

# Enacting Governance through Strategy

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*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

*Published in:*  
Urban Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/0042098015624871](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015624871)

*Publication date:*  
2017

*License*  
Unspecified

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Brandtner, C., Höllerer, M. A., Meyer, R. E., & Kornberger, M. (2017). Enacting Governance through Strategy: A Comparative Study of Governance Configurations in Sydney and Vienna. *Urban Studies*, 54(5), 1075-1091.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015624871>

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Journal article (Accepted version)

**CITE:** Enacting Governance through Strategy: A Comparative Study of Governance Configurations in Sydney and Vienna. / Brandtner, Christof; Höllerer, Markus A.; Meyer, Renate E.; Kornberger, Martin. In: Urban Studies, Vol. 54, No. 5, 04.2017, p. 1075-1091.

DOI: [10.1177/0042098015624871](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015624871)

Uploaded to [Research@CBS](https://research.cbs.dk): June 2017

# **Enacting governance through strategy: A comparative study on governance configurations in Sydney and Vienna**

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Accepted for publication in *Urban Studies*  
December 2015

# Enacting governance through strategy: A comparative study on governance configurations in Sydney and Vienna

**Abstract.** Over the past two decades, research has emphasized a shift from city government to urban governance. Such a shift brings about its very own challenges, namely governance gaps, uncertain configurations in governance, and a limited capacity to act. In this paper, we argue that the concurrent rise of strategy documents in city administration addresses these challenges. Our central claim is that strategy documents can be understood as a distinct discursive device through which local governments enact aspired governance configurations. We illustrate our argument empirically using two prominent examples that, while showing similar features and characteristics, are anchored in different administrative traditions and institutional frameworks: the city administrations of Sydney, Australia, and Vienna, Austria. The contribution of the paper is to show how strategy documents enact governance configurations along four core dimensions: the setting in space and time, the definition of the public, the framing of the *res publica*, and legitimacy issues. Moreover, our comparative analysis of Sydney and Vienna gives evidence of differences in governance configurations enacted through strategy documents.

**Keywords.** Urban governance; governance configurations; strategy; discourse; institutions

## 1 Introduction

Recent debates in the domain of local-level governance have shifted from traditional top-down ‘city government’ to the notion of ‘urban governance’ (Harrison and Hoyer, 2014; Stoker, 2011; Rhodes, 2007). Governance is concerned with organizing how public and private resources are best utilized to achieve common ends. Building on earlier contributions (Rhodes, 1997), scholarly debate focuses on the interdependence and increasingly blurred boundaries of public sector entities (i.e., administrative bodies and public organizations), the private sector, and non-for-profit organizations. A particular emphasis here lies on the relative autonomy of such interactive networks vis-à-vis a sovereign state (Davies, 2005; Torfing et al., 2012) and the notion that the

involved actors enforce their interests (cf. Lowndes, 2001). Governance primarily refers to ‘governing with and through networks’ (Rhodes, 2007: 1246). It has been argued that such network governance ‘hollows out’ the state (Rhodes, 1997), reducing its capacity to act, and thus creating governance gaps (Pierre, 1999).

How do city administrations respond to this substantial challenge? In this paper, we argue that one way in which city administrations address this issue is by crafting strategy texts that rhetorically enact aspired governance configurations. We conceptualize strategy texts (such as strategy documents, plans, charts, diagrams) as discursive devices through which the city administration – like the author of a screenplay – describes a desirable future, arranges people, objects, and topics in time and space, and prescribes actions for the cast (cf. Goffman, 1959). Government-issued strategy documents, from such a perspective, allow governments to put a specific configuration of governance ‘on stage’. Understanding governance through the lens of strategy illustrates how, via these texts, the capacity to act is maintained, despite the fact that flat governance structures undermine the fiat of hierarchical government and question the legitimacy of hierarchical practices and state structures.

Employing a qualitative analysis of core strategy documents, and supported by supplementary interviews with urban strategists and executives to contextualize our findings, we illustrate our arguments by referring to two global cities that show similar characteristics but are embedded in rather different administrative traditions: Sydney, Australia, and Vienna, Austria. We ask four analytical questions about central dimensions of governance configurations that are enacted in, and through, strategy documents: the setting in space and time, the definition of the public, the framing of the *res publica*, and legitimacy issues.

Our analysis offers three contributions to the current urban governance debate. First, we set out to explain how the rhetoric of the strategy text tries to bridge ‘governance gaps’ that arise from different stakeholder values. Second, we inquire how strategy documents manifest structural

dimensions of power that confine governance. Third, we investigate how government attempts to legitimate its own – fundamentally hierarchical – role in strategy formulation in a flat network governance context.

The paper is structured as follows: We first examine governance in the context of city administration, and conceptualize its relation to urban strategies. In particular, we suggest a framework for analyzing urban governance through the lens of strategy. We then describe our methodological choices and explicate the empirical setting. Subsequently, we present insights from our analysis in a comparative way. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, the contributions of our paper, as well as reflections on limitations and implications for further research.

## **2 Theory**

### ***2.1 Urban Governance in the ‘shadow of hierarchy’***

Contemporary literature predominantly understands cities as administered by governance regimes rather than ‘ruled’ by traditional city governments (Mayntz, 2009; Kearns and Paddison, 2000; Healy et al., 1995). According to Rhodes (1997), governance is concerned with processes of control, coordination, and regulation. It aims at organizing how public and private resources are best utilized to achieve common ends. While this approach highlights self-coordination over hierarchical steering, the relationship with hierarchical government structures is undertheorized: For instance, Scharpf (1994) argues that, although hierarchical coordination remains a relatively rare phenomenon, self-coordination among units takes place in ‘the shadow of hierarchy’ (see also Levelt and Metze, 2014). The ‘shadow of hierarchy’-thesis suggests that government still plays an important role in shaping governance configurations, a view consonant with the presence of strong relationships between interest groups and governments (Jones and Evans, 2006). In the literature, three concerns follow from governance practices that are thwarted by the shadow of hierarchy; it is these concerns that we discuss in the following: (a) the need to establish consensus in order to

bridge governance gaps; (b) the configuration of actors and mechanisms of governance; and (c) the processes through which governance can be legitimately shaped.

*Governance gaps.* Challenges for urban governance primarily come from governance gaps that arise from a lack of coherence among different stakeholders' views on which governance objectives and styles are appropriate to address the city's problems. New rationalities that emphasized markets and networks alongside bureaucracy and hierarchy (González and Healey, 2005; Davies, 2005; Cars et al., 2002) widen such governance gaps. With increasing fragmentation of the public sector and the normative emphasis on market-oriented organizations in governing the public interest, diverse views on what and whom governance should address have surfaced: 'Different segments of the city and the city administration tend to embrace different values' (Pierre, 1999: 373). Governments' main challenge with regard to maneuvering these tensions and bridging governance gaps is to create connectivity regarding values, norms, and principles among all actors involved. At first, this seems a 'mission impossible'. The understandings of fundamental aspects – such as which issues and interest groups should be included in the governance process – varies greatly across the city's constituents. Consequently, 'problems in urban governance [...] are explained by differences in priorities, objectives, and strategies between different segments of the local state' (Pierre, 1999: 390). The lack of shared conceptions leaves local governments with the imposition to establish a consensus where none exists.

*The configuration of governance.* What characterizes a governance regime that alleviates such gaps? Critical accounts of new public management (NPM) and the increasing role of the private sector for the provision of public services and goods have diagnosed a considerable 'hollowing-out of the state' (Rhodes, 1997). In principle, however, urban governance does not make any normative 'prejudgment about the cast of actors [...], direction and objectives of the "governing coalition"' (Pierre, 2005: 452). Rather, the specific configuration of governance might vary greatly from city to city. Struggles about who is to partake and what is to be determined through governance

processes give rise to questions of voice and power. The set of institutions that defines ‘who gets what, when, and how’ in urban governance is traditionally thought to be shaped by formal criteria and administrative rules. Actually, power is exercised more often informally – on the backstage – through non-decision making, or structurally, by assigning subject-positions (cf. Lukes, 1978). In this sense, governance is less a function, than something that opens or restricts certain fields of action. Consequently, we understand configurations of governance not just as the manifest and latent aspects of steering and coordination, but as the more macro-level arrangements that frame and impact individual governance practices.

*The city's capacity to act.* The third issue is whether, and how, such governance configurations can be deliberately constructed. Urban governance deals with how governance can be organized effectively – i.e., how network coordination or steering can be optimized (Kjær, 2011). This highlights two problems in the current urban governance literature. First, the focus on a normative or instrumental notion of network governance does not consider how the institutional framework in which a city is embedded shapes the deep-seated and often taken-for-granted understandings of how problems should be addressed and what procedures are legitimate (Davies, 2009; Kjær, 2011). Hence, there is a need to study *latent* notions of governance structures. Second, while a recent debate on ‘meta-governance’ has given rise to questions on how to instrumentalize the governance of governance, this debate mainly addresses emerging governmental tasks that come with high-complex network governance (Sørensen, 2006; Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009; Torfing et al., 2012). We attempt to complement this perspective by understanding the configuration of governance as a culturally embedded set of institutions that transcend particular coordinating and steering activities (March and Olsen, 1995; Walgenbach and Meyer, 2008). Such an understanding of governance refers to ‘different institutions in urban politics [...] [with] own patterns of external dependencies, [where] governance is organized in such a way that it reduces or contains these constituencies while increasing the city’s “capacity to act”’ (Pierre, 1999: 389). The capacity to act



and govern within these fields is not a given, but needs to be established and maintained (González and Healey, 2005; Stone, 1993). In the following, we turn to discussing what role urban strategy documents can play in this respect.

## ***2.2 Strategy documents as discursive governance device***

In light of multiple constituents and rationalities, decision-making includes prioritizing. Governing incorporates a number of hard choices ‘where the values at stake are incomparable, incommensurable and incompatible’ (Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009: 828). In the context of recent public sector reforms, one key instrument in delineating a path into the future comes from private sector management: strategy. In fact, strategy texts have spread rapidly from the corporate world into town halls and city administrations across the world (Kornberger, 2012); most cities today craft strategies to manage their futures (Zukin, 2007; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). Strategy instruments as favored modes to debate possible futures across cities with ‘highly different political, administrative, and legal cultures’ (Pierre, 1999: 373) have resulted in the dissemination of templates that appear homogeneous in form and content (Czarniawska, 2002).

As a tool for public management, strategy texts fulfill many functions, such as highlighting management visions, operationalizing and implementing them, and making them measurable (Kornberger, 2012). We conceptualize strategy as a discourse of which specific texts (strategy documents, plans, charts, diagrams) are practical instantiations. We see strategy texts as manifestations of this discourse. These strategy texts enable the rationalization and location of positions in a broader societal context (Barry and Elmes, 1997), offering a telling account of city administrators’ expectations, aspirations, and justifications (Mills, 1940) of specific governance arrangements. We are skeptical as to whether the state actually achieves what is intended with, or outlined in, strategy texts. For instance, Millard-Ball (2013) argues that there is no causal effect of

climate action plans on cities' environmental performance, but that high-performing cities adopt planning. The goals set out in plans are – despite elaborate operationalization – often merely aspirational, and many of the actors in strategy documents are neither legally, nor morally, bound by the author's claims. As with corporate strategy (cf. Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985), the reliability and the legitimacy of city strategy documents are questionable, as we will discuss below.

This does not mean that the government's own staging is inconsequential. Strategy does not merely represent concerns about the future: Knights and Morgan (1991: 270) highlight the performative aspect when they posit that 'strategy is actively involved in the constitution, or re-definition, of problems in advance of offering itself as a solution to them'. Pälli et al. (2009: 303) argue that 'strategy can be seen as a discourse which has its own specific conditions of possibility and that these conditions enable certain ways of acting while at the same time they restrict other actions'. Strategy texts, in this way, are powerful discursive governance devices deployed by organizations to plan, plot, and project their futures. As artifacts, strategy texts matter: They frame issues, highlight causes, identify effects, distribute agency, and propose courses of action (Cooren, 2004).

Given the recent shift from government to governance, and the concurrent rise of strategy as a central discourse in town halls and city administrations, this paper explores their relationship and asks how, rhetorically, governance is enacted through strategy documents. Our analysis investigates strategy documents in relation to the three problems of urban governance identified above: *How do strategy documents evoke the notion of consensus in the context of governance gaps? How is a configuration of governance staged? And how is such an authoritative claim legitimated against the backdrop of multiple constituents?* We argue that strategy documents project a configuration of governance and mark out a framework for governing the city, including where the urban starts and where it ends, who makes up the city, and which issues are pressing for the city's future. In other words, strategy provides a 'language' – 'vocabulary' and 'grammar' alike – through which actors exercise power in the context of governance issues. A city's strategy is a grand narrative that weaves the threads of

private interests and public ideals into a future fabric of the city. It reflects negotiations of space and time, actor constellations, prioritized issues, and game plans for legitimizing one's actions (Holsti, 1969). Put analytically, studying strategy documents promises to reveal some of the key latent aspects of governance.

First, space and time are essential categories of urban governance; both are prominently reflected in city strategies. Decisions about the trajectory of the city in such documents go far beyond the usual election period and, thus, beyond an elected government's mandate. Strategy also extends space in quite literal ways (e.g., by planning beyond the government's constitutional/legal sphere of influence). Strategy implies an extension of temporal and spatial 'territoriality' and opens them for management intervention.

Second, the categorization of the city's public is distinctive of the way the 'polis' is governed; strategy texts define the existence and role of multiple actor categories, power relations between them, scripts, and the stakes of core audiences. They give credit to both audiences and public decision-makers. By casting the actors and defining the audiences, the authors of strategy documents reveal which coalitions they deem relevant for the city's future – while silencing others.

Third, governance in a narrow sense often neglects discussion about which issues are actually at stake. But the 'matters of concern' put on the city's agenda – the goals and how they are measured – are a central facet of power. In this sense, a city's strategy delimits the space for debates about the future and the arena for struggles and controversies to a specific set of issues.

Finally, the success of 'truth claims' about governance (and, ultimately, the 'survival' of government) is dependent on the support of the city's core constituencies. Installing a vision as a common goal requires legitimacy. Given the fact that city government is but one important actor in urban governance, it needs to legitimize the visions the strategy document conveys and its own role as the author.

Strategy is, in such a sense, the ‘screenplay’ for urban governance (Goffman, 1959) – depicting actors and their constellations as well as the judging audience, the setting of the stage, and the plot.

In our analysis, we ask four guiding questions about the institutional configuration of governance:

- When and where is the scene for governance set?
- Who are the relevant actors and audiences – and which roles are foreseen for them?
- Which matters of public concern does the plot dramatize?
- How does government legitimate its role as the author(-ity) of the narrative?

### **3 The illustrative cases of Sydney and Vienna**

In the previous section, we argued that the puzzles and dilemmas of governance should be addressed through the lens of strategy. Such a perspective suggests taking a close look at the discursive manifestations of strategy and their distinct aesthetics. Consequently, we consider government-issued strategy documents to be an appropriate genre for studying governance configurations.

#### ***3.1 Empirical setting***

We illustrate the usefulness of our proposed analytical framework by examining strategy documents from the cities of Sydney and Vienna against the backdrop of the specific local context. To abstract from a specific case, we chose a comparative research design to illustrate our argument (Peters, 1998; DiGaetano and Storm 2003; Pierre, 2005). We take seriously Pierre’s (1999: 375) comment that national politics and state traditions, in which urban governance is embedded, ‘remain the most powerful factors in explaining various aspects of urban politics’ (see also Rhodes, 2007; Kjær, 2011). Sydney and Vienna have several things in common. Both cities are regularly characterized as global ‘lifestyle-cities’ that are well known for their high quality of life and other ‘soft’ location factors (e.g., according to the Mercer Quality of Living Survey); they are similarly

governable, neither being a ‘mega-city’, yet both being well-developed, medium-sized world cities; both emphasize the importance of livability and sustainable growth over being economic powerhouses.

In contrast, the two city administrations are embedded in divergent national administrative traditions and recent reform trajectories (Painter and Peters, 2010; Meyer and Hammerschmid, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Sydney, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, has been strongly influenced by the NPM reform paradigm over the last decades, while Vienna is still firmly anchored in a legalistic-bureaucratic continental European tradition. In more detail, Australia has been recognized as an early and high-intensity adopter of NPM reforms (Hood, 1995), and is a representative of the ‘Westminster model’ of governance (Rhodes, 1997). Metropolitan Sydney’s governance structure is exceptionally fragmented, with no less than 43 councils administering the greater Sydney area (Punter, 2005) and a population of roughly 4.0 million. On the other hand, Austria, of which Vienna with its 1.8 million inhabitants is by far the largest city, has been classified as a reform latecomer. In addition, in Vienna, NPM reforms have been more focused on introducing managerial instruments into public sector organizations, rather than marketization and competition; privatization and the involvement of the private sector or non-profit organizations in service delivery has been much less significant.

The two cities are thus confronted with quite different levels of subsidiarity. Sydney’s local councils face a powerful counterpart in the New South Wales (NSW) state government (Searle and Bunker, 2010), as well as its many state-controlled sub-agencies that manage key development areas and over which the city’s control is rather limited (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). In contrast, Vienna does not only hold municipal status, but is also a federal state, thus implying that it is not only in charge of enforcing federal law, but also drafting law in a number of policy areas (such as land-use and parts of the environmental legislation) (Hammerschmid and Meyer, 2005). Even though notions of NPM-led decentralization have increased the number of non-ministerial agencies

providing public services, Vienna city hall still exercises a considerable amount of power over its spin-offs. These differences in administrative tradition and past reforms call for a comparison of governance regimes (Peters, 1998; DiGaetano and Strom, 2003; Pierre, 2005) and make it interesting to investigate in what way the two cities' strategy documents enact governance differently.

### ***3.2 Data and method***

To reconstruct each city's perspective on governance issues, we primarily analyzed the central strategy documents: the *Sustainable Sydney 2030* Community Strategy Plan from 2007, and the *Vienna Strategic Plan 2004*. Sydney's strategy project was initiated by the city's independent lord mayor in 2006, and implemented by a team of planning officials, administrators, and consultants. The project built on 30 community forums held in 2007 and 2008 that involved around 12,000 stakeholders and a formal consultation process for organizations. Vienna's strategy document, on the other hand, is based on a largely internal and expert-led pilot dating back to 2000, then an initiative of the conservative people's party (as the minor partner in a coalition government). The strategy formulation for the focal document was overseen by the social democratic mayor and entailed a consultation process with various administrative departments and agencies, yet with very limited public participation. We complemented the analysis of these two central documents with a number of strategy-related documents from both metropolitan areas that were used to map the discursive landscape that surrounds the core strategy document of each city.

In terms of analysis, we first read the two documents in depth and extracted the key message and presumed purpose of each paragraph. We then iteratively coded the documents on the four analytical dimensions *space and time*, *the public*, *res publica*, and *legitimacy* following common practice in qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). For these analytical foci, as well as for a number of additional descriptive categories, including *socio-political context*, *structure*, *self-reference*, and *genre*, we

compiled a list of most central quotes, which served as background information for the interpretation of the data.

Although our empirical discussion does not aim to be generalizable, we went to great lengths to gain a good understanding of both cases beyond our primary data sources. First, to understand the cities' internal identities and the origin of the strategy documents, we conducted interviews with senior urban managers and strategic planners from both cities (21 in Sydney; 14 in Vienna). Second, we conducted preliminary research on the context of Sydney's and Vienna's strategies. We performed an extensive media analysis (over 4,000 international newspaper articles) as an indicator for external expectations and social categorizations of the two cities by international core audiences (Meyer et al., 2012). While we present data from our interviews and media analysis only selectively, these pre-studies sensitized the research team for each city's context and serve as a plausibility and robustness check for our analysis and findings.

## **4 Findings**

### ***4.1 Overview***

Both strategy documents claim a consensus about the future of the city. They strive to present a united political will that transcends various lines of conflict and divergent stakeholder interests in the present. And in both, government appears as the authority of the city's future. Yet the strategy documents handle the urban realities and futures of the two places differently.

Sydney's strategy document is written with the public in mind: it claims to be a result of community consultations. Accordingly, *Sustainable Sydney 2030* celebrates the public as its true author. As the document claims repeatedly, the strategy reflects what *'the people of Sydney want'*. Furthermore, it engenders emotion into the debate about the city (e.g., mobilizing global warming as a scare scenario). Its style is in line with business strategy: It analyses the present, defines a desirable future, and then derives a set of desired actions to get from here to there. Its aesthetics are elaborate both

in text and design, for it illustrates the big picture of urban politics. As such, it has an immediate effect on the reader and can be consumed in passing – and with its visual and multimodal language featuring drawings, images and rendered photos of Sydney in 2030, it can be easily replicated by media.

The Vienna strategy document, in contrast, is a verbose, almost academic document. It discusses the future in precise detail, featuring 14 strategic directions and innumerable explicit and implicit goals. The bureaucratic-expert style reflects the genesis of the strategy, which was compiled in-house in a collaboration of a multiplicity of administrative departments. It seems internally focused and not only written *by*, but also mainly *for*, the internal and external experts listed in the document’s appendix. Aesthetically, images are subordinate to the text and, with its many words, it is a document that wants to be carefully studied rather than browsed through.

The following section reflects the application of the above analytical framework to the two cases.

Table 1 gives a brief overview of the main findings.

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## ***4.2 Space and time***

Fundamentally, governance is about structuring space and time in which action is bounded. How do the two strategy documents temporalize the past, present, and future, and how do they configure space as a precondition for action? In the case of *Sustainable Sydney 2030*, space is not limited by the boundaries of the city’s geographical position, but projected as part of a global cityscape. The space of Sydney is depicted as the imaginary space of the ‘brand’ of Sydney. The city’s strategy plan, thus, ignores the legal territorial boundaries and introduces notions of touristic, economic, and creative space that exists in the minds of people, rather than on the geographical



maps of planners. Sydney benchmarks itself against other global cities (e.g., Singapore or Zurich), but ignores more immediate competitors (such as Melbourne, which is not mentioned at all). In so doing, the strategy allows decision-makers to construct a framework for ‘progress’ and ‘success’. While the authors of the document are well aware that *‘the place we now call Sydney’* has a past, the plan primarily distinguishes between today and future generations. The strategy has a long-term horizon, but does not give an account of its temporality: 2025 or 2035 could have served equally well as goalposts for the ideas put forward, as one interviewed strategist suggested. We can hypothesize that the described future is a precondition and enables action in the present. In this sense, it remains an a-temporal document: *Sustainable Sydney 2030* deals with the present and present coalitions of power, not the virtual future. Its supposedly future-orientated tone is a rhetorical device to legitimize decisions in the ‘here and now’. Since the time of politics and the time of strategy clash significantly, the document suggests a four-year review cycle in order to bring these temporalities in line.

The *Vienna Strategic Plan 2004* marks an interesting contrast to Sydney’s enactment of time and space. Vienna seeks to capitalize on the glorious past as a capital of an empire in the *‘heart of Europe’*. The document features a restricted, local notion of space. Space is a geographical category with clearly demarcated boundaries underlying a *‘regional shift over time towards the middle of Europe’*, mentioned in the context of the EU’s eastward enlargement. In general, the document features different layers of ‘the city’, reaching from the city hall as center to the supranational CENTROPE region. The strategy is located in the present with anchors in the past: as a senior executive at the City of Vienna said, *‘We do not want to push history aside, but build on tradition’*. The strategy document commences with the mayor looking back at what the city was like ten years before and highlights historical anchors that have accumulated the administration’s responsibility. Changing realities, in combination with the allegedly historically grown responsibility to conserve the quality of urban life, are mentioned as a reason to deal with the present strategically and to be a ‘good practice’-city.

Moreover, long-term decision-making structures are mentioned as pre-requisites for intergenerational, sustainable growth which has been jeopardized by political short-sightedness. Beyond that, Vienna's strategy does not invest much in creating images of its future, preferring rather to list present goals and subordinate them to overarching concerns.

### ***4.3 The public***

The way in which the strategy documents of Sydney and Vienna engender their respective publics differs in important aspects. In the case of Sydney, and much in line with a business-like stakeholder approach, the public is the totality of people who live, commute to, or visit the city; the *'people who make up Sydney'* are all people, including those who merely *'rely on the city'*. The key constituency of the city is constructed as 'the people' – a hardly meaningful phrase that hides behind an undifferentiated mass. It is visually represented through pictures of individuals in busy city streets and squares. This generalization is complemented by the city's understanding of equality. As defined in an equity statement, the document emphasizes an environment of equality for all people. The strategy follows the logic of equality where everyone is included in the same way, while asking how much individuals and groups of people can contribute to the city's future development. Throughout the document, the economy is described as the most important constituency, providing work and growth, leading to social inclusion, as well as to sustainable development. Economically less important stakeholders, e.g. the Aboriginal community, are mentioned; de facto, however, their voices are marginalized. The city administration itself is less of an audience – it is stylized as an implementing organ that executes the strategy. This attributes little expertise to the administration that delegates responsibility under the pretense of empowerment and partnership: The city administration claims to be no more than a facilitator, despite orchestrating the public's future. As a strategist at the City of Sydney explained, the strategy process translated many and often contradictory views into a clearly articulated political will. In

this sense, the strategy document is a tool to make the sovereign speak – and express things beyond what other democratically legitimate channels (i.e., elections, laws) can convey.

The Vienna strategy document reflects a service orientation, and frames citizens as clients: *‘The magistrate of the City of Vienna defines itself as a big service group, whose clients are the people of this city’*. Citizen participation is said to be important, but in no other role than as part of such service orientation. The public is not constructed as a key stakeholder. At the same time, parts of the public are not even seen as clients, but as inputs to a production function: For instance, minorities are framed as resource for innovation. On the actors’ side, the city mainly cooperates with itself – which is by no means trivial, as a department head at the City of Vienna stated: *‘The decisive problem that we will always have is how to get everyone to move in concert’*. In the strategy document, cooperation means that different governmental bodies work together, rather than cooperating with the broader public, private sector, or civil society. Even though the document is explicitly *‘meant as an invitation to economy and science, initiative groups, institutions and administration’*, these opportunities to cooperate are left unspecified. All in all, the city administration takes a centralist position. It presents itself as a bridge-builder between vision and feasibility: By describing its role as ‘partner’, rather than a ‘leader’, it delegates its responsibility to others.

#### ***4.4 Res publica***

What should governance be concerned with? The strategies of Sydney and Vienna define – and exclude – various matters of public concern. The Sydney strategy proposes an *‘overwhelming consensus’* of the extensive community consultation process preceding the compilation of the strategy document. The emphasis of the document on sustainability, globalization, and connectivity is reflected in the slogan *‘green, global, connected’*. However, it is largely unrelated to the actual results of the surveys and community consultations. Through translating collected concerns of citizens

and others into three catchphrases, the city constructs reasons to make immediate action appear inevitable. For instance, issues such as global warming and global competition create the context for bold action. While the strategy document tries to narrow the broad selection of topics (ranging from economy to ecology, society, and culture) in a transparent way, the final selection of strategic foci is opaque. The introductory equity statement and the generally widening gap between rich and poor, for instance, would suggest a discussion of social inequality issues and social stability. In contrast, the strategy puts considerations about economic growth center stage. In other words, the strategy translates the *res publica* into a mainly economic matter that will, once resolved, lead to social inclusion and sustainable environmental practices.

Vienna's strategy document is comprehensive and elaborate. It includes spatial, social, economic aspects as well as debates about knowledge, lifestyle, and security. The large scope is mainly accounted to the high complexity and the purportedly 'value-free' addition of all city departments' current projects. Local competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected world and the quality of urban life are two issues that are dominant throughout the document. Since these concepts are closely related and form an argumentative cycle, the hidden champion of Vienna's goals seems to be winning the international inter-city competition: Competitiveness improves the quality of living, which in turn increases competitiveness. For this reason, the document makes the impression of an attempt to capitalize on the city's strengths in order to stand its ground in location competition. As the executive director of a regional development agency of the City of Vienna pointed out, *'Vienna stands for a high quality of life, for culture, classical music, theater, the Spanish Riding School [...]. Vienna's business location is perceived as OK, but the high quality of life is a strong argument for Vienna as a corporate headquarter'*. Potential weaknesses are largely neglected. Some topics are referred to as cross-sectional issues, such as gender mainstreaming and social equality. They are closely linked to the normative alignment of the document and its institutional framework, but seem alienated. In

other words, the *res publica* in Vienna's strategy document is mainly concerned with what the city does well, and what might enable it to remain one of best cities to live in globally.

#### ***4.5 Legitimacy and author-ity***

How do Vienna and Sydney claim legitimacy for the 'plot' their strategy documents suggest? Sydney's strategy document deploys a two-pronged approach to legitimize government. First, it analyzes a number of weaknesses, which require immediate action, claiming that '*[b]usiness as usual is not an option*'. Challenges are framed as dangers to the city, while recent achievements to mitigate these dangers are celebrated. Sydney's document speaks a 'corporate' language, and includes evidence-based performance indicators for its evaluation that render the issuers accountable to future successes and failures. Second, it is built around the idea of a major participatory process. All issues were allegedly chosen in consultation with citizens and other relevant stakeholders, which justifies both the inclusion and the exclusion of certain issues. Mediation of different interest groups is claimed, all of which have been invited to contribute. Yet the media used to solicit opinions from third parties are evidently biased: While the business community – and not clearly specified 'opinion leaders' – enjoyed lunches with the lord mayor and her strategy team, the community was brought together in large meetings. Without threatening the authority of the authors of the strategy document, it is the consultation process that legitimized its outcomes. Several interviewees, including a city strategist and an engagement manager, confirmed this view, emphasizing that the main accomplishment was not the final strategy document, but the consultation process that transformed those participating in it.

In the case of Vienna, different mechanisms are meant to legitimize the strategy document and the implied actions, reaching from tradition-conscious auto-coercion ('*Vienna has committed itself to [...]*') to claiming responsibility for keeping the historical heritage, or to constantly referring to the

city's strengths and the necessity to build on them. Most notably, however, expert knowledge and legal-rational authority seem to be the key to legitimizing the strategy, for whose compilation internal and external experts have been included. A senior executive who was involved in the strategy formulation explains: *'We had screenings, analyses, expert reports [...]. A city has to invest, push, support. It doesn't work by itself.'* This gives the document a distinct technocratic note, rather than actually recording a democratic process and showing what it actually is: a political statement about goals, values, and priorities. The plan is cooperative, and consciously avoids mentioning conflicts between different goals and stakeholders. This displayed harmony also creates some obvious cases of arbitrary argumentation. For instance, the Kyoto goals, rather than social democratic values, are used to explain why new social housing will be necessary. Overall, the city administration attempts to legitimize the strategy through the expert knowledge of its authors.

## **5 Conclusion**

### ***5.1 Theoretical implications***

Our findings highlight how strategy documents of two local governments function as discursive devices that stage an aspired governance configuration. Through these documents, the delicate problem of ruling in a governance context – a somewhat paradoxical task for government – is addressed. This fundamental problem arises, as we pointed out, due to (a) the 'mission impossible' of real consensus in the face of governance gaps; (b) the configurations of governance under the condition of uncertainty; and (c) techniques to legitimize the author-ity of fundamentally hierarchical planning. The strategy discourse and its manifestations in strategy documents, plans, and other texts are used to reinstall, at least rhetorically, the city's capacity to act (Stone, 1993). This is the first main finding of our analysis. A second core finding concerns the empirical comparison of Sydney and Vienna. The two cases of strategizing illustrate heterogeneous ways in

which governance configurations are staged in strategy documents. These variations are interesting, especially given extant research emphasis on global homology of strategy. We found, in both cases, distinct mechanisms to (a) close governance gaps, (b) configure structural dimensions of governance, and (c) establish legitimacy. These processes have implications for our theoretical discussion.

First, strategy documents and related texts seek to close governance gaps. Urban governance is based on the co-existence of multiple ideas, values, and rationalities that lead to constrictive complexity; and governance ultimately is about hard choices in decision-making by governing units (Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009). In increasingly flat governing networks, who is to say which version of the city's future is right? A central position of government is not taken for granted in multi-centric networks. Strategy documents give the readers the impression that certain configurations of space/time, public, *res publica* are inevitable, and its authors are *the* legitimate strategic actor taking charge.

One discursive tactic in the strategy text is to create a self-contained space for making 'true' arguments. The text as a discursive device conditions the possibility for right and wrong, and allows a coordinated course of action. For instance, by arguing that there is a link between the competitive advantage of a city and quality of life, the authors imply that the two strategic goals are reciprocal: A strong position in international rankings is a prerequisite for a prospering economy, which is reflected in a high quality of life. Thereby, the strategy document reflects the logic of a self-contained framework of values.

Another mechanism is that the strategy text presents authoritative action as an inevitable reaction to environmental conditions. Even though single-handedly 'authoring' the future of a city is an authoritative act, strategy is depicted as a reaction to exogenous conditions – from climate change to inter-city competition. Strategy documents highlight deficits and capacities of the city, which make the proposed actions preferable over conceivable alternatives. Both strategies manufacture

a sense of a lack of alternatives. Through this, the proposals seem rational, as long as they are internally consistent; questioning the logic of an argument requires the reader to question the underlying premises first. This mechanism is not apparent in a more agentic perspective on governance, because the values of the actors are considered to be pre-existing (Davies, 2009; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; Kjær, 2011).

Second, the strategy plan speaks to power and the structural dimensions of governance. Setting out the preconditions of governing is, much like governing itself, a normative task. Authors of strategy documents not only define the cast of actors, but also emphasize (or suppress) essential topics and relevant policy-fields. From the point of view expressed in the strategy documents, the everyday troubles of traditional city politics vanish: The authors decide what the long-term public interest will look like. Challenging and prescribing governance configurations by assigning subject positions to actors is a structural form of power (Lukes, 1978). This institutional understanding of power is especially valuable in supplementing the instrumental discourse on meta-governance as the regulation of self-regulation (Sørensen, 2006; Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009; Torfing et al., 2012).

In our data, a pivotal power-related aspect of governance is the extension of conflictive issues into uncontested space and time. For instance, in the case of Sydney, the definition of the space of the city as a global brand and the temporalization of action beyond the accountability of current governing elites enable conflict and contention to be put off to a future time. Vienna invokes past strengths that are related to recent developments and present/future political endeavors. The effects of sweeping problems under the temporal rug are that the cities' strategies quite literally buy time for those in power. Strategy texts – while essentially building on past decisions and trajectories – consume the future in the present. They fill space and time where it has not yet been filled: in the distant, hardly disputed future, exploring *terra incognita*. Those who are in charge at a future point in time will be held accountable for plans made in the present.



Another mechanism we found in the strategy documents was that the authors claim the right to represent others; the inevitability of action is constructed around the needs of third parties that do not have a voice in local power struggles. Speaking on behalf of future generations is convenient, due to their inability to disagree or resist (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000). In *Sustainable Sydney 2030*, for instance, the threat associated with global climate change prompts immediate action. Nature and future generations, however, do not have the ability to react to the city administration's propositions. In both texts, the interests of marginalized groups and minorities justify action in the name of social justice. The definition of a cast of relevant actors and their positions, thus, is an important mechanism for constituting the preconditions of government's role in governance, especially if some of these actors are without a voice.

Third, author-ity requires the legitimacy of local government in governance. Different contexts stimulate different attempts to legitimize the hierarchical crafting of the city's future. Both Sydney's and Vienna's strategy documents evoke a governance framework that legitimizes their actions beyond democratic procedures, such as elections (Coaffee and Healey, 2003). The authors of the city's strategy need to legitimize their authorship, but at the same time the proposed course of action needs to be legitimized within the document. Obviously, legitimacy cannot be dictated, but requires the acceptance of the administration's audiences (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013; Levelt and Metze, 2014). While our empirical study does not allow us to assess how far the two cities' strategies were perceived as legitimate and by whom, we can identify rhetorical mechanisms that seek to establish the strategy document, its authors, and its prioritizations as legitimate.

Most notably, the strategy texts stress complexity. Complexity justifies government intervention as a precondition of fixing the city's problems. In the case of Sydney and Vienna, this intervention takes the form of expert thinking and the ability to mediate the opinions of the general public respectively. On the other hand, Sydney's constituency is constructed as 'the people', who in the name of participation are put center stage. The individual citizen, however, is obscured by an

undifferentiated mass that is managed via ‘communities’. Vienna, in the name of professionalism and expertise, emphasizes the centrality of its citizens as clients, but does not give them any role other than consumers of services. Both approaches, ultimately, overwhelm the public they claim to serve. The reported complexity of urban problems does not leave any doubt that the state actor must step in as expert or mediator respectively.

Another mechanism was the depiction of crisis situations in which only a hierarchical coordinator can efficiently direct the course of action. As stated earlier, the solutions offered in the strategy documents are presented as rational in light of the current challenges of the global economy, climate change, or historical local circumstances. These contexts are described as urgent, pressing, and requiring a high degree of coordination. Similar to the high legitimacy of the state in disaster management, the stylized crisis situations call for government to step in. The two recurrent crises in both documents are the deterioration of the natural environment and the global economy. Sustainable solutions are depicted as a requirement in response to such external threats.

## ***5.2 Implications for future research***

Future empirical work could remedy the limitations of our paper. First, our analysis is based on formal strategy documents. Only little is known, so far, about the details of the consumption process of such documents, or in regard to related effects of power in city governance. Although important, such questions would essentially require an ethnographic research design. Second, our theoretical sampling of the two cases aimed at providing illustrative examples, but is not intended to be representative of global cities. A large-scale examination of the proliferation of city strategies could allow for a deeper understanding of the causes for substantive variation. Third, previous research has shown that strategy practices shape the very issues they were meant to address (Kornberger, 2012). Such ‘self-referential’ performativity of strategy could be further investigated

by focusing on the question of whether, and how, the play outlined in the strategy texts is actually performed.

We contribute to the current governance debate by discussing the relation between strategy documents and the flat environments of urban governance (e.g., Kearns and Paddison, 2000). We established a framework for analyzing different dimensions in which strategy texts reflect aspired governance configurations: the setting in space and time, the definition of the public, the framing of the *res publica*, and questions of legitimacy and authority. Our paper has three implications. First, it shows how government uses strategy to stage consensus under conditions of diverging interests and to attempt to bridge ‘governance gaps’. Despite the fact that putting strategy into practice may not have the intended effects in a hollowed-out governance landscape, the strategy documents portray a more nuanced view on the authoritative act of an actor that has been described as a network coordinator. Second, we argue that structural dimensions of power need to be taken into account. Two mechanisms we identified as an attempt to regain fiat are the extension of conflictive issues into uncontested space and time, and the propensity to speak on behalf of others. Third, our paper notes that authors of strategy texts attempt to legitimize their author-ity, for instance by highlighting complexity, or stylizing crises.

Overall, our paper suggests a step towards acknowledging the paradox resulting from the weakened position of the state in a multi-stakeholder governance environment and the concurrent rise of strategy texts and their authoritative nature. Since cities will arguably be the prime stages for both economic and social change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is pivotal to understand how governance and strategy open up – and close down – spaces for negotiation and deliberation.

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## Tables and figures

Table 1: Comparing core dimensions of governance configurations in Sydney and Vienna

	Sustainable Sydney 2030	Vienna Strategic Plan 2004
<b>Space and time</b>	<p>Future-driven with long-term horizon</p> <p>Globally oriented (economy, 'global talent' of city)</p> <p>Leading in absolute terms</p>	<p>The past as a strategic anchor</p> <p>Local perspective with the city hall at the center of concentric circles</p> <p>Position defined relative to other cities</p>
<b>The public</b>	<p>Public is 'people who rely on the city', businesses centrally positioned</p> <p>Delegation of power under the pretense of empowerment, city as facilitator</p> <p>Cooperation with external stakeholders</p>	<p>City administration as central stakeholder and pontifex between feasibility and vision</p> <p>Citizens framed as clients, city as 'service corporation'</p> <p>Cooperation is internal</p>
<b>Res publica</b>	<p>'Green, global, connected' – decoupled from results of pre-strategic participative process</p> <p>Merit-oriented equality and global leadership (future, prosperity, and livability)</p>	<p>Social equality, Weberian efficiency and competition</p> <p>Competitiveness and quality of living as reciprocally legitimizing ultimate goals</p>
<b>Legitimacy</b>	<p>Consensus through emotion: Unswayable dangers require immediate action</p> <p>Strategy plan as reaction to consultation with Sydney-siders</p> <p>Evidence-based indicators render strategy accountable</p>	<p>Consensus mobilization through expert knowledge and rational arguments</p> <p>Strengths as starting point, self-coercion due to historical responsibility</p> <p>Legitimacy for action substantiated by reference to ranking position</p>