Part IV

Conclusions and outlook
10 Conclusion – what difference do soft spaces make?

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Introduction

In the introductory chapter we set out an ambitious challenge. Our argument broadly speaking was that we have begun to see a whole range of new planning spaces emerge which operate in parallel to the formal scales of statutory planning, drawing in new constellations of actors to create spatial strategies that could accompany formal planning strategies. Typically, these new spaces involved the creation of new geographies, sometimes by eschewing existing political boundaries altogether, sometimes creating spaces by blending existing governmental units. These new geographies typically came with new governance arrangements, outside the ballot box in terms of accountability, even though many retained a link to democratic processes through engagement with elected politicians. Such arrangements might operate above or below existing levels of local or regional government, allowing their proponents to claim that they were able to work more creatively at a strategic or operational level, whilst also being presented, rhetorically at least, as complementing rather than competing with the formal strategies drawn up under the aegis of democratically elected bodies.

The new soft spaces of governance, however, came with a whole series of selectivities, around the actors who would be ‘enfranchised’ by their establishment and those who would be marginalised, and around which types of policy intervention might be ‘privileged’ by such arrangements with a potential fast track to government investment. The flipside of soft spaces then was that potentially democratic structures and processes might be being circumvented and accountability for aspects of public policy in effect ‘outsourced’ to those running the new bodies, and that less glamorous areas of policy, particularly those most oriented to the poor and excluded, might become marginalised even as the actors in the soft space configurations seemed to play on their self-perception as being more integrated, more strategic and more inclusive in their approach to improving public policy.

These new less formal scales and spaces, for which we adopt the shorthand ‘soft spaces’, were seen to have a variety of overt and less overt rationalities attached to them, such that it was difficult to know if they were fundamentally different or part of the same unfolding phenomenon. Either way, we seem to be
witnessing a period of unparalleled experimentation of new forms and spaces of planning which do not so much displace or supersede traditional approaches and spaces as create new hybrid forms of statutory and non-statutory planning. This leaves unanswered some important questions. Why did a phenomenon that first attracted critical analytical attention in the UK (see Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Haughton et al., 2010) very quickly seem to resonate with those studying planning systems elsewhere in Europe? Were the experiences in mainland Europe part of the same set of emergent processes witnessed in the UK, or did they reflect different processes and practices? As Chapter 1 highlighted, the ideas that were emerging around soft spaces seemed to offer particular potential for understanding the new forms of territorial practice around cross-border planning practices.

It was in this context that we set out to identify case studies in diverse national and transnational contexts to examine how soft spaces emerged in different places, and the implications of this for wider systems of spatial planning and territorial management. In this final chapter we want to return to the challenges set out in Chapter 1, drawing on the case study findings to ask whether and how analysing planning in terms of soft spaces helps us to understand recent changes in the practices of planning and territorial management. The research was always intended to be exploratory of an emerging set of practices. For some the notion of soft spaces is frustratingly ambiguous. Rather than limiting the scope of our study to fit in with a particular preconceived notion of what ‘soft spaces’ might be, instead we sought to attempt to find out how the phenomenon might emerge and develop in different national and cross-national contexts, not least given the wide varieties of planning cultures in existence across Europe (Knieling and Othengrafen, 2009).

In some ways then we set ourselves up to identify new questions as well as to address the specific issues set out in the book’s objectives.

We start this concluding chapter by returning to address the study objectives, before a final consideration of the further questions raised by the empirical studies. We combine some of the objectives into single headings in the following analysis rather than treating them all individually, since the responses often seemed to be best framed in this cross-cutting way.

**Rationalities behind the use of soft spaces**

Taken together, the case study chapters indicate that two main rationalities existed in the use of soft spaces. First, soft spaces and related governance arrangements seemed to evolve in response to new needs or challenges, for example to mirror claims about the functional geographies of local economies, or tackling environmental issues more effectively by working to environmental geographies rather than political-administrative boundaries or, more prosaically, to meet the criteria for national or European funding, where the creation of new partnerships and ‘innovative’ forms of thinking were often prerequisites. Here, soft spaces seem to follow a more functional or pragmatic orientation to ‘get things done’. Second, some soft spaces appeared to be introduced as a strategy sometimes in the form of a new spatial imaginary intended to generate or shape debate, in the process
challenging old ways of working or thinking and doing. Here, soft spaces had a more disruptive orientation and rationale.

To start with the pragmatic forms of rationality, the examples of Ashford and Cambridge, the Hamburg Metropolitan Region and the southern part of the Randstad all illustrate how a seeming mismatch between the formal scales of government and functional relations in daily policy and practice provided one of the main driving forces for initiating new governance arrangements. Here, creating new soft spaces offered opportunities for the leading actors, typically but not always public authorities, to overcome such mismatches by bringing actors together and by pragmatically expanding the room for manoeuvre. In short, the introduction of soft spaces was rationalised by their proponents as a means of better representing functional links whilst simultaneously allowing the actors involved to extend their limited government powers outside the formalised planning system. All these case studies have in common that they are problem-centred and have a pragmatic origin. However, the concrete occasions and motives for the emergence of soft spaces can differ. In Ashford and Cambridge, for example, the underlying rationale was to manage the expected population and housing growth, whilst in Sillon lorrain it was the prospect of achieving national funding. In the case of the cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland the process appears to have been mainly driven by the desire of planners to achieve comparability of spatial datasets as a basis for future joint strategic works.

One commonly encountered form of rationality in our findings was the need to create an institutional space for cooperation and to foster processes of institutional capacity building. Interestingly enough, this form of rationality often coexisted with concerns that moving towards a more formalised institutional framework might entail the loss of some of the flexibility that some proponents of soft spaces seemed to value highly. So for some actors involved in generating new soft spaces, there was a perceived need to overcome fragmented political geographies by strengthening political-administrative partnerships and building a regional or inter-regional institutional capacity. This was illustrated in different ways by the Fehmarnbelt region, Sillon Lorrain and the cross-border cooperation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. But these processes of building institutional capacity did not necessarily aim to create ‘hard’ institutionalised structures. The developments in the Hamburg Metropolitan Region and the southern part of the Randstad clearly demonstrate how projects and investments can also be implemented without a transfer of competences from one scale or from one institution to another.

Soft spaces might be seen here as a governance experiment. They could, for instance, represent the culmination of a period of cooperation where the actors involved decide to keep their informal status. Alternatively, they might represent an in-between phase in moving towards a new institutionalised space, seeking to foster trust among the involved partners as a precursor to subsequent closer working relationships.

One could look back through the history of planning and spatial governance in different countries and argue that such motivations and solutions have been a
traditional part of the ‘planning toolkit’. There is obviously some truth in this. Various examples of new, temporary spaces that emerged to address specific issues or problems exist; here one could think of the British new towns between the 1940s and 1960s. However, it is clear to us that the scope and extent of contemporary soft spaces have increased significantly in recent times. This fits in well with accounts of ‘fast policy’ and growing experimentation as part of the current era of neoliberal ideology, as it allows the roll-out of new thinking about how best to ‘do’ governance, and alongside this how to influence planning regulation (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013; Haughton et al., 2013).

Short-life, localised experiments can be useful in this context for testing new policy ideas and shifting thinking in particular selective ways, whilst creating the space for closing them down and plausible deniability for any shortcomings and criticisms that might emerge (Peck, 2011; Haughton et al., 2013). This also includes the involvement of external expertise which is not new to planning as consultants have long been used to provide reports that feed into strategy-making processes. The important change here is the way in which consultants are increasingly being used to prepare vision and strategy documents for soft spaces. As such, they contrast with traditional forms of embedded strategic planning within local governments, where typically the process, until recently at least, was led by local government planners. This shift towards drawing in external experts to help develop strategies that are separate to formal plan-making processes is part of a wider pattern of a hyper-mobile exchange of policy ideas around ‘what works’ (Peck, 2011; see also Knieling et al., 2012).

Seen in this context, soft spaces as spaces of neoliberal experimentation are both locally distinctive and linked into wider circuits of exchange around ideas about how best to turn around the fortunes of particular localities. Bringing in external experts is expected to generate ideas and debate, with consultants also often charged with public consultation processes, creating an arms-length relationship which can be helpful in terms of both suggesting ‘new thinking’ and allowing a strategic distancing if things turn sour and it turns out the proposed vision and strategy generate opposition. The challenge such arrangements bring become particularly acute when aspects of these strategies are uncritically imported subsequently into formal planning documents (Haughton et al., 2010), which was one of the concerns we encountered in relation to the Atlantic Gateway (Chapter 2), for instance.

The second form of rationality that came through strongly from the case studies concerned how soft spaces were sometimes used to develop and project alternative desirable and visionary futures for an area. As Jessop (2012: 17) has argued, such new spatial imaginaries provide ‘a simplified, necessarily selective “mental map” of a supercomplex reality’, in the process helping shape and construct the realities they seek to represent. In other words, they are never a simple representation of reality: they are an intentional part of a process of ‘becoming’, even if, as is the case in such spaces, becoming is part of a strategy of disruption of existing spaces and processes. These new spatial imaginaries can in different contexts be thought of as political imaginaries, social imaginaries, economic
imaginaries, environmental imaginaries or institutional imaginaries. Seen from this perspective, new soft space identities may be promulgated by politicians or other key actors to support particular desired strategies or trajectories for development that make a break from existing settled imaginaries that draw selectively on historical readings of how a region can be understood.

Examples of constructing new spatial imaginaries might include those regional projects that seek to project or develop an identity around a particular form of economic growth (e.g. the Atlantic Gateway) or as embodying particular qualities in relation to cultural identity (e.g. Strasbourg-Ortenau) or environmental well-being. Most frequently presented for public consumption as suggestive of emerging opportunities for economic growth, new soft spaces formed with this kind of rationality are in many cases also simultaneously exercises in re-branding, of shifting perceptions of a struggling economy for instance with a new, more positive imaginary. The new soft space as a brand will typically be outward-looking in terms of growth prospects whilst simultaneously using the new geography to suggest that seen through a different scalar prism an area offers a high quality of life for those who live there – industrial towns for instance are reconnected to their more prosperous or more attractive hinterlands in the new imaginaries. In some cases then imaginaries have a strong political driver (e.g. Sillon lorrain), aiming to destabilise or challenge existing imaginaries that have negative connotations or are perceived to be inhibiting change.

Not surprisingly then, several of the soft space governance arrangements that we studied had a clear discursive framing role, particularly evident in the cases of the Fehmarnbelt region, Strasbourg-Ortenau, Merseybelt/Atlantic Gateway and Ireland/Northern Ireland. These cases all had in common that the new intended regional spaces were accompanied by common frames or strategies which might help to develop a regional profile (Fehmarnbelt region), to change the minds of the inhabitants (Strasbourg-Ortenau), to evolve a new, common understanding of planning that is not linked to past issues (Ireland/Northern Ireland) or to ensure a more strategic and coordinated development considering environmental, economic and social issues (Merseybelt and Fehmarnbelt; see also Hamburg Metropolitan Region). These common frames explicitly include the goal of institutional capacity building to overcome sectoral and spatial boundaries, which need to become more permeable for the long term, and coordinated public and private sector investment. This links to another strong strategic orientation associated with the formation of soft spaces: seeking to increase the economic competitiveness of a region. New spatial scales of governance are frequently rationalised as helping to stimulate economic growth and overcome barriers to growth, associated with what might be termed a neoliberal agenda in some countries, notably England. Such rationalities were observable in the development of successive spatial imaginaries in the Merseybelt region, and also in the Fehmarnbelt region and the Hamburg Metropolitan Region. A similar rationale can be found in the Sillon lorrain, which though not focused on economic growth explicitly provides an example of a soft space being used to attract public investment to boost an economy directly and through hoped-for demonstration and multiplier effects.
In a related vein, soft spaces can be seen as a form of symbolic gesture or representation. As the cross-border case studies of Strasbourg-Ortenau and Fehmarnbelt region reveal in particular, soft spaces may be introduced by politicians in anticipation of creating a common identity, working in diffuse and hard-to-capture ways to help overcome mental barriers and change the perceptions of those living and working in border areas. The aim of cross-border regional integration can also be recognised in national contexts: in both Sillon lorrain and Merseybelt the ‘bridging’ of different local cultures by creating new sub-regional identities appeared to be an important rationale.

**How do soft spaces emerge and how do they evolve over time?**

The research also sought to understand more about the dynamics of how soft spaces emerged, for instance as a result of ‘top-down’ impulses, voluntary ‘bottom-up’ processes, some combination of both, or maybe a transition from top-down imposition to varying degrees of bottom-up modification and ownership. Following on from this, some of our case studies covered areas with a rich history of soft space experiments, allowing us to move from the contemporary snapshots provided by most previous studies to finding out more about evolutionary trajectories. For instance, a new soft space imaginary might be proposed and enjoy a brief spell of attention before falling into abeyance, only to re-emerge or be reinvented in a later period, as revealed for instance in Chapter 2 on the emergence of the Merseybelt in the 1970s, its ‘rediscovery’ in the 1990s, and most recently the emergence of the private sector-led Atlantic Gateway concept.

In some cases, soft spaces emerge at least directly or indirectly in response to local and regional government reforms instigated by central government. Examples of this include the Atlantic Gateway and the southern part of the Randstad. These examples have in common that new arrangements were either introduced or gained traction as a means of bridging the gap that occurred between the statutory spaces of national and local governments in the wake of decisions to abolish regional planning institutions. Here, soft spaces and informal cooperation appear to be a reaction to administrative reforms and administrative complexity, as key actors sought to find new and more effective governance arrangements that might better address specific functional relations within each area.

Although we have tended to highlight new spaces and new constellations of actors coming together, this should not blind us to the frequent importance of established networks of local and regional actors in promoting the creation of soft spaces. These networks were diverse in type, consisting of both more informal (southern part of the Randstad) and more formal rules and procedures (Hamburg Metropolitan Region). In terms of bottom-up or voluntary processes, several examples emerged: the STRING cooperation within the Fehmarnbelt region, the Metropolitan Region Rotterdam The Hague in the southern part of the Randstad, and cross-border cooperation in Ireland/Northern Ireland. The first two of these shared in common that local municipalities or regional actors voluntarily decided...
to cooperate with each other, determining the spatial scope of their cooperation independently. The example of Ireland/Northern Ireland is different from these in that it is mainly based on the voluntary collaboration of spatial planners, aiming to improve mutual understanding around the theme of spatial planning, involving efforts to coordinate national and regional strategy documents in this field.

Soft spaces were not only initiated or put into practice by public bodies, as revealed by our English case study work and the example of the Hamburg Metropolitan Region. In all these examples, private actors play an important role in the emergence and agenda setting of soft spaces, particularly visible in the case of the Atlantic Gateway, instigated by Peel Holdings, and the Hamburg Metropolitan Region where the role of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce was critical.

The important point here is that these various bottom-up approaches are in sharp contrast to the prevailing experiences observed in the generation of UK soft spaces, which the early literature (Haughton et al., 2010) suggested were most commonly the result of the imposition of top-down central government interventions. Whilst it is sometimes helpful to differentiate between such voluntary ‘bottom-up’ processes and ‘top-down’ impulses, in most cases there was a more iterative relationship between top-down and bottom-up impulses once an idea had been launched into the public arena, with central governments typically keen to encourage bottom-up approaches that fitted in with their agendas, and to download responsibility for their own initiatives on to local actors as soon as possible, most likely with mixed motives such as improving legitimacy, sensitivity to local issues and creating plausible deniability if things go wrong.

Our case studies revealed a variety of examples of soft spaces emerging largely in response to external pressures and incentives, for example with regard to national priorities, policy areas or financial initiatives. National policy initiatives in particular frequently played an important direct or indirect role in generating or fostering the conditions for the emergence of new soft spaces. This was very much the case in Ashford and Cambridge which were both designated as Growth Areas as part of the Labour Government’s Sustainable Communities Plan of 2003. Here, the national government offered financial incentives for the two areas, on condition that they worked towards higher rates of housing growth. National government financial incentives also played an important role in Sillon lorrain, where evidence of bottom-up cooperation and spatial governance was required as a condition for national funding. The ‘supra-regional partnership North Germany’ also made use of national funding to consolidate and continue with its recently established structures for informal cooperation. Even the Atlantic Gateway as a private sector-inspired soft space can be seen in part as a vehicle to lobby for additional government infrastructure investment in the region.

Sometimes national government rationales seemed to focus on getting neighbouring areas to work more closely together, particularly evident in the case of city-regions. In Germany, for example, metropolitan regions were introduced as a new spatial category or spatial policy response to challenges posed by reunification, European integration and globalisation. However, the new local arrangements
were not provided with planning competences or additional funding. Moreover, their size was not determined by the federal government: the current eleven metropolitan regions are all based on voluntary cooperation of their associated municipalities. Another example of the influence of national-level initiatives can be found in the southern part of the Randstad. Here, the national government put pressure on lower government tiers to cooperate closely with each other to strengthen the competitiveness of the region and to attract crucial investments. In such cases the new soft spaces have emerged in the ‘shadow of hierarchy’ (Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995: 29; Scharpf, 1991), referring to governance arrangements where public actors, in our cases mainly referring to national actors, have a powerful and influential role to influence the decisions of other actors.

Top-down impulses for the creation of soft spaces were also evident in Sillon lorrain, Strasbourg-Ortenau and the Fehmarnbelt region. In the two former cases the intervention of the French government was clearly evident in their establishment as new spatial governance forms. The emergence of the Fehmarnbelt region as a form of cooperation was driven by the Danish government, in terms of funding and agenda setting. There is also a formal treaty between the Danish government and the German federal government with regard to the fixed infrastructural link which is the main reason behind the cooperation.

As noted earlier, some soft spaces seemed to emerge out of a more iterative process between actors at multiple scales, resisting crude binary distinctions between top-down and bottom-up instigation of soft spaces. Indeed, once an idea had emerged, in most cases it required a degree of accommodation and buy-in from actors working at different scales of government and in different sectors. The Atlantic Gateway for instance was an example of a private company using its networks to develop its concept, seeking first to find support through regional government, and later appealing direct to national government as part of its strategy to encourage buy-in from local actors. This process of scale-jumping was both strategic and opportunist, responding to a rapidly changing policy environment with a change in national government in 2010.

Other case studies were suggestive of a pattern in which soft spaces did not necessarily emerge or evolve in a strategic or intentional way. As the development of the Metropolitan Region Rotterdam The Hague in the southern part of the Randstad illustrates, soft spaces can emerge by coincidence. In this case, the intended plans and strategies of Rotterdam and The Hague fitted closely and reinforced each other rather than competing with each other. Additionally, the mayors of the two cities actively fostered the cooperation so that the Metropolitan Region could successfully emerge as a soft space.

In many of our case studies we found evidence of efforts to stabilise and develop soft space governance arrangements over time. This was particularly visible in Sillon lorrain, Strasbourg-Ortenau and in the southern part of the Randstad, where the soft spaces and informal governance arrangements gradually became more formalised, often involving new and formalised institutions. In a phase of institutional instability, soft spaces seem to be used in an experimental and pragmatic way to respond to functional issues and to prepare the ground for new
institutionalised spaces and arrangements in the future. However, the consolidation of soft spaces is not necessarily restricted to institutions or the institutional setting. In Cambridge the process of policy development and consolidation constitution tended to carry on even as institutional responsibilities changed.

It should be added that soft spaces may also be a highly strategic response to changes in the external operating environment. In the case of the Metropolitan Region Rotterdam The Hague, for example, the creation of a new cooperation space was intended to fill the gap created by the abolished sub-regional level to avoid transport budgets being transferred to the provincial administrative level. At an entirely different scale, the Atlantic Gateway’s proponents highlight the opportunities created by the widening of the Panama Canal and the anticipated changes in trade flows as an integral part of their rationale for investing in upgrades to the port infrastructure of the Mersey region and the Manchester Ship Canal, plus improvements to the capacity of the regional rail and road logistics capacity.

One final fact that might help explain how certain soft spaces have emerged and evolved over time relates to different national and regional cultural and administrative traditions. As the examples have shown, soft spaces develop in the interplay of institutional settings, cognitive frames or cultural codes of the involved actors and their interactions (see also Othengrafen, 2014). To be more specific: it is the diversity and ‘otherness’ of laws, policies, strategies, responsibilities, traditions and cognitive frames that often sets the conditions for the emergence of soft spaces. Overcoming all these legal, administrative and sometimes also cultural traditions is politically sensitive and time consuming. This is particularly a challenge in cross-border contexts as the territorial borders of the nation-states separate planning procedures and traditions on both sides of the border from each other.

The development of soft spaces and soft types of governance arrangements helps to bridge the various ‘borders’, traditions and ‘cultures’, also between regions within one nation-state, and to develop a common policy framework without such drawbacks. Additionally, soft spaces help to ‘decongest’ the multitude of fragmented agencies and institutions that are characteristic of networked, multilevel governance. Soft spaces can cut through such complexity and provide a focus for action in a theme-based policy context. The marked differences in governance structures, cultures and framing discourses within Denmark and Germany have been one prominent example for the collaboration in the Fehmarnbelt region; other examples include Ireland/Northern Ireland, but also Sillon lorrain and the Merseybelt region.

Assessing the impacts of soft spaces and the selectivities involved

As we noted in the introduction, there has been a rapid growth in the emergence of new soft space arrangements across Europe, operating at a range of scales. Some are explicitly strategic in intent and lightly resourced in consequence in terms of finances and personnel. Others, though, are created amidst much fanfare about how
they will speed up delivery of strategic projects and in some cases have attracted considerable funding – most notably perhaps the Thames Gateway in London (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). The aims of these two styles of soft space intervention and their intended outcomes are very different. It is important therefore to be careful in assessing the impacts of soft spaces to achieve this against their stated goals and remits. This is more difficult than it may seem. Take the case of a soft space arrangement that is avowedly strategic in intent and has limited or no staffing attached to it. At one level, it would seem only fair to assess such an organisation against its ability to produce a meaningful strategy. But given that the strategy will typically be presented as something that partner agencies are supporting, should we be looking in these cases for evidence of delivery too?

An added complication here is that all strategies involve a degree of ‘requisite irony’ (Jessop, 2003; Haughton et al., 2010) on the part of those producing them – they are aspirational in intent and tone, stating what those signing up would like to happen, even though they know that in practice not all of the stated goals are likely to be achieved, and indeed that events subsequent to the publication of a strategy may render large parts of it redundant or unachievable – a change in government, or a major recession for instance. For all these reasons, our study of the impacts of soft spaces is not a formal quantified economic evaluation of their impacts – rather it is a broad overview of whether they have made a difference in some way or another.

In this section we focus mainly on achievements and shortcomings against the expectations of their proponents. The case studies show that there are clear perceived advantages of soft spaces, including their flexibility, low cost, temporary nature and the recognition that there is no ‘ideal’, single space through which to plan. This, however, should not absolve us from the responsibility of looking at the unstated goals or the unintended consequences of soft space arrangements, not least debates around their impact on democratic processes for planning. For instance, our case studies revealed how in various ways soft spaces were used to facilitate change: they introduced new spatial or political imaginaries, they played an important role in attracting substantial government funds or they contributed to the provision of housing. There is a counterfactual argument, however, that even as they appear to have achieved some measure of success, sometimes a soft space organisation’s very existence could have stymied alternative forms of change that might have been even more successful. This could occur for instance because of the creation of weak spatial governance arrangements which were not strong enough to stimulate more sweeping changes, lacking in financial resources, political commitment or legally binding competencies. Arguably the 1970s Merseybelt proposals were just such a weak governance framing, which did not link into the wider process of local government restructuring taking place at the time.

In terms of positive impacts, some soft space initiatives have been successful in establishing informal knowledge networks among policy-makers and practitioners who had not been working together intensively before. The most prominent example is the International Centre for Local and Regional Development in the Ireland/Northern Ireland border region but there are other examples such
as Strasbourg-Ortenau and the Fehmarnbelt region. In all these cases, the new spatial governance arrangements provide ‘greater room to manoeuvre’, a space for experimentation that local, regional or national authorities with official planning competencies do not possess. They also allow deniability if such politically sensitive solutions do not work.

However, there are three important caveats to be mentioned here: first, informal networks are often limited to politicians or civil servants, as the examples of the Hamburg Metropolitan Region, Fehmarnbelt region and Ireland/Northern Ireland show. Those involved in mobilising oppositional discourses such as in the case of the Fehmarnbelt region are excluded, typically marginalising actors or initiatives from the civil society. Second, it was evident in the Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau that some networks or spatial alliances only have competencies in fields where local or regional authorities do not exercise their powers and competencies. This confirms, third, that soft spaces are sensitive to hard institutional geographies and political games. Territorial boundaries within regions seem to be very significant, but often they provide the opportunity for informal and flexible cooperation. This was very evident, for example, in Strasbourg-Ortenau and the Hamburg Metropolitan Region. Both regions had ‘formalised’ boundaries consisting of the territories of their constituent municipalities. However, within these boundaries, temporary and flexible cooperation takes place. In this sense, soft spaces allow certain actors to implement their own strategic objectives within a ‘hard’ boundary or under the umbrella of a broader strategy.

The examples of Cambridge and the Merseybelt also indicate that cooperation processes, partnerships and governance arrangements that started with soft spaces may continue to exist over time – sometimes with interruptions for periods, or major changes in institutional support. This does not necessarily mean that soft spaces are formalised or transformed into a hard space. In Cambridge, for example, the soft spaces were sustained ‘in an effort to maintain a functional planning area albeit one with different aims and objectives’. There was a momentum or ‘buy-in’ over time, allowing such initiatives to long outlast the political moment that created them, sometimes leading to a ‘hardening’ into more formal, territorial spaces.

In the Merseybelt region it is the broad idea of a sub-region that embraced both Manchester and Liverpool and the areas between that persisted: even when not at the forefront of the policy agenda, the ideas first put forward in the 1970s still resonated in the minds of certain key actors, serving as a repertoire of ideas to be drawn on when circumstances allowed. Here the influence of a small and relatively coherent group of actors keen to act and think at a scale above that of local government has been particularly strong, providing a degree of continuity of ideas even as policies and governments have come and gone. What we begin to see here is the way in which evaluations of soft space impacts, which might suggest these were limited in the short or medium term, might later need to be revised. Some of the imaginative work of soft space ensembles may be traced through multiple institutional configurations and multiple exercises in imagineering that only begin to take root after decades.
Soft spaces have also successfully changed or created new spatial imaginaries at the city-regional level as, for example, Cambridge and the Hamburg Metropolitan Region have shown. Here, the impact has involved data analysis to allow new maps to be generated suggestive of alternative ideas about functional spaces or to offer new options for politics and planners. Such new imaginaries can also help overcome animosities, rivalries or suspicions between, for example, urban and rural areas. This can be achieved by the development of ‘neutral’ or politically less sensitive labels with positive and progressive connotations. The Atlantic Gateway is a classic example, providing a new label that overcomes rivalries between cities and towns within the strategy area through appealing to a common, neutral-sounding physical space – the Atlantic – and adding a positive rider – Gateway – suggesting opportunity and progress. In some cases (Hamburg Metropolitan Region and Ireland/Northern Ireland) these new spatial concepts or images have already been recognised in formal planning documents. Due to the different rationales of soft spaces, there seems to be a distinction between more political imaginaries such as in Strasbourg-Ortenau and Sillon lorrain, spatial-economic imaginaries (Hamburg Metropolitan Region, Fehmarnbelt region) and planning imaginaries (Ireland/Northern Ireland, the southern part of the Randstad).

All the imaginaries have in common that they have remained evident more at the visual or discursive levels, with limited concrete impacts at the local level in terms of detailed projects or actions. They describe strategies and intentions rather better than actions. The exception might be the Mersey Basin Campaign, possibly because it was allowed to complete its 25-year lifespan and to change aspects of its remit to reflect changed circumstances and new opportunities. Planning imaginaries appear to have contributed, at least rhetorically, to new ways of coordinating and integrating spatial and sectoral policies within a given region as shown in, for example, Ashford and Cambridge, Ireland/Northern Ireland and the southern parts of the Randstad. However, those imaginaries do not simply result in positive impacts – even those with fuzzy boundaries tended to create insider-outsider effects, meaning some actors felt excluded in some way. This was particularly a concern where actors felt that those within the new arrangements might expect preferential treatment from government in terms of spending, for instance, or access to particular powers. Similarly, by focusing a partnership on one set of issues, say economic ones, there is a danger of moving away from a more integrated policy-making approach. In this way soft spaces can, counter to the rhetorical claims of greater policy integration and inclusiveness of diverse actors, actually lead to a residualisation or marginalisation of certain activities, for instance environmental actions, or particular groups of actors, such as those pushing for ‘deep green’ policy approaches.

This brings us to the concern that in many of our case studies soft spaces were constructed around highly selective policy agendas, both spatially and thematically. For instance in the Hamburg Metropolitan Region there are informal boundaries perceived between economically stronger and weaker hinterland districts which result in an ‘inner ring’ and an ‘outer ring’ of actors and territories. Furthermore, the spatial distance to the centre is of importance: the ‘outer ring’ is
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less connected with Hamburg and, in consequence, it is more difficult to motivate actors for joint development initiatives. In the Fehmarnbelt region, Sillon lorrain and the southern part of the Randstad it was evident that cities or agglomerations (Hamburg and Copenhagen in the Fehmarnbelt region, Metz and Nancy in Sillon lorrain and Rotterdam in the southern part of the Randstad) dominated the soft space governance arrangements at the expense of more peripheral areas or the spaces in between. In addition, the Fehmarnbelt region, for example, shows that there are priority areas for cooperation within soft spaces. Here, infrastructure and accessibility policies, i.e. the involvement with regard to transport corridor axes, employment and innovation, seem to be much higher than environmental issues, even though these are formally recognised as important objectives of the cooperation. This is also in other cases reflected by conflicts between politicians who aim at the international visibility of ‘their’ region and planners opting for integrated and sustainable development (e.g. Hamburg Metropolitan Region).

In many of the case studies presented in this book, soft spaces appear to have been successful, in their own terms at least, in addressing some of the problems associated with territorial or political boundaries. Key features of the more successful initiatives were efforts to accept and include on a pragmatic basis the heterogeneity of actors and consciously avoiding a formal geography and instead promoting flexible or blurred boundaries. Prominent examples are the Hamburg Metropolitan Region and the southern part of the Randstad. Whilst there are examples where such soft/fuzzy space has provided concrete impacts at the local level in terms of detailed projects or actions, for instance the Mersey Basin Campaign, more typically impacts are limited. But as has been shown in Cambridge, soft space forms of governance can help set out the conditions for the delivery of growth – here referring to geographical, institutional and financial conditions. Soft spaces have been used here because formal statutory planning was seemingly unable to provide the necessary associated housing growth and associated necessary infrastructure using formal planning instruments.

Democratic legitimacy and the relationship between soft and hard spaces within complex multilevel and pluri-centric governance contexts

As the examples of the Atlantic Gateway, Hamburg Metropolitan Region, Fehmarnbelt region and the southern part of the Randstad indicate, sometimes there are overlapping soft spaces and institutions with different competencies, responsibilities, thematic and spatial foci. Often these spaces are introduced simultaneously, with different actors in the lead but covering similar geographical areas. On the one hand, this increases the institutional thickness of a region and the possibility that certain issues are tackled adequately. But on the other hand, it also leads to a form of potentially problematic zero-sum competitive localism, where the various soft spaces compete for financial incentives, public awareness or institutional recognition; here, the prospects for coordinated approaches seem to be limited or reduced.
The increasing number of sometimes overlapping ‘new spaces’ seems to be the result of processes in which public institutions or agencies as well as private actors are expected to operate in a new ‘market for governance’. The old notions of ensuring organisations did not overlap for fear of duplication and inefficiency have been superseded by the notion that it is better to have a range of alternative potential vehicles seeking to develop alternative visions for an area. In a sense, in this new era of Darwinian struggle for institutional survival, it is down to the individual actors whether to try to survive by competing with each other or by developing complementary roles. This process of institutional jostling for position was evident in Sillon lorrain, the Hamburg Metropolitan Region, the Atlantic Gateway/Merseybelt region and the southern part of the Randstad. The competing and sometimes unclear and fuzzy competencies and responsibilities of actors might lead to mutual mistrust of the involved parties and might, for example, help explain the tensions between the delivery body and local councils in Ashford.

As soft spaces of governance necessarily co-exist with and draw legitimacy from their relation to ‘hard’ spaces of regulatory planning, it would be a reasonable expectation that tensions in how these relationships are aligned and managed would arise. An aspiration for this research was to examine 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 and, particularly, how legitimacy and accountability were handled.

The research highlighted three main positions in relationships between hard and soft spaces around accountability and legitimacy. The first position concerned a consciousness on the part of leading actors on the impact of soft spaces upon accountability and the need to ensure that the new space was clearly tethered and linked to hard, territorial spaces where democratic processes were situated. Specifically, Ashford and Cambridge and Strasbourg-Kehl had put in place arrangements to link strategy making and decision taking across territorial boundaries back to the constituent bodies. There are two points worth emphasising in relation to the care in linking soft and hard spaces in this way. The first concerns the need for concrete outcomes from the hard, territorial spaces in the form of regulatory decisions. In both Ashford and Cambridge, for example, the growth strategies needed to be ‘made real’ through decisions to permit development to proceed. The second point concerns the origin of soft spaces. It would seem that those spaces that are publicly initiated as vehicles to overcome the drawbacks of territorial spaces have a greater sensitivity to accountability and transparency issues.

The second category concerns those soft spaces that were conscious of issues around accountability though were less concerned, if at all, by the consequences or implications. Sillon lorrain and the southern part of the Randstad both sought to influence the strategies and decisions of other bodies, bodies that experienced various governance constellations that included democratic processes. Coordinating and integrating territorial strategies and governance arrangements through more strategic soft spaces is a political process in and of itself and one that can evolve and be presented in a variety of ways for different audiences. One of the
advantages of soft spaces in such circumstances is their flexibility and ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and audiences. Finally, there are those spaces where direct electoral accountability and associated territorial governance processes are to be avoided.

We are thinking here of two examples: the privately led Atlantic Gateway and the publicly led island of Ireland. In the former case the scale and strategic nature of the space was initiated to change the mindset of a multitude of disparate public and private actors and interests. Political actors could engage with the new body and somehow reflect a democratic link, but they need to respect the legal duties of being a director of a private company; they could not represent all local governments in the affected area, nor could they be held accountable at the ballot box. In the Irish case there are sensitive, historic reasons to avoid specificity. The key to such soft spaces was the ability to inspire, motivate and effect change without engaging in contentious actions that might challenge the new imaginary or narrative.

It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. There is a degree of overlap in how the various spaces and governance approaches related to issues of accountability and transparency, usually related to timescale. There are different expectations and functions for soft spaces, as they shift from changing attitudes and influencing the approaches of others to the need for more concrete impacts and outcomes.

What we begin to see is a pattern of widespread and differentiated selectivities in how soft space interventions are structured to privilege certain interests over others and certain policy interventions over others. In other words, they do not all work in the same way. Yet there does appear to be a broad pattern that suggests itself. The main winners in most soft space arrangements are those who purport to support development interests, be these private sector leaders directly, government development agencies or representative organisations for particular sections of private capital, such as chambers of commerce or sector bodies. By contrast, trade unions are often absent from the formal boards of soft space governance bodies, or are very much in a minority. Likewise, those who might purport to represent civil society interests in some way tend to be in a minority, if present at all. More typically we see representatives of a variety of other interests, such as those leading universities and colleges, utility companies and other major infrastructure providers, or sometimes those representing the cultural sector.

At a sectoral level, policy interventions in the economic development, housing and infrastructure development spheres all emerged as central concerns for most soft spaces. We also encountered a number of environmental soft spaces which contained a strong link to economic development rationales, primarily around providing a good quality of life for those seeking to invest in or work in a region. Rather lost from sight were issues around social deprivation and poverty, difficult issues which by and large were left to the domain of statutory government, with the risks of failure seemingly too high to allow them to become an overt part of the strategising of most of the soft spaces we examined. At the same time, however, the broad goals of addressing problems around worklessness and unemployment
were often important elements of the justification found in soft space strategies, but direct interventions around addressing localised causes of poverty were few and far between.

These selectivities simultaneously reflect, reproduce, mask and help legitimate the ways in which soft spaces of governance are inserted into broader structures of government and governance in ways that not merely unsettle existing practices and procedures, but also potentially undermine agreements made in more democratically accountable fora. In addition, the very rationale of most soft spaces is to increase flows of investment support and often decentralised decision-making powers from central government, which may be lauded by the recipients as examples of devolution in action and by detractors as a legitimisation process for distorting flows of money in ways that privilege the already powerful and well resourced, sometimes seemingly at the expense of local government as central governments preferred to privilege other delivery bodies. One of the ironies of many of the soft governance arrangements we have studied here is that they are frequently legitimated as overcoming problems within the existing democratic settlement, whilst creating new forms of governance bodies whose accountability tends to be through managerialist forms of accountability – reporting on outcomes of expenditure against targets to government paymasters for instance, whilst remaining largely invulnerable to challenges from the general public to their modus operandi and setting of priorities.

Soft spaces in Europe – similarities and differences

Soft spaces are largely a phenomenon of the past thirty years of experiments in new ways of ‘doing’ governance. Of their very nature they are experimental and often survive for relatively short periods of time. Yet their significance taken in total should not be underestimated. They are the outcome in part of a thoroughgoing critique of the state and its failure to deliver on the strategies that governments ostensibly commit themselves to in the fields of planning, urban regeneration and local and regional economic development. They in effect represent a fundamental challenge to our understanding of how spatial development has been undertaken in recent years, with a shift away from the dominance of state-led programmes and formal planning strategies to more hybridised forms of intervention, where the role of the state in strategy making and policy delivery has been fundamentally reconfigured, not simply by the much remarked-upon tendency to shrink the direct delivery work of the state and greater reliance on private actors to deliver policy, but by a more fundamental ceding of powers that has challenged the legitimacy and capacity of the local state in particular to deliver, by introducing a wide range of parallel mechanisms of uncertain authority, legitimacy and duration, but which are nonetheless empowered to act the vanguard for new modes of state intervention in improving the fortunes of local areas. That in effect is what soft spaces are often challenged with doing.

All our case studies indicate that soft spaces are clearly new spatial governance arrangements of significance, allowing the involved actors more room for
manoeuvre, i.e. to expand their competences, to set new impulses or to implement projects. It is no coincidence in this respect that much of the work of some soft spaces is contracted out to private consultants, able to draw on their experience of working with similar initiatives elsewhere, and creating a modus operandi where global gurus or consortia of local and international consultancies are brought in, who will typically seek to find out more about local context and histories whilst bringing in ‘fresh thinking’ from the outside. Examples here include the consultants informing the work of the Atlantic Gateway and the extensive use made of consultants during the New Labour era in England to work on, for instance, the Northern Way and city-regional documents (Haughton et al., 2010). The close involvement of Harvard University in the International Centre for Local and Regional Development in Ireland is arguably another example of this phenomenon. The result, according to Peck (2011: 773–4), is that:

Contemporary policy-making processes have promiscuously spilled over jurisdictional boundaries, both ‘horizontally’ (between national and local political entities) and ‘vertically’ (between hierarchically scaled institutions and domains). They also seem to be accelerating, as measured by the shortening of policy development cycles and the intensity of cross-jurisdictional exchanges. Today’s ‘fast-policy’ regimes are characterized by the pragmatic borrowing of ‘policies that work’, by compressed reform horizons, by iterative constructions of best practice, by enlarged roles for intermediaries as ‘pushers’ of policy routines and technologies, and by a growing reliance on prescriptively coded forms of front-loaded advice and evaluation science.

Soft spaces operate at a variety of scales and across boundaries despite different institutional, legal and political contexts. Our case studies reveal that scale is crucial, as it varies by theme and time, involving a ‘particular theme or subject around which the actors have formed a coalition’ and developed specific governance arrangements (Janssen-Jansen and Hutton, 2011: 307; see also Faludi, 2013: 1303). In this regard it obviously does not matter if soft spaces have fuzzy boundaries (e.g. Merseybelt or Fehmarnbelt) or if soft space governance arrangements occur within clear and hard boundaries (e.g. Strasbourg-Ortenau or Hamburg Metropolitan Region); what is important seems to be that there is space left for flexibility in terms of scale, actors, subject and governance arrangements. However, the examples of the Hamburg Metropolitan Region, Fehmarnbelt region, Merseybelt region and the southern part of the Randstad also indicate that there are many overlapping and competing soft spaces at work. This might help to explain why local and regional boundaries in our case studies seem to be at least as significant as barriers to cooperation as national borders.

The case studies furthermore indicate multiple forms of rationality in the use of soft spaces, including the need to overcome mismatches between the formal scales of government and functional relations in daily policy and practice or strategic approaches to establish imaginaries. These rationales often work simultaneously. However, there seems to be a difference between city-regions within a
nation-state and cross-border regions: the symbolic gesture of creating new spatial imaginaries seems to be particularly important in those of our case studies involving cross-border regions, or regions with a history of cultural antagonisms.

Our case study selection sought to highlight a range of scales and uses for soft spaces in some north-west European countries. However, our selection of case study soft spaces is inevitably partial. There are many more instances of soft spaces and this makes it difficult to point definitively to national differences. However, the case studies indicate that different institutional settings or planning cultures (see Chapter 1) do often play a vital role when implementing soft spaces. Looking at the examples of Sillon lorrain and, to a lesser extent, Strasbourg-Ortenau, it seems that the French interpretation of soft spaces is often associated with the search for new institutional solutions linked to formal borders and powers. In this sense, soft space governance could best be described as governance within the system aiming at the reform of existing institutional or political-administrative structures. In England, soft spaces are often viewed as an opportunity to involve private actors more actively and to deliver certain policy objectives.

One expression of this understanding concerns the new neighbourhood plans, where self-identified communities can prepare plans within and across the territorial boundaries of local authorities. This also means that, in contrast to the French examples where public authorities have the lead, private actors have a vibrant role when setting the agenda for soft spaces, particularly with regard to scale, subjects and governance modes. The examples of the Hamburg Metropolitan Region and the southern part of the Randstad furthermore indicate that soft spaces in Germany and the Netherlands comprise informal and voluntary collaboration on issues that do not directly affect the jurisdiction of local or regional public authorities. Here, this can also be observed in the Ireland/Northern Ireland case study, soft spaces are used for the purpose of additional tasks and responsibilities, including the involvement of private actors.

Another distinctive feature relating to national differences can be found with regard to neoliberal agendas as drivers for soft spaces. The neoliberal ideology, including the primacy of market logics and the necessity of governments being refocused on the pursuit of economic growth, resulted in a competitive localism (see also Chapter 1) in which soft spaces seem to play a major role. This is particularly true for England as the examples of Ashford and Cambridge as well as the Merseybelt indicate. The opportunity to develop neighbourhood plans that represent a soft space is another manifestation of the neoliberal ideology. In Germany and the Netherlands, neoliberalism is also influencing the political agenda and planning principles and processes (Waterhout et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, looking at the examples of the Hamburg Metropolitan Region and the governance arrangements in the southern part of the Randstad, soft spaces seem not inevitably or predominantly linked to a neoliberal agenda. It seems that soft spaces are regarded more as an opportunity for the public sector to prohibit certain unwanted developments and to protect the environment, something that spatial planning is often restricted in achieving, whilst also stimulating certain developments or implementing projects in a more proactive way. This seems to
be complementary to the competences and boundaries of local authorities, often emphasising issues such as sustainability and accessibility, and is not strictly restricted to a neoliberal agenda for private sector-led growth.

**Some concluding thoughts**

This research demonstrates how any evaluation of spatial governance and planning in Europe that focused solely upon the ‘hard spaces’ would be misleading and partial. A full picture needs to take on board the new generation of ‘soft spaces’ of governance. The importance of this is that many of the rhetorical justifications for creating soft spaces are based on claims that existing arrangements for planning are not working well and that therefore something extra is needed. In some cases this might involve parallel calls to reform statutory planning – governments in the UK and the Netherlands in particular seem to be endlessly involved in ‘reinventing’ planning for political purposes. Similar discussions can be observed at the level of the European Union. Following Faludi (2010), Europe itself constitutes a soft space with fuzzy boundaries. It is not surprising then that the implementation of European strategies for territorial cooperation or of macro-regional strategies, such as the Baltic Sea Strategy and the Danube Strategy, also represent various types and scales of soft spaces (Stead, 2014). Both the strategies for territorial cooperation and the macro-regional strategies have in common that they provide another example of cross-border, functional planning linked to attempts by the EU to fuzzy national boundaries and jurisdictions.

However, there is little or no evidence from any of our case studies that soft spaces are somehow more effective, producing speedier or better-quality outcomes. This is in part because they necessarily still rely on using the statutory planning systems to get most large-scale development projects approved, so it is not a case of either/or soft and hard spaces – they are always working in tandem. The better question to ask in this respect is whether they are working better than might have been the case if the new arrangements had not been created, and this kind of counterfactual of course can never be answered accurately and is always subject to selective interpretation by those who attempt to provide answers.

In terms of process, soft spaces can be seen as both more inclusionary and exclusionary. Certain stakeholders will get a stronger say in shaping policy, whilst others will find themselves excluded. So stakeholders willing to buy into the prevailing philosophy of a particular mode of intervention envisaged for a soft space may benefit, whilst those who find it incomprehensible, unacceptable or too little may find themselves excluded (Haughton et al., 2013). Some soft spaces seem to involve an inordinate amount of effort on the part of those involved to justify their accountability, both democratic and more generally in terms of wanting to be seen as more than a group of cronies trying to siphon money towards their favoured causes.

The people who are most likely to ‘buy in’ to soft space governance as an idea and to the strategies they create tend to be those selected interests who are invited to the top table: business leaders, university and college principals, and others
who would otherwise not have a direct role in shaping local strategy making. Alternatively, the general public is often less interested in the ‘larger than local’ strategy-making activities of bodies that are not directly mandated by the state or elected by the public, for reasons as diverse as simply being unaware of these large-scale strategies or, if aware, not realising fully how they might impact on their lives or might be shaping strategies that are then formulated at a more local scale.

In a similar vein, for all the claims of being more strategic than local government, which is often portrayed as overly reliant on the whims of electoral cycles and tending to work in policy silos, in truth soft spaces too must operate with political cycles that can hugely impact on their activities, whilst some of the partners in the governance arrangements may well be sensitive to maintaining their rights to veto policies that might adversely impact on their particular domains. It is easy to romanticise soft spaces as a break from the rigidities of the formal government sector, without recognising that many of them end up unwittingly creating new rigidities after their own image, as they exclude certain voices and certain policy possibilities from consideration.

To conclude, where soft spaces work best may well be where they are overt about the need to overcome the obstacles created by specific political, legal and cultural boundaries. That is where they are explicitly identifying and attempting to find solutions to particular boundary effects. Where they are at their most insidious and most contentious is when actors claim not to be involved in this kind of boundary work, allowing them to duck awkward issues around who is in and who is out of particular arrangements, what is being negotiated over and what is being excluded from consideration, and the patterns of winners and losers that necessarily stem from such selectivities.

One absent theme in most if not of all our soft space case study examples was an overt focus on the poorest and least empowered in society. This is not to say they are not considered and not referred to, but typically when they are it is as beneficiaries of hoped-for trickle-down effects, with better training, jobs or housing anticipated for them. It is only when impacts on the less well-off are formally integrated as part of the anticipated evaluation criteria for soft spaces that we will know that this is more than lip service.

References


