



The limits of growth: A case study of three mega-projects in Istanbul



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 April 2016

Received in revised form 4 August 2016

Accepted 25 September 2016

Available online 1 October 2016

Keywords:

Istanbul

Mega-projects

Vision 2023

Urban and economic growth

Construction industry

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to identify and analyse the dynamics and mechanisms of urban transformation in Istanbul using the case study of three mega-projects currently underway - the Third Bridge (officially named Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge), the Third Airport, and Kanal Istanbul. Connected via the Northern Marmara Motorway, these independent projects could also be perceived as parts of a big mega-project - shaping a new city in the north of Istanbul. Triggered by goals defined by the national development document “Vision 2023”, and supported by the intensified construction industry, rapid urban growth multiplies a number of challenges and discrepancies between the official vision of progress and professional estimations of its possible outcomes. Consequently, the article gives an insight into the contextual background of the selected projects and the mechanisms of their implementation, whilst focusing on three fields of estimated impacts (urban structure, environment/ecology and community). The mega projects are identified as strategic instruments and agents of change in achieving the anticipated vision of growth, whilst the low level of their general sustainability represents one of the main concerns and drawbacks in both public and professional acceptance of them.

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1. Introduction

Istanbul's strategic position, also defined by its geographical features, has played a significant role in its global recognition and attractiveness. As an emerging global city and financial center, Istanbul gets the lion's share from the capital invested on urban mega-projects (UMPs). Turkey's “Vision 2023” defines a set of goals to be reached by the centennial of the Republic of Turkey, stressing the importance of public infrastructure investments in further economic growth, and urban and global development (World Profile Group, 2013: 3). Amongst the numerous projects, three large-scale urban regeneration proposals associated with 2023 objectives are distinct - the construction of the third bridge over the Bosphorus, a new waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara (“Kanal Istanbul”) and the third airport (Gül, Dee, & Cunuk, 2014). Having in mind the importance, spatio-economic character and scale of these proposals, the article focuses on their roles as strategic instruments and agents of change in achieving the anticipated vision of economic growth, as well as the questionable sustainability of the selected (and interlinked) projects. In order to define the influence of both the global and local background of the problems, the following research questions have been formulated:

- What are the characteristics of the urban planning environment and what are the roles of participating actors and institutions?
- What are the regulatory mechanisms facilitating environmentally friendly urban growth and to what extent are they taken into account by policymakers and implementers of the projects?
- What is the relationship between mega-projects and urban dynamics with respect to the production of space, economic growth and social processes?

The article is based on a qualitative approach to the selected case studies through analysis of primary and secondary sources (government plans and official documents, expert opinions, NGO reports, newspapers and social media). The applied descriptive method delineates the real-life context in which the selected mega-projects are supposed to be implemented, whilst exploratory case study research is used to anticipate possible outcomes of the project implementation and the estimated impacts on urban structure, environment/ecology and community.

The article starts with providing a brief theoretical background of the role of mega-projects in urban development (from the perspective of the global/local dichotomy and centralization/decentralization debate). Whilst offering an insight into local contexts, the pace of transformation is discussed in relation to economic growth and the anticipated changes. Simultaneously, the level and quality of interaction between official development visions, dominant planning mechanisms and the actors involved are examined. The article then

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proceeds to focus on the selected case studies - three interlinked UMPs. The conflicts between planning and implementation are addressed through the confronted realms of action, while possible impacts at the spatial, environmental, and social level are identified and interpreted in accordance with the analysis results.

2. Mega projects: a tool for urban development and/or city branding?

The term 'Mega-projects' is used to refer to large-scale projects that involve costly schemes of development and transformation of land uses (Douglass, 2002; Fainstein, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2014). Examples include hub airports, high-speed train nodes, and convention centers or huge sports venues. According to Sklair (2005), mega-projects act as a prime strategy for the transformation of urban space, whilst their spatial and functional similarity reflects the homogenizing effect of global forces and the mechanisms imposed by the international property market and private-sector involvement (Presas, 2005; Fainstein, 2001). Mega-projects require mega budgets, in which the economic capital is transformed into "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986), as a signifier of power and wealth at both on international and national levels.

In the contemporary globalized world, inter-city competition for promoting mega-projects gains pace under the pressure of financial capital, while cities face construction booms. Globalization and the increasing inter-dependency between cities and their economies have instigated a number of new processes - power and responsibilities have been shifted from the national to subnational level, the importance of global communications and transnational corporations has increased decentralization, whilst hypermobility and competitiveness have become vital for future development (Martins, 2004; Short, 2006; Sassen, 2007).

The importance of the local background cannot be overlooked, because political ambitions and the state's policy orientation towards the creation of a "global city" can play a significant role in the launching of mega projects. The case of Istanbul is a good example of this practice, which can be seen in other cities, such as Seoul, whose project for Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park, characterized by the shift from local development plan to "territorialized urban megaproject", was initiated by an election pledge and national aspirations towards global recognition of the city (Hwang, 2014).

According to Park (2011), land development and construction projects are favored by expanding market economies, which commodify space and environment, whilst simultaneously being fueled by highly politicized territorial interests determined by spatial selectivity. Considering this trend, it is important to underline Molotch's (1976) theory of the "urban growth machine", which defines pluralistic interests in relation to a city, putting forward the coalitions of actors and organizations that share an interest in local growth and its effects on land values. Governments act as agents of (re)development, either by generating "social returns" such as social housing, or by building "public and private partnerships", especially in the case of rising cost pressures on public funds and the opportunity for exploiting the rent gap to attract investors (Hutton, 2016: 176). Harvey (1989) claims that UMPs are used in entrepreneurial urban policy mechanisms, in order to create a stimulating business environment in which the exchange value of the land exceeds its use value.

Another phenomenon closely linked to the proliferation of mega-projects is city branding, in which development strategies focus on providing higher visibility and recognition for cities in the global arena. Applbaum (2004) recognizes branding as one of the crucial symbolization strategies in which sign value highly contributes to the prestige of megaprojects, and this feature is explained by Baudrillard (1981: 113) as a "conversion of economic exchange value into sign exchange value", within the production-consumption relationship.

In addition to megaprojects, mega-events serve as marketing tools to showcase the image of the city branded by landmark architecture and large infrastructure projects. For example, in the case of Istanbul, global discourse is reflected in Istanbul's persistent but unsuccessful bids to host Olympic Games (2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2020). Whilst an intense campaign was launched to promote the city, Perouse (2014) points out that such a mega-event is not only a marketing tool, but also "a pretext to further accelerate redevelopment plans". Developing the transport infrastructure was one of the most critical concerns for the 2020 Games, as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) identified transport as one of the toughest challenges for Istanbul (Bisson, 2013). In this context, the report of the 2020 Evaluation Commission highlights "Vision 2023", in which "the 2020 Games is part of the national government's transformative 2023 Master Plan for Turkey" (IOC, 2013: 9).

2.1. Istanbul: the pace of change

From the 1920s to today, it is possible to detect a specific relationship between political changes and the process of urban (re)shaping. During the decade followed by the foundation of the Republic in 1923, Ankara was chosen as the capital of the new nation state. According to Akpınar (2014), urbanism was used by the authorities as an effective instrument of sustained economic development, especially on the level of spatial organization and urban infrastructure. Modernization, along with Westernization, represented a process closely related to the preferred integration with Europe.

Istanbul started to get attention from the government in the 1930s and this period was marked by the Prost's master plan. Mega-events and international expositions were used as triggers for urban transformation and development, and the importance of Olympic Games was already acknowledged (Bilsel & Zedef, 2011).

The period between 1950 and 1960, known as the "Menderes Construction Period" after the Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, was characterized by radical interventions resulting in the demolition of inner-city neighborhoods and the opening of large corridors in the historic peninsula (Günay, Koramaz, & Özüekren, 2014). Following industrialization, the influx of working-class populations increased, whilst the need for human labor in farming decreased. Consequently, migration from rural to urban areas intensified, as well as the housing demand (Enlil, 2011). The outcome of this process was *gecekondular* settlements (squats), in which the local government signed over property rights to squatters instead of investing in social housing. According to Tanulku (2015), this stimulated further urban sprawl, unregulated by official planning documents and tools.

The new Constitution of 1961, which followed the military intervention, defined housing as the responsibility of the state, as well as a citizen's right (Günay et al., 2014). The foundation of the State Planning Organization (SPO) in 1960 frames the role of governmental politics in promoting planning and shaping economic growth with the task of preparing national, sectoral and regional development plans and identifying sub-regions for priority investment. However, Enlil (2011) claims that there is a strong link between the state and the holding companies, which influenced growth in the mixed economic system and the import-substitution oriented rapid industrialization, both envisioned by National Development Plans and Investment Programs.

As a consequence of rapid industrialization and population increase, growth of the city through the peripheries introduced the need to link urban areas through transportation systems. However, the construction of the E-5 motorway and the first bridge over the Bosphorus (in the 1970s) triggered urban sprawl instead of providing a sustainable solution, and Istanbul became an "overgrown industrial city" by the 1980s (Güvenç, 1993: 75). The further uncontrollable growth of Istanbul was prompted by the winds of neoliberalism stimulating the free-market economy and favoring

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