

Van den Ende, L. & van Marrewijk, A. Transition rituals in construction projects: A case of two urban project kick-offs in a national river expansion project.

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**Transition rituals in construction projects: A case of two urban project kick-offs in a national river expansion project.**

Paper submitted for the 8<sup>th</sup> Ethnography Symposium 2013, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Paper previously submitted for the 29th EGOS Colloquium 2013, Montréal Canada

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### Abstract

This paper will be a research article based on a case study as part of a PhD research project started in March 2011. The study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the practice and meaning of transition rituals in the context of complex construction projects. The research question is: *What kinds of transition rituals are practiced in the construction process and what meaning is ascribed to them by various project actors?* To answer this question, ethnographic fieldwork is conducted in three construction megaprojects in the Netherlands. First, participant-observation was carried out to find out what kinds of transition rituals occur and to see *how* they are practiced. Then, six transition rituals were selected and analyzed: two urban project kick-offs in a river expansion project, ‘Room for the River’ (the case on which this paper will be based), two project (mid)phase transitions in a subway project in Amsterdam, and two project completions/deliveries in a railroad project, the ‘Hanzelijn’. Subsequently, an interpretive approach is taken in order to explore *why* transition rituals are practiced by seeking the meaning project actors themselves attribute to the practice of these rituals. Accordingly, in-depth, semi-structured interviews are conducted with various project actors in each project comprising those who organize, attend and/or participate in the selected transition rituals.

Because rituals can have numerous meanings, it is key to contextualize this study and explore what rituals mean in construction projects as particular organizational settings. Research on rituals in construction projects is essentially absent. Perhaps, this is because “rituals seem to clash with the organizational drive for rationality, effectiveness, efficiency, and goal attainment” (Smith and Stewart, 2011: 11); this being a common reason why rituals have been understudied in organizations. Conversely, we argue that it is worth exploring the meaning of rituals studied within a megaproject context for several reasons. Firstly, rituals are dually significant practices (Pfeffer, 1981; Martin, 2002), having on the one side a tangible character where they can be used strategically to achieve or establish something, while on the other side they have a symbolic and expressive dimension through which thoughts, feelings and behavior are expressed or formed (Islam and Zyphur, 2009). In this way, rituals provide platforms for project actors to mediate and facilitate the construction process, and shape or change organizational conduct and culture (Trice and Beyer, 1984; Martin, 2002). Secondly, since the value of a ritual is largely dependent on the context in which it is practiced (Bell, 1992; Bell, 2009), this study can generate novel findings about the practice of rituals by providing a new organizational context (i.e. megaprojects) in which to study rituals. Thirdly, construction megaprojects also provide a unique context as they are complex, multifaceted organizational constructs that are constantly transforming. According to Marshall and Bresnen (as cited in Pink, 2013: 112) the spatial and temporal patterning of project work is what distinguishes a project from other organizations, “particularly its time-bound nature; they have ostensibly clear start and end points.” We argue that bounded temporality and the stage-based nature<sup>1</sup> of construction projects are complemented and retained by transition rituals. Particularly, we suggest that by marking project phase transitions, rituals can provide collective spatial and temporal platforms within the construction process, allowing projects and its members to move forward and helping to manage and oversee work structure over time. In simpler terms, transition rituals demonstrate that projects – though unfinished – are constantly heading towards completion, phase by phase.

The paper that will be presented during the 8<sup>th</sup> Ethnography Symposium is based on one of our cases: the river expansion project ‘Room for the River’. Because the Netherlands is

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<sup>1</sup> Megaprojects can be divided into various phases such as initiation, decision-making, planning and preparation, realization, and completion/delivery that are aligned to spatial and temporal planning schemes of the project.

at great risk for high water levels and flooding, this project was started to achieve lower water levels by excavating floodplains along the Ijsselriver which runs along six national districts. This year in the district Overijssel, the project made its official transition from the planning and preparation phase to the realization phase in two main cities that border the river: Deventer and Zwolle. To make this transition official a project kick-off was held in Deventer on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2012, and another was held in Zwolle on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2012. Each ritual involved the attendance and participation of local state officials, project contractors and constructors, as well as local residents and civilians. Data reveals that the two urban project kick-offs are rendered as meaningful for embedding the project in its local environment, for informing, involving and gaining support from outsiders, for establishing safety and transparency, and for enhancing commitment and cooperation among project actors.

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