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Mobilising post-political environments: tracing the selective geographies of Swedish sustainable urban development

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ABSTRACT
This paper develops an analytical framework from which to understand the mobilisation of post-political urban environments across spatial and institutional contexts. Our analysis of two closely related cases from a Swedish context reveals the potential benefits of combining studies on urban political ecology and policy mobility. By utilising Actor-Network Theory (ANT) we illustrate how post-political environments that are shaped by mobile and mutating policies of sustainable urban development are stabilised through distinct discursive strategies, capital investments and the desire for increased influence within global frames of action and contribute to the creation of, what we call, selective geographies.

KEYWORDS
Post-political environments; policy mobilities; sustainable urban development; urban political ecology; actor-network theory

Introduction: post-political environments and the promise of sustainable urban development

Narratives that emphasise a planetary urbanisation process (see Brenner 2014) in the wake of climate change (Bulkeley, Castán Broto, and Edwards 2015) can today be found in a wide range of global political, public and academic discourses. Introduced by the Brundtland Report, the concept of sustainable development has been showcased as a way to tackle the challenges posed by climate change in a way that does not cause harm to future generations (see WCED 1987). Since its introduction, sustainability has become an integral part of everyday life and political consciousness, which is constantly (re)invoked by international events such as the Rio Conference, the Paris Climate Summit, and popular movies such as Al Gore’s: An Inconvenient Truth. While awareness of climate change began to rise, scholars stressed that cities also saw themselves as increasingly engaged in a global inter-city competition on developing strategies and concepts to tackle challenges posed by climate change whilst stimulating urban economic growth (Peck and Theodore 2010; Ward 2013). As a consequence cities were caught up in a position where climate change was meant to be combated while a city’s attractiveness for capital investors needed to be secured and enhanced. Although divergent in its spatial application, the sustainable city model ought to position cities within a global neo-liberal framework under the conditions and challenges...
posed by climate change (cf. Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013). The material articulations of this process can be observed in cities like Vancouver or Barcelona which established themselves as models for sustainable urban development, resulting in buzzwords such as Vancouverism (McCann 2011) and the Barcelona model (Degen and García 2012). Within a Swedish context, a number of scholars have articulated a critique of Swedish sustainable urban development as a consensus-oriented and post-political approach towards urban development (e.g. Hult 2013; Saldert 2017; Tunström and Bradley 2014).

In recent years, a vast body of research (mainly in the field of urban political ecology) has been concerned with post-political configurations of urban environments that are induced by the politics of sustainable urban development (see Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Hagerman 2007; Swyngedouw 2009, 2015). In their work, urban political ecology scholars highlight urban environments as power-laden assemblages that materialise certain narratives while negating others. This underlying distinction is for example emphasized by Swyngedouw (2015) who criticises that ‘[t]here is no contestation over the givens of a situation, over the partition of the sensible, there is only debate over technologies of management, timing of their implementation, arrangements of policy and the interests of those whose voices are recognised as legitimate’ (Swyngedouw 2015, 138). To put it differently, urban political ecology discusses current urban environments as post-political constructs that are designed upon a common sense ideology.

Despite its conceptual development over the last years, urban political ecology remains primarily concerned with the sustainability of cities. Hence, throughout this paper we will refer to ‘sustainability’ as a specific technique to reconfigure, in our case, urban environments (here understood in a general sense) into entities such as ‘the sustainable City’. In contrast, research conducted within the field of policy mobilities has begun to challenge the territorial limitations of the city by emphasising a relational approach in regard to the mobile character of policies between cities and institutions and by drawing attention to the mobilisation and mutation of policies across geographical scales (see Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; McCann and Ward 2012; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2013; Ward 2013). Examining the geographies of policies (here understood as spatial relations) in such a way, this sort of literature provides a nuanced starting point of analysis from which the heterogeneous relations which continuously (re)produce post-political narratives of the sustainable City can be traced. However, while the work of scholars such as McCann (2011) and Degen and Garcia (2012) is based on a profound understanding of how cities became sites of best practice, the diffuse mobilisation and problematisation of the sustainable City is only marginally alluded to.

Hence, we can observe a conceptual gap between these two strands of literature, urban political ecology and policy mobilities studies, which results in a lack of theoretical consideration regarding the spatial fixture and mobility of post-political environments. In order to bridge these two strands of literature, we suggest an analytical framework based on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), since ANT offers a conceptual approach to address the constitution of post-political environments of and between cities.

One underlying tenet of ANT is that what becomes political is a matter of what is made political through relations (Müller 2015, 31). This relational approach to the political encourages us to investigate the construction, mobilisation and stabilisation of post-political urban environments and their geographies. To that end, two Swedish key projects of sustainable urban development, namely SymbioCity (SC) and the SymbioCity approach (SCa), serve as closely related and comparative examples from which we trace the
heterogeneous relations that contribute to the spread of Swedish sustainable urban development policies across spatial and institutional contexts. In this regard, our paper is inspired by the research conducted by Hult (2017). In her dissertation Hult has investigated the circulation of SC in regards to the (re)constitution of power-relations between Sweden and China (see Hult 2017). By comparing the spatial and institutional spread of SC and the SCa we aim to expand on Hult’s approach by analysing how varying rationalities behind the spread of these different sustainable urban development policies contribute to the creation and spread of post-political environments.

For this purpose, we discuss the role of the actors involved in the SC/SCa actor-network, the (post) political character of the environments envisioned by those actors, and the ways in which these environments are mobilised and legitimised across spatial and institutional contexts. To examine these phenomena, we utilise discourse analytical techniques as well as semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from the SC/SCa actor-network.

Before engaging with the two cases however, we will develop theoretical and methodological underpinnings for our analytical framework from which they will be investigated. After the analysis of the two cases we discuss these empirical findings in regard to constructing and mobilising post-political urban environments. In conclusion we argue that by utilising ANT in order to bring urban political ecology and policy mobilities studies into the conversation, our findings demonstrate how post-political environments, such as sustainable City are constituted, mobilised and upheld across various spatial contexts through heterogeneous relations between different actors.

**Analysing post-political environments by translating the black box of sustainable urban development**

One of the main claims of ANT is that only through the formation of relations (between humans and non-humans alike) acting becomes possible (Law 2009; Müller 2015). Through this multitude of relations, heterogeneous networks are formed in which socio-material environments are co-created and enacted (see Mol 1999). The heterogeneity of these networks is characterised by actors (social, technical and natural) and their relations which are constantly (re)negotiated (Law 2006, 51). Considering the formation of socio-material environments in this light allows for an investigation of the ways of translation by which these socio-material environments are defined, ordered, transformed and understood as common overarching entities such as the Sustainable City (see Law 2009; Mol 2010; Metzger 2011). These overarching entities present a simplification which obscures the relations that define, constitute and legitimise them; in that sense the sustainable City becomes a black box (see Callon and Latour 1981). According to ANT, a black box is understood as the outcome of translation, an entity which has been transformed and packed into an overarching body and that lets heterogeneity appear as homogenate (Callon and Latour 1981, 299).

Following Müller’s (2015) argument about the relational character of making the political we can conceptualise the political as the act that undermines the given social orders that are constructed upon it (through relations) and which leaves room, at least theoretically, for radical dissent (see Rancière 1999). Hence, the political presents the practices which pierce through the hegemonic frame of action; practices outside of the common sense. Politics in contrast, is conceptualised as the institutions, strategies,
actions and procedures by which a diverse set of actors form relations to define answers to an agreed problem (see Rancière 1999; Kaika and Swyngedouw 2012; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014; Swyngedouw 2015). Post-politicisation can then be conceived as apolitics in which techno-managerial planning interventions, expert management and bio-political administration displace ideological struggles and arenas for contestation, or in brief, the political (Swyngedouw 2015, 615).

Consequently, in the understanding of urban political ecology, policies are regarded as spheres which define the scope for the process of post-politicisation through the framing of stakeholders, debates and institutional modalities (see Swyngedouw 2015). Here, the overarching argument relies on the premises that policies which promote urban sustainability, for instance, are based on the consensus of an urgency to act given the dangers posed by climate change (Swyngedouw 2009; De Jong et al. 2015). In this constant state of emergence, sustainability presents the only solution and is therefore difficult to contest due to the lack of alternatives. Rather, modes of management and production which proclaim neo-liberal notions such as eco-modernisation become the matters concerning which dissent is formed (see Kaika and Swyngedouw 2012). Given the ideologies of neo-liberalisation by which cities are positioned in a wider inter-city competition, the urgency of sustainability serves as a valuable branding opportunity (see Hagerman 2007; Cook and Swyngedouw 2012). The global spread and adaptation of sustainable urban development policies can be linked to Rancière’s (1999) understanding of the demos: ‘The demos is that many that is identical to the whole: the many as one, the part as the whole, the all in the all’ (Rancière 1999, 10). The notion of the demos refers to the obscured reality, the reality of the City, the Environment or the Population. The actors who belong to the demos could be described as the demos-community. A community of practice which becomes the community that is able to speak and act but which can only maintain the polis (here understood as the city, which represents a political category) because of its position (see Latour 1999; Rancière 1999). As such, the demos-community brings the obscuration of reality into being and can only exist because it continuously draws on this obscuration to sustain its position. Policies of urban sustainability, through their floating meaning and holistic understanding of development, offer thus a platform for this community on which consensus regarding the possibility of action can be achieved.

Overall, urban political ecology provides a critical perspective about the process of translation by which the black box of the sustainable City is packed. This perspective, however, offers little detailed consideration for the heterogeneous relations by which policies of sustainable urban development are mobilised and enacted upon across spatial and institutional contexts. Through analysing the process of mobilisation, policy mobilities scholars point to the labour which is required for the movement of policies of sustainable urban development. In this vein, Healey refers to ‘the power to travel and translate’ as a labour intense process that requires resources such as capital or time (Healey 2006, 532). She conceptualises mobility not as a pre-given characteristic of policies but rather as the outcome of labour intense and power-laden relations. Applying the notion of power to policies enables policy mobilities research to understand policies as techniques that not only serve a public interest but also (re)produce it and thereby transform frameworks of meaning (Kuus 2014). As Freeman (2012) observed in his studies on health policies: ‘Policy changes as it moves, and the more it moves the more it seems to change (…) It must change in order to move, and it must move in order to exist.’
As such, policies and the actors which mobilise them have to be regarded as mutually constitutive. Thus, mobility is the necessary outcome of translation. The spatial movement of these policies reflects the mechanisms and simplifications made by actors to let policies move in one way rather than another (Freeman 2012, 19). Arguably, mobility and mutation (or translation in the vocabulary of ANT) have to be perceived as mutually constitutive (see McCann 2011; Cochrane and Ward 2012).

When framing policies of urban sustainability as floating signifiers, their mobilisation and mutation across different contexts becomes apparent. However, policies are only able to travel if labour is invested. Labour such as the generation of indicators or benchmarks then becomes necessary for the translation process as it creates consensus over differences (see Temenos and McCann 2012). In this labour-intensive process the imaginary geographies of model cities create spatial linkages associated with good practice judgements which underscore consensual agreement (Ward 2013). In this regard, policies of urban sustainability have to be considered as highly political (see McCann and Ward 2012; Temenos and McCann 2012). However, current processes of post-politicisation tend to render these policies apolitical, since sustainability is not regarded as the object over which political struggle and radical dissent are formed. The post-political character of policies of urban sustainability can be explained in relation to the overarching practices of neo-liberalisation (see Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Peck 2015), since highly adaptable sustainable urban development policies fuel the inter-urban competition for investment, shared discourses of growth and development, jobs as well as the realities of increasing international economic integration (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2013, 1096).

To sum up, policy mobilities and urban political ecology literature help to conceptualise the practices of translation and the frame by which the black box of urban sustainable development is constructed. Literature on urban political ecology enables us specifically to look behind the shining lights of the City and allows us to understand how the translation of different socio-ecological assemblages (such as urban environments or urban communities) was produced to create post-political urban environments. In contrast, policy mobility literature sheds light, particularly on the process by which the sustainable city is mobilised and how the mutation of consensus as well as dissent is organised through heterogeneous relations that bridge spatial and institutional contexts. The theoretical linkage of these two fields through ANT draws attention to the processes which enact and are enacted by the notion of the sustainable City, and the actor-network which upholds this normative concept. As such ANT informs our analytical framework to understand the mutual constitution of process and structure as well as the multitude of actions embedded in an overall frame of consensus. As our two case studies will show, this perspective conceptualises the translations of specific schemes concerning Swedish sustainable urban development as outcomes of relations which shape the conditions under which consensus and dissent are formed, mobilised and upheld across spatial and institutional contexts.

**Methodological notes**

Investigating the making, mobilisation and mutation of post-political environments demands methodological sensitivity to the multiple constitutions of mobility and fixture
regarding notions about sustainable urban development. To account for this duality we utilise discourse analytical techniques and semi-structured interviews, revealing the heterogeneous relations (between humans and non-humans) which constitute the hegemonic frame of action.

Specially, the application of discourse analysis sheds light onto the production of post-political urban environments through normative Swedish images about sustainable urban development. For that purpose, we draw upon a Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse Analysis (SKAD) to link actors involved in the field of sustainable urban development to their discursive translation of knowledge. By linking social actors to discursive practices SKAD bridges the gap between language and its users; a gap which becomes most apparent in studies on critical discourse analysis within linguistic studies (see Fairclough 1995). Hence, in contrast to critical discourse analysis, SKAD puts emphasis on the production of knowledge, as it investigates the process of generating, objectifying and institutionalising knowledge as objective reality (see Keller 2005). In the context of our research, SKAD has been chosen because it provides insights into the infrastructures of discursive knowledge production and problem solving within SC and the SCA (see Keller 2012). Furthermore, SKAD suggests that these infrastructures are in turn sustained and expanded by the institutions which are part of the actor-network (in our case the SC/SCa actor-network, cf. Figure 2). Hence, by applying a SKAD we are able to analyse the mutual constitution of institutions (related to SC and the SCA) and their associated knowledge infrastructures in the field of sustainable urban development. For this kind of discourse analysis, a number of documents were analysed, such as: *The SymbioCity Approach. A Conceptual Framework for support to sustainable urban development in low and middle income countries* (SIDA & SKL International n.d.) or *Developing Sustainable Cities in Sweden* (Andersson, Carlson, and Larsson 2011). These documents have been selected by conducting a qualitative content analysis, which was based on the idea to reduce the bias of identifying a certain actor-network *a priori*. Drawing inspirations from social-network studies (see Lu 2013) we have selected an initial document as entry point, namely the SC webpage. Further human (interview partners) and non-human actors (documents and institutions) have been identified through snowball sampling. Building on this process, the key documents (mentioned above) have been identified through counting their cross-references in other documents, which has offered us insights into the discursive construction of the sustainable City scheme as proclaimed by the SC/SCa actor-network. Hence, conducting a qualitative content analysis has also helped us to identify the main actors within the SC/SCa actor-network.

Subsequently the selected documents have been analysed according to the four steps of discourse analysis proposed by Keller (2005). First, *interpretive schemes and frames* have been investigated to understand how ‘the common sense’ of sustainable urban development has been constructed within SC and the SCA. Secondly, *classifications* like ‘We’ or ‘the City’ have been identified in order to understand the formation of collective identities. The third step of SKAD has included an analysis of the *phenomenal structure* in order to highlight the normative setting of SC and the SCA. Consequently, the final step links the three previous steps through revealing the *storylines* by which the Swedish actors involved within SC and the SCA tell their stories about the sustainable City. Within these storylines of SC and the SCA interpretative schemes, classifications and
phenomenal structures are connected to form coherent discourses about sustainable urban development.

Semi-structured interviews were used to acquire data on the mobilisation of schemes of sustainability and related social and technical innovations. Overall, eleven interviews were conducted with actors who are part of the specific actor-network that was formed in regard to the two related cases and which will be introduced in the next section. Our selection of interviewees included representatives affiliated with Business Sweden, SKL International (a company owned by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions), the International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD), Swedish universities, SIDA (the Swedish International Development Agency) working on behalf of the Swedish parliament and government), Swedish municipalities, Swedish engineering companies as well as foreign municipal and company contexts (Russia and Indonesia). All interview partners have been selected according to the findings eroded from the qualitative content analysis. The posed questions have been divided into main and sub-questions in order to reveal how consensus and dissent – in regard to the spread of ideas about sustainable urban development (within SC and the SCa) – are managed and mobilized.

**Tracing the actor-network of sustainable urban development: the cases of symbiocity and the symbiocity approach**

**SC and the SCa: two tales of sustainable urban development**

As a city that was on the forefront of sustainable urban development for several years, Stockholm, the Swedish capital city, has received worldwide recognition and praise (see Bradley, Hult, and Cars 2013; Lindström and Lundström 2008). Hult (2013, 84) argues that the so-called *Sustainable City Concept* has contributed to this global recognition, which was developed by the Swedish consultancy and engineering firm SWECO on behalf of the Swedish government for the World Summit 2002 in Johannesburg. This concept is supposed to showcase integrated ways of incorporating technology and urban development to potential international investors.

On the basis of this Sustainable City Concept, SC was introduced in 2007 by the Swedish government and the Swedish Trade Council (Bradley, Hult, and Cars 2013). SC was established as a platform to link clean technologies to urban planning by means of urban sustainability (Hult 2015, 538). Thereby, spatial references, including the housing exhibition Bo01 in Malmö (Madureira 2014) as well as the Stockholm district of Hammarby Sjöstad, were highlighted as best practice examples. Swedish sustainable urban development then received recognition from supra-national institutions as Stockholm was awarded the title of the first European Green Capital in 2010 (Bradley, Hult, and Cars 2013). The creation of this success enhanced the cooperation within SC, resulting in the export of sustainable technologies to countries such as China, Mongolia, Russia, South Africa, Canada, France, Ireland and the UK (see Lindström & Lundström 2013). Companies which offer their expertise and technology in the field of sustainable urban development through SC include (amongst others): energy companies (Ericsson & Sweden Biogas), companies concerned with water technology (Baga Water Technology AB) or architecture and design firms (White Architects AB & CEC Design) (see SKL International & Business Sweden 2017). While the Sustainable City Concept was picked up by the Swedish Trade Council (now Business
Sweden) to implement a marketing platform, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) used the concept to develop tools and methods for sustainable urban development. These methods and tools were summarised under the SymbioCity approach (SCa), published in 2012. Based on SIDA’s previous experience and expertise the SCa aims to promote sustainable urban development through institutional capacity-building in low and middle income countries (see Dahlgren and Wamsler 2014). Overall, SC focuses on technological tools to transform the City itself while the SCa aims to create the sustainable City through institutional capacity building (see Figure 1).

The SC/SCa actor-network: a global alliance for sustainable urban development

Out of this normative understanding of Swedish sustainable urban development, SC and the SCa can be regarded as expressions and translations of Swedish sustainable urban development goals and objectives. The actor-networks of these translations which emerged from the qualitative content analysis of the available literature are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 illustrates the scale of norms (such as benchmarks and emission limits) of which the actors of the SC/SCa network are confronted with, whereas Figure 3 highlights the relations between the actors of the network.

As the Swedish government took the initiative to implement SC (see Hult 2013) the government and its ministries are essential actors within the SC/SCa actor-network. These institutional bodies articulate national norms for how Swedish sustainable urban development should be performed (see Dahlgren and Wamsler 2014). In the case of SC and the SCa government agencies responsible for the spread of Swedish sustainable urban development are the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and Business Sweden (an agency that aims to support the international expansion of Swedish companies). SIDA and Business Sweden operate (to a large extent) independently of each other as they have different mandates to fulfil. Business Sweden is primarily focused on business development and cooperation while SIDA’s objective is to promote international development cooperation. Hence, SC was first established as a marketing platform for Business Sweden (see Bradley, Hult, and Cars 2013). The aim of this platform is to link Swedish companies and businesses to foreign companies, mostly supported by Swedish embassies in the respective foreign countries (see Figures 1 and 3). To gain the support of foreign

![Figure 1. Development and rationalities of SymbioCity (SC) and the SymbioCity approach (SCa).](image)

**Source:** Own illustration, based on: Bradley, Hult, and Cars (2013); Hult (2013, 2015); Dahlgren and Wamsler (2014).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors within the SC/SCa actor-network</th>
<th>Scale of “norms” (such as benchmarks and emission limits)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Organizations (UN-Habitat, IPCC, World Bank, WHO etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union (EU)</td>
<td>supra-national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish government</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish governmental agencies (SIDA; Energy Agency; Environmental Protection Agency; Business Sweden)</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish ministries (Foreign Affairs; Environment and Energy; Enterprises)</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish Industries/Consultancies (Swo; Ericson; Energy Companies)</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR/SKL)</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swedish universities</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKL International</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swedish municipalities</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD)</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign European government authorities and companies</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign non-European government authorities and companies</td>
<td>(supra-national), national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish Embassies</td>
<td>supra-national, national</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Highlighted actors: actors from which documents have been evaluated

Figure 2. Scale of norms within the SC/SCa actor-network.


government authorities best practice examples from Swedish municipalities are highlighted.

On the other hand, SIDA has started to pick up SC by drawing on its international reputation to develop tools and methods for institutional capacity building (see Dahlgren and Wamsler 2014). Furthermore, SIDA searched for institutions that could develop such methods. Ultimately the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) was selected. SALAR’s experience in Swedish municipal development combined with their previous work in international contexts (through their international company: SKL International) underscored the decision of SIDA (Dahlgren and Wamsler 2014, 7). As such, this approach was presented to foreign government authorities to be implemented with the help of local communities. Similar to SC, Swedish embassies in the respective countries serve as facilitators to get into contact with foreign officials. To provide these officials with the required knowledge in regard to Swedish sustainable urban development, training programmes were implemented provided by the ICLD and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR).

These two schemes of Swedish urban sustainable development, namely SC and the SCa, are embedded in a frame which is constituted by European norms such as benchmarks regarding CO₂ emissions. Moreover, each country (to which one of the stories of Swedish urban development is told) has its own national norms which can also be influenced differently by larger institutional bodies. To legitimise their stories, the Swedish-based advocates of SC and the SCa draw upon the knowledge, benchmarks
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors within the SC/SCa actor-network</th>
<th>Relation to other actors within the SC/SCa actor-network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International organizations (UN-Habitat, IPCC, World Bank, WHO etc.)</td>
<td>Swedish governmental agencies; Swedish ministries; Swedish industries/consultancy firms; SKL International</td>
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<td><strong>Swedish governmental agencies</strong> (SIDA; Energy Agency; Environmental Protection Agency; Business Sweden)</td>
<td>International organizations; Swedish ministries; Swedish government; EU; Swedish industries/consultancy firms; Swedish universities; Swedish municipalities; SALAR; SKL International; foreign European governmental authorities and companies; Swedish embassies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Swedish ministries</strong> (Foreign Affairs; Environment and Energy; Enterprises)</td>
<td>International organizations; EU; Swedish governmental agencies; Swedish government; Swedish industries/consultancy firms; Swedish universities; Swedish municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Swedish industries/consultancy firms</strong> (Sweco; Ericson; Energy companies)</td>
<td>Swedish governmental agencies; Swedish ministries; SKL International; Swedish universities; international organizations; Swedish embassies; foreign European governmental authorities and companies; foreign non-European governmental authorities and companies</td>
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<td>Swedish governmental agencies; SKL International; foreign European and non-European governmental authorities; Swedish embassies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign European governmental authorities and companies</td>
<td>SKL International (only with governmental authorities); ICLD (only with governmental authorities); Swedish embassies (only with governmental authorities); Swedish industries/consultancy firms; Swedish governmental agencies</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Highlighted actors:** actors from which documents have been evaluated

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**Figure 3.** Relations of actors within the SC/SCa actor-network.

**Source:** Own illustration, based on: Business Sweden (n.d.); SIDA & SKL International (n.d.); SWECO (n.d.); Swedish Ministry of Environment (2003); SALAR (2010, 2011); Andersson, Carlson, and Larsson (2011); Ranhagen (2011); Ranhagen and Groth (2012); Andersson (2013); Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs et al. (2013); Dahlgren and Wamsler (2014); Government of Sweden (2017); SKL International & Business Sweden (2017).
and models advocated by supra-national and international institutions such as the WWF, the EU or UN-Habitat (see Figures 2 and 3).

Overall, the structure of the actor-network reveals that SC and the SCa consist of various actors in different spatial contexts. As such, the relations that emerge out of this actor-network cannot simply be put into conventional bottom-up or top-down hierarchies. These relations can be rather described as organised messiness in which scales are selectively drawn upon to serve particular interests. Under such conditions, a diverse set of actors in various spatial settings and with multiple objectives come together to form relations of knowledge production, capital accumulation and administrative ordering. The organisational aspect of this messy conglomerate of actors relies on governmental organisation and capital investments that enable actors and their ideas of sustainable urban development. This development has increasingly referred to notions such as public-private partnership arrangements and (network) governance which are perceived as symptomatic of the process of neo-liberalisation (see Healey 2006; Madureira 2014; Tunström and Bradley 2014). While the findings outlined above support this conceptualisation, they also allude to a more critical investigation of the role of the nation state. In this regard, our findings suggest that these new public-private partnership arrangements are profoundly orchestrated by the nation state in the form of capital investments and administrative support.

**Construing the various discursive strategies of achieving and managing sustainable urban development**

**We, the city and our sustainable urban environment**

Within the SCa a dominating narrative is the urgency of climate change, urbanisation and urban development, all of which shape global conditions (see Ranhagen and Groth 2012). In this context, cities are viewed, for instance, as the sites in which ‘the poor and disadvantaged’ live while facing environmental challenges, hazards, pollution, loss, crisis and epidemics (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 34). However, cities are not only rendered as dystopian sites, but also as sites of opportunity: ‘Properly planned and managed cities and towns offer enhanced opportunities for people to meet, work, access public services, enjoy social and cultural benefits, and fulfil their life dreams’ (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 3). These cities of opportunity can be created through sustainable urban development. Thereby, sustainable urban development is advocated to reduce the challenge of an increasing global footprint and to improve adaptation to and mitigation of climate change (Ranhagen 2011; SKL International & Business Sweden 2017). In this integrated and holistic perspective, sustainable urban development is supposed to invoke city visions and spatial articulations of futures which are promising and realisable (see Ranhagen and Groth 2012; Andersson 2013). Examples for such sustainable futures are conveyed by drawing on spatial references to cities in Asia (like San Fernando), Latin American cities (like Medellín) and Swedish cities (like Malmö) (Andersson 2013, 11–22).

To achieve sustainable urban development, the inclusion of all people (especially disadvantaged groups) should be secured to create arenas in which environmental assessments can be made within a holistic frame of action. In this setting it is said that consensus over sustainable urban development and policy alignment has to be achieved through the
Leaders thus need to facilitate consensus on a set of key outcomes, rather than compile extensive wish lists. [...] It is nevertheless important to invite and consider all contributions, and to welcome debate and critical feedback on initial drafts’ (Andersson 2013, 25). Sustainable urban development does not only address environmental issues, but is also conceptualised as a trigger for creating places of beauty and art in which the common good can be enacted (Andersson 2013). However, according to our discourse analysis, one can distil the overarching credo to highlight the potentials of a systematic and integrated approach to realise a liveable, climate-neutral, accessible city. As Ranhagen & Groth (2012, 12) state: ‘The SymbioCity Approach promotes a holistic, integrated and multidisciplinary approach to sustainable urban development, which includes environmental, social, economic and spatial dimensions’. Following the SCa, cities are portrayed to carry cost and value benefits, not only for their citizens but also for their administrative staff. In such ‘dynamic’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘smart’ cities, ‘intelligent and efficient technologies’ should contribute to ‘healthy, safe, liveable and cost-efficient’ green urban environments (SKL International & Business Sweden 2017).

Within the SCa, the urban environment is represented as a place for all human beings and as specifically destined for urban citizens and their elected local representatives that intend to become citizens and leaders of ‘successful towns and cities’ (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 6). Modifications of the urban environment are legitimised through a distinction between developed and developing countries in which the status of developing presents a point of opportunity: ‘From a developmental perspective, urbanisation provides a crucial challenge and opportunity to create living patterns that harmonise with the environment. Cities with high population density can develop economies of scale in public transport, recycling of water, waste and materials, and efficient energy use’ (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 24). In order to take the lead in the development of sustainable Cities, the collective We is invoked when addressing administrative leaders and their role in shaping the collective urban environment (see Andersson 2013). In this case We includes every citizen who is concerned about the urban environment and who understands the larger issues: ‘Citizens thus need to understand the larger issues, and how proposed long-term development plans also address current local problems. Citizens expect delivery, and many don’t care who is in power, so long as the municipality addresses key problems effectively and delivers tangible improvements and benefits’ (Andersson 2013, 25). As such, SC portrays similar images of the citizens of the sustainable City and also invokes the collective We to highlight a process in which the City and the urban environment are created as a common good: ‘Providing a healthy and liveable city environment for growing urban populations while reducing our ecological footprint is a global challenge. We need to develop urban areas in a way that saves resources, drives sustainable growth, enhances human capital and alleviates poverty’ (SKL International & Business Sweden 2017, emphasis added by the authors). Thereby, the urban environment addresses specifically the global responsibility in the wake of climate change by promoting dynamic and holistic concepts that offer something for everyone: ‘An integrated and holistic approach – from planning to post-implementation – is our key to success’ (ibid). SC is depicted as the tool to turn visions about the sustainable City into reality. In contrast to the SCa, SC highlights the collective We even as a Nordic identity and as something which is part of our lifestyle (see Ranhagen 2011; SKL International & Business Sweden 2017).
The SCa highlights the efficient management of the urban environment. To create these systems, however, it is underlined that multi-disciplinary thinking is required that should be supported by global environmental policies. Given the increasing number of people living in cities climate change is regarded as an opportunity that has to be exploited by any urban development intervention (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 25). Furthermore, it is argued that rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in developing countries threaten human rights: 'Human rights cannot be secured in a degraded or polluted environment (...)’ (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 30). In this context, the lack of management of the urban environment is seen as a major reason why holistic approaches have not been realised so far: 'Poor communities and other vulnerable groups are often most affected when the environment is degraded or inaccessible due to weak environmental management [...]’ (ibid.). Hence, the SCa suggests that such a holistic approach would even integrate the concerns of the urban poor, which have been negated until now due to the prevailing organisational and managerial incapacities (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 41).

In addition, within such a holistic approach, greening the economy is actively encouraged through urban design. This greening involves the reduction of the global footprint, which appears as constantly repeated common goal. In the planning process, consensus is seen as essential for democratic governance in general and involves decentralised decision-making that can even incorporate conflicting issues: 'It should include new issues that emerge on the urban agenda, and address conflicting issues and interests, if necessary' (Ranhagen and Groth 2012: 63, emphasis added by the authors). Potential dissent is supposed to be enacted in regard to the methods used for the implementation and evaluation of sustainable urban development strategies, since feedback is encouraged on the initial drafts of these strategies (Andersson 2013). Furthermore, democratic decision making is to be achieved through the involvement of a large amount and diverse composition of stakeholders in which good quality information on the urban environment is supposed to be provided in order to establish linkages and dialogues about optimal solutions. As Ranhagen & Groth (2012, 66) put it: 'Civil society’s role in environmental planning should be strengthened via participatory decision-making processes, methods of judicial appeal and access to good quality environmental information’. These dialogues are supposed to be enacted in local contexts in order to safeguard the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders and to develop the required synergies for creating the good urban environment of the City (Ranhagen and Groth 2012, 104).

In a similar vein, the idea of sustainable urban development portrayed by SC is also one of integration and holistic thinking, especially in respect to model cities. Hereby, Sweden is illustrated as a successful example in regards to the management of urban metabolisms (such as water and waste). One of these spatial references includes the waste management in the Swedish region Östergötland: 'The program is held in Östergötland in the midst of the industrial symbiosis and clean-tech cluster. An optional five-day workshop-based program can follow in your community’ (SKL International & Business Sweden 2017). In such reasoning, the sustainable City then becomes rendered as smart and efficient, a city in which urban metabolisms are technologically engineered to increase economic efficiency (see SKL International & Business Sweden 2017). Hence,
within SC, urban sustainable development is represented as an ideal that requires a shared vision to secure economic efficiency, and as inherently bound to the Swedish lifestyle. To create the sustainable City the provision of the right information and ‘the right decisions at the right time’ is seen as crucial since the City is assigned with a smart character (SKL International & Business Sweden 2017). Hence, through the intended holistic approach of SC, those ideas and components can be cherry picked that are expected to create good living conditions and welfare.

Overall, the ideas and stories of sustainable urban development within SC and the SCa are manifold. They range from concerns about climate change to stories of economic development, environmental protection and planning to notions about democracy, human rights and responsibility. As such, SC and the SCa incorporate and thus justify the inclusion of a wide variety of actors, ranging from companies and development agencies to Swedish municipalities, and supra-national and global institutions. Embedding these findings into an ANT perspective, we can conceive actors within the SC/SCa actor-network not only as the ones who create relations, but also the outcome of these relations (Latour 2005). Hence, actors and networks are not only multiple constitutive (as our case highlights) but are also able to establish new relations, based on ‘collective’ logics, which cross different institutional and spatial scales. Furthermore, our findings suggest that SC and the SCa construct the City as a place for everyone, the collective We. Thereby, the notion of the City promises opportunities for sustainability through inclusion and participation by referring to Swedish cities which are presented as the ideological resource and material anchor point upon which the sustainable City can be built: ‘There are multiple options if you wish to see what we can deliver. We offer tailor made visiting programs as listed below (…) Welcome to pay us a visit!’ (SKL International & Business Sweden 2017). Within this frame of argumentation, the sustainable City becomes a post-political narrative, since this frame is holistic and adaptable and non-disputable given the global threat and individual responsibility of city leaders to tackle climate change.

**Mobilising the sustainable city as a post-political environment**

To mobilise ‘sustainable’ urban environments Swedish companies and municipalities draw on supra-national organisations (the EU, the Union of Baltic Cities or the Nordic Council of Ministers) which offer funding to support projects related to Swedish urban sustainable development. As one politician of a Swedish municipality highlights: ’[...] Local and regional clusters [i.e. with businesses and universities] as well as international and supra national organizations [here International Climate Alliance and the Union of Baltic Cities] give us a lot of influence and they also help us to market our city. We have a policy to be engaged with international organisations, since this is also very important for our development’ (Interviewee A 2017). This support is centred around administrative and financial aid. Administrative support aims to enhance the global and national influence of the respective municipalities and companies, but also of the organisations themselves. In contrast, financial support is predominantly required to support the development of urban sustainable technologies. In alluding to these supra-national bodies, representatives of Swedish companies and municipalities use their
capacities in the field of urban sustainable development in order to increase the city’s (for which they feel being responsible) influence within wider inter-city competition on capital investments: ‘The most important thing is that there must be a need from various cities for this kind of cooperation, there must be commitment from the political sphere and the city planners. It must be assured that they gain something from it’ (Interviewee A 2017). Within this perspective Swedish municipalities regard themselves as the spatial manifestation of the sustainable City: ‘We have an old tradition of sustainable urban development. For more than 25 years we have been working to create the sustainable city’ (Interviewee A 2017). This image is supported by ICLD and business companies who organise guided tours for foreign delegations in the respective municipalities on demand (Interviewee D 2017). These tours are made possible through financing from large scale donors such as governmental organisations or supra-national institutions. The notion of the sustainable City is then also utilised by companies and Swedish municipalities to enhance regional capital accumulation through the involvement of universities and other companies (Interviewee B 2017).

Swedish embassies in foreign countries are also used to facilitate the mobilisation of policies. Interviewees affiliated to Business Sweden, SIDA and SKL International stressed that Swedish embassies are important arenas to link Swedish expertise to local contexts. As one interviewee mentioned: ‘I would say that there is an increased interest from different Swedish Embassies in working with urban development also because they have heard about SymbioCity. So in that way we have also addressed the urban agenda’ (Interviewee C 2017). Besides administrative support they also contribute with financial aid to secure sustainable urban development projects in the respective countries: ‘[…] we receive funding from the Embassy in Nairobi. So we also follow the guidelines and strategies that are described in SymbioCity’s result strategies for each country’ (Interviewee C 2017). Hence, capital plays a decisive role in the mobilisation of SC and the SCA as it determines the geographical direction in which policies of Swedish urban sustainable development move.

From a Swedish perspective, the sustainment of best practice examples is highly important as it not only stresses the influential role of Swedish companies and agencies but also secures funds from national level institutions, such as ministries or SIDA. In regard to SC, the interviews have shown that given its adaptability and its increasing alignment with Swedish companies, the urban sustainable development models are beginning to move increasingly towards technological driven smart city solutions, which is also supported by capital investments from national and foreign administrative levels (Interviewee B 2017).

To secure investments for both, i.e. SC and the SCA, these idealised notions of Swedish sustainable urban development need to be carefully communicated and learned. These learning procedures enable the ideological re-composition of sustainable cities which are framed as good cities, and simultaneously the mobilisation of commitment for the implementation of the sustainable City. The interviewees considered knowledge regarding the transformation and management of urban metabolisms as crucial to provide and secure this recomposition: ‘And then you should perhaps have a consultation with the citizens in what way the collection of waste can be improved, in what way do citizens behave […] because the waste system is connected to the water quality in the city’ (Interviewee C 2017).
Within this framework of learning and communicating, everyone can become an expert and argue regarding what (especially Swedish) sustainable urban development is all about. Consequently, actors that normally would not participate in urban development processes such as the urban poor or specific private companies are invited to learn and further develop technological and managerial tools to achieve the sustainable City. For this, as all interviewees stressed, political commitment is important: if this commitment cannot be secured, Swedish narratives of urban sustainability cannot be mobilised as the following interviewee confirms: ‘I think it is indispensable that these core principles need to be considered if we talk about urban sustainability because otherwise we would just focus on one sector for example and will not be able to find integrated solutions’ (Interviewee C 2017). Hence, in addition to capital and influence, political consensus in regard to the frame of action becomes highly important. In this context, global references are utilised to legitimise the involvement of actors within the larger frame of action but also create global desires and frames of agreement: ‘For example, last week was the week of the Earth Hour. So during that week we have organised a number of discussions about green city planning and other aspects of sustainability’ (Interviewee A 2017).

Within SC and the SCa the packaging of sustainable urban development is frequently questioned by Swedish companies and agencies. This criticism mainly revolves around more productive, efficient and current translations of its core message: ‘It is very much about having contacts, guiding visitors to the right people and to get companies to be there so that there could be some business opportunities in the future. I am not sure that the concept of SymbioCity is helpful in this context anyway’ (Interviewee D 2017). However, while this packaging can be argued about, sustainable urban development in general is broadly perceived as something necessary, something that that can encourage other countries to make a difference. Throughout all the interviews it was stressed that systematic and holistic thinking is a natural part of Sweden’s planning approach to sustainable urban development. The systematic and holistic approach is also increasingly incorporated and argued for in relation to the organisational structure of Swedish companies in this respect as it appears inherently inscribed in their working procedures (Interviewee D 2017).

In sum, these findings suggest that the post-political character of ideas about sustainable urban development is reconfirmed through the way they travel. During their journeys, these ideas are translated in regard to the configurations of urban metabolisms. As such, ways of implementation, institutional adaptations and the packaging (SC and the SCa) could, at least potentially, become disputable, whereas sustainable urban development itself seems to rest in an untouchable and thus uncontested vacuum. As such our findings demonstrate how a framework based on ANT can be applied not only to show how overarching entities are formed (see for example Metzger 2011). Rather, this analytical framework help to reveal the underlying rationalities behind the post-political character of such overarching entities and how these rationalities become reconstituted at specific moments over space and time. The spread of such post-political environments is further underscored by the City which provides the ideological narrative and material anchor point on which consensus can be built. The importance of the City as a material anchor point for the mobilisation of the
sustainable City idea has also been showcased by Cook and Andersson (2018). In their study on policy tourism in two Swedish cities with former or present ‘role model character’ they highlight how material articulations are decisive for the adaptation of Swedish policies in other parts of the world. One example is the post-war suburb Vällingby in Stockholm that has been praised for its spatial layout (variety of building structure, connected to the Metro-line) and its functional mix (housing, workplaces, retail, public services and cultural facilities), which has made Vällingby, at least to a large extent, self-sufficient. The other example of material articulation is the energy efficient forms of housing in the southern Swedish city of Växjö (see Cook and Andersson 2018). However, despite the importance of material spaces for mobile policies, we have also shown that in contexts where consensus over institutional configurations, translations of urban metabolisms or capital investments cannot be enacted, policies of Swedish sustainable urban development are not able to move. To put it differently, consensus over institutional configurations functions as an enabler for the movement of policies, since it helps to mobilise financial and administrative support.

Concluding reflections on the selective geographies of Swedish sustainable urban development

Our analysis of two Swedish schemes for sustainable urban development suggests that through their mobilisation as post-political environments they contribute to the creation of, what we call, selective geographies. These are shaped by processes of power that elevates certain spaces and actors over others as well as by logics of capital, neo-liberal ideologies of management and desires of influence. As a side-effect disagreement about the frame of action is displaced to the outside and therefore becomes impossible, due to the common sense dogma, which is substantiated by the overarching threat of climate change. To bring these selective geographies into existence and mobilise their potential, global and supra-national institutions serve as sources of reference to legitimise action in space (see Kaika 2017). However, these selective geographies are not only created through these institutions. In addition, so-called best practice examples (such as San Fernando, Medellín, Malmö or Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm, see above) and their material articulations in combination with global demands and national government structures generate specific, but uneven spatial relations. The unevenness of these spatial relations is precisely constituted by post-political urban environments in which the frame of sustainable urban development cannot be contested. Through their spatial and institutional spread, this unevenness becomes reconfirmed as the power of translation resides in a selected number of actors who set the framework in which agreement and dispute are allowed to play out.

These findings offer new insights into the mobilisation and stabilisation of post-political environments. First, we have presented an analytical framework which emphasizes the (co)-creation of infrastructures of knowledge production and common sense reasoning in regard to sustainable urban development. Through the combination of SKAD and semi-structured interviews with an ANT perspective, we have presented a novel way of analysing the multiple constitutions of mobile policies and their ‘fixed’ spatial articulations by investigating globally circulating knowledge regimes and local practices of sustainable
urban development. Applying such a framework extends the current body of literature in the fields of policy mobilities and urban political ecology. Specifically, by combining these two bodies of literature through ANT we have been able to show how post-political environments are spread across various spatial contexts through heterogeneous relations between different actors. In doing so, we have drawn attention to the paradox of creating highly selective yet consensual, agreed upon geographies. In this context ANT reveals the multiple constitution of spatial fixture and mobility through which these geographies unfold across spatial and institutional contexts. Furthermore, the application of ANT has enabled us to highlight the crucial role of the Swedish national government in the mobilisation and creation of post-political environments. The creation of post-political environments is further supported by national state agencies and international embassies in concert with other public and private actors. While the policy mobilities literature is focused on the movement of policies between cities, it has paid limited attention to the influence of nation states in this process. To reveal the interrelation of nation states and cities in mobilising these post-political environments, ANT has provided us with valuable insights into the inter-scalar processes by which the black box of the sustainable City is constituted, mobilised and upheld.

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