ANTI-THESIS

Worlding Cities in the Middle East and North Africa – Arguments for a Conceptual Turn

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This article suggests analyzing megaprojects in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as worlding practices, hence, as a way to influence emerging countries' own status of being in the world. This analytical lens differs from traditional perspectives that have tried to identify regional particularities such as the influence of Gulf countries and an authoritarian way of planning. Seeing megaprojects as worlding aspirations, instead, helps to see them embedded in a wider global context, stressing the post-colonial and developmental dimension of this significant planning trend. It further allows emphasizing interactions with other urban policies such as slum resettlement.

Keywords: Worlding, Megaprojects, Urban Planning, Urban Policy

Urban renewal, waterfront development, and other mega-projects, as well as the hosting of international events, have emerged as significant characteristics of urban space in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since the 1990s.[1] Most prominently, the Arab Gulf countries have invested in unprecedented forms of urbanism. This motivated scholars to consider Arab Gulf cities as emerging global cities (Elsheshtawy, "Redrawing Boundaries") following the logics of the "economy of fascination" (Schmid) or the "economy of attention" (Franck).[2] However, mega-projects have also appeared in other parts of the MENA region, where authors such as Barthel, Benlakhlef and Bergel, and Choplin and Vignal have stressed the direct influence of Arab Gulf countries through money, project developers, and images – sometimes even referred to as "Dubaization" (Elsheshtawy, "Dubai").

To explain these developments in the MENA region, authors borrowed concepts from Europe and North America (Hubbard and Hall; Harvey; Swyngedouw et al.), but tried to distinguish an "Arab" form of mega-projects (Barthel). On the one hand, mega-projects were framed as the outcome of a new entrepreneurial urban governance and as an expression

of globalized urban neoliberalism (Barthel and Planel; Hourani; Krijnen and Fawaz; Heeg, this issue). On the other hand, authors highlighted the specific significance of authoritarian regimes as driving forces behind so-called "presidential" or "royal" mega-projects (Barthel 137; Bogaert; Safar Zitoun).

I argue that traditional concepts from the Global North are not sufficient to explain the dynamics of mega-projects in the MENA region. Moreover, regional characteristics may be more comparable to those of other countries of the Global South. Therefore, I suggest a different conceptual perspective, seeing urban mega-projects as distinct features of *worlding* strategies that follow national interests. The concept of worlding cities (Roy and Ong), developed mostly in the Asian context and in response to calls for more southern, post-colonial urban theory (Robinson, "Global and World Cities"; Roy, "The 21st-Century Metropolis"), offers a comprehensive, post-colonial perspective rooted in the Global South itself. As such, the worlding concept goes beyond notions of entrepreneurial planning and urban neoliberalism, taking into account the specificities and unique dynamics of southern urbanism. This includes the notion of post-colonial emancipation (or

"emergence"), discourses about modernization and development, and the strong role of the central state in urban planning. Moreover, seeing mega-projects through the eyes of worlding may make it possible to break with the increasingly questionable conceptual entity of the MENA region. Hence, this conceptualization may be seen as the logical continuity of earlier claims in MENA urban research that sought to turn away from traditional concepts of the "Arab", "Oriental" or "Islamic" city (El-Kazaz and Mazur; Elsheshtawy, "The Middle East City"; Kanna). Stressing the diverse worlding processes within MENA cities helps to see them more closely embedded within global urban dynamics framed under southern urban theory. This could help to ease comparisons with other parts of the world and to overcome regional deadlocks, such as the repeated notion of the regional leading role of Arab Gulf countries. As I will show below, the role of the Arab Gulf countries for mega-projects in other parts of the MENA region is significant, but it is by far not exclusive (Verdeil and Nasr).

Thus, the worlding concept suggests a different perspective that breaks with the notion of *exceptional* MENA cities, seeing them as *ordinary* "cities in a world of cities" (Robinson, "Cities in a World of Cities") –

without being blind to (sub)regional specificities. Therefore, the aim of this article is to use the worlding city concept as a way to integrate MENA cities in discussions on southern urban theory and to inspire comparisons that seek to understand similarities and differences in urban development on a global scale without being bound to regional borders. The article is based on a review of literature and documents on urban mega-project developments in all parts of the MENA region, but with a focus on Morocco and Egypt.

Origins and Characteristics of Worlding

Since the 1980s, new concepts have arisen that refer to the increasing importance of big metropolises within globalized networks of capital. Sassen's *Global City* and Friedmann's *World City Hypothesis* introduced new city hierarchies that conceptualized a few cities of the Global North as the leading control and management nodes of the world economy. However, these concepts created a vast, powerless periphery without any structural relevance, leaving most of the world's cities "off the map" (Robinson, "Global and World Cities"). Malkawi asserts that "the debate over global (world) cities ignores most cities around the world, including Arab cities" (27). Because of that, the global city concept – despite its popularity far beyond

academia (Roy, "Worlding the South") – is inadequate to explain various globalized dynamics that have shaped and transformed emerging cities in the Global South at a much greater speed and to a greater extent than in the Global North (Robinson, "Global and World Cities"; Roy, "Urbanisms, Worlding Practices and the Theory of Planning").

In response to the northern global city concept, Roy and Ong introduced the more qualitative concept of worlding, to emphasize the dynamic and shifting realities of subjective worldviews ("worldliness"). According to Ong, worlding "is linked to the idea of emergence, to the claims that global situations are always in formation" (12). In contrast to the static hierarchies of the global city concept, worlding implies that governments of emerging countries – irrespective of their actual position within global hierarchies – are able to boost their own status in the world by influencing worldviews, pictures, and images. This means that central governments have an increasing interest in city development and branding. Mega-projects and the hosting of international events become tools to project a renewed national image to external tourists and investors, but also to enhance internal political legitimacy. Ong argues that

because of the increasing importance of cities as "centers of enormous political investment, economic growth, and cultural vitality, [major cities in the developing world] thus have become sites for instantiating their countries' claims to global significance" (2).

Hence, the notion of "aspiration" is central. Different from the status of a "global city" derived from the city's *measurable* position in the world economy, worlding means an aspiration of emerging cities to a subjective, constantly negotiated, and changing notion of what is urban world-class. Competition and comparison are therefore central to worlding aspirations – expressed by plenty of city rankings, the competition to have the highest tower or the longest bridge, and the global circulation of presumptive urban world-class features, such as buildings designed by star architects, waterfront developments, green-city blueprints, or skyscrapers. Verdeil (this issue) notes that worlding can also mean the circulation of progressive global planning trends, such as sustainability. However, by the nature of the worlding concept itself, the main objective remains the striving for international attention and recognition – often rather short-termed. Finally, while speed and speculation are distinct elements of worlding

practices, the circulation of values, visions, and money *among* cities of the so-called Global South (and not only from north to south) further questions the hegemony of northern urbanism (Ong; Roy, "Worlding the South"). This seems most relevant for North Africa, where, as noted, the influence of Gulf countries and also China (i.e., in Algeria) is strong.

MENA Cities Aspire to Urban *World-Class*
Research on urban worlding aspirations has ignored the MENA region, with few exceptions (Beier; Haines). This is surprising following Elsheshtawy, who observed that cities "are increasingly being viewed as a product that needs to be marketed" ("The Middle East City" 7) in order to encourage investment and tourism. Likewise, Barthel is convinced that "mega-projects are at the core of contemporary Arab town planning" (133). I argue that seeing these mega-projects as worlding practices offers two main advantages. First, it allows us to see them in relation to similar developments in other parts of the developing world – not only the Arab Gulf – by using a post-colonial perspective. Second, worlding provides a more comprehensive analytical framework that does not see mega-projects as isolated urban planning phenomena, but, in line with Bogaert, as strongly interconnected with

other urban developments, such as shantytown evictions. In fact, I argue that worlding aspirations in most Arab cities are – as in other parts of the developing world – the main drivers behind urban development, including mega-projects, the hosting of mega-events, infrastructural upgrading, and the fight against supposed urban "*eyesores*" such as slums or street markets.

Worlding aspirations become most visible in planning visions and masterplans. In 2009, the General Organization of Physical Planning (GOPP) presented the vision Cairo 2050 as the flagship of a national modernization strategy seeking to boost international competitiveness and to portray national power – clear attributes of worlding. The vision compares Cairo with other "world cities" (GOPP) such as London and Paris, but also Mexico City, Shanghai, and Abu Dhabi – for example concerning the number of green areas per capita, spatial density, and subway network. Existing Cairo is portrayed as a significant, but ill-equipped and disordered developing city that needs Haussmann-like boulevards, luxurious hotel developments, and spatial decentralization to become world-class itself. Undesired existing structures such as the village Nazlet El Seman, located in proxim-

ity to the pyramids, simply disappear from the map. Although officially abandoned in reaction to the uprisings in 2011, the vision has remained present within individual projects, such as the new administrative capital (see also Loewert and Steiner, this issue) that – according to its self-portrayal – should become a "well-planned city", inspired by "the best civic environments from across the globe".[3] The sheer magnitude of Cairo 2050 and the prominent notions of "world-class" aspiration, political emergence, and national (not so much local) power go far beyond the explanatory power of concepts that were classically used to analyze mega-projects in the Global North.

Similar signs of worlding may be found in almost all other MENA countries as well. Concerning Rabat, several infrastructural "upgrading" and urban renewal projects, such as the waterfront development Bouregreg (Amarouche and Bogaert, this issue), aim to project "an image compatible with the status of Rabat as capital and to confer an international dimension by reinforcing the competitiveness of the city" (Mouloudi 231). According to Rabat's urban development plan, the leading urban development objective is to ensure a "*rayonnement digne des grandes métropoles mondiales*" (luminous appeal

of a global city) (AURS 46). Thus, similar to Cairo, the capital should portray Morocco's self-conception as an emerging, powerful, and emancipated nation – a key characteristic of worlding aspirations. Slums – framed as the antithesis of the modern city – obviously do not fit the aspired image of the "world-class" city. Its dwellers have been largely confronted with eviction and displacement (Bogaert 2).

Beyond the externally oriented demonstration of (emerging) national power, circulating global planning trends also shape worlding practices. Thus, fashionable key words such as "sustainable", "green", or "smart" within urban masterplans should *mark* (if not *market*) progression and innovation. However, if related urban projects are not embedded within broader urban planning strategies, their effectiveness in changing realties on the ground remains low. For example, the tramway of Casablanca, built to fight air pollution and traffic congestion, among other reasons, deters these goals, as it has accelerated the displacement of thousands of shantytown dwellers to the unconnected urban peripheries. Other flagship projects such as eco-friendly Masdar City in Abu Dhabi have shifted away from ambitious plans after initial media attention and financial

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support faded (Brorman Jensen; Verdeil, this issue).

Conclusion

There are a couple of general aspects that come out of these MENA-related reflections on worlding. First, the top-down nature of "presidential" or "royal" urban mega-projects that some scholars considered a distinct feature of MENA urbanism is in fact nothing unique. Following the logics of worlding, it is the result of the strong national interest in urban mega-projects, seen as a tool to materialize and portray emergent national power. Thus, second, their related external orientation toward foreign tourists, investors, and politicians can be considered an aspiration to influence the country's own status in the world. The latter is nothing static, but constantly changing and negotiable through comparison and competition among cities and aspects of urban "world-class" around the world – not only through the media, but also as an integral part of planning documents. Finally, these comparisons, as well as the circulating key words of international planning concepts, underline that Arab Gulf countries are not the exclusive reference points for urban planners in the Middle East and North Africa. Hence, using the analytical lens of worlding is helpful to analyze mega-proj-

ects in relation to other planning strategies, to stress their post-colonial and modernist dimension, and to overcome the limitations of a questionable regional homogeneity.

Notes

[1] A regional pioneer was the waterfront and new town project *Les Berges du Lac Tunis,* which has been developed jointly by Tunisian and Saudi Arabian investors since 1983.

[2] For an overview, please see the work of Wippel et al.

[3] http://thecapitalcairo.com/vision.html.

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