

Circulating Asian urbanisms: an analysis of policy and media discourse in Africa and Latin America

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Introduction

'Singaporean urban models inspiring Africa's new cities' and 'South Korean city-in-a-box exported to Ecuador': only two decades ago these statements would seem hard to believe, but nowadays they are part and parcel of an interconnected world. Indeed, the new neoliberal urban utopia which attracts global capital flows to Africa is made up of master-planned, newly built and self-contained cities: Singaporean and Dubaiian urbanism is popping up in African urban dreams¹ such as Kenya's Konza Technology City, Nigeria's Eko-Atlantic and DRC's Cité du Fleuve. In the meantime, Latin America is receiving its share of Asian urbanism, as exemplified in Ecuador's newly planned Yachay Knowledge City, which is inspired by the South Korean Songdo new city's global 'city-in-a-box' idea. Such developments show the increased prevalence of 'South-South' transnational connections and urban inter-referencing², which are main characteristics of current urbanism: rather than western ideas and finance being exported across the globe, Asian models, concepts and investments are influencing the remaking of today's global South cities.

As spearheaded by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – which include a specific 'urban' goal: to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable – the question how to sustainably manage urban growth will be among the world's main challenges for the future. While Latin America is well acquainted with the process of urbanisation, Africa is about to experience large urban growth. The continent's urban population is expected to almost triple in the coming 35 years, with more

than 1,3 billions of Africans living in cities by 2050 (21 per cent of the world's urban population).³ Despite the urban promises of economic development and increased access to services, Africa's urbanisation is also about millions of urban people living in deep chronic poverty and suffering from unemployment and substandard living conditions: a large majority lives in informal 'slum' settlements characterised by overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and violence.⁴⁵ Rapid population growth results in unplanned and informal urban sprawl, which threatens sustainable development by enhancing traffic congestion, pollution, and unsafe building.⁶ Latin America has experienced such problems in different forms and from earlier on; the continent still faces huge challenges of housing supply and marginalisation / criminalisation of large parts of urban space.

Innovative and sustainable solutions to the urban housing and services question are badly needed. Recently, both African and Latin American governments have started to look towards the 'East' rather than the typical 'West' for new ideas and finance. Asia's economic growth and extensive urbanisation has made the continent a new model for many parts of the world: many current urban innovations are being pioneered in Asia. Whereas the first thing that comes to mind in thinking about Asia in the world may be China's investment in roads/ports infrastructure and extractive industries worldwide, such a narrow focus diverts our view from broader developments: other Asian and Middle Eastern countries play an increasingly large role in both Africa and Latin America (e.g. Malaysia, India, Singapore, Dubai); and the sectors in which Chinese investments and interactions are taking place are wider than just roads and mines.¹ Urban development is increasingly part of the portfolio; and this goes further than investment: for example, China has embarked on the process of pairing with some 126 African cities (in Chinese: Friendship Cities), which will create a framework for African Mayors to exchange regularly with Chinese investors.⁷ The Chinese are also involved in other less commercial projects e.g. building schools in poor areas (e.g. in Nairobi) often as partner in the UNDP programmes⁸.

Asian investments in housing and urban development are increasingly reaching Africa and Latin America: African urban property is seen as a last frontier for global capital.^{9 10 11} Current African – and to some extent Latin American - property investment often takes a particular form, inspired by Asian examples: entirely new cities are built up from scratch as comprehensively planned self-contained enclaves in the outskirts of existing cities. Meanwhile, in Latin America is also looking at copying South Korean 'city-in-a-box' ideas and attracting Chinese investment in urban infrastructure.

In this paper we will scrutinise such new Asian investments – and their related ideological and human mobilities – from the point of view of African and Latin American national discourses in media and policy. We will specifically focus on two case studies:

- South Korean urban model transferred to Ecuador in Yachay Knowledge City

¹ Currently, Chinese investments made in Africa are concentrated in the following sectors: aviation, transport (shipping hubs and transport logistics center), tourism and culture, biotechnology, chemical industries and automobile assembly (see endnote reference7).

- Chinese urban investment in the planned new city at Modderfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa

Based on a discourse analysis of policy documents and websites reporting about the projects we will elicit the particular framings of Asian urban investments by the developers and states themselves. We will also briefly elicit some points emerging from local media, particularly comparing the representation of these new city projects with general Asian investment framings. To what extent is it framed in a sustainability and/or development framework, and what view of sustainability or development is put forward? What views of modernisation are invoked? What does this tell us about 'travelling ideas' and their local incorporation?

Neoliberal urbanism and Asian urban engagements in the global South

In response to dramatic urban growth scenarios and global financial and economic transformation, current urban investment and restructuring in the global South often takes a particularly neoliberal form: as Sheppard et al state¹², an urban revolution from above is taking place, entailing the worldwide implementation of mainstream neoliberal urban growth strategies. In tandem with the increased independence and competitive character of cities and urban regions, there is a perceived need for establishing 'world class cities'¹³ which cater to 'world class' enterprises, high quality services and financial sectors, elite and expat residents, and tourists. Neoliberal urbanism in its broadest sense refers to the increased role of private enterprises and financial capital in the development of urban housing, infrastructure, and services, with the state being assigned an 'enabling' role rather than a providing role. Furthermore, the widespread engagement of economic efficiency ideologies can be put under this umbrella: attracting investment, creating efficiencies, and connecting to the global economy have become indispensable aims for many city governments. While the use of 'neoliberal' as an overall term can be debated (nowadays scholars admit that multiple 'neoliberalisms' coexist), it still seems a convenient umbrella term to place many coalescing urban transformations.

One particular urban form that emanates from neoliberal urbanism is the new city. These cities can take the form of entirely new cities built up from scratch as comprehensively planned self-contained enclaves in the outskirts of existing cities. In other cases, city centres are 'upgraded' and converted into entirely new cities. Both China and India are familiar with such urban forms, whereas Singapore and Dubai are often mentioned as sources of inspiration for such grand schemes. They are often iconic, themed cities, spectacular showcases in the global economy. Shatkin uses the example of urban integrated mega-projects that are planned and built on a for-profit basis, often by a single developer or a consortium of investors, particularly in Asia:

In a departure from past efforts at state-driven master planning and new town development, these projects are planned and built on a for-profit basis, often by a single developer or a consortium of investors, sometimes in partnership with government entities. As large-scale profit-oriented urban entities, these projects represent a vision for the transformation of the urban experience through the wholesale commodification of the urban fabric.¹⁴

While 'high-modernist' master-planned city building¹⁵ seemed banned from planning practice in most areas for at least five decades (i.e. since early post-colonialism in Africa), it is now back on the agenda, moving from Asia and the Middle East to Africa and (to a lesser extent) Latin America.¹⁶ However, this time it is combined with strong private investment and neoliberal discourse.¹⁷ The recent appearance of a wide variety of master-planned city plans in Africa has attracted some attention in academic literature; researchers have engaged in local empirical research (e.g. Buire¹⁸ and Croese¹⁹ in Angola; De Boeck²⁰ in DRC) and made important advances in agenda-setting, defining and scrutinizing such urban utopias^{21 22}.²³ Indeed, Watson places the new private sector-funded utopian 'urban fantasies' in a framework of speculative urbanism as advanced by Goldman²⁴, suggesting that processes of speculative urbanism are beginning to make an appearance on the African continent; she systematically outlines some of the main criticisms of these models.

Such developments show the increased prevalence of South-South transnational connections and urban inter-referencing,²⁵ which are main characteristics of current urbanism: rather than only western ideas and finance being exported across the globe, Asian models, concepts and investments are influencing the remaking of today's global South cities. Indeed, new city planning in Africa (and to a lesser extent Latin America) is regularly equated with Chinese or broader Asian influence, and boxed into the broader 'Chinese engagement in Africa' narrative. The Chinese have in fact been involved in the investment, planning implementation and construction of such plans in various African countries (among others South Africa, Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria), and Chinese urban models and ideas have been circulating, especially in Africa (e.g. through educational and professional exchange of urbanists, exchange of mayors, etc.). Nevertheless, we can argue that western and proper African investments and ideas have also been strong in many other cases. In Latin America, new city planning is not as much of a trend as in Africa, but the few comprehensively planned city ideas that exist are often still related to US influence (Charter Cities) rather than Asian influence. Asian and particularly Chinese engagement in Latin America has focused much more on natural resources and other types of infrastructure. Nevertheless, South Korea has jumped in and countries like Ecuador are content to broaden their international urban engagements beyond the US and Europe.

Asian engagements in Africa and Latin America have attracted a good share of popular, media and scholarly attention in recent years: particularly China's investments in extractive industries and infrastructure have been both applauded and scrutinised. Western discourse has been critical: negative images of 'China's new imperialism', mineral extractivist policy and land grabs have been widely circulated.²⁶ From within China, Hong Kong and Taiwan such criticism has also emerged.²⁷ More positive discourses focus on 'soft diplomacy' and investment on equal terms as opposed to development aid. These discourses often have a limited focus on the (pre)start and end points of the deals and projects, while the *process* of such Asian engagements seems a blind spot.

Following recent calls for urban theorising from the South,²⁸ and concepts of South-South transnational connections and urban inter-referencing,²⁹ not only should we investigate the economic investments and connections behind new cities, but we should also pay particular attention to the mobility of

transnationally borrowed ideas appropriated in new contexts. Indeed, ideas and urban innovations travel between for example South Korea and Ecuador; China and Angola; China/India and South Africa; and from Dubai and Singapore to many places worldwide. Whether new urbanisms are neoliberal, speculative, and/or modernist, they can certainly not be assumed to be borrowed (solely) from western contexts: nowadays much more diverse interconnections are taking place. Modernisation discourses seem to have a strong influence on new city building; even when the investments and consultants are regularly Asian, it can be questioned whether a particular Asian urban model and view on development is put forward. According to Moser, colonial genealogies and more classical western modernisation ideas (following from colonial times) can often be found to influence such urban practices as well.³⁰ Hence we should scrutinise more in depth the views on development and sustainability that are behind these new urban models (and their genealogies); and the specific national (or local) development strategies that such models can be related to. Such insights can be important also in order to understand how such new urban models are viewed and received in their contexts by inhabitants and state officials alike.

Comparing two specific case studies of Asian urban engagements – one from Latin America, one from Africa – will allow us to explore such themes in some depth, while also allowing comparison.

Introduction of cases: Yachay, Ecuador and Modderfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa

Yachay Knowledge City is the most visible aspect of Ecuador's elaborate science, technology and innovation policy (started in 2009), which is aimed to spearhead the country into a post-extractives economy based on high knowledge-intensive sectors such as biotechnology. Yachay (meaning 'knowledge' in quechua, the main indigenous language of the country) is a Scientific and Technological Park established as a special economic zone and ultimately a completely new city. It is located in the fertile agricultural valley of Urcuquí in the north of Ecuador, two hours from the capital Quito. Yachay is a prestige project established by the ambitious government of president Rafael Correa, but one which is already functioning: the public university, Yachay Tech (Universidad de Investigación de Tecnología Experimental Yachay), is currently running with nearly 1000 students. Besides the further development of this university as a city with a technology park, public research institutes, and commercial and residential functions (initially mostly for students and staff, but in the long run the ambition is to attract a broader residents base), the Yachay development plan (4500 hectares) includes a biotechnology cluster, an industrial zone, and an agro-tourism zone. The latter three are long-term objectives (2032-2045); in general the plan of Yachay is quite long-term. Yachay will be the country's first real master-planned city, with an initial government investment (2013-2017) of US\$1 billion. Nevertheless, Ecuador's current economic crisis might endanger the proceeding of the project.

Yachay Knowledge City has been developed based on benchmarking the model of Songdo (or Incheon Free Economic Zone) in South Korea: an urban high-tech knowledge city with strong economic investment incentives and sustainability discourse. Songdo is currently selling its model on the international market, with Ecuador as a first client. Hence Songdo consultants have drafted the Yachay

master plan, and a variety of linkages is being made e.g. South Korean companies to invest in Yachay. Another South Korean city serving as an example and transferring knowledge to Yachay is Innopolis Knowledge City in Daejeon. Besides the South Koreans, a multitude of other actors is involved, such as Cisco (a multinational ICT company) and consultants and partner universities from the US, Latin America and Europe.

Yachay is clearly part of the idea – strongly conceived in central government - that top quality science, technology and innovation are key to changing Ecuador's productive matrix, i.e. moving beyond the current largely extractivist model of development. The move to a knowledge-based economy means that public universities and knowledge generation should be strengthened and put in the service of 'improving society' through increased technological and innovative uses. The city will draw linkages between the university, public and private research institutes, technology transfer centres, high-tech companies and agriculture. In practice the ways to improve society seem to be quite narrowly defined as technology development and valorisation of knowledge in monetary terms, e.g. patent development of new biotechnological and nanotechnology applications. While state steering is a large part of the process and management and finance of the broader project and university is strongly in the hands of the state, government acknowledges the need for a multitude of collaborations with private sector and other actors.

The Chinese new city near Modderfontein in the wider region of Johannesburg, South Africa's economic powerhouse and largest city of 4,4 million people, is still in the first construction phase. Economic downturn in China has caused concern about the continuation of the project, but according to the developers the project is still on track. The project, with its particularly futuristic design, is still to be named and is for now called Modderfontein New City. The Chinese private developer of the project, Shanghai Zendai, plans to develop the 1,600 hectares of land strategically located at short distance from Johannesburg into the 'New York of Africa' or the 'Hong Kong of Africa'. With a total investment of \$5 billion (partly financed by the Bank of China) it is one of the largest foreign direct investments in South Africa. Shanghai Zendai is a Hong Kong-listed investment company that develops and manages property projects in Chinese cities. It seems different from many Chinese investments in Johannesburg, which are more directed by the Chinese state.³¹

Zendai's vision for the Modderfontein New City is 'to re-energise this growth node by creating sustainable developments which offer an ideal environment for business, industry and communities to prosper and grow. Zendai Group's vision is to create unique landmarks and in so doing transform Modderfontein into an international cosmopolitan asset with cultural and art elements.'³² The city will be master-planned and multifunctional. It is aimed to be a highly integrated urban district with sustainable densities that includes all functions of the city: finance, trade, logistics, commerce, technology, education, health care and housing (100.000 residential units in 15-20 years, mostly aimed at middle and higher class). Transport - including walking, cycling and public transport - is an important part of the project. The city will also be a hub for Chinese companies to establish presence in Africa. The government of Gauteng province supports the project in talk, but specific economic incentives have not been indicated. In general it can be seen as a response to the South African government's active

courting of Chinese investment³³³⁴ and recent intensification of China-South Africa relations. In addition, increasing restrictions on property purchases in China are said to be behind Zendaï's African move.³⁵

Framing new cities: what type of 'development' or 'sustainability'?

The governments' and developers' own framing of new Asian-inspired urbanisations in Africa and Latin America tends to focus on contributions to urban or even national 'development' and 'sustainability', which serve to justify the projects and their high budgets. The type of sustainability or development put forward differs much: former research has shown that new city projects can be framed in different terms e.g. green neoliberalism, mainstream modernisation or growth, socially inclusive development, etc. What development and sustainability framings are put forward in these projects, and how do they relate to the Asian framings of the same projects?

Ecuador's general vision on development is clearly outlined in its national development plan *Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir*, based on the 'indigenous' worldview of *buen vivir*, which entails a holistic view of human and sustainable development including social equity and strong environmental sustainability i.e. nature has rights. The state's knowledge, technology and innovation policy, of which Yachay is part, clearly reflects this holistic development discourse, although the focus is much more on long-term economic growth and human development than on environmental sustainability (and the latter more connected to economic growth).³⁶³⁷³⁸ A knowledge economy is put forward as the main solution to all kinds of current development problems; knowledge and science are instrumental and productivity and competitiveness are central. Holistic human development (quality of life, wellbeing, equity) is also frequently mentioned, with references to Amartya Sen's development as freedom.³⁹ A main thread is that only with a key role for the national state can holistic development be reached. Moving one level down to the specific plans for Yachay Knowledge City, we can see that the city is put forward as an integrated economic, social and green development strategy. Here a clear 'green neoliberal' discourse is elaborated: biotechnology is the key sector to be developed and to offer solutions to all types of problems; nature is put to productive use. Sustainable innovations and technology are key, both in the educational programmeⁱⁱ, investment attractionⁱⁱⁱ⁴⁰ and in the design of the city^{iv 41}: growth and sustainability go hand in hand. South Korea's Songdo City expresses a similar discourse and has probably had an influence through its master planning and consultancies for Yachay. On the other hand, there is some mentioning of social justice, inclusion and recognition, particularly in

ⁱⁱ Current educational programs are Life Sciences, Nanotechnology, ICT, Renewable Energy and Petrochemicals

ⁱⁱⁱ While investment attraction will focus on traditional productive sectors on the short term (including even mining and oil), on the medium term the goal is attraction of research & development on electricity, gas, clean energy, water and waste; and on the long term ICT, professional scientific and technological activities e.g. biotech and nanotech (endnote 39)

^{iv} City to be designed 'in harmony with nature': clean energy, saving energy and using energy rationally for lowering CO2 emissions; prioritizing walking and bicycles over cars (also experiment with sharing electric cars); public transport (buses); rational water and waste governance to be rational and modern (wastewater treatment plants); extensive green areas (endnote 40)

the design of the city.^y It seems that in subsequent planning sessions (after Songo's first master plan), recognition of population's opinions and better embedding in local landscape have gained more prominence.⁴² Interestingly, these subsequent sessions were attended not by South Korean consultants, but by experts from the US, Europe and Latin America. Hence given the multitude of actors involved and the state's own continuing managing role, it is difficult to relate development and sustainability views exclusively to Asian influences.

Within Ecuador's discourse on the knowledge city and its development and sustainability aims, specific modernisation-related views can also be disentangled. Ecuador attempts to repeat a historical development pathway to growth based on South Korean or general Asian experiences; as such they aim to learn from these earlier experiences. Ecuadorian newspaper *El Diario* wrote after a diplomatic visit of Ecuadorian officials to South Korea:

Espinosa [Minister of Knowledge and Human Talent of Ecuador] pointed out that South Korea, whose economy passed from scarcity to being the fourth economy of Asia in only half a century, contributes to Ecuador by providing lessons about its development process, 'so that we can construct our own model'.⁴³

This partly reflects a traditional modernisation view, though it is related to Asia rather than the traditional west, and with the disclaimer that an own Ecuadorian model will be designed instead of copy-pasting foreign ideas. Indeed, in practice South Korea is only one of many partners Yachay works with and Ecuador constructs its own diverse set of foreign ideas to adopt (e.g. knowledge, science & technology parks are not specifically Korean or Asian; and western urban planning concepts such as transect planning are implemented in Yachay). As such, in this case there is no direct adoption of an 'Asian' modernisation perspective. Modernisation ideas are also very much present in Ecuador's belief in a better society through knowledge: specifically, a rationalisation and 'scientification' of society is aimed for (even if ancestral knowledge is also mentioned as something valuable, but only in as far as it can be rationalised).⁴⁴ This is linked to the need for internationalisation: for example, in a response to criticism to Yachay's ambitions of becoming a new Harvard or MIT, Rene Ramirez, Secretary of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation of Ecuador, creates an opposition between internationalism vs. parochialism, blaming his critics to be parochial.⁴⁵

While Asian references are only part of Yachay's story, Modderfontein New City in South Africa derives directly from the Chinese developer's ideas, plans, and investment; the provincial government plays a purely enabling and regulatory role. Indeed, land was bought through private transaction, so that state engagement in that sense is limited to the usual environmental and regulatory planning procedures. In any case, Zendai Group does not hesitate to promote the project in terms of the expected developmental impact of the project on South Africa's economy and society, even though they

^y It deserves mentioning that Yachay Tech is a public university i.e. accessible to a wide range of social groups (the selection process may serve to de facto exclude high school graduates from low quality public schools; on the other hand, public spending on education in general has also increased much)

recognise that the project will be 'at the service of what investors, clients and developers want'.⁴⁶ Modderfontein New City is framed as a solution to all kinds of unsustainable urban growth and sprawl problems: its integrated and planned urban model (sustainable densities, multifunctionality, sustainable transport, open green spaces, green & blue technologies, etc.) is in direct contrast to that.⁴⁷ It is framed as a perfectly ordered and safe 'non-city', the complete opposite of a normal African city: we can thus see it as an anti-urban or escapist strategy.⁴⁸

Environmental sustainability and green neoliberalism are key to their 'smart city' discourse, though more directly related to *urban* sustainability and dealing with urban population growth. This is a discourse that is often repeated in the promotion of Africa's new city planning. Furthermore, in an interesting marketing statement the developer mentions Modderfontein to be 'built on the Chinese philosophy of living in harmony with nature'⁴⁹, but he does not further specify this broad statement. On the other hand, economic development objectives are central, with frequent references to employment and economic prosperity: 'There will be jobs created, there will be business opportunities for local people and after stages of the development are completed, there will also be new opportunities created.'⁵⁰ The project is framed in very neoliberal terms, as aiming to push for a 'world class city': 'hope and imagination, the sky is the limit'.⁵¹ Indeed, New York, Hong Kong and London are referenced as 'world class cities' that Modderfontein strives to become: 'the future capital for the whole Africa', an internationalised cosmopolitan place which can compete with world-class cities.

Social development or integration is hardly mentioned by Zendai Group, or only as part of the economic trickle down effects or relating to the future inhabitants of the project in a narrow way (promoting the 'live, work, play, grow' concept). However, in an interesting appropriation of the economic modernisation framing for government purposes, the provincial (Gauteng province) premier repeats much of the economic discourse but places it into a social and racial frame, previewing much of the possible criticism:

Mokonyane [Gauteng premier) said the government was rallying behind Zendai simply because the project would eventually improve the lives of children from the neighbouring Alexandra and Tembisa townships, who were living in poverty. She has called for locals to give Zendai a break from the negative misconceptions of Chinese investors. However, all stakeholders would still have a responsibility to keep Zendai or any foreign investors in check. 'We are excited about the project. It is not all about job creation, but extending ownership of property and business to black people who were previously marginalised,' Mokonyane said.⁵²

It is difficult to view Zendai's vision on development as somehow reflecting a Chinese view on development, but its modernisation and development framings do fit partly with the general Chinese government and media view on their involvement in Africa: just like the company's chairman Dai Zhikang does for Johannesburg, China frames itself as a role-model for Africa, particularly in terms of urban sustainable growth strategies. Furthermore, they see themselves as making an economic contribution, which can only be positive: 'the contribution of Chinese cities to the industrialisation in Africa.' According to Chinese media, African mayors are repeating similar claims, for example Boubacar

Bah, Mayor of Bamako, Mali, who is quoted as saying: ‘The Chinese have maintained a stable economic growth for 40 years. We are here to understand their lessons. These lessons offer us valuable support in building our cities’.⁵³

In China-Africa relations we often see the narrative of Africa repeating the same historical modernisation pathway as China did (providing a basis for learning), for example in dealing with urban population growth. In the case of South Korea – Ecuador, we have seen that this general narrative is also present, but the specific focus on urban population growth is absent there (not entirely surprising given the fact that Ecuador’s real urban boom has already passed). South Korean media also express such views on their involvement with Ecuador, and celebrate Yachay as the first successful sale of the Korean urban model to the global South. Economic development seems the only frame in Korea’s media representation of Yachay, and free trade, investment and new market opportunities are central. This may reflect a focus on Korea’s own interests in this deal; and possibly a less ‘developmental’ and more equal trade framing - though it is clear that exploitation of natural resources in Latin America is still a main interest. Indeed, South Korean economists frame Latin America as a resource-abundant investment destination to be explored, given Korea’s own lack of natural resources; development cooperation e.g. in terms of knowledge and technology cooperation is then a way to gain access to those markets.⁵⁴

Local media framing: new cities vs. other Asian engagements

While analysing local media framings of the projects in detail is beyond the scope of this article, we would like to highlight some interesting points that emerge from a preliminary analysis, particularly when we look at the framing of new city projects as compared to framings of general Asian engagements and investments.

Local perceptions – mostly studied from mainstream newspapers that are available online and blogs – are quite balanced in both countries. The basic ideas stated to be behind the new cities – building a knowledge economy in Ecuador and solving urban problems in South Africa – are largely unquestioned. However, the ways to achieve these goals attract different views. Naturally, Ecuador’s large state investment in the project attracts scrutiny (also given the polarised media landscape) and the high expenditures and alleged symbolic character of the project have been questioned. There have also been doubts about the economic character and linkages of the new city (innovation and technology for multinationals or for national use⁵⁵); and the governance of the project (special economic development zones being reminiscent of the neo-colonial charter cities). Furthermore, surrounding populations’ involvement in terms of land ownership and employment is sometimes questioned, although not on a large scale. However, in general, media coverage is diverse and focuses much on the governance of the university, rather than more profound urban governance questions. South Korean engagement is not scrutinised at all.

While the Modderfontein new city is only in the planning phase, the provincial government and Zendai are already attempting to pre-empt expected criticism on employment and local economic linkages. A

frame that is used in South Africa and not in Ecuador is the focus on social housing: if the project is to be a solution to urban problems (as it is largely framed in the Modderfontein case), then it should include social housing. The Chinese origin of the project does attract more criticism of ‘foreignisation’ and the ‘Chinese taking over’ in South Africa as compared to the Ecuadorian case. Specific concerns emerge about local employment, reflecting broader South African concerns about Chinese engagement. However, mainstream media in general (as well as the provincial government) report quite positively about the Modderfontein project and Chinese engagements in general, in a largely economic frame.

How does this relate to more general framings of Chinese involvement in Africa, and South Africa particularly? In Africa, general intensified Chinese engagements in the country have naturally attracted a variety of responses. Wasserman explains that perceptions of these investments are ambiguous, with public opinion on the one hand welcoming investment and new economic opportunities while the Chinese are also viewed as a competitive threat to local business and criticised for giving jobs only to Chinese.⁵⁶ China is also criticised for political reasons and fear of political interference. The term ‘neo-colonialism’ is sometimes used (traditionally a more western frame for these Chinese engagements and also used by some Asian critics). In South Africa specifically, Chinese investment and the Chinese are cautiously positively viewed in media that report quite neutrally on the subject. Economic investment attraction may appear positive to the public of the newspapers, mostly elites.⁵⁷ Reporting is not so much polarised as in other African countries.⁵⁸ Perceptions on Modderfontein also reflect this position. On the other hand, Harisson et al. argue that ‘the Chinese present a substantial competitive threat for South African business at all levels – including for emergent black-owned enterprise supported by the State’s programme of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) – and as a consequence anti-Chinese sentiment is expressed on occasion within government and from within the South African business community.’⁵⁹ However, increasing business and political ties have softened this sentiment.⁶⁰

Promises of jobs may further enhance positive perceptions as compared to previous Chinese investment projects in Africa, e.g. for road infrastructure. At least Zenda often refers to 200.000 jobs being created in the end, presumably for South Africans (the possibility of hiring local contractors is being explored). Whether this will be the case is to be awaited. Indeed, local employment is often a critical issue in Chinese investments in Africa and Latin America: reports abound of projects importing ‘more efficient’ temporary Chinese labour, not providing employment to local populations. The import of ideas, consultants and the like is less often problematised. In new city projects such as Modderfontein and Yachay, consultants, architects and planners are assumed to be (partly) imported from Asia, but there may be more opportunities for hiring local labour for the remaining employment, also given the long term character of the projects.

Indeed, there are many differences between these complex new city projects and relatively straightforward infrastructural projects that Asia is known for. The benchmarking of urban models is an important part of Asian engagements in Africa and Latin America, but at the same time may be too abstract for people or the media to engage with. This is especially clear in South Africa, though also partly in Ecuador.

On the other hand, if the urban model is sufficiently extreme in its attack on national sovereignty, it can be harshly criticised. A brief comparison with Honduras' Charter Cities plans can be enlightening here. The U.S.-based promoters of the Charter Cities idea (led by economist Paul Romer^{vi}) propose an entirely new urban governance model, isolated from state governance, which goes quite further than 'normal' knowledge cities or special economic zones. In recent years these plans have been developing particularly in Honduras, with government support, and they are called Special Economic Development Zones (ZEDEs in Spanish). The zones, governed by private investors, are allowed to stipulate their own public policies (similar to Hong Kong – China relations): they become autonomous regions where corporate governors write laws, overseen by a committee made up of mostly U.S. citizens.⁶¹ The first ZEDE is currently being conceived on the country's Pacific Coast, financed by \$40 million from the South Korean government.⁶²⁶³ Controversy, criticism and political struggle have surrounded the ZEDE idea from the beginning. For example, the Garifuna minority group and other local civil society groups have expressed harsh criticism, relating to issues such as the grabbing of land and livelihood means of rural populations⁶⁴: in the original plan, empty lands are targeted for establishing the new cities, but the reality is that much of the targeted territory is already inhabited. In addition, there is much controversy around the negation of democracy and national sovereignty, which easily brings back memories of strong US involvement in the country and region.⁶⁵ Even though South Korea is highly involved in the project (also consulting), local criticism is more directed at the US influence and the multinational enterprises and local elites in general that stand to benefit from the model (and most of all at Honduran government that 'sells out' the country without consultation).

Conclusion

We have explored the discourses around new cities in Latin America and Africa, which are inspired by Asian examples, as an interesting illustration of South-South transnational connections and urban inter-referencing.⁶⁶ Indeed, in current urbanism, rather than only western ideas and finance being exported across the globe, Asian models, concepts and investments are influencing the remaking of today's global South cities.

Yachay and Modderfontein are two very diverging cases, but comparison can teach us some exploratory lessons as a basis for broader comparison of new cities. Ecuador and South Africa do have some things in common as states; they can both be seen as a type of developmental state with relatively high social spending and clear sustainable development discourse (in Ecuador particularly environmental; in South Africa more social and combined with strong democratic ideals), but combined with often neoliberal practices. Indeed, Ecuador is often termed a 'postneoliberal' state, but critics argue that it does not go much beyond ordinary neoliberalism in practice⁶⁷⁶⁸ – although it is still characterised by a strong controlling central state. South Africa's current urban policies are often characterised as neoliberal and reminiscent of 'world class city making' perspectives. Both states have increasingly engaged with a variety of Asian actors – particularly from China – in the past decade or so. Hence the comparison has

^{vi} Romer later withdrew from the Honduras project due to a lack of transparency and consultation of one of the early ZEDE projects - see endnote reference 64.

some logic, although naturally there are important differences in how they arrived at the current state, and in the size of their cities and diversification of the economy. Both metrics are higher in South Africa. In addition, the two new city projects are quite different: a state showcase project based on knowledge in Yachay with South Korean and other international influences, vs. a spectacular private Chinese showcase city in Modderfontein. Whereas the first has a university functioning already, the second is still under construction. Whereas Yachay is a unique project for Ecuador and located in a rural area, Modderfontein is not the only new city project in the outskirts of South African cities, though Zendaï claims to be unique in scale.

Similarities found in the discourse around new cities in both countries include the engagement of the new cities' founders (in Ecuador the state, in South Africa the Chinese developer) with a distinctly 'green neoliberalist' discourse. This may be an indication of the increasing prevalence of a smart city framing of combining economic growth and environmental sustainability through sustainable innovations and technologies. Sustainability is then viewed as a new opportunity for cities and a way to attract investment and customers. Furthermore, strong ideas of modernisation are present in both countries, with economic growth and trickle down effects unquestioned and the idea that only international (Asian and/or western) ideas, lifestyles and 'world class cities' can bring development. Specifically, the former development trajectories of the Asian states are taken as an inspiration. Whether this modernisation discourse is particularly Asian can be questioned: it seems more like a hybrid of Asian and western modernisation ideas. It is also too simple to say that the specific urban models being promoted are Asian: although deriving from Asian examples and investment, science & technology parks, new cities and suburban gated communities also have other geographical histories, e.g. from the US and Europe. Indeed, Moser traces the origin of the new city model further back than most other authors, to Europe's colonial history.⁶⁹

Asian urban engagement and the benchmarking of Asian city models seems a rather abstract topic for public debate, hence it is hardly taken up. Rather than Asian actors, Europe and the US are often an easier target of criticism and new Asian actors might be largely overlooked. Indeed, framing by Ecuador and South Africa often focuses on the more equal terms of cooperation with Asian partners and their lack of interference, as compared to Europe and the US. China's own framing also reflects this view: its engagement in Africa is framed as a 'friendship' (as comrades) or brotherhood, 'united for Africa's better future'.

This paper has been a first exploration of some eye-catching new city developments in Africa and Latin America with Asian engagement. New research should explore other new city projects in different countries (also where no direct Asian engagement is present) and could build a framework for comparison. Also, a more extensive comparative analysis of media framings is necessary. Conducting fieldwork on site would help to further elicit local perceptions, e.g. by engaging with civil society, inhabitants, architects, planners etc. Finally, a more long-term perspective on the ongoing Asian urban engagements in Africa and Latin America is necessary, given the possible changes that will take place in the projects' trajectories, framings and consequences (e.g. cancellation or downgrading often being observed in similar plans).

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