Competitiveness AND Sustainability – Can ‘Smart City Regionalism’ Square the Circle?

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Abstract:

Increasingly, the widely established, globalisation-driven agenda of economic competitiveness meets a growing concern with sustainability. Yet, the practical and conceptual coexistence – or fusion - of these two agendas is not always easy. This includes finding and operationalising the ‘right’ scale of governance, an important question for the pursuit of the distinctly trans-scalar nature of these two policy fields. ‘New regionalism’ has increasingly been discussed as a pragmatic way of tackling the variable spatialities associated with these policy fields and their changing articulation. This paper introduces ‘smart (new) city-regionalism’, derived from the principles of Smart Growth and New Regionalism, as a policy-shaping mechanism and analytical framework. In so doing, it brings together the rationales, agreed principles, and legitimacies of publicly negotiated polity with collaborative, network-based and policy-driven spatiality. The notion of ‘smartness’, as suggested here as central feature, goes beyond the implicit meaning of ‘smart’ as in ‘Smart Growth’, as introduced in the mid to late 1990s (Miller and Hoel 2002) vis-à-vis the specifically North American phenomenon of suburban ‘sprawl’, and with its planning and transport-focused orientation. Since then, the adjective ‘smart’ has become used ever more widely, albeit in varying contexts, and advocates innovativeness, participation, collaboration and co-ordination of, and between, policy fields, actors and (their) territories (EC, 2010). A resulting ‘smart city regionalism’ is circumscribed by the interface between sectorality and territoriality of policy-making processes. Using the examples of Vancouver and Seattle with their similar geographical-functional, yet different historic-developmental and governmental characteristics, the paper then looks at the effects of the resulting specific local conditions on adopting ‘smartness’ in the scalar positioning of policy making.

Introduction:

Increasingly, in economic development, the established dominant neo liberalism-driven agenda of competitiveness (Boschma, 2005; Camagni et al, 1998; Bristow, 2005), set against the paradigm of globalization (Gordon, 1999), meets a growing concern with sustainability (Campbell, 1997). Yet, the practical and conceptual coexistence, or fusion, of these two agendas is not always easy, as they allow differing interpretations, weightings and forms of implementation. They thus require negotiations, debates and contestations across both spatial scales and policy fields. This complexity, even possible contradiction, between the two, potentially conflicting, agendas, and its effects on policy-making, is the subject of a recent article in Regional Studies (vol 42, no 9, pp 1223-1236, 2008), in which Haughton et al observe that sustainable development illustrates well the inherent contradictions of meta-governance as a means and mechanism for defining and implementing collaborative policy. The two policy fields produce their own agendas, are advocated by ‘their’ respective actors and established ways of making policies and building networks in response to policy opportunities, and produce their separate associated (new regionalist) territorialities. And it is this multi-
The 1987 Brundtland Report first drew attention to the importance of cities in both challenging - through their growing size and number and associated environmental costs (Gibbs and Jonas, 2000; Gibbs et al, 2002) - and, eventually, helping to address, sustainable development as a global task. Subsequently, the 1992 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro explicitly placed local (especially urban) government in a leading role to seek and develop partnerships with local stakeholders and communities in the search for more sustainable ways and forms of development (Freeman et al, 1996; Portney, 2003). This reflected the realisation that the quest for sustainability requires acknowledgement of, and thus responsiveness to, the interconnectedness of local and wider (global) processes. Local policies thus need to fuse wider strategic perspectives with specific local interests by the electorate. It was thus from the late 1980s/early 1990s onwards, that such debates were moving into mainstream politics, such as in the form of the Local Agenda 21 which, in the UK, has since translated into a framework for developing ‘sustainable communities’ (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005, p 42).

As part of this shift in the public policy realm, Local Agenda 21 triggered a growing and increasingly more visible local government engagement in policies on sustainability. This included the accepted need to reach beyond, and across, divisions between actors, their strategic scalar perspectives, policy agendas and associated spatialities, using negotiated collaborative approaches. While sitting within their respective national frameworks, municipalities began to become more pro-active in sustainability policy making which, especially in metropolitan areas, brought together new political and strategic agendas, alliances, but also divisions. These were based on the particular interpretations of ‘sustainability’ between a narrower focus on ‘greenness’ and a more holistic notion of ‘quality of life’ and civic engagement (Selman, 1998). There was thus emphasis not merely on technocratically oriented policy instrumentation, but rather an encouragement of broader debate and consensus building, starting at the local level and reaching ‘upwards’ in scale. This involved innovativeness and entrepreneurialism in identifying, shaping and implementing sustainability-focused policies – all key characteristics of ‘smartness’ in spatial governance, as discussed below.

In that process, city regions have emerged as the most prominent scale of negotiating and implementing conflictual agendas of those pursuing sustainability and competitiveness respectively (Camagni et al, 1998; Portney, 2003): (1) neo liberalism-inspired and globalisation-driven place-based competitive economic policies and (2) critical reflections about the immediate and longer-term ecological costs of growth, including for ‘quality of life’ (Begg 1999). Both policy agendas come with their respective own internal policy-making dynamics, their particular range, roles and relevance of actors and actor networks, their varying public acceptances, and their particular forms of institutionalisation and territoriality. By their very nature, these policy agendas transgress institutional, jurisdictional and spatial boundaries and divisions, as they seek continued relevance and effectiveness. And policy efficacy is a further key feature of ‘smartness’ in spatial governance.

There are thus two dimensions which are addressed here, and which are intrinsically interconnected by the proposed concept of ‘smart (new) city regionalism’: Territoriality and sectorality (agenda) (see Figure 1). The former revolves around the variable territorial ‘reach’ of policies, i.e. their variable scalar perspectives which are adopted and negotiated, or defended, by the participating actors. This is achieved through re-scaling governance and policy-making arrangements either through modifying existing governmental-administrative territory or territorialising the identified (necessary) ‘reach’ of politics as starting points. Two routes to this may be taken: Superimposing a new (higher) spatial level of governance altogether, or rescaling competencies – both existing and new ones - by shifting them ‘upwards’ between existing levels of
government. Consequently, spatial scale shapes policy perspectives and thus detail: A wider spatial dimension often goes along with a broader, more strategic, rather than detailed project-specific policy perspective. This matters when local competencies are affected by a regionally co-ordinative agenda, such as advocated by ‘smart growth’, for instance. The latter, political ‘sectorality’, refers to equally scalarly variable policy negotiations and topical constellations, sitting within, or reaching across, institutional and/or governmental-administrative structures in the pursuit of greater policy efficacy. Such is expected by participating actors to benefit them all, and that brings them ‘round the table’ (Feiock, 2012). This includes those representing different policy sectors with their ‘own’ specific agendas, and thus helps overcoming ‘silo mentalities’. It is here that the notion of ‘smartness’, as implicit in ‘smart city-regionalism’, can offer an operational framework for linking the spatial and policy-specific perspective to the more strategic-conceptual ‘bigger picture’ with its lesser implementational detail and thus perceived reduced ‘threat’ to individual interests and policy-making autonomy. ‘Smartness’ can do this by facilitating inter-actor communication, collaboration and political negotiations - and thus inter-actor trust - through a combination of both spatial scale (e.g. regionalisation) as driver of policy negotiation and co-ordination, and political agenda as lead agent of co-operation. Smart city regionalism thus brings together the rationales, principles and legitimacies of publicly negotiated, collaborative sectoral polity with network-based and policy-described spatiality (see Figure 1). In both instances, reaching across boundaries and divisions is intrinsic to the notion of ‘smartness’.

Figure 1 near here: Smart City Regionalism as product of variably co-ordinated and co-operative spatiality and sectorality

Figure 1 shows the intersection between of the two variables ‘sectorality’ (political agenda) and ‘territoriality’ (spatial dimension) ‘in their respective varying roles in shaping degrees of policy co-ordination and cooperation. Both variables are also illustrated for their relative ‘extreme’ positions of ‘narrow focus’ (e.g. localism, focus on technocratic projects) versus ‘broader perspective’ (‘bigger picture’). This matters for the likelihood of collaborative engagement. The different scenarios shown may serve as conceptual framework for future case study analyses to investigate the varying factor combinations in the interaction and negotiation between two (or even more) policy fields and narratives such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘competitiveness’ respectively, and the corresponding territorial outcomes. Each policy sector may be expected to seek staking out its own, most effective territory to underpin its specific policy agendas. The resulting spaces may intersect to a lesser or greater degree, including near-complete separateness or almost complete congruence. Scope to achieve such territorialisation will vary in response to local conditions, including political capacity and capability among key actors, and acceptance of such moves among the local electorate. Any such political capital may change over time in response to learning experiences – a further feature of ‘smartness’ - and shifting public debates. And the degree of complexity of negotiated shared agendas may well change, too.

‘Smartness’ as policy conflict resolution through collaborative engagement between policy sectors and spaces

The notion of ‘smartness’ in managing urban growth emerged in the U.S. in the 1990s as a central feature of the new Smart Growth concept. In its essential rationale – and
there are many variations in its definition (Knaap and Talen, 2005), it is an inherently
North American, specifically US-based, concept, and needs to be understood in its
specific neo-liberal, locality-centric and ‘home rule’ context with its strong sense of local
self-government. ‘Smart growth’ emerged as a concern about the environmental, social
and economic costs of continuous suburban sprawl (Alexander and Tomalty, 2001;
Dierwechter, 2008). The concept is inherently political. Following Scott (2007, p 20),
“what smart growth advocates have done is to weave together various strands of anti-
sprawl discourse into a coherent polemic of sustainable development that integrates
economic, environmental and social equity issues”. From a more partisan, anti-
regulation angle, some view Smart Growth strategies as a “folly” (O’Toole, 2001) and
even inherently counterproductive in making housing increasingly unaffordable. This, so
the claim, turns a ‘planner’s dream’ into a ‘middle class nightmare’ (O’Toole, 2001, p 20).
It is a problem generally associated with planning control and protecting open land,
such as urban green belt policies (Jones, 2007). A critical blog from 26 June 2011 on
Smart Growth policies in the Seattle city-region put the choice like this: “Do You Want 5
Acres, or 5 Feet?”, referring to the contrast in size – for the same price - between the
building plots inside and outside the set regional Growth Boundary
(http://smartgrowthusa.wordpress.com/2011/03/22/seattle-smart-growth-urban-growth-
boundary-vision-2040-puget-sound-regional-council-psrc-rural-residential/, accessed 5
Apr 2012).

This interpretation is in stark contrast to the praise heaped on Portland’s (Oregon) smart
growth strategies, as illustrated by the comments of a reporter from one of Vancouver’s
(British Columbia, Canada) main newspapers, the Vancouver Sun. He is entirely taken
by the success of Portland’s Urban Growth Boundaries as fixed demarcation line for
permitted development, accompanied by investment in ‘green’ transport and living,
which also produce economic dividends. This, he labels ‘progressive’ policy making
(Tammemagi, 2008). Yet, it is far from clear, as Downs (2005) points out, that such a
visibly and formally restrictive policy could be applied and replicated at will, given
differing local political and societal milieux. By contrast, the concept of ‘smartness’ per
se is less place-specific, and thus more widely applicable, while ‘Smart growth’ is
inherently more pragmatic, task-specific and technical-instrumental in its outlook
(Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005). This is draws on an underlying techno-rationalist notion
that technical fixes may be possible (Guy & Shove, 2000) to allow squaring the circle of
continuing with a growth agenda, while also responding to quests for sustainability.

This may facilitate engagements among policy makers to negotiate and, eventually,
implement more co-ordinated and co-operative policies across both institutional and
territorial boundaries, e.g at city-regional level. And such may go beyond the immediate
focus on Smart Growth as a planning-based policy tool, as it was advocated by the
American Planning Association in the early 1990s (Downs, 2005; Burchell et al, 2000).
One of its main, rather conventional, policy tools is the drawing up of urban growth
boundaries as spatial ‘demarcation lines’ for suburban sprawl (see inter alia Katz, 2002;
Downs, 2005, Brain, 2005; Dierwechter, 2008). Yet, “Smart Growth is NOT NO
GROWTH; rather it seeks to …….foster efficient development at the edges of the
regions, in the process creating more livable communities” (website of the Association
of Bay Area Governments (capital letter emphasis added,

Now, what is ‘smartness’ in ‘Smart Growth’, which also, it is argued here, sits at the
centre of ‘smart (new) city regionalism”? This distinction between ‘smartness’ and ‘smart
growth’ matters, as the argument here is about the very nature of the idea of
’smartness’ as a vehicle for reconciling conflicting policies and their associated
territorialities, rather than an instrumentalised mechanism of development control. Thus,
for instance, Ramirez de la Cruz (2009) associates ‘smartness’ with greater democratic
input and a search for broader legitimacy of development goals, in housing policies. Yet,
there is a growing range of applications of the adjective ‘smart’. Taking its very meaning
of ‘intelligent’ and ‘shrewd’, and contrasting it with ‘unintelligent’ or ‘dumb’, makes it ,
unsurprisingly, a favoured quality for a wide range of spaces and policy agendas. The result has been a degree of ‘trendiness’ in using the adjective ‘smart’ in policy discourses; e.g. ‘smart cities’ or ‘smart state’, ‘smart energy region’, or ‘smart defence’. There is thus a clear spatial (scalar) and sectoral (policy agenda) dimension to being ‘smart’. This revolves around the efficacy of policies through a best effective use of resources to produce the desired policy outcomes. Accordingly, particular emphasis rests on the negotiating, compromising nature of finding policy solutions which are publicly accepted and politically supported. Predictably, co-ordination, co-operation, innovativeness and learning are key adjectives found in the notion of ‘smartness’ across its varying applications. And this includes pursuing seemingly conflictual policy fields as ‘competitiveness’ and ‘sustainability’ concurrently (Portney, 2003). ‘Smartness’ is thus essentially about finding a policy-making formula that reaches across institutional and territorial boundaries. External factors may add important stimuli to ‘kick start’ a change in local policy agenda and policy making, or may be obstructive to such. If the former, the outcome is a product of local conditions, political leadership and external ‘stimuli’. Spatially, this translates into ‘new regionalist’-style forms of collaborative policy making, based on variable spatial networks of cooperation and collaboration, with their associated (‘virtual’) policy spaces (Herrschel, 2007). There, functional networks (Ernst and Kim, 2002; Coe et al., 2004) circumscribe such space, rather than administrative boundaries, expressing a ‘new spatial logic’ (Castells, 1989). And it is the underlying “interactive effects that contribute to regional development” (Coe et al., 2004, p 469), or, just as well, the development of regions as space-political entities.

Smart city-regionalism is one particular scalar application of ‘smartness’ as outcome of the interloping of two key dimensions: Policy sector and territoriality. For once, it focuses on the regional level as the negotiated collaborative territoriality, and, secondly, it flows out of a perceived need to find a more effective scale for representing, negotiating and implementing two (or more) sectoral policy agendas, as negotiated between municipalities, for instance. By the same token, the negotiated spatiality, here ‘virtual regions’, also feeds back into the co-ordinate policy-making process per se, ideally enhancing it. There is thus some form of feed-back loop between identifying a collaborative policy agenda and the willingness to engage with, in the case of smart city-regionalism, a regionalisation process/agenda, however ‘virtual’ or ‘real’ in the end. As part of that, policy networks and relations between actors with shared objectives and priorities have become increasingly important. They transgress established institutional and associated territorial structures as they renegotiate and re-allocate responsibilities and powers in the pursuit of collaborative policy making. In some instances, as Healey (2003) points out, this “may have the potential to be transformative, to change the practices, cultures and outcomes of ‘place governance’ ” (p 107), and this draws on the ‘political calibre’ of relevant actors (Healey, 1997).

These may include new interest and pressure groups and political groupings with their respective networks, as they seek to gain access to the main policy-making platforms. The inherent conceptual broadness of ‘smartness’ permits a variety of interpretations and implementations, with conflict resolution and policy efficacy as defining qualities. Yet, while such networks and informal linkages may be more responsive and problem-solving than their more bureaucratised, formalised counterparts, they are also less predictable. Chisholm (1989), based on insights from the San Francisco Bay Area, identified informal networks as more capable of solving policy conflicts, than formal mechanisms and procedures. Their relative ‘messiness’ may add, as well as reflect, the varied searches for compromise and mutual accommodation of differences in policy objectives, as subsumed under ‘new regionalism’ in all its fuzzy, yet dynamic, variable and ‘virtual’ spatiality (Keating, 1998; Söderbaum and Shaw, 2002; Tomaney and Ward, 2000; MacLeod, 2001; Herrschel 2007).

‘Smart (new) city regionalism’ as the fusion of the two concepts – new regionalism and smart growth - may thus offer a way forward to bridging divisions in associated governance – both spatial and sectoral, and between the public and governmental
spheres - and locating individual city regions in that framework on the basis of the
relative importance of ‘smartness’ in relation to either – or both - cross-sectoral policy
making and cross-border spatial policies as proposed under ‘new regionalism’. This
highlights the link between new regionalist virtual, policy-based territoriality, and an
innovative, learning-based framing of policies, as suggested here as underpinning
‘smart city regionalism’. Smart city regionalism thus offers flexibility in formulating
negotiated inter-sectoral policies, together with associated variably scaled policy
spaces. Just as importantly, the notion of ‘smartness’ also offers a more visible ‘rallying
point’ for public debate on the balancing between competing policy agendas – be that
based on topicality, political conviction, or position inside or outside of public
administration, and the implications of such for rescaling and/or re-bordering policy
spaces.

‘Smart City-Regionalism’ in the American Pacific North West: Adopting spatial
and sectoral ‘smartness’ in Vancouver and Seattle

The two North American examples discussed here, Vancouver and Seattle, were chosen
because they (a) exemplify North American ‘smart growth’ conditions; (b) possess quite
similar geographical characteristics and functionality to allow comparisons; (c) show
different historic-developmental and governmental arrangements and national
circumstances; and (d) illustrate different local historic-cultural circumstances as
determinants of local policy-making characteristics. Both cities are renowned for their
livability and ‘trendy’ urbanity and thus offer interesting cases to explore processes of
adopting and operationalising the concept of ‘smart (new) city regionalism’ as a fusion
of inter-sectoral policy co-ordination with inter-local co-operation at the regional scale.
The two cities illustrate differing city-regional ‘milieux’ with their specific local and
external characteristics which circumscribe scope for, and practice of, smart city-
regionalism. The two policy fields of seeking greater economic competitiveness and
sustainability exemplify frequently conflictual policy agendas. By the same token,
Seattle and Vancouver possess similar qualitative economic and environmental features
to serve as common ground for a comparative appraisal of their negotiation under
‘smart city-regionalisation’. External differences include a greater acceptance of state
regulation and state presence in society in Canada than the US, where ‘home rule’ is a
defining ideology. While both share a strong sense of local democracy, they differ in the
degree to which central government (Province, State) may get directly involvement in
Canadian compared with U.S. cities’ affairs, including planning regulation.

Among internal factors, there are variations in the recognition and political cudos of
‘quality of life’ as a general policy agenda, subsequent acceptance of the value of inter-
municipal cooperation, the need for a regional perspective, including guidance for local
policy making, a politically active urban-based (as against suburban) citizenry and its
values, and the political skill and shared values among local government and interest
groups. It is here that Vancouver scores particularly strongly, helped by a city-centred
active citizenry going back to the early 1970s (Donald, 2005). This reinforced
Vancouver’s position as the primary focus of the city region, whereas in Seattle urban
flight has left a politically much weakened core city vis-a-vis strengthening suburbs and
a strong sense of independence (e.g. Renton with a Boeing production site, and
Redmond with Microsoft).

The analysis broadly follows the conceptualisation and criteria shown in Figure 1, with
Vancouver showing characteristics of relatively advanced smart city regionalism
(Scenario 2), and Seattle showing features of smart city regionalism ‘in progress’
(Scenario 1). Here, a city-region-wide, territorially based and technocratically focused
(‘narrow’) institutionalization, the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC), gained in
policy contents and responsibility as a result of shifting political discourse towards
broader, more strategic, agendas. This shift became evident from information gained
over a 10-year period since 2002 through personal interviews with key local and
regional organizations in the two city regions. They include local economic development units and planning departments, business representations and advocacy groups (Chambers of Commerce). These embrace both the core cities and, as suburban cities (exurbs), Surrey (Greater Vancouver region), and Renton and Tacoma respectively in the Puget Sound region. In addition, the respective primary region-wide governmental planning organisations PSRC and Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) were included. These interviews were essential for obtaining insights into the local political ‘climates’ and debates, as well as challenges. This information was supplemented by documentary analysis of strategy papers and plans from different points of the last decade, with a particular focus on economic development as strategic context for addressing both competitiveness (of course) and (increasingly so) sustainability. Key factors looked out for concerned evidence of spatial collaboration between municipalities, a sense of regionality in the two city regions, the nature of leaders in shaping policies (citizenry, the Vancouver mayor) and business interests (chambers of commerce). Evidence thus gained suggests a positioning of Vancouver’s ‘smart city regionalisation’ under Scenario 2, owing to its stronger reflection of Smart Growth principles at a more fundamental, holistic level, while Seattle emerges as nearer Scenario 1. This reflects a greater influence of the relatively ‘soft’ – and thus perceived as less ‘threatening’ for local autonomy - new regional governance arrangements. Yet, their limited, technocratically-centred policy brief broadened over time under the auspices of ‘smartness’ as it gained recognition in public policy discourse.

Both cities show distinct differences in their adoption of a city-regional perspective, including readiness to engage in topical and spatial collaborations across municipal and institutional boundaries, although with different timing and at different pace. Differences emerged in particular between core city and respective suburbs. Sharing comparable geographic-environmental settings, economic qualities and polycentric functional structures, Seattle and Vancouver differ in their awareness and adoption of ‘smartness’, exemplified by ‘smart growth’, as a conduit for collaborative policy making across spatial and institutional boundaries, and thus as a vehicle to seemingly ‘square the circle’ between the quests for economic competitiveness and more sustainability. Both cities, irrespective of their somewhat different national contexts for governance, share elements of a distinct Pacific Northwestern mentality (interview with PSRC, 14 Nov 2002) shaped by a not always easy fusion of elements of a strong sense of individuality and independence vis-à-vis an attractive ‘great outdoors’ as highly valued (common) good, and equally valued metropolitan characteristics of livability and urban lifestyle. Still, there are distinct variations based on respective degrees of urbanization (Dierwechter, 2008). Both cities have acquired an internationally well established visibility and image as ‘trendy’ and desirable, urbane places to live (and work), such as associated with Richard Florida’s (2005) ‘creative class’, and are key ingredients in the two cities’ respective public (economic) policy discourses. Yet, national differences in the relationship between state, society and the individual, as between local and central government in the scalar allocation of responsibilities, manifest themselves nevertheless (Fox, 2010).

Differing planning and legal arrangements for identifying sprawl as a potential problem that needs a regional response, and to act upon this insight, is one of the key differences; the other one is the extent to which there is a public perception – in urban and suburban environments - that such regulative policies are required and, indeed, desirable. While in Vancouver development planning control (that is ‘zoning’) goes back to the city’s first development plan of 1929 courtesy of the Provincial government of British Columbia to protect land resources from urban expansion (Donald, 2005), no such thing existed in Seattle until the early 1990s. And when it tentatively began, this was only in response to ‘high impact’ external intervention: the Washington State government’s 1992 requirement of a regional development plan, and, as a second warning, the 2001 pullout of Boeing’s headquarters and transfer to Chicago. This was intended as a deliberate ‘shot across the bow’ of local policy makers in the Seattle city region for them to ‘get a grip’ on the economically costly, and thus uncompetitive,
continuous traffic congestion problem through a region-wide (collaborative) approach

(Seattle Chamber of Commerce, interview, 20 June 2004).

By comparison, in Vancouver, and not just in the city itself, but also the surrounding
suburbs/exurbs, public debate expressed, and reinforced, a preparedness to accept the
principles of development control per se, and do so at the regional scale. And this was
begun much earlier, in the early 1970s, in a bid to enhance urban living and quality of
life. The then liberal political middle-class movement, TEAM (The Electors’ Action
Movement) gained control of Vancouver city council in strongly contested elections. The
backdrop to this was a perceived assault on ‘urban living’, and social equity and
inclusion, by rapid urban expansion and associated extensive new road building, driven, so it was seen, by the self-serving interests of a narrow local elite of remote,”

“inaccessible politicians” (Ley et al, 1992, p 281). This had produced a receptive mood
for ‘smart growth’ principles per se (the terminology emerged only later), including more
strategic, longer-term perspectives as guidance to local policy decisions, and a pursuit
of co-operative policy co-ordination with neighbouring municipalities. The election
results showed that such agendas had gained sufficient political currency for delivering
votes, and this produced a readiness among local politicians to engage in policies that
go beyond short-term, locality-centric goals. The comparatively early start in debating
and formulating such concerns publicly and visibly gave the city-region a policy
innovator’s edge, and also time for building a broader coalition to develop and manifest
such ‘smart’ policies as an integral part of local political discourse which, in itself, has
become a competitive advantage. The current mayor’s decision to use ‘greenness’ as
an obvious boosterist (Short, 1999) and urban entrepreneurial (Hall and Hubbard, 1996;
While et al, 2000) policy tool to promote the city’s competitiveness is an extension of
this expertise. Launching the Greenest City 2020 Action Plan in 2009 (available from
http://vancouver.ca/greenestcity/, accessed 5 April 2012), just ahead of the 2010 Winter
Olympics as the then touted ‘most sustainable’ Games, is a clear statement of that. It is
also an attempt to further strengthen the perception of Vancouver as innovative and
creative - appealing to, and representing, the ‘creative class’ Florida’s (2005) - , and
even *avant-garde* in fusing often conflictual policy fields and pursuing an economically
successful sustainability agenda. The new slogan of ‘Vancouver 2020 – a bright green
future’, is intended to propagate just this, and suggests sufficient political capital (in
terms of voter acceptance) for such a policy agenda as expression of being embedded
in societal values in the city region (interview GVRD, 3 Nov 2003). And these accept
and support a shared vision as guide to co-operative local policy making (Healey
2002).

The primary actor in Vancouver city region’s governance system to deal with
sustainability in a Smart Growth, planning-oriented sense across the city region, is the
Greater Vancouver Regional District. Formally established in 1967 through the merger
of several single task special bodies (interview GVRD, 3 Nov 2003) by the then British
Columbia government, i.e. 25 years earlier than a similar organisation, PSRC, was put
in place in Seattle, GVRD was part of a Province-wide “network of regional districts” to
“provide(s) a mechanism for metropolitan government” (Sancton, 2005, p 324) for
British Columbia’s two dominant city regions, Vancouver and Victoria. GVRD is to act
on behalf of the participating municipalities and is indirectly legitimated through
councillors delegated to its board by those municipalities. GVRD was thus top-down
implemented and then bottom-up legitimated, albeit solely as a strategic body to offer a
regional perspective as *guidance* for local policies (Sancton, 2005). Renamed Metro
Vancouver a few years ago to raise the city-region’s profile and reflect a competitive
image consciousness of the value of the label ‘metropolitan’ for the Vancouver city
region’s urban attractiveness as a place, its latest strategic development document,
‘Metro Vancouver: 2040 strategy’, seeks an explicit fusion of both competitiveness and
sustainability. The Strategy thus is in the mould of ‘smart city regionalism’. Its
sustainability agenda, so it is pointed out, is not a fashionable ad hoc add-on, but goes
back to the 2002 ‘Sustainable Region Initiative’. That was followed shortly afterwards
(2008) by a more explicitly growth-oriented ‘Sustainability Framework’ for a Regional
Growth Strategy (p 1). It was approved by all municipalities in the city region as joint ‘shareholders’ in Metro Vancouver, including the two main suburban cities of Surrey and Richmond which, in terms of population, are themselves the size of Vancouver, and strongly in favour of ‘growth’ (interview, Surrey EDU, 4 Nov 2003). And on 29 July 2011, the latest regional plan was adopted by all municipalities covered by the GVRD, explicitly referred to as ‘Regional Growth Strategy’ (http://www.metrovancouver.org/planning/development/strategy/Pages/default.aspx, accessed 13 July 2012).

The main ‘voice’ for economic development is the small organisation Vancouver Economic Committee (VEC), an advocacy group well connected to both the business community and the city council (the city mayor is the VEC chairman). Its primary mission is to promote Vancouver as a place to invest and act as a platform to communicate business interests and concerns to the administration (VEC interview, 4 Nov 2003). VEC thus sees itself as a key player among the ‘context people’ focusing on strategy, rather than detailed implementation of policy (interview with VEC, 23 Oct 2006). Its recent Economic Development Strategy document, (available from: vancouver.ca/cycycler/cycler/20120131/documents/rr1.pdf, accessed 5 April 2012) shows sustainability clearly presented as an integral economic quality, inherent in the city as a ‘smart’, economically successful location. And this squaring the seeming circle is confirmed by observations made by Smart Growth British Columbia (SGBC), a lobbying and research organisation advocating ‘Smart Growth’ for B.C. (Alexander, et al, 2004). The key characteristics of ‘smartness’, as understood here, have thus entered Vancouver’s policymaking on the back of long-established popular concerns about maintaining the city’s competitive edge, including environmental values as presumed ‘appeal’ to the ‘creative class’ as perceived bedrock of the city region’s economic capacity.

In Seattle, regionalisation of the political, (rather than the technocratic) arena has been slower to evolve than in Vancouver. Only since the late 1990s (interviews at the Tacoma Economic Development Unit (EDU), 6 Oct 2002 and Seattle Corporate Planning Dept, 5 Oct 2002), has the regional scale entered the wider political realm within the city region as a debated potentially useful device in economic policy and urban development generally, rather than as a mere tool for the technically-driven provision of public transport. Yet, it was the latter that established a city-regional approach in the shape of the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC), established in 1990 by the State of Washington. Similar to Vancouver and the GVRD, formal regional agency was thus installed from the top down. Otherwise, localist competition prevailed in this polycentric city region around the two main poles of Seattle and Tacoma (interview at Tacoma EDU, 6 Oct 2002). This public recognition of a regional policy-making dimension, became, shortly after the passing of Agenda 21 at the Rio Summit, manifested by the 1994 statutory requirement by Washington State for the city to adopt an area-wide comprehensive development plan to address rapid sprawl, road congestion and the insufficient provision with public transport outside the central city area. Up to then, no spatially contiguous strategic plan existed for the municipalities in the city region. Seattle’s new plan followed the then newly articulated basic principles of ‘Smart Growth’ as a then politically debated and less contentious ‘face’ of more restrictive development control policies in conjunction with a regional perspective. Adopting elements of Vancouver’s plan as exemplary allowed policy makers to advocate the city-regional agenda on the back of Vancouver’s recognised positive and successful livable’ image as a strategy to follow.

Institutionally ‘soft’ (MacLeod, 2001), and thus perceived by municipalities and the electorate as less of a potentially irrevocable surrender of local autonomy, PSRC has since the mid 1990s continued to raise its profile beyond its original public transport focus, and established itself as a regionally operating agency with a wider development strategy remit. Its current “mission is to ensure a thriving central Puget Sound now and into the future through planning for regional transportation, growth management and
economic development” (psrc.org, accessed 5 April 2012)). This is not dissimilar to
GVRD’s goal in Vancouver, the example it was modelled on. The region’s somewhat
anodyne name, Puget Sound, based simply on a geographic feature, rather than place,
reflects its attempt not to upset local sensitivities among the smaller municipalities – but
also the ‘second city’, Tacoma, about Seattle’s dominance (Fox, 2010). For marketing,
Greater Seattle would be a more effective name, as indeed used by the Trade
Development Alliance of Greater Seattle. In addition, the two port authorities of Seattle
and Tacoma jointly sought to raise the city-region’s international profile (interview,
Tacoma EDU, 6 Oct 2002) through co-ordinated marketing. But this was about external
visibility, rather than addressing internal city-regional divisions which were strongest
between the urban centres and their suburbs – and also embraced transport strategies
(interview, Renton Mayor’s Office, 5 Nov 2003).

The low key, locally ‘non threatening’ nature of ‘region’ is also reflected in PSRC’s web
address extension ‘.org’: It is clearly an organization outside the governmental hierarchy
and thus without statutorily established powers that could cut across, and challenge,
local interests. Instead, it operates akin to “a regional UN [United Nations]”, as a leading
PSRC planner commented (interview PSRC, 14 Nov 2002), with much debating and
slow decision making. Yet, the PSRC offers a publicly visible political arena for debating
conflicting interest and policy priorities across municipalities and between policy fields,
including conflicting agendas, and formulating compromise policies. And it is this
capacity as a catalyst of a wider, more integrated, regional policy-making dimension that
sits at the heart of the notion of ‘smartness’ in city-regional governance, rather than the
search for a ready-made agenda and planning mechanism as under seemingly offered
by ‘Smart Growth’.

With no public preparation for a regional agenda in development policy prior to the
1990s, it was business interests that first engaged with the idea of collaborative, more
policy-oriented ‘smart new city regionalism’, rather than governments or the electorate.
In contrast to developments in Vancouver as early as the 1970s, in greater Seattle,
adoption has been relatively slow of a city-regional dimension in policy making, in tye
pursuit of a win-win solution for all actors involved – across spatial and topical divides.
The many boundaries and divisions – mental and administrative - criss-crossing the
Puget Sound region - manifest established individualism, self-interest, localism and
socio-economic differences, especially between city cores and suburbs. Finding and
adopting a shared and generally accepted collaborative way forward faces many
obstacles, especially concern about losing local financial control (taxation) and,
politically important, popular local support. “Cities are like little kingdoms”, as an official
in the Mayor’s Office of the suburban city or Renton observed (interview, 5 Nov 2003).
Yet, to promote their interests, they are willing to co-operate with like-minded
municipalities as a pragmatic vehicle to pursue their own interest, such as in the
Suburban Cities Association in King County (interviews PSRC, 14 Nov 2002). The
PSRC’s office location in central Seattle, unlike GVRD’s suburban location outside
Vancouver, however, will have done little to alleviate concerns about Seattle seeking to
‘run’ the region by proxy.

A change in public perception, and thus acceptance of the also local merits of pursuing
regionally collaborative political agendas, is required for accepting as useful ‘smart new
city regionalism’. Yet, innovative policies may emerge from that, such as currently
developed in one of the counties in Puget Sound. There, individual municipalities can
agree a partnership deal with the county about transferring (for a fee) development
rights (TDRs) for a piece of green space to the County, effectively taking it out of
municipal control and thus removing it from direct local political contestations about its
development potential.

The political-conceptual underpinnings for adopting the principles of smart city-
regionalism differ between the Vancouver and Seattle city-regions, as in the latter, ‘soft’
administrative structures came first as part of a technocratic agenda, to then tentatively
move onto the broader, political-ideological ground of sustainable development planning
and policy as a regional, rather than local, agenda, while faced by a skeptical local
government and public. In the Vancouver region, such a policy perspective has existed
much longer as part of public discourse than in Seattle, allowing the GVRD to base its
policies on their latent acceptance by the electorate. In Seattle, by contrast, public and
political opinion needed to be convinced of the virtues of regionalization first – in
principle requiring such symbolic actions as by Boeing to kickstart debate. Thus, PSRC’s current 2040 Vision strategy claims to focus on “people, property, planet” as
guidance of the Growth Management, Environmental, Economic and Transportation Strategy for the Central Puget Sound Region (document available from:
This reflects an attempt to publicly reconcile competing (individual) economic interests,
expressed in property ownership and its value, and global sustainability (Freilich et al,
2010).

Conclusions and Outlook: ‘Smart city-regionalism’ as framework for
collaborative and negotiative policy making.

Drawing on the core rationale of the North American-based concept of Smart Growth as
a planning vehicle, this paper has sought to extricate and develop the notion of
’smartness’ as a mechanism for reconciling conflicting policy ideals and trajectories in
local policy making. Smart Growth seeks to facilitate a shift in values, priorities and
perspectives from a narrow, short-term and often monetary, perspective, to a broader,
more holistic and longer-term view embracing both collaborative political processes and
spatial perspective. City regions provide a particularly potent and interesting scalar
arena for such discussions, as they bring together varying political-economic, social and
governmental-administrative arrangements and agendas, with some being more
congenial than others. Contestations, negotiations and objections are thus an integral
characteristic of city-regional governance.

‘Smartness’ has been distilled as the central concept out of Smart Growth, taking it out
of its particular planning-focused, technocratic context, and discussing it as an analytical
framework for exploring the intersection between territoriality (spatial scale) and
sectorality (political agenda). Discussions may be broad and inherently complex,
contested and diffuse as both growth-oriented ‘competitiveness’ and ‘sustainability’ are
being pursued. One of the key features of ‘smartness’ is a preponderance for the
regional scale as mediating platform between local and international considerations for
‘competitiveness’ and ‘sustainability’ policies. It is regionalism, in its ‘new’, i.e. less
structure- and more relationally and topically-driven nature, with variable governance
territoriality organisation, that has been connected here with the notion of ‘smartness’ as
effective organising rationale and principle. ‘Smart (new) city regionalism’, offers a
conceptual strategic scalar platform and spatial reference – including a temporal
perspective - for potential policy negotiations and compromises, as well as analytical
comparisons of collaborative arrangements and agendas between territories and policy
sectors, such as also found in Healey’s (1997, 2003) notion of ‘collaborative planning’ –
or ‘collaborative governance’ respectively.

Two examples, Vancouver and Seattle, have been used to illustrate different trajectories
of engaging with ‘smart (new) city regionalism’, discussed here as a means of ‘squaring
the circle’ in the pursuit of the two policy fields of ‘competitiveness’ and ‘sustainability’.
Developments in the two cities point to the respective roles played by territory and
politics in framing collaborative arrangements for ‘smart city regionalism’ as a vehicle for
negotiating between the conflicting and competing goals of ‘competitiveness’ and
‘sustainability’. In Vancouver, an existing civic acceptance of the benefits of placing the
individual and local into a wider spatial and value context had provided a receptive and
supportive political ground for accepting ‘smartness’ as a guiding principle. This was
also shaped by a national appreciation of the positive roles of state and regulation, and
of society as a context for the individual. And this included a city-regional scale of governance, values, actors, public discourse and agency-shaped structure. In Seattle, by contrast, a nationally more critical, pro-individualism and localist view, often coupled with a short-term perspective, made the framing of city-regional governance more challenging, needing to ‘grow’ from a limited technocratic agenda. Installing an ‘unthreatening’, low key regional structure first seems to have sown the seeds for accepting broader-defined collaborative city regional governance.

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