

# A COMMENTARY ON KRIS OLDS'S CRITIQUE OF THE URBAN MEGA- PROJECT PHENOMENON

## *A Review Essay*

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*Globalization and Urban Change:  
Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects*

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WHILE GLOBAL PROCESSES have profoundly influenced the development trajectories of cities, large-scale, high-impact redevelopment projects arguably represent the most spectacular urban expressions of globalization. These "urban mega-projects," as described by Kris Olds, a geographer at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, are typically situated upon large sites within former inner-city industrial districts, but they can also be observed in suburban and even ex-urban areas. At one level, these urban mega-projects (UMPs) effect dramatic transformations of urban space, land use, and built form. But the implications of UMP development for many cities are more comprehensively far-reaching and nuanced, involving a fundamental reimagining of sites as well as the larger urban territories within which they are situated, experiences of dislocation and displacement (in situ and proximate), and the increasing integration of cities within international property and financial markets

and socio-cultural networks. The rapid expansion of the UMP phenomenon is thus deeply problematic from a normative perspective, and it also represents a scholarly research domain of great interest.

In *Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects*, published as a monograph in Oxford's Geographical and Environmental Studies series, Kris Olds offers a major contribution to our understanding both of the significance of UMP experiences for cities and the complex processes that have given rise to them over the last two decades. Clearly, the globalization of capital markets and investment flows represents an essential precondition for the pervasiveness of the UMP experience within the Pacific Rim and in other theatres; however, as Olds demonstrates, there is in fact a far more complex and variegated set of social, cultural, and business factors at play, interacting between global and local scales, and subject to change over time and space.

A principal aim of the monograph is to contextualize (and differentiate) what is too often seen as a generic, abstract, and dehumanized economic phenomenon by bringing into the discourse on UMPs specific "actors" (global conglomerates, international "tycoons," and other multinational players as well as local institutions, agencies, and individuals) informed by the author's extensive fieldwork and site visits. The book is thus modestly presented as "one small contribution towards deepening and socializing the analysis of the global space of flows, by linking the flows to the actors who formulate them, and by interrogating the internal ever-shifting nature of the space of flows" (42).

The book comprises three introductory, or contextual, chapters (making the case for a "relational" approach to the study of UMPs based on an appreciation of network theory and models of globalization that encompass social and cultural norms as well as economic and market factors); and two long chapters that present case studies of the Pacific Place UMP in Vancouver ("Producing the Pacific Rim Consumptionscape") and the Lujiazui Central Finance District site ("Producing the Global Finanscape") in Shanghai's enormous Pudong redevelopment project. The first three chapters serve both as a repudiation of the overly general theoretical treatments of globalization and as a conceptual platform for the case studies. Instead of the homogenized, distanced treatments of globalization frequently deployed to study the mega-project phenomenon, Kris Olds prefers a more committed, engaged research stance that requires a far more personal knowledge of individual players in the UMP experience and a deeper inquiry

into individual values, motivations, and cultural preferences. More specifically, Olds declares a preference for Arjun Appadurai's framework of global cultural flows (e.g., "ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," and "technoscapes"; see Appadurai 1990), which allow for fluidity, fragmentation, and uncertainty in experiences of globalization, over the "all-encompassing modernist theoretical frameworks such as Marxist-derived world systems analysis which is most often associated with Immanuel Wallerstein" (47). Olds acknowledges that the formalization of his conceptual approach was, in essence, developed during periods of reflection after (rather than before) the extensive fieldwork that underpins the study, but the empirical insights are no less compelling for all that, and the "storyline" of the two case studies is both original and instructive. The attraction of Shanghai and Vancouver as principal case studies lies in the opportunity to examine both commonalities and contrasts in experience in cities at very different echelons within the global city hierarchy (and of course characterized by different political cultures, social structures, and developmental histories and conditions).

The Pacific Place UMP experience in Vancouver effectively demonstrates Kris Olds's point concerning the importance of contingency, and the specific motivations and values of key individuals, or "actors," in the globalization of the north shore of False Creek – a large site comprising about one-sixth of the entire downtown area. It was always in the cards that a global conglomerate would emerge as the developer of the site, given the scale of resources, expertise, and ambitions required, and the greatly increased international profile for Vancouver

generated by the Expo '86 world's fair. But the interest (and eventual commitment) of Li Ka-shing, Hong Kong's wealthiest and most prominent tycoon, was facilitated by a range of considerations, including the city's new cultural context ensuing from rapidly increasing immigration from the Asia-Pacific (and especially Hong Kong); interest in Vancouver as a place to live, work, and gain citizenship on the part of Li's family members; and the outward-looking vision of Vancouver mayor Michael Harcourt, a social democrat who articulated a future for the city as a society within the Asia-Pacific urban system. Olds notes as well that Harcourt's friendship with Stanley Kwok (Li's key Vancouver-based advisor) was instrumental in building a sense of trust and reciprocal interests between Li's Concord Pacific Corporation and the city's representatives. Concord Pacific itself was a special kind of multinational conglomerate, comprising a loose consortium of business colleagues and family members, including several resident in Vancouver, thus presenting almost a local family business profile, in contrast to the more intimidating multinational entities based in first-tier global cities normally associated with large-scale foreign direct investment and UMPs. So arrangements between Concord and the city took the form of a kind of dialectical exchange, working towards common positions (or at least agreements that both sides felt comfortable with) rather than the more usual adversarial experiences that characterize processes between major developers and local authorities. As an illustration of this dialectical process, the final (approved) plans for the site contained significantly less office space than Concord had originally proposed;

given the stagnation of the commercial office market in Vancouver over the past decade, this (apparent) concession to the city has worked in favour of the developer. The planning process for the Concord proposals also included some 300 public meetings convened to discuss the proposals of the Pacific Place UMP, but Olds (and other observers – see, for example, Beazley [1993]) are sceptical about the influence of this public consultation on the overall form of the project. If not exactly “window dressing,” Olds sees the public consultation as being directed largely towards details of the project land use and design features rather than towards the basic concepts, choices, and conflicts between alternative visions for the site.

A decade or so later, Pacific Place is not yet fully developed but has attained a mature stage, and some judgments (or at least observations) about its impacts can be advanced. Pacific Place has generated substantial financial returns for Concord Pacific, as well as a glittering project many see as an exemplar of large-scale development, a “signature” development for the Li family in an important Pacific Rim city, and a dramatic expression of the intimate linkages between Vancouver and Hong Kong. Olds asserts that “Concord Pacific’s success in implementing *their* goals (leaving aside the issue of the positive and negative impacts that the project creates in neighbouring communities) is, in my assessment, due to the ability of the firm’s many representatives (in both Hong Kong and Vancouver) to embed themselves within and exploit relevant networks and institutions on both sides of the Pacific, binding together diverse knowledges in the pursuit of power” (139-40).

From the city's perspective, the outcomes may be seen as more mixed, reflecting the increasing pluralism of urban constituencies and the inherent divergence of social group interests and values. Certainly the Pacific Place UMP has yielded a very substantial stock of new housing, across a range of price points, but generally at the higher end of the condominium market. The residential precincts of Pacific Place represent the centrepiece in a vast expansion of housing in Vancouver's metropolitan core, driven, to be sure, by large-scale corporate capital and by social demand on the part of the "new middle class" of elite service workers described by David Ley (1996). But the extraordinary expansion of housing in Vancouver's inner city over the last decade has also been enabled by the major land-use changes embodied within the City of Vancouver's seminal Central Area Plan (approved December 1991), which opened up new territories on the CBD fringe and in the inner city for residential development, so policy influences have been important in the reshaping of the core's land use (Hutton forthcoming). The quantity of social or non-market housing produced overall has been disappointing, but this can be attributed in part to senior government retrenchment in capital provision for housing as well as to shortcomings of the agreement between the city and Concord Pacific on this issue. The scale, lustre, and momentum of the project, together with other major developments in the Central Area, have indirectly at least inflated land costs and rents in proximate districts of the core, exerting pressure on marginalized residential communities, although the massive increase in housing stock in the city's

core has likely had some "braking" effect on price rises overall in the core's housing market. (There is also a significant secondary rental market situated within the precincts of new condominiums on the north shore of False Creek, providing another source of rental housing supply, although the precise dimensions of this market are not known.)

The Pacific Place UMP must also be seen as a principal agency of the re-imagining of the site and city, and an expression of the larger experience of what Michael Peter Smith has described as "transnational urbanism" (2001). The glittering towers of Pacific Place have of course comprehensively transformed the north shore site with respect to land use, built environment, and skyline, and stand in stark contrast to the mostly medium-density, mixed-income housing precincts of False Creek South directly across the water. Apart from this physical contrast, there is also the important difference in agency and planning process: False Creek South was largely driven by the City of Vancouver's vision for the site, and much of the residential construction was supported by generous federal housing programs administered by the Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation, conveying a powerful sense of public purpose, as opposed to the explicitly multinational (and of course private sector) nature of the Concord Pacific project.

At a broader level there can be little doubt that the Pacific Place UMP has also accelerated Vancouver's integration within Asia-Pacific financial and property markets, a tendency lamented by some who prefer the more low-rise, localized ambience of pre-Expo Vancouver. But against the record of inflation, displacement, and sense of exclusion

associated with the globalization of Vancouver's metropolitan core, it should also be acknowledged that the rapid growth of Hong Kong (and other Asia-Pacific) investment, development, and immigration has provided Vancouver with a new economic "vocation," or developmental trajectory, supplanting the city's role as corporate control centre for the provincial resource sector, a status seriously compromised by the corporate mergers and acquisitions of the past fifteen years or so, and by the secular decline of the British Columbia resource economy as a whole (Hutton 1998). Concord Pacific's project on the north shore of False Creek may have hastened a process that has seen Vancouver exchange its provincial control and its position on the margins of the Canadian urban system for a peripheral status within the Pacific Rim. That said, the new functions and relationships exemplified par excellence by the Pacific Place UMP have at least provided a measure of insulation from the swings of restructuring and recession that have been a common feature of the contemporary urban experience in Canada and elsewhere. In this connection, and recalling Olds's underscoring of the importance of particular individuals in the globalization experiences of specific cities, Li Ka-shing's implicit endorsement of Vancouver conveyed a positive signal to some of the tens of thousands of skilled, highly educated, and outward-looking Hong Kong residents immigrating to the Vancouver-Lower Mainland region from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, greatly enhancing the metropolitan area's entrepreneurial base, human capital, and international connectivity.

If Pacific Place is viewed as a defining feature of Vancouver's recent (re)-

development, the Pudong project in Shanghai is on an altogether different and larger scale, with commensurately larger urban terrains, personalities, egos, dislocations, and displacement at stake in the property redevelopment game. Here Olds is concerned not so much with the design features (and controversies) associated with this, perhaps the most "mega" of the world's urban mega-projects, but, rather, with the "economic, social, and intellectual underpinnings of the production of global flows of images and property development expertise" (141). His approach here is to interrogate the role and behaviours of members of the Global Intelligence Corps (GIC) in the production of landmark urban spaces and, more particularly, the galaxy of international architectural and design stars invited to participate in the planning of the Lujiazui Central Finance District, the most prestigious and high-profile component of the Pudong redevelopment.

As in the case study of the Pacific Place UMP, Olds sets out an elaborate and comprehensive conceptual platform for the narrative, including the important institutional and policy changes of the Chinese state underpinning the astonishing growth of Shanghai and other coastal regions, and the more localized political aspirations of the state in Shanghai, including the assumed synergies between the goals of rapid modernization and internationalization and the plans for the Pudong site. But the lead characters in this saga are the high-flying recruits from the Global Intelligence Corps, a self-regarding contingent of star international intermediaries, professionals, and designers. The *dramatis personae* include the eminent British architect Sir Richard Rogers and a cast

that, although consisting of perhaps somewhat lesser aspirants to global stature, nonetheless features foreign intermediaries hired to manage an international competition design to elicit a world-class plan for a new world city – a means of generating for Shanghai (in the words of the proposal call) “a new economic boom, making it one of Asia’s major money and trade markets” (214). Nor was the scope of the enterprise limited to remaking Shanghai’s Lujiazui site and the larger Pudong project. Again we reference the proposal call: “In a programme of this scope, the coming together of internationally renowned groups onto one site could well lead to a profound reevaluation of town-planning, dealing not only with Shanghai but the town of the future” (ibid.). So we acknowledge a heroic, rather than an incrementalist, vision and purpose here.

This somewhat inflated rhetoric was designed to be attractive to the members of the GIC, and so it proved. Rather than managing the competition in-house, the Shanghai Municipal Government (SMG) hired a number of French advisors experienced in such mega-projects as La Défense and imbued with an almost cultural affinity for the grandiose. From a roster of the world’s leading architects and planners, the Shanghai officials selected Richard Rogers, Massimiliano Fuksas, Toyo Ito, and Dominique Perrault, all drawn from a range of countries with prominent design cultures. Here, however, we recall that their GIC status (and identities) transcended the parochial norms of merely national reputation. The Rogers Partnership proposal took the form of a spectacular, elegant, and deeply rational design, a progressive expression of “new” modernism, in which (in the words of Richard Rogers)

“our approach was to create not a financial ghetto separated from the life of the city but a vibrant, mixed, commercial and residential quarter capable of acting as a focus for the whole of Pudong, and of driving its economy” (226). On its own merits (i.e., without specific reference to the site’s setting and environment), the Rogers plan for Lujiazui was a dazzlingly original and striking design with respect to land use, landscapes, and design values. But in the end, a more pragmatic option was synthesized from the Rogers submission and several other proposals by the SMG’s senior consultants commission and technical committee, responding to the imperatives of project scheduling, market realities, and the SMG’s more immediate needs – a far cry from the rigour, rationality, and coherence of the Rogers proposal. As Olds concludes,

In short, the Rogers contribution was pure paper architecture; an ideal city expressive of the modernist ecotopia that the Rogers team would love to see inscribed in material form. The images contained in the plan are the graphic representations of elitist Utopian thinking. They were formulated by transnational cultures active at a global scale, yet embedded in networks and institutions more closely associated with Europe. That no master plan of such complexity and technological sophistication could ever be implemented in the messy and frenzied context of Shanghai was an insignificant issue; rather, Lujiazui Rogers was pure theory. (229)

In his conclusion ("Final Thoughts"), Olds is critical of the involvement of "jet set quick dip experts" who propose plans for UMPs "free of local clutter and context," and in this regard, the Rogers Partnership experience in Shanghai is "the perfect model of how *not* to work across space and time" (248).

By way of contrast, Concord Pacific's Pacific Place UMP, despite its imperfections and contestable aspects, was at least more grounded in the textures and needs of a real city. Here the specific contingencies of the UMP experience in Vancouver include (relative to the Shanghai case) the sophisticated planning system and professionals of the City of Vancouver (who were better able to mediate between the conceptual and practical dimensions of large-scale site planning and were more experienced in inserting the public interest in the reproduction of the core) as well as the critical engagement of essentially local (or at least locally based) actors representing both the corporation and the city. As Olds observes, perhaps the most significant expression of contingency was the Li family's commitment to a project that could realize social, cultural, and relational – as well as economic and financial – goals. In the Shanghai case, the general excellence of the Rogers proposal was ultimately compromised by the pragmatic values of the SMG and its representatives, but perhaps each party got at least a little of what it wanted from the exercise: in attracting the attention and personal involvement of Sir Richard Rogers, the SMG authorities had both the benefit of his (and his partners') expertise as well as a significant validation of the global stature of the Pudong project, while Rogers himself could gain a measure of consolation in being acclaimed as

*primus inter pares* among the GIC design brotherhood (by virtue of his success in the SMG's international competition) as well as gleaming considerable expert praise for the quality of his design.

For me, the two case studies were the strongest, most compelling, and instructive features of a valuable and scholarly monograph. In this respect, I might have preferred a somewhat different balance for the book, with perhaps less extensive treatment of the underpinning theory and context in the three initial chapters. More categorically I would have been happier with fewer discursive excursions into the obscurantist vocabularies of some of the theorists Olds criticizes – and indeed a few of those whom he prefers – and a corresponding expansion of the case studies. (The very detailed Pacific Place story, with a mass of detail and nuance, is packed into a chapter of eighty-three pages, while the Lujiazui narrative comprises a single chapter of just under 100 pages.) Each of the two principal case studies presents more than enough thematic content and diversity to allow a more accessible chapter structure and flow. I would also, given Olds's considerable expertise in planning, community organization, and public policy, have liked to have seen more discussion on how cities and urban communities can respond more effectively to the pressures of UMPs and global processes more generally. That said, it must be acknowledged that Kris Olds's elegant and exceptionally well informed book represents an important contribution to our understanding both of the urban mega-project phenomenon and, more particularly, of the complex range of influences on the specific UMP experience in "real cities in real places."

For readers of *BC Studies*, there is of course a special reason for an interest in *Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects*: the chapter on Pacific Place offers a particularly insightful profile of an important dimension of Vancouver's critical Asia-Pacific reorientation and redefining relationships.

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