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Exploring Urban Policy Mobilities

The Case of Business Improvement Districts

by Eugene McCann *and* Kevin Ward

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1. Introduction

At first glance, there would seem to be little in the world of governance that is more local than an urban policy with a remit to manage or improve a few blocks in the centre of a city. While some definitions of policy involve the governance of whole countries or, in some cases, large areas of continents, urban policy, or neighbourhood policy, business district policy would seem to be self-evidently local. Yet, things are rarely so straightforward. While urban policies are certainly embedded or fixed in specific local places and tend to be narrowly limited in their territorial extent and effect, their territorial fixity should not be assumed to denote their separateness from the networks, flows, and relations that comprise the wider world.

Take, for example, the case of Business Improvement Districts (BIDS). These are hyper-local forms of governance that have risen to prominence in many cities since the 1990s. They are local both in their scope (they focus on managing the physical environments of urban business quarters, ranging over a few blocks) and in their funding (they are financed by extra levies or “taxes” on business in the areas to be managed, rather than by direct taxation of the city taxpayers as a whole). Yet,

This is an abridged and revised version of McCann E. and Ward K. [2010].

they have risen to prominence in many cities since the 1990s. BIDS are also “more than local,” then, in the sense that individual local BIDS are manifestations of a more generalized and potentially “transferable” BID model. This governance model that first emerged in Toronto in the very early 1970s has been reworked numerous times to fit a range of distinct national and local contexts. So, there is plenty that differentiates Business Improvement Districts both across the states of the US and across the numerous countries in which the model is now in existence. Yet, there are also elements of similarity in the form they take in such geographically diverse settings as Hamburg (Germany), Montreal (Canada) or Tokyo (Japan).

Our purpose in this paper is to explore the tension between the territorially embedded character of urban policies and their entanglements in globally-extensive networks and relations of policy mobilization. While there are substantial literatures in urban studies that emphasize cities’ relationality and fluidity and while there are other equally important literatures that emphasize their territoriality, we argue that urban policy-making needs to be understood as both relational and territorial; as both in motion and simultaneously fixed, or embedded in place. The contradictory nature of policy should not, however, be seen as detrimental to its operation. Rather, the tension between policy as relational, dynamic, and global, on the one hand, and fixed, territorial, and local, on the other, is a productive one. It is a necessary tension that produces policy and places [Harvey 1982].

In the following section, we outline this relational/territorial conceptualization and discuss how it addresses questions of urban policy-making specifically. Subsequently, we develop the example of BIDS as a policy model that is both global-relational and local-territorial. This conceptualization and the case study are drawn from long-term research projects that seek to understand the politics of urban policy-making in global terms through largely qualitative research methods. Specifically, the example draws upon content and discourse analyses of consultancy, government, media, practitioner and think tank publications, on semi-structured interviews with key transfer agents in a number of cities, and on participation in, and observation of, relevant meetings and conferences where ideas about “good” urban policy are introduced, discussed and validated. We contend that qualitative empirical investigations of case studies are a necessary element in any conceptualization of mobile policy. In doing so, we pay close attention to: 1) how urban policies are set “in motion” globally and how geographically-extensive circuits of policy knowledge and the transfer of policy models influence the governance of specific cities; 2) how the “making up” of policy [Ward 2006] is a fundamentally territorialized and political process, contingent on specific historical-geographical circumstances, and 3) how this case study says something about instances of sameness and of difference in a world in which

instances of serial policy reproduction seem all too common, but that nevertheless should not be assumed. In the final section, we draw out some implications of our analysis for the wider field of urban policy mobilities.

2. Conceptualizing Global-Urban Connections: Relationalities, Territorialities, Policies

2.1 The Relational and Territorial Geographies of Urban Policies

A great deal of critical geographical scholarship on cities examines the connections between urbanization and capitalism, the changing territorial forms of the state, and the production of new institutional arrangements for urban and regional governance, focusing on economic development and the “new urban politics” [Brenner and Theodore 2002; Cox and Mair 1988; Harvey 1989a, 1989b; Jonas and Wilson 1999; Logan and Molotch 1987]. Yet, more analysis is needed on how – through what practices, where, when, and by whom – urban policies are produced in a global relational context, are transferred and reproduced from place to place, and are negotiated politically in various locations. That said, a number of influential, although varied, and not always entirely compatible, theorizations have sought to understand the tensions and power relations central to these global-urban connections. Harvey’s [1982] conceptualization of the dialectic of fixity and mobility in capitalism and the implications of investment and disinvestment for urban built environments is one of these. Massey’s [1991] notion of a global sense of place, in which specific places are understood to be open to and defined by situated combinations of flows of people, communications, responsibilities, etc. that extend far beyond specific locales, is another. The literature on spatial scale, much of which focuses on conceptualizations of territorialization and deterritorialization [Brenner 1998, 2001, 2004; Jonas 1994; Smith 1993], and the world cities literature, with its focus on certain cities as powerful nodes in the networked geographies of finance capital [Taylor 2004], are two other established bodies of work. We can also think of Castells’ [1989, 1996] work on the “spaces of places” and “spaces of flows.” While in the former the emphasis is on the location of people’s activities and experiences, the attention in the latter turns to the movement of capital, information and people. His attempt to theorize the urban in this way shares some similarities with the attempts by others to make sense of a world of global-urban connections. Likewise for Sassen [2005, 40], as although the focus is on corporate networks, her writing on “global cities” draws our attention to “the multiplicity of presences in the ... [urban] ... landscape”, which again has parallels with work seeking to locate cities in global flows of various forms. The final literature

of interest here is that on “mobilities,” which seeks to conceptualize the social content of movements of people and objects from place to place at various scales and the immobilities and “moorings” that underpin and challenge these dynamics, constitutes another worthwhile approach [Cresswell 2001; Hannam *et al.* 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006].

Each of these literatures seeks to conceptualize how cities are produced in relation to processes operating across wider geographical fields, while recognizing that urban localities simultaneously provide necessary basing-points for those wider processes. Each suggests that there can be no separation between place-based and global-relational conceptualizations of contemporary political economies. As Hannam *et al.* [2006, 5] put it:

“Mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infra-structural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities.”

Rather, Brenner [2004] suggests that territory must be seen as relationally produced rather than bounded and static. He argues that

“the image of political-economic space as a complex, tangled mosaic of superimposed and interpenetrating nodes, levels, scales, and morphologies has become more [analytically] appropriate than the traditional Cartesian model of homogeneous, self-enclosed and contiguous blocks of territory” [*Ibidem*, 66].

The tensions and crises involved in this multi-scale urban experience are objects of policy-making and politics. Harvey’s [1989b, 143] account of urban politics is particularly clear on this issue: While it is important to understand cities as always in a process of becoming, social relations, state policy, and politics shape and are shaped by urban regions, or territories, which exist “in the midst of a maelstrom of forces that tend to undermine and disrupt” their coherence.

Allen and Cochrane’s [2007, 1171] discussion of (urban) regions resonates strongly with this viewpoint. They do not reject the importance of territory, only its traditional bounded connotation:

“There is little to be gained by talking about regional [and by inference, urban] governance as a territorial arrangement when a number of the political elements assembled are not particularly regional in any traditional sense, even if they draw on what might called the ‘spatial grammar’ of regionalism.”

They continue: many are “parts” of elsewhere, representatives of political authority, expertise, skills, and interests drawn together to move forward varied agendas and programmes. The sense in which these are [urban] “regional” assemblages,

rather than geographically tiered hierarchies of decision-making, lies with the tangle of interactions and capabilities within which power is negotiated and played out.

The urban region is, thus a social and political product that cannot be understood without reference to its relations with various other scales. Yet, to study how this social production gets done involves the analysis of a whole series of very specific and situated interactions, practices, performances, and negotiations.

Conceptualizing urban policy-making and politics through the productive tension between relationality and territoriality entails two things. The study of how urban actors manage and struggle over the “local” impacts of “global” flows and the analysis of how they engage in global circuits of policy knowledge that are produced in and through a “relational geography focused on networks and flows” [Olds 2001, 6]. These transfer agents – understood here as policy actors (a broadly defined category including politicians, policy professionals, practitioners, activists, and consultants) involved in shuttling policies and knowledge about policies around the world through attendance at conferences, fact-finding study trips, consultancy work, and so on – seek, to take policy models from their own cities and promote them as “best practice” elsewhere, or to tap into a global field of expertise to identify and “download” models of good policy. This process of territorializing and deterritorializing policy knowledge is highly political in which “[zones] of connectivity, centrality, and empowerment in some cases, and of disconnection, social exclusion and inaudibility” [Sheller and Urry 2006, 210] are brought into being as struggles ensue over how policies get discursively framed as successes, while the insertion of new “best practices” from elsewhere into specific cities can empower some interests at the expense of others, putting alternative visions of the future outside the bounds of policy discussion [Robinson 2006]. The construction of “models” of redevelopment and their circulation and re-embedding in cities around the world can have profoundly disempowering consequences. On the other hand, this process of policy movement can also spark contestation within cities where activists question the “pre-approved” credentials of newly imported policy models or where activists are motivated to “scan” globally for alternative policies [McCann 2008] as part of what Purcell [2008, 153] calls “fast resistance transfer.”

2.2 From Policy Transfer ... to Policy Mobilities

How might we think specifically about the movement of policies from a relational/territorial perspective? We might consider the already existing political science literature on policy transfer which studies how policies are learned from one context

and moved to another with the hope of similar results. In one sense, this is a literature that is all about global relations and territories. While internally differentiated and heterogeneous, the literature shares some common features. It focuses on modeling how transfer works, creating typologies of transfer agents [Stone 2004], and identifying conditions under which transfer leads to successful or unsuccessful policy outcomes in the new location [Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Stone 1999].

Yet, while this literature is certainly about global relations and territories, it has exhibited less attention to the full range of social territoriality. It is limited in its definition of the agents involved in transfer, focusing largely on national and international elites largely working in formal institutions. It focuses solely on national territories – transfer among nations or among localities with single nations – without considering the possibility, or actuality, of transfer among cities that transcend national boundaries. Furthermore, it tends not to consider transfer as a socio-spatial process in which policies are changed as they travel [Peck and Theodore, 2001].

These limits to the “traditional” policy transfer literature [for a full critique, see McCann, 2011] offer a series of opportunities for further theorization from perspectives that understand, often in different ways, transfer as a global-relational, social and spatial process which interconnects and constitutes cities [Cook 2008; McCann 2008, 2011; Peck and Theodore 2001; Ward 2006, 2007]. For Wacquant [1999, 321], the aim should be “to constitute, link by link, the long chain of institutions, agents and discursive supports” that constitute the current historical period while Peck [2003, 229] calls for more analyses of the circulation of policies in relation to “the transnational and translocal constitution of institutional relations, governmental hierarchies and policy networks.”

Larner [2003, 510] also advocates a move in the same intellectual direction, towards a

“more careful tracing of the intellectual, policy, and practitioner networks that underpin the global expansion of neoliberal ideas, and their subsequent manifestation in government policies and programmes.”

Explicitly interested in understanding both how and why governing practices and expertise are moved from one place to another, she advocates the “detailed tracings” of social practices, relations, and embeddings. For example, we believe her study of the global call center and banking industries and the place of New Zealand in the globalization of these economic activities shows the value of the detailed rendering of what might be seen as the banal or mundane practices of various actors who, individually and collectively, play an important role in constituting globalization [Larner 2001].

Much of the mobilities work attempts to understand the details of a particular form of mobility, or a specific infrastructure that facilitates or channels mobilities, in reference to wider processes and contexts:

“[It] problematizes both ‘sedentarist’ approaches in the social sciences that treat place, stability, and dwelling as a natural steady-state, and ‘deterritorialized’ approaches that posit a new ‘grand narrative’ of mobility, fluidity or liquidity as a pervasive condition of postmodernity or globalization ... It is a part of a broader theoretical project aimed at going beyond the imagery of ‘terrains’ as spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes, and calling into question scalar logics such as local/global as descriptors of regional extent ...” [Hannam *et al.* 2006, 5].

For us, the language of the mobilities approach is a useful frame for our discussion of mobile policies because it emphasizes the social and the scalar, the fixed and mobile character of policies. We utilize “mobilities” in the sense that people, frequently working in institutions, mobilize objects and ideas to serve particular interests and with particular material consequences.

We can, then, see convergences among scholars about the need to be alive to both the why and the how of policy movement. This demands that we pay attention to how – through “ordinary” and “extra-ordinary” activities – policies are made mobile (and immobile), why this occurs, and the relationship between these mobilities and the socio-spatial (re)structuring of cities. The question remains how might we best frame these sorts of empirical discussions? Should we understand contemporary policy-making as primarily about territory, as primarily about relationality, or in terms of a both/and logic which recognizes that contemporary

“global restructuring has entailed neither the absolute territorialization of societies, economies, or cultures onto a global scale, nor their complete deterritorialization into a supraterritorial, distanceless, placeless, or borderless space of flows” [Brenner 2004, 64]?

We take the latter position and now use this analytical approach to consider two examples of urban governance and planning.

3. Circulating Knowledge, Embedded Policies: Evidence from Downtown

3.1 Business Improvement Districts

An example of an urban policy “in motion” is the Business Improvement District (BID) model. Rising to prominence in the early 1970s, the model is both a way of governing space and an approach to its planning and regulation. A BID is a public-private partnership in which property and business owners in a defined geographi-

cal area propose to make a collective contribution to the maintenance, development and marketing/promotion of their commercial district. So a Business Improvement District delivers advertising, cleaning, marketing, and security services across its geographical jurisdiction. The vote to tax themselves by businesses is taken in order to allow them to take management control over “their” area. Business Improvement Districts reflect how

“property owners ..., developers and builders, the local state, and those who hold the mortgage and public debt have much to gain from forging a local alliance to protect their interests and to ward off the threat of localized devaluation” [Harvey 1989b, 149].

BID proponents critique the past role of government in the business of governing the downtown. Instead, Business Improvement Districts are portrayed as “a more focused and flexible form of governance than large municipal bureaucracies” [Levy 2001, 129]. Channeling “private sector agency towards the solution of public problems” [MacDonald 1996, 42], they are represented as “an alternative to traditional municipal planning and development” [Mitchell 2001, 116]. Mallett [1994, 284] goes as far as to claim that Business Improvement Districts, in the US at least, are “a response to the failure of local government to adequately maintain and manage spaces of the post-industrial city.” The BID philosophy is that “the supervision of public space deters criminal activity and the physical design of public space affects criminal activity” [Hoyt 2004, 369]. It draws on the work of Jacobs [1961], Newman [1972] and Wilson and Kelling [1982], which argued that the design of urban space could change the way people behave. As Business Improvement Districts establish the physical layout of benches, street lighting and shop facades, so they shape the ways in which an area is experienced. As such, the BID model draws on, and reinforces, contemporary neo-liberal thinking on both the need to attend to and emphasize urban “business climate” and “quality of life.”

The “more than local” emergence of the Business Improvement District model since the mid-1990s has involved a number of transfer agents. As it has been moved from one place to another so it has been subject to a number of changes in its institutional DNA. As it has been territorialized – embedded in particular socio-spatial relations – so certain elements of the model have been emphasized, while others have been downplayed.

3.1.1 Mobilizing Business Improvement Districts

The first BID was established in Toronto in 1970 and the model spread rapidly, encouraged by Canadian state funding incentives. After moving across Canada

it entered the US, where the initial BID was set up in New Orleans in 1975. During the 1980s and 1990s the number of US BIDs grew slowly but surely. Latest data suggest there are over five hundred across the country, with the majority in just three states: California, New York and Wisconsin [Mitchell, 2001]. During the last decade the model has emerged in a number of cities outside of the US. In Australia, Germany Japan, Serbia, South Africa and the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, BIDs have been established in design if not always in name [Ward, 2006, 2007]. According to Hoyt [2006] within these countries there are now many thousands of BIDs. More recently the organization British Bids has claimed the following geographical presence of the model: United States (450), Canada (350), Australia (185), New Zealand (140), Japan (260), South Africa (40) and European Countries (225) (<http://www.britishbids.info/AboutBIDs/BIDsaroundtheworld.aspx>). In spite of the model's geographical reach, it is most closely associated, at least in the geographical imagination of many involved in its internationalization, with three cities on the US east coast – New York, Philadelphia and Washington – whose senior executives have become BID “gurus,” the two most well-known of whom are Daniel Biederman and Paul Levy. So, even though its origins are Canadian, those involved in the BID model emerging in a diverse range of geographical contexts have regularly positioned it as a US approach to downtown governance.

The circulation of the Business Improvement District model has taken place through a number of channels, some relatively formal, others less so. The International Downtown Association – physically located in Washington but the centre of a network of national downtown trade associations and convener of an annual conference – has been at the centre of the BID model's internationalization:

Founded in 1954, the International Downtown Association has more than 650 member organizations worldwide including: North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Through our network of committed individuals, rich body of knowledge and unique capacity to nurture community-building partnerships, IDA is a guiding force in creating healthy and dynamic centers that anchor the well being of towns, cities and regions of the world [International Downtown Association, n.d.].

In its view, the BID model is one of the most successful ways of improving the conditions of downtowns the world over. According to the then IDA President, David Feehan,

“the IDA is proud of the role it has played in the resurgence of downtowns in the US and Canada. Now, through partnerships in Europe, the Caribbean, Australia and Africa, IDA is expanding its resources and knowledge base even more” [International Downtown Association, n.d.].

Its partners include the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) in the UK, Business Improvement Areas of British Columbia (BIABC) in Canada, Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) in the West Indies, and Central Johannesburg Partnership (CJP) in South Africa. Neil Fraser, the Executive Director of the CJP, describes the role of the IDA as

“a true leader in bringing together city practitioners and specialists from North America and around the world. They provide essential support and assistance in all aspects of private urban management” [International Downtown Association n.d.]

The CJP became a member of the IDA in 1995, and its Executive Director was subsequently appointed to the board of the IDA [Peyroux, 2008]. Through regular conferences, institutes, seminars and workshops organised by the IDA, downtown practitioners feed into and reinforce the general emphasis on creative and liveable cities [Florida 2002]. Together with national partners and others with a stake in the expansion of the BID model, such as private consultancies, think tanks and government departments, the activities of the IDA serve to convince urban authorities of the virtues of the BID model. In 1995 the CJP and IDA organised a “study tour” to the UK and the US for Johannesburg’s public and private sector officials. The purpose was “to visit ... sites and learn from international experiences in order to set up practices and legislation for a CID [City Improvement District] in Johannesburg” [Peyroux 2008, 4].

Less formally, but no less importantly in the model’s internationalization, have been figures involved in the BID model in some of the largest east coast US cities [Cook 2008; Ward, 2006]. Daniel Biederman, co-founder of Bryant Park Corporation, Grand Central Partnership, and 34th Street Partnership, and the President of the latter two and Paul Levy, CEO and President of Philadelphia’s City Centre BID, in particular, have worked hard to promote the BID model around the world. According to Peyroux [2008, 4], “the North American BIDS were a strong reference for the Johannesburg CIDs.” They have presented in many countries, extolling its virtues, drawing on their own highly situated and quite specific experiences to “market” the model and its benefits. Various exchange-making and information-sharing events have been organised in cities including Canberra, Dublin, Johannesburg, London, and Newcastle (Australia). At these, an ever-wider audience of different types of practitioners and policy-makers are educated in the way of Business Improvement Districts. Not only development officers and planning officials, as might be expected, attend and participate at these events. Due to the financial and legal consequences of BID formation, accountants and lawyers are also selected into the web of mobilization.

When organising “local” events, transfer agents have tailored “general” lessons to the specific concerns of host countries or cities. The trick to the on-going global circulation of this model of downtown governance has been of course to ensure that assembled audiences are convinced both of the virtues of the BID model in general and also of its capacity to attend to whatever issues a particular local representative may be facing. In England, the particular case to which this paper now turns, this has meant marketing the BID model in the context of an already extant town management system.

3.1.2 Territorializing Business Improvement Districts

Through our relationship with ATCM, and the unique reciprocal membership scheme with the International Downtown Association (IDA) based in Washington DC, our BID network is the largest BIDs network in the world and our Knowledge Bank an unrivalled resource for information on both BIDs and partnership development. Building on our own experience from the National BIDs Pilot, the Knowledge Bank is growing all the time, as members exchange expertise in the BID Network Exchange and other partnership events across the country [National BIDs Advisory Service, n.d.].

In addition to the “supply side,” there needs to be a “demand side” for policy movement to occur, although they should be understood as mutually constituted and reinforcing. So, for example, locally dependent or embedded transfer agents of one sort or another play an important role in translating a general model into something that makes sense to those with particular territorial remits. In the case of the UK, the introduction of the BID model was first mooted in the early 1990s. As the latest in a long line of post-Second World War exchange of urban policies between the two countries [Jonas and Ward 2002; Peck and Theodore 2001; Wacquant 2001], a report commissioned by the Corporation of London considered the lessons the city might learn from the BID model in New York City [Travers and Weimar, 1996]. Although this report argued for the model’s introduction into London, this did not happen immediately, despite the efforts to promote it in the UK policy maker community. It was not until after the election of the national Labour government in 1997 that a series of “urban” policy documents were issued, most noticeably Lord Rogers’s *Towards an Urban Renaissance* [Urban Task Force, 1999] and the Government’s White Paper *Our Towns and Cities: the Future* [ODPM, 2000]. These focused political and practitioner attention on the role cities should be encouraged to play in driving national economic growth. All were informed by examples of policy tourism. Government ministers, such as John Prescott, and senior officials were regular visitors to New

York and Philadelphia. They were keen to see the BID model in action. A series of other green and white papers were issued at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, creating the financial and legal conditions in English cities for the creation of Business Improvement Districts. During this period there was a sustained creation of favorable “importing” conditions. Various transfer agents operating at and across a range of “spaces of engagement” [Cox, 2001], such as national think tanks, regional development agencies and local authorities visited examples of existing Business Improvement Districts. A series of documents were produced and circulated. Reports appeared in trade magazines such as *Regeneration and Renewal* and *Town and Country Planning* and on trade websites such as www.publicfinance.co.uk. A made to order website – www.ukbids.org – was established to oversee the introduction of Business Improvement Districts into England. Jacqueline Reilly was appointed as the Project Director of the National Business Improvement Pilot Project (and subsequently to run its successor, the UKBIDs Advisory Service). She championed the BID model in England. The creation of English Business Improvement Districts was finally announced in 2001, and the final piece of the legal framework was agreed in 2004. Despite its Canadian origins, central government was clear on the geographical reference points of the variety of the BID model as it was introducing it into the country:

“I can tell you today that we have decided to introduce legislation to create Business Improvement Districts. These will be similar to the successful US examples” [Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions 2001a, 1]

“This approach [to the BID model] building on the very successful business model in the USA, will allow business to see precisely what they are getting for their money and will help to harness local business leadership” [Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions 2001b, 2]

“Business Improvement Districts are ‘New York-style schemes’” [Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003, 1]

Of course the BID model was not introduced into an institutional vacuum in England. Around the country many cities and towns had already in place some sort of governing arrangements. Many hundreds had town centre management partnerships recognized by the Association of Town Centre Management. Indeed the International Downtown Association’s first annual conference took place in Coventry in England in 1997. So the experiences of some of England’s cities were already present in the geographical imagination of international practitioners. In addition, the public finance system in England remains highly centralized. There are few examples of city government raising revenue through taxes. And, as Peck and Theodore [2001, 430] remind us,

“inherited institutional structures, established political traditions, and extant policy conventions and discourses all operate to ensure a degree of continuity in the policy development process.”

In the case of the BID model this matters nationally and locally. The centralized system of central-local government relations affects the way something like the BID model would be introduced. And in different localities it is important that those involved in mediating and translating the BID model are aware of its particular issues. Put simply, while there is much that unites Bolton, Brighton and Coventry there is also much that distinguishes them.

Unsurprisingly, then, the English BID model is quite unique. In particular it differs in three quite fundamental ways in design from the US-derived model that has circulated internationally. First, this was a nation state-sponsored introduction of the BID model through a National Business Improvement District Pilot Project. English cities and towns competed for a place in this project. More than one hundred applied and twenty-three were successful. These were pilot Business Improvement Districts that ran for a couple of years, preparing themselves for a vote. Since the ending of the pilot scheme, any city or town in England has been able to go to a vote. This takes us to the second peculiarity of the English BID model. In the US, property owners vote. In the UK all non-domestic rate payers, i.e. those who rent properties, vote in the BID referendum. This was the outcome of a long debate amongst vested interests – local and national government, retail trade associations, property owners and so on. Despite evidence of involvement by property owners in the activities of Business Improvement Districts [Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007], this does not stretch to getting a vote in their establishment. Third, a successful vote must pass two tests. To begin with, more than 50% of the votes cast must be in favour of the BID. Furthermore, the positive votes must represent more than 50% of the rateable value of the votes cast.¹ So there is a particular politics around the local dependency of businesses [Cox and Mair, 1988]. In some instances the first criteria has been met but the second one has not, as typically smaller, local independent businesses have voted “yes”, while multi-site chains, which are typically larger and hence have a higher rateable value have voted “no.” Moreover, of the 89 BID votes, 16 have been unsuccessful. There have also been issues around turnout. In all but 18 of the votes turnout was at or below 50%. So, there have been a variety of issues around the introduction of the BID model into English localities.

¹ In the US there is no federal or state wide voting system for the creation of a BID. It differs within states, and even within cities [Ward 2007].

What all of this reveals is the complicated ways in which the BID model has both been moved around the world and embedded in existing territorially constituted social relations. It has been moved from one city to another through a myriad of formal and informal networks, via the procedural and technocratic transfer of policy on the one hand, and the presentational performances of high-profile individuals on the other. Simultaneously and necessarily, the BID model has been embedded or “fixed” temporarily in national and local contexts through the activities of a set of territorially entangled transfer agents. It is a policy model with necessary relational and territorial elements.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper details the processes through which the BID model was introduced into England in the context of its emergence in a number of countries over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. It then documents those actors and institutions involved in its mobilizing and territorializing. We show that there is a wide range of transfer agents involved in this process, some with little geographical reach, overseeing their introduction in a specific city; others with far longer reach, able to influence policy reform at a distance. The paper then examines the ways in which the BID model was embedded in a particular territorial context: England. Through the example, we show the ways in which a process of translation is performed, both by those coming in from outside and by actors resident in each of the contexts. We reveal the labour involved. In these moments – whether they are literally “performed” at conferences or workshops, or occur through circulated written publications – supply and demand come so close as to be almost indistinguishable.

While these empirical details are important, we want to conclude this paper by noting a number of broader implications and considerations that stem from our discussion. First, we argue for a conceptualization of the making of urban policy through both its territorial and relational geographies and for an appreciation of how cities are assembled by the situated practices and imaginations of actors who are continually attracting, managing, promoting, and resisting global flows of policies and models. Following Olds [2001, 8], we advocate “a relational geography that recognizes the contingent, historically specific, uneven, and dispersed nature of material and non-material flows.” Second, we critique the existing literature on policy transfer. In sketching out a new way of thinking about the mobility of policies and models, this paper draws on a number of different literatures in which there appears to have been convergence around documenting in detail the means through which policies

are made mobile. Our way forward is to argue for a framework that includes a broad understanding of transfer agents, takes seriously the inter-urban policy transfer that links cities across national boundaries, and understands transfer as a socio-spatial process in which policies are subject to change as they are moved. This we refer to as urban policy mobilities. Third, we do not wish to over-extend the claims makeable on the basis of a single empirical example. Nevertheless, work in other policy areas, as climate change, crime, drugs, education, policing and welfare reform suggests that the BID speaks to wide trends in the making of policy. At the very least recent work suggest that there are some discernible patterns in how policy is made involving the assembling of elements of elsewhere. Fourth, we offer some thoughts on what the current concern for thinking relationally might mean for doing of research. It means paying attention to the various spaces that are brought into being during the journey of a model: a mixture of tracing the circuits and networks through it moves, with an eye on how the model mutates along the way and an attention to how in some cases it fails to get introduced, or what is established is so far removed from what is understood as a Business Improvement Districts that continuing to use the term becomes meaningless. Fourth, the approach we advocate has, at its core, sensitivity to both structure and agency. In the case of the BID model, key individuals did make a difference. This was not done under terms of their making, however. Rather there is a set of macro supply and demand contexts in which some “idea brokers” [Smith, 1991], are structurally advantaged. Some, more than others, are likely to have their ideas and policies made mobile. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that BIDs are constitutive elements in the current urban neo-liberal policy orthodoxy. And, of course, there is an interaction of a range of differently scaled forces in and through which these agents mobilize, broker, translate and introduce ideas in such a way as to make the territorial embedding of circulating models not just possible but probable.

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Exploring Urban Policy Mobilities

The Case of Business Improvement Districts

Abstract: The paper contributes to understanding cities in the world by first outlining the conceptual and empirical challenges of theorizing the urban/global nexus in both relational and territorial terms. It argues that the most useful and appropriate approach to understanding contemporary urban governance in a global context is to develop a conceptualization that is equally sensitive to the role of relational and territorial geographies, of fixity and of flow, of global contexts and of place-specificities (and *vice versa*), of structural imperatives and of embodied practices, in the production of cities. To illustrate the benefits of this conceptualization, the paper will explore how downtown development is governed in a growing number of cities. The role of the Business Improvement District (BID) model in shaping downtowns will be examined in terms of: (1) how and by whom these models are developed in a global-relational context and are set in motion through scaled circuits of policy knowledge and (2) how the mobilization of these models are conditioned by their territorialization in specific spatial and political economic contexts. The paper emphasizes that the “local globalness” of policy models like BIDs and their consequences for cities can best be understood through a combined focus on relationality and territoriality.

Keywords: Urban Policy Mobilities, Business Improvement Districts, Downtown Revitalization, Urban Politics.

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