

Beyond economicism: Challenging the concept of the Australian global city

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Abstract: “Global city” is one of the most successful and contested terms to emerge from urban studies but one that is often criticized for being over-occupied with economic-centric thinking. There are growing calls for the need to go beyond “economicism” (Bourdieu 1985) while not dismissing the prominent positioning of global economic processes in the production of the global city. By organizing their urban texture with international hubs and cultural hallmarks, Australia’s global cities have devised strategic policies to maintain their ‘grip’ on global audiences, while enhancing their attractiveness as central places of the world-system. Global city policies have pushed the Australian metropolis to become a provider for much wider publics than their local constituencies. They serve their urban community, but also national economies and, in many cases, other governments and non-state actors, in an intricate web of trans-national and cross-regional relations. Yet there remains a poor comprehension of the avenues beyond economic-centric considerations that work to shape and sustain this global city frame. This paper focuses on our concern with the present paucity of multidisciplinary discussions of the idea of the “global city” and what we perceive as a need for a more critical consideration of the practical challenges in Australian urban research.

Introduction - re-thinking the global city

The increasing interest in the ‘global city’ as both a cross-disciplinary idea and set of practices is characterized by divergent translations and tolerance-testing eclecticism. Friedmann (1995) describes this as the ‘Dual City’: where theory soars into the abstract thereby neglecting its other face: its rootedness in the everyday practices that constitute the production of history, institutions, culture, and politics. For Giddens (1994) the global city represents the simultaneous processes of distanciation (connection through presence and absence) and disembedding (lifting social relations out of local conditions and restructuring across time and space). Whilst Sassen (1998) emphasizes the global city and its social discontents.

Global city thinking has a real pull on society at large. Global citizens seem an unavoidable part of everyday world affairs with global cities developing a mutually constitutive relationship with the processes of globalization that uphold them. As Sassen (2001) and Taylor (2004) have illustrated contemporary globalisation trends have not annihilated the relevance of place and location. On the contrary as Sassen’s (2007) scholarship has demonstrated the territorial revolution brought about by the age of information technology and the emergence of finance-dominated world economy is paradoxically characterized by the increasing centralization of very localized processes. In this way global cities become sites of concentration of those command and control functions necessary to the dispersal of deterritorialized operations, which rely on the local production of a vast range of correlated highly specialized services, telecommunication infrastructures and industrial complexes.

These functions are not just limited to economic activities, but rather extend through countless sectors stretching through cultural and political fields. As Castells (1996, p. 384) explains the ‘spaces of flows’ that today sustain the ‘network society’ need specific localized hubs and nodes; ‘informational cities’ as he calls them that act as ‘spaces of places’. Global cities are positioned at the crossroads of countless worldwide networks and blessed with the attractiveness of globalizing infrastructures, marketplaces of goods and services and ideas. They have developed a form of magnetic ‘gravity’ which pulls people to choose them (more or less consciously) as privileged global hubs for their strategic positioning in the networked geography of 21st century relations.

This paper has emerged from our concern with the present paucity of multidisciplinary discussions around the idea of the “global city” and what we perceive as a need for a more critical consideration of the practical challenges both faced and inspired by this scholarship in Australian urban research. In moving forward with this agenda this involves a critical rejoinder to the mainstream global city research by actively juxtaposing the established concept of the “global city” with new perspectives that emphasize emergent analytical and practical insights, opportunities and challenges. The ambition around this agenda is three-fold:

1. To re-cast the ambit of what constitutes Australian global city scholarship through the integration of an extensive set of new disciplinary dimensions to which the concept of 'global city' can speak;
2. To promote the establishment of cross-disciplinary conversations and novel research collaborations including (but not limited to) perspectives that incorporate the cultural, historical, postcolonial, virtual, architectural, literary, and political dimensions of global cities; and
3. To highlight the need for both conceptual and applied research that relies not solely on theory, but also draws on urban communities of practice in Australian global cities such as Brisbane.

As part of this broader agenda (see Acuto and Steele, 2013) this paper has two parts designed to focus attention around the implications for the Australian global city in theory and practice. The first part of the paper outlines the key contours of global city scholarship within urban studies and the challenges inherent in the usage of the term. The second part of the paper builds on this to focus on the implications for the Australian global city and in particular the case of Brisbane aspirationally marketed as 'Australia's new world city'. Finally, the conclusion highlights the need to decentre the hegemony of cities as globally competitive economic markets and instead re-emphasize the complexity and variability of global city contexts and localized city planning and building processes.

Exploring the contours of 'global city' scholarship

'Global city' is one of the most successful terms to emerge from urban studies and presents an array of challenges. Represented by an almost unanimous reference to Saskia Sassen's two editions of *The Global City* (1991, 2001) or to the alternative 'world city' formulation of this hypothesis by John Friedmann and Peter Taylor (perhaps best embodied in Taylor's *The World City Network* (2004), the idea of the "global city" has for long been uncritically referenced. More recently, a set of inquiries such as Doreen Massey's *World City* (2007) or Jennifer Robinson's *The Ordinary City* (2006) have sought to provide more balanced investigations, or indeed postcolonial re-appraisals of this phenomenon.

The three texts that, to the best of our knowledge, represent the most direct literary background to our effort are Mark Abrahamson's *Global Cities* (2004), Peter Newman and Andy Thornely's *Planning World Cities* (2005, 2011) and the Derudder et al (2012) *International Handbook of Globalization and World Cities*. Importantly, this emerging critical scholarship has often called for multidisciplinary analysis (Amin and Graham 1997, Bunnell and Maringanti 2010) - a call that we believe has not been answered thus far.

Originally the global city notion was the focus of planning studies theorised by scholars like John Friedmann (1986) as a hypothesis on how cities influence the new international division of labour as promoted by the growing clout of neoliberalism on world affairs. This was to become in the following years a complex research program with a variety of ramifications in urban studies. Critical in this expansion was the work of Saskia Sassen (1991) who popularized the term 'global city' and promoted Friedmann's plea to link global flows with local social developments, and of Peter Taylor and the Globalization and World Cities network (GaWC) who pushed for a formalization of the network analysis of how major cities are entwined with the global economy as well as each other.

As the dominant discussion to emerge in urban studies through the mid-20th century, the global city paradigm has progressively expanded in the past two decades to extend beyond geographical and urbanist research with direct appeal across the gamut of the social sciences. Two key features of this expansion are worth noting in more detail. First, the increasing interest in the 'global city' has promoted scholarly divergences and cross-disciplinary translations. Second, at the same time this interest has trickled into the practices and rhetorics that uphold urbanist practices in these cities. Yet as with other popular terms in urban studies such as 'scale' or 'space', this has led to a wide variety of interpretations about what the 'global city' might be.

Early urban studies such as those by Hall (1966) put a mostly qualitative emphasis on how these cities represent places where most of the regional and international business is conducted. This was progressively developed into a largely quantitative discussion of the networked interconnection of major centres via Friedmann's research hypothesis (see Friedmann and Wolf 1982) as well as Taylor (2004) and GaWC's key role in formalizing the analysis of the 'world city network' of commerce, services and mobility that connects metropolises worldwide. At the same time Sassen (1991)

advocated how the focus on the 'global' city as a hub of command and control functions of those advanced producer services that are core to the neoliberal economy, needed a conjunct analysis of how this economic order was shaping the social order of cities. While all focused on how 'global' or 'world' cities are pivotal elements of contemporary world affairs, empirical and methodological divergences developed through a variety of sub-disciplinary approaches.

As Derudder (2006) highlights the scholarship on metropolises and globalization is characterized by conceptual confusion and alternative understandings of what these cities really are. Certainly global cities can be understood as more than simply economic pivots for example with a focus on 'uneven development' (Smith 1990) embedded in the contemporary economic system. If on the one hand global city theorists themselves have acknowledged the dual social effects of neoliberal globalization that are polarizing class divisions and splintering the human geography of these cities (Sassen, 2001, Hamnett 2003, Massey 2007), on the other hand urban geographers like Jenny Robinson have pointed at the unequal division that the global city creates in theoretical terms as much as in practical realities with those cities that are perceived to be 'off the map'. Confronted by both internal contradictions and critique the 'global city' presents us today with substantial challenges that do not stop at academic scholarship but infuse city policy and planning at multiple levels and scales.

To this extent the 'global city' as both an idea and a condition of interconnectedness to global processes has developed solid ramification in the practice of urbanists local government and corporate entities worldwide (Acuto 2011, Allen 2010). Crucial to the recognisability of today's globalizing metropolises is their ability to mirror and enhance dominant 'signs of modernity' (King 2004, p.5) and urban development recipes put in place by globally recognized hubs like New York and London. This is achieved not just by replicating them but hybridizing them to produce the city's unique image on a global scale.

Global cities become central marketplaces and as Zukin (1992, p.2) has pointed out "culture is more and more the business of cities" – global products to be consumed. By doing this, cities partake in the structuration of transnational processes and in the reproduction of dominant flows and cultures; organizing the geography of world affairs while at the same time being highly dependent on it. By sustaining this dependency, global city policies have pushed many metropolises to become providers for much wider publics than their local constituencies. Yet there is a lack of reflection and a poor comprehension of these impacts beyond economic-centric considerations – still the dominant approach to understanding the global city. While not dismissing the prominent positioning of global economic processes in the production of the global city, there are growing calls for the need to go beyond "economicism" (Bourdieu 1985) when thinking about cities.

Brisbane - Australia's newest world city

Global city policies have pushed the Australian metropolis to become a provider for much wider publics than their local constituencies. They serve their urban community, but also national economies and, in many cases, other governments and non-state actors, in an intricate web of transnational and cross-regional relations. This emphasis on global economic integration and positioning is clearly illustrated in the first State of Australian Cities report:

Through agglomeration economies—that is, the benefits that result from the clustering of activities—and their flow-on effects on innovation and specialisation, cities can achieve a considerable productivity premium...To realise this productivity potential, businesses in Australian cities need to be globally competitive—not merely in cost terms but also in terms of access to the benefits of innovation and skilled labour markets that cities can provide. Cities are competing against each other to attract scarce globally skilled labour, harness creativity and innovation, and enhance their attractiveness as places to live, visit and do business (Major Cities Unit, 2010, p.11).

The economic growth and prosperity of Australia's largest metropolises are often attributed to their role as emerging world cities in a competitive global urban marketplace (O'Neill and McGuirk 2002). The positioning of Brisbane as Australia's latest aspirational global city in the Asian century is evident in the marketing narrative generated by Brisbane City Council and supported by the State government in Queensland.

With a global outlook, exceptional industry strengths and a new world city edge, Brisbane is enterprising and energised. The city is firmly connected to global markets, yet remains economically resilient.

Governed by the largest municipal council in Australia, many multinationals have invested in Brisbane, finding an open, supportive, stable and cost-competitive business environment. Innovators, industry leaders and emerging talent are drawn to Brisbane by the growing opportunity to excel, considerable business benefits and the lifestyle (Brisbane Marketing and Economic Development Board, 2010, p.1).

Brisbane is the capital of Queensland and positioned centrally within the nexus of the urban megalopolis of South-East Queensland which includes the Gold Coast/ Tweed Heads, the Sunshine Coast and Toowoomba. The CEO of Brisbane City Council Colin Jensen (2011, p.21) describes Brisbane as “demonstrably Australia’s ‘New World City’ with a growing economy, globally connected and increasingly integrated to the Asia Pacific region and knowledge-based growth driven by technologically, environmentally and culturally progressive investment”. According to the promotional material what makes Brisbane a ‘world city’ is threefold: 1) being globally connected to the world; 2) the presence of global companies; and 3) a concentration of international business services (see Jensen, 2011, p.3). The emphasis is on global economic integration with more than 70 multinational resource firms such as BHP, Xstrata, Rio Tinto and Santos located in the Brisbane CBD.

Brisbane Marketing and Economic Development (2013, p.1) list the following strengths of Brisbane as a new world city: *Global advantages*: Brisbane’s strategic location on the Australian eastern seaboard provides businesses with exceptional global air connections and the opportunity to operate across three international time zones; *Economic resilience*: Brisbane is a proven economic performer and has a strong and enduring history of growth, investment and prosperity; *Expanding infrastructure*: Brisbane is at the forefront of Australian infrastructure expenditure and is currently undertaking the nation’s largest urban road project; *Population and employment*: Brisbane is firmly established as one of the fastest-growing capital cities in the country and is an investment destination with a vibrant employment market; *Talent, innovation and education*: Brisbane is home to a diverse pool of international talent, a cutting-edge research and development community and three world-class universities; *Sustainability*: Brisbane is looking ahead to a carbon-free future, working to become Australia’s most sustainable city; *Lifestyle*: Brisbane is known globally as a city of choice, a progressive business destination with a subtropical lifestyle and affordable cost of living; and *Tax benefits*: Brisbane offers investors the fiscal advantages of Australia’s lowest taxes and charges.

To reinforce this image further Brisbane is the 2014 G20 summit host for “the world’s premier forum for global economic cooperation and decision-making” with participants from developed countries, the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund. The event is being described as an ‘economic coming of age’ since the World Expo in 1988. The local spruiking asserts that the announcement of Brisbane hosting of the G20 summit in 2014 was “the ultimate endorsement of Brisbane’s reputation as an energised global city and world class destination for conferences and business events with first-rate facilities, event services and venues” (Brisbane Marketing and Economic Development 2013, p.1).

There is of course another side to the Brisbane story that is not included in this global city narrative. As Australia’s fastest growing urban area, community concerns about growth and development in the Brisbane region have been highlighted in vigorous debate about housing affordability, traffic congestion and water scarcity. In particular public fears about ‘development at any cost mentality’ (see Hamnett, 1985) has risen in response to an era dominated by ‘econocratic’ growth management. This includes a social deficit in planning and management (Lang and Woolcock 2010), spatial disparities in income and basic life opportunity (Burton and Johnson, 2010), neglected but pivotal infrastructure in terms of ports and airports (Dodson, Sipe and Baker, 2010) and serious resource and environmental dilemmas in the wake of prolonged population growth (Lowe, 2010; Spearritt and Head, 2010). Needless to say these issues do not feature in the Brisbane as Australia’s newest world city promotion mantra and marketing material amounting to what Spearritt (2010) refers to as soft core urban photography.

For its part the Queensland Government is not coy about staking out an ambitious and competitive economic reform agenda at the state metro-regional or statutory level. The most recent reform initiatives promote economic development through “planning for prosperity’ and the building of ‘a superior planning framework’ (2013) as a way of consolidating and promoting state interests. This emphasis on red tape reduction, streamlining planning processes and the development of a one-stop shop is contrasted with the collaborative ambitions at the metro-regional scale through initiatives such

as the *South-East Queensland Regional Plan (SEQRP)* as a means of better facilitating sustainable planning reform in Queensland.

O'Neill and McGuirk (2002) describe how the pursuit of 'prosperity' has presented uneven development for the Australian global city with expansion in manufacturing and information services, capital gain for property owners and a population boom emerging alongside infrastructure stress, demographic imbalance and environmental deterioration. The global city context is implicit here and whilst Hamnett (1996) has argued that globalization in and of itself does not drive patterns of socio-spatial inequity, an emphasis on the localized policy and planning processes of economic restructuring to serve a globally integrated market arguably does.

As Searle (2013) has shown in the case of global Sydney, particular practices (i.e. socio-cultural and political-institutional) cause these localized effects to be produced by, or reflected in, the different dimensions of globalization. As he notes, global spaces have been produced that replicate similar ones elsewhere, that are distinctive, and that mix the local and global. However the processes of generating and accommodating Sydney's global activities have produced challenges that reflect problems common to global cities in general as well as some that are more specific. Socio-economic polarisation has been accentuated by globalization and its high income jobs on the one hand and inflows of Asian immigrants on the other, with concentrations of poorer Asian and other households in low amenity areas that belie virtual representations of global Sydney. He points out that an increasingly politicized public sector that is called to account by a relatively narrow cross-section of the media and the wider populace has meant that the problems of global Sydney have not always generated required solutions with the necessary political support, providing an impetus toward more pro-government responses to Sydney's global/local issues.

Yet within the Australian urban context there remains a poor comprehension of the avenues beyond economic-centric considerations that work to shape and sustain this global city frame. Work by Hamnett (1996), Baum (1997) and Beer and Forster (2002) contend that economic globalization alone does not explain Australian settlement patterns and that research must go beyond a narrow link between the globalization processes and urban outcomes. As O'Neill and McGuirk (2002) highlight this necessitates a fine-grained understanding of spatial outcomes and the role of metropolitan planning as a response to the challenges of managing localized urban change.

Yeoh (1999) and King (1990) have previously argued every city is in fact 'global' to some extent and instead of the focus being on the privileged sites of globalization processes the focus should instead be on the pervasiveness of the globalization process, its uptake in metropolitan planning and policy and the localized distinctiveness of cities. Whilst Robinson (2002, p.536) observes the focus tends to be on a "categorizing imperative" and a compulsive need to rank and measure cities based on narrow economic dimensions. This penchant within urban research for 'list-mania' has come at the expense of a more critical stance on the multifaceted influence of those cities on world affairs, the fine grain of localised planning and policy processes and the inherent relational and deeper networked ramifications that urban studies has generally implied when it comes to locating global cities on a map.

It is crucial therefore not only to unpack the processes of globalisation shaping these metropolises but also not to dismiss the agency of the global city and its actors in context that do not disappear under the strains of globalization. The significance of transcending boundaries captured in terms such as glocalization and deterritorialisation are central to understandings of contemporary global city challenges and practices. This involves localized metropolitan dynamics expressed through the flow of strategic ideas, planning and capital that work to shape and sustain settlement development and define the Australian city at the global scale.

Conclusion

By organizing their urban texture with international hubs and cultural hallmarks, Australia's global cities have devised strategic policies to maintain their 'grip' on global audiences, while enhancing their attractiveness as central places of the world-systems. As both a practical and conceptual entity the global city has been characterized by both worldwide connectivity as much as complex localized processes and thus continues to challenge the bounds of urban research and policy. When we move to consider these urban settlements as places in complex entanglements of global flows we are prompted to consider the place as opportunity inextricably linked in a fluid geography to places

beyond. Notwithstanding criticisms that the idea of the 'global city' itself has been placed into a wrongful hegemonic position that supports a new order of the global elite (see Robinson 2002).

A focus on the political possibilities of practices that constitute global capabilities and resources are a way of bringing to bear the processes and tensions that straddle the intersection between urban participation and disadvantage (in all its many guises) at the localized scale. Socio-spatial polarization and environmental degradation are but two of the outcomes of this global urban dynamic in which the geographies of world capitalism is rearticulated and reconfigured at scale – body, home, community, region, nation, world, global. This includes attentiveness to the city-building processes that unfold through the global urban system and the regional interface, and are further expressed in both: [i] the placelessness of cities (i.e. cyberspace, ideas, capital); and [ii] the specificities that shape and define the metropolitan scale –fixed capital through buildings and infrastructure.

Taking a practice-oriented view to global city understandings pushes us to take account of the mix of 'glocal' (see Swyngendouw 1997) constructions of the global city and focuses attention to the global-local dialectics in place when investigating these cities. This includes going beyond the primacy of global economic processes in global city scholarship that renders invisible other practices and processes. A critical, cross-disciplinary juxtaposition of traditional, original and experimental perspectives on the Australian 'global city' is a contemporary agenda that, we believe, is sorely overdue.

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