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From brownfield to "utopian" campus

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From brownfield development to "utopian" campus: niche entrepreneurship in strategic action fields of urban development

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Abstract

In current German debates on sustainable urbanisation and urbanism, new urban actors reviving buildings, brownfields or whole neighbourhoods are discussed as potential drivers of urban transformation towards sustainability as well as potential co-producers for conventional actors in urban development and planning. These actor's projects can be understood as spatially confined niches for experimentation with (built) urban space itself. Building upon the concepts of niche entrepreneurship (Pesch *et al.*, 2017) and the framework of strategic action field theory (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; 2015), we ask how these actors secure support for their projects and how these projects in turn are altered in this process. Based upon a case study from Wuppertal, Germany, we show that in struggling for support of powerful actors, these actors often have to significantly compromise, and that these compromises can be understood as contextualisation in the project's spatial and institutional environment.

1. Introduction

In current German debates on sustainable urbanisation and urbanism, new actors such as "spatial entrepreneurs" (Buttenberg *et al.*, 2014) and so called "city-makers" (Beck *et al.*, 2017) reviving buildings, brownfields or whole neighbourhoods are discussed as potential drivers of urban transformation towards sustainability (WBGU, 2016, p. 331ff.) as well as potential co-producers for conventional actors in urban development and planning (Willinger, 2014). We will refer to these actors, which are often rooted in civil society, culture or the creative industry as *new urban actors*, and their relation to questions of sustainability is multi-facetted: While building spaces for cultural and social innovation that might contribute to sustainability transitions, they also address issues regarding the sustainable development of urban form (e.g. prolonging the lifespan of neglected buildings or preventing resource-intense construction) and land use (e.g. preserving open spaces), which have been identified by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) as major action fields of the transformation of cities. In realising their projects, new urban actors regularly engage in new – and

often experimental – forms of governance that challenge the mainstream of urban planning and land development, which in turn has been criticised as a major contributor to unsustainable urbanisation (WBGU, 2016). This mainstream's reliance on growth has recently been picked up from the emerging perspective of post-growth planning (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020).[1]

In this conference paper, we are primarily concerned with new urban actor's efforts to create new forms of governance of (built) urban space, to which we refer as *spatial projects* as a shorthand. We conceive of these projects as spatially confined niches, understood as protective spaces in which experimentation with potentially path-breaking innovations can thrive (Smith & Raven, 2012). Following the German Advisory Council on Global Change, we understand cities as "a spatial organizational form for humankind" (WBGU 2016, 56), in which different systems of societal reproduction are spatially integrated. This perspective resonates with a strand in urban transitions literature that conceives of cities as nexuses where multiple systems overlap, and urban transitions and reconfigurations cut across multiple systems and sectors such as energy, transportation or food (McCormick *et al.*, 2013; Wolfram & Frantzeskaki, 2016; Wolfram *et al.*, 2016; Hodson *et al.*, 2017). With regards to this concept, spatial projects can be analysed as niches in two ways: On the one hand, these projects provide an environment for multiple and often intertwined forms of experimentation, such as alternative forms of housing, circular economy projects or urban food production. On the other hand, however, the projects also deviate from dominant practices of the governance of (built) urban space and stabilising them as long-term projects can be considered building a protective space for alternative spatial practices.

Literature on niche formation has shown that the construction of protective spaces is inherently political as it involves gaining the support of power- and resourceful actors with often radically diverging frames of sustainability challenges and respective solutions (Smith & Raven, 2012 p.1031). In this process that often leads to results that are incomplete or sub-ideal from the perspective of the niche's advocates, a niche is constructed within the very specific possibilities of a given context which are usually understood through the lens of the regime constellation in which the niche has to be embedded, and which are not well enough understood yet (Smith, 2007; Pesch *et al.*, 2017). However, literature on the geography of transitions and particularly urban transitions has also emphasized the influence of place-specific factors on transitions (Hodson & Marvin, 2010; Hodson *et al.*, 2013; Rohracher & Späth, 2014; Ehnert, Kern, *et al.*, 2018). In our view, this holds especially true for spatial projects that, by their localized nature, cannot be separated from the specific urban context in which they are realised, and are often even conceived as a solution to very specific local problems by their proponents (Beck *et al.*, 2017; Beck & Schnur, 2016).

Consequently, we are interested in the agency through which new urban actors are able to challenge mainstream structures and practices in urban planning, and also the compromises they are forced to make in their specific contexts. We ask three research questions:

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[1] On an international level, debate to date has largely revolved in workshops (e.g. Chang, 2020, see also www.aesop2019.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/5_Towards.pdf, postwachstumsplanung.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DoKoRP2020_Postgrowth_Handout_web.pdf)

1. How was the new urban actor able to secure support for their project?
2. How has the project been evolved in this process?
3. What role played the spatial and institutional context in this process?

To answer the above research questions, we present a conceptual approach that is grounded in the literature on contestation in niche development. We build upon the concept of *niche entrepreneurship* brought forward by Pesch and colleagues (2017) to understand agency. Also, we ground this approach in Strategic Action Field (SAF) theory (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Fligstein & McAdam, 2015) as a framework to better capture the complexities of the urban context in which a spatial project is situated that is compatible with our focus on contestation but agnostic with regard to the nature of contextual influences. We will lay out our approach in the following sections of this paper.

To demonstrate our approach, we present a case study of the project Utopiastadt Campus ("Utopia City Campus") in the German city of Wuppertal. The initiative Utopiastadt ("Utopia City") has gained prominence in local and national debates on experimental, sustainable bottom-up city development in Germany (CREATIVE.NRW, 2015; Montag Stiftung Urbane Räume, 2016; Stadt Wuppertal, 2014). The initiative started off in 2011, transforming an abandoned railway station north of the Wuppertal city centre, and developed ideas on how to also transform the surrounding former railway grounds into a catalyst area for experimental, sustainable and integrative development. In the meantime, the reactivation of the former railway line as an urban cycling highway revitalised city quarters along the route, not only benefiting Utopiastadt but also raising the attractiveness of the former railway brownfields for commercial development. In 2016 conflict over the development broke out in the open. In this conflict, Utopiastadt, being funded through a support programme of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) under the close participation of the municipality of Wuppertal, received support from the city administration, which ultimately led to a standstill in mid 2016. This standstill was overcome by the formation of a formalised council including the owner, an international property investment company and the local city development department. The council resulted in a collaboratively developed framework for the development of the area and ultimately the purchase of significant parts of the area by Utopiastadt in 2019.

In this paper we will concentrate on the period up till the completion of the purchase in early 2019. Combining transcripts and protocols of the council with interviews with key actors and programmatic documents, we reconstruct the basic process as well as the interplay of shifting frames of development through which the new urban actor was able to realize its project. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, we lay out the theoretical foundations of our conceptual approach (section 2), and its application as an analytical framework (section 3). Then, we dive into the case study (section 4) and discuss our results as well as the contribution and limits of our approach (section 5). We close the paper with some final remarks regarding the contribution of new urban actors to urban sustainability transition (section 6).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Niche entrepreneurship

The concept of *niche entrepreneurship* brought forward by Pesch and colleagues (2017) aims to enlighten the role of politics and individual agency in the process of niche formation. At its core is the claim that the logics of niche formation which revolve around the three elements of visioning, social networks and learning and articulation processes (Geels, 2011; Schot & Geels, 2008) strongly resemble the dynamics of political agenda setting as laid out in John Kingdon's (1995) classical concept of policy entrepreneurship. According to Kingdon, agenda setting can be analysed along the lines of three distinct "streams" concerned with perceived *problems*, proposed *solutions* or policy alternatives and *politics*, i.e. changes in public opinion, political majorities etc. Although specific policies might be originally conceived as solutions to certain problems perceived by their proponents, they are analytically divided from the dedicated problem stream as this stream is concerned with the problems deemed to be relevant by decision makers. Coupling the two becomes possible in the rare instances when all three streams align in so called *windows of opportunity*, which typically open up as an effect of coincidental changes in the problem or policy stream, but which, as Pesch and colleagues argue, might also be brought about actively, if the policy entrepreneur has the means to do so. To successfully place a solution on the agenda, policy entrepreneurs rely on three kinds of strategies: Drawing attention to an issue, building coalitions, and connecting solutions with problems by navigating the institutional and political context.

Building upon these similarities, the authors use the term "niche entrepreneur" for an "an actor who, analogous to the policy entrepreneur, successfully connects the elements that are needed to successfully develop a niche" (Pesch *et al.*, 2017 p.1923). Niche entrepreneurship, however, does not exhaust itself in *political* agenda setting, as it involves realising their project vis-à-vis incumbent interests and dominant practices on the ground as well as mobilising resources that are controlled by regime actors. Including these actors in the process of niche construction is crucial for successful niche entrepreneurship (ibid., p. 1927). In accordance with Smith and Raven (2012), it follows that the specific kind of innovations a specific niche can provide a secure space for arise only as a result of a process of negotiations between the niche entrepreneurs and the incumbent actors. Pesch and colleagues therefore emphasise that niche formation has to be analysed as a process of "learning *for* niches", in which the characteristics of the niche itself are a result of the process itself and strongly dependent on the contexts in which this process takes place (ibid., p. 1939).

From the concept of niche entrepreneurship, we derive two central processes for our analysis of the establishment of spatial projects:

- **Coupling:** In our view, the core contribution of the concept of niche entrepreneurship lies in the idea of coupling that is at the heart of Kingdon's agenda setting approach: A niche has to be accepted as a viable solution to the pressing problems perceived by decision makers to gain support, and coupling does not arise by itself but is the outcome of a strategic process advanced by entrepreneurial actors within windows of opportunity.

- **Learning:** Furthermore, the central conceptual expansion with regard to Kingdon's approach is the inclusion of incumbent actors which have to be convinced to cooperate as well. This sheds a light on the fact that the final form the niche takes might deviate from the project that the niche entrepreneur aimed for in the first place. Instead, the actual solution – and thus the niche project established – is the result of a learning process with regard to what can be realised vis-à-vis incumbent interests.

We will lay out how these two core processes are operationalized for our analysis in section 3. First, however, we turn to the theory of Strategic Action Fields (SAF) as a general framework in which the two processes will be analyzed.

2.2. Strategic Action Field Theory

Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (2011; 2015)[2] define strategic action fields (SAFs) as mesolevel constructed social orders that arise when at least two actors interact on the basis of a shared understanding of the purpose, boundaries and governing rules of the field. The theory posits that SAFs are "the fundamental units of collective action in society" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015 p.9), which itself can be conceived as an array or network of interdependent and nested fields. As the concepts is agnostic with regards to size, systemic function or level of structuration of the unit of analysis, SAFs have been adopted as an approach to study such diverse phenomena as the struggle over race and civil rights in the US (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015), the mortgage securitisation industry (ibid.), the field of climate policy in Germany (Stecker, 2015), bottom-up networks in urban development in Warsaw (Domaradzka & Wijkström, 2016), or the establishment of a national museum project in the French city of Metz (Krauss, 2015). The theory has also attracted increasing interest as a framework to study sustainability transitions, e.g. for energy transitions in different contexts such as urban energy policy (Blanchet, 2015), specific wind energy projects (Fuchs & Hinderer, 2014) or large providers on a national level (Kungl, 2015).

SAFs are conceived as either *emergent* from what was before unformed social space, *stable* and characterised through a settlement or undergoing an *episode of contention*. Stable fields are characterised by a level of acknowledgement of the aforementioned shared understandings in form of a *settlement*. Actors benefiting from or marginalised by a settlement are characterised as incumbents or challengers respectively.[3] While even in stable fields, there is a constant "jockeying" for position, in contested fields, distinctions between incumbent and challenging actors become increasingly blurred. SAF theory puts great emphasis on the processes through which fields change from one of these states to another. In both stabilisation and destabilisation of SAFs, three factors play a crucial role:

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[2] The following summary of the theory is based upon these two foundational texts.

[3] SAF theory shares the terminology of *incumbents* and *challengers* with other approaches to transition or societal change. In SAF theory, incumbents and challengers are defined with regard to a specific SAF, i.e. as actors benefiting or being marginalised by the settlement in place. This implies that no actor is classified as an incumbent on the basis of general or inherent qualities, and actors can be incumbents in one field while being challengers in another.

First, the stability of fields rests to a largely on the stability of proximate fields within the array of interdependent fields. Second, in mobilising for contention or crafting a settlement, actors rely heavily on strategic action, understood as framing and mobilisation, based upon social skill, understood as the ability of actors to craft interpretations that integrate other actors. Finally, at least in modern societies, state actors play a key role in sustaining and ratifying settlements as they are concerned with maintaining stability across a large variety of fields under their sovereignty.

Based upon this summary, SAF theory holds three merits for the analysis of the formation of niche projects in the urban context: First, the theory's very general definition of SAFs allows for the conceptualisation of a specific niche project as well as the context in which it is realised through the lens of an array interrelated SAFs that can, in principle, be described with the same concepts. Second, SAF focusses the analysis on the connections between field and context, as the potential for stability and change (even if it takes strategic action to be realised) is largely a function of proximate fields and state actors trying to maintain stability across these fields. Combining both aspects, this allows for the operationalisation not only of the political and institutional context (e.g. the local property market or municipal brownfield policy), but also the spatial context (e.g. a surrounding neighbourhoods or a planning project in an adjacent area). Finally, through its constructivist ontology, SAF theory focusses the analysis on the framings through which change and stability in any given field are achieved. This hints to the basic mechanisms through which the aforementioned contextual influences are translated into the SAF concerned with the development of a specific place. The influence of such political struggles over place frames and visions as well as the often hindering compromises necessary to achieve political consensus on localised transitions have recently be emphasised (Murphy, 2015 p.74). With its focus on the social construction of fields, SAF theory helps to shed a light on how these necessary compromises are achieved on the ground.

3. An analytical framework for niche entrepreneurship in SAFs

Before laying out our analytical framework, we first have to clarify how struggles around establishing spatially confined niches can be conceived within the SAF framework: *For the purpose of this paper, we operationalise the governance of the (built) space where the niche is to be established as an SAF.* In this SAF, actors struggle about the rules by which the space is to be accessed or developed by diverse actors (e.g. by means of commercial lease or squatting, fast development by external contractors or co-production with local civil society etc.), and possibly the boundaries of the space to be governed itself (e.g. which parts of physical space are to be included). In a stable field, the answers to these questions will be stabilised in some kind of settlement that must be acknowledged, if not accepted by all actors. Establishing a niche, then, is about bringing about a settlement which allows for a form of governance that is innovative with regard to mainstream practices.

Analysing niche entrepreneurship within the general framework of SAF theory has two important consequences for our analysis: First, *coupling* can be analysed through the lens of framings that include the solution as a proposed settlement for the area as well as the problems it is coupled with. Accordingly, *learning* can be analysed as changes in these basic framings over time. Second, these

framings can be analysed within the context of proximate SAFs, which means that contextual elements included in these framings can be attributed to specific proximate fields (e.g. the orientation of project to its neighbourhood, or the urge to create housing in a city with a tight housing market to SAFs concerned with this neighbourhood or the housing market respectively).

Based on these core thoughts, we propose a framework that integrates the framings of solutions and problems through the analysis of *narratives* in which these elements are integrated as *episodes*. *Coupling* and *Learning* are included as processes in which the elements of individual narratives are connected or altered in a specific way. We will lay out the basic elements of this framework below.

3.1.   Analysing shifting frames of solutions and problems through narratives

Narratives have been applied in studies concerned with policy change as well as in transition studies as an approach to understand phenomena such as sense-making, coalition building, future-oriented agency and the ascription of responsibilities (e.g. Stone, 1989; Hajer, 2000; Mayer, 2014; Wittmayer *et al.*, 2015; Hermwille, 2016). However, while we acknowledge these applications and some of our results might be fruitfully connected to these theoretical discourses, we use narratives here solely as an analytical instrument. Following Robert Scholes, we define a narrative as "the symbolic presentation of sequence of events" (Scholes, 1981 p.205). According to Margaret Somers (1994) this presentation is achieved through the selective appropriation of events into episodes (out of a "potentially limitless array of social experiences" (p.617) which are then connected by means of a plot that places these events in causal, temporal and spatial order.

We use narratives in this sense to explore how solutions and problems are causally connected to present a proposed settlement as well as the legitimising context this settlement serves: A complete narrative is conceived as a selective, temporally structured account of how a settlement in an SAF should look like in the face of certain challenges based on a suggested causal logic. To understand coupling and learning, we break these narratives up analytically into *episodes*. Following Willy Viehöver (2006), episodes are conceived of not as specific events but as semantically comparable parts of structurally comparable narratives. These parts are not always fully realised in each account of the narrative but are the foundational building blocks identified in individual acts of communication on the basis of which the full narrative is reconstructed.[4] The episodic structure is derived from an initial analysis of a selection of narratives, and therefore guided by the type of narrative in question.

Based on these principles, we propose a simple structure of four episodes: (1) *challenges*, (2) *solutions*, (3) *prospects* and (4) *paradigms* (Tab. 1). With the first two episodes, we operationalise – and differentiate – the notion of "problems", which is motivated by our preliminary analysis of some narrative accounts in our case study, showing that solutions are not always framed in the light of

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[4] Viehöver is concerned with narratives as structuring elements of policy discourses. We cannot follow the full discourse analytical program proposed by Viehöver, but acknowledge his basic assumption about narratives and thus use his technique as a model for reconstructing development narratives in the SAF.

present problems but often as a way to achieve desirable future states. Episodes can be arranged in a temporal order where challenges represent the present, prospects the future and solutions the steps to move from the one to the other. We complement these with *paradigms* – which technically is not an episode, as it is not woven into the temporal structure of the narrative, but rather serves to make plausible the temporal-causal connections between challenges, solutions and prospects.

Tab. 1: Episodic structure of the narrative

Challenge	Solution	Prospect	Paradigm
Definitions of the present situation that call to action.	Elements of a possible settlement, including the purpose of the field, its boundaries, the rules governing legitimate action and the roles of actors involved.	Desirable states to be achieved, and in some instances undesirable states to be prevented by taking action.	Explicit accounts regarding causal assumptions within the narrative.

This episodic structure serves four purposes: First, it serves as a basic coding system for the qualitative analysis of our data. Second, it allows the reconstruction of individual actor's narratives at certain times in the period of analysis. Third, it allows for the comparison of actor's narratives, both diachronically over time as well as synchronically between individual actors. Fourth, based upon this, it allows to identify instances of coupling and learning.

3.2.   Coupling and Learning

As we have pointed out, we focus on processes of coupling and learning to answer the first two research questions formulated in the introduction. It is now time to define these processes in a strict way:[5]

- **Coupling** is the successful connection of a solution to a challenge perceived or a prospect envisaged by another actor (whose support is sought) within a development narrative, where "successful" means that this connection is adopted by the other actor as well. Coupling is identified by synchronic comparison of narratives at a given point in time.
- **Learning** is the process through which the solution of a development narrative is altered through negotiations between actors. This narrow definition is based in the notion of *learning for the niche* which is concerned with how the final form in which a niche project can be realised is found out

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[5] We analyse these processes to understand how the support of state and incumbent actors is won, which means that questions of power will be involved in the actual processes. However, as an analytical tool, both processes are agnostic regarding questions of power and could be applied to other actors as well.

through a negotiation process that involves both the niche entrepreneur and the actors whose support is sought.[6] Learning is identified by diachronic comparison of narratives over time.

3.3.   Tracing the field environment within narratives

Finally, to operationalise the external field environment in our investigation of narratives, we trace references to proximate fields within the individual elements of the episodic structure: We analyse in which fields challenges and prospects are situated, which connections to other fields are integrated in a solution and which more general causal assumptions are made about certain fields. We identify these fields strictly on the basis of the narratives identified in our analysis and make no further assumptions as to the boundaries, purpose and rules regarding these fields. In our analysis, these fields arise as an aggregation of the references made in the individual narratives. We will discuss this limitation of our study in section 5.

4. Case Study: Utopiastadt Campus in Wuppertal

4.1.   Case study methodology

Our single case study of the Utopiastadt Campus is based upon three bodies of data: (1) documents of programmatic nature laying out policies, plans and public positions of the actors regarding the development of the area in question, (2) data accumulated in passive participation in a series of meetings beginning in early 2016, which includes transcripts as well as official protocols of the meetings, (3) five additional guided interviews with representatives of each of the major parties involved in the forging of the final settlement as well as the external expert who moderated the "official" council meetings through which the settlement was achieved. These interviews served primarily to reconstruct the basic case narrative and were not used to analyse narratives.

From this data, we reconstructed a basic case narrative outlining the development of the area as well as the interactions between the actors. We structured this narrative along the phases throughout which an SAF, according to Fligstein and McAdam's theory, shifts into contention and is settled again. We then conducted a Qualitative Content Analysis (Kuckartz, 2018; Mayring, 2015) of relevant data in each of these phases. Where possible, we relied on programmatic documents and protocols. However, for the phase in which contention spiked consensual protocols were lacking. Here, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the meeting transcripts. The material was coded with the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA along main categories derived from the episodic structure laid out in section 3.1, which were filled up with sub-categories derived from the empirical material. A special focus was laid on aggregating sub-categories referring to the external field environment. In addition, actors behind the framings were coded and, when possible aggregated to the level of collective actors.

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[6] Arguably, change might also be identified in the solutions and prospects as well as the paradigm of a narrative. However, as we aim to understand how a niche project is shaped by the context it is realised in, these instances are not included in our narrow definition here.

Episodes were then aggregated on the level of actors at individual data points (i.e. programmatic documents, meetings etc.) to identify actor's narratives at different points in time. These narratives were then compared synchronically between actors at given points in time and then diachronically across time points and phases of the SAF. Results of these comparisons were integrated with our basic case narrative to reconstruct the processes of coupling and learning respectively. In our following presentation, we focus primarily on the main actors involved in the development: Utopiastadt, the property owner, and the city administration, and do not differentiate between individual representatives of these actors.

4.2. Case narrative of the Utopiastadt Campus

Our basic case narrative is grounded in five phases we derive from SAF theory and shows that the SAF concerned with the development of the Mirke railway grounds was moved from an initial settlement into contention and back into a new settlement centred around the establishment of the "Utopiastadt Campus". Below, we will give a short account of this narrative, before we examine the central instances of coupling and learning in the following sections.

4.2.1. Initial settlement: Part brownfield, part commercial premises

Originally one of the early centres of industrialisation and particularly the textile industry in Germany, the city of Wuppertal had begun to undergo deep structural transformation since the 1970s, including the loss of industry jobs and a steep decline in population. The Mirke station had been part of a railway line located in the north of the city that had been closed down since 1991, after which large parts of the surrounding area had been neglected for two decades. Although in northwestern parts of the area, railway-related businesses like logistics and a scrap-dealer remained, most of the area was considered a brownfield. The close proximity of the A46 motorway with a lack of noise protection on the northern border contributed to the unattractiveness of the area. The station building itself was owned by the city's local savings bank, and the surrounding area by a large property managing company that had been founded in 2002 by the German railway operator to manage out-of-use railway grounds and that was subsequently privatised between 2006 and 2007. Apart from managing existing uses, the company undertook no steps to actively develop the surrounding area in this period.

For the purposes of our analysis, we consider the situation in late 2007 as the initial settlement of the field, in which the area was largely seen as a brownfield. However, developments that prepared the ground for upcoming contention, were already on the way, although they did not impact the station grounds at that point: In 2005, the city council had decided to commission an urban development plan to stop decline in four centrally located historic city quarters as part of the support programme "Stadtumbau West" ("Urban redevelopment West") funded by the German state of North-Rhine Westphalia. This included the Elberfelder Nordstadt ("Northern city Elberfeld") surrounding the Mirke station. In the plan's final report, dating from late 2007, the neighbourhoods around the station grounds were framed as a potentially attractive residential area suffering from decline. Already, and significantly, a civil society initiative (Wuppertalbewegung) had begun pushing for a transformation of

the old railway line into an inner-city cycling route, which was identified as a potentially future positive factor for the area in the programme. However, no steps for action on the area were taken, as the urban development programme first focused on other city quarters, and the revitalisation of the station building was seen as a task left to investors.

4.2.2. Onset of contention: Raising attractiveness and coupling

The situation changed when the inner-city cycling route that became known as the Nordbahntrasse ("Northern line route") began to materialise and the initiative Utopiastadt moved into the station building in 2011. Contention in the SAF rose, as different plans for the area were developed. On the one hand, the property owner began to push for a more conventional development of the area, aiming to gradually sell it to interested parties. This strategy was in line with the company's activities on other former railroad grounds along the Nordbahntrasse, which officially opened in December 2014 and fostered the overall attractiveness of these areas. Also, after a change in ownership structure that impacted the overall business strategy, the company decided to more actively pursue the sale of all parts of the area. On the other hand, early on, Utopiastadt had begun to develop a narrative that presented the area as a catalyst for urban development. The initiative's activities in the station building were funded by a support programme by the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and by leveraging the requirements of this programme, the initiative successfully coupled this plans with the municipal redevelopment policy. We will investigate this process as the central instance of coupling in detail in section 4.3. Also, in May 2015, Utopiastadt co-operated with other civil society actors on an application of funding by a foundation to develop the railway grounds as the "Utopiastadt Campus". In this application, albeit not successful, Utopiastadt's vision was further developed.

At that time, the property owner was not aware of Utopiastadt's emerging plans for the "Campus" development nor of the programmatic coupling.[7] Plans for small-scale development of the Western brownfields were already under way, when in late 2015, an opportunity arose, as a well-known real estate developer from Wuppertal presented an option for the acquisition and development of the whole area surrounding the Mirke Station. As Utopiastadt became aware of this offer, contention over the development broke out openly.

4.2.3. Episode of contention: Two conflicts and a standstill

Contention in the SAF culminated in three unofficial meetings between March and July 2016, as the conflicting interests became increasingly clear. In the first meeting in March 2016 which was facilitated and moderated by the economic development agency, the local property developer, Utopiastadt and the city administration, talked about the developer's plans and the inclusion of Utopiastadt's activities in one central but functionally separated part of the area. These plans were rejected by the initiative, which was backed by the city administration. In the meeting, that ended without a solution, it became

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7   Interview with property owner's representative (04.03.2020).

clear that the local property developer was unwilling to risk conflict about the development and also tried to preserve good relations with Utopiastadt. In the aftermath, the company publicly announced the abandonment of its own plans and its open support for Utopiastadt to leave "space for utopias".

After these events, the property owner decided to take the development in its own hands. In two consecutive meetings, the first in June in Utopiastadt in the station, the second in July in Wuppertal's city hall, the property owner presented its plans for a joint process that included the city administration. The administration, however, again backed Utopiastadt's position and demanded for a strong inclusion of the initiative in the process. In these two meetings, no consensus was reached, and the process of developing the Mirke station grounds came to a standstill. As our focus is on the processes of coupling and learning, we will not elaborate the details of these conflicts. However, as the conflicting narratives of both Utopiastadt as well as the property owner became clearly visible in these meetings, we will pick up on the main points of conflict when we dive deeper into the process of learning that finally made new settlement possible in section 4.4.1.

4.2.4. Establishment of new settlement: Collaborating and learning

To overcome the standstill, the city administration co-ordinated a series of meetings in the station building that were moderated externally. Importantly, in the second meeting in November 2016, Utopiastadt, the property owner and the city administration adopted the name "Utopiastadt Campus Flächenentwicklungsbeirat" ("Utopia City Land Development Council", UCF). While the full scope was not clear from the beginning, the UCF soon evolved into a process of regular meetings from October 2016 on that resulted in a jointly produced framework plan for the area that was adopted by Wuppertal's city council in June 2018 as well as the acquisition of large party of the area by Utopiastadt at the end of 2018 and early 2019. For this acquisition, the initiative had to raise significant credit. This was made possible by three factors: First, existing commercial uses continued in the north-eastern parts of the area providing income for the initiative. Second, the municipality of Wuppertal signalled the possibility to step in as a guarantor for the credit. Finally, a consortium that included the municipality, the local University of Wuppertal, the Wuppertal Institute, and Utopiastadt itself, successfully applied to host the *Solar Decathlon Europe*,[8] an international competition in energy efficient housing that is expected to provide a first economically feasible use on the acquired area. In this competition, energy efficient housing solutions for the Mirke quarter will be developed and contest winner will build demonstrators that will remain on the station grounds even after the end of the contest. In our view, the UCF process can be analysed as a process of learning, which will we elaborate on in section **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**.

Over the whole time, developments in the West of the area continued, and the construction of a kindergarten, which was uncontroversial for all parties, was realized.

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[8] www.solardecathlon.gov/international-europe.html

The UCF process resulted in what can be classified as a new settlement at the end of 2018. It is characterised by its new ownership structure: In one segment in the west of the area, public and social services will be realised, a kindergarten is already active today, and two other areas have been purchased by the kindergarten's owner and a local foundation plans to develop it as a social working project. A segment in the southeast of the station grounds is still owned by the original property owner. Debates about the development of housing in this area persist but are in line with the overall framework developed in the UCF, and, importantly, still take place in the setting of the council which continues to function on a more occasional basis. As the area in question is not designated a residential zone yet, the possibility of housing is still dependent on the co-operation of the city administration. The rest of the area is now owned by Utopiastadt, and, for the time being partly in commercial use by existing business, and partly expected to host the Solar Decathlon in the coming years. We will assess this solution in the discussion of our results in section 5.1

4.3.   Coupling the Campus to urban redevelopment and the Mirke quarter

The central process of coupling took place at an early stage in the narrative, when Utopiastadt secured funding for its activities in the station building (*section 4.2.2*). In this process, Utopiastadt coupled its solution to the existing municipal agenda for urban redevelopment (*section 4.2.1*). This coupling was made both possible by two factors: On the one hand, the development of the inner-city cycling line as well as the prospect to revitalise the station building itself had been identified as a future positive development impulse in the existing municipal redevelopment agenda. When the cycling line began to materialise, this opened up a window of opportunity to re-address the issues of the station grounds as well as the surrounding city quarter as well. On the other hand, Utopiastadt made use of the requirements of the support programme and the wider urban development policy through which it sought funding for its activities in the station building to take advantage this window of opportunity.

The programme "Initiative ergreifen" for which Utopiastadt applied in 2011 to gain financial support for their project in the station building had two significant implications for the process concerning the surrounding areas that followed: On the one hand, the programme prescribed the inclusion of the municipality as an intermediary for the pay-out of funds and effectively made the development of the station building a municipal project.[9] On the other hand, it required the supported project to be embedded in a superordinate urban development programme. As no such programme was active in the surrounding quarter, the municipality, together with a city quarter council that was initiated by Utopiastadt itself as a coalition of civil society actors, produced an update on the original urban redevelopment programme from 2005. This update, here referred to as the "integrated action

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[9] The program „Initiative ergreifen" ("take the initiative") (initiative-ergreifen.de) is sponsored by the Ministry of Regional Identity, Communities and Local Government, Building and Gender Equality of the Land of North Rhine-Westphalia.

programme" (IAP)[10], was adopted by the city council in October 2014 and now focused on the northern part of the district the station was located in. The IAP built upon the challenges identified and basic strategy of the original development plan, but also expanded it significantly.

In terms of solutions as well as challenges and prospects, the original plan identified the neglected station with the decaying surrounding area as a burden for the city quarter. It stated that this burden could be lifted by developing gastronomic and cultural use in the station and green spaces in the surrounding area as well as relocating the scrap dealer. A possible stop to decline and raising attractiveness of the city quarter as well as potentially higher-quality businesses on the commercial grounds were identified as prospects of this development. Importantly, the realisation of the inner city cycling route was identified as a possible catalyst for these developments.

Utopiastadt's own plans for the area can be traced back to early exposés for potential funding dating back as early as 2011 and 2013. From the beginning, the initiative framed its project as a "Campus" for culture and the creative industry. Although the boundaries of this Campus between the station building and the surrounding grounds were not clearly defined, the plans explicitly envisioned green spaces and outdoor facilities on which urban gardening and cultural events take place. It also positioned itself within the context of the city as whole and particularly the surrounding quarter with prospects of stopping negative trends, fostering image and place identity and developing a site of supra-regional significance and radiance. In this plans, leveraging the area's location as a central link between city and the cycling lane featured prominently.

In the integrated action programme, these visions feature prominently, but are combined with plans to develop commercial uses on the ground: Regarding the railway premises, these were framed as a future "Business Park Mirke Station" ("Gewerbepark Mirker Bahnhof"), which included a local orientation of businesses and other uses and demanded a strong integration with the project Utopiastadt. Importantly, the IAP named Utopiastadt as one of the main actors involved in the development of the area, alongside the city administration, the local economic development agency, the city's savings bank, and the property owner itself. These developments, together with the success of Utopiastadt's project in the station building were framed as key solutions to the challenges and prospects of urban redevelopment. Importantly, the IAP did not encompass the "Elberfelder Nordstadt" as a whole, but concentrated on its northern part, that had until then not been framed as a distinct city quarter, was named "Mirke" – an older placename for the area in which the station was built.

Through the IAP, Utopiastadt's plans for the area were coupled with the municipality's redevelopment agenda, and also with its surrounding spatial context, which was re-framed as "Mirke" in this process. The resulting solution expanded on Utopiastadt's plans to include municipal wishes to preserve and develop commercial spaces. However, it demanded for a strong integration with Utopiastadt's activities and also put Utopiastadt as one of the main actors on the municipal agenda. Importantly,

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[10] In German: "Integriertes Handlungsprogramm" (IHP), the full German title is: "Fortschreibung des Integrierten Handlungsprogramms für die Bereiche ‚Mirker Quartier' und ‚Südstraße'" (Council oft he City of Wuppertal: Resolution VO/0613/14, 11.10.2014, ris.wuppertal.de/getfile.php?id=171768&type=do)

through the construction of the support programme which demanded for the pay-out of funds through the municipality, Utopiastadt's activities in the station building effectively became a municipal support project, which raised the city administration's interest in fending off all developments that might impair its development.

The content of the coupling provided the ground for the city administration's strong support of Utopiastadt in the conflict with the property owner: The administration stressed that the welfare of the initiative and its central role in any development process was a pollical goal. On this basis it demanded a process which aimed for an integration with the development of the city quarter and took into account the preliminary work of Utopiastadt and other civil society actors. Finally, it made it clear that the municipality's co-operation, which the property owner sought for a profitable development, was linked to these two goals.

4.4. The UCF as a learning process

In our case study, the central process of learning can be observed in the process of the UCF meetings through which the standstill was overcome. We have identified four phases of this process through which the final solution evolved as a merger of the conflicting solutions proposed by Utopiastadt and the property owner. In this process, both actors had to diverge significantly from their initial solutions. From the perspective of niche entrepreneurship, the final niche materialised in interaction between the original vision and the context in which it was realised. In the following, we will first sketch out the original plans (4.4.1) and then go through the process through which they were merged (4.4.2).

4.4.1. Conflicting narratives of Utopiastadt and the property owner

Utopiastadt's vision of a campus as conceived of at the beginning of the UCF process can be reconstructed, from the joint application for foundation funding in May 2015 as well as points of conflict in the three meetings at the height of contention between March and July 2016. In their application, the coalition around Utopiastadt built upon the challenges identified in the IAP and envisioned an integrated and co-operative development of the area explicitly oriented towards generating solutions for the quarter's challenges based on the principles of citizen engagement, participation and co-production. An important part of this vision was to buy and thus protect the area from the influence of capital market investors. Apart from direct positive effects for the quarter, prospects included the generation of transferable knowledge for other quarters as well as creating a model of community-based urban development. In the meetings, the initiative opposed the separation of non- and for-profit uses, arguing that the latter would impede the catalyst function of the free spaces. It also demanded for a recognition of the work carried out by civil society as an investment and criticised plans to privatise profits resulting from this work. Third, it positioned itself as a steward, rejecting the small-circle setting of the meeting on grounds of not being legitimised and lobbied for a long-term open-ended process with strong participation of further actors. Finally, it expressed its willingness to buy the whole area with the help of sponsors to prevent a short-term sell-off of the premises.

The plans of the property owner centred around a joint "co-operative" process in which the company planned to work closely together with the city administration. In terms of uses, it sought to combine commercial and housing development to address a lack of commercial spaces as well as a need for housing that had become noticeable in Wuppertal, as the city, after years of decline was again growing. The envisioned process involved a competition of concepts embedded in a framework plan, based on which individual parts of the area would be sold to external developers. It also included a limited participation process including the general public and, a consultation of Utopiastadt which was invited to contribute programmatically to the process. However, in the two meetings, it became clear that the property owner was not planning for a privileged role of Utopiastadt. The company stressed that acquisition would be possible only at the end of the envisioned process, through which the possible uses and respective market values would already be determined. This strategic stance was grounded in the central prospect of generating monetary returns, the scope of which could only be determined on the basis of concrete determinations of uses. We have summed up the differences between both narratives in Tab. 2.

Tab. 2: Conflicting narratives of Utopiastadt and property owner

Actor	Challenge	Solution			Prospect	Paradigm
		(General) Purpose	*Rules*	*Actors*		
Utopiastadt	general decline of a socially deprived city quarter financially deprived city with limited capacity of public services entitlement of civil society for previous engagement	catalyst for development of city and quarter space for development of bottom-up projects	broad participation and co-production culture and creativity as driver of development open-ended process integration of uses local embedment	Utopiastadt (and allies) as steward(s) securing the area from capital-market interests engaged citizens, bottom-up initiatives, actors from culture and creative scene generating concepts and uses monetary support by foundations and donors exclusion of actors primarily interested in monetary returns	solutions for challenges of the city quarter fostering common good in city quarter backflow of monetary returns to quarter and community learning and knowledge transfer to other quarters in city supra-regional visibility	urban development needs catalyst spaces creativity and engagement drive development engagement is investment common good-oriented development needs time ownership means responsibility ownership is reconcilable with open process
property owner	general backlog of the city need for housing and commercial spaces potential for development in city quarter potential for monetary returns because of rising attractiveness of the area shareholders wish for monetary returns	space for profitable development of high-quality housing and higher-quality businesses	development of different segments by individual investors decision based upon individual concepts general structure and uses defined by framework concept strict division of labour limited participation in framework process tight time schedule	property owner and municipality as process owners conceptual work delegated to external planners integration of general public in participation process Utopiastadt consulted in programmatic process	prevention of migration from city touristic attractiveness rising population and increasing liveliness in quarter monetary returns for shareholders	Monetary investments drive development development demands for ownership owners have to act according to economic logic economic logic is not reconcilable with an open process only stable returns make long-term perspective possible

4.4.2. The UCF as a learning process

Looking backward, four phases of the UCF process can be identified. Parallel to these phases and outside of the UCF context, Utopiastadt and the property owner began to negotiate in earnest about the acquisition of the area. Over these phases, a shared narrative of development, integrating the challenges, solutions and prospects of both Utopiastadt and the property owner, gradually emerged.

1. **Constitution:** In the first phase, spanning over three meetings till January 2017, activities centred around the constitution of the new moderated meeting format, its formalisation as the "UCF", creating transparency, agreeing upon a working plan for the future and also the inclusion of the economic development agency. At the beginning, the individual parties acknowledged the conflict between the basic challenges and prospects they were aiming to address: The challenges of the city quarter and the prospect to create a catalyst for the development of the quarter and the city as a whole on the one hand, and the challenge of shareholders expecting monetary returns as well as the prospect of a profitable sale on the other hand. Identifying this conflict as a challenge was the foundation of the following process, in which these challenges were addressed by agreeing first upon processual aspects of the solution, which included two significant concessions: Utopiastadt agreed to work in a closed setting and for the time being abandoned the demand for broad participation. The property owner on the other hand agreed to drop its tight time schedule and agreed to pay for the moderation.

2. **Preparing solutions:** In the second phase, consisting of six meetings till August 2017, three main strands of interaction can be made out: First, the UCF worked on criteria on how to deal with parties interested in the development of the western parts of the area. Second, it discussed concrete developments on the area, such as the realisation of the aforementioned kindergarten. Third, it began to prepare a joint planning process to work upon a framework of development, collaboratively selecting an external planning office to work on the framework. In this phase, the UCF began to work upon structural parts of the solution, dividing the area into different segments which could be treated individually and at different points in time. The UCF also agreed on broad thematic and normative criteria to reconcile the possibility of sale with the prospects of a development fostering the common good and social cohesion of the city quarter.

3. **Collaborative planning process:** The third phase between September 2017 and February 2018 concentrated on the collaborative creation of the framework concept in four workshop meetings with the external planners. In this phase, a framework was developed to integrate the elements of the solution and to reconcile a degree of openness with the predictability demanded for by the property owner.

4. **Implementation:** After the finalisation of this concept, the fourth phase centred on the formal adoption and public communication of the framework in June/July 2018 as well as the completion of the purchase at the end of 2018 and early 2019. Even after the publication of the framework, the basic conflict between the two prospects of monetary returns and the preservation of a catalyst area remained. The final part of the solution realised in this phase, therefore rested upon Utopiastadt taking on the role of a buying party itself, and thus providing the monetary returns the property owner aimed for while securing the area for its own agenda.

We identify this process as an instance of learning, because it revolved around adopting Utopiastadt's vision to the context in which it had to be realised, which was largely determined by the agenda of the property owner whose support the initiative had to secure. Tab. 3 summarises the major alterations to the original project. (The same could also be argued from the perspective of the property owner's original plans for sale, as we will argue in the discussion section of this paper.) In the following section 4.5 we will show how this context can be traced to the external field environment.

Tab. 3: Learning: Central alterations of the project in the UCF process

Actor	Solution		
	(General) Purpose	*Rules*	*Actors*
Utopiastadt's initial vision	catalyst for development of city and quarter space for development of bottom-up projects	broad participation and co-production culture and creativity as driver of development open-ended process integration of uses local embedment	Utopiastadt (and allies) as steward(s) securing the area from capital-market interests engaged citizens, bottom-up initiatives, actors form culture and creative scene generating concepts and uses monetary support by foundations and donors exclusion of actors primarily interested in monetary returns
Utopiastadt Campus as new settlement*	mixed space accommodating for (1) catalyst and bottom-up projects for city quarter (2) profitable development fostering energy efficient housing transition	closed process leading to general settlement acquisition at market prices enabling development division between conventional and catalyst areas broad participation and co-production as a long-term perspective shared normative foundation of uses (cooperation & common good) integration of uses local embedment	Utopiastadt, municipality and property owner as central enablers Utopiastadt as steward of catalyst spaces AND economic actor making large-scale acquisition local business and social services as developers on parts of the area engaged citizens, bottom-up initiatives, actors form culture and creative scene in catalyst areas co-operation with actors from science and research
Significant divergences from Utopiastadt's initial vision	*integration of catalyst and "conventional" functions* *(at least temporal) orientation towards energy efficient housing transition*	*short-term reliance on smaller coalitions* *acquisition at market prices as condition of development* *functional division between segments of area* *broad participation and co-production as long-term goal*	*Utopiastadt as an investor* *more diverse structure of central actors* *science & research as major actors* *(as of now) limited role of civic engagement & bottom-up initiatives*

*) aggregated from the consensus visible in the UCF meetings as well as the framework concept published in May 2018.

## 4.5.   Contextualisation in the field environment

In the case of the Utopiastadt Campus process, the SAF concerned with the governance of built space in the area has been tied to a variety of proximate fields which shaped the final settlement and might presumably influence the development of the SAF in the future. We will demonstrate this with the most significant fields involved in the investigated processes of coupling and learning (summarised in Fig. 1).

In the process of *coupling*, Utopiastadt's project was contextualised to a at least two proximate SAFs: The field of *state urban development policy*, which in part is concerned with supporting the role of urban bottom-up actors, played an intermediate role, as it provided the funding programme "Initiative ergreifen" for the initial Mirke station project, which required the embedment into a municipal urban development context. This was achieved through the integrated action program (IAP) which connected the project to both the (1) *local urban redevelopment policy* and spatially confined (2) *development of the Mirke quarter* (short: *Mirke*), framing the development of the Mirke Station grounds as an answer to the challenges and prospects of the spatially adjacent SAF *Mirke*, as well as, by means of knowledge transfer, *local urban redevelopment* as a whole.

In the process of *learning*, the project evolved significantly in the negotiations with the property owner. The company's challenges and prospects are strongly motivated to an actor with the *real estate industry* concerned with generating monetary returns for its transnational shareholders. The acquisition by Utopiastadt effectively limited the influence of real estate industry (which can be considered a proximate field in itself), this acquisition had to be made within (3) the *local property market,* which imposed the imperative to raise a significant amount of credit. This in turn was made possible through the acquisition of the (4) *Solar Decathlon Europe*. The competition can be considered a proximate field which as of now will have significant influence on the development of the grounds and, connects the SAF to (5) (*local and international*) *energy efficient housing transition*, because the funding parties' challenges and prospects are located in these fields.

The analysis shows that the connections can very often be located in the external field environment. We stress here that our results are based in the references made by the actors and only *indicate* towards certain proximate fields that could be subjected to analysis as SAFs, to further clarify or differentiate the fields. This would also help to better understand their dynamics between the fields, which are not necessarily unidirectional. As a point in case, the spatially confined SAF of the Mirke quarter was effectively brought into existence and contextualised in the urban redevelopment policy as well as local and international energy transition in the process of coupling. Of course, we do not claim that Mirke as a part of (built) urban space was created from scratch, but rather that it emerged as a field of action, which only underlines the social construction of the fields in question.

Fig. 1: Contextualization in major proximate fields
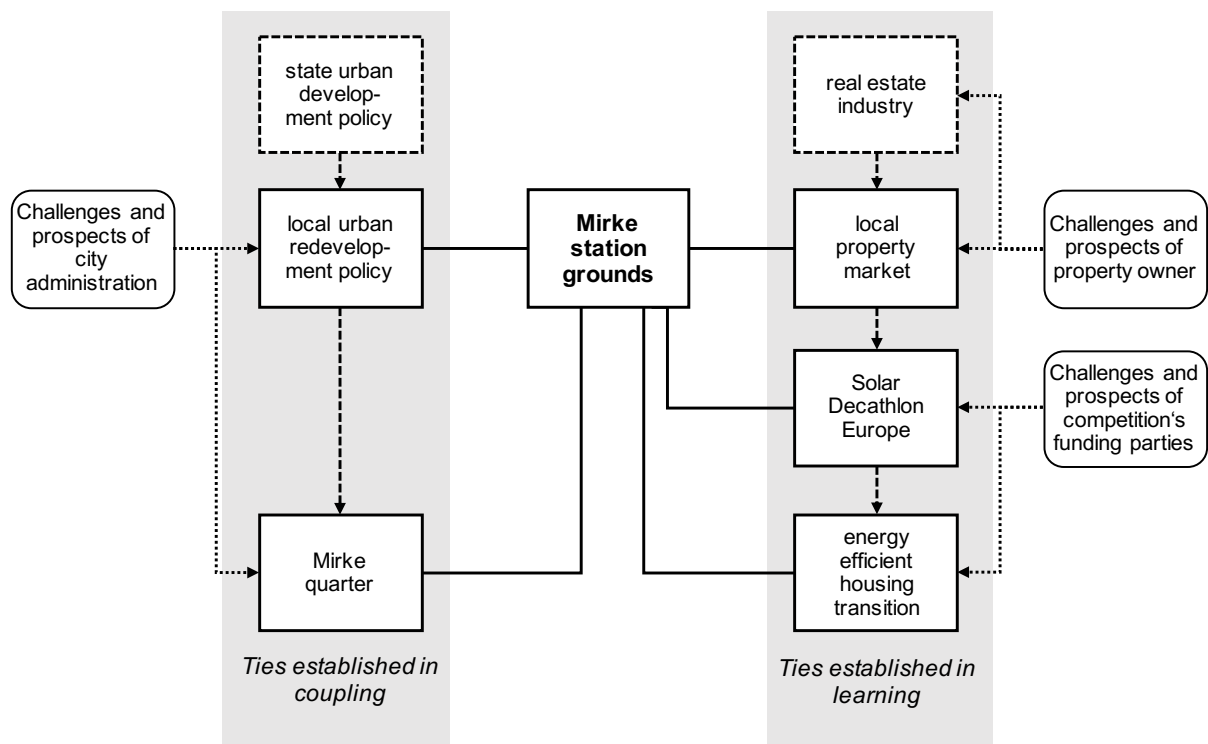
Explanation: dashed arrows: external fields influencing each other; dotted arrow: challenges and prospects influencing coupling, solid lines: established ties

5. Discussion

5.1.   Discussion of empirical results

5.1.1. Coupling, Learning and Contextualization in the Utopiastadt Campus process

Our analysis shows that the processes of coupling and learning have significantly shaped the outcome of Utopiastadt's strife to secure the former railway grounds surrounding the Mirke station. This included first coupling Utopiastadt's preferred solution of a "Campus" for culture and creativity to the challenges identified in the local urban redevelopment agenda. On the one hand, it embedded the project more tightly in the surrounding city quarter. On the other hand, the coupling secured the administrative and political support that stopped the property owner's own plans for development and facilitated the learning process in which the new settlement emerged. In this process, the solution was altered significantly to generate monetary returns for the property owner, which was achieved by connecting it to the property market as well as the field of energy transition.

Returning to the first of our research questions formulated in the introduction of this paper, analysing the frames of solutions, challenges and prospects cannot fully explain *why* Utopiastadt was able to secure the co-operation of first the city administration and later the property owner itself. However, our approach helps to understand which *kind* of support it was able to secure as well as the *extent* to which these actors were willing to support or compromise with the initiative. Regarding the second

research question, we can trace the evolution of the project with clarity, and we can also trace the alterations back to the agendas of the actors Utopiastadt interacted with. Finally, we showed that the linkages and alterations established in the emerging narrative can be interpreted as instances of contextualisation, in which the ties to the external field environment were established.

5.1.2. Niche entrepreneurship in the Utopiastadt Campus process

In the light of our results, to what extent is the Utopiastadt Campus process a case of niche entrepreneurship? On the one hand, the process involved archetypical characteristics such as both gaining the co-operation of political and regime actors by coupling the niche entrepreneur's project to perceived challenges as well as building a learning environment, in which the final project emerged as a result of negotiation with incumbent actors. On the other hand, it was not the initiative Utopiastadt alone who made this process happen. While Utopiastadt navigated the institutional context of the urban development policy of the state of North-Rhine Westphalia to make the first coupling possible, utilising a window of opportunity and forging a coalition of actors from the city quarter to provide the municipality with a solution to its challenges, the UCF process which provided the learning environment was largely made possible by the city administration. However, this result is in line with the findings of Pesch et al. (2017 p.1938) who state that "different niche entrepreneurs may be needed to translate the generic solution into a concrete plan." We thus conclude that in the case of the Utopiastadt Campus, at a certain point, the city administration (or individual actors responsible for the project) began to act as a niche entrepreneur as well.

Our study also suggests a differentiated perspective on the property owner's role. The company not only strongly committed to the joint process of the UCF, which included funding both the professional moderation of the meetings as the commissioning of external planners to work on the framework concept. It also made significant concessions on its own initial plans, which suggests that the learning process in our case was, in fact, a *mutual* one. While this could partly be attributed to the city administration's support of Utopiastadt, we think that expanding the conceptual scope of the analysis contribute to better understand the role of incumbent actors in niche formation, as we will argue in the following sections.

With regards to the protective space itself, our analysis shows that the kinds and extent of experimentation the Campus accommodates for have been shaped by the process. Noticeably, protection from market imperatives, such as the need to generate monetary returns, is far from complete and it is too early to assess what kinds of experimentation will be realisable under these circumstances. At least for the near future, experimentation with energy efficient housing with a strong connection to the Mirke city quarter will dominate on the part of the area acquired directly by Utopiastadt, effectively making the area part of a local niche for energy transition. To what extent it will also stay a niche in which new models of urban development can be explored in the long run remains an open question.

5.2. Conceptual discussion and further research perspectives

In our view, our study has shown the utility of our approach: The concepts of coupling and learning have focused our investigation on key processes of the overall development, while the narrative approach has proved a useful to reconstruct, integrate and compare the elements involved in these processes. Furthermore, SAFs have proved a fertile perspective on niche entrepreneurship: On the one hand, the theory helped to conceptualise the establishment of a niche as the establishment of socially constructed settlement. On the other hand, it allowed for a systematisation of the contexts as fields that are accessible for further investigation. However, our empirical study is clearly limited, and we see potential for further exploring these concepts in future studies.

5.2.1. Expanding the notion of coupling and learning

In our view, the processes of coupling and learning do not necessarily apply to niche entrepreneurs alone. In the case of coupling this would be fully in line with Kingdon's original agenda setting approach, which is in no way limited to marginalised or challenger actors. In this vein, the local property developer's as well as the property owner's plans for the field could be analysed as *failed attempts of coupling*, in which the respective actors misjudged the municipality's agenda and priorities. This could prove useful to understand contested settings in which the success of a niche entrepreneur's efforts depends as much on its strategy as on the failure of its competitors. Also, we would like to point out that in our case, the learning process in our case was in fact a *mutual* one, as the property owner also gave up on some of his original goals for the area.

Also, coupling and learning can be seen as two sides of the same coin. As we have concentrated on the dominant of both aspects, we have characterized the process through which Utopiastadt secured the support of the city administration as *coupling* and the process through which it secured the support of the property owner as *learning*. Admittedly, it could be argued that both instances are characterized by elements of both: In the process of coupling the project itself evolved, and through the process of learning the project became a solution for the challenges and prospects perceived by the property owner. Such an analysis, particularly in the investigated instance of coupling, could deepen our understanding of the process.

5.2.2. Exploring the scope of SAF theory

Further empirical research could also complement our understanding of niche entrepreneurship in its context by more fully exploring the scope of SAF theory: First, SAF theory conceptualises fields as *nested*, and often composed of other fields, "like Russian dolls" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011 p.3). Additional research could differentiate between the different spatial parts or segments of the area as sub-fields which have been developed very differently in the process, to investigate how frames of these sub-fields have influenced the field as a whole. Connected to this is the question of field boundaries, i.e. how the protective space is delimited, as for example the station building itself has at times been framed as proximate to the field as well as part of the field by different actors.

Second, the same principle could be applied to differentiate between actors which have only been analysed on the level of organisations and not individuals. SAF theory allows to analyse collective actors as SAFs themselves. Our data indicates that different representatives of the actors involved have played different roles over time and contributed to strategic positioning of the respective organisations. This could further contribute to understand the role of individuals which has been beyond the scope of this paper.

Third, further expanding the period of investigation could enlighten to what extent the settlement is final or new dynamics of contention might be underway. SAF theory posits that even in settled field, there is a constant "jockeying" (ibid., p.5) between actors, and external shocks can always threaten a given settlement. From this perspective, further investigations could shed a light on how the protective space secured through a given settlement is not only established but has to be defended and renegotiated and can also be expanded over time.

Fourth, further studies could reach out to the indicated proximate fields to explore how the development of the Utopiastadt Campus has interacted with its context in more detail. This could not only clarify the influence of context but also enlighten how the context is altered conversely. Particularly, this would entail analysing how the Mirke quarter has emerged as a field of action in co-evolution with the development of the station grounds. Such studies could help to understand the wider impact of niches and experimentations which has recently been discussed under terms such as accelerating, diffusion or scaling (Ehnert, Frantzeskaki, *et al.*, 2018; Von Wirth *et al.*, 2019; Lam *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, our study is empirically limited to the local setting of Wuppertal. For example, future studies could investigate interaction with the level of supra-national urban development policy. This context is beyond the scope of this paper, but here we stress that analysing the activities of the three main actors as well as the significance of the project for their respective standing in this field might help to further clarify the strategies they pursued in the SAF concerned with the governance of (built) urban space on the Mirke railway grounds.

6. Conclusions

Many projects realised by new urban actors like space entrepreneurs and city makers can be understood as spatially confined niches, as they frequently provide a protected space for experimentations with various forms of social innovation. Often, experimentation involves (built) urban space itself, and the projects strife to secure a space for new forms of governing this space. In realising this kind of projects, actors have to engage with dominant governance practices, and to be successful, secure support and resources held by political and incumbent actors who sometimes have very different plans for the spaces in question. Our research has shown that the concept of niche entrepreneurship helps to understand how new urban actors are able to secure these resources and also what compromises they have to make.

In our case of the Utopiastadt Campus, political and incumbent actor's goals could often be located in the project's spatial and institutional context, and winning their support required framing the project as a solution to the challenges and prospects perceived in these contexts. The initiative Utopiastadt was impressively successful in navigating this context and realising its project. However, our case study has also shown the project evolved significantly in the process. Importantly, Utopiastadt had to raise credit which now puts the pressure of generating monetary returns to pay interest on the future uses on the Campus. If the initiative will be able to reconcile the originally envisioned catalyst function with the requirements of economically feasible development, remains an open question.

Further research should therefore both widen the scope of analysis – and trace niche entrepreneurship over proximate fields – as well as lengthen the period of investigation: Only long-term analysis will show to what extent new urban actor's projects will provide the protected space they strife for, and, indeed, prove to be stable niches in the governance of (built) urban space.

Acknowledgements

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