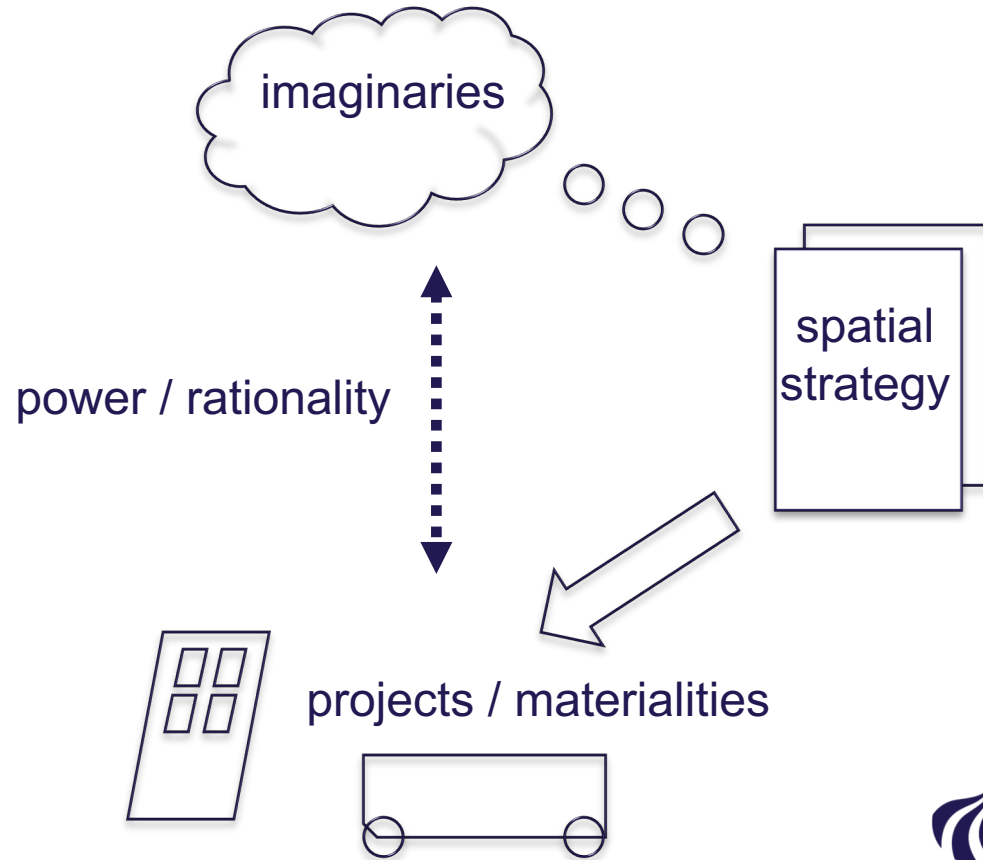
A photograph of a city street with a tram. The tram is white and blue, moving along tracks in the center of the street. Pedestrians are walking on the sidewalks, and there are trees and historic buildings in the background. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

The Politics of Light Rail Projects in the Age of Neoliberalism

Kristian Olesen
Associate Professor, Aalborg University

Why study the politics of light rail projects?



- 1) In what ways do spatial imaginaries contribute to rationalise particular urban development projects?
- 2) In what ways do particular urban development projects give power to spatial imaginaries?



Why study the politics of light rail projects?

Finanslov: Tilskud på 830 mio. kr. til Aalborg Letbane fjernes

Letbanen i Aalborg vil give et milliardstort samfundsøkonomisk underskud. Derfor dropper Venstre den tidligere regerings aftale om at bidrage til at betale for banen. Det fremgår af partiets forslag til en finanslov for 2016.

Ekstraregning: Letbane hiver millioner op af kommunekasserne

De officielle udgifter til Hovedstadens Letbane lyder på 6,2 milliarder, men det tal udelader flere hundrede millioner kroner, som de enkelte kommuner selv skal betale.



Exploring the rationality of light rail projects

Strategic planning as persuasive storytelling

- “Spatial visions play important roles in bringing specific policy issues and particular policy solutions onto the national policy agenda. As demonstrated in this paper, the spatial vision of the Loop City has played an important persuasive role in upscaling the significance of the light rail link in Ring 3, and thereby legitimizing the need and rationalizing the importance of the project.” (Olesen, 2017: 990)



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Talk to the hand: strategic spatial planning as persuasive storytelling of the Loop City*

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses how the spatial vision of the Loop City for the Øresund Region has played an important persuasive role in legitimizing and mobilizing local and national political support for a light rail link along the outer ring road in the Greater Copenhagen Area. The paper discusses the persuasive power of spatial concepts and supportive storylines in bringing transport infrastructure projects onto the national policy agenda. In conclusion, the paper calls for critical attention to the rationalities underpinning practices of persuasive storytelling in contemporary strategic spatial planning.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Strategic spatial planning;
storytelling; spatial concepts;
imaginaries; agenda-setting

Imagine a light rail, running from Lundtofte in north via Kge. Lyngby, Gladsaxe, Herlev and Glostrup to Ishøj, Brøndby and Avedøre Holme in south, thereafter over the Øresund Bridge to Malmö and up along the Swedish coast back to Helsingør and returning to Lundtofte. This sounds like a future vision and it is indeed. But if the Ring City Vision for the urban areas along Ring 3 is implemented, this can be reality in 2047, precisely 100 years after the Finger Plan for the Greater Copenhagen Area was launched. (Realdania, press release 10 December 2010, author's translation)

Introduction

In the beginning of 2010, the Danish philanthropic foundation Realdania announced a partnership with 10 suburban municipalities at the outskirts of the Greater Copenhagen Area. Realdania hired a team of consultants with the Danish architectural company BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group) in the lead and charged them with the task of preparing a spatial vision for the 10 municipalities. The resulting vision of the 'Loop City' was presented to the municipalities in December 2010. This paper analyses how the spatial vision of the Loop City has played an important persuasive role in bringing a light rail project connecting the 10 suburban municipalities onto the national policy agenda. In particular, the paper explores how the reframing of the suburban light rail project as a transport infrastructure project of national importance, and coupling the project to concerns of regional competitiveness and economic performance, have played an important persuasive role in legitimizing and mobilizing local as well as national political support for the infrastructure project.

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Exploring the rationality of light rail projects

Vision vs. Evaluation

- “In all three decision-making processes, spatial visions have played important roles in inscribing LRT into a reality beyond socio-economic feasibility – a reality where strategic urban development and urban quality are rated as important values. At the same time, the spatial visions (and the values embedded in these) have been important in the mobilisation of political support and in the enrolment of actors in support of the LRT projects.” (Nicolaisen, Olesen & Olesen, 2017: 19)



Vision vs. Evaluation – Case Studies of Light Rail Planning in Denmark

Morten Skou Nicolaisen, Mette Olesen and Kristian Olesen

Abstract

Light rail transit (LRT) is a popular public transport mode used to upgrade the public transport system and support urban development strategies. Despite the seemingly poorer socio-economic return of LRT in cost benefit analyses (CBA) compared to bus rapid transit (BRT) systems, LRT solutions are often chosen over BRT. Several studies show that the decisions to build such systems have not primarily been based on the socio-economic feasibility of the systems. Rather, they are often justified in terms of the branding value and positive image for public transportation, as well as the perceived ability to reduce road congestion and stimulate urban development. Drawing on Actor Network Theory (ANT), the paper analyses how LRT systems have been applied in a Danish context and the role that the CBA has played in this process. The results show that conventional socio-economic factors in CBA, such as travel time savings, play a relatively minor role compared to the larger urban transformation visions that LRT projects are embedded in.

Keywords: urban planning, transport planning, project appraisal, policy-making, light rail, actor network theory

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Being a modern city

...is to have a light rail

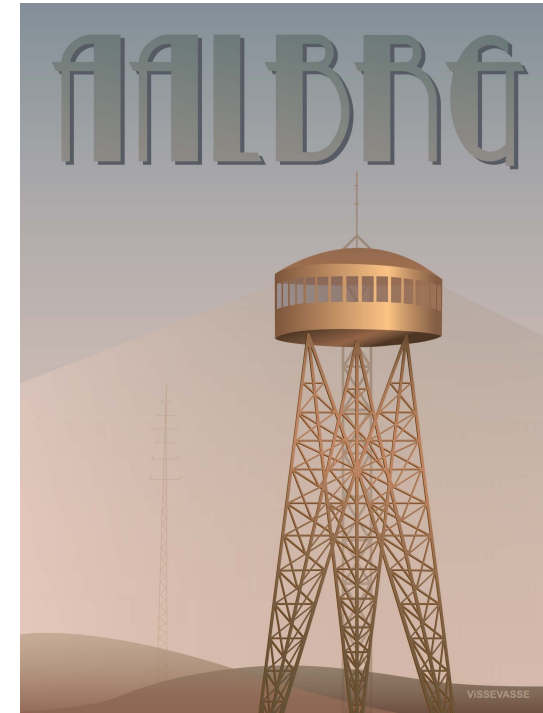
- "In the early 20th century, the streetcar had been the urban mode of transport par excellence in the United States. In fact, the streetcar was a symbol of what it meant to be a city." (Culver, 2017: 22)
- "Great cities are born of and give rise to great infrastructure" (Neuman and Smith, 2010: 21)
- "Light rail imparts a sense of urban modernity, permanence of place, order, sophistication, and connectivity benefitting enduring world-class cities" (Boschken, 2002: 184)



Being a modern city

Infrastructure as the fetish of the modern city

- “The fetish character of commodities often turns them into objects of desire in themselves and for themselves, independent from their use value. [...] Commodities do not only carry their materiality, but also the promise and the dream of a better society and a happier life” (Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000: 123)
- Whether transit vehicles are full or empty may have less to do with ‘showing’ the urban area’s global vitality than whether the system’s mere presence (i.e. capacity) gives a sense of bustle, freshness, and performance (Boschken, 2008:16)



Being a modern city in the age of neoliberalism

The competitive global city

- "... the major consideration for adopting rail over bus investment has been rail's superiority in providing the appearance of technologically advanced, safe, clean comfortable, permanent and on-time transit services fitting the expectations of a bustling global city clientele" (Boschken, 2008: 11)
- "In a global competition for inward investment, entrepreneurial public sector planners and policy makers are increasingly looking to cultivate a positive image of their cities through targeted planning of image-conscious projects such as investments in rapid transit infrastructure" (Higgins and Kararoglou, 2016: 460).

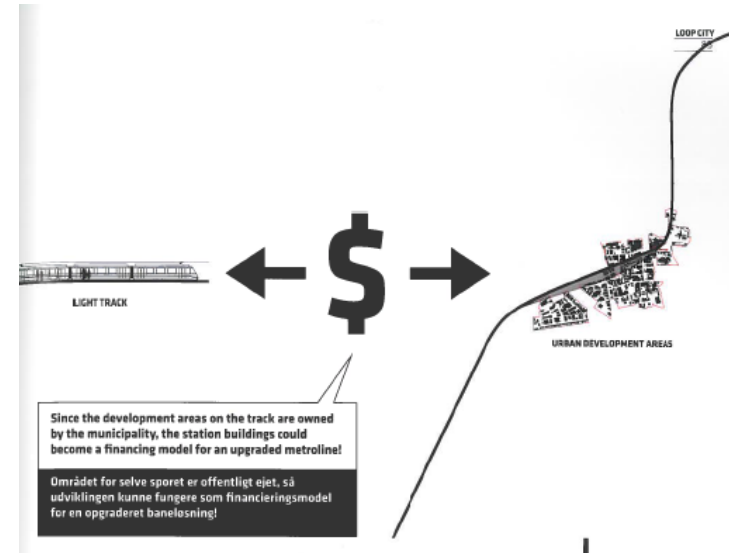


Being a modern city in the age of neoliberalism

The economic impact of light rail

1. Unlocking previously hard to reach sites for development
2. Triggering fresh growth through elimination of significant transport constraints
3. Stimulation of inward investment
4. Extension of labour market catchment areas
5. Reorganisation or rationalisation of production, distribution and land use
6. Land value and property value increase and capture

(Knowles & Ferbrache, 2016: 431)



Being a modern city in the age of neoliberalism

The consequences

- “Public transit is being transformed to fit the larger political project that we call neoliberalism, driven by the same forces that are stripping the social purpose from other public programmes” (Grengs, 2005: 58).
- “while a rise in prices may bring benefits for developers, there is a negative impact on low-income households who may be priced out of the market near to light rail stations. Arguably, it is these people who are unable to afford cars and are reliant on access to public transport” (Knowles and Ferbrache 2016: 43)



The Case of Aalborg

The growth axis

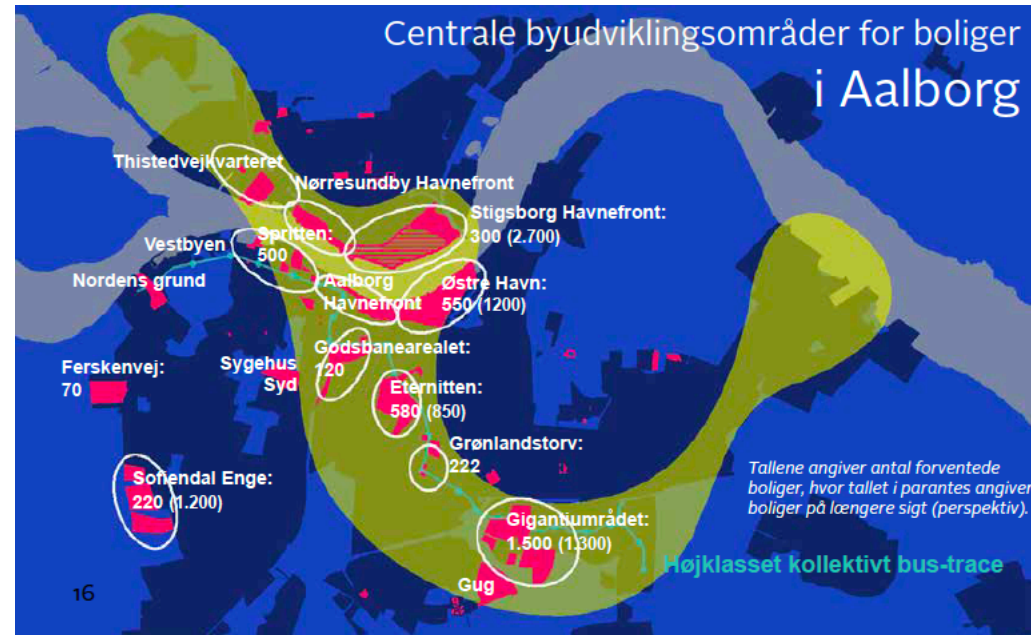
“The art in planning is however to focus. If investments are too spread, the efforts will have too poor effect. Therefore, this spatial strategy will prioritise a few areas where development is already under the way, and where planning has the opportunity to support further development. This is first and foremost in the growth axis.” (Aalborg Municipality, 2011: 2)



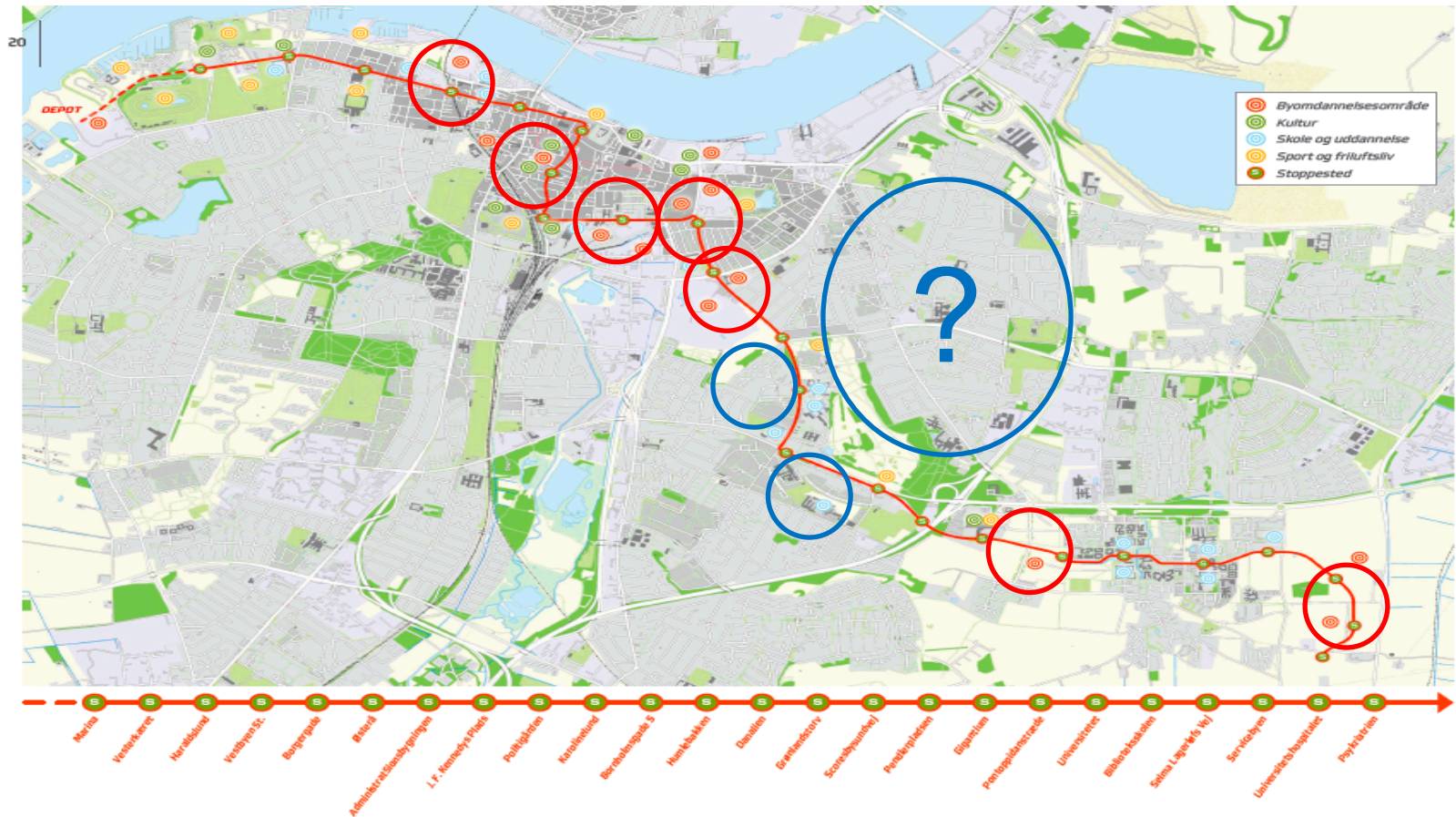
The Case of Aalborg

Urban development

“The light rail will transform the city. It will contribute to that Aalborg will appear as a modern, foresighted and environmental friendly city. The rail can become a part of the city’s identity, and will be used actively in connection to urban development and urban regeneration.” (Region North Jutland et al., 2010: 11)



The Case of Aalborg



Critical questions

Light rail as an urban development project

- Who is the light rail planning for?
 - Doctors, university staff and sports fans rather than residents who cannot afford a car
 - Is public transport losing its social dimension?
- Why implement a light rail?
 - To boost urban development in predefined areas ready for investments
 - To develop big city image (or not lose behind other cities)



Conclusions / reflections

Towards a politics of light rail projects

- Spatial strategies play an important role in legitimising/rationalising the need for light rail projects – and these projects in turn support the over spatial vision (e.g. the growth axis)
- Just because light rail projects are "sold" in a neoliberal packaging, does not mean that they will lead to particular outcomes (Culver, 2017: 28)
- Light rail projects play a role in targeting private investments to specific (predefined) areas of the city
- Light rail projects are likely to boost private (and public) property values
 - Accumulation of capital
 - Rents increase and displacement of the weakest groups



Conclusions / reflections

Towards a politics of light rail projects

- Does this mean that we should not plan for light rail projects?
- No, but there is a need for being more sensitive to the politics behind light rail projects
- A light rail projects has not just become a goal in itself (all though this seems to be the case in many places)
- Light rail projects play into a larger agenda, which effectively is shaping what the consequences of the project will be



The Politics of Light Rail Projects in the Age of Neoliberalism

Thank you for listening

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