Of Intercity Competition, Global City Formations and “Intelligent Corridors”

Although the nature and extent of globalization is widely contested in policy and academic debates, one phenomenon almost all sides agree with is the mounting intensity of intercity competition in the contemporary round of global economic restructuring. Cities and regions are increasingly competing with one another to attract the attention of venture capitalists and transnational corporations that traverse the globe, seeking the best sites for their investments. Politicians and business analysts are quick to caution against the perils of failing to “hold down” (Amin and Thrift, 1994) these global economic flows. Failure in intercity rivalry, they warn, would mean relegation to the margins of the global economy. Improved urban competitiveness is consequently exhorted as the “path to economic nirvana” (Begg, 1999:795), if not economic survival. To remain effective in this new economic regime, many policymakers are engaging their primary urban centres in a process that is now commonly referred to as world or global city formation (Sassen, 1994; Knox and Taylor, 1995; Yeung and Lo, 1998).

Global city formation entails the enhancement of urban economic competitiveness through massive real estate and infrastructure development. These urban mega projects are typically characterized by large-scale (re)development, composed of a mix of commercial, residential, retail, industrial, leisure, and infrastructure uses to “reorient the international imagery” of their host cities for attracting inward investments (Olds, 1995:1713). Many of these urban mega projects are increasingly underpinned with investments in advanced information technology, with the intention of electronically integrating the host cities into the exclusive global city network; the “nodes and hubs” through which the primary tributaries of global capital and information flows are circulated and coordinated (Castells, 1996:413). Elaborate “intelligent corridors” (Corey, 2000) or “information districts” (Graham and Marvin, 2000), with research and producer services centred
on information technologies and integrated with “wired” residential, education, entertainment and other supporting activities may perhaps be one of the most discernible strategies characterizing global city formation in this so-called Information Age.

The proliferation of “intelligent corridors” and other telemedia-based global city formation strategies across the world have triggered much academic and policy research. These initiatives, however, have thus far offered only a partial understanding of these dramatic and costly urban restructuring processes, for three reasons. Firstly, most narratives focus largely on economic issues to the virtual exclusion of cultural and political factors, leading to a partial understanding of the dynamics of such urban transformations. These narratives often assume the domineering hold of transnational capitalism by focusing narrowly on how cities can best adapt to the challenges of global economic competition. Urban policies and the resultant geographies of urban mega projects are explained in terms of how they are tailored to the structural needs of corporate interests, and to the promotion of the city as a “command and control center” (Sassen, 1991) for global economic activities. Recent discourse emphasizing how current advances in telecommunications can significantly restructure our urban economies have further skewed our analysis away from the social and political imperatives arising from global city formation. Consequently, Mee (1998:228) laments that “the overwhelming sense one gets from writings on the information economy is that culture is subordinate to the logic of inevitable economic and technological changes”.

Secondly, and attendant to the slanted analytical position proffered above, is the assertion that there is little governments can do to shield their urban centres from the current trend of economic restructuring. The only option is to find ways to “cushion themselves” against their economic and structural vulnerability (Lee, 1996:370). As a result, strategies in global city formation are seldom questioned by policymakers and are widely perceived to be universal material processes in the new regime of global capital accumulation/production that should or must be replicated. Successful global cities “are wheeled out as paradigmatic cases, alleged conveniently to encompass all urban trends everywhere” (Amin and Graham, 1997:411 cited in Bunnell, 2000:5).

Thirdly, there is a tendency for much of the contemporary research on global city formations to place emphasis on a brand of global-local dialectics that focuses on the developmental processes and linkages that are taking place at either the supranational or subnational levels. For Scott (1998:10–11) the “new global capitalists’ economy” is characterized by “regions constituting the fundamental building blocks or motors of the entire system” resulting in a “global mosaic of regional economies”. Others such as Sassen (1999a) have emphasized the instrumentality of non-state or metastate “intermediary institutions” for handling cross-border operations