

Distributing the Future: Organizational Agency and Anticipatory Logic in City Development

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Abstract

Innovations and urban development activities are often driven by future-oriented claims that justify and support business activities. So-called promissory organizations make claims either to support their own business activities or clients' interests, and this anticipatory logic being used oftentimes includes politically charged claims. In the field of urban development, premised on the access to finance capital and shared beliefs and ambitions about what the future would ideally look like, promissory claims play a key role when mobilizing partner companies as well as policy makers. This paper presents empirical findings from a site focused on sustainable mobility and energy innovation, showing how promissory claims help coordinate action and attract investment. However, for such claims to result in tangible outcomes, they must be combined with managerial skills (in the corporation) and administrative capacities (in the city). Without this, even compelling visions risk remaining unrealized.

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“The future has arrived—it’s just not evenly distributed yet.” (William Gibson, cited in Reeves-Everson, 2021: 722)

Introduction

This paper analyzes empirical practices of “future-making” whereby companies and public agencies seek to shape the future in sustainable urban development planning activities. The analysis addresses how such actors seek to design the future by making promissory claims (Pollock and Williams, 2010), following an anticipatory logic (White, 2016) comprised by both established facts and visions.

While management studies often explore how managers “make sense of the future” through a retrospective and prospective lens (Malnight, Buche & Dhanaraj, 2019: 75), there is a lack of research on how promissory organizations actively shape uncertain futures by fostering shared expectations, preferences, and beliefs (Wenzel, Cabantous & Koch, 2025). By analyzing such practices, the paper aims to explore how promissory organizations use anticipatory logic to shape urban development projects, and what role such future-oriented claims play in mobilizing actors and resources in sustainable mobility initiatives. This is analyzed through the findings of an empirical, first-hand case wherein the vision of a future in sustainable mobility technologies are widespread and serve to radically reduce the environmental imprint.

Promissory organizations and anticipatory logics

Pollock and Williams (2010: 526) define promissory organizations as intermediaries that are “prodigious in the production of future-oriented research that not only represents the state of affairs in a particular marketplace but also contributes to shaping such markets.” When promissory organizations articulate future oriented knowledge claims, they rely on the performativity of the claims, Pollock and Williams (2010: 526) suggest, ensuring power to influence in policy-making activities (Smallman, 2020). Promissory organizations operate on basis of what White (2016) refers to as an *anticipatory logic*, which denotes a line of reasoning that is partially based on factual know-how and information, and partially premised on plausible scenarios for how the future may unfold.

In practical terms, Pollock and Williams (2010: 543) identify three types of promissory statements being made. The first statement refers to *infrastructural knowledge* which “typically attempts to classify technology markets”. Second, *visions let loose* as “typically provocative signposts drawn up about the state and future development of the industry.” In comparison to the classificatory claims made in the first activity, such claims are more vaguely addressing what the future of specific markets would plausibly look like, given what is known today, and on basis of the use of extrapolations based on historical data. Third, *statements and their world* wherein promissory organizations identify and name selected actors. When using these three classes of future-oriented claims, promissory organizations may “successfully mobilize support for *generic* promises and visions,” and when accomplishing this goal, they also “increasingly ‘organize’ expectations” within markets (Pollock and Williams, 2010: 542).

In sum, promissory organizations rely on an anticipatory logic to make claims about the medium to long-term future, and such claims are oftentimes shaped by perceived social interests and needs, more or less advocated by specific social groups and market actors.

Methodology of the study

To empirically study future-making practices in urban development, The electric mobility site, EMS (a pseudonym), was selected due to its complexity and high level of sustainability and economic development ambitions. The study of EMS is based on a longitudinal research design (Pettigrew, 1990), initiated in 2021 and planned to continue throughout 2026. It included three types of data collection methods: semi-structured interviews with organizational representatives and consultants, observations of bi-weekly development plan meetings, and document studies. The collected empirical material is summarized in Table 1 below.

DATA	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS AND MEETINGS ATTENDED	TOTAL DURATION (HOURS)	NUMBER OF PAGES OF TRANSCRIPTS AND FIELD NOTES
INTERVIEWS	21	23	414
MEETINGS	60	115	366
TOTAL	81	138	780

Table 1: Empirical materials collected

The empirical material was analyzed through a coding process (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) constituted by three steps, wherein the first step was to classify individual interview excerpts and field-notes on basis of empirical concepts (where codes such as “solar panels,” “electric drivetrains”, “logistics facilities,” “public transportation,” were used). In the second step of the coding procedure, such excerpts and field-notes were co-located under somewhat broader yet still empirical categories (say, “infrastructure investments,” “energy systems,” “innovation work”) so that patterns in the empirical material could be identified and further explored. In the third and final coding procedure, the account of the urban development work activities was structured on basis of specific analytical concepts (say, anticipatory logic, promissory claims, governance practices, etc.) so that a comprehensive theoretical contribution could be formulated and advocated.

Findings

To anticipate the future

The regional executive officer at The Real Estate Corporation (hereafter REC), which owns the land to be developed, argued that at the time of the purchase, REC executives considered the land as a future “logistics hub,” located within convenient distance from regional industrial activities and the largest port in Scandinavia. However, to obtain a better overview of the current market demand, REC organized a series of workshops: “Soon enough, we figured out that there was much interest in sustainable mobility technologies, and in companies in that domain,” (Regional Executive Officer, REC). Under all conditions, there was an agreement among the workshop participants, the executive project leader at REC said, that “both land transportation and airborne transportation will undergo considerable changes in the coming

period.” The need to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions in the face of alarming rise of global warming measures, not the least in Northern and Arctic regions, was regarded as the impetus for rethinking how the future of transportation would look. Consequently, REC consolidated its development activities on basis of what the executive project leader described as the work “to find clients who really are active in the future’s sustainable mobility,” and who are committed to the accompanying idea that such a “systems change” would “occur on basis of electrification” (Regional Executive Officer, REC). In realizing their vision, REC had to collaborate closely with the city administration, having the overall responsibility for the city’s sustainable development.

While the land to be developed was originally considered an excellent site for logistics services, the joint collaboration with city representatives and market actors resulted in a considerably bolder and innovation-oriented vision.

Furnishing the future on basis of political savoir-faire

The regional executive officer in REC, with extensive experience from executive positions in public and private urban development companies, claimed it is more useful to try to shape the future than to predict it: “Rather than spending too much time on trying to predict changes, I think it is better to try to generate the changes yourself, inasmuch as that is doable at all” (Regional Executive Officer, REC). REC representatives did not passively wait for the city to plan the land acquired. Instead, they proactively sought to identify ways to speed up the development process by targeting agencies and decisions makers with authority to accelerate progress. “All the time, you need to check the map: where is the power and the authority, and how can that be used to move on,” (Regional Executive Officer, REC). Fortunately, the work to develop new urban sites wherein innovation-oriented work could be located was politically prioritized as such industrial land was considered endemic short supply locally and regionally. One municipality agency representative appreciated the broader focus and its ambition to contribute with new sustainable transportation technology: “[Our agency] work primarily with strategies and future-oriented activities. One of my main responsibilities in this position—as I have several—is to monitor the industry activities from a strategic and long-term view” (Officer, Municipality Agency E).

While participants were intrigued by the idea of shaping the future, such work must follow Swedish legislation, established procedures and conventional wisdom. The city’s 2070 strategic plan sets ambitions of developing industrial land and generating 80,000 jobs across diverse sectors. This means that the city and its agencies, acting in collaboration with market actors such as real estate companies and construction companies in search of business opportunities, need to be able to consider broad varieties of interest.

The ability to collectively formulate a meaningful, and attainable, image of the future is key to future making activities. The future needs to be made, not simply passively awaited, but to take actions to achieve stipulated goals requires shared commitments that are widely accepted and understood, and resources allocated to conduct the activities needed.

“Branding the destination” as future-making activity

At REC, the executive project leader spoke broadly of the need to transform the specific land into a so-called *destination* and branded in ways to signal its attraction to relevant clients. “One issue is how to create an attraction around the location,” the executive project leader (REC) said. The site manager agreed on these marketing terms, and added that he and his colleagues “wish to have the chance to explain our vision and our beliefs” to presumptive clients, and “to create the industrial land that we have seen that the region and the city would need to develop.” Furthermore, once client companies have been contracted, there is a stated ambition that such

companies would “act as ambassadors,” so that REC can take advantage of the networks that client companies are part of and access, and preferably identify “similar companies” that would further strengthen the sustainable mobility innovation activities being under development (Site manager, REC).

The manager at an electric mobility research institute, being a so called “anchor client,” attracting others to the site on basis of its research and development activities, also shared this commitment to develop the site: “I really hope this becomes a creative environment, with more companies relocating here”. From REC’s perspective, the future can only be distributed (using William Gibson’s metaphor) if made intelligible and actionable. This requires branding the site as uniquely valuable, offering opportunities not easily found elsewhere. Therefore, the anticipatory logic needs to be structured around activities that resonate with both policy makers, agency professionals, presumptive client company representatives, and also real estate companies, such as REC’s own co-workers. To distribute the future thus means to generate shared and meaningful images of what such a future may contain, including, in this case, sustainable mobility technologies and solutions that would generate net welfare effects by reducing e.g., environmental imprints.

Anticipatory logics practices	Purpose	Motivation	Conversion factors	Outcomes
<i>Infrastructural knowledge</i>	Successful definitions of technology become an 'infrastructure'.	Serves to attract attention and to act as a shared image that unify ongoing and forward-oriented activities that shape the future.	Key actor holds legitimacy and network to establish vision. In this case, REC owns valuable land that is in direct coupling with municipality land.	The vision was that sustainable mobility systems would not only include the development of specific vehicles such as electric cars, but also provide technological solutions to the energy production and energy storage demand so that the vision of sustainable mobility would become operable, and thus become more robust as individual and collective achievements are made.
<i>Visions let loose</i>	Establish an obligatory 'point of passage' that others are forced to take into account.	Serves to classify technology markets as the most elementary form of promissory work.	The growing acceptance among relevant actors strengthen the vision. In this case, influential corporations sign up and emphasize the message.	The term and concept of sustainable mobility was widely used to provide a shared platform when developing the land being acquired, and to attract new clients to re-locate their activities to the site.

<i>Statements and their world</i>	To link players together.	Serves to denote how the focal promissory organization identifies business partners, client firms, and suppliers, it believes would make a contribution to the vision being formulated and communicated.	Vision expands in line with engaged actors' interests and ambitions for collaborations. In this case, 'anchor'-clients encourage the EMS programme to be a place for inspiration and support.	The city and its agencies were treated as key partners in the project to generate new industrial land and facilities that would be supportive of the general ambition declared by both REC and the City Hall—to be at the forefront of a sustainable economic system—which of necessity must include sustainable private and public mobility technologies and a sustainable transportation system.
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Table 2: Table of the three anticipatory logics practices (inspired by Pollock & Williams (2010) and the studied case).

In the field of urban development, the joint activity to build cities that are sustainable and that provide a high degree of welfare for its residents, are premised on e.g., shared beliefs about what the future would ideally look like. Consequently, promissory claims play a key role when mobilizing policy makers, municipality agency professionals, and partner companies in urban development activities. The empirical material reported demonstrates that promissory claims are supportive of the joint work to create new industrial sites, and with the concept of sustainable mobility premised on the electrification of vehicles as a key component.

Concluding discussion and contributions

Innovation and urban development activities are frequently embedded in claims about the future that serve to justify and further support certain business activities that are declared to be consistent with and conducive to the future scenarios being sketched. One such case is the claim that new sustainable mobility technology, is part of a future vision that is portrayed as both attractive and attainable. To be successful, such promissory claims need to be combined with managerial skills and administrative capacities to deliver results that are consistent with optimistic promissory claims. Unless that is the case, promissory claims are little more than scenarios unaccompanied by any robust ambition to fulfill such visions.

As indicated in the scholarly literature on future-making, promissory work serves to formulate the blueprint for how the future of the economic system of capitalism is preferably developed, it needs to be both theorized in such terms and supported by empirical material from a variety of socio-economic domains and markets. The article thus contributes to the management studies literature on future-making by demonstrating that the work to anticipate the future plays a vital role in supporting economic activities and the market system *tout court*, and that this work needs to be considered as being premised on interests articulated.

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