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Plurality of Hubs and Emerging Place Typologies in Gulf Cities

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Rulers of Gulf countries have developed a strong interest in establishing and promoting new visions of their capital and major cities over the past few decades. In particular, the new vision to establish hubs in various economic sectors including trade, transit and tourism as well as culture and education have instigated a variety of mega projects and subsequently a diversity of place typologies. This paper explores newly emerging places and their networks rooted in distinctive hub visions, which have resulted in globalised urban spaces as nodal points within international networks.

Introduction

Today, all major cities within global networks compete for being seen as important hubs (Conventz et al., 2014). Thus, one of the preconditions for any emerging hub is the geopolitical location combined with the establishment of state-of the-art infrastructure that will enable it to access international markets. In order to become independent from heavy industries and the public revenues of natural resources, each emerging hub city needs to attract key service sectors (Alderson and Beckfield, 2007). The resulting city competition has put increasing pressure on emerging urban regions to enhance urban growth rates and thus to sustain their momentum as new and attractive markets. While large-scale public investments are needed to provide modern infrastructure, urban governance has participated in initiating mega projects as important development catalysts (Altshuler and Luberoff, 2003).

The resulting construction booms have reshaped urban morphologies not only physically but also socio-economically. The newly created hubs are continuously challenged to become not only attractive investment opportunities for a limited period of rapid urban growth but to become regional and international service centres and thus the headquarters of transnational companies (Sassen, 1996). Governance therefore needs to mediate between both growth and consolidation strategies to establish sustainable hub cities. One key aspect in this regard is the promotion and establishment of knowledge economies based on highly educated workforce and thus dependent on continuous migration (Williams and Baláz, 2014, p. 147).

In the Middle East, the Gulf region has recently emerged as a centre of attention regarding new development dynamics driven by the bold vision to establish regional as well as global service hubs. Based on the still remaining wealth on fossil fuels, the fortunate geopolitical location between global markets as well as the rather particular political conditions of aristocratic structures in small city states, the vision of establishing hubs has been based on a clear top-down master plan followed by various investment strategies and restructured local governance. The following discourse is based on evaluated national development agendas and a review of past and recent development patterns.

Gulf cities: From Ports to Hubs

Due to the harsh climatic conditions and limited fresh water sources the Gulf coast has hardly been populated for centuries. During the 19th century the British East India Company and its trade routes to India began to introduce a new evolutionary chapter along the Gulf coast and the emergence of

small port cities. In addition to British colonial interests to gain influence along the borders of the Ottoman Empire, the world market's interest in pearls led to the move of inland tribes and the rise of small fishing villages to connected ports. In spite of their limited size of less than 50,000 inhabitants these port cities were the starting point of all Gulf cities today (Wiedmann, 2012).

Their rather diverse social structure made of local tribes, Persian and Indian merchants as well as East-African pearl divers led to early multicultural realities. After a period of economic depression, when the international pearl trade collapsed during the 1930s, all port cities shrank before the oil production and the subsequent modern urbanization have commenced after World War II. The first modern infrastructure permitted and necessitated the migration of millions of foreign workforce to the Gulf region in order to establish modern cities, which were needed to administer independent Gulf States after the end of the British protectorate (Scholz, 1999, p. 77).

Due to their limited wealth on fossil fuels the leaders of Dubai and Bahrain were pioneers exploring alternative economic sectors in order to sustain the growth of their settlements. While the initially established economies were indirectly linked with oil and gas industries, there have been early attempts to attract alternative service sectors by establishing free economic zones. In 1985 the Jebel Ali Free Zone in Dubai marked a new phase of regional and global trade in the Gulf region. The success of the emerging trade hubs was mainly based on three factors: (1) the fortunate geopolitical location between major global markets and a rapidly growing regional market. (2) the lack of restrictions in free economic zones and the access to cheap labour. And (3) the political stability due to aristocratic structures and welfare state mechanisms.

While increasing trading activities began to be manifested in first World Trade Centres, free economic zones and new financial districts, the infrastructure to enable growing trading hubs inevitably led to another hub phenomenon, the transit hub. The recent expansion of national airlines has led to mega projects, such as Dubai World Central (DEC, 2013). In parallel to the extending regional and global connectivity due to international airports, tourism began to attract the attention of decision makers as an important service sector (Abu Dhabi Council for Economic Development, 2008, p. 113).

The success of tourism strategies is rooted in both the high level of accessibility and the lack of regional leisure destinations. Tourism was furthermore used to market Gulf cities as rising investment opportunities. At the end of the 20th century the permission of foreign investment in designated real-estate projects led to an unprecedented construction boom. The exponential urban growth and the economic success as emerging investment hubs established Gulf cities as pioneers of a new growth oriented development vision in the entire Middle East (EDB, 2015, p. 97).
The increasing internationalization of Gulf societies due to the continuous move of guest workers led to a growing identity crisis, which is rooted in a shrinking share of the local population and the extensive import of goods, services and policies resulting in new globalized urban landscapes (Salama, 2015). Subsequently, the preservation of local identities became one of the priorities of new national development strategies (GSDP, 2008. p. 7). In order to restore the traditional images of local identities various mega projects, such as the Souq Waqif in Doha, were launched. In addition to these attempts aiming to integrate traditional urban spaces, rulers began to perceive their cities as major cultural hubs redefining lifestyles and leading socio-political debates in the region, which is expressed by various media outlets and international events.

Large scale investments have aimed to establish higher education as well as international research, which is expressed in initiatives, such as Dubai Knowledge Village or Education City in Doha (Salama

and Gharib, 2012). The entire hub evolution can thus be summarized as a strategic plan starting from trading and transit towards tourism and investment and finally culture and knowledge economies, resulting in a set of various place typologies forming Gulf cities today (Figure 1).

Trade Hub:
Since 1980s:
- Free Economic Zones
- World Trade Centres
- Financial Districts

Transit Hub:
Since 1980s:
- International airports
- Airport cities
- New port cities

Tourism Hub:
Since 1990s:
- Hotel & beach resorts
- Mega malls
- Traditional markets

Investment Hub:
Since 1990s:
- High-rise clusters
- Reclaimed Islands
- New satellite cities

Cultural Hub:
Since 2000s:
- Cultural institutions
- Restored city centres
- International events

Knowledge Hub:
Since 2000s
- University compounds
- Technology parks
- Research centres

Figure 1.: The six hub visions and the key resulting place typologies (Source: Authors).

Social and Spatial Implications

In spite of large-scale investments and the fortunate geopolitical location all six hub visions are still in the making. The plurality of hub visions and implemented development strategies have led to a variety of distinctive place typologies, perceived as islands, often disconnected and scattered. The free economic zones have led to separate cities within cities, which is contributing to the overall fragmentation of urban structures. International airports have been extended to airport cities attracting companies to relocate and thus leave well integrated central business districts. Mall and hotel complexes have been established as multifaceted leisure centres offering a variety of shopping and entertainment opportunities in various locations depending on land price and accessibility. The cultural hub vision has led to various contradicting place typologies, such as large scale mega projects in inner city cores attempting to restore local structures by replacing a large percentage of previously grown spatial realities. One example in this regard is the Msheireb project in Doha, which has replaced an entire district resulting in large scale demographic transformations (Law and Underwood, 2012). Most cultural landmark projects have been launched in proximity to historic places. The exclusiveness of these projects has however hindered their public realm to become new urban spaces for social inclusion.

The attempt to establish higher education as well as research and development in order to initiate emerging knowledge hubs in the Gulf region has led to various detached mega projects in the urban peripheries. In addition, the move of highly educated workforce has led to new dynamics in local housing markets and commencing gentrification processes in central districts (Salama and Wiedmann, 2013, p. 234). Consequently, it can be stated that all hub strategies have contributed to

the rise of new place typologies, which are however hardly connected and hardly rooted in long-term demand-driven dynamics. Thus, the top-down approach in initiating hubs has led to the increasing challenge to establish a more coherent and integrated urban development in Gulf cities.

One key aspect of establishing consolidated hubs rather than temporary hub phenomenon will be the political will to accommodate and integrate migrant communities as a long-term necessity in order to sustain and develop new economies. Today, Gulf cities have become prototypes of globalized emerging cities and thus their place typologies are expressions of all five elementary frameworks introduced by Arjun Appadurai (1996): Ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. While most of these urban landscapes are the result of recent developments, ethnoscapes can be seen as the most rooted and thus most important aspect of contemporary urbanism in the Gulf region due to the persistent role of migration. As in the past migrants were the driving force of emerging port cities as well as first modern capital cities, current migration has become the key precondition for realizing post-oil hubs within global networks.

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