Imagining the future of the City-region: Randstad and Mexico City
NAi Debate on Tour in Mexico City, Mexico

The Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) has been working with partners abroad to organise different debates on location under the title Debates on Tour. In several contexts, it has promoted an open dialogue between Dutch and local experts regarding topical, global themes in architecture and urban planning. Under this framework, the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), TU Delft, IBERO Ciudad de Mexico and ITESM Campus Querétaro have been working closely to organise this knowledge interchange in Mexico City.

The following text aims to set the basis for the dialogue towards a dialogue, knowledge and practice interchange between urban thinkers, architects, planners, decision makers and government representatives regarding two distinctive city regions: the Dutch Randstad and Mexico City. However the particularities of both contexts, the dialogue calls for a framework of analysis that resonates more closely with the problems and opportunities faced by the planning/design of the city-region. This document is organised in three sections. The first part introduce the emergence of city-region, to follow in the second section to the brief description of the planning particularities of the Dutch Randstad and the Mexico City-region. In the last section, a main research question and a brief preliminary conclusion is stated that in the following months, should be develop according to the results of the debate.

Introduction
The future lies before us as a highly uncertain and contested landscape with numerous challenges along the way. The global crisis in all its facets, -energy, economic, environmental and financial- is imperatively calling for a structural change in our society, that undoubtedly has to be embedded in cities.

Urbanisation at large scales has inherent sustainability problems on which planning institutions and governance mechanisms have dealt with limited success. No matter the level of development and resources, the challenges come with the management and planning of new forms of urban agglomeration and its emergent urban dynamics. In this sense the city as a precise and confined to a its institutional boundaries is becoming an outmoded entity, hence it has lost most of its significance and consequently to express adequately its underlying economic and social organisation structure (Parr, 2005)

Research in the last decade, has postulated the emergence of new urban forms that have been mainly the result of what can be described as region-based urbanisation as opposed to city-based urbanisation. The regional scale has taken an increased significance as the city influence was expanded to a wider region, hence the region became the locus of global competition (Burdett, 2011).

The emergence of the city-region
In recent years, the concept of the city-region has received an important surge of interest from policy makers and academics. This territorial unit has adequately illustrated the impact of globalisation in terms of capital, labor and culture on the social and spatial configuration of cities. They range from
known urban agglomerations dominated by a strongly-developed core like Mexico City, to more polycentric configurations such as the Randstad in the Netherlands. As a preliminary definition, a city-region is considered as a ‘multifunctional nodal region’ (Parr, 2005) in which the interaction between an urban core(s) and its semi-urban and rural hinterland are connected in a territorial and functional system with economic, political, socio-cultural, and ecological dimensions. Although their economic and spatial relevance, the political attention is still largely focused on the problems regarding the inner city, keeping aside the urgencies of the city-region.

Unfortunately, the challenges that city-regions face cannot be tackled on the mindset of traditional planning. This implies an appropriate and proactive response, in the shape of transformative practices. In order to achieve this, we have to look for a creative type of planning that is able to embed transformative processes moving from episodic to continuous sequences of change (Albrechts, 2010).

In this debate the aim is to establish a platform for dialogue between two distinctive city regions: the Dutch Randstad and Mexico City. Comparing these two large urban regions unfailingly will disclose many similarities and differences. However the particularities of both contexts, the dialogue calls for a framework of analysis that resonates more closely with the problems and opportunities faced by the planning and design of the city-region.

The Randstad and Mexico City contain the major proportion of national population and constitute the major economic engines of their countries. Even though both contexts face common planning challenges, each of them has particular approaches in terms of planning-design strategies to react to their challenges. The Randstad is portrayed by a future-led approach, that uses visioning in combination with spatial concepts as explorative and indicative planning/design tools to be translated into strategic projects. In the case of Mexico city, a “here and now”-led approach, is characterised by emergent spatial interventions across local and regional scale mainly nursed by bottom-up/informal processes. In this sense, we look for the distinctiveness of each approach in the ongoing search for the adaptive, creative and transformative qualities of their planning and design of these city-regions.

Therefore, we investigate how designers, planners, stakeholders and society contribute to the construction of the future city-region in a context of rapid urbanisation process, uncertainty and scarcity of resources?; How to integrate and promote an active participation of the society towards a common desirable future?

The Dutch Randstad
The Randstad is facing severe challenges that should be addressed through sustainable responses. Challenges such as global economic dynamics, water management concerning flooding protection and water storage; new patterns of living and recreation, traffic congestion, maintaining and developing high quality green spaces, emergent social problems regarding housing, safety and labour market, as well as making room for new economic development. Looking for the answer to these challenges, a long term vision for the Randstad ‘Structural Vision Randstad 2040’, was developed addressing different social, cultural, ecological and economical trends and their spatial implications, with a strong link to the spatial structure and its inter-relations over the borders. The vision is setting
the attention to three main issues: climate persistence safety, accessibility and economical dynamics and quality of life with an attractive living and working climate.

Even though, the visioning process is the result of the level of creativity embedded on the Dutch spatial planning, the value of each exercise depends on the role and function, their usefulness relies on their indicative nature. In this sense, the vision confronted different possible futures with some implicit and explicit indications on why society should work on constructing them. Additionally, the vision emphasised on the critical issues and challenges ahead generating a sense of urgency among as many actors as possible motivating them to take action in a specific direction as well as framing the actions of different sources and interests (Albrechts, 2010). Therefore, with the integration of spatial concepts, a framework that embodies the long term strategy was constructed.

Furthermore, spatial planning in the Structural Vision Randstad 2040 is not considered a top-down blueprint but a future-oriented narrative and an explorative process of policy making (Blank, 2009). The flexible and indicative nature of this planning document is perhaps its major advantages due it’s potential capacity to be reinvented and redeveloped over time. However, this indicative character brings along other disadvantages such as the complex translation of spatial regional ambitions into local needs to allow the active participation of the society (Hajer, 2000).

In this context, how could the integration of spatial concepts and visions help to guide the debate of a desirable future of the city region?; Which spatial concepts are currently guiding the debate?; How do these instruments facilitates the translation of the spatial ambitions to spatial interventions?

Mexico City
In the context of Mexico, urban planning has been a political instrument subordinated to measures taken from the top spheres of government decision linked to the macro scale of economic and social planning. As a result, the existing urban planning model has reached a point of complete conceptual obsolescence; it has been inflexible and oriented to technical and administrative aspects in detriment of integrating spatial policies towards clear future ambitions (Gutiérrez, 2009).

In Mexico City -as in other city-regions in developing countries- the traditional dichotomy of the formal and the informal city has been blurred and replaced for a complex spatial relationship between them. Thereby, the stable and predictable condition idea of the city as the result of planning has been deeply questioned by the surge of informal urbanism: the definition of a self-regulated, self-sufficient and self-determined city.

For this debate the character of the ‘informal’ should be positioned in different terms, broadening the definition to go beyond the normal understanding as the city of the poor and marginalised and focusing in the tactics and innovations of non-regulated, non-official urbanism initiated by local civic groups, such as local economic, social, and/or cultural associations (Hernandez, 2009).

These emergent processes are nursed by the active society in the form of different projects and spatial interventions in diverse scales. But most of these processes are dictated by the current emergencies in the shape of short-term planning and specific actions, limiting their capacity to create a positive long-term ripple effect of transformation on the urban context. It is not probable that such
aggregation of individuals to tackle the structural challenges of the city-region such as sustainable water management, integration of transit networks, energy production or new land-use allocation with the necessary scale and urgency needed (Gutiérrez, 2009). However, the potential scope of these emergent processes could be benefited by their articulation towards a more future-led inclusive strategy.

In this context, how are urban strategies able to reconcile differences between long-term visions and short-term action and between whole-city-frameworks and area-based interventions?; Which approaches are suitable to overcome the gap between visions and projects?; How can these spatial concepts/instruments help to articulate isolated efforts through flexible and adaptive planning/designing process?; How to guide these emergent interventions towards common ambitions without losing their uniqueness and flexibility?

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References


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