Orchestrating for the Circular Economy in Interorganizational Networks: Between Change and Ceremony

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Research article

Orchestrating for the circular economy in interorganizational networks: Between change and ceremony

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ABSTRACT

The circular economy has been promoted as a key response to grand environmental challenges. Yet transitioning to a circular economy remains a complex endeavor, requiring coordinated action across interorganizational networks. This study examines the Circular Built Environment Network, a large-scale interorganizational network established to accelerate and institutionalize the circular economy in the Danish construction sector. Such engineered networks often rely on orchestration mechanisms to manage and coordinate relationships among diverse participants in pursuit of collective goals. Through a qualitative examination of the Circular Built Environment Network, we reveal: (1) how the circular economy is mythologized as a rational myth, (2) how the network is formed around this myth, and (3) which orchestration mechanisms are promoted to maintain couplings between the myth, the network, and participant interactions. The findings show how coupling configurations evolve over time, shaping the effectiveness of collective efforts to advance the circular economy. The study concludes that the network's lack of actorhood and insufficient mobilization of participants around a strategic vision hindered its ability to orchestrate for the circular economy, rendering network gatherings and activities largely ceremonial rather than transformative.

1. Introduction

The concept of the circular economy has gained prominence, capturing the attention of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike (European Commission, 2020; Magnano et al., 2024; UNEP, 2023). Transitioning to a circular economy has been advocated as a key approach to addressing grand environmental challenges (Doh et al., 2019; Dzhengiz et al., 2023), including environmental degradation, resource depletion, and waste generation—issues to which the construction sector significantly contributes (Benachio et al., 2020). Defined as a systemic model of production and consumption, the circular economy seeks to replace the linear "take-make-dispose" economic paradigm with a circular "reduce-reuse-recycle" approach (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). It is also regarded as a pathway to achieving *growth within*, referring to maximizing the value of resources through self-sustaining closed loops in which resources are reused, recycled, and repurposed until they reach exhaustion (Palea et al., 2024).

While the circular economy is widely acknowledged as a catalyst for transformational change (Mubarik et al., 2024), its systemic scope hinges on coordinated action across levels (i.e., macro, meso, and micro) and organizations (Ho et al., 2022), as no single organization possesses the authority or resources to lead such transformation (Langley et al., 2023). Despite numerous initiatives, many collective attempts remain largely symbolic, reproducing visions of circularity without achieving disruptive change (Blomsma et al., 2022; Coenen et al., 2025). In the absence of cross-level coordination, the circular economy risks remaining a *rational myth* (Boiral et al., 2020) or a *circular utopia* (Capponi et al., 2025; Tosi et al., 2024)—an idealized but unattainable vision that prescribes organizational structures and activities aligned with circular principles.

In response, research has emphasized the importance of interorganizational networks in orchestrating circular transitions, collectively advancing the practical application through coordination, resource mobilization, and norm-setting (e.g., Blackburn et al., 2023; Eikelenboom and de Jong, 2021; Mubarik et al., 2024; Provensi et al., 2024; Schöggl et al., 2023). Interorganizational networks are commonly

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defined as enduring, voluntary arrangements of three or more legally autonomous organizations that coordinate activities to achieve both individual and collective goals, however, without relying on formal authority (Powell, 1990; Provan and Kenis, 2008). Instead, they typically rely on participants' voluntary engagement to sustain collaboration and operate without binding obligations or hierarchical governance structures (Dagnino et al., 2016; Ferrigno et al., 2023).

As a result, shared norms and values must be orchestrated among network participants, enabling them to collectively develop an understanding of how to address the challenge or realize the goals under which the network is established (Blackburn et al., 2023). Moreover, interorganizational networks often have limited independent decision-making capabilities (Grothe-Hammer, 2019), meaning they cannot act on behalf of their members and must instead orchestrate to 'bestow individual and collective actors with roles, responsibilities, and behavioral scripts' (Bitektine et al., 2020: 887) that align member actions with network goals. Despite increasing scholarly attention, few empirical studies have investigated how interorganizational networks orchestrate for grand environmental challenges, such as the circular economy, in pursuit of collective sectoral outcomes (Grabski-Walls and Ambos, 2024; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, this study examines *how an interorganizational network orchestrates to advance the realization and practical application of the circular economy in the Danish construction sector*. We investigate the Circular Built Environment Network, formed by the Innovation Fund Denmark and the philanthropic association Realdania, comprising nearly 100 participants spanning public research institutions and private companies. A common denominator among participants is their association with a project funded by the Innovation Fund Denmark and Realdania under their joint circular economy campaign aimed at accelerating and institutionalizing the circular economy in the sector (Innovation Fund Denmark & Realdania, 2020a; 2020b).

Theoretically, the study draws on the concepts of rational myth (Hallett, 2010; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and network orchestration (Müller-Seitz, 2012; Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013). Rational myth helps analyze how the circular economy gains legitimacy as a solution to environmental challenges and explains coupling configurations (Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021), while network orchestration provides insights into how collective means-ends relations are constructed to bring such visions into practice.

This study contributes to the field of environmental management by providing empirical findings of how an interorganizational network orchestrates for the circular economy. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from individual firm capabilities to collective orchestration, extending prior work on network governance and sustainability transitions (e.g., Elf et al., 2022; Seles et al., 2025; Yuan and Pan, 2023). By synthesizing the network-level orchestration processes and their institutional effects, the study moves beyond descriptive observation to offer an interpretative model linking orchestration dynamics to legitimacy-building and institutional change. We argue that this shift is necessary, as system-level change is rarely orchestrated by the efforts of focal firms (Muzio and Wickert, 2025), which have otherwise been a prevalent focus in orchestration literature (e.g., Blackburn et al., 2023; Ermini et al., 2024), but requires broader commitments taking both institutions, organizations, and interactions into account (Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021; Mair and Seelos, 2021). The study also identifies shifting coupling configurations (Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021) and demonstrates how the concepts of rational myth and network orchestration can enrich theoretical understandings of circular transitions (as per Magnano et al., 2024).

2. Theoretical background

This section presents the theoretical background of the study. We first introduce the concept of rational myth, which explains how organizations align their structures and activities with institutionalized ideals perceived as legitimate responses to grand environmental challenges, such as the circular economy. The notion of rational myths thus serves as a starting point for understanding the interorganizational network under scrutiny. Building on this, we elaborate on network orchestration as a relational approach to constructing coupling configurations, i.e., the specific means-ends relations that incarnate a rational myth and thus guide collective efforts toward strategic visions.

While prior studies have treated rational myth and orchestration as distinct perspectives, this study integrates them into a unified analytical framework. Specifically, it conceptualizes orchestration as a mechanism through which coupling configurations between institutional ideals and everyday interactions are either strengthened or weakened over time. This synthesis allows for a dynamic understanding of how institutionalized visions, such as the circular economy, are enacted, maintained, or contested through the practices of orchestration.

2.1. Rational myths and institutionalization processes

The concept of rational myth was first introduced by Meyer and Rowan (1977) to describe how organizations incorporate formal structures. Beyond being a cornerstone of the macro-level approach in neo-institutional theory (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Glynn and D'Aunno, 2023), it is central to institutional analyses of legitimacy acquisition (Hallett, 2010).

Rational myths are 'idealized cultural accounts' (Hallett, 2010: 54) that prescribe organizational structures and activities, establishing taken-for-granted couplings between rational means and desirable ends. In this way, rational myths inform organizations about actions considered appropriate to pursue, even when these may not align with internal business interests or work practices (Bromley and Powell, 2012). Consequently, organizations tend to conform ceremonially to rational myths, which, in the words of Meyer and Rowan (1977: 341), means they 'buffer their formal structures from the uncertainties of technical activities by becoming loosely coupled, building gaps between their formal structures and actual work practices.' This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *decoupling* (e.g., Bromley and Powell, 2012). Other work highlights that rational myths may also be used agentically, allowing organizations to contest, adapt, or repurpose them to pursue internal change (Townley, 2002).

According to Meyer and Rowan (1977: 343–344), rational myths have two defining features. First, they are rationalized and impersonal prescriptions that, in a rule-like manner, specify couplings between appropriate means and desirable social ends. Second, they are highly institutionalized, meaning their legitimacy is taken for granted among institutional referents. Examples of rational myths that have received scholarly attention include: (1) development of the ISO 14001 standard as a means to improve environmental practice and performance (Boiral, 2007), (2) implementation of total quality management to enhance organizational performance and societal prosperity (Zbaracki, 1998), and (3) the spread of industrialized construction, which served to modernize French society in the post-war period (Boxenbaum et al., 2017).

Newer research, especially on inhabited institutionalism (Hallett, 2010; Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021), criticizes contemporary research on rational myths, which has viewed the individual as nested inside organizations that are nested inside institutions, and thereby neglected the variety of coupling configurations that link institutions, organizations, and social interactions (cf. Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021). Coupling configurations foreground the variety of linkages between formal structures and enacted practices, illuminating how rational myths are inhibited, contested, or reassembled in practice.

While adherence to rational myths is considered a way for organizations to gain legitimacy (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008), such myths also drive institutional isomorphism by depicting what organizational structures and activities constitute a "proper" organization (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017). As more organizations incorporate these

mythologized prescriptions, the myths become increasingly institutionalized. To avoid mere ceremonial conformity, where organizations intentionally maintain gaps between means and ends (Bromley and Powell, 2012), the prescribed structures and activities must also resonate with other accounts of legitimacy within the organizational field.

Zilber (2006) argues that rational myths often travel from one institutional environment to another and, in this process, must be translated from generic myths into specific ones to become institutionalized within the organizational field. This translation process involves interactions and negotiations among field-level participants (Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021), as well as the reshaping of the means that are finally transmitted into the organizational field (cf. Zilber, 2006). In this context, the formation of interorganizational networks provides bounded spaces (Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013) where field-level participants can interact, negotiate, and collectively translate and institutionalize the rational myth of the circular economy. Moreover, research highlights orchestration as particularly useful in facilitating such transitions (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2022; Magnano et al., 2024).

2.2. The role of network orchestration in establishing means-ends relations

While recent research has explored orchestration mechanisms in interorganizational networks with some degree of collective actorhood at the collective network level, which enables interconnected decision-making (e.g., Blackburn et al., 2023), less attention has been devoted to orchestration in networks lacking such actorhood (Grothe-Hammer, 2019). This is surprising, given that these networks cannot assign responsibilities or act on behalf of their members (Dhanaraj and Parkhe, 2006). Instead, they typically pursue their stated purposes and fulfill goals through network orchestration.

Orchestration has been examined in relation to several domains, including supply networks and ecosystems. Noteworthy insights from these streams are that network orchestration primarily centers around a focal firm (Ermini et al., 2024) that influences the network by aligning objectives, facilitating knowledge sharing, and driving innovation. From this perspective, orchestration is fundamentally about managing interorganizational relationships to generate collective value (Linde et al., 2021), often through deliberate and strategic interventions. While this view has proven powerful in studies of innovation ecosystems, supply networks, and industry platforms, it may be less applicable to loosely coordinated networks that lack a clearly identifiable focal firm.

The literature on interorganizational networks is both wide and diverse, encompassing a broad spectrum of network types that differ considerably in terms of their formalization, governance structures, and coordination mechanisms. Consequently, interorganizational networks can be found in many different empirical domains, including industry alliances, innovation ecosystems, public-private partnerships, and interfirm alliances (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Provan and Kenis, 2008). This diversity underscores the importance of distinguishing between different types of networks, especially when analyzing how coordination and collective outcomes are achieved.

Network orchestration can be defined as deliberate actions aimed at assembling and developing a desired interorganizational network (Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013) and facilitating aspired interactions and negotiations within the network (Dhanaraj and Parkhe, 2006). These actions include, among others, the management of innovation leverage, knowledge flows, network membership, and network stability (Nambisan and Sawhney, 2011).

Studies on network governance have traditionally made a distinction between *emergent* and *orchestrated* interorganizational networks (Müller-Seitz, 2012). Emergent networks arise due to changes in the institutional field that trigger challenges with adverse organizational impact (Dagnino et al., 2016), such as access to important resources or conditions for legitimacy acquisition. In line with this, emergent networks are often mission-driven and distinctly self-organizing (Dagnino et al., 2016) in their efforts to combat experienced problems or achieve business objectives of shared interest. Conversely, orchestrated networks are typically considered engineered (Müller-Seitz, 2012), as they are purposely established and guided by a distinguished network orchestrator to 'create value (expand the pie) and extract value (gain a larger slice of the pie) from the network' (Dhanaraj and Parkhe, 2006: 659). In this way, orchestration is often purpose-driven (Cohen and Muñoz, 2015) and represents a distinctly relational approach, grounded in the desire to create and enable ties to come to fruition (cf. Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013). Orchestration is also considered by some an important contemporary approach to managing and coordinating relationships among loosely coupled actors amid increasingly dynamic environments (Ferrigno et al., 2023).

Orchestration has been highlighted as a means of fostering shared meanings and understandings (i.e., cognition) among disparate stakeholders regarding the means-ends relations that should be established within the institutional environment to incarnate a rational myth (Hallett, 2010). Alongside the establishment of means-ends relations, orchestration mechanisms should also underpin the development of shared cultural and cognitive accounts among network participants (Nambisan and Sawhney, 2011), thus making the means-ends relations so strong that they inhabit the network participants (Bitektine et al., 2020). Through the efforts of the distinguished network orchestrator (Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013), network participants are transformed into carriers (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) or agents (Battilana and Casciaro, 2012) of the established means-ends relations. This is particularly important in networks without actorhood at the collective network level, as they lack the ability to act on behalf of their members. Instead, such networks must encourage and support network participants in pursuing *real utopias* (Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2022), which involves replacing prevailing organizational structures and activities that reproduce linear patterns of production and consumption with more circular yet attainable alternatives.

3. Research context and design

Grounded in an interpretative sociological approach, this section first introduces the Circular Built Environment Network, which, in terms of background, size, and scope, represents a significant and unprecedented effort to accelerate and institutionalize the circular economy within the Danish construction sector, thus making it a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). After presenting the case, we elaborate on the collection and analysis of data.

3.1. Case description

The Circular Built Environment Network was a three-year interorganizational network initiated in the spring of 2021 by the Innovation Fund Denmark and the philanthropic association Realdania (henceforth the 'organizers'). The network's purpose was to assemble a heterogeneous group of organizations and projects to collectively accelerate and institutionalize the circular economy in the Danish construction sector. This reflected broader political ambitions to address grand environmental challenges by implementing the circular economy within the Danish business community, as articulated in national strategies and action plans (e.g., Danish Ministry of Environment, 2021; Danish Ministry of the Interior and Housing, 2021).

To achieve this purpose, Bloxhub was entrusted with the responsibility of building the network and facilitating its activities. Bloxhub (henceforth the 'orchestrator') describes itself as a Nordic hub for sustainable urbanization, specializing in fostering partnerships, facilitating knowledge-sharing, and enabling business scaling. The role of orchestrator was primarily undertaken by a single individual in an executive role at Bloxhub.

With ambitions to bring expert knowledge and practical experience

on the circular economy into the network, the organizers established an international advisory board (henceforth the 'advisory board'). The advisory board was tasked with informing and contextualizing discussions within the network on circularity from an international perspective. Additionally, the advisory board supported network participants in effectively communicating their projects using the language of the circular economy to reach a wider audience. Recent research has demonstrated that such communicative efforts are critical in successful circular economy transitions (Carbonell-Alcocer et al., 2025). Throughout the network's lifespan, the advisory board consisted of three members, each specializing in the circular economy within architecture, charity, or consulting. Members of the advisory board were appointed by the organizers and the orchestrator.

In addition to the organizers, the orchestrator, and the advisory board, which together formed the backbone of the network by providing expert knowledge, funding, governance, and structure, the network also included participants affiliated with one of 20 projects funded by Innovation Fund Denmark and Realdania under their circular economy campaign. Each project aimed to generate new knowledge about the circular economy in the context of the construction sector and develop practical solutions based on circular principles such as circular business models, design-for-disassembly, life-cycle assessment analysis, material passports, and waste management. Sixteen of these projects were industrial research projects, while the remaining four were research and innovation projects (abbrev. 'R&I projects'). Each industrial research project comprised an industrial researcher (i.e., a three-year industrial PhD student or a two-year industrial postdoc) enrolled at a university while simultaneously employed by a (host) company, with supervisors from both. In contrast, each R&I project involved 5–12 parties from public research institutions and private companies, aiming to develop practical solutions and generate research-based knowledge that could underpin the circular transition in the construction sector.

Cross-project synergies were expected within the network, and the organizers sought to group a program of projects that could collectively strengthen the network's contribution to the circular economy transition. Therefore, projects were handpicked by the organizers based on their expected contributions and potential synergies with other projects in the network. The selection process followed a two-stage assessment procedure. In the first stage, all project applications were evaluated by the Innovation Fund Denmark's Industrial Researcher Committee. If a project received a positive assessment, it would receive full funding. In the second stage, the organizers and the orchestrator then handpicked projects from this pool of positive assessed project applications that had requested to become part of the network, selecting those they considered most suitable for inclusion in the network.

The insights presented in this study were gained as part of one of the latter R&I projects, which examined how to establish a market for circularity in the context of the Danish construction sector. An overview of the Circular Built Environment Network, including the different actors and their main responsibilities, is illustrated in Fig. 1.

3.2. Data collection

The empirical evidence for this study was derived from three distinct data sources: documents, interviews, and participant observations. Combining these, while acknowledging their respective strengths and limitations, proved fruitful in illuminating various facets of the examined interorganizational network (Eisenhardt, 1989) and in generating knowledge that aligned with the study's objective. Each data source is further elaborated upon below.

3.2.1. Document analysis

To comprehend the evolution of the circular economy from a utopian vision (Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2022) of alternative future production and consumption patterns to a cardinal point in policymaking, we analyzed a variety of documents on the circular economy and the construction sector. Document analysis is widely recognized as a method for reconstructing historical details about the phenomenon being investigated and examining decisions influencing its historical genesis (Morgan, 2021).

We identified documents using snowball sampling, starting with Innovation Fund Denmark and Realdania's circular economy campaign (Innovation Fund Denmark & Realdania, 2020a; 2020b). Snowball sampling is useful for visualizing the process through which knowledge is socially constructed and for revealing power relations in this process (Noy, 2008). After thoroughly reviewing the campaign documents, we retraced their references and repeated the process until reaching the seminal work of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021). Our objective in analyzing these documents was to understand how the circular economy has been mythologized—i.e., framed as a potential solution to sustainability issues in Danish society and the construction sector. The documents used are listed in Table 1.

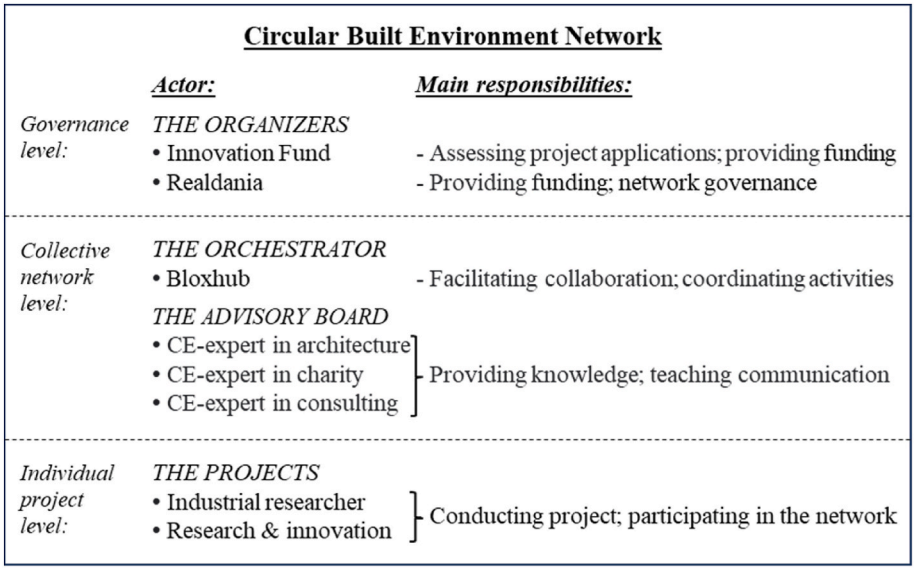

Fig. 1. Circular built environment network actors and main responsibilities.

Table 1
String of documents in the document analysis.

Year	Author	Name of publication
2020	Innovation Fund Denmark & Realdania	*Circular Built Environment – a Shift of the Construction Industry to Circular Resource Economy*
2020	Innovation Fund Denmark & Realdania	*The Construction and Building Sector's Transition to Circular Resource Economy*
2020	European Commission	*A New Circular Economy Action Plan: For a Cleaner and More Competitive Europe*
2018	Danish Ministry of Environment and Food and Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs	*Strategy for Circular Economy: More Value and Better Environment Through Design, Consumption, and Recycling*
2017	Advisory Board for Circular Economy	*Recommendations for the Danish Government*
2015	European Commission	*Closing the Loop: An EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy*
2015	Ellen MacArthur Foundation & McKinsey Center for Business and Environment	*Growth Within: A Circular Economy Vision for a Competitive Europe*
2013	Ellen MacArthur Foundation	*Towards the Circular Economy: Economic and Business Rationale for an Accelerated Transition*

3.2.2. Interviews

A total of 37 interviews were conducted with the organizers, the orchestrator, and participants affiliated with the 20 projects, representing 30 unique interviewees. We also extended invitations to members of the advisory board but received no acceptances. The interviews were conducted in spring 2022, autumn 2022, and spring 2023. Conversations lasted between 41 and 72 min, with an average of 54 min.

The interviews were loosely structured (Chauhan, 2022) and guided by protocols tailored to each interviewee group (i.e., organizers, orchestrator, industrial researcher, supervisors, and R&I project participants), reflecting a distinctly exploratory and situational approach to knowledge generation. While the protocols, which were distributed to interviewees in advance, ensured coverage of core themes, they also allowed flexibility to pursue emergent lines of inquiry. Interview questions covered topics such as company-network knowledge transfer, network activities, network collaborations, expectations for the network, project objectives, and understandings of the circular economy.

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Microsoft Teams, in either Danish or English, based on the preferences of the interviewees. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in the language of the conversation. To ensure confidentiality, all interviewees were anonymized, and all participants provided verbal consent for us to use the transcripts in our study, as long as the individual interviewee could not be identified and all quotations were not used out-of-context. For this reason, all quotations in the analysis refer only to the type of interviewee rather than to specific individuals. An overview of interviewees and the topics covered is shown in Table 2.

3.2.3. Participant observations

We participated in and observed seven network gatherings (see Table 3 for an overview). Three were regular network meetings featuring project presentations and discussions. Two were counseling events with project presentations, presentations from the advisory board or external speakers, and both groups and plenary discussions. Two were symposiums, which were developmental in nature, aimed at fostering in-depth group discussions on the circular economy. Meetings exclusively for industrial researchers were also held, to which we were not invited.

As part of one of the R&I projects within the network, we were invited to selected gatherings and participated under the same conditions as other attendees. During these gatherings, we maintained awareness of our dual role as both network participants (determined by the project affiliation) and observers (determined by the project's research interests). To manage this dual role, we employed a reflexive approach (Cassell et al., 2020), maintaining transparency about our positionality and acknowledging our potential influence on knowledge production. In our field notes, we systematically distinguished between observations and personal interpretations to minimize bias.

In line with this, we intentionally embraced our participant role during gatherings, referring to ourselves as part of the network (using "we" and "us") and contributing to discussions and network activities with reflections and knowledge. However, when preparing field notes, we maintained a professional distance (as per Langley and Klag, 2017), documenting details of events, discussions, and concerns raised by participants rather than relying on personal experiences alone.

Between one and four researchers attended the gatherings. All participants were aware of our dual role. Besides providing insights into the network, observations also served as a reference point for questions asked during the interview conversations. The gatherings observed are listed in Table 3.

Table 2
Conducted interviews.

Period	Unveiled topics	Interviewees
Spring 2022:	• Network activities and affiliation • Project content • Understandings of the circular economy	• 12 industrial PhD students • 1 industrial postdoc
Autumn 2022:	• Company-network knowledge transfer • Expectations of the network • Network activities and affiliation	• 8 company supervisors
Spring 2023:	• Expectations of the network • Network activities and affiliation • Network collaborations • Network orchestration and governance • Project content	• 7 industrial PhD students • 1 orchestrator • 1 organizer • 4 participants in R&I projects • 3 university supervisors

3.3. Data analysis

We employed a temporal bracketing strategy to structure our analysis in line with the study's processual and interpretative orientation. This strategy, which involves dividing data into distinct time periods, allows for comparative analysis to unveil how one period affects the next (Bizzi and Langley, 2012). Accordingly, we divided our data into three successive "periods," which reflected our stated research interest and served as units of analysis (Langley, 1999).

The rationale for employing this strategy, as articulated by Langley (1999: 703), was to facilitate an examination of 'how actions of one period lead to changes in the context that will affect action in subsequent periods.' Temporal bracketing also highlights how network activities and associated orchestration mechanisms may either sustain or undermine network relations (Bizzi and Langley, 2012), ultimately enabling or constraining the network's ability to pursue its desired goals.

We inductively delineated three temporal periods representing key developments in the progression of the Circular Built Environment Network. These were: (1) constructing the myth, (2) translating the myth, and (3) institutionalizing the myth. The first period spans from December 2015 to April 2020, beginning with the EU's first circular economy action plan (European Commission, 2015) and ending with Innovation Fund Denmark and Realdania's joint campaign (Innovation Fund Denmark & Realdania, 2020a; 2020b). The second period covers April 2020 to June 2021, ending with the inaugural physical gathering. The third period runs from June 2021 to January 2024, marking the network's dissolution.

Once segmented, data was coded in two stages. First, we applied open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to each period, identifying

Table 3
Observations conducted.

	Gathering	Date and Duration	Content
2021:	Network meeting	June 4, 225 min	**First physical network gathering** • Organizers and orchestrator presenting the purpose of the network • Introduction to the network participants
	Counseling event	Nov. 24, 420 min	• Keynote by the advisory board • R&I projects presentations • Roundtable discussions • Advisory board panel discussion
2022:	Symposium	Oct. 26, 360 min	• Seminar by external speaker • Roundtable discussions • R&I projects presentations • Plenary discussions
	Network meeting (only supervisors)	Nov. 9, 120 min	• Organizers and orchestrator explaining the possibility of applying for exclusive funding for collaborations between network participants • Informal discussions among company and university parties about potential collaborations
2023:	Network meeting	March 16, 180 min	• Industrial researcher projects presentations • R&I project presentation
	Symposium	Oct. 1–4, four days	• Organizers and orchestrator presenting the purpose of the symposium • Seminars by external speakers • Cross-project group work • Discussions and commitments for preparing joint research notes on the circular economy between network participants and projects • Roundtable discussions • Plenary discussions
2024:	Counseling event	Jan. 22, 180 min	**Closing network gathering** • Organizers and orchestrator presenting the purpose of the network • Industrial researcher projects presentations • R&I projects panel discussion • Plenary discussions • Launch of Circular Build Environment Network publication, including abstract of projects and joint research notes • Organizers and orchestrator announcement of new network on regenerative construction, which will run from 2025 to 2027.

emerging concepts, actor positions, interpretative frames, and recurring tensions. This involved close engagement with interview transcripts, field notes, and identified documents, with attention to the situated meanings and practices described by participants. Codes were developed iteratively and compared across sources to enhance analytical richness. Examples include: "linking the circular economy to societal needs," "imagining future circular practices," "negotiating purpose," and "decoupling project work from collective goals."

In the second stage, we engaged in axial coding to identify relationships among open codes within and across periods, clustering them into broader themes, such as: "rational myth construction," "strategic ambiguity and mobilization," "orchestration mechanisms and limitations," and "evolving coupling configurations." Theoretical constructs were continuously revisited to refine interpretations through iterative empirical-theoretical comparison.

The result of the coding process was a set of thematically "connected blocks" for each period (Langley, 1999), describing stable yet evolving patterns of meaning, interaction, and coordination in the network's development. Table 4 provides an overview of the periods guiding our analysis and the developed themes.

4. Analysis

Our analysis is structured into three periods, each illustrating how shifting coupling configurations (Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021) shaped the evolution of the Circular Built Environment Network. These configurations connect the rational myth of the circular economy, the network as an organizational form, and participants' social interactions. In the first period, we trace how the circular economy was constructed as a rational myth at the European and Danish levels, legitimizing "reduce-reuse-recycle" strategies as rational means to societal ends. The second period analyzes how this myth was translated into network formation, initially serving as a powerful organizing principle. The third period examines how orchestration mechanisms seeking to couple means to ends gradually weakened, as participants contested and decoupled from the myth, turning network activities increasingly ceremonial.

4.1. First period: the mythologizing of the circular economy

4.1.1. Adopting European Union circular economy action plans

The growing societal interest in addressing environmental challenges, together with influential reports from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and its partners (e.g., Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013, 2021; Ellen MacArthur Foundation & McKinsey Center for Business and Environment, 2015), positioned the circular economy gaining traction among policymakers as a powerful catalyst for transformational change for reconciling economic and environmental goals.

The European Commission adopted two action plans for the circular economy (European Commission, 2015, 2020) that framed the construction sector as an area particularly capable of realizing environmental and economic benefits through circularity. These plans prompted European Union member states to develop national strategies for circular economy implementation (for an overview of member states' circular economy policies, see Sanz-Torró et al., 2025). In the construction sector, circularity became linked to policy ambitions of reducing waste and greenhouse gas emissions, institutionalizing a policy logic (Husted and Danken, 2017) that portrayed circular economy measures as both technically feasible and socially desirable.

Beyond outlining technical measures, these policy efforts elevated the circular economy to a rational myth (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), presenting it as a taken-for-granted ideal aligning rational means (reduce-reuse-recycle strategies) with broader social ends (environmental and economic gains). However, the couplings between myth and practice remained largely symbolic at this stage, with limited operationalization beyond policy rhetoric.

4.1.2. Developing and implementing Danish circular economy strategy

Following the European Commission's (2015) first action plan, the Danish government established an advisory board in 2017 composed of 12 cross-sectoral experts tasked with recommending how to operationalize the circular economy in Danish business (Advisory Board for Circular Economy, 2017). Based on 27 recommendations, the Danish government launched a circular economy strategy in 2018 (Danish Ministry of Environment and Food and Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs, 2018), identifying the construction sector as one of six priority areas requiring intervention for accelerating the circular transition.

Two specific initiatives were prioritized for government action. The first introduced a *sustainability class* in the Danish building code, incorporating life-cycle assessment (LCA) requirements and embodied carbon

Table 4
Overview over the three successive periods.

	First period	Second period	Third period
Unit of analysis:	Constructing the myth	Translating the myth	Institutionalizing the myth
Basis of attention:	The proliferation of the circular economy (idealized cultural accounts)	The establishment of the network ("rationalized" structures and activities)	The network orchestration (interactions, negotiations, and cognition)
Timespan:	Dec. 2015–Apr. 2020	Apr. 2020–June 2021	June 2021–Jan. 2024
Start:	•First EU action plan	•'Circularity campaign'	•Physical network gatherings
End:	•'Circularity campaign'	•Physical network gatherings	•Network dissolution
Main data source:	Documents	Documents; interviews (retrospective)	Interviews (prospective); participant observations
Developed themes:	#1 Adopting European Union circular economy action plans; #2 Developing and implementing the Danish circular economy strategy; #3 The circular economy as an idealized cultural account in the construction sector	#4 Announcing circular economy campaign; #5 Establishing the Circular Built Environment Network; #6 Mobilizing network participants around a strategic vision	#7 Orchestrating at the network level to establish means-ends relations; #8 Decoupling the circular economy; #9 Dissolution of the Circular Built Environment Network

thresholds. The second promoted *selective demolition* through legal requirements for demolition work, directly reinforcing the European Commission's (2020) ambition to minimize construction and demolition waste. These regulatory measures represented a critical tightening of couplings between the rational myth and institutional structures, as circular principles began shaping legal and technical expectations. Through LCA and selective demolition requirements, policymakers translated abstract ideals into enforceable practices, embedding the myth more firmly within the sector's institutional fabric.

4.1.3. The circular economy as an idealized cultural account in the construction sector

Growing awareness of the circular economy among policymakers, coupled with legislative measures, gradually extended into construction-sector practices. Two dynamics illustrate how organizations began to embody the myth.

First, the provision and dissemination of technical knowledge allowed organizations to plan and document their activities in accordance with the "reduce-reuse-recycle" paradigm (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). For instance, Environmental Product Declaration Denmark's database of environmental data for building materials supported compliance with LCA and sustainability class thresholds, while the Danish Knowledge Centre for Circular Construction issued guidelines for managing construction and demolition waste, thus materializing policy rhetoric through calculative infrastructures and standardized practices.

Second, organizations experimented with proto-institutional practices such as design-for-disassembly and material passport initiatives at the project level (e.g., Köhler et al., 2022), the development of selective demolition practices within companies (e.g., Frederiksen et al., 2022), and municipal business models for reusing and recycling construction and demolition waste (e.g., Christensen et al., 2022). These efforts illustrate how actors enacted the myth in situated ways, using it as both a guiding vision and a source of legitimacy for innovation.

This first period of the analysis reveals how the circular economy was socially constructed as a rational myth within the Danish construction sector. In this process, the European Commission framed it as a powerful and transformative means of addressing environmental challenges, driving national policy development and concrete regulatory interventions. Hence, couplings between rational myth, institutional structures, and organizational experimentation were relatively tight, creating fertile ground for the subsequent formation of the Circular Built Environment Network.

4.2. Second period: formation of the Circular Built Environment Network

4.2.1. Announcing the circular economy campaign

In spring 2020, the organizers launched a joint campaign to mobilize collective engagement and institutionalize the circular economy in the Danish construction sector. The campaign aimed to articulate an urgent societal need while building legitimacy around the Circular Built Environment Network by uniting public research institutions and private companies. Participants were expected to conduct industrial research and R&I projects contributing knowledge and practical solutions for the circular transition. By framing participation as both a contribution to societal good and a source of legitimacy, the campaign effectively leveraged the rational myth of the circular economy as a mobilizing device. As one organizer explained:

> "*Our ambition was to identify a theme that was of societal interest and where construction and the built environment could make a difference. I truly believe we have managed to find a theme* [i.e., the circular economy] *that is timely and of growing societal interest and importance.*" (Organizer)

The two interrelated calls for project proposals (Innovation Fund Denmark & Realdania, 2020a; 2020b) operationalized this mobilization strategy by framing the circular economy as a rational response to environmental challenges in construction. The first call targeted industrial research projects aimed at developing company-specific circular solutions, while the second call invited R&I projects to advance sectoral knowledge and innovation. The rationale for combining industrial research and R&I projects was to foster synergies and create a knowledge base greater than the sum of its parts:

> "*We have supported projects of societal relevance for many years and believe that the transition to a circular construction sector requires a more coordinated effort supported by research activities. Grouping the projects and participants in a network is a way to ensure that the projects enrich each other. Besides the increased impact of the individual projects, we also believe the network can be a way to anchor knowledge and solutions on circular economy in the sector.*" (Organizer)

This configuration positioned the network as an orchestrated arena for translating the rational myth into practice, providing opportunities to create synergies across otherwise heterogeneous participants through shared discursive framing and resource interdependencies.

4.2.2. Establishing the Circular Built Environment Network

Active participation in the Circular Built Environment Network was a prerequisite for receiving funding from the Innovation Fund Denmark and Realdania. Accordingly, the organizers and the orchestrator scheduled a series of gatherings throughout the network's lifespan. According to the orchestrator, these gatherings were essential given the breadth and varied interpretations of the circular economy concept, ranging from, e.g., business model innovation to waste management practices. They were also deemed crucial for supporting development and progression at the individual project level as well as building cohesion at the collective network level:

"*The network was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why we wanted to ensure that the network participants met frequently. The gatherings were intended to provide both a space for industrial researchers to exchange ideas and to serve as a place where network participants could collectively develop and gain knowledge.*" (Orchestrator)

The gatherings thus served several functions, including supporting individual projects through feedback and exchange, while also symbolically reaffirming the myth of the circular economy as a shared reference point. By combining quarterly network meetings, counseling events three-four times per year, and biannual symposiums, the organizers and orchestrator attempted to orchestrate spaces where couplings between myth, projects, and participant interactions could be maintained:

"*We have previously encountered situations where the results of the projects we supported lacked an audience, which prevented the desired effects from being realized. The Circular Built Environment Network consists of 100 participants who work within the same theme, which is rather unique and offers excellent opportunities to make a difference.*" (Organizer)

Despite these ambitions, however, the network's orchestration mechanisms remained fragile. While gatherings encouraged knowledge sharing, they relied on voluntary commitment and lacked the authoritative capacity to align participants' priorities beyond their own projects.

4.2.3. Mobilizing network participants around a strategic vision

To mobilize network participants around a strategic vision, the organizers and orchestrator established an advisory board. The board was entrusted with bringing expert knowledge and practical experience into the network, enriching and contextualizing discussions with international perspectives, and supporting participants communicate their work to broader audiences. This was intended as a key orchestration mechanism for strengthening the couplings between the rational myth and project-level activities.

However, the advisory board struggled to fulfill this vision for two main reasons. First, its members were reportedly unaware of the expectations placed on them:

"*I think we* [i.e., the organizers] *have had some ambitions for the advisory board that, we must admit, have been too difficult to fulfill. We could also have been clearer about these expectations. It is also challenging to find qualified members for the advisory board because the network participants are knowledgeable, and because the advisory board members need to appeal to both academics and practitioners.*" (Organizer)

Second, several industrial researchers noted a mismatch between the advisory board's narrow resource-centric framing of the circular economy and the broader concerns of individual projects:

"*The advisory board has a very old-fashioned understanding of the circular economy, which does not reflect the content of the projects. It mostly focuses on resources and neglects other aspects of the circular economy such as biodiversity, life-cycle assessment analysis, and waste management. I feel that the discussions we have in the network are becoming so general and basic that they become irrelevant.*" (Industrial PhD Student)

"*The advisory board members have a good perspective on things, but they fall within a very similar category in terms of age, background, and focus area. I think it would be beneficial if the advisory board could cover a broader range of topics. In fact, I have suggested changes to diversify it.*" (Industrial PhD Student)

While the organizers originally had intended the advisory board to evolve alongside the network, the re-composition was never completed due to competing priorities. Instead, external speakers were brought in to compensate for the advisory board's shortcomings, as this was seen as a more flexible and less time-consuming solution.

This second period of the analysis demonstrates how the network was effectively formed by leveraging the rational myth of the circular economy, attracting a large and diverse set of participants. Initially, couplings between myth, network, and interactions were relatively tight, with gatherings reinforcing collective legitimacy. Yet the lack of sustained orchestration around a strategic vision—illustrated by the advisory board's shortcomings—meant that these couplings remained loose. The network's purpose was legitimate and broadly shared, but its ability to transform legitimacy into durable alignment across projects remained limited.

4.3. Third period: orchestration mechanisms promoted to couple means to ends

4.3.1. Orchestrating at the network level to establish means-ends relations

In the summer of 2021, after COVID-19 restrictions eased in Denmark, the Circular Built Environment Network resumed in-person gatherings to reinvigorate collective engagement. The orchestrator described the network's composition and size as both its strength and its challenge. While it included participants across the entire value chain committed to advancing the circular economy in Danish construction, motivating them to prioritize network activities proved difficult due to their varied and sometimes conflicting individual interests and needs:

"*I do not have the authority, nor do the organizers, to compel participants to prioritize the network. My only option is incentives, not penalties. I have heard numerous excuses from participants for not showing up. Members of R&I projects complain that industrial research projects progress too slowly, members of industrial research projects question why R&I projects are part of the network, university supervisors are frustrated about the knowledge level being too low, and company supervisors feel that the network activities lack business relevance. There are many ends that must be met.*" (Orchestrator)

One perceived approach to increasing engagement was, according to the orchestrator, to orchestrate the network as a more flexible and dynamic entity, offering tailored network activities in smaller thematic groups aimed at creating synergies to be shared at the collective network level. However, this approach was met with resistance and dismissed by the orchestrator's superior. Another approach was to introduce sanctions for participants who repeatedly failed to engage or contribute, but this idea was eventually abandoned due to concerns about negative effects at the individual project level.

This key challenge with fluctuating network engagement, as emphasized by both the organizer and the orchestrator, was that it generated discontinuity, undermining the ability to foster stable interactions and build sustained relationships at the collective network level. For example, as the orchestrator explained, when an industrial PhD student is away on a research stay, sick leave, or parental leave, their supervisors often withdraw as well. This reflects how participants tend to see themselves more as members of their funded project than of the Circular Built Environment Network. As expressed by network participants:

"*There is a counseling event tomorrow, and I must admit that I am really in doubt whether I should go. It is expected that I prioritize it, but for me, the most important thing is the industrial researcher I am supervising. I believe my time is best spent in 1:1 supervision sessions instead of participating in the counseling event.*" (Company Supervisor)

"*I have not attended many network gatherings and activities. To be honest, I found them very time-consuming and extremely chaotic in terms of communication. Every time I signed up for a gathering, changes happened in the scheduled program. In the end, my task is to supervise our industrial researcher, which is why this is my main priority.*" (University Supervisor)

These accounts demonstrate how project-level priorities consistently outweighed collective ones, weakening couplings between the network and participants' interactions.

As these quotes demonstrate, the orchestrator struggled to get participants to prioritize network activities, as individual project commitments were persistently favored over collective network goals. During a symposium, the orchestrator even stated that the Circular Built Environment Network, due to its composition and size, could speak with a stronger voice than any individual, offering special opportunities to influence the sector. However, participants showed little to no interest in supporting this proposal.

4.3.2. Decoupling the circular economy

As the Circular Built Environment Network matured, several network participants began building gaps between the collective network level and the individual project level, thereby decoupling (Bromley and Powell, 2012) project activities from the rational myth of the circular economy. This decoupling was both discursive and practical, as some participants rejected the circular economy as outdated, while others found network gatherings irrelevant for their project work:

> "*I would argue that the circular economy is outdated, and that we should move forward by considering ecosystems and the planet's resources. I have therefore contributed to the network with a critical attitude towards the circular economy.*" (Industrial PhD Student)

> "*I was very active in the network in the beginning, but I later realized that the network gatherings and activities were not relevant to my project, although they were socially rewarding. When you are under pressure, you need to prioritize what is most important, and for me, that is my project. I still strive to attend the network gatherings, but I cannot translate it into my project.*" (Industrial PhD Student)

These accounts indicate that the myth no longer functioned as an organizing principle but as a contested frame. According to the orchestrator, it is extremely challenging to foster shared meanings and understandings about the circular economy at the collective network level, and thereby fulfill the network's intended goals, when participants actively or passively work against it. As participants decoupled from the rational myth of the circular economy, network gatherings and activities became distinctly ceremonial, which further loosened the couplings between myth and practice:

> "*The network gatherings and activities quickly become extreme international and highbrow, to the point where the circular economy seems almost estranged and too distant for practical utilization. That said, projects will always develop in new directions, and the network should be supportive rather than confining them to a predetermined theme.*" (Company Supervisor)

Some participants also expressed frustration with the resulting ceremonial character of gatherings:

> "*As a network, we have a significant obligation to establish a unified voice and to determine what message we would like to convey to the sector. What have we discovered and what do we wish to communicate to the sector as a network? I am struggling to discern that. While all projects yield some interesting results, what exactly do we want to communicate as a network?*" (R&I member)

This frustration underscores how the lack of integrative orchestration led to a widening gap between individual project outcomes and collective impact.

4.3.3. Dissolution of the Circular Built Environment Network

The final network gathering in January 2024 marked the formal closure of the Circular Built Environment Network. While network participants widely acknowledged that the circular economy remained far from institutionalized in the construction sector, they also credited the network with enhancing the discursive prominence of circularity in the sector:

> "*I would argue that the Circular Built Environment Network has managed to foster a discourse on the circular economy in the construction sector. This discourse is crucial for the sector to make the final steps towards becoming fully circular.*" (Organizer)

> "*I believe the network has made the circular economy more prominent in the sector, and more companies are looking into it. That said, I also think it is important to mention that the network has been a safe spot for industrial PhD students during turbulent periods of their projects.*" (Industrial PhD Student)

These reflections suggest that while the network did not achieve strong orchestration or institutionalization, it nevertheless contributed to the discursive prominence of the circular economy and offered social support for participants. Following its formal closure, the organizers and the orchestrator announced a new three-year interorganizational network on regenerative construction to be launched in 2025. Besides the new thematic focus, the network would adopt the same setup as the Circular Built Environment Network.

This third and final period of the analysis illustrates that network participants increasingly decoupled individual project-level activities from the collective network level. As the network matured, the couplings between the myth, the network, and social interactions progressively weakened. While the myth persisted as a loose thematic orientation for the network, it no longer served as a strong organizing principle for participants' interactions. As a result, the myth and social interactions became decoupled, the network gatherings took on a more ceremonial character, and the orchestrator faced continued challenges in fostering interaction and commitment at the collective network level. This weakening of couplings ultimately undermined the network's ability to sustain a shared purpose.

5. Discussion

Our analysis reveals how the transition to a circular economy in the Danish construction sector—widely regarded as a crucial means of addressing grand environmental challenges (Benachio et al., 2020; Dzhengiz et al., 2023)—was not only pursued through the establishment of an interorganizational network but also shaped by shifting coupling configurations between the rational myth, the network, and participant interactions. In this section, we first elaborate on these coupling configurations across the three examined periods. Next, we discuss how the efforts of the interorganizational network can be understood as a strategy for collectively orchestrating for the circular economy. Finally, we present the contributions and implications of the study.

5.1. Coupling configurations across the examined periods

As shown in the analysis, the coupling configurations developed dynamically rather than remaining stable. In the first period, the circular economy was elevated to the status of a rational myth, with policymakers acting as central myth-makers. As the concept was embedded in European and Danish policy frameworks and partially formalized through legislation in the construction sector, it came to function as a taken-for-granted policy imperative. Organizations increasingly perceived alignment with circularity as both appropriate and legitimate, mobilizing resources and attention in ways that tightly coupled the myth with sectoral regulation and organizational strategy.

In the second period, the myth of the circular economy had gained sufficient prominence for organizers to form the Circular Built Environment explicitly around it. The network was framed by the organizers and the orchestrator as a space for knowledge generation, idea exchange, and coordinated experimentation, providing participants a favorable arena for translating the myth into sector-specific solutions

(Zilber, 2006). During this period, relatively tight couplings existed between the myth, the network, and social interactions, underpinned by a shared purpose and orchestrated efforts to ensure synergies between participants and projects.

In the third period, however, these couplings progressively loosened—not for sake of legitimacy but via socialization (cf. Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021: 13). Participants thus increasingly decoupled individual project activities from the myth of the circular economy by prioritizing individual project-level goals over collective network objectives. As a result, the couplings between the myth and the network, and between the network and social interactions, became moderate, while the myth and social interactions were largely decoupled, rendering network gatherings predominantly ceremonial.

Fig. 2 visualizes the shifting coupling configurations over time.

5.2. Orchestrating for the circular economy

While it is widely acknowledged that tackling grand environmental challenges requires collective efforts beyond the capacity of individual actors (Langley et al., 2023), orchestrating such efforts in interorganizational networks that lack actorhood (Grothe-Hammer, 2019) at the collective network level remains a persistent and underexplored challenge.

The circular economy is widely promoted as a transformative approach to addressing such challenges (Ho et al., 2022), particularly in resource-intensive sectors like construction. As shown in the analysis, a key premise in forming the Circular Built Environment Network was to bring together participants from public research institutions and private companies across the construction value chain to collectively accelerate and institutionalize the circular economy within the Danish construction sector. Achieving a critical mass of participants and projects was considered central to maintaining momentum and ensuring institutionalization of circularity. However, the network's size and heterogeneity, combined with its lack of actorhood, ultimately made orchestration increasingly difficult.

On the one hand, the network participants—affiliated with 20 different projects, each with varying individual interests—highlight the importance of building relational ties and fostering interdependencies to facilitate collaboration (Doh et al., 2019; Paquin and Howard-Grenville, 2013). On the other hand, the organizers and orchestrator lacked formal authority to enforce collaboration and alignment. As a result, the network and its 20 projects often competed for attention and resources, as illustrated in the analysis, where company and university supervisors prioritized activities at the individual project level over those at the collective network level.

Another issue complicating orchestration was the dominant focus on (physical) resources at the expense of other aspects of the circular economy, such as circular business models, design-for-disassembly, life-cycle assessment analysis, material passports, and waste management. Paraphrasing Pradilla et al. (2022), grand environmental challenges are open-ended and evolve over time, meaning that approaches to addressing them should be dynamic and inclusive rather than static and exclusive. As demonstrated in the analysis, the lack of such dynamism and inclusiveness within the otherwise wide-reaching scope of the circular economy (e.g., Ho et al., 2022) contributed to internal fragmentation, and participants increasingly decoupled by reorienting toward alternatives framings such as regenerative construction and ecosystem approaches.

5.3. Contributions and implications

Recent research emphasizes that grand environmental challenges represent collective problems that require collective action and collaboration to address (e.g. Doh et al., 2019; Grabski-Walls and Ambos, 2024; Provensi et al., 2024; Schöggl et al., 2023). This study contributes to the environmental management literature by showing how circular transitions are collectively pursued through orchestrated interorganizational networks (Müller-Seitz, 2012) and by identifying key

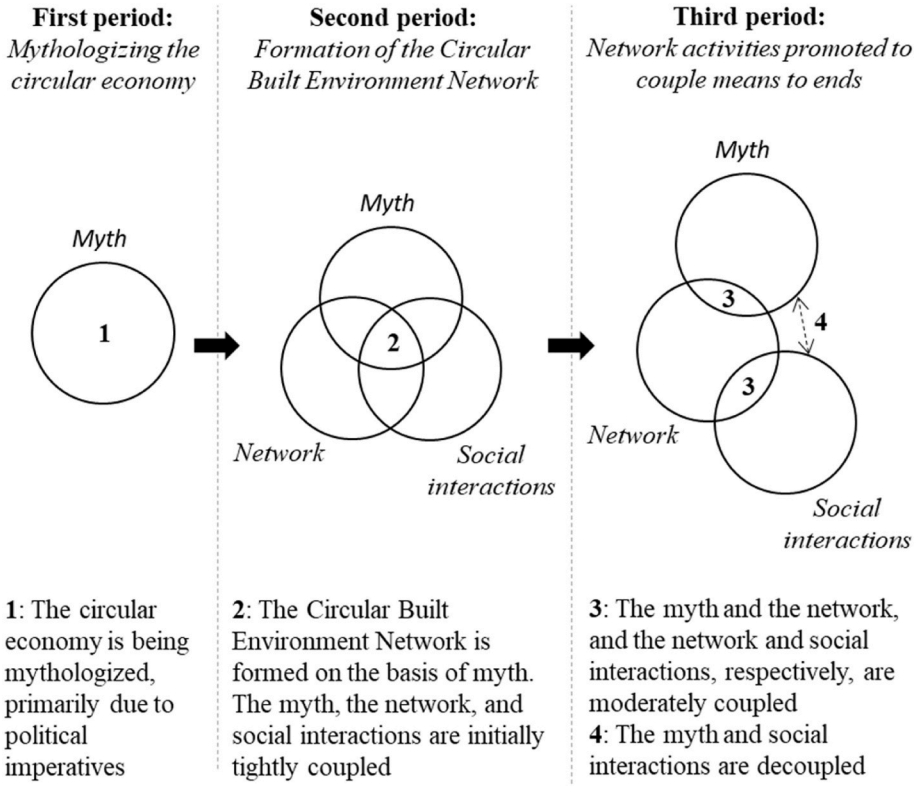

Fig. 2. Coupling configurations across the examined periods.

challenges in orchestrating these efforts over time. This area has received little attention compared to research on how individual organizations build capabilities and competences for the circular economy (e.g., Elf et al., 2022; Seles et al., 2025; Yuan and Pan, 2023).

Specifically, the study contributes insights into how coupling configurations between rational myths, networks, and social interactions (Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021) evolve across time, revealing that rational myths can enable network formation by providing legitimacy and direction but may lose their binding power when orchestration mechanisms fail to sustain collective alignment between participants and collective goals.

The findings yield three practical implications for orchestrators, organizers (e.g., funders), and policymakers. First, orchestrators of interorganizational networks, especially in fragmented, resource-intensive sectors like construction, should co-develop a shared strategic vision that is not only inspirational but also operational. This includes defining the network's purpose, expected forms of collaboration, and coordination responsibilities. To support this, a tiered governance structure, comprising a central coordination body with a formalized mandate to steer and align cross-project activities, could be beneficial.

Second, organizers (i.e., funders) could introduce incentive systems that explicitly reward engagement at the collective network level. For instance, funding calls could require applicants to define both individual project contributions and their intended input to shared deliverables or cross-project collaboration. Portions of funding could also be made conditional on active participation in joint activities, thereby aligning project-level incentives with collective goals.

Third, while policymakers played an important role in setting the circular economy agenda, there has been less political commitment to supporting its practical realization. In other words, the relationship between policymakers and the sector at large remains largely one-directional, with policymakers informing the sector about societal needs through national strategies and action plans, but with limited interest in supporting the realization of these needs, beyond a few legislative interventions. We therefore suggest that policymakers engage in iterative learning processes with practitioners, using network experiences to refine and adapt regulative frameworks. Such reflexivity could help close the gap between discursive promotion and practical institutionalization of the circular economy.

6. Conclusion

The circular economy is frequently presented as a catalyst for transformational change, which, however, hinges on the collective and coordinated action of multiple actors. Given the limited research exploring collective efforts to institutionalize and accelerate the circular economy—often at the expensive of scholarly inquiries into the efforts of individual organizations—this study examined the Circular Built Environment Network, an orchestrated interorganizational network consisting of public research institutions and private companies aiming to accelerate and institutionalize the circular economy in construction. Our interest was to explore how such a network orchestrates the realization and practical application of the circular economy in the Danish construction sector.

By analyzing three successive periods in the Circular Built Environment Network's lifespan, we showed how the circular economy: (1) attained the status of a rational myth for addressing grand environmental challenges, (2) served as the foundation for establishing an interorganizational network in construction, and (3) became a site of contestation as participants and projects increasingly decoupled from the collective network. In doing so, the study provides insights into how coupling configurations between rational myths, networks, and social interactions (Hallett and Hawbaker, 2021) evolve over time in collective efforts to transition toward the circular economy.

The study demonstrated that the Circular Built Environment Network experienced difficulties in orchestrating for the circular economy. A central reason for this was that lack of actorhood at the collective network level, meaning that the organizers, orchestrator, and advisory board had no authority to make decisions on behalf of participants and projects. Instead, they could only pursue higher-level objectives through incentives and by encouraging participants to prioritize the network and its associated gatherings and activities. Additionally, the network's recurring focus on the resource-based aspects of the circular economy led several participants to decouple from the rational myth of the circular economy, reframing their projects in relation to the concepts of regenerative construction and ecosystems. As a result, the network achieved discursive prominence but failed to mobilize participants around a shared strategic vision, and gatherings remained distinctly ceremonial.

The findings of this study are based on data from a single interorganizational network. It is likely that other interorganizational networks—with different participant compositions, inclusion criteria, and governance structures (see Fig. 1)—may have different prerequisites for successfully fostering the orchestration mechanisms needed to address grand environmental challenges. A key limitation of this study is the unclear role of the advisory board in explaining why a shared strategic vision was not successfully formulated. Another limitation, identified late in the study, is that several gatherings took place to which we were not invited, meaning that certain discussions and decisions may have occurred without our knowledge.

To better understand and expand our knowledge of how interorganizational networks can orchestrate to address grand environmental challenges collectively, future scholarly inquiries could draw inspiration from research on meta-organizations and strategic programs. Insights from the meta-organizational literature, which examines organizations of organizations that possess some degree of actorhood at the meta level (Berkowitz et al., 2022), may inform approaches to building relationships among network participants, incorporating both authoritative and voluntary mechanisms. Likewise, program management research (e.g., Frederiksen et al., 2024) could provide perspectives on how groups of projects within interorganizational networks, despite their high degree of autonomy, can be coordinated in pursuit of strategic objectives.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nicolaj Frederiksen: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Stefan Christoffer Gottlieb:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition. **Andreas de Gier:** Investigation. **Christian Koch:** Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Martine Buser:** Investigation, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this manuscript.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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