Changing Places: On the Use of Utopia and the Role of a Place Alarm System

Tore Omholt

BI-Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway

In the paper, the experience of contradictions and conflicts as a normal feature of social change and evolutionary trends, is discussed. Contradictions normally destabilize a system, causing dilemmas and conflicts. However, the paper warns against thinking of destabilization as dysfunctional, as complex systems require a high degree of instability to deal with changes in the environment. Dealing with instabilities requires systems, which can produce alarms that signal a need to regain additional options for development and introduce them into the planning process. The paper introduces the concept of a place alarm system, which uses visions and utopias in various forms for alarm purposes. To illustrate this kind of thinking, the paper first presents a model of an alarm system, which demonstrates how we can deal with contradictions by including the temporal dimension in our analyses of place systems and bring broader temporal horizons into consideration. As an example, contradictions increase when we consider the future from the perspective of the present; the present future multiplies contradictions. On the other hand, viewing the present from the future (future present), creates possibilities for goal-directed planning to avoid the problems, which have produced alarm signals. As the paper demonstrates, these two possibilities of what may be called reflexive and utopian temporal modalizations, are not given as alternatives, but mutually imply each other. The paper then presents two case illustrations, which demonstrate how to deal with conflict and contradictions to facilitate collective and goal-directed planning, using the alarm system framework. In both cases, we are witnessing place planning processes, which lack the necessary requisite variety (Ashby, 1956) to deal effectively with the environmental complexity and internal conflicts facing the local communities. As indicated in the analyses, the present planning regimes do not promote variety and vitality regarding current place developments.

Keywords: utopia, alarm system, conflict, contradiction, democratic participation, collective action

Introduction

Social systems will continually experience contradictions and conflicts, because of social changes and evolutionary trends. Consequently, a social system has to learn how to deal with contradictions and conflicts, not only to eliminate the current ones, but also to identify and produce contradictions and conflicts to function as a basis for alarm, which as early as possible can warn about future problems and challenges for place development. In the following, we will call a system based on contradictions and conflicts for alarm purposes *a place alarm system*. A common feature of such systems is their use of visions and utopias in various forms.

Tore Omholt, Ph.D., Institute of Marketing, BI-Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tore Omholt, Ostadalsveien 6E, Oslo 0753, Norway.

Utopia normally indicates any ideal community or state; an ideally perfect social and political system, usually with the implication that such is impossible of realization. Hence, the concept in this form is rather useless for analyzing place practices, and there is need for a more substantive theoretical framework.

In the following, we first develop a theoretical framework and model for the use of utopia as a basis for place alarm systems. We then present two cases, which illustrate ways of using utopia to deal with uncertainties signaling structural insecurities in place development, before we present a conclusion.

Towards a Theoretical Framework of Place Alarm Systems

We will base our discussion of utopian oriented place practices on social systems theory (Luhmann, 1995) and theories of organizing (Weick, 1969), focusing on the resulting contradictions and conflicts as part of what may be called a place alarm system. Contradictions, meaning practices based on opposing or different operating principles (Giddens, 1979), normally destabilizes a system, causing dilemmas and conflicts. One must guard, however, against the widespread error of thinking that destabilization as such is dysfunctional. Complex systems require a high degree of instability to enable on-going reactions to themselves and changes in their environment, and they must continually reproduce this instability. Conflicts are social systems because they limit the scope for variation and alternative action (Luhmann, 2013), and signal a need to regain additional options and introduce them into the planning process.

The need to regain options can also be phrased in terms of theories of organizing and dealing with uncertainty (Ashby, 1956; Weick, 1969). In situations of increasing environmental change and internal conflicts and contradictions, we are dealing with special types of uncertainty, which may be referred to as equivocality (Weick, 1969; Burton, Obel, & Håkonsson, 2015), resulting in lack of understanding and failure of traditional planning. Organizing is directed toward information processing in general, and more specifically, toward removing equivocality from informational input. However, in order for equivocality to be removed, it must first be registered. This means that the order or complexity within the registration process must match the degree of order or complexity in the environmental input, as observed or interpreted by the organizational actors. Then, in order for the registered equivocality to be removed, the orderliness within the organizing or implementation process must be greater than that in the input (Weick, 1969, p. 91). This, seemingly incompatible demand, will be illustrated in the following case discussions.

The need for utopia in place development projects in situations characterized by extreme uncertainty or equivocality reflects problems related to traditional and "straight" forward planning practices. Many organization and management theorists assume that organizations are rational arrangements of people and props, which are held together by plans that give coherence to actors. Normally, such coherence comes from the fact that when the act to be accomplished is projected in the future perfect tense, the means for accomplishing the act become explicit, and the actions run off with greater coherence. It is the reflective glance, not the plan per se that permits the act to be accomplished in orderly way. A plan works, because it can be referred back to analogous actions in the past, not because it accurately anticipates future contingencies. Plans vary in clarity with which they enable the actor to review and throw into relief his lived experiences. The important property of a plan is the way in which it determines how one views the past. Hence, if there exists a truly novel situation, one for which there is no analogous experience in the past, then the only thing the person can do is act without the benefit of using past experience or create an utopia to strive for, so that he can then discover what he has done or hopes to achieve.

Managers are frequently advised to construct "better" plans and to do so more often. Such prescriptions can be wasteful and misleading. In some sense, it is wasteful to spend time trying to anticipate future contingencies, because one can never know how things will turn out. If, instead, actions can be taken, which then can be viewed reflectively and made sensible, there is a greater likelihood that efficiency will improve. In situations of great external and internal uncertainty, there is little experience to use for reflecting and dealing with structural insecurities.

The existence of conflict in place communications normally leads to structural insecurities. Dealing with such insecurities depends on how we include the temporal dimension in our analyses and work out contradictions. On the one hand, when we bring broader temporal horizons into consideration, more intentions and practices may contradict one another. In other words, we experience that contradictions increase when we consider the future from the perspective of the present, as when we consider visions or utopias; the present future multiplies contradictions.

By contrast, viewing the future from the present (future present) opens up the possibility of deferring something and doing it later, creating a future vision based on goal-directed planning (Omholt, 2009). One temporal perspective increases the insecurities of current place practices; the other relieves it or at least reduces the tension (Luhmann, 1995, p. 378).

These two possibilities of reflexive and utopian temporal modalization are not given as alternatives, but mutually imply each other. The purely technological perspective based on future present, dealing with contradictions sequentially, is in itself a utopia. Conversely, every utopian view of the future appeals to the need for action. We illustrate this in Figure 1.
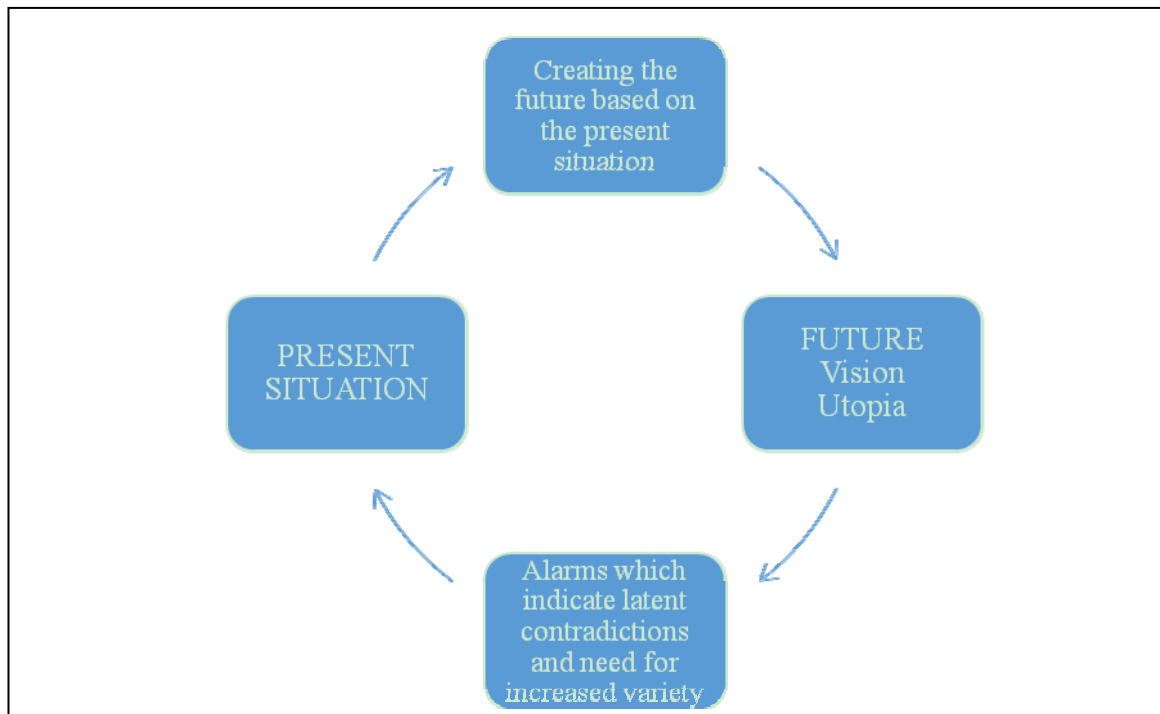

Figure 1. Temporal modalizattion

This model also indicates two different ways of using utopia or utopian narratives to deal with uncertainties characterized by structural insecurities, which we will illustrate in the following two cases. In the

first case, we start with a situation characterized by environmental uncertainty and internal contradictions and conflicts, and there is no basis for collective and goal-directed planning. The use of a utopian narrative, however, indicates how structural interdependencies can be exploited as a basis for successful planning and restructuring of a local town center.

In the second case illustration, we show how an urban governance system faces an unsustainable environmental evolution with great uncertainty. The urban planning and political system have little experience with these kinds of problems, but produce a rather utopian city plan. Several types of alarm signals are then communicated, and the question is how to develop the requisite information processing capacity to deal with the anticipated problems.

Case Illustration I

This case concerns the development of a Norwegian town, Porsgrunn, with a population of 35,000, as a regional retail center (Omholt, 2013), dominated by several conflicting functional systems with different operational logics:

• Public administration, municipal planning and regulation, focusing on democratic participation and appropriate rule following.

• Multiple chain retailers and shopping center organizations, focusing on economies of scale and scope.

• Independent, private retailers, focusing on market oriented and specialized operations.

• Property developers and owners, focusing on return on investments.

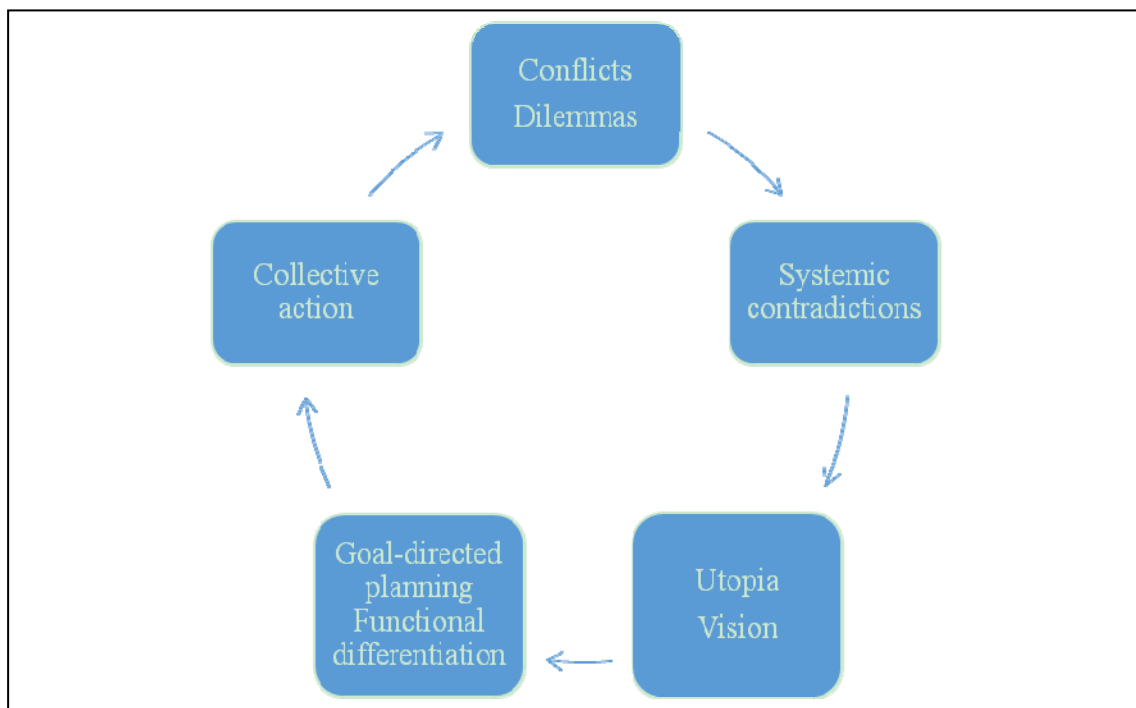• Customers, focusing on convenience and comparison-shopping.

Figure 2. The town center process

A one-day dialogue conference (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986) oriented towards developing a vision for the town as a regional retail center showed the place stakeholders to be facing multiple uncertainties and

insecurities in the form of systemic contradictions (Giddens, 1979) and dilemmas regarding future developments, which resulted in open conflict.

Further interventions, however, including the use of a utopian and strategic narrative, and analyses of trade balances, generated several alarms regarding the possible loss of competitive position, if the indicated synergistic opportunities for place development, which followed from the utopian narratives, were not exploited. Based on further goal-directed planning and the cumulative effects of our interventions, we then experienced the development of a collective capacity for future place development, where the stakeholders increasingly conceived of themselves as participants in an interdependent future oriented place organization and system, as indicated in our model of the process in Figure 2.

Case Illustration II: Analyzing a Strategic and Utopian Plan for City Development

As another example of the development of a place alarm system based on utopian visions and procedures, we will analyze and discuss the strategic plan for development of the city of Oslo for the period 2020-2040 (Oslo Kommune, 2017). Oslo is to become a greener city, warmer, more creative with room for everybody, including a population increase of 200,000 without extending city borders, and zero pollution. Key elements of the strategy include the elimination of private cars from the city center, a strategy of urban concentration, and daily transport requirements to be based on walking, bicycling or the use of public transport.

Figure 3 illustrates this process:

The presentation of this utopia has generated several preliminary alarms, which signal problems that have been ignored in the planning process:

• Based on extrapolation of previous trends, the plan expects an increase in the city population of 200,000 in the period, mainly resulting from immigration. Whether this is sustainable is not discussed.

• The plan will require substantial development of housing, requiring the elimination of low-rise family houses with private gardens. Construction of new housing will be left to private property developers, resulting in high-rent elevator-apartments which few can afford, at least not new city inhabitants with immigrant background living on welfare. This is a policy, which will result in place standardization and less district variety (Jacobs, 1961) and which has caused strong protests in several districts. It promotes a lack of functional differentiation of the planned residential node structure, which already has produced conflicts and protests within a city population with diverse interests and residential preferences.

• The vision of a greener city calls for the elimination of private cars from the city center. Transport in the future shall be based on collective transport, bicycle or at foot. At least 25% of all trips are expected to be based on bicycle, which clearly represent a rather utopian thought. The idea shows a complete ignorance of expected future car usage based on electric cars with no pollution.

These are alarms, which represent several latent conflicts and contradictions, which need to be dealt with to secure collective action. Some of these contradictions are:

• A contradiction of different governing regimes.

• A contradiction of principles for urban structuring, where the current plan contains a singular emphasis on a monocentric plan for city center development, without considering a more polycentric and flexible regional structure.

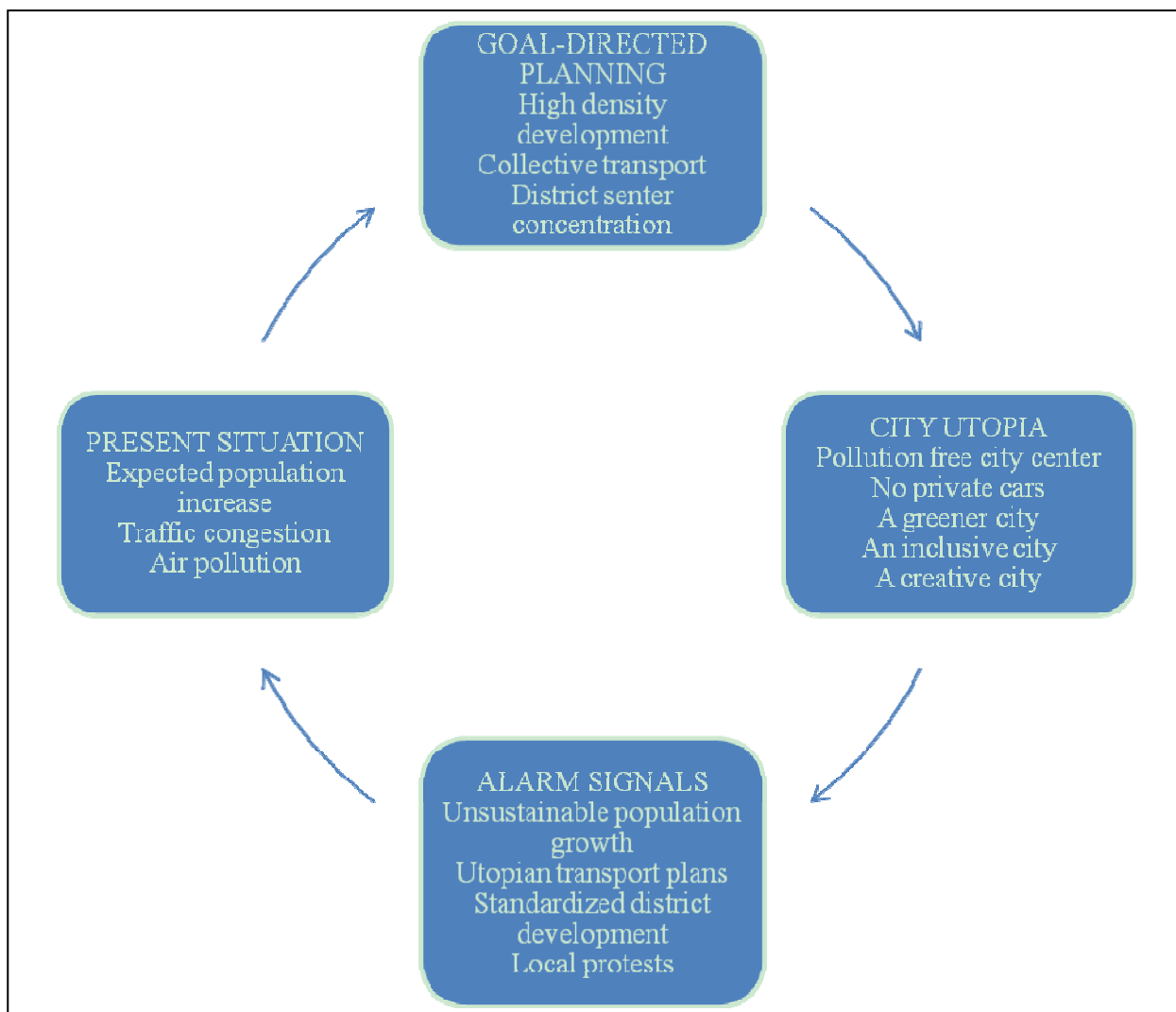• A contradiction of methods for democratic participation.

Figure 3. The city planning process as an alarm system.

As regards governing regimes, following Osborne (2010), we may distinguish between different governing regimes. One of them is New Public Management (1980-), where the political system formulates principal goals and leaves it to the various subsystems to realize them within given resource frames. Another regime is New Public or Open Governance (1990-), being based on inter-organizational cooperation between public institutions, private sector stakeholders, and voluntary organizations. Both regimes represent what may be called a neo-liberal orientation to governance. It is our contention that much of today's urban planning is still influenced by a neo-liberal orientation, which is increasingly characterized by diverse networking and fragmentation. This has resulted in a division of labour regarding urban planning, which does not function, and there still is a need for new institutional systems which are more relevant and which can facilitate forms of open governance that can take care of collective interests and inclusion (Healey, 2002; Ellefsen, 2003; Fimreite, Medalen, & Aars, 2005; Omholt, 2015).

As regards democratic participation, some proponents of the kind of urban planning we see in Oslo may argue that inclusive and collective place making is a question of participation and of being heard. The proposal for the 2015-2040 city plan has been mailed to all inhabitants with a registered e-mail address. In addition,

various meetings and hearings have been arranged, including a public meeting in the city hall, as well as contact meetings with representatives from various groups including elderly people and immigrants. Nevertheless, we are inclined to characterize this kind of participation as less effective and inclusive, as the participants are presented a more or less finished proposal, without having been able to participate in the preparation of the plan and without being able to or involved in discussing alternatives, and there is cause for alarm.

As contended by O'Neill (2015), some optimists think that new communications technologies make participative democracy and inclusion possible for large groups. However, as pointed out by her, this is implausible, for many reasons. First, those with fewer resources may not match the rapid expansion of access to these technologies among the richer part of the population. Second, even those who are free to spend many hours communicating with many others often prefer to spend that time on other types of communications, rather than on political communication with others. The new technologies cannot secure dialogue, because they cannot ensure that inclusive (or even less-than-inclusive) audiences grasp or even notice what others seek to communicate, let alone participate in discussions of public affairs. Where dialogue is the aim, those audiences must be able to respond and be heard, and must actually do so (O'Neill, 2015, p. 142).

Following Weick (1969) and O'Neill (2015), we will argue that place making based on democratic participation and consensus is an unattainable requirement and probably not necessary for securing inclusive place making. Democratic participation only solves problems of participation; it does not necessarily solve problems of inclusive place development or collaboration. It often results in compromise solutions, at the cost of solutions, which exploits opposing but interdependent ideas needed for innovative solutions to problems of inclusivity. Consequently, we have to look for other forms of participation to supplement governance systems to facilitate inclusive place making, in particular forms of participation based on face-to-face interactions.

One may look at this kind of political utopia, as presented here, as impossible for realization, but this ignores the function of a place alarm system: to create and uncover enough contradictions and conflicts to aid city evolution and deal with current and future problems. The problem, however, is that we are witnessing an urban planning process, which lacks the necessary requisite variety (Ashby, 1956; Weick, 1969), which is needed for effective information processing. In the plan, there is little or no reference to place development principles for promoting place variety (Florida, 2017), some of which could be:

• Building flexibility and temporality into multi-functional centre (Millington, Ntounis, Parker, & Quin, 2015).

• Promoting functional differentiation and innovation based on exploiting functional interdependencies and local competencies (Omholt, 2015).

• Securing democratic participation based on mutual pre-planning goal-setting and opportunity to deal with alternatives to misguiding utopias.

Hence, the present planning regime, which may be characterized as fast-forward urbanism (Cuff & Sherman, 2011), does not promote variety and vitality in city life. The question now is: Given a future situation signaling increased contradictions and conflicts, how do we organize the place making process to create the necessary variety and basis for collective acceptance? In the following Table 1, we have listed some alternative organizational forms and their effect with regard to creating information processing and collective

capacity.

Table 1

Alternative Organizational Forms to Deal With Alarm Signals and Create the Necessary Information Processing Capacity to Secure Collective Action in Situations of Conflicts and Contradictions

Organizational form	Basis for decision making	Information processing capacity	Collective capacity
Hierarchy/bureaucracy	Rules/regulation	Low	Low
Governance network/strategic alliances	Regulation + contract	Medium/great	Low/medium
Community organization	Hierarchical regulation + organizational interactions	Great	Great
Social movement	Networking Workshops	Low	Low/medium

Creating capacity for collective action is a question of selecting organizational forms that have the necessary information processing capacity to deal with external uncertainties, internal conflicts and contradictions. As indicated by the alternatives listed in Table 1, traditional forms based on hierarchy and networking, including social movements, lack the necessary information processing capacity, mostly because they presume the adequacy of rules, regulations, and contract based alliances. Such organizational forms are designed to deal with uncertainties characterized by a low degree of equivocality.

However, the results from our first case illustration of town center development showed that the orchestration of several interventions, based on broad and democratic participation, contributed to secure broad and collective action. These are interventions that can be characterized as face-to-face organizational interactions.

The special significance of face-to-face interaction is not that it involves small groups, or that it represents "society in miniature". Face-to-face interaction rather emphasizes the significance of space and presence in social relations (Giddens, 1979). Organizational interactions (Luhmann, 1995) are a type of social system, which assumes presence and face-to-face contact between members of the local place making system and organizations, representing the various functional subsystems, and where the social communication is referring to the problems of inclusive place making.

Organizational interactions based on face-to-face contact have several advantages over interactions, which take place *within* the participating organizations, among other things:

• Reveals the significance of perceptual processes, which can create great complexity in absorbing information.

• Simultaneous and rapid information processing.

Supplementing the basic governance systems with organizational interaction, creating what we have termed a community organization in Table 1, is a particularly effective strategy when we have place making systems with conflicting interests, systemic contradictions and elements with different needs and operating logics. Such contradictions appear as paradoxical, but can be overcome by introducing schemata or interpretive schemes following from utopian narratives, which function as means of deparadoxification or overcoming the systemic contradictions, for example, by illuminating and exploiting external and internal interdependencies, which have been overlooked or have been difficult to deal with within the hierarchical place governance system.

Conclusion: Using Utopia as a Basis for Place Development Under Conditions of Uncertainty

As stated in the introduction to this paper, place organizations today are faced with increasing and incomprehensible uncertainty due to environmental changes and conflict among place stakeholders with activities based on contradictory operating principles. Under such circumstances, there is little experience to be used as a basis for goal-directed planning. In the paper, we have discussed the use of utopia as a basis for dealing with such uncertainties. As illustrated by our two cases, construction of a utopia or utopian narrative makes it possible to identify future conflicts and contradictions, which need to be dealt with, in order to secure collective action in place development. Identification of conflicts and contradictions also makes it possible to discuss how the necessary information processing capacity can be developed and decision made with regard to choice of the relevant organizational form.

In our first case, the use of an utopian narrative indicated how structural interdependencies, which previously had caused situations of conflicts and decision-making dilemmas, could now be clarified and exploited as a basis for goal-directed planning, contributing to collective action. The second case showed how an urban governance system, which was faced with an unsustainable environmental evolution and which had little or no past experience to deal with these kind of problems, except based on traditional physical urban planning. However, the construction of a city plan, although rather utopian and contested, nevertheless could be used as basis for identifying future and latent conflicts and contradictions to be expected. As discussed, this made it possible to clarify the need for additional information processing capacity and the development of relevant organizational forms to facilitate effective participation.

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