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Gavin Shatkin, *Cities for Profit: The Real Estate Turn in Asia's Urban Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781501709906 (cloth); ISBN: 9781501711138 (paper); ISBN: 9781501712357 (ebook)

Agatino Rizzo and Anindita Mandal, *Predatory Urbanism: The Metabolism of Megaprojects in Asia*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2021. ISBN: 9781800881068 (cloth); ISBN: 9781800881075 (ebook)

New Asian Capital: Spectacular Developmentalist Urbanisms in Action

Introduction

In August 2019 Indonesia announced that it will start the relocation of its capital city from Jakarta to a site in the province of East Kalimantan on the island of Borneo (Maulia 2019). Reasons for this move are numerous, ranging from pragmatic grounds of a sinking Jakarta and overcapacity, to more symbolic rationales of moving the capital to a more central location that will ensure even development across the country (Rizqo 2021). Named Nusantara, the city is intended to be a "global" (JLL 2020), "smart" (Sardjono 2021), "forest" city (Diela 2019).

Nusantara is emblematic of how Asia has seen an explosion of new cities being built over the past few decades. Seen as part of a broader trend of Asian countries engaging in various forms of developmental urbanisms, the planned new-build capital city is also an exercise in speculation by actors connected to the state. The relationship between the state, capital, and land politics in Asian urban developments is a particularly unique dynamic in driving these forms of urbanisms. This becomes even more evident in the planning of new

capital cities as states attempt to generate income streams off such projects, finding new ways of boosting the city through various urban design trends.

While a common theme of spectacle and grandeur underlie this new capital city urbanism, economic motivations such as real estate speculation and the influx of foreign investments in smart city technologies also occupy elite imaginaries of the (new) city. At the same time, urban developments often necessitate various forms of dispossession and exclusion. These state endeavours foreground various crises at various points in space and time. Social, political, ecological, and legitimacy crises are grounds for urban spectacular fixes; infrastructure projects designed to be aesthetically pleasing while also mitigating or ameliorating said crises, constituting new social and ideological relations vis-à-vis the state.

Asian cities are increasingly marked by distinct state-capital relations which manifest materially in various spectacular urbanisms. As urbanisation continue to take place, states are becoming aware of the windfall gains they can receive by building cities from scratch through real estate mechanisms, spectacular urban design, and smart/sustainable city boosterism. Urban developments in Asia seem to be mostly about developing new ways of extending or maintaining state control over potential revenue streams and social life more generally (authoritarian or otherwise). While this plays nicely into developmentalist rhetoric, increased state revenue can never guarantee the success of developmentalist policies and "trickle down" to targeted groups. Concentration of wealth and power toward state and state-adjacent actors are what drive urbanisation in Asia and its desired outcomes.

The Spectacular Urbanism of (New) Capital Cities

In *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Asia* (2018), Natalie Koch poses the question: How should one understand the rise of new capital cities? She ponders the tendency of authoritarian regimes as the main agents in building spectacular capital cities. Capital cities, she argues, are often "miniaturisations" of the country to which it belongs. This is followed by a "focalisation effect" – a rhetorical device deeply rooted in material space, the "idea that a material site *represents* some abstract concept" (Koch 2018:

28). Focalisation often takes place when leaders lack the necessary resources to support such narratives in a materially meaningful way. In her ethnography of Nur-Sultan (previously Astana) this comes at a time where Kazakhstan sought to break away from its Soviet history following the latter's dissolution, and forge a new national and economic identity.

Koch argues that this rhetorical device help shape spatial imaginaries of what the city and country are. By mobilising synecdoche – a figure of speech where a part of a thing is imagined to represent its whole – she describes how capital cities are intended to be envisioned as a spatial configuration that stands for the whole country. When synecdoche is considered, the reason why authoritarian regimes have an affinity toward the spectacular is put into relief. For such governments, fundamental improvements to the workings of their societies are much more difficult to effect (and less beneficial) than producing spectacles.

Furthermore, spectacles require spectators, of which Koch argues there are three: the broader public; local elites; and the international community. The invocation of international spectators outside one's country (or region) in deploying spectacles seems to be enough to mobilise both elites and the general public in participating and co-producing the spectacle as synecdoche. In such spatial practices, a blend of patriarchy and paternalism manifests; in deploying the spectacular capital city, the Kazakhstan state positions itself as a benevolent institution wanting the best for its subjects. While some might argue that the international stage is already seen as masculine (see Pojani 2021) – thus spectacular urbanism for a global audience is rife with patriarchal rationalities – Koch argues that "as a political technology, it [spectacle] never has an inherent logic" (2018: 151). This is because approaching spectacles geographically, as Koch invites us to do, reveals the spatial and temporal contingencies on which paternalistic practices rest. In wanting to depict the nation to be progressing through the developmental model, state actors appropriate this political technology for their own ends.

The production of new capital cities is not a new trend; indeed, the idea of producing or relocating a capital city has existed almost as long as the nation state itself. Brasilia, Islamabad, Canberra, and Nur-Sultan come to mind in illustrating this fact; these cities were built as a break from the past. However, the scale at which new cities – capital or not – are

being constructed in the 21st century and the efforts taken in branding, promoting, and selling them are of a whole different magnitude. Viewing new capital cities as megaprojects, we can discern what the various economic, political, and social stakes are at play.

Insatiable Megaprojects

Megaprojects are becoming a common sight in rapidly developing countries. Although it is difficult to pin down why this is so, it is less hard to see how megaprojects have been deployed. Infrastructure projects have been constructed, to a degree, for the purpose of spectacle. But the main function(s) megaprojects serve – and the morphological form they take – depends deeply on spatial, historical, economic, and political contexts of the country/city in which it is being built.

One manifestation of such infrastructure projects is the urban real estate megaproject. In *Cities for Profit: The Real Estate Turn in Asia's Urban Politics* (2017), Gavin Shatkin investigates how and why large real estate projects have proliferated in urban developments across Asian cities. Looking at Suharto-era Jakarta in Indonesia, Kolkata in India, and Chongqing in China, Shatkin argues that urban real estate megaprojects have become an animating element in the (re)development of these cities. Historically, the housing boom in these countries followed rising land values as drivers such as urban population growth instilled confidence in real estate investors, but arguably more important is the deregulation of the finance sector and various reforms in land management.

Shaktin asserts that urban real estate megaprojects in Asia flourished due to a variegated neoliberalisation process involving a great deal of state intervention and initiatives. As such, two variables were identified in explaining the real estate boom: "the state's ability to exert direct control over land markets … [And] the autonomy of state authorities responsible for the planning and management of urban land against the influence of nonstate social actors" (Shatkin 2017: 85). The interaction of these two elements is crucial; the autonomy state actors have as landowners/managers enables them to find ways to further monetise existing land they currently own/manage which ultimately leads to more

opportunities for the state to acquire new land. Throughout the cases real estate megaprojects were only able to flourish due to these factors, as the state owns much of the developable land and has the ability to effect necessary legal changes. Control of land partially grants the state the autonomy to "shape the agendas of social actors (be they wealthy or poor) to its own intentions" (Shatkin 2017: 88), in combination with existing institutional and legal mechanisms that may hinder or enable them. As populations and cities increase in size, governments will look to new places for real estate projects, not only as a guaranteed income stream, but also as "a state-directed construction of particular types of market mechanisms that *enable new forms of state power*" (Shatkin 2017: 85).

In small countries in the Arabian Gulf, where most of their resources are fossil fuels, megaprojects reflect this dynamic of state power as governments aim to diversify their economies. They are made possible through the import of necessary building materials, labour, and food from countries across the globe. Agatino Rizzo and Anindita Mandal's *Predatory Urbanism: The Metabolism of Megaprojects in Asia* (2021) explores this process by framing such urban development as "predatory". Their use of this concept mainly has to do with how planned cities and megaprojects require the exploitation of "cheap" resources in their production. Taking inspiration from the planetary urbanisation literature (Brenner 2014), Rizzo and Mandal employ the *resource-urbanisation nexus* in order to capture a "relational … translocal and multiscalar understanding of the political economy and ecology of those territories that … are conditioned by the extractive logic" (2021: 12). In other words, predation is understood as the process through which megaprojects and city-making are undertaken where both intangible and tangible resources are exploited and accessed beyond national or regional boundaries traditionally conceived. A similar process is also observed by Koch where, in establishing and sustaining spectacular urbanism, unspectacular Others need to be identified to make spectacles intelligible. These usually consist of "neglected" spaces in the nation's hinterlands, where people live in derelict conditions relative to the wealthier core. But as both Koch and Rizzo and Mandal note of Qatar's and the United Arab Emirates'

megaprojects, the small land mass in combination with abundant national wealth engender a spatially distant hinterland that includes many of their noncitizen residents.

Megaprojects are also predatory in that they consume images of places elsewhere and replicate them locally. As Rizzo and Mandal argue, intangible resources such as "prestigious" aesthetics are adopted into the urban design of new locales to give the impression of said images. Within the predatory urbanist logic, the appropriation of these designs renders the megaprojects less resilient and sustainable. Looking at "green" megaprojects in Qatar, Malaysia, and India, Rizzo and Mandal observe how foreign images are continually being incorporated, to the detriment of its surroundings. The problem, as they put it, comes when local and national contexts do not accommodate the kinds of urban visions being adopted, as they ultimately "induce increased consumption of resources" (2021: 129).

As seen in the cases of Central Asia, the Arabian Gulf, and Southeast Asia explored by Koch and Rizzo and Mandal, megaprojects require the establishment of new frontiers and hinterlands, from which tangible and intangible resources are extracted and through which the megaprojects are rendered spectacular. Through these processes, instances of dispossession seem to be inextricably involved. As Shatkin points out, these state-led developments are rationalised as projects of economic development but at the same time reinforce and expand state power over various aspects of everyday politics.

Development by Dispossession

Developmentalist rhetoric has been the rallying cry in advocating for not only bigger infrastructure but also more sophisticated technologies that underpin them. It is apparent, however, in realising these policies, the state and adjacent actors resort to various forms of dispossession, entrenching even further existing inequalities which their developmentalist policies were meant to eradicate.

Shatkin points out that, in rolling out real estate megaprojects, states take caution in balancing dispossession as to not endanger state legitimacy in order to maintain their autonomy and control of land markets, framing it "as part of an ideological project of

ecological and social transformation through urbanization" (2017: 229). He demonstrates how discourses of modernity and sustainability are being mobilised; the integration into "modern society" of peripheral peasants in the Indonesian, Chinese, and Indian cases points to how state-sponsored infrastructure projects are always in conjunction with and justifying dispossession. The "virtuous cycle" of using state power to control land markets, extracting the rent resulting from land monetisation, therefore extending autonomy of the state, proves to be fertile ground for dispossession. Indeed, it is through land grabs and displacements that the state is able to engage in this cycle.

Koch stresses how paternalistic relations between the state and society are key in rationalising dispossession with regard to new capital city developments. Be it through patriarchal developmental logics or the mobilisation of synecdochic thinking, this paternalism frames the state as the arbiter of the greater good. As Shatkin argues, state-sponsored dispossession happens in a "vacuum of knowledge" in which only the state can be said to be knowledgeable regarding urban development: they "position themselves as agents of a progressive urban transformation, through which their task is to purposively transform rural and slum dwellers into fully integrated and 'productive' members of urban society" (2017: 232). Managing this knowledge vacuum through paternalistic relations is thus an essential aspect of allowing dispossession and maintaining both state autonomy and control over land markets.

Speculating Capital City Urbanisms in Asia

As multiple crises looms, governments the world over are finding new ways to maintain their legitimacy and power through new income streams and promises of a better economic future. Thus, Asian new capital cities are an increasingly likely phenomenon in the coming decades. Aggrandising new non-capital cities and special economic zones notwithstanding, the ideological implications of a new capital city potentially trump any other megaproject. In extending David Harvey's (1982) spatial fix, the *socioecological fix* emphasises the socioecological aspect of fixed capital (i.e. infrastructure) as well as their ideological facets.

Michael Ekers and Scott Prudham argue that it plays "a vital role not only in facilitating economic function but also in helping to secure the legitimacy of particular social orderings and the consolidation of specific socioecological relations and registers of meaning" (2018: 28-29). For them, infrastructure projects are fixes that serve economic functions to avoid crises, while also cementing new and existing socioecological relations for the benefit of the ruling class.

We can thus consider Koch's use of synecdoche in realising new capital cities as spectacular fixes, where state-affiliated actors initiate such megaprojects to develop and maintain their legitimacy at the expense of designated peripheries. Spectacular urbanism thus enables and solidifies the aforementioned "registers of meaning". However, a fix is never conclusive nor definitive; as Ekers and Prudham argue, "the success or failure of a socioecological fix rests on how well it reconciles the imperatives of the circulation and realization of value with those of social life more generally" (2018: 30). The outcome of spectacular urbanism is thus contingent on how the new ideologies and relations it engenders acquiesce with the workings of everyday life.

Meanwhile, Shatkin's argument about Asia's "real estate turn" as a prognosis of its urban future is difficult to ignore. Greenfield real estate megaprojects provide governments the opportunity to generate new and steady income streams while at the same time increase control over land markets. As the rise of smart city initiatives is part of this interest by foreign investors, incursions by smart technologies into private spaces such as corporate offices, homes, even bodies, will bolster the attractiveness of both public and private spheres as areas for investment (Sadowski 2019). The smart real estate megaproject is yet to be realised but one can imagine how such initiatives are rife with informational value waiting to be extracted – what better way to actualise it than in a new capital city?

As megaprojects, new capital city developments will have to find or establish new hinterlands. While many megaprojects are increasingly branded to be sustainable and increase urban resilience, Rizzo and Mandal point out that this claim is only true to the extent of their immediate surroundings or within the country's territory. Even then this claim is

often unfounded as the proposed functions of the projects sometimes fails. Nevertheless, Koch calls for a geographical understanding of spectacular megaprojects and the extrastatal relations that exist in their production and maintenance. The utilisation of the *resource-urbanisation nexus* by Rizzo and Mandal takes up this challenge; the inclusion of labour mobility and non-tangible resources such as architectural images allow us to think about the new capital city megaproject as predatory, steadily increasing in its metabolism, therefore always in need of new resources. The spatiotemporal location of these hinterlands is thus contingent on the megaproject and what its stated objectives are – the nation's or region's "backwards" history, its neglected peripheral regions, the struggling neighbouring country, and/or whole continental regions underserved by the world economy.

New capital city developments are presented as a panacea for problems the current capital is experiencing, a *tabula rasa* free of any historical baggage. They are often promised to not dispossess or displace local communities nor degrade surrounding environments. But as we have seen, an overall increase in urban metabolism requires an increasing influx of new in/tangible resources, establishing new peripheries within and beyond national borders. Dispossession comes with current approaches to urban development; the constructed exclusion of lower income groups through these developments is in contradiction with the promise of inclusion modernisation was supposed to accomplish. The promises of smart urbanism to bring efficiency and sustainability do not address nor ameliorate this inequality and instead perpetuate them. At any rate, the glitter of glass and steel, and the imbrication of sensors and optical fibres in proposed new capital cities, present them as the spectacular projects that they are, constructed by the unspectacular peripheries in which many of the dispossessed live.

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