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# Actors and Vectors: Towards Alternate Histories of the City-Building Process

Joe Nasr

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- 1 Recently, some scholars (including myself and other participants in this session) have thrown challenges to the study of the city-building processes in both “central” and “peripheral” parts of the globe. These critiques have come from two angles. First, we have called for studies of the actors involved in these processes to account for—on one hand—all possible actors, and—on the other hand—all power relations between these actors. By all possible actors, we mean the full range of local stakeholders, among them those who are supposed to be weak or powerless. As for the full range of power relations, these include the multiple ways in which all actors manage to take part in and influence such processes. This is the “actors” side of the title of this paper.
- 2 The second critique has been the challenge made to researchers of the city-building process to include the myriad forms of linkages and vectors of influence and transformation, which are nested into such processes, in their understanding of how cities and their buildings come to be. While “the transfer of ideas on the built environment, and more particularly on the history of colonial and postcolonial city planning and architecture,” has been considered for years by many scholars, this has largely been “from the angle of, either the transfer of city-building concepts from the ‘center’ to the ‘periphery’, or the invention of concepts in the periphery by those originating from the center.”<sup>1</sup> These are however only a fraction of the types of influences on the city-building process, and they include only a fraction of the vectors of influence. Moreover, the transference, in all its form, can and should be a fully legitimate topic of research in its own right within architectural and urban history—this being a key lesson of the emerging area of transnational history as a field of study. This is the “vectors” side of the title.

3 In this short essay, I examine briefly how these double dimensions of a fuller consideration of the city-building process can have a number of methodological implications for researchers in architectural or urban history.

Some personal illustrations

4 I first attempted to express these methodological issues in the book I co-edited, published in 2003: *Urbanism—Imported or Exported? Native Aspirations and Foreign Plans*. These issues were made operational through some of the recent or ongoing research activities in which I am currently involved. One is my participation in a series of studies of the professional cultures and milieus of urban planners in the Middle East. The core of this track has been a research program on “Urbanistic Cultures and Milieus in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean.” I was one of eight researchers who attempted in this program what Anthony King has called for as “a sociology, but also . . . a history and geography of knowledge production” on the built environment<sup>2</sup>—and specifically, knowledge production anchored among local actors of the built environment (in this case, urban planners, however they may be defined).<sup>3</sup> Within this research program, I focused on the relation, among indigenous planners, with both the outside world (through overseas education, work abroad, foreign influences, etc.) and with local practice.

5 Prior to this program, I had undertaken one study of Saba Shiber, a Palestinian-born architect-planner who, after being trained in Egypt, Lebanon, and the United States, came probably closest among local (Arab) urban planners to achieving the status of foreign expert within the region itself.<sup>4</sup> Complementing that was a study of Lebanese and Jordanian local planners, based primarily on a number of interviews that sought to piece together what I referred to as the “Cultures, Contexts, and Currents” of the profession, or whatever semblance of a profession may exist in those countries.<sup>5</sup> These two studies in a way balanced studying the exceptional and the ordinary, whose necessity we had argued for in our book.

6 The second recent basis for considering the questions raised here is my current collaboration on a multifaceted research on the history of the creation and adaptation of one of Oscar Niemeyer’s least known yet most significant projects, the international fair in Tripoli, Lebanon. This study, conceived fully after the publication of the book, was initiated with the lessons of that book internalized in its approach to research. The key lesson was to approach the entire research as that of a local project *and* a foreign one. Three local researchers (George Arbid, Mousbah Rajab, and myself—and I will return to the question of “local researchers” below) approached this as any study of local projects ought to be: one that considers all the actors and vectors—in this case, some of which happened to be exogenous. I would argue that all projects, at some level, are “local” projects. One foreign researcher (June Komisar) was integrated into the program, working jointly with us on the Brazilian entry point to the project—an essential entry point, but one that would have been meaningless if it had been the only angle.

7 These various research activities offer a number of considerations that will be explored explicitly but briefly here. I will be considering in particular the challenges that the above approach to research on the built environment can pose for the researcher. I will rapidly identify some of these challenges, citing first how these have been recognized in the introduction to our *Urbanism* book.<sup>6</sup> I would then illustrate the handling of these issues in the research activities mentioned above.

- 8 Challenges related to identifying all the actors and their impacts
- 9 Any researcher who seeks to ensure coverage of all relevant actors and stakeholders in their research on the city-building process, and to identify their impacts on this process, faces the following challenges.
- 10 One may struggle in fashioning a narrative that “can recognize the city as a fragmented or discontinuous domain.”<sup>7</sup>
- One may confront difficulties in accessing the indigenous viewpoints and figuring out their priorities, motivations, and approaches.
  - While differentiating locals into multiple types of individuals and institutions is necessary, this is never simple.
  - There are countless limitations when attempting to hear the voices of those with higher degrees of “voicelessness.”
- 11 \* In a profession as unstructured as that of urban and regional planning in many countries around the world, many basic questions were not obvious in my research on Lebanese and Jordanian planners, such as: who to interview, or how to ensure a balance among the different profiles.
- 12 \* A case of a transnational like Shiber represents the perfect challenge for the conception of “local”; while he is indeed an extreme, numerous others offer different obstacles to the distinction between what is local and what is not.
- 13 \* In our *Urbanism* book, while we had sought to give as much presence to the “voiceless,” ultimately, these did not have as much voice as we’d have wished—illustrating well the inherent difficulty in achieving this aim in most cases.
- Challenges related to identifying the vectors and their impacts
- 14 At least as thorny as the identification of the gamut of actors and their roles is that of vectors and their impacts. Attempts at teasing out the influence of various vectors include the following challenges.
- Many hurdles may be faced when piecing together the web of interactions that make up the complex stories of city-building.
  - Efforts at integrating influences of cross-national practices into an understanding of urban formation can be challenging.
  - Sensitivity is required when adopting similar approaches to analyze the production of urban forms in dissimilar power-relation settings.
  - A range of issues are raised by the specificity of colonialism as a power-relation setting and as a vector.
  - Questions are posed when modernity, and modernizing urban planning and architecture, are considered through the prism of the local and the individual.
  - Problems arise in detecting the traces of influences and influencers, not just in highly hybridized places, but also in less obviously crossbred places.
- 15 \* Identifying the vectors in urban formation should not lead to easy assumptions of the impacts of these vectors. The danger in linking too easily vector and effect could be seen clearly in contradictions at the heart of two articles in the *Urbanism* book. Mercedes Volait questioned “the supposed synchronization between colonization, Westernization and urbanization” as English and Egyptian influences did not match the periods of English and local governance. Roland Strobel’s article meanwhile showed an example in postwar East Germany where the Soviet occupation forces were pressing

local architects to have a more locally inspired architecture at a time when the latter had a more internationalizing outlook to design.

16 \* Other articles in the book (such as those by Carola Hein on Japan and its colonies, or by Nora Lafi on how Tripoli, Libya served as an experimental outpost for reforms that later were adopted in the Ottoman heartland) showed the challenges when flows of persons and ideas become particularly complex. This also became apparent later in my interviews with planners in Lebanon and Jordan.

17 \* Research on the Tripoli Fair project required collaboration across continents to really achieve the principles put forward here, but this is usually not feasible, often resulting in studies whose understanding of the city-building process is incomplete.

Challenges related to sources on the actors and vectors

18 Stepping back from the difficulties in teasing out the various actors and vectors impacting the development of a city or its parts, there can be an assortment of challenges in figuring out and using the relevant sources on these actors and vectors.

- Impediments to the ability to locate the type of evidence needed may exist.
- There can be a danger in the over-reliance on the archives of the exporters, as these may often be the only ones available for research, or at least the easiest ones to use.
- Certain key actors and power relationships tend to be emphasized in archives and in other sources (police records, court records, papers of the elite, etc.)—and conversely, there is frequently an absence of other actors and power relationships from such archives and sources.

19 This is a general problem that was encountered in the *Urbanism* book and in my subsequent research. Basically, the availability of archives and other sources in many poorer countries is quite limited (compared to those in many richer countries at least), which can push towards the use of existing sources, even though these can steer the research towards particular issues and approaches that happened to be well-documented.

Challenges related to the identity and position of the researcher

20 The positionality of the researcher—and behind that, his or her identity, background, agenda, etc.—cannot be disregarded in analyzing the analysis of the city-building process. Who the researcher is inevitably would have at least some influence on the sources used, the methodology selected, the explanations posited, etc. Hence, there may be some obstacles to overcome related to a researcher's own nature.

- The impacts of the identity, and particularly the nationality, of the researcher can be considerable.
- The capacity of the researcher to consider honestly and wholly the strategies of autochthons and the nature of their actions may frequently be hindered.

21 \* The problematization of “nationality” in Alaa El-Habashi's article in the *Urbanism* book, where questions of “us” and “them” as debated in who has the right (and who does not) to participate in professional activities in 1920s Egypt, can be seen as reflected in the problematic questions on researchers themselves. In other words, who *can* or *should* do research on the city-building process?

22 \* In his opening article to the *Urbanism* book, Anthony King chose to explicitly revisit his own earlier research on Indian housing – and his own positionality as a researcher—in light of recent thinking on what he refers to as “the cultural politics of writing” on the built environment.

23 Together, these considerations may point to a possible alternate historiographical paradigm that may be emerging, or at least could potentially do so. A question would be: is such a paradigm actually emerging, and if so, under what form? Indeed, comparing where we stood when we started working on the *Imported or Exported Urbanism* project around a decade ago and the situation today, it is hard for us to ignore the changes that are occurring. A number of studies in architectural or urbanistic history have been published where a broader range of actors have been taken into account, and where the roles of local actors not only have been considered, but even formed the main object of research. The reception of the book seems to have been welcome, not so much (or not only) because of its contents as it is because of its intentions. In that sense, we feel less isolated in the discomfort that we were feeling in the mid-1990s when the idea for the book emerged. Perhaps (and hopefully) the book's arguments are starting to become obsolete, as such alternate histories of the city-building process, and of the actors, structures and vectors in it, are becoming more common. Whether this is actually heading towards a shift in the historiographical paradigm related to the built environment remains to be seen.

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## NOTES DE FIN

1. Joe NASR and Mercedes VOLAIT, eds., "Introduction: Transporting Planning," in *Urbanism—Imported or Exported? Native Aspirations and Foreign Plans*, Chichester, England, 2003, p. xi.
2. Anthony KING, "Writing Transnational Planning Histories," NASR and VOLAIT, p. 2.
3. Taoufik SOUAMI and Eric VERDEIL, eds., *Urbanistes de l'autre rive : Les professionnels de l'aménagement urbain au sud et à l'est de la Méditerranée* [tentative title], Paris, forthcoming.
4. Joe NASR, "Saba Shiber, 'Mr. Arab Planner': Parcours professionnel d'un urbaniste au Moyen-Orient," *Géocarrefour* (forthcoming).
5. Joe NASR and Sylvaine BULLE, "Planning Professionals in the Machrek (Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine)," *Progress in Planning*, in preparation.
6. Most of the bullets in the following sections are based on points first made in the section on "Methodological choices and challenges," in NASR and VOLAIT, pp. XXIII–XXX.
7. John ARCHER, "Paras, Palaces, Pathogens: Frameworks for the Growth of Calcutta, 1800–1850," *City and Society*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2000), p. 19.

## RÉSUMÉS

Recently, some scholars have thrown two types of challenges to the study of the city-building processes in both "central" and "peripheral" parts of the globe. First, they have called for studies of the actors involved in these processes to account for the full range of local stakeholders, and for all power relations between these actors. Second, a challenge has been made to researchers of the city-building process to include the myriad forms of linkages and vectors of influence and transformation, which are nested into such processes, in their understanding of how cities and

their buildings come to be. This essay presents how these double dimensions of a fuller consideration of the city-building process can have a number of methodological implications for researchers in architectural or urban history. Together, these considerations may point to a possible alternate historiographical paradigm that may be emerging, or at least could potentially do so.

## INDEX

**Index chronologique** : XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, époque contemporaine

**Mots-clés** : historiographie, urbanisme, historiography, methodology, research, urbanism, méthodologie, recherche

**Index géographique** : Liban, Jordanie, Palestine

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