Community Responses to Mega-Projects

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Abstract
Mega-projects figure prominently in the arsenal of contemporary city-building strategies. The allure is of a city redefined, placed on the world stage and able to improve services, facilities and revenues. Community attitudes to such projects are often more mixed, with fears of gentrification, displacement or loss of existing city character. This paper examines community engagement with large-scale urban redevelopment projects in Montreal, Vancouver and Los Angeles to explore whether new constellations of community-based actors and political processes are emerging in parallel to the rise in mega-projects. The findings suggest that although mega-projects are adopted to pursue global ambitions, concerted community-based demands are to use them to satisfy local needs. In all three cities, innovative practices have resulted that prioritize the quality of residential areas and the needs of low-income households. The paper concludes by assessing the significance of the distinct forms of community engagement apparent in the three cities.

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Introduction

Large-scale development projects are a key element in the contemporary city-building strategies of many municipalities throughout the world. Major projects – whether a new stadium, a world-class museum, a high-speed rail line, or another Petronus-like Tower – are seen as transformative, placing a city on the world stage and thereby attracting visitors, investment, jobs, and, ultimately, a higher quality of urban life for local residents. The image of a city is increasingly linked, at least in the minds of many urban managers, politicians and businesses, to grand-scale and strategic mega-projects.

Public institutions throughout the world build mega-projects – large-scale facilities and infrastructure – to improve transport, health or other services, or economic development prospects. Private developers pursue large-scale commercial projects as a means to generate revenues. In both cases, projects channel investment into specific locations in the city often bringing together efforts to redevelop the urban fabric with the promotion of economic and business development.

Such diverse aims are also complemented by new means of financing, implementing and operating large-scale projects. From the private sector side, the links between private investments and wider public objectives of urban revitalization has meant access to public funds, whether in the form of complementary direct investments, development bonuses or waivers of taxes, fees and the like. From the public sector perspective, the cost and complexity of large-scale projects, as well as prevailing political attitudes in many parts of the world, have meant that many new ‘public’ facilities have been pursued in partnership with the private sector. Relations range from construction and management contracts to extensive public-private partnerships. Much attention has focused on the dynamics of the resulting multi-stakeholder projects.

The paper examines the role of community and other civic players in mega-project development in Canada and the United States and asks: What do we learn, as planners and urban theorists, from an examination of community engagement with large-scale urban projects? Are new forms of urban development around mega-projects paralleled by new constellations of political actors and political processes?
Los Angeles, Vancouver, and Montreal are used as a basis for analysis. In all three cities, community groups have engaged with recent efforts to promote large-scale urban development, in some cases more successfully than others. Though many other cities could have been selected, these cases demonstrate a range of responses to mega-projects that highlight the changing nature of projects, types of community-developer engagement, and differences of local context. Because the terminology around ‘mega-projects’ is fuzzy (Markusen, 2003), the cases selected all entail investments in specific mixed-use facilities that are linked (at least rhetorically) to urban revitalisation and wider city building efforts. Material is drawn from interviews conducted by the author with key community participants as well as from policy and academic literature on the projects, where available.

Three themes structure the paper and the analysis of illustrative cases. First is the question of ‘the mega project’: How do mega-projects fit into urban development strategies? What are their typical features and effects? At a second level are questions of community engagement: In what sense are new political structures and processes emerging to meet ‘mega-projects’? Who is involved? What is the nature of their participation? Can specific outcomes be linked to different forms of engagement? Third is the question of planning, which is picked up in the conclusion of the paper: Who is doing the planning in these cases? What new relationships and practices are emerging? The paper thus addresses the role of large projects in city-building and city-branding efforts, contemporary means of effective citizen engagement with development interests, and the limits and possibilities for collaborative approaches around such projects.

**Mega-Projects as Urban Development Strategy**

Mega-projects conform to a model of urban development that many governments favour: high-profile strategic projects with the potential to satisfy immediate aims (e.g. improving services, providing facilities), attract external capital (both in construction and subsequently) and redefine a neighbourhood or the city as a whole. Mega-projects respond to global competition among cities for investments, knowledge workers, tourists and prestige (Olds, 2001; Brenner, 2004). They are high-profile and strategic, linked to infrastructure upgrading, tax base enhancement, or ‘imagineering’ (UNCHS-Habitat, 2004; Borja & Castells, 1997; Paul, 2004). Mega-projects can vary in scope and scale, from a major library or hospital to multi-faceted interventions aimed at transforming a district (UNCHS-
Bornstein, 2004). Even where project aims are narrow, there are expectations of positive ‘spillover effects’ (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Storey & Hamilton, 2003), from “new images of the city on the global stage” (Whitson, 2004) to neighbourhood revitalization and gentrification. Mega-projects are sometimes analyzed as a particular variant of ‘urban projects’ [projets urbains], with analysts assessing the latter in terms of their primary aim: political, operational or architectural (Courcier, 2005). However, the mega-project is interesting in part because it is pursued with rhetoric of positive outcomes at all three levels: city building, effective implementation, and aesthetic improvement.

Yet researchers also note that mega-projects are often ‘planning disasters’ that generate heavy impacts and systemic cost over-runs (Altshuler & Luberoeff, 2003; Hall, 1980), in part due to lack of accountability or public participation (Flyvbjerg, 2003). Moreover, while benefits from such projects are likely to accrue at a municipal or regional level, residents in nearby areas incur many disamenities (Storey & Hamilton, 2003), whether through displacement to accommodate the facilities, increased traffic, noise and air pollution, or a shift to non-residential uses in the area. For all these reasons, the literature identifies mega-projects as a factor increasing spatial and socio-economic polarization in contemporary cities.

These are strategic projects for the cities and developers (whether public or private) but few such projects, at least in North America, are pursued through a strategic planning approach. Instead, these projects marry normative aims of government planning – the generation of public benefits – with seemingly pragmatic approaches to getting large-scale projects implemented. Because they are so costly and complex, they increasingly involve private-public sector partnerships, or major institutional developers (universities, etc.). Even large-scale private projects are likely to benefit from public funding on the basis that the project is important for the character of a neighbourhood and the quality of services. In North America, promoters of these projects rarely, if ever, systematically pursue a strategic planning approach: they often do not fit into wider strategic plans and frameworks at either a municipal or regional level, and generally make no provisions for community assessment. Frequently they are site specific, with the benefits presumed rather than carefully analyzed or subjected to public deliberation.

The inclusion of new actors and development alliances changes the terrain for urban development, but in not always predictable ways. The use of public private partnerships to finance, construct and
operate these mega-projects threatens to curtail possibilities for strategic or community-grounded approaches as the locally-grounded, evolving and iterative process of working together is argued to make financial projections – and therefore commitments – difficult. The emergence of new institutional developers, hospitals, universities, port authorities etc., also creates both new tensions and opportunities as their mission (serving students, the metropolitan-wide service provision, etc.) may be distinct from those concerns most relevant to residents of the immediate surroundings.

**Community Engagement around Mega-Projects**

Studies of the politics of mega-project development suggest that project promoters have become more inclined to accommodate community concerns in recent years (Altshuler, 2003). Researchers drawing on urban regime theory, for example, speculate that project developers fear that local opposition could lead officials to reject financing, planning permits or other required approvals; as a consequence, measures to address concerns around parking, noise and community facilities are incorporated into plans (Altshuler 2003; Mason, 2006). However, only transport and tourism projects have been studied systematically (Santo, 2004).

In some instances, community-project engagement has gone further than token agreement on mitigation. Plans for mega-hospitals in New Haven (Rhomberg & Simmons, 2005) and East St Louis (Reardon, 2000; Reardon, 1998) a sports-entertainment complex in Los Angeles (Gross et al., 2002; Reich, 2003; Cummings & Volz, 2003) and, at a different scale, the Olympic bid in Vancouver (Mason, 2006) include novel elements to better mesh the project with the needs of vulnerable residents. In these cases, participants indicate that alliances between local groups and unions, civic leaders, officials and/or large institutions were important to the outcomes, with tactics ranging from confrontational to collaborative.¹ These are the projects that are the focus of further analysis in this paper.

For a cooperative process, literature on multi-stakeholder decision-making and community-university partnerships suggests numerous pitfalls: agreements have foundered due to lack of support from those outside of the process, lack of binding clauses, timetables and financial commitments, drawn-out negotiations and, later, implementation that strains often understaffed and under-resourced community organizations (Baum, 2000; Gilderbloom, 2005; Wiewel, 1998; Innes, 1999,
The challenges of negotiation, collaboration and consensus-building between institutional developers and communities – around power, representation, resources, access to influence, good faith – are well-known (Baum, 2000, Forester, 1989; Fontan et al., 2003). While there is information on collaborative planning, citizen empowerment and civic engagement, this has not been approached within the framework of strategic projects and therefore the specific tensions associated with high-profile mega-projects are still poorly understood.

The literature on governance provides another perspective on these dynamics. Careful analysis of the various forms through which actors, at different scales (Brenner, 2004), operate in the governance of a city process brings attention to the power that distinct groups have in agenda-setting, policy-formulation, decision-making and action. Just as there are different models of citizen engagement, the different institutional systems that guide, enshrine, contain and enable involvement contribute to different political cultures, and different spaces for negotiation (Healey, 2006). In each city, there are diverse mechanisms and opportunities for citizen input encoded in law and city charters; however, when existing channels are ineffective citizens may opt for other forms of opposition (Latendresse, 2004, 2005; Hamel, 1989; Hamel & Rousseau, 2003). Mega-projects test the limits of established mechanisms of collective decision-making. Studying the planning and implementation can help us to advance our understanding of urban governance and improve it on the ground.

**Canadian and U.S. Community Engagement with Mega-Projects**

Several mega-projects are briefly presented here to highlight (a) the different strategies employed around complex and large-scale strategic projects and associated outcomes, (b) the importance of institutional context, and (c) emerging lessons for planners, community groups and developers around routes to projects that better fit into their immediate neighbourhoods while achieving wider strategic aims.

**Montreal**

Montreal has a long-history of citizen engagement with large scale projects. Protests and opposition, against highway construction, residential redevelopment, and tourism facilities, have in some cases led to re-orientation of the projects towards neighbourhood defined priorities (cf. Fontan et al., 2002, 2004; Hamel, 1989, 1991; Herland, 1992). *The Old Port* is presented as an example. In other
cases, protests have contributed to or been blamed for the collapse of redevelopment initiatives, as the recent case of the Peel Basin redevelopment illustrates. The focus here is two-fold: on the forms of ‘negotiation’ and ‘pressure’ dominant in the projects and, second, on the associated rhetoric.

The redevelopment of the Old Port of Montreal is a large-scale planning project that local residents were able to influence through the formal public participation process. It serves as an exemplar of patterns of citizen engagement with mega-projects characteristics of earlier periods and extending into the present. Public participation was confined to particular moments and issues, yet though perhaps co-optative and token, there was influence. As such, the Old Port is an excellent illustration of the way public engagement around a strategic urban project evolved over time, highlighting both successes and on-going tensions.

The Old Port encompasses 47 hectares situated between the St. Lawrence River and historic Old Montreal. After the opening of the St Lawrence Seaway in 1959, activity along the riverfront quays declined significantly. To reverse the downward trend, the federal government created the Association of the Old Port, a quasi-independent agency, with two objectives: to make a profit and to restore the federal government’s image in Quebec, which was suffering from both costly planning failures of the 1960s and the rise of the Quebec separatist movement. The project also had to respect the designation of Old Montreal as an historic district.

Public participation in the project occurred in two principal stages. The Port Association organized a series of public consultations in 1978 and 1979, the first such process for a major project in Montreal. On the basis of initial consultations, actions were taken including: the establishment of the Old Port of Montreal Corporation (‘Port Corporation’), a wholly-owned subsidiary of crown corporation Canada Lands, responsible for subsequent development and management of the area; demolition of a grain elevator; renovation of a clock tower; creation of a linear park; and removal of six sets of railway tracks. A second round of consultations around the vision and plans for development followed. Just prior to the consultation, the Port Corporation hired a consortium of international architects to draw up plans for the port. Proposals were to include large scale office, commercial and cultural spaces, waterfront condos and a new metro station. Residents, through the subsequent public hearings, rejected the Port Corporation’s initial vision of the area, with a smaller
scale framework instead adopted together with ‘guiding principles for development’ and social responsibility (see Figure 1).

In 1989, residents again voiced opposition to the Port Corporation’s planning approach, this time on the basis of preferences in contracting. The Port Corporation had invited prestigious architectural and design teams from the U.S. and Ontario to design the Port. When the public and local architects opposed the plan, arguing that it ran counter to the principles articulated in the consultation, The Port Corporation back-pedaled and hired a local firm. Subsequent public input has largely been channelled through city-wide consultation processes, on borough development, the Master Plan for the City of Montreal, the Cultural Development Policy, the economic development strategy, etc.

The Old Port is considered a success in many respects. It is a public space accessible to all, with a variety of events available at little or no cost. Cultural festivals, a science centre, and a skating rink co-exist with historical museums and festivals, the Clock Tower, a grain silo and the Old Montreal streets and churches that reaffirm the past. Local residents are given permit parking and efforts are being made to maintain cleanliness, an important issue where many restaurants and bars cater to tourists. The public’s participation – and the guiding vision, principles and plans for development – are considered key to the success of the project (Courcier, 2005; Wolfe, 2007). The willingness of federal government representatives to engage with the public allowed, according to some analysts, for a compromise to be progressively developed among various interest groups and stakeholders (Courcier, 2005).

Nonetheless, there are a variety of concerns relating to the area’s development to date and its future prospects. Of key import, the Port Corporation has a role as financial custodian of the land
and facilities. Over the past twenty years balancing the books may have been more important than maintaining port uses, historic preservation, or activities compatible with those of adjacent areas. Indeed, this past year the Port Corporation split its functional organization into two parts, with one vice president and team responsible for the science center and the other responsible for the quays. In this way, the president of the Corporation contends, visions, programming and management appropriate to the two distinct uses can be developed and pursued.

There has also been a move to consolidate land-ownership under the Canada Lands Company, the crown corporation currently holding the majority of the land. Canada Lands has an interesting history. It was a key player in several other local projects subject to neighbourhood struggle. It also has been active in a neighbouring harbourfront area, where plans for a postal site have shifted from community uses to private development and back again. Canada Lands’ experience in working with activist community organisations may result in maintenance of arenas for public input around the port’s development. There are, however, other indications that public input may be sidelined. The federal government’s recent plans for the waterfront’s development were based on consultations with diverse government representatives and not with the public at large. And City relations with community groups around other mega-projects have not gone universally well, as described below.

In 2005, the Harbour Society (Société du Havre de Montréal), responsible for elaborating overall redevelopment plans for the Peel Basin just west of the Old Port, announced that it had identified a consortium of interested investors. The press release made by the partners began,

Loto-Québec and the Cirque du Soleil unveiled a proposal today for the establishment of a world-class entertainment complex to be located on the site of the Peel Basin in the du Havre sector of Montréal. Unique in the world, this project would provide Montréal and Québec with a powerful lever to spur the development of the local economy, tourism and the cultural sector. The project would also translate into the creation of 6,450 direct and indirect jobs. (Cirque du Soleil, press release, June 24, 2005)

The proposed entertainment complex was to include a 2,500-seat performance hall for the Cirque du Soleil and touring companies, a 300-room hotel, a park capable of housing a circus big-top, a spa and an artists’ wharf. Loto-Québec would relocate the Casino de Montréal from its current site on the nearby Ile St-Helene and establish an exhibition center for business and trade shows. A soccer stadium was to be built by another investor. A monorail would like the various sites to each
other and to the Old Port. The entertainment complex alone was estimated to entail investments of $997 million by Loto-Québec with private partner contributions around $178 million.

The supposed advantages of the Peel Basin site were that it was located in close proximity to the downtown area yet physically isolated – due to transport infrastructure – from most residential areas. The project also fit well with broader visions for redevelopment of the Peel Basin and Bonaventure Expressway put forward by the Société du Havre: creation of a urban boulevard with the demolition of a raised highway, private investment in residential condos and commercial buildings along the boulevard, and location of attractive commercial and entertainment activities in proximity to the new development pole, the water and downtown (Société du Havre de Montréal, 2006).

From the perspective of the investors, public consultation was to be factored into the project development process. Investors committed publicly to observe the municipal requirements for public consultation and to develop guidelines with community groups around hiring of local residents. They were not prepared, however, for the vocal and concerted community opposition that emerged. Community groups came together around a shared assessment that the project was ill-conceived and meshed poorly with its urban surroundings, the neighborhood of Pointe St. Charles. Given a pre-dominately working-class and low-income community, local groups argued that a casino and other tourist/entertainment facilities poorly met the needs of local residents for affordable housing, local services, and safe, healthy living environments. While jobs would be created, local groups asked for greater details on other benefits of the projects. A special committee set up to assess the project recommended that the government delay approval for 18 months while public consultations and further studies could be done (Ministry of Finance, 2006; Government of Quebec, 2006). Cirque du Soleil subsequently decided against investing in the project, citing poor publicity in association with the project (add source) as well as concerns that:

*It [systematic protest] is becoming a trend, the ‘brand’ of our society... It’s unfortunate because Montreal is recognized internationally -- for its joie de vivre, as a destination -- and instead of building on those assets, we continue to fight within the family. Meanwhile, while other cities in the world continue to grow, we continue to lose ground [culturally].* (M. Laliberté, Radio Canada interview, March 2006)

Similar sentiments have been voiced by key public figures. For instance, the president of Astral Media Radio, Jacques Parisien, at a Chamber of Commerce presentation, said that:
Montreal will not, in the near future, be the city of grand projects….Too tolerant of minority groups, too open to consensus and the respect of minorities of all sorts, victim of a lack of courage on the part of politicians, victim of that provincial and federal political obsession of prioritizing the regions…Montreal ought to capitalize on its assets. (Parisien quoted in Cloutier, 2006: 1)²

Other observers (cf. H. Aubain, Gazette columnist) have noted that the project was ill-conceived and inadequately studied or discussed. The proposed project would likely have promoted gentrification, condo and commercial development, and, in locating a casino near a low-income neighbourhood, accentuated social and economic vulnerability. Yet project proponents, business leaders and some officials labelled local residents as ‘spoilers’, willing to forego jobs and reinvestment in futile efforts to demand more community benefits.

Montreal, as with most cities, is characterized by several forms of citizen engagement with development. The pattern observed in the Old Port’s development, of intermittent consultations in public forums on defined topics, still is the dominant approach to communities and mega-projects in Montreal. Challenges to that pattern, through organized community coalitions and vocal opposition, have been met by efforts to discredit public input and question government leadership.

Vancouver

The case of Vancouver, and the Vancouver Agreement, highlights efforts to link social priorities to economic development and city-imagineering efforts. Mega-events, such as Olympic Games, are a specific form of mega-project that, while spatially more dispersed, historically have been associated with displacement of low-income residents, an increased tax burden for the city’s population, increased real estate prices, a new image of the city (Whitson, 2004) and few visible social benefits (Eisinger, 2000; Olds, 1998; Hall, 2006). Recent Olympics bids, such as that of Cape Town and Vancouver, have integrated wider social and environmental objectives into the proposal. The Vancouver Agreement emerged in conjunction with the City’s bid for the 2010 Olympics and Paralympic Winter games and focused, initially, on Downtown Eastside, the old commercial center of the city.

The Downtown Eastside is an area with a rich architectural and community history that for several decades has been characterized by high rates of poverty, lack of adequate housing and abandonment by business. Social problems include transience and homeless, unemployment (22%), high levels of dependence on social assistance, crime, prostitution, HIV infection, drug addiction and
dealing (City of Vancouver, 2007a; 2007b). There are many single-person households, homeless and those dependent on social assistance (40% of total income is from government transfer as compared to 10% for the city as a whole) (City of Vancouver, 2007b). High-rates of drug use, and related deaths, prompted city officials to enter into partnerships with other levels of government, community service providers and local businesses to address social problems. The Olympic Bid included a commitment to address these problems, both through the construction of job-creating facilities for the competitions and via targeted policies and interventions to address economic and social vulnerability of the residents. The Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program summarizes its role as, “restoring the area to a healthy, safe and liveable neighbourhood for all [by] developing and implementing long-term approaches to community health, community safety, housing, and economic development” (City of Vancouver, 2007a).

To date, the Agreement has achieved some success (City of Vancouver, 2007b). Nearly 70 projects – of market and affordable housing, mixed use complexes, service facilities and others – have been built or are currently in construction. The historic Woodward Building is under re-development for housing, educational and commercial uses; the project includes 200 social housing units and 536 market housing units, which sold in a single day on the market. Affordable housing will also be developed in Southeast False Creek, the 200-250 housing units to be used first as the Athletes’ Village; at least one-third of the units will be designated for low-income households. To avoid displacement associated with the Olympics and urban redevelopment, the city adopted measures to restrict conversion of single occupancy units (e.g. rooming houses and single-room occupancy hotels) to other uses. Unemployment has fallen, though median incomes are still less than 30% of the city’s average. A program targeting those with ‘multiple barriers to employment’ has provided 200 people with one-to-one assistance with housing, childcare and counselling. Through this and other programs some 400 people have found work. The Four Pillars program to address drug-related issues has set up telephone referral services for adults and youth, a Supervised Injection Site which includes detox and referral services, and a webpage with information for service providers and the public. There are four new health clinics in the area. Deaths associated with drug or alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS and suicides have declined since 2000 with less visible drug use and dealing on the street. Other measures to reduce crime and increase safety include: undercover operation targeting pawnshops, convenience
stores, SRO hotels and pubs; self-defence training for street-based sex workers; and urban design improvements.

Community involvement in establishing the framework for the Vancouver Agreement and in implementation of specific programs suggests that, while public support has been important, the key drivers have been government officials. The 2010 Winter Olympics Bid, with its commitment to community benefits, was subject to a public referendum in 2003, with 64 percent of voters in favour of hosting the Games. The Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug treatment, with over 60 partners from government, business, social service providers and community organisations, was active in mobilizing support for the initial concept and subsequently raising awareness around drug-related issues.

The language of the city and Vancouver Agreement documents is one of inclusion and a collaborative social development planning process. However, community involvement in the planning process associated with the Vancouver Agreement has not been extensive. “Community Directions”, a coalition of residents and community organisations, was established to “ensure that any initiatives for the neighbourhoods benefit the people who live there,” focusing first on the most vulnerable (City of Vancouver, 2000). From available documentation, it is unclear the role this coalition has had in subsequent developments. Coyne and Associates find that lack of community support, organizational capacity and leadership meant the initiative foundered when initial leaders left (Coyne, 2006); reports of the working committees did, however, feed into the Four Pillars’ activities, the SRO policy and other longer-term programming. Mason concludes that despite community participation on taskforces and the consultations around the Integrated Strategic Plan, “the systematic community processes envisaged under the Downtown Eastside Strategy have not been realised” (Mason, 2006). Responsibility was shifted to community development programs within the city government and to the Four Pillars Program (with its focus on drug use and crime reduction). He speculates that this transfer of responsibility “obviated the need for such strategic input” from the community (Mason, 2006).

At the level of neighbourhood specific initiatives, problems of voice, consensus and representation have arisen typical of many participatory efforts. The five neighbourhoods are diverse, and residents have distinct concerns. Tensions among organisations with different constituencies, missions
and definitions of key problems have been reflected in different patterns of support from government: some have received recognition from key government officials while others have been called “unrealistic” (Mason, 2006). Bringing in vulnerable groups, especially the Aboriginal population (of which 10% of the city’s total live in the Eastside) as well as those with psychosocial difficulties (arising from homelessness, substance abuse, or lack of institutional care), has proven difficult. Only some neighbourhood organisations have been able to sustain their initiatives. People have complained of a lack of overall vision, clarity on the outcomes from participation, and recognition of the distinctive contributions that those with social and economic difficulties might bring to a community process (Coyne, 2006). Nonetheless, research into community capacity around the project has found that people are more tolerant, less likely to respond from a pre-set position, and more disposed to cooperate with others (Coyne, 2006).

The Vancouver case represents a very different approach to community participation than that described for Montreal. Area-based planning brought together stakeholders into coalitions around issues and neighbourhoods, some of which were sustained while other faltered. Mega-projects were explicitly linked to neighbourhood needs; the redevelopment process associated with preparing for the Olympic Games became linked into wider strategic efforts to address poverty, unemployment, disease and poor health, crime and substance abuse. It is an illustration of a way in which diverse interests – in promoting the city ‘on the global stage’, serving the interests of local business, reversing urban decline, and addressing the problems of those more marginalised and vulnerable – can be brought together in a relatively cooperative manner, moving towards a strategic planning approach, under the leadership of government officials.

**Los Angeles**

Community groups in Los Angeles, New Haven and several other U.S. cities have also used formal channels to influence the design and elements of mega-projects but they have done so using a dramatically different range of tactics and tools. In contrast to the influence through formal channels established by government, community groups in Los Angeles and several other U.S. cities have taken the lead in establishing new alliances, community tactics, and planning practices in response to mega-projects. In these instances, community groups have joined forces with unions, religious organisations, and student, environmental, health and immigrant rights groups to make large-scale
projects work for local communities. Alliances with politicians, detailed knowledge of planning processes, strong preparatory research and organizing tactics drawn from union and community activism have allowed for novel agreements to be reached with mega-project promoters.

The case of community benefits agreements in Los Angeles has been documented by several researchers and the community organisations themselves (cf. Gross, 2002; Gibbons, 2002). The impetus for community action was a series of development proposals affecting the downtown Figueroa Corridor neighbourhoods (see Fig. 4). According to the 2000 census data, residents of the central downtown area are overwhelmingly renters (95%) and ‘people of colour’: 42% Latino, 25% African American and 16% Asian. Incomes are 37% of median income for the city as a whole. There is a high concentration of affordable housing in the area, though much of it is in poor condition. However, demand exceeds supply and even the single resident occupancy hotels (SROs) have closed their waiting lists for rooms. In 2000, over 11,000 low income people were either homeless in the area or residing in SROs, including over 150 families with children on the street and another 200 such families in residential hotels (SAJE, 2002, pp. 5-6) There are few parks, daycare facilities and related services for young families or the elderly. Downtown jobs are concentrated in the garment sector and services, both characterized by low-wages.

In the 1990s, the Figueroa Corridor – with adjacent highways, the University of Southern California (USC) campus and the Staples sports stadium – was subject to additional pressures. Both USC and the Staples Center (L.A. Arena Company) elaborated expansion plans likely to squeeze the neighbourhood. $70 million in public funds were to be funneled into the projects. The expanded Staples Center, known as the L.A. Sports and Entertainment District, included plans for a 45-story hotel (1200 rooms), a theater for live entertainment, and a plaza with surrounding retail shops, restaurants and nightclubs. Other plans included expanding the adjacent Convention Center (by 250,000 sq. ft.) and constructing two apartment towers (800 units) and a smaller hotel. Developers, who included Philip Anshutz and Rupert Murdoch, had committed to the project as part of a previous agreement with the city, agreeing to bolster the convention center in return for approval of the sports stadium (Romney, 2001). Figueroa Corridor residents feared gentrification and associated residential displacement, a net loss of affordable housing, and increase in traffic and noise, and few direct benefits arising from the $70 million in public dollars.
Community organisations reacted to the plans for the Staples Center. Under the umbrella organisation Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), a coalition of 29 groups was formed and included the community-organisations historically active in the neighbourhood, unions and union-linked community development organisations, churches and religious organisations, university-based groups, environmental and health activist organisations, and immigrant rights groups. Based on research documenting weak benefits from past projects, existing needs in area, and best practices throughout the country, SAJE formulated a policy framework for action that all the coalition members were willing to support. Coalition members mobilized support at local, city and state levels: they used the media, political contacts, alliances with similar campaigns elsewhere, and focused attention on key decisions necessary for project approval. Coalition members then approached the Arena Land Company with the proposals and let Los Angeles City Councillors know of widespread opposition to the project in the absence of substantial community benefits.

A newspaper writer (Romney, 2001) describes negotiations as “rocky” initially but notes that “the tone changed over time as mutual trust built”. Lead developers and negotiators had experience working with community groups and had as a goal to win “true support and advocacy for the project”, “make the project better and improve benefits for the community” and doing so without “burdening the development or its tenants with costly conditions not required elsewhere” (Romney, 2001).

The resulting Staples Community Benefits Agreement was a formal development agreement, subject to monitoring and to legal redress if terms were not met. It was the first time in the U.S. that such a wide range of community concerns were incorporated into a legally binding document. Among the specific elements were agreements that: new housing units would be built as part of development with a minimum of 20% of units affordable to low income people; half of new employees must be hired through a local training center, with $100,000 in seed funding from the developer for specialized job training; 70% of the estimated 5,500 jobs – both in construction and the resulting development – were to be paid at or above city-stipulated ‘living wage’ rates with community notification of upcoming tenant lease agreements; $1 million was to be given for parks and recreation facilities within a one mile radius; and resident permit parking with parking costs were to be paid by developers for five years.
The agreement was a milestone for neighbourhood groups working to maximize community benefits from large-scale projects. In the case of Los Angeles, subsequent actions have largely followed the terms of the CBA. Gilda Haas, director of SAJE, writes, “The developer, AEG, has acted with integrity, has lived up to the terms of the agreement, and, in 2005, joined forces with the Coalition to take on another developer that tried to evade the pact” (Haas, 2007). SAJE, working with groups in South Central Los Angeles, recently successfully campaigned to include community benefits in a $2 billion mega-project, the Grand Avenue Project, and community groups throughout the country – often in conjunction with union activists – are exploring replicability.

The emergence of a community benefit agreement in Los Angeles required concerted efforts on the part of community coalitions – to document local conditions, investigate policy and planning possibilities, and mobilize support – however the role of the developer vis-à-vis the community was quite different from some other instances of large-scale urban development, perhaps a direct result of the existing institutional and political landscape. In New Haven, for example, a community coalition used strategies similar to those employed in Los Angeles to bring a hostile developer to the table. The developer was Yale University, the largest land owner in the city and accustomed to ‘calling the shots’. ‘Town and gown’ tensions are also likely to have played a part in Yale’s unwillingness to engage with community groups, as did the links between the community development concerns and union organizing among Yale’s employees. Yet based on alliances with unions, state officials and community groups, lobbying of the Board of Aldermen who had to approve the project, and mobilization of community residents, the coalition achieved a comprehensive community benefits agreement for investments in housing, access to health care, job training programs and the right to organize labour in the hospital. In Los Angeles, in contrast, the private development was highly visible, and the benefits of a positive image among the wider community perhaps of much greater importance to the developers.

Indeed, the links between the neighbourhood organisations and the union are particularly interesting. The City of Los Angeles, despite a weak union base from the 1950s to 1980s (Milkman, 2002), experienced a series of organising drives in the 1990s that reinvigorated labour, transformed local politics, and allowed for a strong entry of the unions into a wide range of urban struggles (Milkman, 2002; Hauptmeier and Turner, 2007; Reich, 2003). The 1990 Justice for Janitors cam-
paign mobilized urban Latinos together with other groups, and their success was the basis for what Hauptmeier and Turner (2007) call coalition-based social-unionism that has carried into the present. The 29 groups in the Figueroa Corridor Coalition had worked together before, supporting the unions in organising efforts at USC.

The link between the unions and neighbourhood organisations can be analyzed at different levels. The unions brought with them specific knowledge of organizing and a capacity for research – rooted in new community-development oriented ‘think and do tanks’. Research in California focused for example on the distribution of benefits arising from redevelopment, with analysis of projects in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose and other cities. Research on wage to cost-of-living ratios and the costs and benefits of living wage ordinances also invigorated public debate and policy formulation. These moves, in part, reflected the union crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, when unions throughout the U.S. lost their historical blue-collar base and needed to re-orient towards the new economy. In some cities, such as Los Angeles, unions (often with support from national organisations) targeted service and immigrant workers. But in many places throughout the country, union organizers began to recognize that calls for public support at the time of strikes were likely to go unheeded unless unions became more relevant to people’s daily life; that meant new strategies and forms of engagement with community and neighbourhood quality of life issues (Bornstein, 2006).

**The Shifting Terrain of Mega-Project Politics**

To return to the themes of strategy, participation, and planning, these illustrative cases suggest different patterns, dominant and emerging, in cities through North America, each one of which presents new challenges. Key differentiating factors in the form of citizen-project engagement appear, based on these illustrative cases, to emerge from who provides leadership (government versus community), the disposition of developers (from highly engaged to highly antagonistic), and the composition and tactics of the community actors (coalitions with common agendas versus ad hoc engagement).

In both Vancouver and Montreal, the rules of engagement and the spaces for consultation were established by government. In Vancouver, the developers were part of the broad consortium linked to the Olympic bid. While subject to public pressure to include social and environmental objectives within the proposal, neighbourhood development issues to be addressed were largely those without negative
repercussions for business interests. They were typical concerns that chambers of commerce and business associations share with local government and community groups: reducing crime, economic decline, prostitution, HIV/AIDS, drug addiction and the like. Reuse of sports facilities for affordable housing and agreements to work with government (and government co-funding) to address other housing shortages were part of the package of real estate reinvestments. Strategy then was around solving specific socially-based problems, bringing together different levels and departments of government in novel ways. Community groups had no common strategy, no ‘bottom line’ or proposal to put forward. Efforts by community groups to re-frame debates, and question overall patterns of investment and wealth-generation, were at the local and project-specific level. As a result, some groups – and initiatives – have fared well (drug addiction programs, Chinatown development, SRO conversion prohibitions), while others have not. Planning remains the domain of government, working with community groups to define issues and to implement selected actions in an area-based or issue-based approach.

In Montreal, in contrast, consultation around the Old Port was structured by the developer who had an interest in resolving conflicts during a period characterized by struggle, thereby establishing a way forward. Community groups and independent residents thus had a space to voice concerns – vociferously if they wished – about the overall orientation of the project and its role in neighbourhood development. And indeed, the broad principles guiding development were shaped significantly by a community vision. Again, there are challenges: moments for engagement were defined and limited; the Port Corporation pursued investments likely to generate returns (though also creating a public space with publicly-accessible events) without addressing major social issues for the city or surrounding areas; and there is no clear venue or process for resolving emerging tensions. Strategy thus was a responsive one, articulating an alternative vision in public meetings in reaction to the proposal generated by the Port Corporation.

More recent debates over the role of the mega-projects and citizen groups in Montreal have been heated, bringing to the fore issues about urban priorities, tolerance and consultation, liveability and justice. Prospects are often presented, by the media and business leaders, as a choice between stagnation and mega-projects, with Montreal portrayed as ‘immobilized’ and filled with ‘nay-sayers’ (‘immobilisme’ and ‘nonisme’). Community representatives have countered that there may be other
types of urban projects, including examples in Montreal of successful projects emerging out of collaborations or negotiations between developers and community groups.\(^3\)

In both Canadian cases, the absence of the unions in community development, and the lack of common community-based coalitions, is notable. Perhaps the relative strength of unions in Canada as compared to the U.S. has meant that they have not felt the need to move into alliances with community groups around neighbourhood issues. (Unions and student groups have formed strong alliances around numerous issues in the past, and unions actively supported community initiatives during the 1970s-80s, possible bases for expanding into more spatially-oriented issues.) For Canadian community politics, however, it is not only the lack of coalitions. The lack of strong ‘think and do tanks’, organisations with research capacity and skills in union organising tactics – as well as Alinsky-style grassroots community planning – most differentiates the Canadian situation from the U.S. example discussed here.

The U.S. case demonstrates how community-led initiatives can lead to dramatically different relationships around mega-project development. Careful research with community residents was done in some of the Vancouver neighbourhoods, but in the Los Angeles example, and in New Haven as well, research was used to define policy initiatives around which a coalition could agree and act. As a result, mega-project development could be linked wider issues of increased poverty, wage levels and terms, and slum lord practices.

Clearly each city has its own history, with own political landscape. What is interesting about these cases is that community groups are searching out ways to redefine mega-projects to better generate beneficial local impacts. Whether or not the developers are willing to listen initially, the emergence of alliances between community groups and decision-makers can shift the terrain, encouraging – or even forcing – developers into discussions.

Strategic efforts on the part of government and the private sector are, in some cities, being met by concerted community-based efforts to challenge prevailing requirements around development. In some cases, community groups have become involved through existing mechanisms that assure public input, consultation and/or collaboration; city officials and bureaus, mediators, and developers have played a part in negotiating the extent and form of community benefits included in resulting projects. New actors also are being brought into the city-building process, not least of these the
unions, which historically have had little involvement with place-based quality of life issues outside of the workplace. As unions have engaged with urban planning issues, they have introduced organising tactics, redefining community-government-developer relationships in often dramatic ways: the consequences extend beyond the city-building efforts and specific elements of the mega-projects to questions of community capacity, collaborative and confrontational relations, and urban politics more generally.
References


City of Vancouver (2007a) Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program. Webpage at: http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/


Endnotes
1 My thanks are extended to the representatives of the community groups and government agencies with whom I spoke in November-December 2006 (Los Angeles, San Diego, New Haven, Montreal) and May-July (Montreal).
2 Translation by the author. Original text: « Montréal ne sera pas, dans un avenir rapproché, la ville des grands projets. Trop tolérant aux groupes minoritaires, trop ouvert aux consensus et au respect des minorités de toutes sortes, victime du manque de courage des politiciens, victime de cette obsession politique provinciale et fédérale de prioriser les régions, Montréal devra plutôt capitaliser sur ses forces», a-t-il déclaré hier midi devant la chambre de commerce.
3 Notable examples include redevelopment of Benny Farms, the Angus Shops (phase 1) and Milton Park. Source: discussion at the Montreal 4th Citizen’s Summit; interviews with local community representatives by author, 2006-07.