Urban Entrepreneurialism, Global Business Elites and Urban Mega-Development: A Case Study of Suntec City

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, cities have witnessed dramatic transformations as they adjust to new economic, social and political imperatives. In particular, it has been widely theorized that globalization and urban restructuring have seen the emergence of a new mode of “entrepreneurial” governance where the primary task of city officials is, in essence, “to lure highly mobile and flexible production, financial and consumption flows into its space” (Harvey, 1989a:11). Within the entrepreneurial regime, “public-private partnerships” have often been deployed as a key strategy in urban regeneration programmes, most dramatically seen in the construction of prestigious urban “flagship projects” or “mega-projects” such as spectacular waterfront cities, world-class convention centres, cultural centres and other mixed-use commercial developments (see Smyth, 1994; Olds, 1995). Often associated with this “new entrepreneurialism” is the emergence of a “new urban politics” (Cox, 1993; Judd and Kantor, 1998) which challenges the redistributive consequences of entrepreneurial policies. In particular, (global) private capital is seen to play an increasingly dominant role in the shaping of urban development, while the local state is being reduced to a subordinate and disadvantaged position. In extreme cases, this has led to the “weakening” and the eventual “capturing” of the state (Logan and Molotch, 1987; T. Hall and Hubbard, 1996).

To the extent that urban entrepreneurialism is characterized by the preoccupation of city officials with the promotion of economic growth, Singapore arguably epitomizes the “entrepreneurial city”. The relentless drive to establish the city-state as an economic powerhouse is demonstrated by the efforts of state agencies such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), Economic and Development Board (EDB) and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to promote and attract high-growth investments, financial services and value-added services into the city-state. In particular, the URA’s “pro-business” urban planning, which aims to position Singapore as an “international business hub” can be most clearly seen in
the construction of new urban spaces at downtown core areas such as Marina Centre. In general, “pro-growth” government policies and economic imperatives have guided the development of the city-state over the past four decades, precipitating the rapid transformation of the urban landscape.

While the emergence of the entrepreneurial city may be seen as a common trend in many late capitalist societies, its shape and nature is contingent upon varying local factors and conditions such as different national regulation systems and local political cultures. Researchers should, therefore, be wary of viewing “a homogenous entrepreneurial city emerging mechanistically from global economic forces” (Short and Kim, 1999:117). Unfortunately, academic “(re)production” of entrepreneurial cities has only focused narrowly on a few Anglo-American cities such as Manchester (Lawless, 1994; Peck and Tickell, 1995); Birmingham (Hubbard, 1996; Loftman and Nevin, 1998) and New York/Syracuse (Roberts and Schein, 1993). Thus, this paper attempts to redress this imbalance and contribute to the conceptual and empirical knowledge of the entrepreneurial city in a different context.

Using Singapore as a case study, this paper’s interest is in the production of new urban spaces at downtown Marina Centre (see Figure 1).

Specifically, I will focus on Suntec City, a S$2 billion (US$1.15 billion) flagship project financed by elite Hong Kong businessmen. Suntec City comprises a mega-size convention and exhibition centre (the Singapore International Exhibition and Convention Centre), integrated with five state-of-the-art office towers and a giant retail mall and entertainment centre. Hailed as a world-class “city-within-a-city” and the largest private commercial development in Singapore, Suntec City is symbolic of the successful partnership between local public agencies (including senior political leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew) and global private capital. Like mega-projects in other cities, Suntec City constitutes “both a real and symbolic node” that is aimed at “hooking up” the city-state to the global economy (Olds, 1995:1719).

This paper begins with a conceptual overview of urban entrepreneurialism and contemporary urban development. In this theoretical context, the nature of Singapore’s “entrepreneurial state” will be explored. Contrary to the novelty of the so-called “new entrepreneurialism” literature, it will be pointed out that Singapore’s experience demonstrates that the interventionist government, since national independence, has long played the proactive role as both planner and entrepreneur in promoting urban/economic development. While the observation of “state entrepreneurship” in Singapore is not new (see for example Low, 1990:143–175), it is, however, interesting to examine how “public-private partnership” and “political entrepreneurship” have been mobilized and deployed in the development of Suntec City. In particular, it is argued that urban entrepreneurialism in Singapore has not led to the alleged “capturing” of the state. Rather, state