Governing the City through Projects: Comparative Perspectives on the ‘Projectification’ of Urban Governance

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Over recent decades, new institutional and organisational arrangements have facilitated the governance of the city on a project basis. The use of urban development projects and mega-projects as a mode of governing spatial transformation has been well documented across Asia (e.g. Roy and Ong, 2011), Africa (e.g. Watson, 2014), Latin America (e.g. Cerro Santamaria, 2013), Europe and North America (e.g. Pinson, 2009; Swyngedow and al., 2002). Urban transformations are increasingly delivered through project-based interventions, for instance through urban pilots or experiments (Evans et al., 2016), urban infrastructure planning (Dodson, 2009), retrofitting urban energy infrastructure (Hodson et al., 2013), climate change mitigation and adaptation (Bulkeley et al., 2014), and urban water management (Farrelly and Brown, 2011). Whilst this literature focuses predominantly, on Western cases, project-based experimentation has also been documented in other contexts (see Bai et al., 2010; Peng and Bai 2018 discussing experiments in Asian cities).

As such, project-based interventions often involve complex financial structures and specific forms of expert knowledge, which reconfigure the roles of state and non-state actors and shapes new modes of governance. To date however, research has paid less attention to how project-based interventions have influenced, negotiated or displaced other urban practices – including planning and regulation – and what are the implications for governance. Project-based governance must thus be examined not just as a process of reshaping urban spaces, but also new or changing state spaces (Brenner, 2015). This imperative must also be foregrounded in comparative efforts that build on research from distinct locations, in order to move beyond Western-centric theories of the state in a context of global urbanisation. What can a comparative urban research agenda bring to interrogating the consequences of project-based intervention on the reconfiguration of the local state and of its modes of interactions with other actors?

This call for papers aims to bring together scholars to engage in a comparative efforts to assess the impact of the projectification of urban interventions across disciplines and geographies. The resulting paper session envisages comparative engagement with urban processes as necessarily interdisciplinary and geographically diverse. Therefore, it seeks to explore the implications of project-based approaches to urban governance in a way that moves beyond disciplinary and sectorial silos, rooted in an explicit attempt to straddle South-East-North divisions.

As this interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral and geographically-sensitive approach to project dynamics is relatively new, we are seeking papers that address the following issues – related to project-based interventions and urban governance - from multiple disciplinary perspectives (economics, planning, engineering, politics, geography, ethnography, science and technology studies...) and in and across different geographical contexts:

- The implications of project-based financing for urban policy, especially in relation to project lifecycle (from conception to implementation and evaluation) and longer-term policy making;
- The relationship between tactical or incremental forms of urbanism and project-based governance – we expect this discussion to depart from what remains to date a relatively western-centric understanding of urban ‘tactics’ or ‘acupuncture’ to advance our understanding of informal/formal practices of change (Brenner, 2017, Simone and Pieterse, 2018);
- The implications of the projectification of urban governance for the relations between the public sector, and private actors and citizens, considering knowledge production, learning and public consultation;
- The relationship between project-based governance and the production of urban expertise to support projects (from conception to implementation and evaluation), including issues related to policy mobilities and the role of transnational actors (e.g. the relationship between international actors, such as the EU and World Bank, that influence the structuring of projects and urban governance);
- The relationship between the projectification of urban governance and the internal organisation, restructuring and capacities of local governments.
We are looking for contributions that explicitly engage in comparative efforts and transdisciplinary discussions. The paper session should be an occasion to work towards a special issue in an interdisciplinary journal, and thus participants will be asked to submit draft papers for internal peer review before the conference.

References