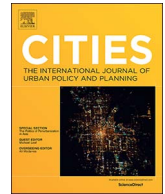




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# Baku formula 1 city circuit: exploring the temporary spaces of exception

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## 1. Introduction

The geography of mega-events as agents of temporary and long-term urban transformation and policy change is increasingly globalizing and diversifying. They are often justified by the augmented global visibility they offer their host cities (Hall, 2006), alongside promises of influxes of tourists (Smith & Osborn, 2012) and foreign capital (Gruneau & Horne, 2015; Sanchez & Broudehoux, 2013). Whether these promises are realized or not, it is becoming a commonly accepted practice for event organizers to use public funds and public areas (parks, squares or street networks) as ‘event infrastructure’ to achieve the goals of strictly regulated and commercially ticketed, frequently private, events.

While mega-events are temporary occasions, they often provide an example for permanent practices of spatial regulation and private-sector appropriation of daily civilian life, producing lasting impacts on their host communities and built environment (Hall, 2006; Smith, 2013). These longer-term actions are often facilitated by temporary regulations or executive decisions that permit practices typically forbidden in the host cities, but accepted on account of their purported short-term nature (Vainer, 2016). The F1 World Drivers Championship, attended largely by the wealthy elite (Lefebvre & Roullet, 2011, p. 338), has become a significant part of this global mega-event industry and their urban impact is also magnifying. Still, little scholarly work examining the evolving relationship between the F1 and its host cities exist (see Gezici & Er, 2014; Lefebvre & Roullet, 2013; Tranter & Lowes, 2005; Tranter & Lowes, 2009).

Baku, Azerbaijan is the biggest city in the Caucasus and the capital of the oil-rich country. After Azerbaijan regained its independence from the USSR in 1991, its capital Baku went through a dramatic process of urban transformation fuelled primarily by state revenues from oil and gas export (Marriott & Minio-Paluello, 2012). The government and economic elite put extensive effort into attracting global attention to Azerbaijan, both as a tourist destination and as a regional economic center (Valiyev, 2014). Large-scale international events in Baku were considered as important tools for achieving these objectives. In 2016,

Baku became part of the F1 calendar and hosted the European Grand Prix (GP)<sup>2</sup> on its newly created Baku City Circuit (BCC) laid on a street network of the city (Fig. 1) (BCC, 2016d). The city even installed a special statue and dressed central iconic buildings in event colors and banners.

Through field research on the 2016 F1 race in Baku, this paper presents a case study of the interrelationship between heavily commercialized mega-events and transformations in their host cities. The work examines the impact of imposing event-related exceptional temporary practices and restrictions based upon the work of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's *State of Exception* theorizes the abandonment of the rule of law by the sovereign during a supposed crisis in the name of greater public good. In Baku, a conceptually analogous development can be observed, as exceptional practices are enforced to stage the costly private event in public space within a limited time frame justified by the promise of overarching international promotion as well as socio-economic development. The same processes have produced a negative impact on the lives of many local residents.

This article utilizes data generated via a mixed pool of methods. Considering the political setting of Azerbaijan<sup>3</sup> – where information is sometimes missing, incomplete or inaccessible<sup>4</sup> – the triangulation of different sources and research methods was vital to fill the information gaps. The primary source for this paper is the direct field observations conducted in Baku before, during and several months after the race (June 13–21 and October–December 2016). News from local and international media and reports from the BCC and the Formula One Group (FOG) were used to construct the profile of the event. Further information was gathered from ten semi-structured interviews<sup>5</sup> conducted mostly in Baku, but also remotely with two respondents via Skype. Between October and December of 2016 representatives of the BCC, journalists, academics, and prominent civic activists were interviewed – all having knowledge or work experience with large international events, or with the process of urban development in Baku.

The article begins with the outline of the theoretical framework underpinning the paper by presenting the concept of exceptionality and its varying uses in cities and mega-events. Later, an introduction to the

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<sup>2</sup> The European Grand Prix in Baku was renamed the Azerbaijan Grand Prix in 2017 for branding purposes.

<sup>3</sup> This “closed context” (Koch & Valiyev, 2016) is one of the main factors behind a limited number of academic work on Baku and on Azerbaijan.

<sup>4</sup> Though, freedom of speech and the right to access information are guaranteed by the constitution, the Law on Mass Media, and the Law on the Right to Obtain Information it is severely restricted in practice (Freedom House, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were audio recorded and transcribed for the later use.



Fig. 1. BCC map laid on a public street network of Baku.  
Source: map created by the author in 2017, satellite image from ESRI.

mega-event phenomenon and the evolving relationship between the F1 motorsport and its host cities follows. This leads to a discussion of the case study of Baku and the field work findings. The article concludes with statements conceptualizing Baku City Circuit as a wealthy temporary space of exception relying on state support financially, legally and politically while ignoring and excluding the actual needs of the local population.

## 2. Mega-events as spaces of exception?

The notion of the exception, which theorizes the suspension of the rule of law for the protection of the juridical order, derives from German legal theorist Carl Schmitt's work *Political Theology* first published in 1922. This concept was later advanced by Agamben (1998, 2005) in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *State of Exception*. In 'this latter book, Agamben explores the exceptional suspension of the rule of law by the sovereign to preserve' public good which is realized by the provisional abolition of the distinction between legislative, executive, and judicial powers fundamentally altering the structure and meaning of legal and political form (ibid., 2005, p. 7). The state of exception unfolds through the suspension of the constitution and the extension of military authority into the civilian realm. Agamben reviews the progressive normalization of the application of the state of exception in contemporary democracies moving from war to peacetime use.

The city is no stranger to the practices of exception, "both within and beyond the confines of existing legal frameworks" (Baptista, 2012, p. 40). Scholars have demonstrated the use of exceptional practices on the urban level for decades. For example: the controversial practices of privatization in Hong Kong in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis

of 1997 (Chu, 2010); urban policies in Rotterdam based upon securitization and gentrification of deprived areas (Schinkel & van den Berg, 2011); the urban regeneration project, The Polis Programme, in Portugal (Baptista, 2012); the Greenwich Park transformation for the London 2012 Olympics (Smith, 2013); and others. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2006) is one of many scholars who advanced the concept of exception to claim that the creation of a particular space of exception can be characterized as simultaneously positive and negative. Ong relates exceptions not only to negative exclusion but to positive application to create a new entity or an opportunity. This argument can be extended to the case of F1 race in Baku which is realized through the creation of spaces of exception in the city but also excludes other activities carried out by the locals from the same space.

Müller, 2015a, b also describes mega-events as: ambulatory occasions of a fixed duration that attract a large number of visitors, have largely mediated reach, come with large costs and have large impacts on the built environment and the population (p. 3). The preparation for mega-events within a limited timeframe and strict rules often creates the need to suspend or alter the legal structure of the host city or country. This means changes in policies related to planning, taxation, immigration, environmental protection, use of public infrastructure (Kassens-Noor, Gaffney, Messina, & Philips, 2016; Marrero-Guillamón, 2012; Sanchez & Broudehous, 2013). These alterations are often possible through the unofficial declaration of a state of exception that is justified by their temporary character, but leave behind a legacy of permanent changes to the urban landscape (Smith, 2013, p. 250). These changes also demand the deployment of large public funds and are political decisions rarely based upon public consensus (Eisinger, 2000).

Mega-events are increasingly being used to impose a temporary state of exception on cities during their hosting periods as well as being

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