

Interplaces and Metropolisation in the Metropolitan Core Area of Belgium

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63th Congress – ERSA 2024

Special Session 39: From neglect to nuance: exploring the diversity of second-tier cities

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Ongoing developments in urban and regional constellations increasingly require us to think beyond the city as a clearly identifiable and self-contained object of analysis (Brenner, 2013; Soja, 2016). This is certainly the case in Europe, where dispersed metropolitan regions have become the norm rather than the exception (Indovina, 2016). Multiple processes of regional urbanisation, which have collectively been termed ‘metropolisation’ (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021), imply that formerly rural areas and suburbs situated at the periphery of metropolitan regions are increasingly embedded in larger, integrated wholes. Because these places are situated in between extended patterns and processes of urbanisation, they have been referred to as ‘interplaces’. However, despite the burgeoning literature on interplaces in general, the common conceptual basis of the concept is somewhat obscured as they generally tend to be tackled from one particular perspective, e.g. an economic (Phelps, 2017), social (Keil, 2020) or ecological one (Wandl et al., 2017), but rarely comprehensively so.

This paper aims to create more conceptual clarity in the debates surrounding interplaces by finding this common conceptual basis while at the same time providing room for differences. By drawing on the framework of metropolisation and its different dimensions, we generate a typology of interplaces and briefly illustrate each type with a case from the Metropolitan Core Area of Belgium.

Interplaces: a diverse literature

There has been a shift of interest to new peripheral places that are located beyond the traditional city, but are increasingly being reconfigured in light of metropolitan integration. This is reflected in the increased attention paid to secondary cities in relation to their primary counterparts (Pendas & Williams, 2021), but is far more diverse considering the many different types of ‘post-suburban’ developments in metropolitan regions that combine rural, suburban and urban characteristics into new hybrid forms. These hybrid developments include notions such as the *Zwischenstadt* (or ‘in-between city’; Sieverts, 2003), the *città diffusa* (Secchi, 1991), the Edge City (Garreau, 1991), the Edgeless City (Lang, 2003), the Continuous City (Lerup, 2018), urban interstices (Phelps & Silva, 2018), territories-in-between (Wandl et al., 2014) and many other hybrid forms of peripheral centralities (Phelps et al., 2022). Even though the geographical contexts from which each of these interplace-concepts are drawn differ, a number of themes that link them are recurring. These include, amongst others, the importance of considering the city-region in which they are positioned as the relevant scale of analysis to explain their emergence, the uneven distribution of benefits across interplaces within this city-region through processes of borrowed size and/or agglomeration shadows, the different

historical development trajectories of interplaces, the key role of transport infrastructure and connectivity to other parts of the city-region in their development, the constant relationality between an interplace and the regional core and, lastly, the difficulty of developing strategic planning policies for interplaces.

Metropolisation as a framework to understand interplaces

Parallel to yet hesitantly intersecting with the literature on interplaces, metropolisation serves as a suitable theoretical and analytical framework to study them. The metropolisation framework starts from the assumption that urban processes are no longer exclusively unfolding in clearly identifiable cities. Rather, the socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes that define urbanity arise in different settings within the wider region, and do so with different intensities, blurring the boundaries between what used to be clearly urban, suburban, or rural (Indovina, 2016). Thus, urban processes are best described as having zonal and field-like properties. These processes are commonly grouped into three dimensions: a spatial-functional dimension, a political-institutional dimension, and a cultural-symbolic dimension (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021). Spatial-functional integration refers to the many tangible flows that create interdependencies between places in the region. Political-institutional integration addresses the extent to which policy cooperation has developed on a regional level and metropolitan policies are effectively implemented. Cultural-symbolic integration refers to the upscaling of the area that people identify with and feel emotionally attached to (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021). Metropolisation examines how each of these dimensions acts as an integrative force across multiple scales.

From the perspective of metropolisation, interplaces can then be defined as those ‘in-between’ places that are shaped by ongoing integration in the wider metropolitan region yet where contradictory processes of integration unfold (Phelps & Silva, 2018). People in one interplace may be functionally reliant yet culturally averse to the city, whereas another interplace may be part of a wider city-region politically with limited bearing in actual functional relations. Or a particular post-suburban interplace may gradually become functionally independent of the central city yet without having developed an independent local identity. In other words, there is a wide variety of types of interplaces depending on the degree to which they are or are not spatial-functionally, political-institutionally and cultural-symbolically integrated with other parts of the metropolitan region.

The Metropolitan Core Area of Belgium as an illustration

We illustrate this typology of interplaces with examples from one particular case, namely the Metropolitan Core Area (MCA) of Belgium. The MCA is a densely populated area of ca. 6 million inhabitants that broadly comprises the Brussels Capital Region and the Flemish provinces of East-Flanders, Antwerp, and Flemish-Brabant. The Belgian MCA – also nicknamed the ‘Flemish Diamond’ (Albrechts & Lievois, 2004) – has traditionally been scattered with myriad urban cores that have accrued over the past two centuries (Grosjean, 2012). The resulting urban morphology is extremely chaotic. Moreover, functional relations such as commuting patterns are so diffuse and complex that it has become difficult to distinguish between centre and periphery in the MCA to the extent that they have been replaced by “an almost omnipresent ‘secondarity’” (de Meulder, 2008, p.29). Places and their ‘centralities’ are therefore described as being inherently vague, indecipherable, and beyond comprehension. In addition, the MCA covers an area with a complex and cluttered governance structures, where a dominant anti-urban mindset paradoxically prevails even in the most ‘urban’ places (de Olde & Oosterlynck, 2022). The notion of a ‘nebular city’ is often invoked to describe the unique situation of the functionally entangled, culturally layered, and politically cluttered MCA (van Meeteren et al., 2016).

Methodology

Given the diversity of urban conditions ostensibly present within the MCA, we expect to identify a great number and a great diversity of interplaces. In practical terms, we detect and typify interplaces by operationalising each of the three metropolisation dimensions. For the spatial-functional dimension, we employ a community detection algorithm on commuting data to detect places characterised by diffuse dependencies to multiple urban centres at once. For the political-institutional dimension, we use a similar approach but draw on a database of intermunicipal cooperation agreements across policy domains in order to detect municipalities that are situated in between communities of municipalities that consistently cooperate with one another. For the cultural symbolic dimension, we zoom in on those places that are neither fully integrated from the spatial-functional nor the political-institutional perspective, and assess to what extent the formation of a regional identity can be observed. Taken together, by locating the places where these three perspectives on metropolisation overlap and diverge, we enable a comprehensive analysis of interplaces. In conclusion, then, our paper contributes to a more thorough and systematic understanding of interplaces in metropolitan regions and the tensions between their opposing socio-economic, cultural and political characteristics.

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