

The underestimated Airport Region: Reflecting on Planning Policies in the Airport Regions of Amsterdam, Barcelona and Munich

In Aerlines Magazine issue 40, Michel van Wijk wrote about the development of airport regions and about the challenges spatial planners face that come with this development. He elaborated on this by making an institutional comparison between Schiphol and Frankfurt airport. He concluded that institutional settings are predominantly determined by the local situation, and he also concluded that learning from other success stories is easier said than done. We in turn emphasize the importance of emerging airport regions, which are still often overlooked by planners and policymakers. However, we think striking resemblances can be found between airport regions. By comparing the airport regions of Amsterdam, Barcelona and Munich, it becomes clear which common planning issues exist around contemporary airports, and to what extent planning can reduce the level of local and global complexity, and to what extent it can deal with the current multi-level dynamics of airport regions.

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The Complex Articulation of Global and Local Dynamics

Continually globalizing forces have formed a new reality. A reality that is characterized by an increasing and paradoxical worldwide interdependency that is blurring and redefining boundaries, flows of people, products, services, capital and information. This means that traditionally fixed and geographical regularities become less and less relevant. Spatial contiguity is no longer an exclusive precondition for social and economic interaction. At the same time, economic and social shifts enter the domain of national politics, elite networks, lobby groups and social movements, stretching between and across cities, regions and even countries (Dicken 2004, Boelens 2005). Established policy discourses are challenged, traditional arenas and government networks questioned, and actors search for new relationships with other stakeholders in both economic and socio-cultural spheres (de Jong 2008). In this sense, the economic and institutional landscape has changed dramatically.

Connectivity becomes of increasingly strategic importance in this global competition of locations. Airports as nodes between the global and the local are thus becoming crucial locations within global city regions (Schaafsma 2008). In this way, airports seem to be fragmented into the material organization of time-sharing practices that work through flows on the one hand, and ecologically-rooted and historically-rooted spatial organizations that dominate bounded geographical spaces on the other: a phenomenon that we will call “glocal complexity” (de Jong 2008). At first, having discovered the advantages of being hotspots in metropolitan regions and having been triggered by the volatile disposition of the aviation industry, airports began to operate more and more like private companies by offering ‘urban services’ such as shopping, entertainment and real estate. These ‘urban services’, combined with traditional airport-related activities and the emergence of the airport as multi-modal transport node, can be defined as the ‘airport city’ (Güller and Güller 2003, van Wijk 2008).

	AAS and Region	BCN and Region	MUC and Region
Passengers 2007	47.8 Million	32.8 Million	34 Million
Cargo 2007	1.610.282 tonnes	96.700 Tonnes	251,100 Tonnes
Movements 2007	435,973	352,489	431,8
Dominant Airline 2007	KLM-Air France	Iberia and Spanair	Lufthansa
Dominant Alliance 2007	Sky Team	One World and Star Alliance	Star Alliance
Dominant Low-Cost Carrier	Easy Jet	Clickair and Vueling	AirBerlin
Airport Manager	Schiphol Group ((Shareholder: Dutch State, city of Amsterdam, city of Rotterdam)	AENA ((100 percent: Estate Government))	Flughafen München Gesellschaft (Shareholder: Bavarian State, the Federal Republic of Germany, city of Munich
Distance from the city	6 km	10 km	30 km
Area of the airport	2,878 ha	1,533 ha	1,560 ha
Airport status	Intercontinental hub	No hub-function, lack of intercontinental connections	Secondary hub airport
Institutional framework	Decentralized, but with strong enabling legislation	Top-down, no local or regional involvement	Strongly decentralized, sector orientated
Spatial economic framework	Airport city	Airport city under development	Airport corridor
Airport region	Airport region concept hardly exists. Regional enabling legislations concerning spatial planning and noise hindrance do exist	Delta Plan not really enhancing coordination among projects, important noise disruptions	Airport region concept hardly exists, so far a great challenge for the responsible actors
Main Gaps in traditional planning	Excessive governance, climate of distrust, no general development strategy	Excessive freedom of municipalities in land-use planning, rigid and out-moded airport master planning	Sector oriented, not dealing with the spatial conflicts, no growth management for airport region

Table 1: Comparison between the three airport regions.
Source: the Authors

However, large international airports are becoming more than airport cities as their impact reaches far beyond the airport premises, affecting the wider region. Airports evolve into greater airport areas, which we will call airport regions. Still, the potential of this new functional region is not used to its fullest extent: ‘the airport is often considered as a gateway to the world, but not as a gateway to the city region’ (Hartwig 2000: 66). Schaafsma (2008: 78) endorses this conclusion as airport regions ‘are a new reality, often still overlooked by planners and policy-makers’. We will underpin these conclusions by analyzing three European airports and their regions: Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, Barcelona International Airport, and Munich Airport International. Although the airports differ from each other when it comes to physical, institutional and spatial economic appearance (table 1), interesting similarities can be found when it comes to spatial planning on an airport-regional scale. Our hypothesis is that traditional planning approaches do not seem capable of dealing with glocal complexity that influences major airport regions worldwide. This lack of awareness can trigger conflicts for future expansions and other complex spatial developments. Afterwards, we will discuss to what extent planners can cope with the new glocal situation by finding a balance between local and global interests.

The Airport Region of Amsterdam

Amsterdam Airport Schiphol (AMS from now on) was originally founded as a military airfield in 1916. Nowadays, Schiphol is an important intercontinental hub, and handled 47.8 million passengers in 2007 (Schiphol Group, 2008). AMS actually lies within the boundaries of the municipality of Haarlemmermeer, but is normally perceived as being part of the greater metropolitan area of Amsterdam. The effects of the airport on its direct surroundings are enormous: from noise nuisance to spatial restrictions, to the creation of jobs and international competitiveness. For example, 755,896 complaints were registered in 2006. In that same year, AMS generated more than 61,000 direct jobs

and even more indirect jobs in the region, especially in trade, logistics and general business services. Furthermore, the airport city concept has attracted several European headquarters and distribution centers in the region (Regioplan 2007, Ministry of VROM 2006). However, clear regional policies are lacking, and, in the cases where they exist, regional policies are characterized by enabling acts as there is a constant tension between international competitiveness and regional noise nuisance. These more or less paradoxical matters have been brought together in the so-called ‘dual objectives’, which state that economic development should be feasible without ecological deterioration. Yet, there appears to be a gap between national ambitions with regard to AMS as stipulated in national acts and traditional planning approaches, and the actual daily airport affairs where global and local interests collide and come together. The enormous importance of the airport for Dutch prosperity in the global network economy is stressed, but, at the same time, no one wants to take full responsibility for this tricky political issue. The last five years have been hectic: the new runway has come into operation, the total amount of complaints has increased considerably, and political dissension and a climate of distrust has arisen. Schiphol has therefore become an emotionally charged topic with a growing number of parties involved in the decision-making process. The concerned actors are divided over four ministries, three provincial authorities, several municipalities, different airport coalitions, airport operators and airport users, commercial actors, advisory organizations and other actors (van Wijk 2007, Andere Overheid 2005). Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that actors to whom new developments would prove to be very helpful believe that the national government is rigid and indecisive, and that actors to whom sustainable development would prove to be very helpful are under the impression that economic growth is more important than livability. More remarkable is the fact that the concerned actors admit that the same parties keep running into each other in various committees, and that none of them



Figure 1: Amsterdam Airport Schiphol.
Source: Schiphol Beeldbank, 2007

seem to be able to decide which committee is really relevant and which one is not (Andere Overheid 2005). Finally, the role of the airport operator, Schiphol Group, is somewhat ambiguous. Officially, the organization is state-owned, but, in practice, Schiphol Group acts like a private company with commercial interests. Public and private interests seem to be intertwined.

The disturbed relationships have an impact on the policy-making process. While concerned actors try to solve the crisis of confidence by forming new deliberative bodies, excessive governance arises by doing so, which means there is simply too much co-ordination that is seen as oppressive and obstructive (Cerfontaine 2006). Thus, there are many actors concerned with Schiphol, and severe dissension has arisen between them. Put all together, this results in a lack of trust, in unclear roles and in a policy-making patchwork quilt (van Wijk 2007). Prevailing policies seem not able to solve this political stalemate. They are mostly characterized by ad-hoc decision-making, typical Not-In-My-Back-Yard behavior, and by a lack of collaboration when it comes to spatial developments.

The Airport Region of Barcelona

Barcelona airport (BCN from now on) is located 10 kilometers from the city of Barcelona in the delta of the Llobregat river in the municipality of el Prat de Llobregat. Passenger traffic has grown by more than 100 percent since Barcelona staged the Olympic Games in 1992, from 10 million passengers to 33 million passengers in 2007. Moreover, the Barcelona-Madrid air shuttle service is the busiest city-pair connection in the world (OAG 2006). Currently, the airport is finishing its expansion plan (AENA and Ministerio de Fomento 1999). The main improvements are a new third runway near the coastline (already in operation since 2004), a new terminal building between the two parallel runways, a people mover for inter-terminal transits, new maintenance and cargo areas and a new airport city business district. All these investments will be finished by 2009 and will allow capacity to rise from 23 to 52 million passengers a year, and from 52 operations per hour to 90 operations per hour. The BCN enlargement project is part of a wider regional infrastruc-

ture project, called Delta Plan. The Delta plan, also marketed as the Euro-gate, is an agreement for cooperation in the infrastructure and natural environment of the Llobregat River Delta; so, although it is called a plan, it is basically a cooperation agreement to open a political opportunity window to permit the realization of all the strategic infrastructures planned by different administrations in the delta area. The Delta Plan wants to take advantage of the synergies created by the Airport and the Port, as well as by the train and road networks, to consolidate Barcelona Metropolitan Region as the most important center in the Mediterranean Axis (Suau-Sanchez 2007).

The problems of BCN are very much influenced and motivated by traditional planning approaches concerning both the airport and the region. Airport management in Spain presents itself as a top-down structure without any institutionalized bottom-up influence. Besides, the airport operator AENA (Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aérea), an entity that is fully dependent on the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructures (Ministerio de Fomento), has never shown any sort of market-oriented flexible airport planning or anticipation of future developments. AENA's master plans mainly base their development choices on simple forecasting figures. Furthermore, very large infrastructural developments need years before consensus is reached among actors and realization, usually more than a decade, hence AENA and BCN are late to meet the needs for airport infrastructure in the region.

While the airport institutional framework presents itself as a monopolistic model in which only one actor takes all management decisions (AENA), the regional spatial framework appears to be a complicated and intricate web of relationships. Municipalities are free to develop their own land without important restrictions. As often has happened, pushed by the need of more funding, municipalities develop land to obtain short-term benefits without taking into account the regional needs or the long-term consequences. Apart from this fragmented map in the decision-making process, noise hindrance is a serious problem as municipalities and local communities seem to be well organized, but there is almost no communication between AENA and inhabitants.

The Airport Region of Munich

Munich Airport International (MUC from now on), inaugurated in 1992, is a young airport and one of the 35 airports within Germany's strong decentralized airport system (Initiative Luftverkehr für Deutschland 2006). Among these airports, there are two hub airports, Frankfurt and Munich, which together deal with 48 percent of the 174 million passengers in Germany. Having had a 10.4 percent passenger growth in 2007, MUC is actually one of the fastest growing airports in Europe. An airport corridor can be distinguished between the city of Munich and the airport. The corridor is very important for the economic development of the metropolitan region of Munich. Many global players, like Microsoft and General Electric, are located in that corridor. Most of the municipalities located in the corridor experience enormous job growth that is above the regional average, both in relative terms and in absolute terms. Hence, the airport



Figure 2 Munich Airport, 2005. Source: Flughafen München Gesellschaft Photo Department.

region arises as an attractive location within the metropolitan region of Munich, particularly for high-tech firms (Droß and Thierstein 2007). However, it also causes hindrance. A striking result of a recently held survey in the airport vicinity was that people found traffic noise just as annoying as aircraft noise. An even more striking result of the survey was that the population of the airport vicinity feared a declining quality of life because of rising air traffic and road traffic (Flughafen München 2004). So, these are the first emerging signs of conflict because of growth and development.

The regional plans lay down the airport expansion and want to control the economic effects of the airport by directing these effects to certain districts of the airport region. The Munich regional plan contains one forthright objective for the airport region. It stipulates that in particular the rural part of the surrounding area should profit from the economic effects of the airport (Regionalplan München, Raumstrukturelle Entwicklung). The regional planning program of Bavaria states that improving the accessibility of the region is important for the development of the Munich metropolitan area. Furthermore, the capacity of the airport should be enhanced and its position as a European hub airport should be assured (LEP Bayern). Both plans focus on to economic objectives when it comes to the airport region. The municipalities develop their areas individually and seem to dislike future growth. There are two municipal collaborations in the airport region. The “North Alliance” is a collaboration of eight municipalities within the corridor between the city of Munich and the airport. In the past, the alliance tried to block further infrastructural expansions, but they seem to promote themselves

more recently (Droß and Thierstein 2007). The other municipal collaboration links together the two administrative districts of Freising and Erding, in which the airport is situated, their capitals and the airport company. The association tries to integrate all relevant groups, strengthen the regional identity, to set up a network between the regional actors and existing projects and to start new projects. The projects of the joint venture mainly focus on marketing issues (Airfolgsregion 2007).

The airport region of Munich has shown a tremendous growth in recent years. This has resulted in additional conflicts next to aircraft noise and airport expansions: traffic congestion, and a growing population as a result of urban sprawl. However, these conflicts are mostly not on the agenda of the planning authorities. Even regional planning only focuses on economic objectives of the airport region. Regional planning lacks focus on growth-related conflicts, which emerge as a result of growing traffic, and on the expenses of the growing population and the chosen land-use model.

Conclusions

Having analyzed the three cases, we can identify several similarities that confirm that traditional planning is not able to cope with the complexity described. The gaps we can identify are: a) There is an excessive number of plans, which are sometimes superposed, but do not fit together. Plans of different hierarchic levels are not correctly interlaced, and regional plans that are presented as comprehensive tools lack executory power or lack comprehensiveness. b) Crucial spatial development conflicts are not linked together. The responsible institutions seem to deal

with spatial conflicts in a very sectoral way. c) There are many actors that influence and are influenced by the airport region that are not involved in the planning and management process. d) Round tables where actors meet do not result in a common vision and strategy for the airport and the region; however, they become new arenas for conflict. e) Airport operators see local actors as a threat and vice versa; however, the success of both parties depends on collaboration and the search for synergies. f) There is a lack of long-term strategies and long-term agreements between actors. These identified gaps lead to very complex scenarios: a big puzzle of different issues that are interrelated on different time and space scales, and that involve different actors. These gaps make it very difficult to face the current and future challenges that arise in airport regions.

We state that there is a need for new spatial development policies for airport regions, which should include strategies that incorporate all crucial spatial development conflicts and concerned actors. The core issues should be analyzed and linked together. There are often far more interrelations than can be seen at first glance. This development strategy should be the result of a consulting process involving all responsible and affected actors. This does not mean that a common vision for the airport region is needed per se, as our case studies have shown that airport regions are characterized by an abundance of incompatible interests. Instead, we believe that the recognition of both economic competitiveness and environmental deterioration in the airport region, but a lack of decisiveness to link these paradoxical issues, means that more relational policies are becoming a necessary approach to sustainable planning. In order to do so, recognition of the importance of the airport region as a functional region becomes vital. Unfortunately, this new reality is often overlooked or underestimated by planners and policy-makers. Furthermore, effective strategies to deal with complex dynamics of current, often paradoxical, developments in airport regions should be formed by understanding new relations that emerge as a result of globalization, deregulation, the developing network society, the growing high-tech economy, and the rapid growth of aviation. We should return to the actors themselves: what are their motives, driving forces and goals? What visions do they have and how do they want to implement them? Which new leading actors can be distinguished and how can they be interested in the wake of a wider set of constellations? It requires an entirely new sort of airport planning, which has to be approached bottom-up, on different scales, in specific and promising relational arenas to eventually formulate desired strategic links and relationships, which will strengthen the desired long-term performance of airport regions in economical, social and ecological terms.

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