



Mega-projects, city-building and community benefits

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 September 2010

Accepted 11 January 2011

Keywords:

Mega-projects
Community benefits
Urban planning
Redevelopment
Vancouver Olympics
Los Angeles
Montreal

ABSTRACT

Mega-projects figure prominently in the arsenal of contemporary city-building strategies. The allure is of a city redefined, placed on the world stage and able to improve services, facilities and revenues. Community attitudes to such projects are often mixed, with fears of gentrification, displacement or loss of existing city character. Although mega-projects are adopted to pursue global ambitions, concerted community-based demands are to use them to satisfy local needs. This article examines mega-projects that address both city-building and local concerns. Cases – situated in Montreal, Vancouver and Los Angeles – are examined in which innovative practices prioritized the quality of residential areas and needs of low-income households. The article reviews how agreements were reached, the form they took and neighborhood outcomes. The paper concludes by exploring whether new constellations of community-based actors and novel planning processes are emerging in parallel to the rise in mega-projects.

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Introduction

Large-scale development projects are a key element in contemporary city-building strategies. Major projects, whether a new stadium, a world-class museum, a high-speed rail line, or another Petronus-like Tower, are seen as transformative, placing a city on the world stage and thereby attracting visitors, investment, jobs, and, ultimately, a higher quality of life for residents. Mega-projects – large-scale facilities and infrastructure – channel investment into specific locations in the city. They often bring together efforts to redevelop the urban fabric with the promotion of economic development. Such diverse aims are complemented by new means of financing, implementing and operating large-scale projects, typically involving public and private partners.

The paper examines selected mega-project developments in Canada and the United States and asks: What types of community-oriented agreements are emerging in association with large-scale urban projects? Are new forms of urban development around mega-projects paralleled by new constellations of political actors and political processes?

Urban projects in Los Angeles, Vancouver, and Montreal are used as a basis for analysis. In these cities, community

groups have linked large-scale urban development to the provision of local benefits. Though other projects could have been studied, the selected cases demonstrate a range of responses to mega-projects that highlight the changing nature of projects, types of community-developer engagement, and differences of local context. Material is drawn from interviews conducted by the author with key community participants as well as from policy and academic literature on the projects.

Three themes structure the article. First is ‘the mega project’: How do mega-projects fit into urban development strategies? What are their typical features and effects? Second is the community benefits associated with such projects: To what extent are project developers committing to local benefits? Can specific outcomes be linked to different forms of community and civic engagement? Third is planning: What new relationships and practices are emerging?

Mega-projects as urban development strategy

Mega-projects conform to a model of urban development that many governments favor: high-profile strategic projects with the potential to satisfy immediate aims, attract external capital and redefine a neighborhood or the city as a whole (UNCHS-Habitat, 2004). Mega-projects respond to global competition among cities for investments,

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knowledge workers, tourists and prestige. Mega-projects can vary in scope and scale, from a major library to multiple interventions aimed at transforming a district or hosting a mega-event. Even where project aims are narrow, there are expectations of positive 'spillover effects' (Storey & Hamilton, 2003).

Yet researchers note that mega-projects are often 'planning disasters' that generate heavy impacts and systemic cost over-runs (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003; Hall, 1980), in part due to lack of accountability or public participation (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003). While project benefits accrue at a municipal level, residents in nearby areas incur dis-amenities (Storey & Hamilton, 2003), whether through displacement, increased traffic and pollution, or a shift to non-residential uses in the area. For these reasons, the literature identifies mega-projects as a factor increasing spatial and socio-economic polarization in contemporary cities.

These projects are associated with novel funding and management arrangements between government and developers. Since mega-projects are costly and complex, they increasingly involve institutional developers or public-private partnerships. Since they are seen as improving the city, even private-sector mega-projects are likely to benefit from public funding. Governments often justify the resulting partnerships as pragmatic approaches to getting complex projects implemented. At the same time, public funding in private developments creates expectations that public benefits should ensue, with the types, scale and recipients open to public debate.

Community benefits and mega-projects

Studies suggest that promoters of mega-projects have become inclined to accommodate community concerns. Local opposition can lead officials to reject financing, planning permits or other required approvals; as a consequence, measures to address concerns around parking, noise and community facilities are incorporated into plans (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003). Developers may seek out community partners and get them on board early in project elaboration, before potential opponents can mobilize (Fainstein, 2008). In some instances, community-project engagement has gone further than token agreement on mitigation towards substantive agreements around local area improvements or benefits.

Plans for diverse mega-projects in North America include novel elements to better mesh the project with the needs of vulnerable residents. Such projects are the focus of this article. Studying 'community-inclusive' mega-projects helps reveal tensions between city-building and community development, and the ways the relationship is redefined in specific projects.

Community benefits in selected Canadian and US mega-projects

Several mega-projects are presented to highlight (a) the range of strategies employed around large-scale projects and associated outcomes, and (b) lessons for planners, community groups and developers around routes to pro-

jects that better fit into their immediate neighborhoods while achieving wider strategic aims.

Montreal's Old Port and Peel Basin

Montreal has a long-history of citizen engagement with large scale projects. Protests against highway construction, residential redevelopment, and tourism facilities have led to re-orientation of projects towards neighborhood-defined priorities (cf. Fontan, Klein, & Tremblay, 2004; Hamel, 1991). *The Old Port* is presented as an example. In other cases, protests have been linked to the collapse of redevelopment initiatives, as the recent case of the *Peel Basin redevelopment* illustrates.

The *redevelopment of the Old Port of Montreal* is a large-scale planning project that the local residents were able to influence through formal public participation processes. It serves as an exemplar of citizen engagement with mega-projects characteristic of earlier periods and extending into the present.

The Old Port encompasses 47 ha situated between the St. Lawrence River and historic Old Montreal. After the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, activity along the riverfront quays declined significantly. In response, the federal government created the Association of the Old Port, a quasi-independent agency, with two objectives: make a profit and restore the federal government's image in Quebec, suffering from costly planning failures of the 1960s and the rise of the Quebec separatist movement. The project also had to respect Old Montreal's designation as an historic district.

Public participation occurred in two stages. The Port Association organized consultations in 1978–1979, the first such process for a major project in Montreal. Based on initial consultations, actions taken included: the establishment of the Old Port of Montreal Corporation ('Port Corporation'), a subsidiary of crown corporation Canada Lands, responsible for subsequent development and management of the area; demolition of a grain elevator; renovation of a clock tower; creation of a linear park; and removal of railway tracks. A second round of consultations around the vision and plans for development followed. Just prior to the consultation, the Port Corporation hired a consortium of international architects to draw up plans for large-scale office, commercial and cultural spaces, waterfront condos and a metro station. Residents, through the subsequent public hearings, rejected the Port Corporation's vision for the area, with a smaller-scale framework instead adopted together with 'guiding principles for development' and social responsibility (see Fig. 1).

The Old Port is considered a success in many respects. It is a public space accessible to all, with a variety of events available at little or no cost. Cultural festivals, a science center, and a skating rink co-exist with historical museums and festivals, the Clock Tower, a grain silo and the Old Montreal streets and churches that reaffirm the past. Local residents are given permit parking and efforts are made to maintain cleanliness, important where many restaurants and bars cater to tourists. The public's participation – and the guiding vision, principles and plans for development – are considered key to the success of the project (Courcier, 2005; Wolfe, 2007). The willingness of federal government

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