much faster than our own designers would have'. However, the scope of participation was limited by time constraints: only a small group of residents was involved and, although they provided feedback, their creative involvement in the design was limited.

In compliance with the municipality's planning procedures, the plan's final design, maintenance plan and total costs had to undergo a final check by several experts from the municipality. None of these experts was available at the time, which delayed the project by several weeks. When the results of the checks became available, they showed that several elements of the plan would be difficult to construct. Without informing and involving residents or the local designer, the plans were adjusted to comply with the regulations. The redesign of the park was completed in early 2019.

Discussion and Conclusion

Amsterdam initiated an ambitious urban renewal programme for 32 of its deprived neighbourhoods. The municipality also has high ambitions for more democratic forms of planning. However, these ambitions are mostly undefined, leading to different implementations at street level. This in turn forces the civil servants 'on the ground' to deviate from their usual roles and procedures and act like 'street-level planners'. We hypothesised that local government officials in the front line might respond in two different ways. On the one hand, they might use *coping mechanisms* to formally meet the new participatory demands while

clinging to their usual role and, thus, to the existing institutional norms and procedures. On the other hand, we see early indications that they used the discretionary space resulting from the ambition for increased participation as a niche, where they could experiment with new roles and pathways.

James, assistant project manager for Venserpolder, successfully worked with a company to invent new ways for residents to participate. Due to his lobbying skills, he managed to make other professionals from the municipality participate or at least cooperate. James reinvented and extended his role from only *facilitating* the participation process with residents to that of an all-round participatory process facilitator, mediating between the interests of citizens and those of other civil servants.

Peter, the Area Support worker for the Eendrachtspark renewal, also worked around the current planning regime. First, he enterprisingly linked the park plan to the Developing Neighbourhood's budget and funding, and he had to work within a narrow timeframe as spending had to be approved by the end of 2018. He combined acceleration and participatory planning by involving a local landscape designer, thus bypassing the tender procedures. Peter coped with institutional boundaries by inventing short cuts and bypassing some elements of normal procedure altogether.

The two cases discussed here, Venserpolder and Eendrachtspark, show that these street-level bureaucrats for the most part acted in line with the second hypothesis, aiming to use the discretionary space to invent new solutions. Yet their actions tend to work *around* existing institutional regimes, rather than trying to innovate them from within. For them, bypassing procedures proved to be an effective way to deal with the combination of time constraints and

pressure for democratic planning. The question arises as to whether this type of disruptive behaviour by street-level bureaucrats typifies a larger number of cases and, if so, whether it exerts enough pressure on the current planning regime to have a transitional impact. In other words, how can the SLBs' innovative short-cuts contribute towards democratic planning? Answering this question will require further research. The literature on transition could prove useful. According to Geels and Schot (2007), transitions may be understood as the outcome of interaction between the three levels:

- the landscape - exogenous macro-trends

- the regimes - dominant institutions and practices

- the niches - places of innovative practice

Viewed within this framework, street-level bureaucrats' niche innovations put pressure on the current regime; they may cause destabilization and in turn, create a window of opportunity for niches to grow and disruptive practices to emerge (Geels and Schot, 2007). The decentralization of the urban planning programmes described, as well as the national policy trend towards 'do-democracy' (Nota 'Doe-democratie', Ministry of General Affairs, 2013) and the increased focus on bottom-up initiatives and civic society can be perceived as important landscape trends. The upcoming 'Omgevingswet' further increases the pressure ('Environment and Planning Act', Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017): it entails the combination and integration of 23 environmental and planning laws and emphasizes participation as a mandatory element in planning processes. However, one of the major challenges, as the cases demonstrated, is the disconnect between 'SMART-defined' municipal planning processes and local planning practices with their unpredictable timeframes and requirements, which is characteristic of democratic deliberations with the community.

In the second half of 2019, we will continue to analyze the activities of street-level bureaucrats in different cases in the Developing Neighbourhoods and conduct more interviews to analyze whether their pressure on the current planning regime will amount to a substantial transition towards more democratic planning.

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