Part I

A conceptual framework for soft spaces
1 Soft spaces, planning and emerging practices of territorial governance

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The argument here is not that planners are shifting from one set of spaces to another, but rather that they are learning to acknowledge that they must work within multiple spaces, and as part of this adapting to and even adopting the tactics of soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries where these help deliver the objectives of planning.

(Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 619)

Introduction

During the past thirty years there has been a major proliferation of new territorial governance forms that have come to co-exist with and indeed complement the formal territorial spaces of government. The emergent new spaces of governance can operate at multiple scales, from the neighbourhood to the supranational, and are particularly associated with regeneration, spatial planning and environmental policy. This book focuses specifically on the soft spaces that relate to strategic spatial planning, which given the multifaceted nature of planning means that we also touch on various regeneration and environmental soft spaces.

The importance of this is that the past two decades have seen an explosion of planning activity outside the statutory planning system, including innovative approaches to territorial management involving soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Haughton et al., 2010). Examples of such soft spaces include the European Union (EU) Baltic Sea macro-region, the Oresund region and the Thames Gateway area in the UK, plus recent work on metropoles and city-regions, such as the projets territoire and planification stratégique in France and überregionale Partnerschaften (supra-regional partnerships) like Hamburg and Nuremberg in Germany.

As these examples indicate, the emergence of new, non-statutory or informal spaces can be found across Europe, in a variety of circumstances and with diverse aims and rationales. What all these planning activities and processes have in common is that they are the result of hybrid and multi-jurisdictional governance processes, drawing together actors from a variety of spheres into new networks (Bevir, 2013; Bevir and Rhodes, 2013; Denters, 2013). These governance arrangements frequently involve attempts to generate new spatial imaginaries that do not necessarily or even ordinarily reflect political-territorial boundaries.
In this book we focus on those governance experiments that involve the creation of new geographies, which we refer to as soft spaces, with new and sometimes fuzzy boundaries that eschew the existing political-territorial boundaries of elected tiers of government. The research presented here provides the first major international comparative study of soft spaces in planning, with case studies drawn from various countries in north-west Europe. The book is focused explicitly on moving beyond the theory to examine practices; that is, to investigate soft spaces empirically to better understand the various practices and rationalities of soft spaces and how they manifest themselves in different planning contexts.

This chapter sets out the context of soft spaces forms of governance to frame the more empirical chapters and analyses that follow. First, we examine alternative ways of understanding the term ‘soft spaces’ in relation to planning before turning to different theories of why and in what circumstances they emerge. Finally, we highlight a range of themes and objectives that structure the chapters that follow and to which we return in the conclusions at the end of the book.

What are soft spaces and how do they relate to planning?

We use the term ‘soft spaces’ in this book to refer to the emergence of new, non-statutory or informal planning spaces or processes. They exist alongside but separate to the spaces and scales of elected government bodies such as local regional or national government. Whilst some governance spaces can be coterminous with the territorial boundaries of elected government, soft spaces by contrast involve the creation of new geographies that transcend existing political administrative boundaries. As such, they represent specific social constructions of space that do not correspond to the political-territorial boundaries and internal divisions of the nation state.

The governance bodies that use these spaces to define their areas of interest are not subject to the formal system of democratic elections, though they may well set out to work within alternative accountability frameworks, and to claim legitimacy though their engagement with elected politicians and government actors. Soft space forms of governance typically involve diverse mixes of actors, including from government, civil society and the private sector, creating new networks that may vary according to the project or thematic policy area under construction. Typically they are intended to allow new thinking to emerge and to provide testing grounds for new policy interventions.

The emergence of new, non-statutory or informal planning and regeneration spaces is evident at a range of scales, including at:

- European (Jensen and Richardson, 2004; Faludi, 2009, 2010, 2013a),
- macro-regional (Fabbro and Haselsberger, 2009; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Stead, 2011),
- sub-national/regional (Heley, 2013; Walsh, 2014; Haughton et al., 2010; Harrison and Growe, 2012; Knieling et al., 2003),
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- metropolitan, city-regional (Levelt and Janssen-Jansen, 2013; Savini, 2012; Knieling, 2011) and
- local spaces of delivery, for masterplanning and regeneration projects for instance (Counsell et al., 2014; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).

This diversity of forms has led to an almost similar diversity in attempts to understand these trends in theoretical terms, typically attempting to identify the range of rationalities behind the emergence of soft spaces and the implications both for statutory planning and more flexible or informal ways of planning. Some have framed soft spaces within the context of metagovernance (Haughton et al., 2010) and neoliberal spatial and scalar restructuring (Cochrane, 2012; Haughton et al., 2013). Others have pointed to the growing influence upon space and scale of globalisation, the influence of the European Union (Chilla et al., 2012; Faludi, 2013b) and new doctrines such as governance and spatial planning that challenge ‘Euclidian planning’ (Friedmann, 1994; Healey, 2007; Albrechts et al., 2003).

Against the background of a longer discussion about the limits of statutory planning and related restrictions of administrative structures and processes (e.g. Benz, 1994; Knieling et al., 2003 for the German discussion), the term ‘soft spaces’ emerged out of work by UK academics working on an Economic and Social Research Council project to examine how devolution had affected the practices of spatial planning across the UK and Ireland (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2007, 2008; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Haughton et al., 2010). In one of the earliest outputs of this work, a definition was put forward, which drew heavily on debates around territorial and relational spaces within the geography literature:

whilst planning still needs its clear legal ‘fix’ around set boundaries for formal plans, if it is to reflect the more complex relational world of associational relationships which stretch across a range of geographies, planning also needs to operate through other spaces, and it is these we think of as ‘soft spaces’.

(Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 619)

Since then others have gone on to try to add clarity and precision to this definition. So for Metzger and Schmitt (2012: 265–6), ‘soft spaces’ refers to the

Informal or semiformal, non-statutory spatialities of planning with associations and relations stretching both across formally established boundaries and scalar levels of planning and across previously entrenched sectoral divides.

Particularly in early accounts, those using the terminology of soft spaces of planning frequently counterposed them to the ‘hard’, territorial spaces of planning, the statutory spaces of regulation that bring with them certain images, language and tools around regulatory processes, accountability structures, policy hierarchies linked to hierarchical scales of decision-making, and bounded jurisdictions. Whilst a distinction is drawn between the soft and hard spaces of planning, it was
also recognised that the statutory and informal systems of planning existed in a symbiotic relationship, each needing the other (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). Subsequent work drew attention to how the crude binaries of soft and hard spaces ran the danger of failing to see the possibilities for transitioning between the two forms and for hybrid practices emerging that were part-soft, part-hard in characteristics (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012).

Additionally, soft spaces have also been discussed as a strategic approach to break away from the constraints associated with the formal scales of statutory planning (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 619). Similarly, Olesen (2011: 151) summarised that

> We might understand soft spaces as particular strategy-making episodes, where strategic spatial planning moves beyond formal planning arenas in attempts to destabilize existing practices and structures.

Very quickly work on soft spaces was adopted and adapted by others, notably including Andreas Faludi (2010, 2013b) who used it to develop his own thinking on what he referred to as soft planning. Though the terminology and interpretations might vary a little, the idea of soft spaces was seen by many commentators to be helpful in understanding that something important was happening in European planning practices, something that was not fixed and yet also not entirely fluid; a hybrid form of planning that drew upon the legitimacy and statutory powers of territories yet was more open and continuous; a form of planning that engaged with and coordinated different policy sectors and boundaries, creating new spatial imaginaries yet not discarding the old. Most significantly, this was not a conscious or planned outcome; it was happening spontaneously in different places and different circumstances.

**Why do soft spaces of planning emerge?**

Given the different scales and contexts yet similar manifestations, what was driving the emergence of these new planning spaces? If we think of them as policy tools, then what is leading to this surge of activity? From the existing literature and our own research we can identify a range of influences upon the emergence of new planning spaces such as soft spaces. These include discussions about the rescaling of the nation state, neoliberalism and competitive localism, post-political planning processes and territorial governance.

**Redistributing state powers and state rescaling**

The emergence of soft spaces needs to be understood against debates around the changing nature of nation states as they come under pressure from ‘above’ (supranational political decision-making arenas such as the EU) and ‘below’ (for example, new functional city-regions) and the need to rethink what government is and how policy making is achieved in a networked world (Hajer, 2003).
Originally, nation states aimed at territorial integrity as a matter of national security, which involved not simply dealing with national borders but also arranging the political organisation of its internal geographies into governable units, particularly regions and local governments. In recent decades nation states have had to attempt to find new territorial fixes in the face of economic globalisation and other challenges to state authority. The result is not so much a marginalisation of the nation state as a dramatic rethinking of how it mobilises its powers and resources at sub-national level and through supranational agreements, to help it deliver its strategic objectives.

The rescaling of the state has two dimensions then, with ‘hollowing out’, here understood as a process in which state powers are lent upwards (e.g. to the EU), downwards (e.g. to local or regional government) and outwards (e.g. to neighbourhood regeneration partnerships). Running alongside this hollowing out, however, has been a near continuous experimental process of ‘filling in’, in which new institutional forms are trialled, bringing in unique constellations of actors often mobilised at hybrid spatial scales or in new geographies that challenge pre-existing state territorialities (Goodwin et al., 2005, 2006; Jessop, 2000, 2001). This reworking of powers is spatially strategic and selective; that is, the nation state retains its overall primacy and selectively reworks its powers by lending them vertically across scales and horizontally to bring in new policy actors (also Brenner, 2004, Jones, 2001). It is the state that decides who to lend its powers to and that can rescind these at its whim.

It would be wrong to suggest that such processes have been wholly negative; clearly there have been significant benefits in terms of a greater flow of ideas and spatial coordination. Yet there have also been more negative consequences in terms of the seemingly constant rescaling of preferred governmental scales of action, involving a remaking of the formal tiers of sub-national government in particular, with powers shifting between different scales and institutions in ways that seem experimental or short term. One important consequence is the resultant congested and confused landscape of responsibilities and functions, raising an important question of ‘where can planning be found?’ for those who wish to engage in the process.

**Neoliberal restructuring and competitive localism**

Driven by neoliberal ideology about the primacy of market logics and the necessity of governments being refocused on the pursuit of economic growth, competitive localism has emerged as a dominant feature of sub-national government across large parts of Europe. Neoliberal policy prescriptions for reducing the cost, size and role of government were portrayed as a necessary adjunct to an entrepreneurial emphasis on liberating the individual and private enterprise from the so-called shackles of the state. The state was recast from its ‘welfare’ era role of ‘taming the market’ to one of promoting the market, requiring a rhetorical attack on government itself as being overly bureaucratic, inefficient, ineffective, interfering and expensive.
Land use planning has always had a market-supportive function (Harvey, 1989) but what marks out the period from the mid-1970s is a more active role as planning has been co-opted into an ongoing process of neoliberalisation (Peck et al., 2009). As part of this changing conceptualisation of the role of government in the UK, the Netherlands and elsewhere, planners were told to change their ways, to embrace the logic of markets and pursue economic growth. The idea that planners could simply ‘allocate’ or zone land for development and then wait for it to happen was replaced by a more proactive stance in promoting growth. At a different scale we have seen new growth-oriented approaches to cross-border cooperation and territorial ‘fuzzying’ through macro-regional strategies and partnerships.

It is possible to see soft spaces as one of the arenas within which planners and others come together to ‘make sense’ of neoliberal principles, attempting to address the inevitable contradictions in different and evolving approaches and ‘setbacks’ within its underlying and always mutable logics. There are no ‘easy’ or ‘clear’ answers or settlements and those responsible for creating planning systems must constantly search for workable market-supportive scalar, institutional and spatial fixes. The exact nature of these spaces will vary but what links them is the search for alternatives that replace, complement or challenge existing state spaces, sometimes at the expense of the public welfare objectives, for instance in the provision of social housing.

The need to establish alternative governance arrangements

Despite periodic attempts to rework the formal scales of government, the territorial boundaries of elected sub-national government tend to be relatively enduring, particularly those with long-established identities and relatively stable borders. Lines on maps still matter. Attempts to unsettle established local government units frequently create political tensions. But such relatively static contained spaces sit uneasily with the rapidly changing world we now live in, where people’s everyday practices and identities are increasingly mobile, fluid and multiple. More than ever before, the fixed geographical boundaries of local government and other entities do not reflect how we live our lives, with people willing to travel further and for longer to get to work for instance.

Perhaps not surprisingly in this context, we have witnessed a proliferation of experiments in alternative governance bodies which work to new geographies, evident at all scales from the very local through to sub-regional, regional and international (Lovering, 2007; Haughton et al., 2013). The term ‘governance bodies’ is the key here, for we are not talking about formal government bodies, in the sense of being directly accountable to elected representatives. Instead they are groups of stakeholders that include government actors alongside actors from the private sector and civil society, bonded by some sense of common purpose, typically justified as helping achieve greater coordination of activities, building consensus on what needs to be done and delivering it effectively. They can further be seen as a drive to improve integrated and joined-up policy making (Salet et al., 2003; Sorensen and Torfing, 2009) and to overcome bureaucratic delays to implementing policy.
In this context informal planning concepts and instruments such as regional development concepts, urban networks or regional conferences have been introduced in many European countries since the 1990s to address these and similar concerns. For the critics, statutory planning with its hierarchical system of plans and fixed planning procedures often does not allow flexible and rapid responses to new challenges; it is limited in how it engages with its stakeholders and it frequently lacks priorities and deadlines for implementation. By contrast, the new approaches can develop non-binding concepts for a region and agreements to ensure the implementation of the regional plan via regional projects. Whilst economic issues played an important role for many of the soft spaces of planning, they are not the sole motivation; there are also examples of environmental concepts to be found in European member states and even crossing the borders of member states, e.g. river basin districts or maritime strategies.

In the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia in Germany, soft space forms of governance have been integrated consciously in the field of regionalised structural policies. The positive experiences gained from regional development processes in the 1980s and during the International Building Exhibition Emscher Park in parts of the Ruhr area between 1989 and 1999 included the principles of voluntary cooperation and endogenous initiatives, flexible and independent delineation of regions, and flexible and localised planning approaches and projects. These lessons have been used to inform the follow-up programme, REGIONALE (Reimer, 2012).

Through an open competition (held every two years since 2000), regions can apply to take part in projects under the REGIONALE programme. The responsibility of drawing the boundaries of the participating regions is up to the participating towns and municipalities, resulting in functional or relational spaces that are not congruent to the territorial-political regions. The objectives of the REGIONALE are:

- to strengthen the regional identity and characteristic profile of the region as the basis for citizen and private sector engagement,
- to pursue higher-quality developments and the coordination of integrated and networked cross-sectoral projects,
- to help to develop a consistent image of the region (external profiling) and
- to encourage citizen participation in regional development (Danielzyk et al., 2011; Reimer, 2012).

The main steering body is the REGIONALE-Agency, financed by the state government of North-Rhine Westphalia and the participating municipalities. The agency supports regional actors in the implementation of the projects and consists of representatives of state administration (federal state and municipal level), business organisations and regional banks (Danielzyk et al., 2011).

As the REGIONALE example illustrates, soft spaces are always exercises in becoming, remaking and dissolving. They involve concerted attempts to develop and project new identities as meaningful for a wide variety of policy actors and to
varying degrees the general public (Keating, 1997; Paasi, 2002, 2010; van Houtum and Lagendijk, 2001; Painter, 2008). As the examples of the London Docklands, Thames Gateway, Randstad, Flemish Diamond and Baltic Sea Region indicate, new imaginaries have emerged elsewhere that have been relatively successful in establishing themselves in either policy discourse or the public imagination (van Houtum and Lagendijk, 2001). Others have been less successful, created perhaps with a five-year funding horizon, then fading from view if they failed to have their mandates and funding renewed, such as The Northern Way in the UK. All seemed for a while set to become established fixtures on the governance scene, then faded in importance. In a sense, this is what we might think of as institutional Darwinism at work.

Running alongside this is the fact that we live in an era of fast-policy, where policy innovations can be rapidly piloted at the local level then depending on whether they are deemed to be successful they can be cancelled, continued, improved or rolled out at the national level. As politicians do not like to be tainted with failure, it makes sense that many of these new initiatives are put in the hands of alternative governance bodies, although this rationale is rarely made explicit. Typically instead they are justified as a fresh approach, involving bringing in the skills of the private sector or community bodies, as helping policy integration, or as being delivery focused.

**Relationality and territoriality in planning**

The rich re-interpretation and updating of structuralist Marxism in the 1970s provided new insights into the city, its role in the reproduction of capitalism and the nature of space. The broad argument was that rather than being an unproblematic fixed container, space is best understood as being socially produced and experienced. There is a consequent mismatch between the spaces of everyday social life and the conceived space of, among others, planners. The significance and influence of the post-structuralist perspectives on space have been profound, particularly in geography and planning theory (see Murdoch, 2006). Relational geographers argue that objects and space can only be understood in relation to each other and that space does not exist as an entity in and of itself (Jones, 2009, 2010).

According to such views, space (and scale) are unbounded and geographies are to be understood as local nodal interactions of global flows (Massey, 2005). Here, spaces are constituted through political interactions or controversies and discursive processes of imagining (MacLeod and Jones, 2007: 1186). The implications in geographic thinking include calls for a new vocabulary of sociospatial relations (Amin, 2004) and for a better understanding of the intertwining of multiple spatial forms (territory, place, scale and network) (Jessop et al., 2008). Yet such outcomes were in some ways problematic, particularly when faced with messy and political practices in policy arenas such as planning. For planners the influence of ‘thinking space relationally’ in conjunction with the spatial planning mantra of ‘place making’ helped underpin the renewed interest in strategic planning that looked beyond territorial boundaries taking on board more networked issues.
Albrechts, 2004, 2010) and the view that space was ‘essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing’ (Massey, 2005: 5).

Attempts to think and act relationally have their limits, however, with a variety of studies arguing that in their most ‘pure’ form relational understandings underplay the continuing significance of existing territorial spaces and their institutional and political reflections and actors. As such, there has been a recent attempt to ‘bring territory back in’ in understanding spatial practices (Painter, 2010; Cochrane, 2012; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010), resulting in a culture of planning and spatial practices that now looks beyond what in some jurisdictions is the traditional, land use and territorial basis of planning. Yet the narrative impact of relational thinking upon planning continues to be strong, partly we suspect because it is pushing at the open door of more functional drivers of new planning spaces, providing an alliance of the theoretical and the practical. Such functional influences on how planning necessarily intermediates with the diverse geographies of diverse actors (e.g. energy and water utilities, transport infrastructure providers, catchment plans for rivers) are clearly identifiable and have a long history, going back to the need to plan both territorially and relationally, looking beyond a plan’s own boundaries.

Ultimately, however, those planners responsible for making the statutory system work must always ‘close down’ such ‘external’ considerations into a plan or decision on land use rights. This cognitive dissonance, being simultaneously ‘open’ to networked relations of actors and ‘closed’, here referring to the territoriality of formal state structures (Morgan, 2007: 33), is a dimension of planning that is fundamental to spatial practices. Lines on maps matter when it comes to establishing legal rights that are sufficiently robust to stand up in courts of law. Relationality in planning has its place, but so too does territoriality. The implication of this is that new planning spaces, including soft spaces, need to be anchored to and influenced by the realities of defining and allocating land rights. The allocation of such rights remains an important function of planning controls in any country and gives effect to the purpose of plans and strategies through the right to develop or not. Soft spaces, therefore, are not ‘free-floating’ entities cut loose from democratically accountable and legally defined territorial spaces, but are always tethered to greater or lesser degrees by the need to manage change in territorial rather than abstract, relational places.

**Remaking Europe**

Within the EU there is also another driver of new planning spaces. Strategic policy making at this scale is increasingly driven by and reflective of the tensions between nation-state territoriality and supranational EU territorial cohesion objectives. Such tensions vary between sectors. In some policy fields such as environmental policy, there are clear supranational mandates and agreements, whilst in others including the field of spatial planning there is far less in the way of supranational agreement. At the EU level a range of territorial strategies have emerged to address such tensions that have had implications for new forms of...
spatial governance. Whilst framed as helping deal with supra-territorial issues and helping to overcome boundary problems by providing new coordination roles, there is invariably scope for tension about not clashing with national policy mandates and priorities.

The clearest examples are the growing number of macro-regional strategies. Following the first scheme in the Baltic in 2005 (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012), a number of schemes were and continue to be developed in the course of intergovernmental initiatives aiming at reinforcing cooperation. Proposed new planning and soft spaces such as the Danube, Mediterranean or Alpine Regions (Sielker et al., 2013) emerged as ways to manage complex and asymmetric political, institutional and geographical situations (Dühr et al., 2010), but also helped create new, EU-backed non-national territorial spaces. These spaces can be seen as new political projects and spaces, unsettling and challenging national or sub-national territorial spaces and projecting strategic ambitions about competence gaining and keeping. This political project is not necessarily an attempt to replace one set of spaces with others. Some new and soft spaces might have a limited life and seek to provide quick solutions by challenging existing scientific understandings or bureaucratic inertias. Others may ‘harden’ into strongly institutionalised forms, becoming de facto territorial spaces (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012).

The emergence of such soft spaces can sometimes be driven by the desire to gain preferential access to European Commission funding. Deas and Lord (2006) identified a growing number of ‘unusual’ spaces around cooperative arrangements established by INTERREG and other programmes. For some this amounts to a Europeanisation of territoriality through soft spaces (Faludi, 2009). Such spaces can be elements in bargaining over political competences and power, with concepts like European polycentricity, biogeographical regions or macro-regions linked to particular visions of policy development. But the new initiatives are also invitations from above for local actors to come together in ways that potentially unsettle existing territorial agreements from below.

The approximately 2,500 registered LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) in Europe, for example, represent governance arrangements that include specific spatial imaginations and arrangements that provide testing grounds for new policy interventions. LAGs are the central components for the implementation of the EU LEADER initiative designed to help rural actors consider the long-term potential of their region. Their responsibilities include the development of regional strategies (e.g. developing proposals for regional development and their implementation), supporting stakeholder networking and the appraisal and approval of individual LEADER projects (e.g. Moseley, 2003: 93–5).

The initiation of LAGs is the result of a voluntary, conscious strategy of local and regional representatives from various public sectors as well as entrepreneurial actors and representatives from the civil society who are all represented proportionally in the local steering committees that define the key priorities and projects within the LEADER region (new governance arrangements). The geographical scope of a LEADER region is thus determined by its participating local authorities and other actors; depending on the development challenges
or policy objectives at stake it consists of a varying number of municipalities, administrative counties or parts thereof. In consequence, LAG areas often do not correspond to the political-territorial boundaries; additionally, boundaries are often fuzzy and subject to change as a result of local authorities or other actors joining or leaving the LAGs.

The second dimension of soft spaces as political tools can be seen through the attempts to develop new mandates for the EU in coalition with a range of professional and other interests (Sielker et al., 2013). Land use or spatial planning began to emerge as a desirable mandate for the EU in the 1990s (Faludi, 2009; Dühr et al., 2010) though no European competency existed. A range of expert committees developed a European spatial development vision that had no legal mandate but provided a new spatial imaginary and powerful and persuasive visions. Notions such as polycentricity were linked to EU objectives such as cohesion and competitiveness through the European Spatial Development Perspective that helped persuade the European Commission to fund the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network to help underpin the generation of new spatial imaginaries and spaces and the process of spatialising the EU agenda (Chilla, 2012).

For Faludi (2013a), the inclusion of territorial cohesion in the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 marked a significant move towards the Europeanisation of space, though it is still unclear whether ‘territorial cohesion’ amounts to ‘spatial planning’. This deliberate obfuscation helps fuzzy the European Commission’s mandate to include spatial planning when no such actual mandate currently exists. There is an obvious connection between the role of the epistemic community in pushing for the creation of cross-border, European spaces and the same epistemic community who are pushing for relational spaces and new functions and powers.

**Post-political planning spaces**

The planning system has come under sustained pressure to become more transparent, more accountable and more sensitive to the expectations and beliefs of multiple publics. In part this reflects a growing scepticism about the role of expert knowledge and the ability of experts such as planners to engage meaningfully with those with alternative value systems and alternative knowledge sources. Added into this there has been an increasingly well-educated public able and willing to challenge the basis of expert knowledge and of political authority. In the field of planning, this scepticism has been fuelled by the privileging of growth and the role of planning and planners in facilitating development and national competitiveness, leading to often irreconcilable tensions around planning objectives. The notion of a consensus or ‘public interest’ that planners, politicians and the public could work towards has splintered in the face of such pressures.

It is important to emphasise that those involved in setting up and administering the new soft spaces of governance can be selective in their thematic and spatial focus rather than comprehensive, even if they are developed in cooperation with public, private and civil society actors from more than one municipality or district. As such, they might be able to channel private and public resources
into growth-promoting activities, whilst leaving the more challenging aspects of dealing with areas of entrenched poverty, say, to others.

But more than this, soft spaces in planning can also be used to bypass, displace or defer conflict. It is in this context that we might see the emergence of alternative governance forms as providing a ‘solution’ to the problems that can arise when democratic accountability hinders ‘progress’. From this perspective, soft spaces may also be post-political spaces where conflict can be stage-managed against a background of fuzzy accountability (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). The soft spaces of planning are typically associated with attempts to facilitate market-led growth and development that simultaneously emphasise partnership, governance and sustainability whilst working around the territorial accountability of statutory planning processes. Such spaces can present multiple faces, seeming to be all things to all people whilst in reality acting as:

shadowy spaces for legitimating deals and understandings by a mix of elected and unelected actors.

(Haughton et al., 2013: 218)

As such, soft spaces may also operate as post-political spaces that ‘work behind’ territorial spaces, providing strategies and policies that can, for example, avoid statutory consultation or requirements such as environmental impact assessments, or that might be misused by stakeholders to influence public agenda-setting in an early and hardly democratically legitimised phase. The danger here is that whilst the statutory or territorial spaces of planning attract the attention of stakeholders and the public, the ‘real’ spaces of planning can be elsewhere, assembling stakeholders and developing visions beyond meaningful public scrutiny. This analysis suggests that one reason for the proliferation of soft spaces may be the desire of some actors to avoid, minimise or manage conflict and opposition.

**Multiplicity and complexity in new planning spaces**

It should be apparent from the analysis so far that there is no clear unilinear directional relationship between the soft spaces of planning and the statutory spaces of planning: it is not simply the case that ‘soft space’ interventions are intended to unsettle statutory planning from its ‘rigidities’ in the hope of providing innovative solutions. Reality has proved to be more complex than this. The growing regionalisation of planning (Albrechts, 2004, 2010) has led to a rescaling and the creation of new formal or statutory tiers of planning, sometimes following experiments in soft forms of space. But soft spaces have also played a central role in helping facilitate hard spaces; within new regional plans there are a host of sub-regional plans and strategies that map on to more functional planning areas. This dynamic relationship suggests that rather than a binary situation we have instead a multiplicity of co-existing spaces, each involving differing assemblages of interests, materialities and actors ‘in a complex set of political mobilisations . . . defined
by its practices, not by some predetermined scalar arrangements of power’ (Allen
and Cochrane, 2010; see also McCann and Ward, 2012).

This might also help explain why day-to-day planning necessitates an engage-
ment with a range of different, overlapping functional planning spaces. In addition
to housing market areas and travel-to-work areas, planners must also engage with
diverse environmental spaces such as river estuaries, regional parks, bio-regions,
renewable energy regions and landscape regions. These do not necessarily map
readily onto territorial planning spaces, leading to a proliferation of overlapping
and enmeshed functional spaces of planning.

The need to find ways of working better with multiple functional planning
spaces necessarily operates against a backdrop of relatively enduring existing,
statutory or juridical spaces of planning. Whilst juridical, ‘hard’ spaces can be
difficult or slow to change, short-term fixes can be used to address any mis-
matches with functional geographies through the emergence of a range of func-
tional soft spaces that help mesh and coordinate different sectors to ‘make sense’
for planning. However, within planning there are predetermined, statutory scalar
arrangements and territorial, hard spaces that are relatively enduring. Soft spaces
are part of the response to managing the need for and tensions and challenges of
relational space against a backdrop of such territorial spaces. The point is that
within planning we start from a position where there are existing, privileged
spaces that are complemented, challenged and accompanied by a range of new,
soft spaces.

Objective of this publication: moving from theory to practice
in studying soft spaces

The key questions therefore remain to be resolved through abstractions and
concrete research: who or what ‘constructs’ regions and borders, and how,
through what associations/networks, and for what purposes? The answers
are, without doubt, contextual.

(Paasi, 2010: 2601)

From the outset of this research project, the major objective was to identify the
multiple ways in which soft space forms of governance manifested themselves
and the implications of this for wider systems of spatial planning and territo-
rial management. The focus of this publication thus is explicitly on the empirical
investigation of soft space forms of governance to fully understand the various
practices and rationalities of soft spaces. As planning and soft space forms of
governance are inserted into specific cultural frameworks composed of the social,
environmental and historical conditions and interactive processes among involved
actors and their cultural cognitive frames and codes (Berger and Luckmann, 1966;
Healey, 1997, 2009; Knieling and Othengrafen, 2009; Young, 2008), it is neces-
sary to consider the specific ‘cultural contexts’ in which planning and soft space
forms of governance are embedded and operate (Healey, 2009; Othengrafen,
2012; Othengrafen and Reimer, 2013).
Against this background, eight case studies have been selected for detailed analysis, each presenting specific social, environmental and historical conditions. Since each soft space is dependent on specific legal, political and administrative conditions (see e.g. CEC, 1997; Nadin and Stead, 2008; Newman and Thornley, 1996) and can have different or even unexpected manifestations, we have deliberately not developed a singular all-embracing and prescriptive definition of soft spaces, since this seems to be too restrictive for this kind of empirical research. This is particularly true of a subject matter that is both partly defined by what soft spaces are not – statutory planning – and by the parallel confusing fact that soft space forms of governance are nearly always separate to, yet imbricated within, statutory planning processes. In consequence, we adopted a more open and exploratory approach that allows scope for consideration of all the distinctive practices and rationalities of soft spaces that might emerge in different planning contexts.

We set out a series of overarching objectives for the project which we expected to be used to shape investigation and analysis in each of the empirical case studies.

- To examine the diverse rationalities underlying the use of soft spaces in practice.
  - Relatively little is yet known about the reasons or rationales leading to the formation of soft spaces at particular scales. Early research in the UK (e.g. Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010) suggested that soft spaces might emerge as a reaction to functional needs or to crises or strategies to attract investment (experimentation), but these and other potential rationales have yet to be tested out and analysed in wider contexts. As such, this objective embraces the need to identify different rationales, to analyse the contextual conditions in which they arise (e.g. the economic or environmental problems to be solved; the use of funding programmes such as INTERREG etc.) and to examine if some issues are more conducive to soft spaces formation than others.

- To examine why and how soft spaces emerge and how they evolve over time (both as process and product).
  - In relation to the rationales behind soft spaces, it is necessary to know how soft spaces have emerged over time and what role specific policies, strategies or programmes or actors play in these processes. In this context, the research also aims to examine whether soft spaces are the result of ‘top-down’ processes, voluntaristic ‘bottom-up’ processes or some combination. Since soft spaces evolve over time, a related concern was to learn more about the dynamics of change: do soft spaces dissolve and reappear, become hard spaces or are they employed for a specific time only?

- To examine the relationship between soft and hard spaces within complex multilevel and pluri-centric governance contexts.
As soft spaces of governance necessarily co-exist with and draw legitimacy from their relation to ‘hard’ spaces of regulatory planning, there might be some real tensions in how these relationships are aligned and managed. It has been a central aspiration for this research to examine in detail how soft and hard spaces are related to each other in different contexts, examining the range of possible responses, from tensions to mutual learning and re-assignment of roles. To learn more about the specific complex multilevel and pluri-centric governance contexts, we have set out to examine which key actors are involved in soft spaces, in particular which stakeholders are included or excluded (public and private actors).

- To examine the actor, ideational and spatial selectivities associated with soft spaces.
  - By critically examining soft spaces, the question of ‘hidden agendas’, motivations and distributional implications is of crucial importance; that is, who wins and who loses. Additionally, it is a major concern of this research to find out if soft spaces provide a way of masking and partially legitimating processes of manipulation. This also includes the analysis of who is setting the agenda, for instance which actors have resources and get to steer towards certain issues and goals.

- To examine the impact of soft spaces: what difference do soft spaces make?
  - Whatever the reason for the emergence of a soft space, they are tools to either facilitate or thwart change. The question that then arises is: are they effective tools and under what circumstances do they achieve their aims?

- To examine the impacts of soft spaces on democratically legitimated structures and institutions.
  - The rise of soft spaces, for example, questions the way in which participating actors are selected and engaged with the new governance arrangements and which sometimes seem unbalanced, geared towards powerful and resourceful stakeholders. The case studies in this book thus address issues of legitimacy and accountability: what are the implications of the soft spaces for democratic legitimacy and accountability? Do soft spaces provide a way of ‘shuffling’ responsibility away, of acting at arm’s length from formal systems of accountability and legitimacy? Do soft spaces gain a form of legitimacy or authority through other means?

Given the complexity and geographical diversity of the research context and the need for a strong comparative basis, a multiple case study design has been selected (Sykes, 2008; Yin, 2003). Empirical data has been collected in eight in-depth case studies, including five city-regions in four countries as well as three cross-border regions. In each area interviews have been conducted (see each chapter for further details), chosen to reflect the views of a range of stakeholders and any prominent
critics. A common set of issues and questions was developed to be used by all the teams (semi-structured questionnaires), but with scope left for these to be adjusted to fit particular national and local circumstances. Parallel to the interviews, there was a process of collecting and analysing a variety of secondary data in each area, including committee reports, media coverage and official marketing materials, such as websites. The project group as a whole helped shape the individual case studies through meetings and seminars on emerging findings.

The city-regions – Merseybelt/UK, Metropolitan Region Hamburg/Germany, Metz-Nancy/France, Rotterdam Metropolitan Region/the Netherlands and Ashford and Cambridge/UK – have been selected as they each present an example of new sub-national governmental and governance arrangements. The focus is explicitly on important city-regions or cities; the decision to examine the experiences of second-tier cities or city-regions rather than capital cities or city-regions was in part an attempt to avoid the exceptionalism arguments that come when dealing with capital cities. We also felt it important to capture the experiences of the types of city in which the majority of the population lived and also as it happened in the kinds of cities in which the majority of the research team lived or worked.

As national borders within Europe become less significant, international cross-border regions present another important type of soft space governance arrangements, which we cover in a final empirical section involving three case studies. The EU has been keen to promote cross-border working for a variety of reasons, including concerns about peripherality in some cases. The resultant funding has helped stimulate a wider range of efforts to enable policy-makers and stakeholders on both sides of the border to join together to address common problems and challenges and exploit the enhanced territorial potential resultant from the development of a functionally integrated region, where two peripheral ‘back-to-back’ regions existed previously (Anderson and O’Dowd, 1999). Against this background, the three cross-border regions – the Femambelt-Crossing, the Strasbourg-Ortenau-Eurodistrict and the Ireland-Northern Ireland border region – are examined to analyse different paths, rationales and manifestations of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of governance. A special focus is on borders and institutional practices and their role for the formation and development of a collective identity, memory and culture.

The final chapter provides an overview of the lessons to be learnt from the case studies and the implications for theory and recommendations for practice that emerge.

References
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