



Urban mega-projects for a ‘world-class’ riverfront – The interplay of informality, flexibility and exceptionality along the Yamuna in Delhi, India



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ABSTRACT

While the rejuvenation of India's rivers is a major future challenge for sustainable urban development, large-scale riverfront development projects across India indicate that the riverbed is often seen almost exclusively as real estate. In Delhi, a series of urban mega-projects has been realized on the river's floodplain, which almost simultaneously had been cleared of large slum settlements. By focusing on the environmental dimensions, discourses and legal conflicts, the case study contrasts the slum demolitions and the development of two intertwined mega-projects (the Akshardham Temple complex and the Commonwealth Games Village). Grounded on Ananya Roy's (re)interpretation of informality as “a mode of urbanization”, the paper argues that urban mega-projects in India should be interpreted as intentionally created zones of exceptions embedded in a calculated urban informality.

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Introduction

In order to transform their economic landscapes and enhance their competitiveness, cities around the globe have (re)developed their urban riverfronts and in many cases urban mega-projects have played a key role in riverfront revitalization (see among others [del Cerro Santamaría, 2013](#); [Desfor, Laidley, Stevens, & Schubert, 2011](#)). Large-scale riverfront development projects are also implemented or planned in many cities across India (e.g. Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Delhi, Guwahati, Lucknow, Mumbai, Pune, Surat). In the capital city of Delhi, a series of urban mega-projects has been developed along the banks of the river Yamuna ([Baviskar, 2011](#); [Follmann, in press](#); [Follmann & Trumpp, 2013](#)). Studies on urban mega-projects in India have predominantly focused on the social implications especially for the urban poor in terms of displacement caused, redevelopment and manifold problems of resettlement (see among others [Chatterjee, 2009](#); [Desai, 2012](#); [Weinstein, 2009](#); [Weinstein, 2012](#)). Without neglecting this important aspect (see Dupont's contribution to this issue), this paper explicitly concentrates on the environmental dimensions, discourses and legal conflicts.

In general, urban mega-projects have significant socio-natural impacts on the (urban) landscape (cf. [Gellert & Lynch, 2003](#)).¹ Therefore, urban mega-projects raise many questions and their effects should be generally assessed through a comprehensive environmental (and social) impact assessment. Especially, when urban mega-projects are located in ecologically sensitive areas like riverbeds, direct and indirect effects on the physical nature (e.g. biological, geomorphological or hydrological effects) and environmental risks for the project and the city as a whole (e.g. flooding) need to be assessed carefully. Environmental impact assessments are mandatory for urban mega-projects; however, the procedures for environmental impact assessments are often described as being inadequate in India (see e.g. [Kohli & Manju, 2005](#); [Kohli & Menon, 2012](#); [Menon & Kohli, 2009](#); [Paliwal, 2006](#); [Panigrahi & Amirapu, 2012](#)). Furthermore, many observers have called attention to violations of environmental laws and regulations; and examples include a long list of prestigious, mega-projects: the hill city Lavasa ([Datta, 2012](#)), the malls on Delhi's Ridge ([Ghertner, 2011b](#)), the Sabarmati riverfront project in Ahmedabad ([Desai, 2012](#)), and the mega-projects along Delhi's riverfront ([Baviskar, 2011](#), [Follmann, in press](#), [Follmann & Trumpp, 2013](#)). It is often argued that these

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¹ [Gellert and Lynch \(2003\)](#) have termed these effects as “displacements”. Since this article also deals with slum evictions, I prefer to speak of *effects* rather than *displacements* in order to avoid confusion.

projects are realized because of the absence of sufficient environmental policies or an insufficient monitoring and control system (see e.g. Datta, 2012). This paper challenges these simplified explanations and argues in favour of a more systematic understanding of the role of urban mega-projects in the Global South and, in particular, India. It does this by drawing on findings from European cities, which have shown that urban mega-projects based on inherent exceptionalist logics are able to set aside ordinary planning procedures (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002). The paper therefore questions why this should be any different in the urban development context of a rapidly urbanizing country like India. Based on Ananya Roy's (re)interpretation of informality as "a mode of urbanization" (Roy, 2005, see also Roy, 2009b, 2012), the paper argues that the Indian state itself – drawing on its neoliberal agenda – intentionally empowers these mega-projects to bypass existing environmental laws and regulations in order to facilitate development. The research presented is mainly based on an analysis of official documents² and qualitative interviews which were carried out by the author during several periods of field work in Delhi between October 2009 and March 2013. Interview respondents included politicians, government (planning) officials and environmental activists.

Mega-projects and the world-class vision

In the context of globalization, it has been the aspiration of urban development policies around the world to transform cities into global cities (Robinson, 2002: 548). In India, this process is closely interlinked with the opening and liberalization of the Indian economy since the beginning of the 1990s (Dupont, 2011; Nissel, 2001) and the perception that India's metropolitan cities are the country's engines of growth and development (Kennedy & Zerah, 2008; Mahadevia, 2006). Major cities like Mumbai and Delhi have been promoted to become *global metropolises* and *world-class cities*.³ In short, converting India's cities into world-class cities has meant making them more investment friendly. This resulted in an urban restructuring, which promotes the development of modern infrastructure, high-end residential projects, exclusive shopping malls and urban entertainment multiplexes – often developed as urban mega-projects (cf. Dupont, 2011).

Urban mega-projects⁴ are the focus of a growing body of literature looking at different aspects including the frequent over-running of costs and risks associated with the weak accountability of involved actors (cf. Bruzelius, Flyvbjerg, & Rothengatter, 2002; Priemus, Flyvbjerg, & van Wee, 2008), the changing role of the public sector within finance and implementation (cf. Altshuler & Luberoft, 2003), or the discourses, coalitions and planning policies facilitating their implementation (cf. Altshuler & Luberoft, 2003; Diaz Orueta & Fainstein, 2008; Fainstein, 2008; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002). Analysing large-

scale urban development projects (UDPs) in European cities with regard to the existing planning instruments and regulations, Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez (2002) show that "exceptionality measures" are typical for urban mega-projects. They argue that mega-projects are generally weaved into the existing legal planning framework, but their "initial conception, design, and implementation lies at the margins of formal planning structures" (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002: 572). Their exceptionality is usually justified using the unique scale of the projects, pressure of time, a better efficiency and a need for greater flexibility in the planning and implementation process (ibid.). But in the end, what makes urban mega-project developments complex are their size and the need for large tracts of land. Especially in central parts of fast-growing Indian mega-cities, where we find an increasing shortage of land, rising land values and where land reserves are generally small-sized and exposed to various claims. Therefore, to foster the urban restructuring process and to develop urban mega-projects, the political elites and authorities in charge of urban development⁵ are in need of new instruments to bring *new land* into the market, which was not previously available. This *new land* might either have been used informally before, or might not have been tackled before due to environmental reasons (e.g. risk of flooding), or both.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that in India and in many other parts of the Global South, urban mega-projects are inserted in an omnipresent urban informality. So far, this relationship between urban mega-projects and urban informality has been rarely explored. Shatkin (2011: 82) argues that the motivation for mega-projects in urban Asia has been "the perception that the state had lost control of the city" caused by the remarkable growth of the cities. Thus, both private- and state-led urban mega-projects seem to prevail because they are viewed as a tool to bring back long-desired large-scale *planned* development. On the one hand, we might therefore understand urban mega-projects as a strategy of the state to respond to urban informality. On the other, the paper explores how urban informality is utilized by the state to implement urban mega-projects in an exceptional way.

Informality, flexibility and exceptionality

Urban informality has long been an extensive research field in the social science including among others development studies, urban studies and geography. Research has especially focused on the so-called *informal economy* covering in particular informal housing and labour arrangements to better understand poverty, (marginal) livelihoods, and social exclusion as well as exploitation of low-skilled workers and urban inequality (cf. edited volumes by AlSayyad & Roy, 2004; McFarlane & Waibel, 2012b). It is only recently that scholars have challenged the divide between the formal (associated with planned and authorized development by the state) and the informal (associated with local, spontaneous and everyday practices; often equated with illegal practices). By emphasizing on the interconnectedness of informal and formal practices by both individuals and the state the formal/informal division has been reconceptualised as a multi-layered formal/informal continuum (see among others AlSayyad, 2004; Daniels,

² Many of the official documents and correspondences between different state agencies have been accessed by the Delhi-based environmental NGO Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan (YJA) through Right to Information Act. The author is thankful to YJA for sharing the accessed materials.

³ See for example DDA Master Plan Delhi 2021 and the Bombay First initiative in Mumbai. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to review here the roots of the vision to develop India's mega-cities into world-class cities.

⁴ In the literature urban mega-projects are also termed as large-scale urban development projects (see among others Moulaert, Swyngedouw, & Rodriguez, 2001; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002). In general, urban mega-projects are loosely defined. The prefix *mega* indicates that these projects are very large compared to other urban developments (Altshuler & Luberoft, 2003: 2). As large-scale projects, they are generally associated with high costs and a transformation of large tracts of land requiring some years for implementation (Fainstein, 2008; Kennedy et al., 2011).

⁵ In India, the authorities in charge of urban development are generally located on the regional or central state level. Since the reforms for a devolution of powers to the local state (74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution) have not been implemented by the majority of the regional states, "a power vacuum" still exists on the metropolitan level (Ren & Weinstein, 2013: 108). Thus, city governments are usually not (directly) involved in developing urban mega-projects (see e.g. Kennedy, 2009; Kennedy & Zerah, 2008, and selected contributions in Baud & de Wit, 2008).

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