



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Planning urban megaprojects in the Gulf: The international consultancy firms in urban planning between global and contingent



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## Abstract

Driven by globalization and market openings, many architecture and engineering firms have become global. By focusing on the urban megaprojects in the Gulf, a particular cultural and political context, this paper argues that such firms have a major role in the rapid urban transformation of Gulf countries and act as transfer agents of an international knowledge in the urban planning domain. However, the transfer is adapted by several context-related characteristics, such as local governance, urban knowledge, and regulatory framework. This paper explores the procedural adaptation of these firms to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in terms of internal structure, methodology, adopted tools, and interaction with the context. The level of learning that results from this transfer is also investigated.

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## 1. Introduction

The economic diversification of oil-rich Arab states in the Persian Gulf has massively transformed urban landscapes, particularly large urban developments with unprecedented sizes (Acuto, 2010; Al-Hathloul, 2004; Elsheshtawy, 2008). Several studies emphasize the effect of spectacle and fascination (Schmid, 2009) that characterize such

developments. These new urban landscapes are described as products of the globalization of urban policies and sometimes they are considered as a specific product of the particular context of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council<sup>1</sup> (GCC). Therefore, GCC studies frequently ask whether these spectacular iconic projects and urban extensions reflect a globalized world with urban models, references, and urban neo-liberalism or result from a set of

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<sup>1</sup>GCC countries include all Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, except for Iraq and Yemen. All of its members are monarchies.

cultural, social, and politico-economical contexts that are highly influenced by monarchical systems.

Instead of providing a binary answer, these questions may be addressed by investigating the literature on “mobile urbanism.” “Policymaking must be understood as both relational and territorial, as both in motion and simultaneously fixed, or embedded in place” (McCann and Ward, 2011). Although urban policies are often local, grounded, and tied to specific places (Friedmann, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2002), contemporary policymaking is fundamentally shaped by a context of “fast policy transfer” (Peck and Theodore, 2001) where “transfer agents” (Stone, 2004), including politicians, practitioners, activists, and consultants among others, transfer their knowledge about urban policies around the world. These transfer agents are broadly categorized under the transnational capitalist class, which includes people and organizations from many countries that operate at a transnational level and are related to transnational social spaces (Sklair, 2005; Olds, 2001; Robinson and Harris, 2000; Carroll, 2009). International consultancy firms are designated as global intelligence corps (King, 1990; Olds, 2001; Rimmer, 1991), and their role has become increasingly crucial worldwide. The emergence of transnational clients, coupled with the development of communication technologies, have transformed these firms into global powerful actors that spread office networks worldwide following the grid of powerful cities (Knox and Taylor, 2005; Faulconbridge, 2010).

International Consultancy Firms in the domain of Urban Planning (ICFUP), which include architecture- and engineering-oriented firms, are the major agents in expanding the channels of cross-border policy transfer (Peck, 2003) and in transferring policies, practices, models, and references that can be translated into urban forms. However, these transferred elements are the objects of an adaptation process that are relative to each local context. Even in the mobile policies and policymaking literature, the term “transfer” is defined as a “socio-spatial, power-laden process in which policies are subject to change and struggle as they are moved” (McCann and Ward, 2011).

ICFUP has a fundamental role in GCC. Major GCC cities undergo a development process and employ several strategies for creating iconic spaces and megaprojects to build a world city image (Andraos and Wood, 2013; Davis, 2007). The spectacular urban growth in GCC (Elsheshtawy, 2008; Al-Hathloul, 2004) significantly depends on foreign knowledge (Ewers, 2013). Ren (2011) ranked many GCC cities (i.e., Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha) as top cities where international consultancy firms in the construction domain had their own branch offices. These rankings reflect the significant role of international firms that implement iconic landscapes and megaprojects. Despite the significant reduction of construction activities during the 2008 global financial crisis, our site survey (see the methodology in the next paragraph) shows that the majority of the international firms have successfully adapted to such event to cater to a new post-crisis optimistic mood.

In this context, this paper emphasizes the crucial role of ICFUP in producing GCC cities, as transfer agents of urban-related knowledge, in the context of megaprojects. Specifically, we examine the following related questions: To what extent do these firms contribute to globalized models and methods to GCC, and what is the weight of the local factors

in shaping these transferred elements? Moreover, how do these firms, which are constrained by local conditions and systems, adapt their operational framework (i.e., how they structure, organize, and mobilize their tools and methodologies) and theoretical references (i.e., concepts, notions, models, and currents on which they base their conception and production) within the transfer process? Despite the importance of international firms in shaping globalized cities, their role and presence in GCC major cities bring many particularities that are related to the scale and the weight of the development to which they contribute. Moreover, despite its powerful status as the major contributor of necessary expertise in building megaprojects—which is the primary tool in the implementation of urban policies in GCC cities—ICFUP are constrained by local factors. These factors include the governance system and the particular, complex, and demanding framework of megaprojects.

Studies on knowledge mobility and policy transfer emphasize different levels of transfer and differentiate transfer, diffusion, and learning (Stone, 2004). “Transfer” involves the processes of struggle and change, whereas “diffusion” describes a trend of successive or sequential adoption of a practice, policy, or program. This trend is contagious rather than chosen and connotes the spreading, dispersion, and dissemination of ideas or practices from a common source (Ibid). Stone (2004) argued that diffusion had several limitations because such concept failed to describe how policies or practices were altered during the adoption process. “Learning” occurs when “policy-makers adjust their cognitive understanding of policy development and modify policy in the light of knowledge gained from past policy experience” (Stone, 2004). In his essay on the knowledge transfer in the United Arab Emirates and the other Gulf states, Ewers (2013) discussed the extent to which the imported expertise can leverage local capacity development. According to Ewers, the levels of learning vary between sectors, of which the financial sector achieves the highest level of local learning by interacting with foreign experts. Similarly, this article discusses the level of learning within a local context that can be identified through the presence of ICFUP and the “transferred knowledge.”

In this paper, ICFUP will be initially examined as an actor that is very evocative of an urban production mode that heavily relies on a new urban planning mode, which in turn is shaped by knowledge mobility, and produces megaprojects as a key output. By relying on the urban planning history literature in the wider Arab and Middle Eastern contexts, the introduction emphasizes the particularity of the situation of GCC, which is marked by a relatively recent and brief urban planning history, and of ICFUP, which functions as the chief urban planning knowledge mobility channel and the major urban planning producer. These firms will then be used as an analytical framework to understand the market and the politico-economic context. The interactions between the context and the firms will be underscored. Specifically, the market conditions and challenges that contribute to the adaptation process of ICFUP will be unveiled. We subsequently examine the diversity of ICFUP and categorize these firms into architectural firms and engineering-architectural firms based on their operational modalities, strategies, and structures. Despite their similar

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