Conferences, informational infrastructures and mobile policies: The process of getting Sweden 'BID ready'

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Abstract

This paper makes a contribution to the fledgling literature on policy mobilities and mutations. Using the example of the internationalization of the Business Improvement District (BID) model, it argues that conferences constitute important arenas in and through which both the mobilizing and embedding of urban policies can occur. Focusing on a two-day conference that took place in Sweden in 2009, it uses the language of *trans-urban policy pipelines* in order to capture the formation of relationships over distance as a means of comparing, educating and learning about the experiences of other cities. Revealing the complex architectures and ecologies that have underpinned the movement of this model from one country to another and from one city to another over the last two decades or so, the paper uses a combination of ethnographic techniques together with semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with organizers and participants to produce a single-site but relationally thickened description of the place of conferences in facilitating the movement of policies across space.

Keywords

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They came, they saw, they liked. That pretty much sums up the reaction of the 750-plus delegates visiting Calgary for the International Downtown Association (IDA) conference Sept[ember] 11 to 14 . . . Like most of these gatherings, the IDA conference was a show and tell about what works and what doesn't. Everyone shared their experiences managing various issues, from homelessness to hospitality . . . Everyone was there to steal ideas – the IDA conference's motto is 'If they can do it, so can we!' (White, 2008: 26)

Mobile policies . . . are not simply travelling across a landscape – they are remaking this landscape, and they are contributing to the interpenetration of distant policymaking sites. (Peck and Theodore, 2010a: 170)

Introduction

In geography and parts of the wider social sciences, cities are increasingly understood as being 'the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing . . . open and . . . internally multiple' (Massey, 2005: 141). Expanding and opening up existing territorial understandings of social processes (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; MacLeod and Jones, 2007), cities are being increasingly understood relationally (Allen et al., 1998; Amin and Thrift, 2002; Amin, 2004). This is a broad and internally differentiated intellectual set of

projects as one might expect (Faraís and Bender, 2010; Healey and Upton, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2011). Nonetheless, one important strand of this work has focused on the means by which cities are constituted through their positionality in geographically stretched policy networks (Peck and Theodore, 2001, 2010a, 2010b; Ward, 2006, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Cook, 2008; McCann, 2008, 2011; McCann and Ward, 2010, 2011; Prince, 2010a, 2010b; González, 2011; Peck, 2011;). Drawing upon and critiquing traditional political science approaches to the issue of policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2004; Stone, 2004), these contributions have emphasized 'the people, places, and moments' (Prince, 2010a: 169) involved in the making mobile of policies. It has asked a series of questions including: How are cities assembled through comparisons and references to elsewhere? Who and what is involved in the movement of policies from one city to another? How do policy models evolve, mutate and transform as they are moved from one city to another? What spaces do policies travel through on the way from one city to another? What are the territorial consequences of embedding policy models in one city that are derived from another?

It is in this intellectual context that in this paper we consider the role of conferences – broadly understood here as temporary (i.e. time-limited) events that bring together people from particular epistemic communities for face-to-face interaction and the exchange of verbal, visual and symbolic information – in

facilitating the movement/fixing of policy models across/in space. We began with a quote by Richard White, a former executive director of the Calgary Downtown Association, writing in the *Calgary Herald* on his positive experience of the 2008 International Downtown Association's (IDA) annual conference in Calgary. He evokes the conference halls and walking tours of Calgary as sites of comparison, exchange, persuasion and learning and, echoing the second quote by Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, sites that link together and potentially transform geographically distant but socially proximate policy-making sites.

Although there is a relatively large body of scholarship on conferences and urban development (Laslo and Judd, 2004; Clark, 2007), conferences and tourism (Morgan and Condliffe, 2006; DiPetro et al., 2008), conferences and subject formation (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Skov, 2006) and conferences and academic career development (Ford and Harding, 2008; McLaren and Mills, 2008; Morse, 2008; Bell and King, 2010), there has been surprisingly little research to date on the role of the conference as a micro-space of globalization (Larner and Le Heron, 2002) or, in White's words, as a space to 'steal' policy ideas. Attending to this lacuna, we draw upon and develop work in relational economic geography (Maskell et al., 2004; Storper and Venables, 2004; Torre, 2008; Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008a, 2008b) to assemble a framework for understanding the role of conferences in the embodied, programmatic and technical aspects of policy mobility. In doing so, we will focus on the role of conferences in the movement

and mutation of the Business Improvement District (BID), a policy model that has been rolled out in many towns and cities in Canada and the USA since the early 1970s and has become increasingly popular in parts of Europe in recent years (Hoyt, 2006; Ward, 2007). Such a model involves the establishing of a public–private partnership that operates in a geographically defined district, providing a variety of services (for instance, security or marketing). As we shall detail later, the partnership has to be both voted in by, and, through mandatory financial contributions, financed by, businesses in the district. These contributions and voting procedures vary from place to place.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first section considers the small but burgeoning relational economic geographical literature on different types of face-to-face (F2F) events, such as conferences. In reviewing this work, we make the case for taking seriously the inner workings and external relationships that structure these events. Using the language of *transurban policy pipelines* – the formation of relationships over distance as a means of comparing, educating and learning about the experiences of other cities – we argue that conferences constitute important arenas in and through which both the mobilizing and the embedding of urban policies can occur. We also argue that the movement of policy does not always constitute a decisive shift from one locality to another. Though there are all manner of contingencies along the way, the movement of policy is nonetheless shaped and sharpened by certain pathways

and trajectories that make some policies more likely to travel, and some places more likely to figure in comparisons.

The second section turns to our empirical example. Using a combination of ethnographic techniques[i], semi-structured interviews[ii] and questionnaires[iii] with organizers and participants to produce a thickened description, we critically reflect upon a 2009 conference in Sweden on the BID model, using it to highlight the role that these rather unspectacular events often play in the movement of policy models. In the third section, the conclusion, we show that, although conferences can act as sites of inspiration, the hosting of these events does not automatically lead to a post-conference rolling out of new policy instruments. Friction, contingency and conflict remain important aspects of the mobilization of policies.

Assembled cities: infrastructures, face-to-face communication and expertise

In recent years it has been argued that traditional (and orthodox) studies of policy transfer fall short theoretically (Ward, 2006, 2010a; Cook, 2008; McCann, 2008, 2011; Cook and Ward, 2011, 2012; Peck and Theodore, 2010a, 2010b; Peck 2011). Although this political science work has not been without its insights into policy diffusion, learning and transfer, it has also not been without its intellectual limits. Put succinctly, this voluminous literature has a series of

characteristics – 'its tendency towards narrow typologies, its adherence to one or two scales, and its tendency to fall into a literalist trap of assuming that little happens to policies "along the way", or "in the telling" as they move from place to place' (McCann, 2011: 111) – that curtail its capacity to make sense of the place of cities in wider global circuits of policymaking. Acknowledging these limits, a heterodox series of contributions using 'sociological, anthropological or institutional frames of analysis' (Peck and Theodore, 2010a: 169) has emerged. Drawing on this literature, this section disaggregates the shift from thinking about policy transfer to thinking about policy mobility and mutation into three constituent elements. First, we argue that a series of informational infrastructures have been enhanced and expanded in recent years that have facilitated the movement of policies from one place to another. Second, we highlight the performance of individual agents – in particular those positioned and mobilized as 'experts' – in actively shaping the models and their audiences' understandings. Third, we contend that conferences, and the various face-to-face communications that occur, continue to be important in creating the conditions under which policy mobility may or may not take place.

Policy mobility and informational infrastructures

Of course, conferences are not alone in the movement of policy models from one city to another. They form one component of a wider informational infrastructure, international in reach, that has emerged in recent years. It is made

up of 'institutions, organizations, and technologies that, in various ways, frame and package knowledge about best policy practices, successful cities, and cutting-edge ideas and then present that information to specific audiences' (McCann, 2008: 12). For different areas of policy – climate change, crime, downtown revitalization, drugs, economic development, etc. – there are different (and sometimes overlapping) infrastructures in place. These are transitory assemblages of various elements – institutions, presentations, websites – that are assembled and re-assembled, held together temporarily only then later to be broken up and/or reconfigured. Although the precise configurations are subject to flux, recent years seem to suggest a certain amount of coherence and stability, although they remain somewhat short of being 'fixed'.

Comprising variously entangled scaled agents (of different geographical reaches) – urban think tanks, national trade associations, international consultancies, governmental bodies and so on – this infrastructure is both *the cause and the effect* of wider transformative processes. It is the *cause* in the sense that the emergence of a range of different types of agent has made the movement of policies from one place to another more probable. Although it is acknowledged that access to these informational infrastructures is not equal (McCann, 2011), it is now easier for many city policy makers and practitioners in one part of the world to access information and to learn about the performance of a city in another. New material and virtual publications such as blogs, e-mail

circulation lists and websites act to pull together, hold in place and circulate

knowledge about cities. Examples are translated into models, or into best or

good practice, that are then wont to be replicated elsewhere (Ward, 2006; Peck

and Theodore, 2010a). Longer-established practices of urban comparison and

learning, such as attending conferences and workshops, or participating in study

tours and other educational activities, continue to shape and structure the

pathways through which policies move (SV Ward, 2003, 2010). It is the *effect* in

the sense that, as the number of those involved in facilitating the movement of

policies from one place to another has increased, so a series of new 'business'

opportunities have emerged. New consultancies, intergovernmental agencies and

think tanks have sprung up to meet the demands of those involved in one way or

another in planning and shaping the futures of cities. The experiences of cities are

brought together in new ways. The infrastructure has become denser in many

cases, because there has been an increase in the activities associated with the

making mobile of policies. This makes it more possible and, in some cases, more

probable, that policies will be reconstructed as models through the labour of

those in the policy mobility 'business' or 'industry'. Quite where these models are

moved to and through is structured by a mixture of previous pathways of

interconnection and more contingent (and chance) intersections.

'Transfer agents', expertise and legitimacy

'Transfer agents' (Stone, 2004) are those involved in the practices that move a

policy from one place to another. They are not rational, lone learners but are, rather, 'embodied members of epistemic, expert and practice communities. They are sociologically complex actors, located in (shifting) organizational and political fields, whose identities and professional trajectories are often bound up with the policy positions and fixes they espouse' (Peck and Theodore, 2010a: 170).

One such 'transfer agent' is the socially constructed 'expert'. According to McCann (2008: 5), 'experts of truth' are those 'who create powerful narratives of cities' relationships to each other and to their populations and who work to mobilise policies through these relational geographies'. These experts are often to be found speaking their 'truth' at practitioner and professional association conferences of various sorts. Of course, all conferences have speakers. These are selected by the organizers to impart their expertise and knowledge and give legitimacy to the events at which they speak. They are constructed in such a way as to be differentiated from 'normal' delegates. They are named on flyers and their biographies are infused with geographical reference points, because their place on the stage relies on their ability (and that of the organizers) to situate them within widely accepted and acknowledged successful examples. Placing 'experts' geographically in this way does one of two things: it serves either to reinforce or to challenge accepted wisdom about the cities that others should strive to emulate. In many cases the reputational capital of a speaker accrues from their symbolic association with specific 'supply-side' places – such as

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Barcelona, Bilbao, New York, Vancouver and others – and the existence of various 'demand-side' contexts (McCann and Ward, 2011).

Dan Biederman, the consultant and co-founder of the Grand Central Partnership, the 34th Street Partnership and the Bryant Park Corporation BIDs in Midtown Manhattan, is one such 'expert' or 'guru'. Not only have narratives of his professional history – which place him at the epicentre of New York's 'miraculous' transformation of the 1990s – led to him receiving numerous keynote invitations to a variety of international conferences over the years, but his performances at such events have also enhanced his reputation as a BID guru. As well as his assertive and brash persona, he is well known for his astute use of relational comparisons and his frequent references to 'broken windows', 'tipping points' and other such 'pop-sociology/criminology'. Add to this his easily recited mantras, such as: 'Forget the saying, "If you build it, they will come" . . . If you build something, and don't do much more, they will not come.'[iv] Combined, it is not altogether surprising – and some might say a little disconcerting (e.g. Katz, 1998) – that onlookers such as a reporter from the *Austin American Statesman* (1999: A14) are attracted to his mobile policy prescriptions:

> The luncheon speech by Dan Biederman had an element of deliciousness to it. How could the members and guests of the Downtown Austin Alliance not feel a touch of giddiness listening to the man called an architect of public–private partnerships and known as the Mayor of

Midtown (Manhattan)? He poked a stick at Seattle. He pricked the balloon

that is lower downtown Denver. And, oh, what a future he described for

Austin.

Of course speakers such as Biederman do not just turn up and then disappear.

There are associated products – 'collateral' in the words of downtown

practitioners – that appear and shape development trajectories in ways that

would have been difficult to envisage. PowerPoints, reports, speeches, sometimes

videos of their presentations, and scribbled notes by listeners can all take on lives

of their own, being passed around and circulated, uploaded and downloaded.

In addition to being places where 'expert' speakers talk and delegates

listen, conferences are also important places where actors meet and talk face to

face, which also shapes the way in which policies are disseminated, compared and

framed. The next section, therefore, turns to the issue of face-to-face

communication in the construction of overlapping and intersecting territorial

circuits of policy knowledge.

'Being there', face-to-face communication and performing conferences

Although various technological advances mean that it is possible to learn about a

city from a distance, in the realm of urban policy at least there appears still to be

some value in being there, so to speak. From large, international conferences

through to smaller, more focused workshops, there continues to be an

inexorable growth in the opportunities for policy makers and practitioners to compare, evaluate, judge, learn, and to situate their city in relation to others. Writing about economic trade fairs but with findings that parallel the sorts of conferences that act as points of connection in the circuit of policy mobility, Bathelt and Schuldt (2008b: 3) have argued that 'personal contact between people continues to be a decisive mechanism of communicating news, exchanging knowledge and solving problems'.

Writing in the same economic geographical intellectual vein, Storper and Venables (2004: 357, original emphasis) have claimed that:

> F2F communication is a *performance,* a means to information production and not merely to more efficient exchange. In their performance, speech intentions, roleplaying, and a specific context all come together to raise the quantity and quality of information which can be transmitted.

Face-to-face learning is, therefore, not just about the words. There is a 'buzz' of some sort generated by temporary geographical co-location and co-presence (Bathelt et al., 2004; Torre and Rallett, 2005). In this context of interaction and exchange, policy makers and practitioners get a better (tacit) understanding of whether case studies are (potentially) applicable and transferable to their socio-spatial contexts. Question and answer sessions facilitate forms of iterative and reflexive learning. These produce a rich ecology of information and knowledge

flows about 'best practice' and 'good practice' policy cases in a highly localized setting, such as a single room or hotel. For some, this means conferences constitute 'temporary clusters' (Maskell et al., 2004). That is, conferences 'support processes of interactive learning, knowledge creation and the formation of international networks' (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008a: 855).

In terms of the structuring of conferences, there are formal and informal opportunities for face-to-face engagement. Formally, there are presentations, roundtables and breakout sessions that act to bring together delegates and create spaces of exchange, comparison and learning. Informally, bars, cafes, hallways, registration desks and even toilets and smoking areas are 'globalizing micro-spaces' (Larner and Le Heron, 2002: 765). These are constituent elements in an atmosphere of comparison and learning where places and people can be brought into what Amin and Cohendet (2004) call 'relational proximity'. For McCann (2011: 118–19) these spaces are where:

> globally significant best practice is deployed and discussed, where lessons are learned, where trust is developed, where reputations are made or unmade (reputations of best cities, successful policies and 'hot' policy gurus), and where acquaintances, or 'weak ties', are made among copresent conferees, thus connecting what would otherwise be socially and spatially isolated policy communities.

Towards trans-urban policy pipelines

Here we argue that the three elements discussed previously in this section – the infrastructure that supports the movement of policies, the representational practices of various 'experts', and the place of conferences as central nodes in the globalizing of urban policies – can be productively brought into dialogue through the notion of trans-urban policy pipelines. Terms also used in the various literatures include assemblages, circuits and networks. For us, however, the notion of a pipeline is a potentially useful one. It reflects the assembling of elements of different geographical reach into interlocking sets of relations that connect geographically discrete locations. The pipelines are neither fixed nor static but are dynamic and subject to mutation and refinement. In this, our conceptualization and use of the term differs slightly from its usage by Bathelt et al. (2004). In the case of trans-urban policy-making, there is an iterative relationship with the emergence of pipelines. That is, for urban policy to be moved from one location to another there needs to be some sort of supportive infrastructure. Likewise, the formation of relationships over distance as a means of comparing, educating and learning about the experiences of other cities – such as in the case of pipelines – makes policy mobility more probable, although it is rarely predetermined and there are no guarantees.

In this paper, which marks a tentative usage of the term in this context, trans-urban policy pipelines are understood to exhibit the following characteristics:

- Pipelines are trans-urban linkages between geographically discrete territorial clusters of those involved in the policy-making business (academics, activists, advocates, consultants, evaluators, gurus, journalists, politicians, policy making professionals and so on).

- In trans-urban policy pipelines, the 'urban' is understood as a territorial entity or expression comprising elements of elsewhere. So the urban 'scale', so to speak, comprises bits of local, regional, national and global government, legislation, regulation, etc., often held together in some form of territorial alliance.

- Through trans-urban policy pipelines pass both tacit knowledge – through co-location and copresence at conferences or study tours – and more codified knowledge through other infrastructural elements such as websites, email circulation lists and associated publications.

- Learning acquired through participation in trans-urban policy pipelines dissipates through the different 'local' clusters of practitioners and policy makers – 'spill-over' in the words of Bathelt et al. (2004). Someone reading an article, or attending a conference as part of their involvement in the trans-urban policy pipeline reports back to others involved locally in their area of policy, creating a relational 'local' buzz.

- The movement of policies – fully formed packages, selective discourses, partial representations, synthesized models – through the trans-urban

policy pipeline is not resistance free and rarely leads to serial

reproduction. Rather, policies morph and mutate along the way, often

taking on lives of their own (Peck and Theodore, 2010a).

- 'Best practice' in trans-urban policy pipelines is socially constructed, with

  some participating cities paraded as 'hot spots' (think Barcelona for

  economic regeneration or Portland for sustainable development), whereas

  others are ignored or held up as 'what not to do', or positioned in the

  role of emulators. The best practice 'hierarchy' of cities and the content of

  the best practice is subject to change over time and space (SV Ward,

  2010).

- Those individuals in the trans-urban policy pipeline participate for a

  number of reasons. A mixture of personal, professional, organizational

  and, of course, geographical contexts shapes and structures the rules of

  participation.   In the next section of the paper we develop our

  conceptual arguments further. We use the case study of a Swedish

  conference on the BID model as a means of illuminating our arguments

  with an empirical example.

Conferencing: BIDs i Sverige?

Introduction

There are currently no BIDs in Sweden. So how can our paper be part of this

special issue on *Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): Internationalization and contextualization of a travelling concept?* Well, policies do not suddenly appear in a particular location. Rather, there is labour involved in creating the conditions under which a policy is more likely to be introduced. This is the case currently in Sweden. Over two days in October 2009 in central Stockholm, approximately 80 people attended a conference on BIDs. Its purpose, according to the promotional flyer, would be to answer the question: 'Skulle BIDs fungera i Sverige?' That is, would BIDs work in Sweden? The conference and its overarching question did not come out of the blue. It represented the next step along a particular pathway or trajectory. Beginning in the late 1980s, local Town Centre Management (TCM) partnerships – similar to BIDs but lacking their mandatory private sector funding mechanism – had emerged across Sweden. Although TCM was one of the first local public–private partnership structures in Sweden, the history of postwar collective bargaining between the state, business and the trade unions has meant that the private sector has had a long involvement in framing public policy of various sorts (Gustafsson, 1995). A variety of factors led to TCM partnerships being seen as viable and necessary policy prescriptions. These included the widespread concern about town and city centres in the face of growing retail and office decentralization, the deep recessions in the early 1980s and 1990s, the wider political emphasis on restructuring the state and making it more 'entrepreneurial', and the need to form public–private partnerships to access

European structural funds (Forsberg et al., 1999; Bache and Olsson, 2001; Hudson, 2005; Fröding et al., 2008; Dahlstedt, 2009). Less obviously but just as importantly, policy makers and practitioners were aware of the growth of TCM in the UK, where urban centres were seen to be facing similar issues. The growth of TCM in Sweden was further facilitated and promoted by the establishment of its professional body – Svenska Stadskärnor (Swedish City Centres). This was set up in 1993 (Forsberg et al., 1999).

TCM has been seen by some in Sweden as a successful means of bringing in increased voluntary private sector funds and (selected) private sector views to the decision-making tables, leading in turn to the increased 'competitiveness' of their respective centres (Ahlqvist and Coca-Stefaniak, 2005). However, the ease with which some businesses can 'free ride' on the back of contributions by other businesses and the limited levels of private sector funding are understood to be weaknesses in the current systems (Forsberg et al., 1999). Given these concerns, it is perhaps not surprising that those in Sweden began to look outside the country for other possible downtown governance models.

The Business Improvement District 'model'

As noted earlier, BIDs are formed around two constituent parts: first, they are public–private partnerships; second, and in almost all cases, they involve selected businesses in a defined geographical area voting to make a mandatory collective

contribution to services in their commercial district – often centred around maintenance, development, security and marketing/promotion (Steel and Symes, 2005; Hoyt 2006; Ward 2006, 2007; Morçöl et al., 2008).

Beyond this common definition, however, there is significant variation between BIDs. In the US, as Hochleutner (2003: 380) notes, '[s]chemes of BID governance differ significantly from locality to locality, as well as from BID to BID within localities'. Thinking more transnationally, the services they provide, the level of contribution by businesses and the way in which the contribution is calculated vary, sometimes subtly and sometimes dramatically, from place to place. Likewise, there is a significant variety over space in the *types* of business that gain access to the governing tables, in those that are levied and in those that are eligible to vote (Morçöl et al., 2008). In the UK, for instance, the contribution is compulsory for all business property occupiers within the area once the BID is established, setting it apart from predecessors such as TCM schemes. In the US, it is compulsory for all property owners. In other countries, such as Australia, the contribution is not compulsory. The name Business Improvement District, furthermore, is not always used – so in Canada they talk of Business Improvement Areas, in the Netherlands 'bedrijven investeringszones' (business investment zones) are promoted, and in Germany it is Neighbourhood Improvement Districts (Hoyt, 2006; Kreutz, 2009). So, although in some respects we can talk of a BID 'model', there is a variety of actually existing, similar and

contrasting BID 'models' in circulation.

BIDs were first introduced into Europe in the early 2000s. Business Improvement Districts have subsequently been established in Albania, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Serbia and the UK. A series of infrastructures have been assembled around the model as a means of supporting its development, refinement and movement from one place to another. Indeed, it is possible to argue that there has been a process of co-production of 'model' and of infrastructures. In this context, Swedish policy makers and practitioners have become increasingly aware of the BID model and its achievements in three ways. First, they have indulged in 'policy tourism', participating in study tours to the UK and the US. This has meant visiting existing BIDs, learning about them and reporting back to colleagues about the model and how it may or may not be appropriate for Swedish towns and cities. Second, keynote international speakers have spoken at Svenska Stadskärnor's annual conferences. Organizers have sought out BID 'gurus' – consultants, practitioners, etc. – as a means of bringing those involved in Swedish towns and cities closer to the 'good practice' experiences of other cities. The organizers sought to invite BID gurus because the act of inviting high-profile speakers secures the organizers – and those they represent – a place in the professional biographies of the speakers, in the process co-locating them vis-à-vis other places and events that go into constituting the reputational capital of speakers. Third, policy makers and practitioners have

attended conferences organized by the Washington-based IDA, the London-based Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) and TOCEMA Europe (a partnership of professional bodies situated in nine European nations). At these conferences they have participated in a range of educational activities: seminars, luncheons, master classes, workshops and so on. Learning has taken place in a number of different ways, as a range of cities different experiences are brought into conversation with one and other.

Creating the conditions for introducing   the BID model into Sweden: assembling an infrastructure

The initial interest in Sweden in the BID model was seized upon by the research project 'Den Goda Staden' (The Good City), which ran between 2005 and 2010. The project was led by the representative of the national Transport Office (Trafikverket) on the board of Svenska Stadskärnor and co-funded with the national Housing Office (Boverket), the municipalities of Uppsala, Norrköping and Jönköping, and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. The mandate of the project was to 'develop common knowledge and experience to overcome obstacles and difficulties . . . to create opportunities for discussion and exchange of experience on urban development and transport' http://www.vv.se (accessed March 2010), our translation. The emphasis was very much on partnership-based solutions. In addition to researching other possible downtown governance 'models' – so doing their bit of 'scouring the world' – the leaders of

'Den Goda Staden' commissioned the Centre for Regional Science (Centrum för Regionalvetenskap) at Umeå University to write a feasibility study for Swedish BIDs.

The final report (Edlund and Westlin, 2009) did a number of things. First, it drew attention to the institutional structures in place in countries where the BID model had been successfully introduced. It emphasized the various elements that went into the make-up of the 'model'. Second, it discussed both the apparent successes and the apparent failures of the BID model in different countries. Unsurprisingly, it was inherently comparative. Third, and finally, it discussed the various domestic legislative changes that would need to be made in order for the BID model to be introduced into Sweden. This involved setting out some future scenarios, thus creating the policy climate to consider wider changes that would need to be made to create favourable conditions for the introduction of the BID model. This whole process began to constitute a 'Swedish' infrastructure to consider the creation of BIDs, though, unsurprisingly, this Swedish infrastructure did incorporate elements and aspects taken from BID infrastructures elsewhere.

To disseminate the report's main findings and to instigate a more focused engagement with the international experiences and domestic futures of BIDs, the alliance of local authorities and professional bodies decided to hold a conference. As part of this event they also committed themselves to inviting speakers from outside Sweden. In part this can be understood as an attempt to forge relations

with others elsewhere in the world with more BID experience. For one of the co-funders interviewed, the conference was also about 'taking the discussion back to Sweden . . . getting the interest of the wider audience as not everybody knows what BIDs are about' (interview with board member, Svenska Stadskärnor, February 2010). Much like the logic behind the initial report, the thinking was that the conference would situate the BID model in a relational comparison framework, combining references to how it had functioned in other parts of the world with how it might function domestically in Sweden. This would mark the beginning of the forging of pipelines to elsewhere. To (selectively) 'showcase' the international experiences of the BID model, the conference would feature six 'international know-howers', as one of the organizers put it (personal communication, Umeå University, April 2010). These were to come from Canada, Germany, the UK and the US (although the US academic was unable to attend the conference).

The conference: comparing and learning

Table 1 shows the structure of the two-day conference. The first day consisted of a small round-table discussion. This involved the international guest speakers, the organizers of the conference and a small number of invited municipal policy makers. It provided an opportunity for all involved to meet one another and to discuss some of the report's key findings in an informal context. Evidence from elsewhere was 'translated', insofar as the incomparable was made comparable

and the faraway was rendered proximate, through the presence of external 'experts'. In bringing together this constituency, the ground was set for the forging of longer-term and longer-distance relations between senior figures in the fledgling Swedish BID sector and established international 'experts'.

The second day was billed as the main 'public event'. It consisted of a more traditional conference structure and room layout, and was entitled: 'Business Improvement Districts: Urban development through collaboration and co-financing'. Here the purpose was to bring a wider and more disparate array of policy makers and practitioners into the potential fold. A variety of public and private officials at local, regional, and national level attended from towns and cities across Sweden, paying a small admission fee. These included economic planners, transport planners, consultants and architects, many of whom had experience working with or within local TCM schemes or Svenska Stadskärnor. In addition to the subtle pressure of being encouraged to attend by colleagues and the organizers in a number of cases, a questionnaire filled out by 14 delegates revealed that many attended the conference to broaden their knowledge about the BID model – something they had only heard or read about (whether at a conference, on a trip abroad, in the media or through informal conversations) – and to learn about its relevance and adaptability to Sweden and their respective working practices and territories. One respondent, for example, noted that they were 'very interested to hear about how BIDs in fact worked, and which part we

in Sweden could copy and paste'. So, attendance was purposeful and centred on comparing and learning as a means of reflecting on the potential returns of importing the BID model into Sweden.

To confer legitimacy on the conference and its speakers, and conforming to widespread practice in staging conferences and seminars, the speakers were discursively positioned as 'experts' (McCann, 2008). Their names were prominent in the promotional flyers and emails, with the speakers introduced to the audience at the event as having knowledge, experience, expertise and power in their respective fields of work. The reputations of the international guests were further enhanced by the way in which their biographies situated them within or alongside successful BIDs elsewhere. They, in other words, could tell the audience how the BID model had already 'worked' in other towns and cities around the world.

On the second day of the conference, in particular, the staging of the event through the use of personalized introductions, a very large PowerPoint screen, a raised stage, microphones, a lectern and the audience sitting in rows facing the stage helped to theatrically construct the speaker as the expert, somebody who needed to be listened to (see the staging of expertise and authority in Ford and Harding, 2008). Since the presentations on the second day formed the centre-piece of the conference, they are worth focusing on.

Table 1. Event programme

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13 October, 2010: Introductory Workshop (Konferens Strandvägen 7A, Stockholm)

09:30	*Welcome and introduction to the workshop*
	Lars Westlin (Umeå University)
10:30	Discussion (with lunch and coffee breaks)
16:00	Summary
16:30	Dinner at restaurant

14 October, 2010: Conference (Royal Viking Hotel, Stockholm)

08:30	Registration and Coffee
09:00	*Urban development through interaction and co-financing*
	Lennart Andersson (Vägverket), Lena Lindström (Svenska Stadskärnor) and Andreas Jarud (Fastighetsägarna) *BIDs in Sweden?* Lars Westlin (Umeå University)
	Business Improvement Areas
	John Ballantine (Municipal Affairs and Housing, Ontario)
	Development and impact of BIDs in the UK
	Jacquie Reilly (Association of Town Centre Management)
11:30	Lunch
12:30	*Business Improvement Districts: A view from the outside*
	Ian Cook (University of Manchester)
	The Scottish experience
	Ian Davison Porter (BIDs Scotland)
14:15	Coffee
14:45	*From business to neighbourhood Improvement Districts – transfer of the BID model to residential neighbourhoods*
	Stefan Kreutz (HafenCity University, Hamburg)
	Inverness BIDs: The local experience
	Stefan Krause (Inverness BID)
16:30	*Summary*
	Lars Westlin (Umeå University)
17:00	Finish
19:00	Dinner at restaurant

Following presentations by board members of Svenska Stadskärnor and by

Umeå University's Lars Westlin – who set out the domestic context of TCM and

the generally held view that there was a need to look elsewhere for ideas and

inspiration to improve existing partnership arrangements – the international

speakers focused almost exclusively on the different elements of the BID model

with which they were familiar. There was little explicit reference to Sweden, the

comparisons often being implicit to begin with. Nevertheless, it was clear that the

talks were tailored to the audience and to the potential making mobile of the BID

model. John Ballantine (Ontario's Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing)

spoke about BIDs in Ontario, Stefan Kreutz (HafenCity University) talked about

BIDs in Hamburg, and four speakers reported on BIDs in the UK: Jacquie Reilly

(ATCM) provided a national overview, Ian Davison Porter (BIDs Scotland) gave a

Scottish overview, Ian Cook (one of the co-authors of this paper) spoke about

Coventry, Plymouth and Reading, and Stefan Krause reported on the BID he

manages in Inverness city centre (see Table 1). The various case studies reflected

not only the internationalization and Europeanization of the BID model, but also

the conceptual point that lesson-learning rarely involves one place looking at

another (A to B) but involves multiple points of reference and comparison (Cook

and Ward, 2011, 2012). A variety of trans-urban policy pipelines – broadly

understood – began to be established through the speakers' range of geographical

references. Those in a range of Swedish towns and cities were brought into

relational proximity with those making policy in a range of other countries – even if those makers were not present. Nevertheless, the UK seemed to be the dominant point of reference at the conference, a reflection not only of the four UK-based speakers and the advanced use of the English language in Sweden, but also of the past histories of English–Swedish collaborations and lesson-learning over TCM and the similar histories of TCM development (and its associated free-riding) in both countries (Forsberg et al., 1999; Cook, 2008). Altogether, the UK-headed plurality of reference points seemed to reflect a growing movement away from a reliance on US reference points in European discussions around BIDs, which so dominated during the 1990s and early to mid 2000s (see Ward, 2006; Cook, 2008).

BIDs, unsurprisingly, were praised by most of the speakers. Causal links between the successful economic performance of cities and towns and the creation of BIDs were positively asserted. Only Ian Cook was critical, being sceptical about this oftenasserted causal link and also questioning the 'democratic deficit' that tends to characterize the BID model. These contrasting views did produce some debate – with, for example, Stefan Krause arguing that BIDs *are* democratic because they bring businesses into the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the bulk of presenters centred on the issues of autonomy, additionality and flexibility (all of which case the BID model in a positive light, it is argued).

Focusing on the last theme, BIDs were frequently heralded as being flexible not only in terms of the services they could provide but also in terms of the spaces in which they could be used. Ian Davison Porter, for instance, told the audience that BIDs legislation in Scotland was so open that it was easier to talk of what BIDs could *not* do rather than what they could. He spoke of previous discussions with people interested in forming more imaginatively themed and situated BIDs, including those along canals, in hospital grounds, on golf courses, in rural areas and between whisky distilleries. His presentation emphasized that it was the imagination of the individual – that set the limits to what could be done with the BID model.

The accounts were structured not only by what the speakers thought others (e.g. the organizers, the audience) would understand and want to hear, but also by the many presentations, reports, PowerPoints, meetings, conversations and experiences generated from elsewhere. The final versions of the various PowerPoint presentations may have been saved in Stockholm, but they drew upon (comparatively and quite literally) elsewhere. Many of the speakers also noted to Ian Cook and the wider audience that their PowerPoint presentations were based on frequently used templates; for example, Ian Davison Porter told the audience that the following day in Edinburgh he would be using the same PowerPoint presentation for a group of Norwegian BIDs policy tourists. The language therefore was intertextual, with speakers employing 'a set

of tropes and representational techniques with which the audience has prior comfort and familiarity' (McCann, 2011: 116). The notion of flexibility, once again, is a good example of this, being frequently used in Sweden and elsewhere by BID and TCM policy makers, practitioners and academics. Indeed, Levy's mantra that BID's are a 'more focused and flexible form of governance than large municipal bureaucracies' and Steel and Symes' argument that 'BID's can be 'microfitted' to suit local conditions and needs' were echoed in the representations of the BID model that many speakers offered at the conference.

It was not just in and through the formal speeches and presentations that participants exchanged experiences. The 'downtime' around the presentations was also important to the circulation of policy expertise: people could relax, stretch their legs, get some 'fresh air', pick up and flick through brochures and exchange business cards, as well as converse with the speakers, organizers and other delegates, some of whom they had already met before and some they had not. Food and drink – a staple part of most academic and policy conferences – was also important here, with organizers and presenters eating dinner at restaurants on both nights, and with lunch and coffee breaks on both days also (all at the cost of the organizers). Rather than being simply 'fuelling sessions', these offered more relaxed settings where the merits of the presentations and the conference could be discussed, where gossip, small talk and jokes could be exchanged, and where stories, ideas, problems and solutions (not limited to the

presentation case studies) could be discussed, compared and debated (see Cabral-Cardoso and Cunha, 2003, on business lunches).For Ian Cook it was insightful to note how several Swedish delegates introduced themselves to, and engaged animatedly with, Jacquie Reilly throughout the lunch break on the second day, immediately after her presentation, before she had to fly back early to the UK. Not only had she provided an engaging account of the emergence and evolution of BIDs in the UK, giving them a glowing endorsement, but she also possessed a high degree of reputational capital in policy circles, being the head of UK BIDs at the ATCM, leading one of Europe's oldest and largest BID national programmes, hosting numerous study tours and events, and appearing at a variety of international meetings and conferences. The dining hall, therefore, was an important space in which face-to-face relational comparisons could occur.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we have sought to make two theoretical contributions to the emerging literature on mobile policies, relational comparisons, geographies of knowledge circulation and the wider accounts of the policy-making process more generally (see, for instance, Pero et al., 2011). First, we have outlined the notion of *trans-urban policy pipelines* as a means of conceiving of the movement of policy models from one locality to another. The notion of transurban policy pipelines emphasizes the mutating infrastructure that exists in support of the movement or mobilization of policy models, the (often) selfstyled 'experts' whose involvement

in policy model mobility reinforces its embodied nature, and the place of conferences as sites of comparison, education, exchange and learning. Other terms abound in the various literatures. 'Policy assemblages', 'policy circuits' and 'policy networks' are three that have emerged. In introducing the notion of 'pipelines', we wish to emphasize the interconnectedness of the infrastructure that supports the movement of policies, the representational practices of 'experts' of various varieties, and conferences as central nodes in the globalizing of urban policies. Second, and building on this, we have argued for a deeper analysis of the role of conferences, understanding them as timelimited events that bring together people from particular epistemic communities for face-to-face interaction and the exchange of verbal, visual and symbolic information. These spaces of global circulation and exchange have remained rather underexplored in urban studies. And yet there is evidence that they play important roles in making possible the movement of policy models from one place to another (Ward, 2006; McCann, 2008, 2011). Both these points are made as a contribution to a more critical, grounded and reflexive approach to policymaking, one that differs fundamentally from more traditional accounts that understand it as apolitical, formulaic, neutral and technocratic.

Empirically, we have used the example of a Swedish conference on the BID model. We showed that this conference was the latest in a long list of informational technologies drawn upon to discuss and frame the futures of

Swedish downtowns in relational comparison with places in and beyond Sweden. The conference considered how BIDs have functioned in other parts of the world vis-à-vis how they might operate domestically. Various 'expert' speakers were invited to present their evidence. Notes were written and links to online PowerPoint presentations were circulated to delegates, to be (potentially) read and then re-read by others when they returned home. Geographically discrete but relationally proximate places were brought together. At the conference, information, knowledge, experience and expertise were exchanged. There was a form of 'buzz' generated by the co-presence of policy makers and practitioners from a range of different contexts, inside and outside of Sweden.

For one interviewee, the conference 'corrected' several misconceptions about the BID model:

'[On] the first day in the small conference we had participants from different municipalities and I had the feeling they saw BIDs as a way to force taxes on companies to do stuff that the official people wanted to be done . . . [F]or me it was very important to have international people saying "no, you have got it wrong, it is not a top-down perspective; it is a bottom-up perspective". Because people from the Swedish municipalities thought that BIDs is great because then we can force taxes on local companies to build this new motorway and in my experience no BID is working like that. So that was a very, very good thing. And perhaps I think

sometimes it is harder to listen to and learn from some internal people, if

you know what I mean, because we are just having our interests and what

is best for me . . . [whereas] international people . . . say "OK, it is like

that". And then I saw that they were starting to understand.' (Interview

with board member, Svenska Stadskärnor, February 2010)

For the interviewee, the conference made a small but important difference to the

way some municipal representatives thought about BIDs. Nevertheless, despite

the small and large insights gained into how BIDs work elsewhere and the

promoting of BIDs seemingly 'inherent' qualities of flexibility, autonomy and

additionality, the conference has not yet led to national legislation in Sweden.

'After the conference, the BIDs discussion actually died out a bit . . . But it is not

dead; it is just resting at the moment' (interview with board member, Svenska

Stadskärnor, February 2010). Its current hibernation, the interviewee reasoned,

was due to two factors. First, the Swedish proponents of the BID model were

reluctant to push 'quickly' for its introduction in the leadup to the September

2010 parliamentary election. This type of quite profound change was understood

to be politically unthinkable. Second, even after the election – in which The

Alliance, the centre-right coalition, formed a minority government – there

remained some concerns about the social and political acceptability of the

mandatory taxation that is so central to the BID model. This was expressed by a

number of delegates at the conference. At present, the various stakeholders in

Sweden are not fully convinced that the value added by the BID model over the existing TCM system trumps the need to introduce a levy on BID members, perceived by some as 'just another tax'. Furthermore, given Sweden's social democratic traditions, some are unsure whether the model – emerging as it has out of two of the more neoliberalizing urban policy contexts: the UK and the US – is entirely appropriate. So, at the time of writing, there is little consensus about whether BIDs will 'work' in Sweden, meaning that the movement 'for' BIDs has subsided. This, of course, simply highlights how a 'model' often mutates as it travels, both internally in terms of its design DNA and externally in terms of what its travelling means for the contexts it encounters.

So, although policy-making in recent decades does appear to be based on more truncated forms of learning and on the speeded-up evaluation, formation and rolling-out of policy cycles – what Peck and Theodore (2001; Peck, 2002) call 'fast policy transfer' – the Swedish example reflects some of the possible obstacles and conflicts involved in mobilizing and embedding policies. If this is not slow policy transfer, it is certainly not 'fast'. After all, the first BID was established in Canada just over 40 years ago and there are still no Business Improvement Districts in Sweden. The barriers to entry, the frictions that exist, have yet to be overcome, despite some in the country being open to the model. What is more, it is likely that the immediate future for Sweden downtown management will be characterized by more conferences, more debates, more lobbying and more

international exchanges and visits. These are the spaces of circulation, coercion, comparison, dialogue, exchange and translation. It is on these, as well as on other more traditional locations of decision-making and politics, that researchers might usefully focus their attention. With the Swedish example, at least, there is still work to be done before the BID model finds itself being introduced into another geographical context.

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[i] Notes were taken before, during and after the conference itself, so that 'the field' does not exactly map onto the duration of the conference. They were also taken at and around the main venue. The more general ethnographic approach reflects the technique's usage in human geography (see Herbert, 2000).

[ii] Semi-structured interviews took place during and after the conference with organizers and delegates. These were taped, transcribed and analysed for use in this paper, and were used alongside secondary materials.

[iii] Questionnaires were distributed after the conference through the organizers. The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open questions related to issues of attendance, dissemination, learning and participation.

[iv] See http://downtownuptown.blogspot.com/2006_02_01_archive.html (accessed 3 August 2011).