



## Contested discourses of a mixed-use megaproject: Cornubia, Durban



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### ABSTRACT

Housing for the urban poor remains a significant challenge in South African cities. Post 1994 the South African state engaged in a large-scale housing programme delivering over 3 million state subsidised homes. However, housing policy since 2004 has shifted away from the delivery of housing units to the development of integrated human settlements. The national state has identified large scale mixed use projects, such as Cornubia in Durban, as the new approach. This paper explores the discourses constructed by multiple actors, including the national and local state, the private sector, technical experts (consultants) and civil society as they have shaped the development of this mixed use 'housing' project over time. The paper reveals the multiple ways in which space is constructed in a megaproject that is intended to address both pro-growth and pro-poor goals.

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### Introduction

Megaprojects, or very large development projects, have emerged in cities across the globe as a reflection of state supported neo-liberalism. Defining characteristics of megaprojects are their complexity; the scale of new construction or rehabilitation; the state-led public-private partnerships and multiple developers which are usually required to produce them; their exceptionalism in relation to policy and planning; the transformation of land use in one contiguous area; the long period of time required for completion and the high cost of the development (Fainstein, 2009; Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003; van Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk, 2008). Two main types of large scale projects have been identified, namely economic projects, such as industrial estates or shopping malls; and infrastructure projects, including airports, roads and other transport infrastructure such as bridges and tunnels (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Kennedy, 2013). Fainstein (2009: 768) argues that the original large scale projects that were developed in American cities in the late 1990s as a response to pressures of the global economy were "very big, mixed use developments" that provided sites for housing and were attractive to multinational businesses. Housing continues to form part of megaprojects, such as accommodation included in mega-event developments, waterfronts, or mixed use projects, particularly as a result of the equity measures it addresses (Fainstein, 2009). However, housing is usually not the main focus of megaproject

development. Nonetheless, in South Africa the political, economic and social pressure associated with the post-democracy housing question has resulted in the development of human settlements being elevated to the level of large scale project development involving all three tiers of government (national, provincial and local).

Large scale human settlement projects, which reflect a 'mega-project' approach to addressing sub-standard housing in South African cities, emerged from the 'Breaking New Ground' Policy (BNG) which was launched in 2004 to address housing backlogs and persistent urban segregation in South Africa cities. Ten years of post-democracy housing delivery under the 1994 Housing Policy and Strategy had resulted in the large scale provision of state subsidised formal housing units to the poor. However, this national housing programme did not adequately achieve its goals of addressing housing backlogs or of developing integrated sustainable human settlements; fundamentally, it did not reconstruct the geography of apartheid (Charlton, 2009; Department of Housing, 2004; Sutherland, Robbins, Scott, & Sim, 2013). The BNG was therefore introduced to address a number of shortcomings in the national housing programme. Two large scale human settlement projects, N2 Gateway in Cape Town (City of Cape Town) and Cornubia in Durban (eThekweni Municipality) were identified as presidential lead projects, which are now known as national priority projects (2011) to exemplify this new approach to housing the poor.

In the early 2000s, the eThekweni Municipality, under the leadership of the then city manager Mike Sutcliffe, began to shift towards entrepreneurial urbanism, with a focus on the

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development of large scale projects or ‘mega-projects’. The Point Development, a large scale urban renewal project on prime coastal land within the inner city (see Hannan & Sutherland, 2014), was proposed in 2003 by the Municipality in partnership with private developers. At this time Moreland Properties, now known as Tongaat Hulett Developments (THD),<sup>1</sup> in partnership with the Municipality identified mixed-use projects with a large scale housing component, as a specific approach to enhance economic growth, create employment, address housing backlogs and produce integrated human settlements. The ANC government had been successful in delivering housing units to the urban poor but these settlements created ‘islands’ of poverty as they lacked the facilities, employment opportunities, social integration and urban connections that transform housing projects in to integrated human settlements. This approach was aligned with the national housing department’s BNG policy. Large scale developments were therefore being promoted at both a national and local government level to address the multiple challenges facing South African cities.

According to Kennedy (2013) ‘megaprojects’ are a useful analytical tool for exploring urban governance and urban transformation. This paper focuses on the Cornubia megaproject development, a public-private partnership between the eThekweni Municipality and THD<sup>2</sup> to produce a new ‘integrated human settlement’ consisting of a large housing component, commercial and light industrial development, and social facilities. The development was touted by the Municipal Housing Department Head and THD as being strategically positioned to contribute to the consolidation and integration of the area. It therefore represents an ‘economic’ mixed-use megaproject (Fainstein, 2009; Kennedy, 2013). The paper explores the strategies deployed by different sets of actors, namely the state, private sector, consultants and civil society, to wield control over space by reflecting on the dominant discourses that have emerged in this large scale project over the period 2005–2011. The paper reveals the tensions and entanglements between the different actors and their interests, as they have attempted to dominate the production of this large scale development, thereby shaping the future of the city.

### Megaprojects for economic growth and social transformation?

In large cities, megaprojects are used as a “strategy of international competition to attract capital” and they “leverage the potential of cities as growth engines” (Kennedy, 2013: 5). They therefore form a core component of the pro-growth agenda of cities. However, in the case of South Africa, as a result of the country’s post-apartheid commitment to economic growth and social redistribution, large scale projects are required to address both pro-growth and pro-poor imperatives. The tension between the pro-growth and pro-poor agenda is strongly evident in the country given its neo-liberal development approach and its continuing high levels of social inequality and poverty. Megaprojects in South Africa, particularly large scale infrastructure projects, are packaged and promoted as having the potential to drive economic growth, create employment opportunities, restructure the space economy of apartheid and ensure that benefits trickle down



Fig. 1. Locality Plan (Iyer, 2011: 9).

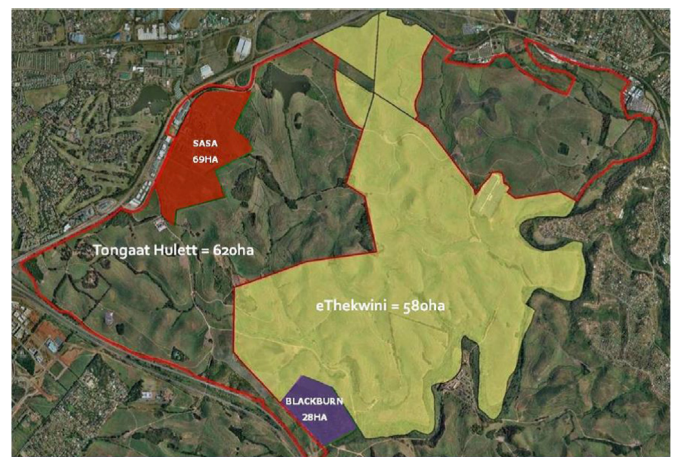


Fig. 2. Cornubia Land Ownership (SSI, 2011: 23).

to the poor and disadvantaged. Public-private partnerships are used as a mechanism through which to negotiate and implement both global economic and local redistributive imperatives (Houghton, 2013).

However, using megaprojects as a driver of economic growth and as a means of social redistribution is challenging, as literature reveals the failure of megaprojects to address social concerns<sup>3</sup> and to reduce poverty and inequality (Dupont, 2013; Fainstein, 2009; Follmann, 2015; Robbins, 2015). The pro-growth approach is evident within the eThekweni Municipality, with national, provincial and local government developing mega-projects and large scale investments to drive economic growth in strategic zones within the city (Hannan & Sutherland, 2014; Houghton, 2013; Robbins, 2015). Within this approach there is a clear focus on neo-liberal discourses of market driven growth, flexibility and locational competitiveness, with each city-region or city zone having a unique and competitive place-specific economic profile (Brenner, 2004). Megaprojects support the approach of

<sup>1</sup> Tongaat Hulett is a listed agri-processing business which engages in agriculture, land management and property development.

<sup>2</sup> Initially a joint venture between the eThekweni Municipality and Tongaat Hulett, the Cornubia development has since been adopted by the South African Cabinet (2011) as a national priority project or Lekgotla Project, bringing all spheres of government in as official partners in the development.

<sup>3</sup> Bornstein (2010) argues however, that in megaprojects in Los Angeles, Montreal and Vancouver community concerns were taken in to account and social issues were embedded in to the design of the projects.

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