Between Global and Local: Urban Inter-referencing and the Transformation of a Sino-South African Megaproject

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ABSTRACT: In 2012, a Chinese developer, Zendai, purchased 1,600 hectares of land in Modderfontein, Johannesburg, and announced plans for a new urban megadevelopment. Hiring a Chinese designer, the company released a series of computer-generated images. Drawing on these, the media and many in the city perceived the site to be distinctly "Chinese," rooted in futuristic, speculative visions of urbanity. At the same time, African urban research turned its attention to similar large-scale projects throughout the continent, and has continued to speculate on their consequences. Building on these two different interpretations of Modderfontein, this paper engages with the site as a manifestation of both global trends (e.g., increasing Chinese engagement with Africa, urban inter-referencing throughout the Global South) and a reflection of place- and context-specific factors. In doing so, we focus on the ordinariness of the project to interrogate how the idea of creating an ultramodern global economic hub, rooted in the experiences and practices of a Chinese-based developer, was in the end mediated by the actions of international consultants and the City of Johannesburg. We suggest that Modderfontein should be seen as a generative form of urbanism where elements perceived to be Chinese were lost in the master planning process. We argue that the socio-material dimensions of the project instead reflect a distinctly South African urbanism.

KEYWORDS: Johannesburg, real estate, megaproject, comparative urbanism, China/Africa.

Introduction

China's growing influence on the African continent manifests in a multitude of ways. Among the most significant is the nexus between Chinese capital, technology, and expertise and Africa's urban centres. For a continent such as Africa, with a history of extraversion and impeded development, cities can provide the necessary impetus for broad-based growth as they are home to large, differentiated labour markets and allow for economies of scale in service and goods provision (Carmody and Owusu 2016). Similarly, cities act as central facilitators of globalisation and attract investment and industrial development (Castells 2010). Yet, while urbanisation can bring forth opportunity, it also presents challenges. Africa is home to a rapidly urbanising population that is expected to reach 1.3 billion by 2050. As such, the continent faces a significant shortfall in urban infrastructure, housing, and services. Given these conditions, Chinese actors ranging from policy banks to state/private firms and individual investors have found significant commercial opportunities in the financing, design, and construction of African cities. Moreover, growing Chinese influence has also found expression in the circulation and transfer of ideas regarding economic development and the role of urban spaces in inducing growth (Murphy *et al*. 2018).

Within this context, this paper turns to the Chinese impact on African "new cities" – megaproject-sized, greenfield, master-planned developments that have become popular throughout the continent (Watson 2014; Van Noorloos and Kloosterboer 2018). Examples of these range from existing developments such as Kilamba Kiaxi in Angola and Eko-Atlantic in Nigeria to proposed projects such as New Cairo in Egypt, the Nairobi "Friendship City" in Kenya, and an as-of-yet unnamed $20 billion "industrial city" project in the Central region of Ghana. While heterogenous in objectives and designation (for instance, "Friendship City" and the Ghanaian industrial city will double as special economic zones [SEZ]), these projects share an exclusionary spatiality, and the aesthetic/plans of Chinese cities and broader urban spaces (Murphy *et al*. 2018). Indeed, a number of them are (or are scheduled to be) built or designed by Chinese companies.

This paper thus seeks to question how the export of "Chinese" urban practices and urbanism translates into African built environments. It does this via a case study of the now defunct Modderfontein New City project in Johannesburg. Specifically, we question how Modderfontein, as a site owned and led by a Chinese developer, was originally envisioned as a space of "Chinese" urbanism in the heart of Johannesburg. Building on that and existing analysis of Modderfontein's use of London-based expertise and inspiration (see Ballard and Harrison 2019; Brill and Conte 2019), we then question how the local state (in the form of the City of Johannesburg) and the use of international consultants mediated and, in some ways, transformed this vision. This, we argue, in line with the theme of this special issue, reasserts the "ordinariness" of the project.

Launched in 2013 by Shanghai-based real estate developer Zendai, the Modderfontein project was to be a 1,600 hectare mixed-use development in Johannesburg. Designed to mirror Chinese "new towns" (see below) in terms of linkages to both the wider city and the global economy, Zendai's original concept projected Modderfontein as a hub for burgeoning Chinese (and more broadly, Asian) businesses during their anticipated African expansion. The Modderfontein development has garnered attention in academia as an example of a privatised edge city (Van Noorloos and Leung 2018; Brill and Reboredo 2018), and as an example of international real estate practices, specifically the role of non-local consultants and their use of London-based comparisons (Brill 2018; Ballard and Harrison 2019; Brill and Conte 2019). However, whilst internationalisation strategies have been addressed in terms of the English, American, and "global" imaginaries and expertise, there has been substantially less attention paid to the Chinese dimension of the project. A notable exception is Dittgen's (2017) exploration of modernity and Chinese urbanism in Johannesburg, which is explicitly attendant to the Modderfontein project. In it he demonstrates the site's transition from a "flashy investment project" to a "splintering of ownerships, company shares and (probably) business orientations." In focusing on the corporate changes around Zendai, Dittgen revealed how, in contrast to other forms of Chinese urbanism in Johannesburg (specifically the city's Chinese-owned malls and Chinatown neighbourhoods), Modderfontein's "intended goals are consciously to contribute to the shaping of the future city." We seek to build on this understanding and explore the transformation of Modderfontein while questioning the role of the Chinese developer in this context.

This research is based on more than 50 interviews conducted during the researchers' doctoral dissertation fieldwork. Interviewees ranged from Heartland and Zendai employees to City Planners and other government officials, and were designed to create a broad yet deep understanding of the project throughout its evolution. Fieldwork was conducted intermittently by the two researchers over a span of approximately three years, between May 2015 and April 2018. This in-depth understanding is combined with documentary analysis of media reports, since it was through the (mostly South African) media that a particular version of Chinese urbanism was produced. Additionally, we consider the master plan (and interim updates) circulated by Zendai and their consultants. This paper focuses on the early stages of the planning process, specifically the period from 2012 to 2015, since it was during these first few years of (attempted) development that Zendai's vision was most prominently articulated. Moreover, the majority of existing analysis of Modderfontein has tended to look at the later periods. The vision created at the time of our focus informed later understandings, on the part of both project consultants and the City of Johannesburg, of what the Chinese developer ultimately wanted.

The paper proceeds in the following way: the second section introduces the concept of urban inter-referencing and discusses how it plays out throughout the Global South. The third section then explains the historico-geographic configurations behind the elements of "Chinese" urbanism currently being exported to Africa. The fourth section looks at the early stages of the pre-planning application, those that immediately followed Zendai's acquisition of the site, to understand how media releases produced, articulated, and reinforced a particular version of "Chinese urbanism" in this context. In section five, the mediation of these images through the planning application process and master-planning exercise is used to demonstrate how the site was transformed from a "Chinese" development into something distinctly South African. The final section then analyses local reactions to the project, demonstrating how the initial concepts and images remained ingrained in the public imagination despite the broad changes taking place throughout the planning process.

Urban inter-referencing in the Global South

"Masterplanning has, almost everywhere, carried with it a particular vision of the 'good city'" (Watson 2009: 2261). In this respect, plans are underpinned by processes of inter-referencing and utopian ideals focused on well-recognised models. Such designs are based on a desire to be recognised internationally and to play a part in the global economy, thus despite a broad understanding of the flaws of having one overarching scheme or redevelopment, master plans or pre-defined "visions" continue to dominate in some locations (Roy and Ong 2011), especially in the Global South (see for example Ansari (2004) on Indian cities' use of master plans). Often emerging from the use of grand, pre-determined master-planning approaches to development are tensions between "global" and "local" forces. In particular, when new places manifest as a city, often as "new cities," enclaves, or "edge cities," in a way that makes a "clear attempt to link (…) physical visions to contemporary rhetoric on urban sustainability" (Watson 2014: 3), the legal position of existing city-wide plans can be undermined. In an African context, Watson highlights how grand master plans for new development plans have problems from the start, suggesting a policy mismatch at the point where "global economic forces are interacting with local African contexts in new ways" (*ibid.*: 8). This echoes other research showing "actual existing urbanisms" pitched against the forces of globalisation and worlding (Shatkin 2011).

Rather than necessarily confronting these challenges, the focus of plans for new areas ends up being on the "global circuits of property construction" and the fantasy and dream-like nature of plans (*ibid.*; Rapoport 2014), rather than actually existing urban realities. In particular, with the increasing popularity of "South-South" urban imaginaries and inter-referencing, more African cities are looking towards Asia in search of both urban concepts and capital investment (Van Noorloos and Leung 2018; Adama, 2017). As Ong (2011) notes, Asian cities have become the models of an urban future that "does not find its ultimate reference in the west." Indeed, as cities throughout the continent seek to improve their position within the global urban hierarchy, megapolises such as Shanghai, Singapore, and Dubai are often cited as inspiration by both elites and planners. Pressing the issue are two factors: Africa's rapid, large-scale urbanisation, which often occurs informally, overloading city services and exacerbating extant socio-economic problems; and the continent's dependence on primary resource export, which allows for elite rent capture but does not create broad-based sustainable development or employment opportunities (Taylor 2016; Adama 2017).

It is within this context that localities turn to megaprojects, mega-developments, and "new towns" as a possible panacea. These types of projects are among "the most visible urban revitalisation strategies" undertaken by aspiring city elites and have emerged as popular schemes to both solve existing urban problems and attract global capital (Swyngedouw *et al*. 2002). In the South African context, large-scale investments have become a central point of housing delivery on a national scale (Ballard and Rubin 2017), yet the way in which they have manifested is contested and dependent on the interaction between different levels of government and the private sector – there is a plurality of forms (Ballard *et al*. 2017).

In the case of Modderfontein, the media and many in the City perceived the site to be a distinctly "Chinese" form of urbanism, rooted in futuristic, speculative visions of urbanity. Yet as Ren and Weinstein (2009) note, despite the preponderance of elites attempting to "Shanghai" (used here as a verb) their city, few understand the multitude of historically specific processes and transformations that created contemporary Shanghai itself. Indeed, the question of what is (or whether there is) a specific "Chinese urban imaginary" requires an understanding of the historico-geographical development of Chinese cities, as the concept of "Chinese urbanism" and the production of the country's urban landscapes is embedded within temporally specific configurations that overlap and transcend geographical and regulatory scales (Cartier 2002; Wu 2016; Shen and Wu 2017). The specific articulations of this urban form (e.g. new cities, special economic zones) and the particular livelihoods they are intertwined with thus cannot be overlaid into separate contexts without fundamental alterations.

Chinese urbanism and the popularisation of new city/new town developments

The "Chinese" vision of the urban, beginning with the early urbanism of the Shang Dynasty, has largely conceptualised the city as intertwined with the state's practices, ideologies, and exercise of social control (Lin 2007). This remains the case today, as China's urban transformation has been both driven and managed by the state through its planning and regulatory bodies in order to promote growth (and thus ensure stability) without the direct commands available in a centrally planned economy (Shen and Wu 2017). However, the specific role of the Chinese city within state-society relations has undergone several dramatic shifts since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949. Mao envisioned cities as centres of production rather than consumption, eliminating Central Business Districts (CBDs) and reportedly telling planners to limit the size of cities to disperse urban populations (Lin 2007). The reform era (post-1978) led to new alterations, yet until the 1990s large Chinese cities functioned as political and social centres for the state, a far cry from their current role as command and control centres for globally-oriented firms and industries (Wu 2016).

Urban transformations have occurred concomitantly with periods of state rescaling and regulatory change. As the reform era began, growth-oriented policies prioritised the rapid development of coastal cities and provinces, part of what Deng Xiaoping termed the "ladder step" program (Lim and Horesh 2017). Large Chinese cities would function as both economic engines and modern showcases of the country's progress (Chow 2017). The early market reform period saw the devolution of planning controls to local authorities. Cities began competing with each other, and a new entrepreneurialism gripped Chinese urbanism (Xu and Yeh 2005; Zhang and Wu 2006; Chien and Gordon 2008; Wu 2016). Uncoordinated, expansive, and ecologically damaging development followed, powering China's "economic miracle." The built environment of the reform era city reflected these structural changes; a land market was established, leading to the commercial redevelopment of urban cores as well as large-scale greenfield projects on the fringes (Cartier 2002). Peripheral development resulted in massive industrial and residential relocation, which took the form of spatially scattered, unconnected zones, in a model known as "using land to breed land development" (Deng and Huang 2004; Yeh 2005).

Yet with China's entry into the WTO in 2001, a new form of state-orchestrated spatiality emerged. Driven by a mixture of market and state logics, urban reorganisation has led to a fresh wave of suburban development. As Shen and Wu (2017) note, in contrast to earlier expansions, which exhibited exclusive zoning rights, the new strategy involves the creation of multifunctional towns and cities arranged as a "polycentric metropolitan region." Local states have also demonstrated great interest in introducing, developing, and deploying market instruments while simultaneously engaging in market-like entrepreneurial activities (Wu 2016). Suburbanisation has thus become a tool for mobilising capital (Lin and Yi 2011), and the state itself has become a player in the housing market through its direct involvement in flagship infrastructural and suburban projects (Shen and Wu 2017). It is within this context that China's "new towns" or "new cities" have emerged.

Chinese "new towns" are generally master-planned, mixed-use mega-development projects that cater to upscale commercial and residential usage. Adopting planning notions such as "garden cities," "smart cities," or "transit-oriented developments" (TODs), the towns are conceptualised as growth poles within wider polycentric urban structures (Wu and Zhang 2007) that simultaneously exhibit deep linkages with the global economy – this mirrors the original framing for the Modderfontein development. Indeed, many of the projects are designed by international firms with the idea of promulgating "world class city" narratives. Additionally, as Wu (2018) notes, the projects are used by the local state as collateral to gain capital from state banks in order to finance infrastructure and economic development. Thus, they form a central part of a transnationally-connected yet regionally-articulated "growth machine," in which the state uses market instruments to extend its position within the market sphere.

As with other concepts and instruments that helped China become an economic power (e.g., Special Economic Zones), new towns and cities have been co-opted by Global South elites as viable tools for politico-economic development, regeneration, and the creation of a new urban imaginary (Larkin 2013). This process has been aided by the expansion of international design and planning expertise (see Rapoport 2014; Faulconbridge and Grubber 2015). For African elites and planners seeking to overcome the continent's legacy of urban underdevelopment, these urban forms represent an attempt to start anew, erasing the socio-historical conditions that have produced cities in Africa (Carmody and Owusu 2016).

The Chinese government, its policy banks, and Chinese firms (both state-owned [SOE] and privately-owned [POE]), have sought to capitalise on this trend by taking on roles financing or building Africa's new towns and cities. The Kilamba New City is a particularly pertinent case for "Chinese urbanism" in Africa, as it was built and financed by Chinese firms (through oil-backed concessional loans) and portrayed throughout the media as an example of Sino-Angolan developmental cooperation. In many ways, Kilamba has become the pre-eminent example of how Chinese actors are changing urban environments on the African continent[1] and has inspired the construction of similar, if not more grandiose, developments. However, the specific configurations of state-corporate actors vary from project to project, and results are difficult to reproduce. Indeed, unlike in the Modderfontein case, in Kilamba, both central states played a significant role in the construction process, and the project elicited broad state support (financial, discursive, diplomatic), culminating in a visit by Xi Jinping in 2013.

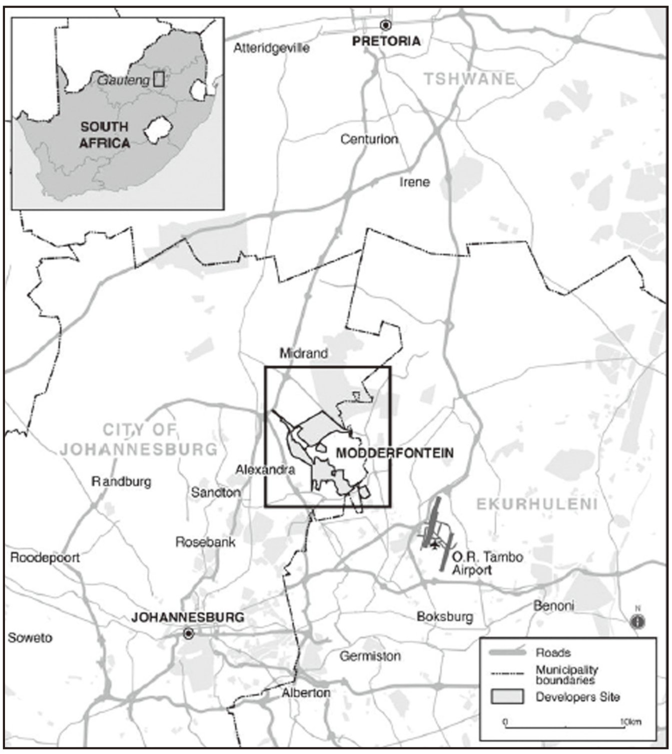
1. Chris Weller, "Africa's carbon-copy cities show how much it wants to be the new China," *Business Insider*, 19 August 2015, https://www.businessinsider.com/african-cities-now-look-like-chinese-cities-2015-8 (accessed on 26 July 2019).

The ownership situation is also unique, as the development itself is owned by an Angolan SOE while the Angolan central government provided the land (forcibly removing the previous occupants) and led marketing operations. On the other side, Chinese firms, including large-scale SOE's such as China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), built the necessary linkages and infrastructure.

The early Modderfontein story – press releases and Chinese visions

Zendai's initial concept for the site

In 2012, shortly after purchasing Modderfontein, located in north-east Johannesburg (map 1) for approximately R1.6 billion (approximately USD 110 million) through funds acquired from the Bank of China with performance guarantees from South Africa's Standard Bank (which itself is partly owned by a Chinese bank – ICBC), Zendai contracted Chinese designers to put together a master plan for the area. Their suggestions, or a loose interpretation of them, were then released as computer generated images in the South African media. The images used were of rounded glass bubbles with large bodies of water between them, a sharp contrast to typical Johannesburg low-density gated communities and malls, and indicative of Zendai's modernist agenda. Figure 1 below details the transaction area, while Figure 2 is part of the original images released by the MAD Architecture firm[2] for the Modderfontein project (Interview, Researcher, 2017, Johannesburg).



Map 1: Modderfontein's location within Johannesburg. Source: Miles Irving, UCL.

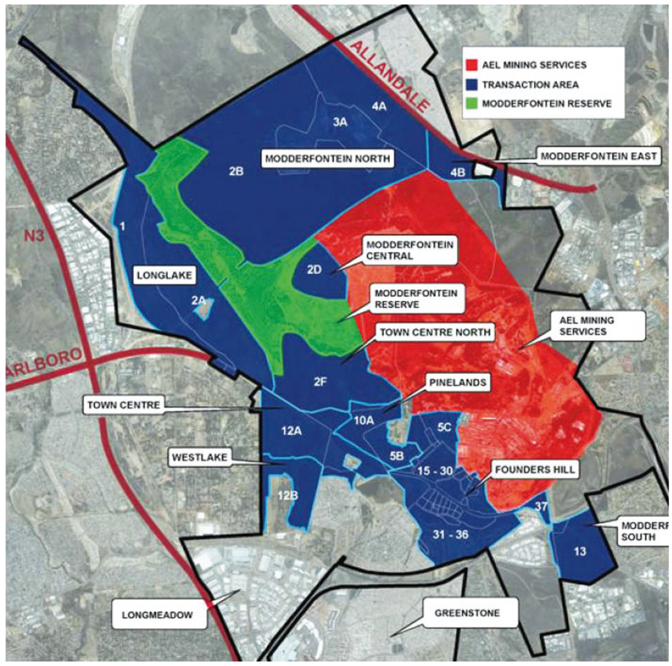


Figure 1. Transaction Area (AECI, 2013).

Figure 2. Artist rendering of the Modderfontein project. Source: Lisa Steyn, "Dai's vision for a Modderfontein metropolis," *Mail & Guardian*, 8 November 2013, https://mg.co.za/article/2013-11-08-00-dais-vision-for-a-new-metropolis (accessed on 8 November 2019).

As has been argued elsewhere, in the case of Modderfontein, interviewees at Zendai highlighted how the press reports that accompanied these images were "poorly received" (Interview, Zendai, 2015, Johannesburg; Dittgen 2017; Brill and Reboredo 2018). As such the company was forced to immediately defend their intentions, even before they had started the project. Similarly pressing was the scale of the project, which even some within the organisation thought had little chance of success in the Johannesburg context (Interview, Heartland, 2018, Durban).

For the residents of Johannesburg, the images and initial reports immediately suggested a developer that wanted to make dramatic changes to the city's landscape, which would necessitate broader societal shifts if it was to be successful. Given Johannesburg's history of deliberate exclusion, marginalisation, and segregation, large-scale, elite-led developments are typically met with scepticism among city planners and the local population. As one employee explained: "Yes, there are flats [in Johannesburg] and there's different types of dwellings and you have a look at the Chinese way of living – they want to impose that on this area here and then, the Africans,

2. MAD would later work with Zendai on the Nanjing Zendai Himalayas Centre, which has a similar aesthetic to the early Modderfontein sketches.

we said 'hang on, who's the market now for that'?" (Interview, Zendai, 2017, Johannesburg). To some extent, according to those interviewed, a change of tack was what Zendai had hoped to achieve with the images (Interview, Zendai, 2015 Johannesburg), and Mr. Dai was keen to highlight that Modderfontein under his leadership would be significantly different from projects attempted before in Johannesburg.

Following these early evocative images, Zendai began to craft their development strategy, which centred on creating an economic hub (Interview, Zendai, 2015, Johannesburg) that would be "so much better than Sandton," the financial capital of South Africa (Interview, Zendai, 2017, Johannesburg). Following the "new town" plans seen in Chinese urbanism, Zendai sought to create a space whose economic activities would be deeply entrenched in global economic systems – a new, internationally-oriented economic node. Additionally, the original layout presented the project as being connected to the broader city through integrated transport systems, including a new Gautrain[3] station, thus allowing for sustainable growth and the expansion of Johannesburg's polycentric urban core. Initially it was suggested that the project would bring in R1 billion in Foreign Direct Investisment (USD 14 million) and R14 billion (USD 970 million) in direct and indirect benefits to the national economy (AECI n.d.), and these figures were used to persuade the provincial government to support the project discursively.

As the South African media highlighted, Zendai sought to induce demand (and market the property) through the inter-referencing of global cities (for a more comprehensive analysis of Zendai's actions at this time, see Ballard and Harrison 2019). They went so far as to market themselves as the "New York of Africa" (Interview, Zendai, 2017, Johannesburg). This statement set the tone for the project and was seized upon by local media, which highlighted how "the aim is to create a commercial hub to challenge world's biggest cities like Hong Kong, London and New York" (Lomu 2013). Eager to embrace spectacle and drum up publicity for the project, Dai similarly stated that Modderfontein was to be the "future capital for the whole of Africa" (*Times Live*, 2015, quoted in Carmody and Owusu 2016: 67). To meet these goals, Zendai wanted to attract Chinese firms looking to expand to South Africa, as well as the continent more broadly. As one Chinese consultant working in South Africa explained, the belief among real estate developers in China at the time was that the South African market was "very stable, like China 10 years ago" (Interview, Consultant, 2017, Johannesburg).

Given that many of the people working at Zendai, including their leader, Mr. Dai, had extensive commercial experience in China, they considered themselves well positioned to create a commercial development that would cater to this market. Zendai's embrace of the China/Africa narrative and their deliberate reliance on Chinese/Asian firms epitomises both the hypervisibility of Chinese projects and the nebulosity of overall Chinese engagement with Africa. In reality, as Pairault (2018) notes, Chinese FDI in Africa represents only 1.2% of the country's total outward FDI. In fact, Chinese FDI in the whole of Africa is equal to only 14.1% of what it invests in the US, and approximately the same as what it invests in Germany. Rather than investing, China mostly provides services (typically in the form of construction) and financing (through different types of loans) to African countries. However, the media typically report agreements under the umbrella of Chinese "investment" and can thus distort the reality of Chinese engagement. The distinctions in engagement modalities are further blurred by the official discourse, which is often kept purposefully vague, and similarly conflates investment/financing/service provision. In Johannesburg, the "Chinese" (that is, Chinese nationals or South Africans of Chinese descent) spatial footprint is characterised by largely disconnected spatial clusters (Dittgen 2017). While the "China malls" (large-scale shopping centres specialising in wholesaling) near central Johannesburg have been paid for through loans from Chinese state banks or private financing, no Chinese-backed projects close to Modderfontein's size or cost exist in the city (Interview, Planner, 2017, Johannesburg). In Zendai's case, South Africa's mature housing market and low growth rates meant that without a large influx of Chinese businesses, the original plans for project would likely never get off the ground. As such, the early phases of the project had a decidedly speculative and outright risky element. Some academics have surmised that the entire project may have been a way for Dai to raise Zendai's value before selling the company (Interview, Researcher, 2017, Johannesburg), yet if this was the case the rest of the board was kept in the dark (Interview, Heartland, 2018, Durban).

The spatiality of the original Modderfontein plan mimicked the patterns observed in Chinese urbanism (again specifically the "new towns"), as Zendai was going to break from existing incremental development and create a new urban district complete with CBD, residential areas, cultural attractions, and urban amenities. Whilst smaller versions of these developments are arguably also something that characterises Johannesburg's existing built environment (e.g., Waterfall City, Steyn City), given Modderfontein's original goals, networks, and framing, it can be – and was – interpreted as a reflection of Zendai's experiences in China. Additionally, given the direct reliance on globally-oriented networks and the embedding of the project within the Sino-South African relationship from the outset, Modderfontein immediately stood out as unique among large-scale developments.

Part of creating a new edge city is often marketing around fashionable urban terminology; for example, as Watson (2014) has shown, African edge city development proposed by international developers often brand themselves as eco- or smart. In this way they not only detach themselves physically but also rhetorically from the existing urban core and its realities. This was also the case in Modderfontein, and it was an element the media drew attention to: "The *smart city project* is a big statement from Chinese businesses."[4] Despite this focus on business, the early proposals also recognised the need for mixed-used sites, again similar to Chinese new towns, as was stated in a media release: "The majority of the land will be developed for families, in the hope of developing the area into an international community"[5] (Dai Zhikang quoted in Slater 2013). These proposals also sought to tie the development into existing urban discourses, playing up its ties to Johannesburg's "integrated development" plans (for more see Ballard *et al*. 2017).

A mediated vision: Tempering expectations

Over the four years following acquistion, Zendai, and their new London-based consultants (Atkins), compiled a master plan for the City of Johannesburg. Of significant importance to project evolution, however, is the ownership change in early 2015. In January of that year, Dai Zhikang sold the entirety of his shares to a Chinese state-owned company, China Orient Asset Management Corporation (COAMC). COAMC, which was initially a "bad bank" for BOC, continues to manage non-performing assets, suggesting

3. The Gautrain is Johannesburg's light rail system. It connects Sandton, Pretoria, and OR Tambo International Airport. For a more extensive analysis of the proposals of a Modderfontein station see Brill and Conte (2019).
4. Krista Lomu, "Shanghai Zendai to develop a 'smart city' in South Africa," *GBTimes*, 3 March 2015, https://gbtimes.com/shangai-zendai-develop-smart-city-south-africa (accessed on 26 July 2019).
5. Dylan Slater, "Chinese Developer Determines Modderfontein's Future," *Bedfordview and Edenvale News*, 11 November 2013, bedfordviewedenvalenews.co.za/221782/aeci-land-soldaeci-sells-outland-sold-to-chinese-developersold/ (accessed on 26 July 2019).

that the Chinese state had little faith in the project's development (Interview, Heartland, 2018, Durban). Approximately a year later, COAMC sold off nearly 50% of their shares to other Chinese companies (Dittgen 2017), further splintering the ownership group.

Concomitant with the backroom changes, in 2015, Zendai SA and their consultants hosted a series of workshops with local stakeholders, including the City of Johannesburg. It was during this process that the necessary documentation was put together for the planning application. By juxtaposing the plan at this stage with the early documents, sketches, and media, it's possible to see how Modderfontein steadily shifted away from the original vision and eventually emerged as a more "South African" type of project.

In terms of the masterplan, the biggest shift was a change in the focus of the development's commercial property: between site visits in 2015 and 2017, Zendai had reclassified their target market from Chinese businesses to knowledge-based firms, largely in response to the changing geopolitics of China's involvement in South Africa. This, arguably, is part of making the site more "ordinary" or "normal" within Johannesburg. Within this, Zendai wanted to pay particular attention to education (Faku 2014), with the potential to build a new university. Additionally, the time frame shifted significantly, moving from an original estimate of 15 years of development to nearly 50 years (Ballard *et al*. 2017). As new CEO Du Wenhui noted: "Compared with three years ago, the rand has fallen 30 percent. When profits cannot make up for the currency loss, we can only slow down our investments."[6] Finally, the aesthetic of the project changed significantly. The master plan did away with the modernist skyscrapers (and dreams of attracting large-scale Chinese capital) and instead focused on cost-effective offices that would appeal to "users that find value in proximity to the airport" (Modderfontein Regeneration 2015). The final plan focused on creating an environmentally and socially responsive development that would be more in line with Johannesburg's extant urban fabric and the requirements of the municipal government.

In 2017, the plan went to Planning Council, a reflection of a potential new buyer (M&T Development – a South African firm) and the City's reluctance to prolong the process even further (as it had been going for nearly five years). The plan that was finally submitted presented a very different vision of the site compared to the initial images and ideas circulated under Dai in 2012. Rather than ultramodern glass skyscrapers – a "New York" of Africa – it was instead a more typically Johannesburg-styled project with rows of securitised, low-density housing around a central point (in this case, the Modderfontein reserve) – it was an ordinary space in Johannesburg's wider urban fabric. While the new Gautrain station is still scheduled to be built, whether it will has yet to be determined. Large-scale edge city developments have become commonplace in Johannesburg, and in the end Modderfontein became another example. Moreover, *Fin24* (a South African news website) is reporting that the site will largely be dominated by low-income housing or "gap housing," a rapidly developing part of Johannesburg's real estate market. Strong government support for very low-income housing and a large supply of high-end housing has meant developers have turned to the "gap" – which refers to those buyers who are just beyond the government subsidy level. The incremental changes in this project thus typify the way large-scale developments slowly unfold and reflect the socio-economic and political dynamics of their context.

Local reactions to Zendai's evolving plan

As Alden and Wu (2016) note, South Africa's increasing economic and political engagement with China, despite being framed in official government policy as necessary for the country's development needs, has led to an ongoing unease with regards to the nature and depths of these ties. While elites, especially within the ANC, are generally friendly with Chinese actors, within the popular discourse issues ranging from concern over the opacity of deals between the two governments to economic competition between South African and Chinese businesses have led to a deep-seated distrust of Chinese actors, which occasionally boils over.

In the case of Modderfontein, this distrust (exacerbated by the aforementioned hypervisibility and exaggeration of China's engagement with South Africa) meant that people, including those from the public sector, were suspicious of the deal. As one interviewee explained her view: the exaggerated images of the site suggested it was one of spectacle and rhetoric, rather than encouraging more deliberation over its future. For her, "After the death of everything, there will be this amazing thing that will happen in Modderfontein" (Interview, City of Johannesburg, 2017, Johannesburg). Another explained the root of his fear: that the land was "seriously undervalued as land – from a deal-making perspective it was like some of the cheapest land ever developed in one of the most well-located areas" (Interview, Public official, 2018, Johannesburg). Implicit in this was a question of how the deal was negotiated. However, such criticism ignores Modderfontein's historic role as home to one of South Africa's largest dynamite factories. The land eventually set aside for the project was owned by AECI, an explosives and specialist chemicals company, and only sold in 2012. Yet as another media report noted: 'Without a doubt there has been criticism from certain quarters,' Lai King said, referring to claims that Chinese companies flood a country, bring their own workers, take the benefits and flee.[7]

This dimension was most evident in the way the governance of the site was discussed during interviews, where many saw the difference between China and South Africa's urban development being one of the state's role and therefore highlighted how "[i]n China with a very centralised government, if you get permission from somewhere at the top it has to feed down because there's a very hierarchical structure" (Interview, City of Johannesburg, 2017, Johannesburg). This was understood to be different from the situation in South Africa, and as has been reported elsewhere (Brill 2018; Ballard and Harrison 2019), "there was a bit of a lack of understanding about the local context" (Interview, City of Johannesburg, 2017, Johannesburg). Some interviewees were even more explicit, noting that "[t]here was an assumption that if you go to Province and get buy-in politically at provincial level it will trickle down – that's how it would work in China" (Interview, Engineer, 2017, Johannesburg).

The view of Zendai, and Dai's vision for Modderfontein, as something inherently Chinese was articulated and arguably to some extent exoticized in the media as well. Lisa Steyn's article highlighted how: "The new billionaire in town is a maverick, a visionary, an art collector and businessman." In many ways, this view of Dai as something other than a traditional developer speaks to an othering and is evident in descriptions of him, for example: "Dai reportedly dreamed of being the Warren Buffet of China."[8] In this way, whilst linking Dai to recognisable global (north) individuals associated with corporate power, the media continued to differentiate the site and its owner

6. Wenwen Wang, "Slow and steady in SA," *The Global Times*, 29 November 2016, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1020943.shtml (accessed on 26 July 2019).
7. Lisa Steyn, "Dai's vision for a Modderfontein metropolis," *The Mail and Guardian*, 8 November 2013, https://mg.co.za/article/2013-11-08-00-dais-vision-for-a-new-metropolis (accessed on 26 July 2019).
8. *Ibid*.

as Chinese, going as far as to note that "according to Mr Dai, the project has been titled Zendai Modderfontein and there are also plans to possibly change the name of Modderfontein to Zendaifontein" (Bedfordview 2013). As such, the project experienced a heightened level of criticism from the media that was simply not there for "South African" urban megaprojects such as Waterfall City. Given the relative scarcity of large-scale Chinese projects in South Africa, the Modderfontein site became emblematic of Chinese intervention and quickly became associated with extant narratives of neo-colonialism, resource extraction, and government corruption. In turn, this fuelled the broader "othering" of the development and Zendai as an organisation, and ultimately informed how the development was characterised even as it underwent profound changes.

Conclusion: A "Chinese" megaproject in Johannesburg

The masterplan that eventually went to the planning authority was rooted in a global understanding of contemporary urban development, but with inflections of South African and Chinese urbanism. Yet with the sale of the site, MT Development – the company now in control – is expected to build a large-scale project for mixed incomes that will cater to the dominant economic activities of Johannesburg and match the city's extant aesthetic. Rather than being a centre for Chinese business, the area will instead likely reflect the tendencies of the economy at the time of completion and therefore fit within the general decentralisation of commercial activity that has come to typify Johannesburg's development (see Todes 2012). The idea of creating a futuristic site for the global economy, rooted to some extent in the experiences of a Chinese-based developer, has in the end been mediated by the actions of non-Chinese consultants, the City of Johannesburg, and local politics.

This paper has sought to understand Modderfontein as both a manifestation of global trends (e.g., increasing Chinese engagement with Africa, urban inter-referencing throughout the Global South) and as reflection of place- and context-specific factors. In advancing the agenda and calling for more analysis of Africa's Chinese-inspired urban spaces, we seek to demonstrate further that urban development is not monolithic or easy to explain, but rather is full of discrepancies and histories upon which any future development – and research of said development – must rest. Despite the ease with which developers and consulting firms can reference ideas from other cities or societies (see Brill and Conte 2019), the specific articulations of those urban forms and the particular livelihoods they are intertwined with cannot be overlaid into a new context without fundamental alterations. The study of new cities and other urban megaprojects on the African continent should be recontextualised to focus on the wide range of local features and factors that ultimately decide the success or failure of a given project. As developments are never strictly top-down affairs, approaching them with a lens toward the local makes it possible to move beyond the obvious and fully unpack the place-specific flows, forms, and networks that assemble within a project. This, we would argue, in line with the broader special issue, leads to an almost ordinariness about them.

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