



Territorialized urban mega-projects beyond global convergence: The case of Dongdaemun Design Plaza & Park Project, Seoul



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the formative process of an urban mega-project (UMP) in Seoul from a multi-scalar perspective. In particular, the paper attempts to reveal the importance of local actors in the UMP's development by analyzing the dynamic and contested interactions among diverse actors and processes occurring at multiple geographical scales. More specifically, by focusing on the "Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park Project", this paper focuses on the following questions. First, who are the important actors that have affected the formative process of the Seoul UMP? Second, how and through what type of processes have these actors affected the UMP's development? The empirical case study will reveal that the formative processes of the Seoul UMP are the product (what I term the "territorialized urban mega-project") of highly complicated and dynamic political interactions among diverse actors at multiple scales.

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Introduction: Problematizing global convergence

In August 2007, the mayor of the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG), Oh Se-Hoon, selected Zaha Hadid, a star architect who has achieved global fame for her unique architectural design, as the designer of the "Dongdaemun Design Plaza & Park Project" (DDP). This urban mega-project (UMP) was the first in the "Clean, Attractive and Global City Seoul" plan (SMG, 2008), and Oh adopted Hadid's design "Metonymic Landscape" as the basic plan of the Dongdaemun Stadium Redevelopment (Fig. 1). The DDP, which covers an area of 83,000 m², includes the Dongdaemun Design Plaza, which will support the design industry, and the Dongdaemun Design Park, which is intended to attract foreign tourists. The SMG expect the DDP to "increase the value of the design industry from the current 7 billion U.S. dollars to 15 billion dollars in annual sales in 10 years and increase the number of foreign tourists from the current 2.1 million to 2.8 million".¹ In addition, the SMG anticipates the economic value of the DDP over the next 30 years to be "53 billion dollars in productivity and 446,000 jobs", a phenomenon that is referred to as the "DDP effect".² Today, UMPs similar to the DDP have been actively promoted around the world.

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¹ Retrieved from http://ddp.seoul.go.kr/eng/summ/value_eco.php on May 15, 2009.

² Retrieved from http://ddp.seoul.go.kr/eng/summ/value_eco.php on May 15, 2009.

As many have noted, global actors, such as global architectural firms and global urban planners, play a crucial role in the creation of UMPs. There is an increasing "global convergence" (Shatkin, 2008: pp. 385–387) in which North American and European UMP models are hegemonized by global actors throughout the world as a result of globalization and neoliberalization (Glendinning, 2004; Jencks, 2005; McNeill, 2008; Sklair, 2006, 2013; Sklair & Gherardi, 2012; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, & Rodriguez, 2002). I do not deny the role of global actors in UMP development and the tendency toward global convergence of UMPs. However, it is important to understand that there are several limitations in the literature on UMPs. First, regarding space, the global convergence-based literature that views global actors as an engine for the initiation of UMPs tends to downplay the role of other actors at the local and urban scales³ in the creation of UMPs (Díaz Orueta & Fainstein, 2008; Shatkin, 2008). That is, such studies are trapped in the "global–local dichotomy" (Sayer, 1991) in which epistemologically global actors are depicted as strong and free movers at the global scale, whereas local actors are passive and tied to the local scale. Second, regarding time, studies that focus on the present-day UMP creators, such as star architects or mayors, fail to examine the history of locality and path-dependency that motivated the UMP (Shatkin, 2008: p. 384). Finally, many case studies, which are based nearly exclusively on Western European and North American cities, are inadequate to capture the variegated natures of other UMPs

³ Here, I assume that the local scale is smaller than the urban scale. The urban scale is similar to the metropolitan scale in Western cities.



Fig. 1. (1-1 and 1-2) Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park (pictures by the author).

around the world, although there has recently been an increase in the number of non-Western studies on the subject (e.g., Kong, 2007; Ponzini, 2011; Shatkin, 2011). As Díaz Orueta and Fainstein (2008: p. 761) rightly recognized, “while many of these projects physically resemble those in developed countries, their political and economic contexts are radically different”.

Here, in agreement with Díaz Orueta and Fainstein (2008) and Shatkin (2008), this study examines the formation of the UMP of Seoul, South Korea, using a “multi-scalar approach” (Allen & Cochrane, 2007; Park, 2005) that problematizes the global–local dichotomy in modern social science. I chose this approach because it emphasizes the dynamic and contested interactions that occur at multiple geographical scales between diverse actors and processes.⁴ As mentioned, the research on UMPs that emphasizes the role of global actors fails to adequately describe the role of local actors, such as local growth coalitions, in the formation of UMPs. Therefore, local scale-blind discussions on UMPs require a theoretical lens to understand the local scale and its relationship with supra-local scales (e.g., the global or national scales). Referring to the politics of local economic development literature is beneficial in addressing this issue.

Cox and Mair (1988) attempted to reveal how territorial politics protects its structured coherence at the local scale when a certain locality is under the threat of economic crisis. For instance, after establishing public utilities, such as gas pipelines and power plants, that immediately require large funds for a certain region, these built environments cannot freely move to other places. Therefore, a firm that has invested in such built environments at a certain locality is dependent on the rise and fall of the local economy. Cox and Mair (1988: p. 308) coined the term “local dependence” to explain this geographical phenomenon. When a crisis occurs, local dependent actors (e.g., property developers and the chamber of commerce) can form a local growth coalition to protect the local economy. Using a territorializing strategy that divides between “us” and “them” and constructs a boundary between “inside” and “outside”, a local growth coalition can mobilize local residents (Cox, 1999). That is, if one opposes the local economic development project, one will be regarded as being against local interests. In this process, different local actors converge into one

locality where they live, whereas the extant issues of class, race and gender within the same local scale are marginalized. In addition, Cox explains that scale jumping occurs when local dependent actors within the same “space of dependence” attempt to construct a “space of engagement” that associates non-local dependent actors, such as a “global intelligence corps” (Olds, 1995, 1997), that legitimizes a development plan (e.g., UMP) as necessary and unavoidable with local dependent actors for their territorial interests (Cox, 1998: p. 2). Cox’s insight into the politics of local economic development and scale jumping may help us understand the ways in which local actors and their territorial politics significantly influence UMP formation, which may be referred to as a *territorialized urban mega-project*.

In addition, I emphasize that we must broaden our research methods to include “the others” who are often excluded and erased from the creation of a territorialized urban mega-project. Most studies on UMPs in the developed world focus on primarily global and national economic actors when explaining UMP formation and pay only minimal attention to the role of “the others”, such as street vendors and slum residents, because the current urban movement in the developed world lacks the intensity that possessed during the 1960s and 1970s (Díaz Orueta & Fainstein, 2008: p. 760). However, the variation in the politico-economic circumstances of different countries (e.g., their level of democratization) means that politically dynamic and contested interactions in the creation of a UMP may entail class struggles in non-Western cities (see Díaz Orueta, 2007; Ponzini, 2011). In sum, the consideration of the practice of “the others” at the local level would be important to comprehending the formation of certain UMPs in the non-Western world and the Western world, as observed in the dynamics of the “Occupy Wall Street” protests in New York.

More specifically, by concentrating on the DDP, this article focuses on the following questions. First, who are the important actors that have affected the formative process of the Seoul UMP? Second, how and through what type of processes have these actors affected the UMP’s development? Verifying the variegated nature of UMP formation in Seoul, an empirical case study is expected to support the hypothesis that the formative processes of a UMP in Seoul are not the outcome of global convergence exercised by global actors but the product of highly complicated and dynamic political interactions and contestations among diverse actors at multiple geographical scales. Based on the preceding discussion, I examine a specific case study.

For this case study, I reviewed documents (including government reports, interest groups’ formal and informal documents and newspapers, mostly written in Korean), conducted interviews

⁴ The multi-scalar approach is not new in the debate on the globalization promoted by critical social scientists. However, using this approach remains meaningful politically and theoretically in that it reveals the importance of local actors and their interaction with other actors, including national and global actors, because this approach problematizes a dominant episteme based on North American and European UMP models that overemphasize global actors.

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