

**Conferences, informational infrastructures and
mobile policies: The case of Business Improvement
Districts in Sweden**

IMAGINING URBAN FUTURES WORKING PAPER 10

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Abstract

This paper makes a contribution to the fledgling literature on policy mobilities. Using the example of the internationalisation of the Business Improvement District model, it argues that conferences constitute important arenas in and through which both the mobilising and embedding of urban policies can occur. Focusing on an important two-day conference that took place in Sweden during 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, 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 organisers and participants to produce a single-site but relationally thick description of the place of conferences in facilitating the movement of policies across space.

Keywords: mobile policies, Business Improvement Districts, urban governance, conferences, Sweden

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: 170a).

1. 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 (Cook, 2008; Gonzalez, 2010; McCann, 2008, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2010, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2001, 2010a, 2010b; Prince, 2010a, 2010b; Ward, 2006, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). Drawing upon and critiquing traditional political science approaches to the issue of policy transfer (Dolowitz and

Marsh, 1996; Evans, 2004; Stone, 2004), these contributions have emphasised ‘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 this paper considers 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. This paper begins 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, learning and, echoing the second quote by geographers Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, sites which link together and potentially transform geographically distant but socially proximate policymaking sites.

While there is a relatively large body of scholarship on conferences and urban development (Clark, 2007; Laslo and Judd, 2004), conferences and tourism (DiPetro *et al.*, 2008; Morgan and Condliffe, 2007), conferences and subject formation (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Skov, 2006) and conferences and academic career development (Bell and King, 2010; Ford and Harding, 2008; McLaren and Mills, 2008; Morse, 2008), there has been surprisingly little research to date on the role of the conference as a micro-space of globalisation (Larner and Le

Heron, 2002) or, in White's words, as spaces to 'steal' policy ideas. Attending to this lacuna, the paper draws upon and develops work in relational economic geography (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008a, 2008b; Maskell *et al.*, 2004; Storper and Venables, 2004; Torre, 2008) to assemble a framework for understanding the role of conferences in the embodied, programmatic and technical aspects of policy mobility. It uses the example of the movement of the Business Improvement District model, which has been partially and geographically unevenly internationalised over the last two decades. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are public-private partnerships, in which property and business owners in a defined geographic area elect to make a mandatory collective contribution to the maintenance, development and marketing/promotion of their commercial district. The internationalisation of the BID model has revealed the mutating and hybridising tendencies in attempts to move policy models. There remains no standard naming convention. So, where Business Improvement Districts might not exist in name, they do in model DNA, for example where there are 'special improvement districts', 'neighbourhood improvement districts', 'municipal improvement districts', 'business improvement areas', 'downtown improvement districts', 'city improvement districts', 'urban improvement districts' or 'bedrijven investeringszones' (business investment zones) (Hoyt, 2003, 2006; Kreutz, 2009; Morçöl and Zimmerman, 2006; Steel and Symes, 2005; Ward, 2006).

Henceforth, this paper is organised into three sections. The first section considers the small but burgeoning relational economic geographic literature on different types of face to face (F2F) events, such as conferences. In reviewing this work, it makes the case for taking seriously the inner workings and external relationships that structure these events. Using the language of *trans-urban policy pipelines* – the formation of relationships over distance as a means of comparing, educating and learning about the experiences of other cities – it argues that conferences constitute important arenas in and through which both the mobilising and embedding of urban policies can occur. The second section turns to this paper's empirical example. Using a combination of ethnographic techniques, and semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with

organisers and participants to produce a thickened description, the paper critically reflects upon a 2009 conference in Sweden on the BID model, using it to highlight the role these rather unspectacular events often play in the movement of policy models. In the third section, the conclusion, the paper shows that while conferences can act as sites of inspiration, the hosting of these events do not automatically lead to a post-conference rolling out of new policy instruments. Friction and conflict remains important in the mobilisation of policies.

2. Assembled cities: infrastructures, face to face communication and expertise

In recent years it has been argued that traditional (and orthodox) studies of policy transfer come up short theoretically (Cook, 2008; Cook and Ward, 2010a, 2010b; McCann, 2008, 2010; Peck and Theodore, 2010a, 2010b; Ward, 2006, 2010). While 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, 2010: np) – that curtail its capacity to make sense of the place of cities in wider global circuits of policy making. 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, the section disaggregates the shift from thinking about policy transfer to thinking about policy mobility into three constituent elements. First, it argues 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, it highlights the performance of individual agents – in particular those positioned and mobilised as ‘experts’ – in actively shaping the models and their audiences’ understandings. Third, and finally, it contends 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.

2.1. 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 international-in-reach institutional infrastructure that has emerged in recent years, which 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 revitalisation, drugs, economic development etc. – there are different (and sometimes overlapping) infrastructures in place. These are transitory assemblages of various elements – institutions, presentations, websites, etc. – which are assembled and re-assembled, held together temporarily only then later to be broken up and/or re-configured. While 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 of 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 agents has made the movement of policies from one place to another more probable. While it is acknowledged

that access to these informational infrastructures is not equal (McCann, 2010), 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 part of the world. 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 (Peck and Theodore, 2010a; Ward, 2006). 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 (S. Ward, 2003, 2010). It is the effect in that as those involved in the facilitating of the movement of policies from one place to another has increased in number, a series of new ‘business’ opportunities have emerged. New consultancies, inter-governmental 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 (Peck, 2003). The experiences of cities are brought together in new ways. The infrastructure has become denser in many cases, as there has been an increase in the activities associated with the making mobile of policies. This makes it more possible and, in some cases, 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 inter-connection and more contingent (and chance) intersections.

2.3. ‘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 organisers to impart their expertise and knowledge and give legitimacy to the event they are speaking at. 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, as their place on the stage relies on their ability (and that of the organisers) 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 to which 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 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, 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 him to receive 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 BIDs guru. As well as his assertive and

brash persona, he is well known for his astute use of relational comparisons, his frequent references to ‘broken windows’, ‘tipping points’ and other such ‘pop-sociology/criminology’, and his easily recited mantras – such as “[f]orget the saying, ‘If you build it, they will come’... If you build something, and don’t do much more, they will not come” (downtownuptown.blogspot.com/2006_02_01_archive.html). It is therefore 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), quoted below, 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. PowerPoints, reports, speeches, sometimes videos of their presentations, scribbled notes by listeners, all of which can take on lives of their own, be passed around and circulated, uploaded and downloaded, appear and shape development trajectories in ways that would have been difficult to have envisaged.

In addition to being places where ‘expert’ speakers talk and delegates listen, they are also important places in which actors meet and talk face to face, which too 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.

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

While 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, and learn, 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.

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

F2F [face to face] communications is a *performance*, means to information production and not merely to more efficient exchange. In their performance, speech intentions, role-playing, 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, 2004). 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’ and ‘good practice’ policy cases in a highly localised setting, such as a single room or hotel. For some, this means the 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 (2010: np) 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 co-present conferees, thus connecting what would have otherwise be socially and spatially isolated policy communities.

2.4 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 ‘experts’ of various varieties, and the place of conferences as central nodes in the globalising of urban policies – can be productively brought into dialogue through the notion of trans-urban policy pipelines. They 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 territorially coherence alliance;
- Through trans-urban policy pipelines pass both tacit knowledge – through co-location and co-presence at conferences or study tours – and more codified knowledge through other infrastructural elements such websites, e-mail 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, synthesised models etc – through the trans-urban policy pipeline is not resistant-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), while others are ignored or held up as ‘what not to do’, or positioned as 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 (S. Ward, 2010).
- Those individuals in the trans-urban policy pipeline participate for a number of reasons. A mixture of personal, professional, organisational and, of course, geographical contexts shaper and structure 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 Business Improvement District model as a means of illuminating our arguments with an empirical example.

3. Conferencing: BIDs i Sverige?

3.1 Introduction

Over two days in October, 2009 in central Stockholm, approximately eighty people attended a conference on Business Improvement Districts. 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 the mandatory private sector funding mechanism of BIDs – had emerged across Sweden. While TCM was one of the first local public-private partnership structures in Sweden, the history of post-war 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 for town and city centres in the face of growing retail and office decentralisation, 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 (Bache and Olsson, 2001; Forsberg *et al.*, 1999; Hudson, 2005; Fröding *et al.*, 2008; Dahlstedt, 2009). Less obvious but just as important, policy makers and practitioners were aware of the growth of TCM in England, where urban centres were seen to be facing similar issues. The growth of TCM in Sweden was further facilitated and promoted by 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 increased ‘competitiveness’ of their respective centres (Ahlqvist and Coca-Stefaniak, 2005). However, the ease by which some businesses can ‘free ride’ on the back of contributions by other businesses and the limited levels of private sector funding that such a system has secured 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 of the country for other possible downtown governance models.

3.2 The Business Improvement District ‘model’

The BID model was 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. Swedish policymakers and practitioners have become increasingly aware of the BID model and its achievements through three ways. First, they have indulged in ‘policy tourism’, participating in study tours to the UK and the US. This has meant visiting existing Business Improvement Districts, 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. Organisers 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. For the act of inviting high-profile speakers secures the organisers – 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 organised by the Washington-based International Downtown Association (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 they have participated in a range of

educational activities: seminars, luncheons, master-classes, and workshops and so on. Learning has taken place in a number of different ways, as a range of city's different experiences were brought into conversation with one and other.

3.3 Creating the conditions for introducing the BID model into Sweden

The initial interest in Sweden in the BID model was seized upon by the research project *Den Goda Staden* (The Good City) which runs between 2005 and 2010. The project is led by the national Transport Office's (Trafikverket) representative 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 has been 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" (www.vv.se, accessed March 2010, our translation). The emphasis has been very much on partnership-based solutions. In addition to researching other possible downtown governance 'models', 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 Business Improvement Districts. The final report (Westin and Edlund, 2009) did a number of things. First, it drew attention to the institutional structures in place in countries where the BID model has been successfully introduced. It emphasised the various elements that went into the make-up of the 'model'. Second, it discussed both the apparent successes and 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, 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.

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. 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" (board member, Svenska Stadskärnor, interview, February, 2010). Like the logic behind the 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. To (selectively) 'showcase' the international experiences of the BID model the conference would feature six "international know-howers" as one of the organisers put it (personal communication, official, 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).

3.4. The conference: comparing and learning

The first day of the conference consisted of a small round-table discussion. This involved the international guest speakers, the organisers of the conference and a small number of invited municipal policy makers. It provided an opportunity for all involved to meet one and other and to discuss some of the report's key findings in an informal context. Evidence from elsewhere was 'translated', so to speak, the incomparable made comparable through the presence of external '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’.

A variety of local, regional and national, public and private officials based in towns and cities across Sweden attended, paying a small admission fee. These included economic planners and transport planners, consultants and architects, many of whom had experience working with or within local TCM schemes or Svenska Stads kärnor. In addition to the subtle pressure of being encouraged to attend by colleagues and the organisers in a number of cases, a questionnaire filled out by fourteen delegates revealed that many attended the conference to broaden their knowledge about the BID model, something which they had only heard or seen about – whether at a conference, a trip abroad, the media, or through informal conversations – and its relevance and adaptability to Sweden and their respected working practices and territories. One respondent, for instance, 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 international guests were further enhanced by their perceived ‘closeness’ and ‘emersion’ in BIDs operations and research. They, in other words, could tell the audience how the BID model had actually 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 personalised introductions, a very large PowerPoint screen, a raised stage, microphones,

lectern, and the audience sitting in rows facing the stage all helped to theatrically construct the speaker as the expert, somebody who you need to listen to (cf. the staging of expertise and authority in Ford and Harding, 2008). Indeed, the presentations on the second day as the centre-pieces of the conference are worth focusing on. Following presentations by board members of Svenska Stadsbornor and Umeå University's Lars Westin – 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 BID model with which they were familiar. There was little explicit reference to Sweden – the comparisons were often implicit to begin with. Nevertheless, it was clear that their talks were tailored to the audience, to the potential making mobile of the BID model. John Ballatine (Ontario Municipal Affairs and Housing) spoke about BIDs in Ontario, Stefan Kreutz (HanfenCity University) on BIDs in Hamburg, and four speakers spoke about BIDs in the UK: Jacquie Reilly (ATCM) provided a national overview, Ian Davison Porter (BIDs Scotland) with a Scottish overview, Ian Cook (the co-author of this paper) on Coventry, Plymouth and Reading, and Stefan Krause on the BID he manages in Inverness city centre. The various case studies reflect not only the internationalisation and Europeanisation 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, 2010a, 2010b). Trans-urban policy pipelines of sorts were established by the range of geographical references made by the speakers. Those in a range of Swedish towns and cities were brought into relational proximity with those making policy in a range of other countries. Nevertheless, the UK seemed to be the dominant point of reference at the conference, a reflection not only the four British-based speakers and the advanced use of the English language in Sweden, but also 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. Causality between the successful economic performance of cities and towns and the creations of Business Improvement Districts was positively asserted. Only Ian Cook was critical, being sceptical of this often-asserted causal link, and also questioning the ‘democratic deficit’ that tends to characterise the BID model. These contrasting views did produce some debate – with, for example, Stefan Krause arguing that Business Improvement Districts *are* democratic as 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 cast the BID model in a positive light).

Focusing on the latter theme, Business Improvement Districts 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 told of previous discussions with people interested in forming more imaginatively themed and situated BIDs including those along canals, in hospital grounds, golf courses, rural areas and between whiskey distilleries. The presentation emphasised that it was imagination of the individual – or the lack of – which set the limits to what could be done with the BID model.

The accounts, whether delivered verbally or on in the form of written presentations, were structured not only by what the speakers thought others (e.g. the organisers, the audience) would understand and want to hear, but also the multiple presentations, reports, PowerPoints, meetings, conversations and experiences generated from elsewhere. The final version of the

various PowerPoints may have been saved in Stockholm, but they drew upon – comparatively and quiet 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, with Ian Davison Porter telling 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 inter-textual, with speakers employing “a set of tropes and representational techniques with which the audience has prior comfort and familiarity” (McCann, 2010: np). The notion of flexibility, once again, is a good example of this, being frequently used in Sweden and elsewhere by BID and TCM policymakers, practitioners and academics. Indeed, Levy’s (2001: 129) mantra that BIDs are “more focused and flexible form of governance than large municipal bureaucracies” and Steel and Symes’ (2005: 325) argument that “BIDs can be ‘microfitted’ to suit local conditions and needs” reflected how many of the speakers represented the BID model 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, when people could relax, stretch their legs, get some ‘fresh air’, pick up and flick through brochures, exchange business cards, as well as converse with the speakers, organisers 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 organisers 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 organisers). Rather than being simply ‘fuelling sessions’, these offered more relaxed settings where the merits of the presentations and conference could be discussed, 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 (cf. Cabral-Cardoso and Cunha, 2003 on business lunches). For Ian Cook an important memory was that of several Swedish delegates

engaging 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 Jacquie provided an engaging account of the emergence and evolution of BIDs in the UK, giving them a glowing endorsement, 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 through which face to face relational comparisons could be engaged in.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has sought to make two theoretical contributions to the emerging literature on mobile policies, relational comparisons and geographies of knowledge circulation. First, it has made a conceptual case for the notion of *trans-urban policy pipelines* as a means of conceiving of the movement of policy models from one locality to another. This emphasises the infrastructure that exists, supporting the mobilising and movement of policy models, the (often) self-styled 'experts' whose involvement in policy model mobility reinforces its embodied nature, and the place of conferences as site of comparison, education, exchange and learning. Second, and building on this, it has argued for a deeper analysis of the role of conferences, understanding them as time-limited events that bring together people from particular epistemic communities for face to face interaction and exchange of verbal, visual and symbolic information. These spaces of global circulation and exchange have remained rather under explored 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 (McCann, 2008, 2010; Ward, 2006).

Empirically, the paper has used the example of a Swedish conference on the BID model. It 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 to 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 (board member, Svenska Stadskärnor, interview, February, 2010).

For the interviewee, the conference made a small but important difference in the way some municipal representations thought about BIDs. Nevertheless, despite the small and large insights gained into how BIDs work elsewhere and the promoting of BID's seemingly 'inherent' qualities of flexibility, autonomy and additionality, the conference has not yet lead 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' (board member, Svenska Stads kärnor, interview, February, 2010). Its current hibernation, the interviewee reasoned, is due to two reasons. First, that politicians and Swedish BID supporters are reluctant to push for the introduction of the BID model during a parliamentary election year. This sort of quite profound change is understood to be political unthinkable at the present moment. Second, there remain 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, with its social democratic traditions some are unsure whether the model – emerging as it has out of two of the more neo-liberalising urban policy contexts: the UK and the US – was entirely appropriate. At the time of writing, there is, in short, little consensus about whether BIDs will 'work' in Sweden.

So, while policy making in recent decades does appear to be based on more truncated forms of learning and speeded up evaluation, formation and rolling-out policy cycles – what Peck and Theodore (2001; Peck, 2002) call 'fast policy transfer' – the Swedish example reflects some of the possible frictions and conflicts involved in mobilising and embedding policies. If not slow policy transfer, this is certainly not 'fast'. What is more, it is likely that the immediate future for Sweden downtown management will be characterised by more conferences, more debates, more lobbying, and more international exchanges and visits. In this 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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