Summary

Struggling for meaning within the Dutch infrastructure sector
An interpretative analysis of political-executive practice of decision-making

Introduction

Both practitioners and politicians claim that decision-making processes concerning complex infrastructure development in the Netherlands cost too much time and do often result in suboptimal results. Besides the costs of delayed realization, there are also serious costs of the decision-making process itself in which many researchers, consultants and public professionals are involved. Several research reports into the Dutch situation (Elverding et al., 2008; KST81440, 2004) indicate that the episodes of infrastructural development during which the Ministers, Delegates and Alderpersons play the lead role is the period during which the costs of infrastructural developments really increase in a skyrocket fashion. This has created the idea that the common practice of decision-making of these political-executives is inadequate and sometimes counterproductive, hindering and frustrating the decision-making process (Bordewijk & De Vries, 2009; Hendriks & Toonen, 1998). The practices of these actors are regarded as indecisive, inconsistent and too much focused on finding consensus among political-executives of which there are always many involved in these large decision-making practices.

Among practitioners, there is a call for change of the decision-making practice among political-executives. However, this practice of decision-making is not well understood in practice and remains under-researched in academia: why do these Alderpersons, Delegates and Ministers practice decision-making the way they do? The indecisiveness and the lack of persistence to stick with decisions are only aspects of a much more intricate decision-making practice of political-executives. Since this dissertation is problem-driven, the objective is to gain a thorough understanding of this practice in order to make the ‘puzzling phenomenon’ of political-executive decision-making less perplexing. In order to engage in such a so-called abductive mode of researching, it is important to become more detached from strong basic assumptions through which the practice of decision-making is most often made sense of. According to influential scholars such as March (1994), Allison & Zelicow (1997) and Stone (1997) these assumptions often claim that decision-makers are rational actors striving for efficient and effective decision-making processes. This dissertation will demonstrate that this basic assumption is not necessarily shared by all people in the decision-making arena. In a sense, one could reason that the purpose of this dissertation is to craft an alternative perspective or lens and by looking through this lens, to better understand political-executive decision-making.
Theoretical foundations

Theoretically, the alternative view of this research is inspired by studies from the fields of public administration, policy analysis, planning studies and organization sciences. Especially literature which focuses on the complexity of public decision-making has inspired this research. However, even though the complex nature of decision-making is not denied, the ambiguous nature of public decision-making is put at center stage in this research. March explains the difference between complexity and ambiguity very clearly: while scholars of complexity attempt to approach a fundamental reality hiding behind complicating structures and processes, scholars of ambiguity assume that reality is not discovered but is invented through social construction instead. Even if there is a fundamental reality, different people give different meaning to this reality in their own unique and diverging if not contesting way. In essence, when focusing on ambiguity during decision-making, one focuses on the meaning of the object of decision-making is negotiated among actors who all understand such a phenomenon in their own way.

As such, political-executive decision-making can be regarded as a form of meaning making: decision-making is about creating the window or frame through which is determined how events and phenomena in reality are understood. Immediately the question arises: if decision-makers all have a different experience of a phenomenon, how then is it possible to create a common understanding in order to make a legitimate decision? There are two main traditions regarding the dynamics of meaning making, offering different views on the way people socially construct reality. In the Habermasian tradition, people engage in argumentative deliberations during which the content and quality of their arguments determine the impact of their view on the mutual meaning that is negotiated. In the Foucauldian tradition, the impact of someone’s view on reality is not determined by the intrinsic value or inherent quality of that view but by the power position of the actor holding that view. The traditions differ in the way they view the notion of power: Habermasians consider power as something erratic, disturbing the negotiation of common meaning based on reasoned deliberation. Foucauldians would consider power as the constitutive force creating reality and would claim that ‘power is knowledge’ instead of ‘knowledge is power’. In their view, power would be crucial during the negotiation of meaning among political-executives who experience and understand the object of decision in different ways.

This dissertation is inspired by the Foucauldian tradition, regarding Alderpersons, Delegates and Ministers as actors who base their practice on political reason instead of being part of the ‘rationality project’ (Stone, 1997). This means that political-executives are focused on framing the meaning of events in reality instead of trying to find the most efficient or effective solution for dealing with these events. In a sense, political reason precedes rational problem-solving because the way the meaning of an issue is framed decides which kind of calculative, rational means could be used to increase efficiency or effectiveness. Meaning itself cannot be measured or calculated by rational scientific means. As Stone (1997) states, political reasoning always concerns a negotiation among political-executives in order to influence the meaning of what is decided about: influencing this meaning means influencing the course of decision-making and these strategic meaning makers are well aware of their influence.
In sum, this dissertation is built on the idea that the world is ambiguous, meaning that decision-makers give meaning to potential infrastructural developments in different ways. Since there are multiple political-executives involved during decision-making processes who all give a different meaning to a potential development, a negotiation of meaning will take place among them. This theoretical foundation leads to the following research question:

How do political-executives with diverging strategic agendas negotiate and enact a common ground that enables them to make legitimate decisions about potential infrastructural developments?

The ultimate contribution of this dissertation is thus twofold: knowledge development concerning political-executive decision-making practice and conceptual development by means of the construction of a fully-fledged lens through which the meaning making practice of political-executives can be studied.

**Tentative conceptual lens focused on the struggle for meaning**

This dissertation is inspired by the so-called narrative turn in the social sciences, since stories are essential for making meaning in an ambiguous world ruled by political reason. Political-executives are engaged in a narrative mode of knowing instead of a logico-scientific or rational mode of knowing. The latter mode is about using universal truth claims in order to prove some argument through rational calculation by forming logically necessary ‘if x, then y’ relations. Instead, the narrative mode of knowing is about finding meaning by connecting events and about understanding ambiguous reality by taking into account human intent and action (Bruner, 1990). These ways of knowing parallel each other, having their own criteria for verification: a strong rational argument should be tested and proven to be ‘true’ while stories should be credible: they are not tested but judged on behalf of their credibility and lifelikeness. When some event does not make sense in real life, it is usually not because we are not able to place an event in the proper category or to appropriate the relevant universal law. More likely, we are not able to make up the story that makes the event understandable within a specific context.

Stories are perfect tools during the negotiation of meaning of infrastructural developments. In a way, the political reason discussed above is closely connected to such a narrative mode of knowing: every actor has his or her own experience of reality and tells his or her own story, trying to impact the common meaning given to a phenomenon in reality. There are two reasons for stories to be crucial for meaning making. Firstly, there is the primacy of plausibility over accuracy: stories are not judged for being accurate or correct but for being plausible and convincing. Secondly, it is possible to tell multiple diverging stories about the same phenomenon in reality that can all be regarded as plausible. These aspects of stories open up the possibility of emplotment, thus creating a meaningful relation between the separate events of a story. Most scholars on story-telling would consider emplotment as finding the best fitting story in order to explain something happening in reality. However, in a Foucauldian perspective the act of emplotment can also be regarded as a strategic act of meaning making: instead of finding a ‘best fitting’ plot which would make events in reality understandable, one could also say that the meaning of these events depends on the plot that becomes dominant during meaning making. Instead of searching for the ‘best fitting’ story in order to explain an occurrence,
political-executives try to tell stories in order to give this occurrence a meaning that serves their interests.

**Telling powerful framing stories**

Stories are powerful framing devices, used by political-executives to intentionally and strategically attempt to portray reality in a way which is beneficial for their own agenda. Framing stories are not aimed at convincing other decision-makers but at influencing the meaning of potential infrastructural developments. Some aspects of a situation are intentionally made salient and some aspects are silenced in order to present a plausible image of the object of decision-making. Since all Alderpersons, Delegates and Ministers involved have their own framing story to tell, they engage into a framing contest (Kaplan, 2008) in order to negotiate the relative impact of all those contrasting and conflicting stories. In order to legitimate their ultimate decision, it is necessary to construct a so-called collective action frame (Benford & Snow, 2000), a common ground which could be considered as a mutual story that is acceptable to all decision-makers involved. Although the mutual story is a compromise, it is important to stress that not every story-teller has an equal influence on the mutual story.

When the framing contest is regarded as meaning making through the negotiation of a mutual story, the question rises which actors have more and which actors have less influence on this mutual story. Again, the primacy of plausibility over accuracy in narrative knowing is crucial for understanding the dynamics of this negotiation of meaning. Notions like narrative credibility (Fisher, 1989), which could be used to judge the ‘truthfulness‘ of a story, are not useful in the political-executive realm. In the context of political reason, dubious stories can have great impact as long as they are deemed plausible. The impact of a story depends much more on the power of the storyteller than on the intrinsic power or credibility of that story. During infrastructural decision-making processes, the actor who can put most power behind his or her interpretation – his or her story – has most impact on the meaning of planned developments.

In the context of meaning making, power is understood as *potentia* – the potential to influence socially-constructed reality – instead of *potestas* – the potential to dominate other actors. Political-executives do not aim to exert power over their peers but they try to continually increase their influence on the mutual story. The balance of power based on the relative power positions of decision-makers determines their ability to make their framing story count. The relative power of a decision-maker depends on the sources of power developed by this decision-maker in comparison with other decision-makers involved. However, it is difficult to measure or even categorize or conceptualize what these power sources actually are: in diverging contexts, these sources of power take different forms (Hardy & Clegg, 1996; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1998). Moreover, the balance of power should be regarded as instable and dynamic, for the relative power of actors can change during the long duration of infrastructural decision-making processes. Negotiating a mutual story is about establishing a fragile and shifting equilibrium between meaning makers. The tentative conceptual lens is based on the idea that political-executives build and use power to increase the influence of their framing stories on the common understanding of a potential infrastructural development. The aim of this research is to look through this lens to make sense of the decision-making practices of Alderpersons, Delegates and Ministers. Moreover, the conceptual lens will be further
developed by searching for relevant sources of power and by finding different dimensions of framing stories.

Methodological approach

This interpretative study follows an abductive research logic: instead of deductive or inductive reasoning which is about finding general laws, abductive reasoning is focused on finding a puzzling phenomenon and then finding a perspective through which this ‘puzzle’ seems less perplexing and more comprehensible (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Abductive research is about creating local knowledge that offers insights that can inspire people to look at infrastructural decision-making practice in a different way. The researcher is in a sense abducted by this new way of looking. This kind of research connects well to the notion of ambiguity and the narrative mode of knowing, since stories can emplot a phenomenon in a certain way, thereby abducting the audience to give a specific meaning to that phenomenon.

The insights of this study are based primarily on the many stories told by respondents about concrete decision-making processes. All of these stories are different from each other and most of the time they are contrasting and conflicting. The researcher has to interpret and make sense of these stories through a rigorous analysis of narratives, resulting in a sensemaking story constructed by the researcher. The researcher is actually also a story-teller, abducting the reader in order to offer a different perspective which makes political-executive decision-making practices more commonsensical.

Two case stories have been constructed by the researcher based on two decision-making processes: Project Mainport development Rotterdam (PMR) which is mainly about the extension of the Rotterdam harbor into the North Sea and the A1 Zone Development program in the East of the Netherlands which is about highway broadening coupled with spatial development. Both of these cases involve a multitude of political-executives from different regions and governance levels who all have to negotiate a mutual story. The PMR case is retrospective, which means that the story-telling decision-makers can reflect on a process that has already been finished. The A1 Zone case is real-time, meaning that it was fully underway during the time of taking interviews. These two approaches complement each other, for the retrospective case really demonstrates key moments of struggle while the real-time case demonstrates the chaos, ambiguity and attempts of framing without the benefit of hindsight.

The method of in-depth and open interviewing has formed the main basis for gathering the stories of political-executives. Participant observation and document analysis have also been performed, but these methods were always secondary to the narrative accounts that were produced during interviews. In both cases, the researcher held 45 in-depth interviews which lasted from thirty minutes to sometimes around three hours, the average being one-and-a-half hours. The aim of these in-depth interviews was specifically to make sure that the respondents would tell stories and engage in a narrative mode of knowing instead of a scientific mode. In other words, what is the real story behind the decision-making process and not the formal, procedural and nuanced version? Especially political-executives were easily lured into a story-telling mode, which corresponds with the political reasoning expected of them. All the interviews have been transcribed and, also with the aid of computer-aided analysis, an interpretative analysis of all the stories based on the tentative meaning making lens inspired the researcher’s sensemaking story about the way in which political-executives engage in the negotiation
of meaning. The case stories constructed by the researcher are based on the moments of framing contest which are recognized by contrasting diverging and conflicting stories about the same event or episode of decision-making.

**Two interpretative case stories**

The decision-making process concerning Project Mainport development Rotterdam (PMR) is the topic of the first case story which is retrospective in nature, because it took place during some 12 years approximately from the middle of the 1990’s until approximately 2008. PMR is mainly focused on the potential creation of the Second Meuse Plain, an extension of the Port of Rotterdam into the North Sea. The process involves many political-executives from different layers: Ministers and Secretaries of State from different departments, a Delegate of the province of South-Holland and many Alderpersons of which those of the City of Rotterdam are the most prominent ones. Indeed, all these political-executives have their own strategic agenda which they want to enact into reality and therefore they all tell different stories that frame the PMR development in different ways. For instance, the City of Rotterdam and especially the Directorate of the Port Authority which is part of the municipal government wants the port extension to be as large as possible – at least 2000 hectares – in order to make sure that the Port can handle the growing stream of container freight shipping.

In contrast, the Ministry of Spatial Planning and Environment and also the Ministry of Nature Reservation want the Second Meuse Plain to be much smaller – for instance not larger than 1000 hectares. However, they are not against the port extension development because it also offers opportunities to further their own strategic agenda. The Ministry of Spatial Planning wants to revitalize the older parts of the Port which are located near the city by transporting facilities towards the Second Meuse Plain, thereby creating space for innovative inner-city project development.

The Ministry of Nature Reservation is convinced that the construction of the Second Meuse Plain will lead to compensation investment in order to create green recreational areas which the Ministry would otherwise not have been able to invest in. The Ministry of Transport is taking the lead and regards the Second Meuse Plain as a showcase project but they do not have the budget for such an investment. Therefore, an important role is played by the Ministry of Finance which has the funds to invest in the port extension but which is demanding a solid business case to legitimate such investment. On another political-executive layer, Alderpersons of municipalities surrounding Rotterdam attempt to couple their own plans and visions to the PMR plan in order to receive funds that they themselves are lacking.

All these political-executives strategize in order to make their framing story influence the collective action frame which legitimizes decision-making. Such a mutual story is indeed negotiated among the decision-makers, although the question now remains whether this plan will also receive the necessary investment from the Ministry of Finance. The choice whether to invest or not does not depend on the intrinsic quality of the negotiated plan but seems to depend on another aspect of meaning making: the struggle about the institutional status of the Port Authority. The Finance Minister wants the Port Authority to become an autonomous organization partly controlled by National Government while the Alderpersons of Rotterdam want the Port Authority to remain a department under municipal control. The Finance Minister proves to be the most powerful actor and when the Alderpersons of Rotterdam agree that the Port Authority is
autonomized, the decision to build the Second Meuse Plain is finally made. The case story about PMR decision-making demonstrates how political-executives try to increase their impact on the mutual story which gives meaning to a potential development. Moreover, the case story demonstrates how strategic agendas which are not explicitly part of a plan – in this case the institutional status of the Port Authority – can trigger a struggle for meaning which is of crucial importance for the potential enactment of a mutual story.

**A1 Zone Development**

The A1 Zone Development program is focused on creating an integral spatial development plan concerning the areas surrounding the eastern part of the A1 highway, consisting of approximately 40 kilometers from the city of Apeldoorn to the highway juncture near Azelo. A crucial part of this plan concerns the broadening of this part of the A1 highway by adding a third lane: in the East of the country, political-executives have been convinced for years that mobility is hampered and will be even more hampered if the highway is not broadened. Decision-making concerning the A1 Zone Development is taking place in the MIRT decision-making framework, which basically means that the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment has an Infrastructure fund which is distributed among potential investments throughout the country. Twice a year so called MIRT meetings take place during which political-executives representing so-called regional *Landsdelen* present their plans and argue for funding. There are too many plans compared to the funds that are available, so the Minister must be selective. Investments decisions of the Minister thus must be based on a strong mutual story legitimizing such investments; otherwise both the Parliament and other competing regional political-executives will criticize and attack the plans. Everywhere in the country, regional political-executives attempt to negotiate a mutual story which will enable them to secure National investments.

The story about the A1 Zone Development decision-making process concerns the episodes in the run up to the MIRT meeting, during the MIRT meeting and the aftermath of that meeting. It becomes clear that there are multiple layers and locations on which struggles for meaning take place: the ultimate mutual story legitimating the A1 Zone story is built up out of a manifold of underlying mutual stories. For instance, within the A1 Zone area there are two city regions – Stedendriehoek and Twente - consisting of multiple collaborating municipalities of which some are rural towns and others are middle-sized to large cities. Each of the city regions is negotiating its own mutual story which proves to be a struggle for meaning: all Alderpersons are framing the A1 Zone plan by telling their own framing stories which often contrast and conflict with each other. Urban Alderpersons often have different interests than rural Alderpersons and also cities compete with each other in order to make sure that their own strategic agenda is part of the A1 Zone mutual story.

Moreover, the mutual stories of the two city regions must be aligned with each other and also with the framing story told by the Delegates of the provinces of Overijssel and Gelderland in which these regions are located. In turn, these two Delegates also have to negotiate a mutual story about the A1 Zone Development and the position of this plan within the overall agenda of *Landsdeel East*. Both Delegates have their own strategic agenda: while the Delegate of Overijssel focuses on the A1 Zone plan, the Delegate of Gelderland is more focused on another highway development program which is competing with the A1 Zone Development for scarce National funds. Meanwhile, all
regional political-executives involved understand that they have to tell a coherent mutual story to the Minister which they all support - at least in a formal way. If the region is divided and has no mutually negotiated vision, it is easy for the Minister to discard the claims for funding and to invest in plans of other regions which can indeed legitimize their claims upon a mutual story. In order to increase the potential success of the decision-making process, there are also officials from the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Ministry of Spatial Planning present during the decision-making process. In a way, these actors help the regional actors to frame the mutual story in such a way that their plan fits into the emerging investment agenda of the Ministry of Infrastructure. In a top-down manner, they try to influence and guide the bottom-up meaning making going on in the regions.

Most decision-makers involved claim that the A1 Zone Development program is less about the Zone and mainly about the broadening of the A1 highway. Framing the highway as a backbone for regional spatial-economic development is a way to create urgency for broadening the highway. Indeed, when the decision-making process began about two years prior, integral planning of spatial and infrastructure developments was valued by the Ministry. However, times have changed and due to the financial crisis the focus on expensive integral developments has waned. During the MIRT meeting, the Minister explains that the A1 highway broadening is not a National priority. However, when the region political-executives are willing to co-invest into highway broadening with the use of their own funds, their plan might be prioritized on the National agenda. The regional political-executives are disappointed but on the other hand, they did expect to hear this story from the Minister. Now they will have to engage into further negotiations among each other about the possibility of co-investment and of course, they will have to negotiate again a mutual story in order to legitimize the use of regional funds in order to develop National infrastructure. Every political-executive will continue to take part in decision-making processes such as the MIRT process in order to increase the chance that his or her own strategic agenda and strategic plans will ultimately become realized. Strategic visions of Alderpersons and Delegates often remain stable but the framing stories they tell in order to have impact on decision-making in order to bring these visions into reality are changing all the time.

**Conceptual contribution: elaboration of the meaning making lens**

The case stories constructed by the researcher are based on interpretative analysis implicitly using the tentative lens consisting of the connected concepts of story-telling, framing and power. The resulting sensemaking story can in turn be analyzed more specifically, based on recurring patterns recognized in the story-telling practice of political-executives. This analysis results in further specification of five dimensions of framing and five sources of power which were recognized in both case stories. The elaboration of the concepts of framing and power can help to create a lens which in turn can be used to investigate the struggle for meaning during other decision-making processes. In this way, the research question guiding this dissertation is addressed which is focused on the ways in which political-executives negotiate common ground out of a diversity of stories: they do this by engaging into a struggle for meaning during infrastructural decision-making.
First of all, the five dimensions of framing will be shortly discussed. Each dimension thus is about another aspect and another question which is being answered during the framing contest. The first dimension is **scale framing**, during which the ownership or accountability for the potential development is negotiated: which actor is committed to what extend to this development? The second dimension is **scope framing**, during which the scope of the mutual story is negotiated: which plans or strategic visions proposed by decision-makers are allowed to be part of the mutual story? The third dimension is **urgency framing**, which concerns the time-frame of the potential development: what is the necessity of this development compared to other developments? The fourth dimension is **discursive framing**, which entails the attempts of political-executive to ‘hook into’ contextual larger stories in society: how well does a development fit within the salient public discourses? The fifth dimension is **comparison framing**, which concerns stories about the experienced ‘fairness’ of the mutual story which is starting to emerge: Whose turn is it this time to score some development and is everybody getting a fair piece of the pie?

The answers to the different questions belonging to the different dimensions help to see how the meaning of a development depends on different kind of stories framing different aspects of reality. However, to understand in which ways these framing stories have impact on the emerging mutual story, it is crucial to gain more insight into the power sources that are built up and used by the makers of meaning. There are five sources of power which were recognized after a more explicit analysis of the case stories.

Firstly, there is **network** power which entails the use of the network of relations in which a storyteller is involved. The (formal) position of an actor in the network is important but also the opportunities to form coalitions or the contacts with other (more powerful) actors can increase the impact of storytelling. Secondly, the **discursive** source of power – closely connected to discursive framing – depends on the ‘fit’ of the framing story with either the contextual larger stories in society or with crucial policy stories in specific fields. For instance, during periods when complaints about traffic jams are echoing throughout society more and more, different story-tellers have discursive power then during periods when there are strong sentiments to protect the environment. The **material** power of a story-teller depends on either the unique features of the physical location under discussion or on the position of a potential development with regard to surrounding (planned) developments. For instance, when the expansion of a city is hampered because it is located alongside a river, stories about new bridges to be built can become powerful. Moreover, when a dedicated freight railroad has been constructed – connecting the Port of Rotterdam with the German border – stories about the need to expand the port in order to make that infrastructure investment profitable can have strong impact.

A fourth power source is **comparison** power, based on the principles of a fair – although not equal – distribution of investments throughout the country. Stories are less likely to be discarded when most decision-makers involved can be convinced that the political-executive telling the story has indeed been neglected. When peers and general public are convinced that some political-executive deserves ‘his or her turn’ to receive investments, the stories of Alderpersons or Delegates have more impact. The fifth and maybe most important source of power has been termed **actor** power, for this power depends on personal aspects of the story-tellers. Political-executives can have more or less experience with and insights into the meaning making process in which they are engaged.
Some decision-makers are more aware of the rules of the game and therefore, they know how to optimally use the other power sources at their disposal. They know when to forge coalitions or to use their contacts and they anticipate which public debates become more salient then others. On the other hand, actor power is also based upon the reputation and status of a political-executive as a successful decision-maker. This reputation of course depends in turn on his or her ability to be influential during previous struggles for meaning. In a self-amplifying feedback loop, success increases status and status increases success.

**Making the research puzzle less perplexing by looking through the research lens**

The elaboration and sharpening of the meaning making lens forms the conceptual contribution of this dissertation. However, looking through a lens based on the powerful telling of framing stories enabled the researcher to make the puzzling political-executive decision-making practices more commonsensical. The first insight granted by looking through the lens concerns the role of political-executives during decision-making, which is different or even reversed compared with other actors involved such as project managers or planners. These actors are strategists of meaning or 'world-makers' who want to actualize their own comprehensive strategic agendas for development and thereby want to safeguard their status and reputation as political-executives. They do not necessarily focus on efficient or effective decision-making: it is more sensible to perceive specific decision-making processes as mere stepping stones or vehicles for bringing into being their strategic dreams. They are world-makers who make sense 'beyond' or 'around' concrete and single decision-making processes in a holistic manner.

Each Alderperson or Delegate has his or her own comprehensive strategic agenda about the future development of his or her own territory and the position of that territory in the world of tomorrow. They use decision-making processes in order to manipulate the emerging future reality in order to make it resemble their own visions as much as possible. They search and scout for useful decision-making processes and they regard every decision-making process in which they are involved as a lever through which they can manipulate the world that is gradually being actualized. However, they know that all of their political-executive peers also have their own strategic agendas and also use decision-making for their own benefit. An overall struggle for meaning becomes understandable when one considers that there is just not enough money to build everything and moreover, there is just not enough space in the country for all those plans. Political-executives – like good story-tellers - are focused on the emerging dialectic between parts and whole: they both try to align stories about their concrete developments with the emerging larger national agenda while they simultaneously try to influence that larger agenda by telling powerful stories about their own concrete planned developments.

The awareness of the struggle for meaning during infrastructural decision-making processes is clearly exhibited by the many quotes and anecdotes told during the research process. For instance, there are many quotes that exhibit the fear of political-executives of 'missing the boat', or the fear of lagging behind in development and becoming ghost towns or insignificant regions that are unable to fulfill one's own respectable destiny among larger and more powerful peers. Whether these actors are Alderpersons of small or large municipalities or even provincial Delegates: they are very eager to protect their potential to bring into being their own dreams and to keep sufficient degrees of freedom while being surrounded by large and powerful forces that steer the course of history. They
all want to remain players instead of pieces on the board to be played with. Provincial Residences or City Halls and Town Halls often exhibit the greatness of their community at times that they were almost as powerful and thriving as today’s economic power houses of the Netherlands. These public residences seem to exhibit that there have been moments in history that the struggle for meaning and the balance of power was weighing in their favor before tipping over and thereby creating the reality that is experienced today. Political-executives are the ones who have to engage in this all-encompassing struggle for meaning in order to make sure that the dreams and visions of their communities do not become false hopes. The lens on meaning making based on storytelling, power and framing could be regarded as a ‘struggle for meaning’ lens if one considers the dynamics of meaning making which are recognized while looking through this lens.

The view of political-executives as meaning makers or even world makers engaged in a continuous struggle for meaning does indeed make the decision-making practices of Alderpersons, Delegates and Ministers less puzzling. The image of political-executives as actors who hamper and frustrate infrastructural decision-making processes is based on a rational and almost scientific view on decision-making processes. These actors are focused on giving meaning to the emerging infrastructural contours of society instead of automatically striving for the most efficient and effective decision-making processes. While their practices seem dysfunctional with regard to the usual criteria of successful decision-making, when viewing through a ‘struggle for meaning’ lens they seem to be doing exactly what they should be doing in order to serve the community they are chosen to represent.