"The transnational circulation of master plans and urban megaprojects: Shortcomings and challenges for local planners and designers"

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Introduction

Today design and architectural experts, technologies and media tend to travel more extensively than in the past and to affect more deeply the conception and implementation of buildings and the urban environment (Knox and Taylor, 2005). Knox and Pain (2010) argued that this is part of a homogenization push of globalization, i.e. due to increasing financiarization and de-materialization of the real estate market, to the competing and neoliberalizing attitudes of cities, hypermobility and indulgence of design professionals. Similarly we now know that financial and technical packages for developing buildings as well as whole parts of cities circulate (among others: Moulaert, Swyngedouw and Rodriguez, 2002). In recent decades global cities as well as capital cities of Asia have in fact witnessed the effects of a steep increase in this transnational circulation of architects, urban designers and planners. It has become more and more common to expect world-famous "archistars" and "urbanistars" to design not only "iconic" or spectacular pieces of architecture, but also to outline the master plans for infrastructure hubs, corporation headquarters and institutional compounds, university campuses or museum complexes. Similarly, other sorts of large-scale development projects have resorted to branding for building political consensus and media visibility. Despite their pervasiveness, the problematic practice of transnational planning and design - both in terms of local democratic decision-making process and in terms of its urban effects - has been left to the architectural debate. The generic discussion of the urban effects of globalization can be informed with dedicated analyses of cases of transnational urban planning, design and transformation.

From Barcelona to Doha and from Singapore to Chongqing: Two Transnational Transfers

Given the relevance of such transnational urban planning and design in contemporary cities, one may ask, for example, if branded projects are able to provide the city with an iconic image under any condition. To what extent the use of transnational experts correspond to homogenization of development projects and finally the urban landscape? What difference do local planning conditions make in influencing and governing such branded transformations? In order to answer these questions I selected two cases of transfer. The first transfer concerns a very similar version of the innovative mega-structure of the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore is being now developed in Chongqing, China; they were both designed by the same international architecture (Moshe Safdie) and structural engineering (Arup) firms. The second transfer concerns the Agbar Tower and its role in the regeneration of the neighborhood of Poblenou in Barcelona. A quite similar project generated the Doha Tower which was supposed to be a central piece in the development of the new business district of the capital of Qatar. Both high-rise projects were designed by the same firm (namely Ateliers Jean Nouvel) in very dissimilar urban conditions. By analyzing and comparing similar branded projects in radically different contexts, this paper shows both local and global shortcomings and challenges.

The effects of the Maruna Bay Sands structure are substantial for the structure and image of Singapore. Despite the strongly innovative nature of the development it has soon become a reference point for Singaporean people and a tourist landmark. Of course the public spaces generated (part of which is in the 200 meter-high sky-deck) only partially counterbalance the strong private and consumerism component of this place, which is used mainly by tourists. The final outcome derived mostly by the ability of the local planning authority to drive a complex process and to steer the extremely innovative expertise in architecture, urban design and engineering. At the time of writing the Chongqing project is not completed, nor an overall evaluation of the ongoing development is publicly available. Nonetheless one can derive several considerations by comparing the plans and schemes. The Singapore and Chongqing structures are both mixed-use and they include hotel functions; they are meant to become landmark buildings and to distinguish the image of the city. In Chongqing the monumental and iconic role of the building seems to prevail over the aim of generating a new public realm for both citizens and tourists. The public space is mostly dedicated to consumption or private enjoyment. The services provided to the city are limited. A different balance in functions, which include office spaces and residential towers can be highlighted in the Chongqing development. Infrastructure and accessibility had special care and improvement in both cases, though the limited information about green areas in the Chinese site make it difficult to understand if they will match Marina Bay's high standards or not. In this case, the image of the project crafted by designers is central in the transfer. Singapore's towers and sky-deck forms are a highly recognizable icon for the development of the waterfront and were in fact mobilized in Chongqing megastructure too.

From a physical viewpoint Poblenou was a focal point in the development of the city of Barcelona envisioned since the mid-1990s. At that time, public and private interventions almost completed the waterfront regeneration and the Diagonal Mar; at the same time a special agency planned the massive transformation in the northeastern area of the Sagrera. Poblenou (and the infrastructural node of Glòries) was at the center of this framework and policymakers perceived the conversion of the light-industrial fabric as an opportunity for developing new economic activities. The completion of the Diagonal Mar and the enhancement of Plaza des Les Glòries Catalanes as an infrastructural node lead the administration and the public agency in charge of the redevelopment of the neighborhood (22@) to locate projects with higher building density and height limits here. In this way, they succeeded in their attempt to recompose the urban fabric of Poblenou with reference to Cerda's grid (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2011). A limited number number of projects were designed in Poblenou by international name architects: the Campus Audiovisual by Chipperfield, Diagonal 123 Office Building by Perrault and few others. Among these projects, the most visually prominent is the Agbar Tower, the office building

designed by Ateliers Jean Nouvel. The Agbar Tower became a symbol of renewal for the area and a landmark that is visible from most parts of the city. The pictures of the building are widely used today for urban marketing and tourist promotion.

One of the most important and visible mega-projects in Doha, Qatar, is the central business district (CBD) of West Bay. Contrary to its classical features (high level of accessibility, high building density, high concentration of retail and office space, heavy traffic on multiple modes of transportation, ….), this top-down CDB project concentrated mostly on buildings and not on the public realm (as reported by Mirincheva, Wiedmann, Salama, 2013). Dozens of high-rise buildings have been built within the last 15 years. In other terms, one can see this district and, most notably, its skyline have become an icon for contemporary Qatar. One of the skyscrapers on the waterfront is the Doha Tower designed by Jean Nouvel, completed in 2010 and partially in use today. This building stands nearby other skyscrapers with striking aesthetics such as the Tornado Tower and Palm Towers. The fact that the building is only partially in use, makes it difficult to say that there is a population that recognizes it as a peculiar place. The building was intended as a piece in spectacular collection of buildings, as one of the distinctive signs in the modern skyline of West Bay. However, the other high-rise buildings having spectacular shapes and similar building techniques and materials tend to reduce its visual impact.

Conclusions

One must recognize that urban landscape homogenization and other problematic effects of transnational urbanism do not depend only on generic globalization, but also on plans and projects which do imply different degrees of autonomy according to contextual conditions. Both in Singapore and Barcelona, the positive results in the urban realm derived from a blend of management activities and control over design of the built environment by local planning agencies and transnational designers. One cannot take these skills and conditions for granted in rising Asian cities such as Doha and Chongqing, and in western countries as well, for multiple reasons. More and more often, urban transformation occurs through single large-scale strategic projects which tend to be exceptions with reference to the vision for the development of one city or region. When both public and private resources or the available time become scarce or the political stability is lower, urban policymakers and planners may tend to lower the standards and quality of the planned interventions, in order to keep the available investments flowing and maintain the political consensus among relevant stakeholders. These can be seen as ways of lowering the critical contribution that planning practice is expected to give to society both in terms of process management and care for the urban form and landscape in the face of transnational urban phenomena (Munoz, 2008).

The weakening of local planning expertise can generate governance conditions that are prone to new transnational expertise and leave little room for relevant local debate and learning (Ponzini and Nastasi, 2011). On the basis of the evidence that was provided by this comparative analysis, one can see the relationship between the urban environment and branded architectural projects as well as understanding the relevance of typological and visual features of the context where the project is located.

This reflection reveals on one side the paradoxes and criticism to the mainstream rhetoric of the circulation of branded architectural projects and, on the other, it highlights the urgent need for developing stronger local competences for urban design and planning, improving urban design competences and planning institutions and agencies (e.g. design commissions, guidelines, …, see: Kim and Forester, 2012; Palermo and Ponzini, 2012 and 2015).

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