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Stakeholder involvement in distributed projects: a performative approach to large scale urban sustainable development projects and the case of Stockholm Royal Seaport

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of stakeholders in large scale urban sustainable development projects (LSUSDP.s) has proven difficult. The stakeholders are distributed across the geographical area, and they have stakes not only in the LSUSDP, but in the geographical location where the project takes place. To understand stakeholder management in “distributed projects”, we propose abandoning the “inside-out” perspective where the project is the point of departure, and focus on the emergence of stakeholders across time. Adopting such a performative, “outside-in,” perspective on the longitudinal and digital study of a LSUSDP, we are able to map how actors became stakeholders in the project through their actions. The paper makes four contributions. First, we reconceptualize stakeholder involvement by adopting a performative perspective, whereby “stakeholders” are envisaged as emergent and non-fixed. Second, we demonstrate how such a reconceptualization may be applied to the analysis of an empirical case. Third, we show that stakeholder involvement is not merely the result of stakeholder management but something that happens over time, through the material and discursive actions of those that become stakeholders. Finally, the paper contributes with an illustration of how the online, digital footprint, of a project may be useful to understand the emergence of a project.

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Introduction

Large scale urban sustainable development projects (LSUSDP.s) are complex economic and politically shaped activities (Styhre and Brorström 2022). As such they pose impact on sustainable development and sustainability transitions in urban areas (Elmqvist et al. 2019) and they are important activities in relation to, for example, the UN Sustainable Development Goal No.11 of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable¹. LSUSDP.s are containing a wide range of stakeholders with different expectations and interests (Eskerod et al. 2015, Chan and Oppong 2017, Oppong et al. 2017). To involve these stakeholders is important since their interests and concerns can influence, for example, the development of new business models (Attanasio, Pregnella, De Toni and Battistella 2021), sociotechnical transition of systems (Nora, Alberton and Alaya 2023) as well as the progression and shape of the project (Ward and Chapman 2008).

To involve stakeholders that are affected by, or may affect, the outcome of a project, the practices of *stakeholder management* has emerged (Freeman 1984, Ward and Chapman 2008, Oppong et al. 2017) and for decades now, stakeholder management has been considered a core activity for project success (Olander 2007, Eskerod and Huemann 2013, Bayiley and Teklu 2016). The actual performing of stakeholder management in LSUSDP.s is however not easy. Different stakeholders hold different, often equally legitimate, interests (Flyvbjerg et al. 2003, Davis 2014, Eskerod and Ang 2017, Winch 2017), which makes it difficult for project management to follow the normative idea of “managing” them. This has led some to suggest that the idea that there is a win-win solution to all potential conflicts between stakeholders in projects may be naïve (Eskerod et al. 2015).

In LSUSDP.s, stakeholder management is even more complex, since these often are large-scale, or even mega projects with several powerful stakeholders linked together in a complex network (Raco and

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¹See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11> (accessed 2023-06-26)

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Tunney 2010). But unlike mega-projects (cf Flyvbjerg 2014), or project networks (cf Hellgren and Stjernberg 1995, DiFillippi and Sydow 2016), the stakes of a stakeholder in an urban sustainable development project go *beyond* the project itself; they are also linked to the geographical area of the project. Based on the mapping of stakeholders, the findings indicate that it is even more difficult to coordinate stakeholders by project management as the stakeholders are *distributed* across the geographical location of the project and have stakes, not merely to the project, but to the geographical place where the project is taking place. Extant research shows that this feature of the stakeholder-landscape of the LSUSDP is rarely taken into consideration. Instead, it is the needs and objectives of the initiating organization of the project that is often in focus for stakeholder management activities in LSUSDP.s (Leighninger 2007, Di Maddaloni and Sabini 2022). There is thus a need to rethink stakeholder involvement in the context of LSUSDP.s, or *distributed projects* as we would like to denote them.

In this article we propose a complementary way to understand the complexity of stakeholder management in projects, particularly distributed projects. We argue that the “inside-out” perspective of traditional stakeholder involvement, where stakeholders are identified by project management based on an analysis of which actors may have an interest and/or an influence on the project, is problematic. Not only does this build on the assumption that particular actors with particular interests in the project may be identified objectively *up-front*, maybe even before the project begins by project management, so that they can be managed accordingly; an assumption that certainly may be questioned in LSUSDP.s, where it is difficult to know “*which stakeholder’s voices should have ‘a place at the table’*” (Yang 2014, p. 838-839; our italics). It also assumes that a particular core-periphery thinking where the project is the core, and activities or stakes far from the project is in the periphery. In distributed projects this is problematic since it is the geographical location that is the core, rather than the project (cf Leighninger 2007, Di Maddaloni and Sabini 2022). Furthermore, the traditional inside-out perspective assumes that stakes are *fixed*, at least for a certain period of time, since it is the analysis of these stakes that forms the base for how a particular stakeholder should be managed. Also this assumption may be questioned, particularly in the context of LSUSDP.s that bring together a wide range of stakeholders with multiple and conflicting cultures that evolve and shift over time (Marrewijk 2007, Silvius and Schipper 2014b).

In order to contribute to the reconceptualising of stakeholder involvement in projects we instead propose an “outside-in” perspective on stakeholder involvement. Drawing on the performativity turn in management studies (Diedrich et al. 2013) this outside-in perspective builds on the idea that stakeholders do not *exist a-priori* to a particular project; instead, they *become* stakeholders in a project through material or discursive action. A performative approach builds on a processual epistemology (Helin, Hernes, Hjort and Holt 2014) in that it foregrounds the “*doing*,” rather than the “*being*” (cf Austin 1955/1975), and on a relational ontology (Chia 1995), as the stakeholder is seen to come about through the production and reproduction of discursive and material action (MacKenzie and Millo 2003). Adopting a performative approach allows us also to move from the instrumental, “inside-out,” perspective of traditional stakeholder management where stakeholders are defined in a seemingly objective way by the project initiator (eg. the project manager and/or the project team) through practices of identifying, analysing, managing and/or involving those that are thought to be relevant to the project (cf Freeman 1984); to an “outside-in” perspective, where *stakeholders and their interests are seen to emerge over time* in relation to a particular project. With the outside-in perspective, we are thus able to map *stakeholders-in-the-making*, i.e., how actors *become* stakeholders in the project through their actions, not only in relation to the project, but in the particular geographical location of the project.

To demonstrate the performative perspective on stakeholder involvement, we analyse an empirical case of an ongoing and LSUSDP: the Stockholm Royal Seaport project (SRS). This is a project with high sustainability ambitions that was initiated by the city of Stockholm with the ambition of making Stockholm an international role model and showcase for smart cities and sustainable development. SRS aims, in short, at making the SRS-area “the new flagship in Sweden’s and Stockholm’s green-tech armada” (Högström et al. 2013, p.175). Hence, SRS is an important project for the city of Stockholm when it comes to building the city’s profile as a sustainable city and as a testbed for innovations for energy efficiency and for minimizing negative climate impact. It has also caught the attention of many actors from different industries and settings (Högström et al. 2013, Metzger and Olsson 2013, Holmstedt, Brandt and Robért 2017, Bibri and Krogstie 2020), making it an interesting project to study in the context of stakeholder management.

From a performative perspective, a project is performed over time and anywhere where the project is talked or written about, or where an action is taken in the name of the project (Callon and Law 1982). In the case of SRS, the project may thus be seen to emerge not only in the project offices where the project is planned and managed, or in the physical space of North-East Stockholm where various building related activities take place, but also in visionary documents about the project, in media, in social media, and so on. With this in mind, the study performed focused on the “making” of the SRS-project as it happened online, over a ten year-period (2011-2020).

A way of conceptualising our research design is that we went “backstage” of the project, to speak with Goffman (1959), which rhymes well with the outside-in approach to stakeholder involvement. Rather than identifying and researching a particular chosen set of actors that we assumed to be stakeholders in the project, inside-out; going backstage and following the “digital footprint” of SRS as it emerged longitudinally, allowed us to not make a priori-assumptions about who the stakeholders were – and who were not. Instead, we were able to see how stakeholders *became* stakeholders over time – and how other stakeholders lost interest in the project as time went by.

The paper contributes in four ways to the study and understanding of stakeholders in projects. First, and in response to the call by Eskerod et al. 2015, we reconceptualize stakeholder involvement by adopting a performative perspective, whereby we theoretically reconceptualize “stakeholders” as emergent and non-fixed. Second, we demonstrate how such a reconceptualization may be applied to the analysis of an empirical case. And third, by doing so, we show that stakeholder involvement is not merely the result of stakeholder management – it is something that happens over time, through the material and discursive actions of those that becomes stakeholders. This, we argue, helps understand projects; particularly distributed projects, where those active in the geographical location of the project may become stakeholders with time. In addition, the paper contributes with an illustration of how the online, digital footprint, of a project may be useful to understand the emergence of a project (cf Szymkowiak et al. 2021).

The paper is organized as follows. After a brief overview of the literature of stakeholder involvement we describe SRS and the way the empirical study was performed. We then describe how the stakeholders in SRS changed across the studied period and provide examples of their involvement through empirical

illustrations. Then follows a discussion on the revised thinking and new perspective and an outline of the practical and theoretical contributions.

Stakeholder involvement

The literature on stakeholder involvement often refers to the seminal work on stakeholder theory developed by Edward Freeman in 1984. Below we outline the main tenets of this theory. As we shall see, stakeholder management is complex, and involving all stakeholders may have unwanted consequences. To manage stakeholders in the context of LSUSDP.s is even more difficult. As a consequence of this, calls have been made for reconceptualizing stakeholder involvement (Eskerod et al. 2015, p. 42).

Stakeholder theory

Core to Freeman’s (1984) argument was that the interests and power of all stakeholders that are relevant for the success – or even survival – of the organisation need to be considered and managed, for the organisation to achieve its goals and objectives. Based on this, various methods have been proposed for identifying and analysing stakeholders, their needs and concerns, and stakeholder theory may be described as a framework for analysing the behavioural aspects of projects through the identification, classification, and assessment of stakeholders (cf Olander 2007).

Freeman defined stakeholders as individuals or groups who can affect and/or are affected by the project (Freeman 1984). According to Freeman (1984) stakeholder management is about managing those individuals or groups. Later, Phillip (2003) has argued that stakeholder theory should also address those with power over the decision-making process, and those who may benefit from these decisions. Stakeholders are all those that have “a *vested interest* in the success of a project and the environment within which the project operates” (Olander 2007, p. 278, our italics). A “vested interest” is defined as having control of power, legitimacy, or urgency (ibid.) and although vested interests are key in the delivery of large, complex projects, they are also seen as problematic, as they are potential sources of resistance and delay (Brookes, Morton, Dainty and Burns 2006) and the primary cause of cost over-runs (Flyvbjerg et al. 2003). To counteract such outcomes, stakeholder management has been seen as key (eg Davis 2014, Eskerod and Ang 2017, Winch 2017).

To involve stakeholders early on in a project will help the project manager understand how different stakeholders value the output of the project (Eskerod

and Ang 2017), and this will help them communicate – and control the flow of information – about the project, with the purpose of keeping stakeholders' commitment to the project stable over time (Fishhendler et al. 2015). This is true, not only for local stakeholders and community engagement (Baba et al. 2021), or for single stakeholders, but in the context of multiple stakeholders in, what has been called, *stakeholder landscapes* (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016). Stakeholder landscapes is a framework that supports analysing, grouping and classifying multiple stakeholders in the context of projects (ibid). Through the concept of stakeholder landscapes, projects managers may be supported to “evaluate the stakeholder landscapes of their projects and adjust their management approaches accordingly” (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016, p. 1538). According to Aaltonen and Kujala (2016), a stakeholder landscape covers both internal and external stakeholder environments, and include internal, formal members of the project coalition which have contractual relationships with the project initiator (also called primary stakeholders), as well as external stakeholders which are not formal members of the project coalition (also called secondary stakeholders).

To work with “stakeholder inclusiveness” by taking *all* stakeholders into account, regardless of their power and potential to help or harm the organization (Eslerod et al. 2015, p. 42), is however not easy. It comes with the risk of losing focus of the (fewer) stakeholders upon which the project is mainly dependent (Eslerod et al. 2015). This is because the involvement of stakeholders may lead to escalating expectations on behalf of the stakeholders that they are listened to, which can become a problem if project management is not able to handle the input. Hence, a challenge related to stakeholder inclusiveness is that it may lead to stakeholder disappointment (ibid).

Recent research on stakeholder management include outreach to stakeholders on social media (De Luca, Iaia, Mehmood and Vrontis 2022, She and Michelon 2023, Shokouhyar et al. 2023), address the lack of consideration of social sustainability and local community engagement in large construction projects (Di Maddaloni and Sabini 2022) and focus on the influence of traditional authority on stakeholder management in the pre-construction phase of large construction projects (Dansho et al. 2020). Recent research also address the complexity of the growing number of stakeholder groups and increased collaboration intensity of stakeholders in urban innovation projects due to digitalization of society contextual and empirical factors that influence stakeholder management which might lead

to information overload (Kroh and Schultz 2023), while Gil (2023) address the need to make sense of empirical regularities such as delays, cost growth and scope creep in mega projects not as “bad” management but as “rules of the game.”

In summary: stakeholder theory seeks to improve the chances of more effectively achieving the objectives of a project where the complexity of the stakeholder landscape, and the vested interest stakeholders have in the project, may otherwise cause problems for efficient delivery (Freeman 1984, Parmar et al. 2010, Wagner Mainardes et al. 2011). At the same time, stakeholder inclusiveness is not without challenges, which has led some to urge for a reconceptualization of stakeholder involvement (Eslerod et al. 2015).

Large scale urban sustainable development projects: distributed projects

In the context of LSUSDP.s, stakeholder management becomes even more complex, for example when integrating moral dimensions (Baba et al. 2021) and embed projects in sustainable development (Eslerod and Huemann 2013). During the past decades there has been a growing awareness that a multitude of stakeholder's influence decision-making of LSUSDP.s (Yang 2014) and a variety of concepts have been used for stakeholder involvement in the urban development literature (see Ianniello, Iacuzzi, Fedelse and Brusati 2018); all reflecting ideas of democracy and involvement for the purpose of reaching better decisions, fostering trust, etc. (Beierle 1999). When identifying which stakeholders to involve in the context of LSUSDP.s, Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation is a commonly used, and it has recently been claimed that this model is “as relevant now as ever” (White and Langenheim 2021, p. 156). By “participation” is meant a way to improve the ways in which people can effectively participate and have an influence on policy decisions which directly affect their lives (Fung and Wright 2001). The general message is that the greater the participation of the public in policy making, the better this will be for improving governance (Hurlbert and Gupta 2015). Generally, engaging individuals is seen to enhance both the quality and the legitimacy of policy decisions that are dealing with so called “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 1973), i.e., multi-faceted issues in fragmented policy contexts (Fazi and Smith 2006).

There is however also a critique that research often romanticizes participation and seldom covers the conditions under which participation may work, or what level of participation that should be used when involving stakeholders in LSUSDP.s (Ianniello et al. 2018). In addition, it has been argued that information deficits

and asymmetries for stakeholder engagement processes “limits the goals of many citizen participation efforts to the agenda of the organizers, rather than embracing also the interests and ideas of other stakeholders” (Ianniello et al. 2018, p. 26).

Furthermore, Leighninger (2007) and Di Maddaloni and Sabini (2022) has pointed out that stakeholder involvement in LSUSDP.s often centres around the needs and objectives of the initiating organization, i.e., the project organization and the project manager. This is problematic, since LSUSDP.s are what we would call *distributed projects*, i.e., projects centered around a particular geographical location, where a multitude of projects often are taking place, meaning that a multitude of actors have stakes and possibly agency in relation to the project – albeit not necessarily being linked to each other formally in a particular project, or coordinated by project management. This means that the distributed project is different to what has been term “project networks” where project management still coordinate the network of stakeholders (Hellgren and Stjernberg 1995, DiFillippi and Sydow 2016). And although distributed projects may be denoted as large-scale, or even mega-projects, in that they are large, complex, with national significance, running for a long period of time, and involving multiple public and private stakeholders (Flyvbjerg 2014), distributed projects are neither managed or organized by a single stakeholder, or a consortium of collaborating stakeholders (cf Flyvbjerg 2014). Instead, it involves a multitude of stakeholders that are held together by the common denominator of a particular geographical place. This means that the distributed project is a project where everything related to the particular place is of relevance to the project – and where the project is distributed across many stakeholders that may or may not be connected to each other formally, but that all act in the name of the project, thus affecting the project across time – but not necessarily together in a coordinated way. To depart from the project itself and see this as the core of various actors’ stakes thus seems too simplistic, as Leighninger (2007) also points out.

From understanding stakeholder involvement inside-out, to outside-in

To amend this simplistic view on stakeholder involvement Eskerod and Huemann (2013) propose a shift in perspectives, from the management-of-stakeholders to the management-for-stakeholders. While the first is an instrumental approach that builds on the resource-based view where stakeholders are seen as providers of resources, the latter see stakeholders as valuable and

legitimate in their own right, and where win-win situations should be sought (ibid.). But however important the distinction between these two approaches may be, both are based on an instrumental “inside-out” perspective, focusing on how stakeholders are/could/should be “better managed” or “more involved” by the initiating organization. Furthermore, both perspectives build on the assumption that *which* actors are stakeholders and *why*, may be identified by project management already *before* the project begins. This is however not self-evident and over the years there has been an on-going debate on who are stakeholders and not, and there are numerous definitions of the concept of “the stakeholder” (Eskerod and Huemann 2013). Stakeholders’ interests in a project may shift over time, depending on the emergence on, for example, the development of the project, as well as the cultures and sub-cultures of the stakeholder (Marrewijk 2007). Furthermore, it assumes that the stakes a stakeholder holds are analysed in relation to the project, not in relation to the geographical place of the project, which is a problematic assumption for LSUSDP.s that may be characterized as distributed, as described above.

A further shift seems necessary, from an inside-out perspective, to an outside-in perspective where who is or who isn’t a stakeholder in a project is not decided upon by the organization that initiated the project (cf Leighninger 2007), the “focal organization” (Eskerod et al. 2015, p. 43), and their agenda (Ianniello et al. 2018).

A performative approach to stakeholder involvement

In order to develop such an outside-in perspective on stakeholder involvement in projects, we turn to performativity theory. Performativity theory rests on the understanding that the world is in constant becoming through discursive and material actions (Bramming et al. 2012). With inspiration from philosophy of language, (Austin 1955/1975), communication theory (Bateson 1972), social theory (Goffman 1974), and social philosophy (Lyotard 1979/1984), performativity theory have been developed and used in, for example, gender studies (eg Butler 1990), cultural geography (eg Nash 2000), science-and-technology-studies (Callon 2006, Latour 2005), stakeholder theory (Nora, Alberton and Ayala 2023) and management (for an overview, see Diedrich et al. 2013).

A performative understanding of the world rests on a processual and relational ontology in that reality is seen to emerge out of constantly changing relationships (Chia 1995) and consequently, a phenomenon needs to be

defined performatively, i.e., as a result of on the constant change that it is undergoing (Helin, Hernes, Hjort and Holt 2014). Adopting a performative approach to the understanding of stakeholders in projects, then, focuses on *the stakeholder-in-the-making*, which means that rather than understanding “stakeholders” as actors that *exist* in a project and that therefore can be identified by, for example, the project manager at any given time, actors *become* stakeholders through the relationships that emerge as they *act* in the name of a project. Stakeholders thus *become* stakeholders through what could be called the performing of “stakeholdership” – not because they “*have stakes*.” Rather than making a priori-assumptions about who *is* a stakeholder, and what their stakes *are*, a performative perspective thus understands the stakeholders of a project as emerging over time as, actors take action in relation to the project (cf Floricel et al. 2023).

The taking of action in the name of the project can be done materially or discursively – from a performative perspective material and discursive actions are given equal weight when it comes to the performing of a phenomenon (Bramming et al. 2012). In the context of LSUSDP.s, the material actions that make an actor a stakeholder may involve various activities related to the project, such as the production of drawings, the clearing of land, the building of a foundation, but it also involves discursive actions such as the talking or writing about all these activities, or the engaging in debates and public discussions about the project, or the giving of presentations about the project.

Method

The paper draws upon a single case study (Dul and Hak 2008, Eisenhardt 1998, Flyvbjerg 2006). The case is the Stockholm Royal Seaport project which is an ongoing LSUSDP geographically located in the eastern parts of the City of Stockholm. A single case-study allows for exploring the empirical material of longitudinal processes (Langley 1999) and can “expand and enrich the repertoire of social constructions available to practitioners and others”, by helping to form new questions, rather than merely help finding answers (Gomm et al. 2000, p. 52). A single case can also serve as “a very powerful example” (Siggelkow 2007, p. 20) and the findings may provide analytical generalizations to build theoretical propositions relevant to similar cases (Yin 2012).

The case: Stockholm Royal Seaport (SRS)

The SRS was initiated by the city of Stockholm and is, on the city’s webpage, described as “one of Europe’s

largest LSUSDP, where former industrial land is being transformed into a city district on land owned by the city of Stockholm”². The planning process for SRS began in the early 2000s and the project is planned to be completed by the year 2030. The construction works was planned to begin in 2009 but was postponed due to appeals until 2011. In 2013 the first residents were able to move to their new apartments. By 2030, SRS will encompass more than 12.000 new homes, 35.000 new workplaces, several restaurants, bars, cafés, shops, gyms, and theatres, as well as a hotel and a conference centre.

The city’s aim is to make SRS a unique development project, not only by providing housing but by making it an area where the city, universities and industry will collaborate to develop new environmental engineering solutions.³ Ideals of urbanity, sustainability and healthy, liveable environments are formulated in the vision for SRS (Högström et al. 2013) but in the environmental and sustainability program for SRS, the city prioritises ecologic and economic sustainability to social sustainability, and in the strategies for SRS the city focuses on design and technology (Bibri and Krogstie 2020). This prioritization is further reflected in the main focus on smart energy systems when developing SRS into an Eco-City in a triple helix-inspired setup (Bibri and Krogstie 2020). Prioritising ecology and economy over social aspects is, however, not unique to SRS but is a pattern in the planning of the city of Stockholm (Bradley et al. 2008). Despite one of the key strategies for SRS being to improve social cohesion through participation, and “cooperation between residents and businesses, city’s administrators and companies, property owners, academia, and other stakeholders” (Bibri and Krogstie 2020, p. 27), Bibri and Krogstie (2020) have found a lack of structures for collaboration between stakeholders. This makes it particularly interesting to study SRS with a focus on stakeholder involvement.

The urban developers of the city of Stockholm often emphasize that SRS is performed in an agile way, and that the goals and plans of the project are continuously re-evaluated and adjusted in order to keep up with, for example, the technical development⁴. This also means that SRS is an LSUSDP where the future is constantly projected (Karrbom Gustavsson and Hallin 2013). Hence, SRS is a good empirical example of the

²See <https://norrardjurgardsstaden2030.se/en> (accessed 2022-12-08)

³See <https://www.fastighetssverige.se/artikel/bygget-av-norra-djurgardsstaden-igang-7248> (accessed 2022-12-27)

⁴See <https://vaxer.stockholm/omraden/norra-djurgardsstaden/> (accessed 2022-05-04)

sustainability city ambition often expressed in urban planning (Wheeler and Beatley 2014).

Research design: going backstage of SRS

In order to find a research design matching the outside-in perspective on stakeholder involvement as proposed above, the paper follows a research design where we focus on empirical data from the “backstage” of SRS, rather than from the “frontstage” (cf Goffman 1959). The concepts of front-, and backstage are part of the dramaturgy-framework proposed by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) giving attention to the micro-sociology of everyday life and focusing on performances, on the “making.” Goffman argued that life is a stage, where people are performing, or acting out a role. Based on his own study of the everyday life at a hotel, Goffman argued that what was happening in the restaurant was happening frontstage, while what was happening in the kitchen was happening backstage. Goffman saw everyone as actors, and “like actors in a play, we follow our stage directions, speak our lines, and make our entrances at the appropriate time” (Tanner and Timmons 2000, p. 976).

Goffman’s concepts of front- and backstage have been used in a variety of studies in various contexts, for example how to analyse what goes on in courts (Miller and Johnson 2009, Portillo et al. 2013), how Internet users engage across the backstage and frontstage (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013), and to analyse transparency in a political party (Ringle 2019). Here, we use the concepts of front- and backstage to distinguish between that which happens on the “stage” of SRS as part of formal and managed project activities, focusing on the project initiator (i.e., project manager and/or project team) managing the project according to formal time plans, strategy documents and project management models and procedures (i.e., frontstage), versus that which happens online, on the Internet (i.e., backstage). This means that rather than collecting data directly from those who are formally involved in managing the project, we have collected data that is public available online about SRS. More specifically this means that we have followed the digital footprint of SRS.

This is a contribution in itself, since despite the rapid scientific and technological advances and the growing use and awareness of social media users (De Luca, Iaia, Mehmood and Vrontis 2022, She and Michelon 2023, Shokouhyar et al. 2023) and the role of information on Internet (European Commission 2018, Szymkowiak et al. 2021), that which takes place backstage of a project, leaving digital footprints, has gained little attention in project management, let alone in research on

stakeholder management. By focusing on what emerges online, we acknowledge an “important place” and “a source of expanding horizons”; a source that is commonly used today by anyone interested in finding information about something (Szymkowiak et al. 2021, p. 2). This is especially the case for young people, or Gen Z, a “wholly-digital generation” which derives knowledge and their understanding of the world from the Internet and their smartphones (Dimitriou and AbouElghait 2019, p. 314). Gen Z uses the Internet and social media as a part of their daily lives and socialization. The Internet provides fast and easy access to information that is of relevance for decision making and the massive amount of information available online “completely changes the way people learn, educate themselves, run businesses, maintain contacts, access information” (Szymkowiak et al. 2021, p.2).

The digital footprint – collecting, organizing, interpreting and presenting

By digital footprint we mean the imprint that SRS makes digitally over time (Foth, Bajracharya, Brown and Hearn, 2009; Gustavsson and Czarniawska 2004). In practical terms, this means that we have gone to the virtual backstage of SRS one day in late February every year from 2011 to 2020. We have searched for the Swedish name for SRS (“Norra Djurgårdsstaden”) on the following commonly used search engines at the time: Altavista, Yahoo, Google, Bing and DuckDuckGo. Hence, the first step (step 1: collecting) in the inductive process of collection and analysis of the empirical material was the collective search on several commonly used search engines each year.

Internet-searches are always based on algorithms. This is unavoidable as algorithms are core to the search engines used when performing online-searches. It is however not unproblematic, since the algorithms of search engines may favour certain websites over others when ranking search results. Such rankings may, for example, be based on the location of the computer being used in the search, the search history of searches performed on the particular computer, or on explicit filters implemented in the search engine, related to, for example, ethical or legal restrictions (see eg Kulshrestha et al. 2019). The algorithms of search engines are thus not unbiased; they are infused with the values and decisions of those developing them, and they are the result of a complex interplay between, for example, search engine optimizers and content providers (Schultheiß and Lewandowski 2020). In order to counteract a biased result in our searches, we took precaution by following the suggestions of professionals⁵: we used *multiple*

Table 1. Categories.

Categories	Examples
Collaborating for effect - Collaborators	Individuals or professionals coming together in associations or platforms <u>collaborating and progressing a certain cause for affect</u> . Organizations, similar or different, are also coming together in associations or organized networks collaborating for affect or concern. <i>Examples: Företagsgruppen Norra Djurgårdsstaden, BRF Äril, BRF Zenhusen.</i>
Translating policy - Enablers	Organisations, primarily public authorities and major national funders of research, innovation and development projects became involved related to the <u>translating of policy</u> . <i>Examples: Energimyndigheten, Regeringen, Vinnova.</i>
Providing service for local life – Local providers	Commercial, local initiatives gradually became interested in <u>providing services for local life</u> in the SRS neighbourhood. <i>Examples: Selmas Deli, Blomsterverket, Puls & Träning.</i>
Making housing business – Property developers	Commercial, national or international, organizations developing and exploiting land and properties are <u>making housing business</u> . <i>Examples: Skanska, Tobin Properties, Wallenstam, Svenska Bostäder, HSB.</i>
Providing (technical) solutions – Tech developers	National or international commercial organizations are <u>providing (technical) solutions</u> in energy, digital technology and the built environment. <i>Examples: Fortum, ABB, CF Møller, WSP.</i>
Providing content and service – Content and service providers	Commercial brokers/intermediaries are <u>providing content and service</u> that other commercial organizations can be linked to. <i>Examples: Notar Mäklare, Booli, Fastighetsbyrån.</i>
Influencing - Individuals	Individuals, predominantly as single actors, voicing opinions about SRS are <u>influencing</u> others. <i>Examples: Oscar Freyre, Stefan Killander, Djurgårdsstaden blog.</i>
Creating recognition – Media creators	Writing and publishing journalistic texts, films or tv by smaller or larger media houses with a general or specific focus <u>creating recognition</u> . <i>Examples: Dagens Nyheter, Expressen, SVT, Byggvärlden.</i>
Governing - Initiator	The city initiated and controls the development of SRS hereby <u>governing</u> the future. <i>The city of Stockholm.</i>
Creating knowledge – Knowledge producers	Universities and research institutes are <u>creating knowledge</u> about the sustainable future. <i>Examples: KTH Royal Institute of Technology, SICS Swedish ICT, Interaktiva institutet.</i>

search engines every year (including DuckDuckGo which is a search engine that does not save any search history, which is a known way to counteract so called “filter bubbles” where deviating results are filtered out); we used *different computers* different years (which meant that previous search history did not affect new searches); and we performed the searches in *different geographical locations* (as a way to counteract locational bias). The analysis that follows is based on a compilation of the results generated when taking these precautions.

All three authors were extensively involved in the collection and analysis of the empirical material. While the actual search was the first step, this also included downloading, saving and basic structuring of the hits. Each hit was saved as a pdf-file and structured in folders based on search engine, year of search and place in the list. Initially we only saved the first top-10 hits per search engine every year, but since 2013 we have downloaded and saved the pdf:s for the top-20 hits per search engine and year. One argument for expanding to the top-20 is that the Internet has developed, expanded and has become an increasingly used “place” for people searching for information (Szymkowiak et al. 2021).

After the last search in February 2020, the next step (step 2: organizing) was to compile the

information about the pdf:s in a separate excel-document. The categories for this compilation were year, place in the list, search engine, domain name and web address. Based on this compilation we removed duplicate hits (i.e., the same webpages that occurred on different search engines and the same webpages that appeared across years), and pdf:s that were empty (one reason for empty pdf:s is that some hits did not translate into text-based pdf:s; for example if they included films or images only). Through this process, the initial 640 hits were reduced to 341.

To be true to the performative approach, the next step (step 3: interpreting) focused on *activities* as expressed in all the pdf:s and the creation of types of activities. In this step we used a systematic approach where two of the authors interpreted the pdf:s followed by the third author validating the interpretation. The actual interpreting of activities followed this line of reasoning: A pdf reporting news about the project, either in the form of an article from a daily newspaper, or in the form of a press release from a company, was interpreted as “Creating recognition”. And pdf:s expressing information regarding the opening hours of a flower shop in the area, or the prices of groceries of a local grocery store, were interpreted as “Providing local service”. True to our performative approach, the interpretation was focusing on activities that were performed and based on thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke

⁵See for example “Do Unbiased Search Engines Exist? Top Alternative Search Engines to Consider”, <https://neeva.com/learn/do-unbiased-search-engines-exist-top-alternative-search-engines-to-consider> (Accessed 2023-05-01)

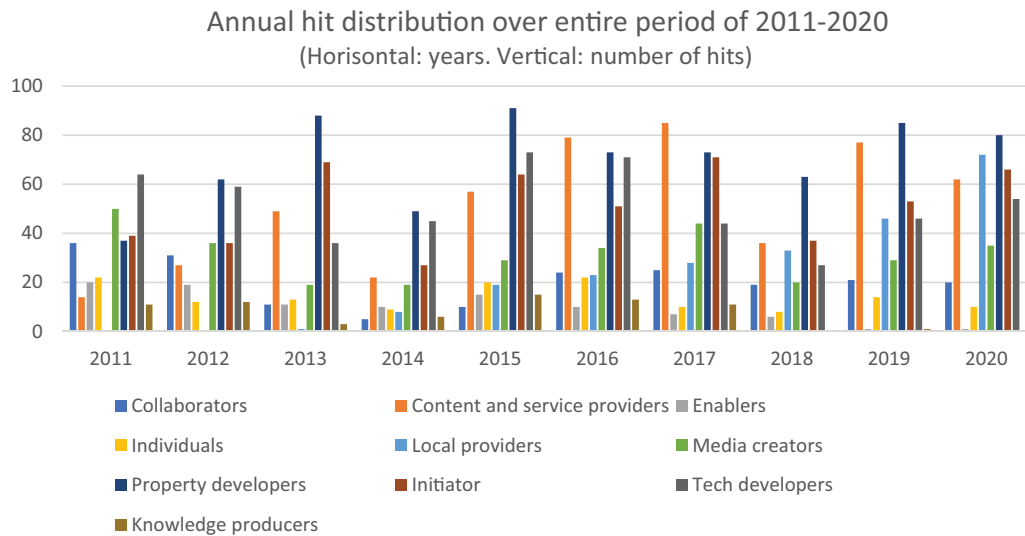


Figure 1. Annual hit distribution over entire period of 2011–2020. (Horizontal: years. Vertical: number of hits)

2006) this step resulted in that 10 types of activities were identified. These 10 types of activities were then linked to 10 categories of stakeholders (see Table 1). Finally (step 4: presenting) we analysed and mapped *when* each category of stakeholders was the most prominent, developing figure (Figure 1) to support a visualisation of this development over time.

Findings

Figure 1 below provides an illustration of when the 10 categories of stakeholders took action on the online backstage of SRS from 2011–2020 and thus became stakeholders. Below, we will describe each type of activity in more detail.

Collaborating for effect – collaborators

One type of actions through which actors became stakeholders in SRS was actions performed in collaboration for a particular cause. Examples of such actions include the protesting against the exploitation of protected nature; the arguing for more space for bicycles; and the promoting of installing charging stations for electrical vehicles. In these actions, individuals collaborated in tenant organizations and professional organizations collaborated in various associations with the purpose of affecting SRS in a particular direction.

This category of action is particularly notable in the beginning of the studied period (2011–2012), which may be explained by the vested interest that the stakeholders had in the emergence and future development of SRS as a sustainability urban area through the implementation and use of green technology and populated by people upholding a healthy lifestyle.

Towards the end of the studied period (2016–2020), actions related to collaborating for affect shifted to concern, for example social events and complaints about the traffic situation. Now houses had been built and people had moved to SRS, tenant organizations had vested interests in issues related to the buildings, the neighbourhood, and the daily life in the district.

Translating policy – enablers

Another set of actions through which primarily public authorities and major national funders of research, innovation and development projects became involved stakeholders in SRS are related to the translating of policy, particularly related to energy efficiency and innovation. This took place, for example through the establishing, expressing and describing visions, directions, plans and regulations – in text as well as in images, i.e., various activities the enabled the project. The translating of policy was particularly notable in the beginning of the studied period (2011–2012), when permissions and funding to plan, develop, innovate, and build in the SRS-area was required. Examples of actions included calls for research proposals and innovative ideas on energy efficiency, ICT, or smart cities. It also included public information about the plan and progression of SRS including involving people and organizations in the development of new detail plans and land agreements.

Providing service for local life – local providers

In the beginning of the studied period, there were planning, negotiations and preparation for the first stages of housing development. This included

planning of new infrastructure and mounting down old industry, purifying soil and moving harbour activities. At this time, there were no new houses, no new residents and no local service providers who vested an interest in the making of SRS. The local providers that gradually became interested during the studied period include commercial, local initiatives providing services to residents, visitors and people working in SRS. When people and organizations had moved to and established physically in SRS, the demand for various kinds of local services grew. Examples of such services were gyms, supermarkets and cafés. At the end of the period (2020) the organizations providing services for local life vested much interest and were much involved in the making of SRS by informing about opening hours, making sales offers and announcing new establishments.

Making housing business – property developers

Property developers make business by initiating new housing projects. As commercial organizations they develop and exploit land and properties as their core business. In relation to SRS, they first took action to compete for a land allocation agreement. When selected by the landowner (the city of Stockholm) they signed a land allocation agreement and later also a land development agreement which gave them the possibility to initiate their housing project and pursue their business plan for that specific housing project. The property developers were keen on attracting customers to their respective housing project and vested an interest in marketing SRS as an attractive area with a nice living environment, a children friendly outdoor environment with good access to schools, services and the nature.

Since SRS developed in stages, with approximately 6-10 properties being developed in each stage, some property developers became active in the beginning of the period (those that had signed land agreements for the first stage of SRS), while other property developers became active in later stages of the studied period. [Figure 1](#) illustrates that making housing business was a strong vested interest by property developers in relation to SRS during the whole studied period (2012-2020).

Providing (technical) solutions – tech developers

National and international commercial organizations became stakeholders early in the studied period by activities whereby they provided technical products or services to SRS. Technology companies focusing on

smart energy solutions were active before the any physical activity took place in the area by signing a letter of intent. This way, the tech companies promoted their innovative energy technology solutions in collaboration with the city of Stockholm (2011-2012). These tech companies were both large national and international companies with strong business record and long tradition as well as smaller start-ups promoting innovative digital smart solutions. The tech companies focusing on energy efficiency and innovative digital smart solutions, were, however, not much involved later on in the studied period.

Then, however, other commercial organizations specialized in architecture, building installations, structural engineering etc. vested an interest. These organizations were contracted by the property developers for designing the buildings and coming up with solutions for various kinds of issues. Hence, commercial organizations with expertise related to the built environment providing (technical) solutions were active in SRS from the middle of the period (2015-2016).

Providing content and service – content- and service providers

This category includes the activities of organizations providing information, products or services of other commercial organizations that can be linked to real estate products or services, related products or services, or also a mix of different products or services. In the beginning of the period, there were only a few organizations involved that provided content and services. These were mainly focusing on sharing information about smart and/or sustainable city development in general, or SRS in particular, both nationally and internationally.

After some years, when the people were starting to sell their homes in SRS, content and service providers such as real estate brokers vested much interest. The real estate brokers provided content and service to their customers and became heavily involved in SRS during the second half of the period. The real estate brokers also strived to increase the attractiveness of SRS by marketing SRS in general and the apartments in particular. This included for example information about the services in the area, the closeness to the waterfront, the nature and the close proximity to the vibrant, business city centre.

The vested interest by the providers of content and service was based on other stakeholders that were related to SRS requesting their services.

Influencing – individuals

Individuals in general and residents living in SRS can be seen as influencers when they are voicing their personal opinions about SRS. This category became stakeholders by influencing others about SRS, but as seen in [Figure 1](#) this category is not much involved across the studied period. In the beginning of the period (2011-2012), some influencers became stakeholders by expressing critique or concern about SRS, for example critique concerning green washing and a discussion concerning the name of the area. There were also individual politicians writing about what was going on in SRS and what decisions or meetings they had been engaged in on their blogs. In general, the interest from influencers was low during the studied period.

Creating recognition – media creators

There were organizations involved in the making of SRS by creating recognition when publishing news about SRS. Creating recognition includes writing and publishing journalistic texts by smaller or larger media houses with a general or specific focus. Included here are newspapers, television and business news web pages etc. publishing news or stories about SRS. In the beginning of the period (2011) there were tech companies and property developers in collaboration with the city, promoting and presenting investments and specific energy technology via media publishing news and stories. This could possibly recognition among also those not (yet) involved in SRS and made media a stakeholder when publishing about SRS. Later in the period, there was not much interest from media in the making of SRS.

Governing – initiator

The city of Stockholm is the major landowner of the area where SRS is built. By initiating SRS through representing, informing about, developing, promoting, and marketing Stockholm, the city offers investment opportunities for commercial organizations. The city controls by law the city planning and assign who is allowed to initiate housing projects, how and when. Hence, the city becomes stakeholder by initiating and controlling – governing – the project. In the beginning of the studied period (2011), Stockholm had already planned SRS for many years. The involvement in the beginning of the period was thus based on vesting interest by initiating and controlling the project by signing agreements, promoting the project to property developers, investors and the public, and planning and controlling construction works.

Later in the studied period, much of the involvement by the city was based on informing about new or updated plans and up-coming activities in SRS to initiate and attract new investments. The controlling was furthered by initiating evaluations about, for example, energy performance of buildings, transport situation and real estate market prices. These evaluations were presented in written reports and visual material online.

Creating knowledge – knowledge producers

Universities and research institutes undertake research to create knowledge. There were several universities located nearby the area where SRS takes place. One of them was KTH Royal Institute of Technology, which specialises in architecture and the built environment, energy technology, ICT etc. and which showed interest in SRS in the beginning of the period. In line with the vision of SRS to become a sustainable role model for urban planning and a test bed for innovations working in a triple-helix like setup, some universities were active initially and became stakeholders when engaging in research projects initiated in collaboration between universities and the city. However, the digital footprint shows a low interest in creating knowledge during most of the studied period and at the end of the period (2018-2020), there is no sign of involvement by universities or research institutes in the digital footprint.

Discussion

In response to the call by Eskerod et al. (2015), and as a way to contribute to the understanding of the complexity of stakeholder involvement, particularly in what we have called distributed projects, we adopted a performative approach to the analysis of the longitudinal study of the digital footprint of SRS in order to study stakeholders-in-the-making. This approach is useful in at two ways. First, it makes visible stakeholders-in-the-making; the waxing and waning of stakeholders over time. And second, it enables a shift from analysing stakeholders inside-out – from the project core to the project periphery, to the outside-in perspective. Such a shift is especially important when aiming at understanding distributed projects, we would argue.

The waxing and waning of stakeholders

First, the performative approach enabled us to see how stakeholders *become* stakeholders over time as

they took actions on the online backstage of SRS, and how the activities of different categories of actors made them stakeholders – or not – to different degrees during the studied period. The study of SRS shows that three categories of stakeholders – initiators, property developers and collaborators – were active throughout the studied period. This is not surprising as these represent the stakeholders that initiated this LSUSDP and participated in its development. From a traditional project management perspective, they would be considered key stakeholders to the SRS-project. One explanation for this is that it reflects the normative, formal planning and building rationale in which the City and authorities vest an interest in an LSUSDP being intensively involved in the early phases of it; when plans have to be approved, financing has to be secured and agreements are being negotiated, and while there is a market economic rationale why real estate brokers vest much interest and become intensively involved when residents are selling their apartments.

The other categories of stakeholders were however not equally invested in the project throughout the studied period. Four categories – enablers, knowledge producers, tech developers and media creators – were primarily stakeholders in the early phase of the project, with fewer activities towards the end of the studied period. Initially, tech companies for example developed and provided energy efficient and smart digital solutions, but when these technologies had been implemented, their activities in relation to SRS diminished. The decrease in activities backstage of these actors in relation SRS could be interpreted as a decrease in interest in SRS. None of these actors have any particular interest in or link to the geographical area of SRS outside of the SRS-project, so it is likely that when the project was under ways and the novelty of it had gone, that they moved on to other projects, elsewhere. Instead, local providers and content- and service providers became more prominent. These latter categories consist of actors that in various ways and for various reasons are situated geographically in the SRS-area by, for example providing real estate services, or services for local life, such as groceries, and gym-facilities, but whose activities are dependent on the project having come to the stage when houses had been built and when people had moved in.

Interestingly enough, one category was underrepresented in the material: individuals. There may be several reasons for this, also related to the search itself. It is not unlikely that powerful stakeholders such as the

city or the property developers pay search engines to have their webpages rank high when people perform searches; a practice that individuals may not do. But if this was the only reason for why individuals did not appear to any extent in the material the precautions taken by us (as described in the methods-section) would at some stage provided us with a different set of results. In fact, individuals did not rank high in any of the search engines, from any computer or location, at any given year during the studied period. So either the voices of individuals were silenced “onstage,” for instance through the participatory process initiated or undertaken by the city where citizens were invited to express opinions on the project, or there were not many individuals who cared about the project enough to get active backstage. Based on previous research the lack of individual voices on the backstage of SRS can be seen as worrying, since participation of residents is often emphasized as key for the success of LSUSDP.s (eg. Fung and Wright 2001). Furthermore, to enhance the legitimacy of policy decisions that are dealing with wicked problems, for example related to sustainability, residents need to be involved (Fazi and Smith 2006). In addition, in a triple-helix like setup (compare with Bibri and Krogstie 2020) and based on how people in general, and young people in particular, search for information and knowledge online (Dimitriou and AbouElgheit 2019, Szymkowiak et al. 2021), knowledge creators such as the universities and research institutes would have been expected to be more involved in “places” where the future is “made.”

In sum, the performative approach helps us see how stakeholders are emergent and non-fixed; how they wax and wane over time as a distributed project like SRS progress. If we adopt a performative approach to stakeholder involvement, then we can’t make assumptions about the interests of a particular actor in a project; the actor only becomes a stakeholder when they take action in relation to the project (Hallin 2009).

Stakeholder involvement in distributed projects

Second, as seen earlier, based on the analysis we proposed the term *distributed project*, to denote projects like SRS. In projects like these, it is the geographical place that ties the stakeholders together, rather than the project, and it is in relation to this physical place that they have vested interests and in relation to which they become stakeholders. We would argue that taking an “outside-in” perspective and focusing on the geographical place when analysing stakeholder

involvement in distributed projects, rather than an “inside-out” perspective by focusing on a *single* project that took/is taking place (for example a project of a particular building), allows for a more nuanced understanding of the project ecology that is common in contemporary urban development (cf Hedborg and Rosander 2023, Hedborg Bengtsson, Eriksson and Karrbom Gustavsson 2020). Furthermore, it helps overcome the problem that the “inside-out” perspective brings when it comes to addressing issues related to sustainability, since achieving sustainability in urban environments requires a wider systems’ thinking (Frantzeskaki et al. 2021) and an interplay between various stakeholders and networks across spatial and temporal scales (Frantzeskaki et al. 2021, Ernstson et al. 2010).

Stakeholder involvement in the distributed project needs to account for the fact that it is a project that takes place across a long period of time (longer than any of the single projects and beyond a series of projects in one specific industry). As seen above, some stakeholders were not involved the whole (studied) time. Providers of service for local life, for example, appeared and became influential backstage towards the end of the studied period. So whereas the literature on involving residents in urban development and/or stakeholder involvement in projects commonly focus on strategies and activities needed to involve and engage stakeholders in projects prospectively as a way to enhance democracy or minimize risks and enhance the chances for success, a retrospective analysis in the distributed project enrich the understanding of which stakeholders enrolled in the “making” over time. Such an analysis involve mapping stakeholders across a long period of time and reflecting upon how their involvement change over time. This is particularly important when it comes to sustainability projects, since there, stakeholders that belong to future generations also need to be involved in order to achieve sustainability (compare with Silvius and Schipper 2014a).

Conclusion and further research

Based on the discussion above, we draw two conclusions.

First, our study supports the idea that the power of stakeholders in a project varies over time (see eg Hallin et al. 2021, Raco and Tunney 2010). Focusing on the backstage of the large scale urban sustainable development project Stockholm Royal Seaport by studying its digital footprint over a 10-year period, we

were able to map the stakeholders that were involved “making” SRS online and across time and how their involvement in the “making” changed. This mapping made visible which stakeholders emerged as strong in the online making of the project backstage. The mapping also shows which stakeholders became more and less influential over time. While some stakeholders became influential the whole studied period, other stakeholders became more or less influential over time. For the project manager keen to foster democracy and involvement in sustainable urban development (cf Beierle 1999), this is an important observation, since it indicates that more work might be needed to engage those that may not naturally have a strong voice in the project.

Second, we would argue that when involved in distributed projects, rather than focusing on the involvement of stakeholders in relation to the project initiating organization (e.g. the project manager and/or the project team) which is commonly how stakeholder management is performed (see eg. Eskerod et al. 2015) or to the project network (see eg. Hellgren and Stjernberg 1995, DeFillippi and Sydow 2016), stakeholder involvement analysis should focus on the involvement of stakeholders in relation to the *geographical place*. Doing this allows for a mapping of the multitude of stakeholders involved also backstage, and enable the *involving* of these frontstage (compare with Eskerod et al. 2015). Project “reality” and stakeholder involvement is thus performed frontstage and backstage simultaneously.

While this study is a single case study that provides analytical generalizations of relevance for scholars in project research and practitioners in construction project management and urban planning, further research could include comparative studies, nationally or internationally, to further the understanding of stakeholders-in-the-making in distributed projects to make the findings more generalizable. Further research could also explore sustainable LSUSDP.s where there are multiple land owners. Which stakeholders become influential over time in the “making” of the future on privately owned land? Such findings would complement this study.

Another opportunity for future research is for project scholars in general, and for scholars interested in LSUSDP.s, to be able to change methods and perspectives to gain new insights. To understand sustainability transition through complex, long-term, socio-technical systems (such as cities and urban environments) in an age of digitalization, the perspective needs to change, from focus on the project from inside-out to a focus

on the project from outside-in. Projects are often distributed, we would argue, and thus require distributed methods; the Internet and processual perspectives as has been illustrated in this article.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [TKG], upon reasonable request.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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