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Reflections on researching new cities underway in the Global South

Abstract

Over the past decade, new master-planned cities have been increasingly adopted worldwide as a strategy for economic growth. This paper reflects on new cities built from scratch as a field of study, and the particular methodological considerations associated with conducting research in and on new cities, structured around four key themes. First, we discuss the inherently global and transnational character of new cities as a specific challenge that shapes our approach to studying them. Second, we examine challenges of accessing people and information in rapidly developing private and high-profile ventures. Third, we address power dynamics and positionality in new city projects that are globally concentrated in “closed”, non-democratic contexts. Fourth, we draw attention to the unique logistical constraints and challenges of doing field research in new cities under construction and outline the disparate experiences of site visits, where varying degrees of control and surveillance impact research activities.

Key Words

new cities, positionality, Global South, closed contexts, field logistics, research safety

1. Introduction: New city projects as a field of study

Since the late 1990s, new master-planned city projects have been increasingly adopted as a key strategy for economic development in the Global South. There are over 150 new master-planned city projects underway globally, the vast majority of which are located in around 45 countries in the Global South and in emerging economies (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021). Many new city projects are part of state efforts to “leapfrog” from agriculture, manufacturing, or resource extraction into a knowledge economy (Bunnell, 2004), while others are driven by nation-building agendas (Forest & Moser, 2020), real estate speculation, or severe housing shortages (Cugurullo, 2016; Datta, 2017). The forces driving the creation of master-planned cities worldwide and the nature of the projects themselves have changed substantially over the past half century and significantly shape how we can conduct research on them. In the years immediately following the end of colonial rule, a number of new cities were created by newly independent states with expertise, funding, and support from the newly formed United Nations, IMF, and numerous European and American-based international aid organizations (Avermaete & Casciato, 2014). These socialist-infused utopias of the 1950s and 1960s, of which Chandigarh, Brasilia, and Islamabad are emblematic (Hall, 2014; Tauxe, 1996; Yakas, 2001), were primarily state-driven

and aspired to relieve pressure from overcrowded and neglected cities that were experiencing unprecedented rural-urban migration; provide vast amounts of housing for the masses; create symbolic institutions and civic spaces; impose a vision of modernity that was believed would lead inevitably to prosperity; showcase what was possible in an independent “Third World” (Fitting, 2003); and address systemic poverty in former colonies (Moser, 2015; Vale, 2008). In contrast, corporations are among the major groups of actors creating new cities today and new city projects are advertised as “exclusive”, “world class”, or “global financial hubs” for “corporate titans”, with “luxurious residences offering an unmatched lifestyle” and the “best prime real estate”¹. This shift in the actors and approach to new city developments as well as their increasingly entrepreneurial and exclusive nature means that researchers face a variety of new obstacles when studying them. While considerable attention has been devoted to the methodological implications of conducting research in elite (Smith, 2006; Darbi and Hall, 2014; Harvey, 2011; Conti and O’Neil, 2007), corporate (Campling, 2021; Schoenberger, 1991) or authoritarian contexts (Koch, 2013; Menga, 2020; Mohammad & Sidaway, 2013; Turner, 2013), contemporary new cities often embody the unique intersection of all three of these contexts in one field site, which introduces additional considerations for research, as we outline in the next sections.

Despite the rapidly expanding subfield of literature on new cities following the sudden spike in the number of new city projects launched in the past two decades (see for example Avery & Moser, 2022; Caprotti & Gong, 2017; Chitti & Moser, 2019; Datta & Shaban, 2017; Keeton, 2011; Keeton & Provoost, 2019; Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021; Moser, 2019; Rizzo, 2020; van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018), scholars have not explicitly examined the methodological challenges of researching them². Furthermore, because a large proportion of new cities globally are at early stages of construction or exist only as “PowerPoint cities” (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021), a large proportion of investigations of the global city-building trend are discursive analyses of new master-planned city projects that examine “representations of the imagined city” (Lynch 2019: 1152), with comparatively less field-based exploration involving site visits. Publications on new cities have tended to examine project visions and ambitions through their policies, accompanying rhetoric, or through company websites, masterplans, or seductive 3D models and digital visualizations (see for example Watson 2014; 2020). While this approach provides crucial insights into both state and private visions for urban futures and who these

futures include and exclude, field research in new cities provides unique opportunities to examine gaps between new city ambitions and their implementation. Among these, fieldwork allows the exploration into the local adaptation or translation of globally circulating ideas by planners, how ambitious project goals are scaled back, or the modifications made by pioneering residents that alter new city masterplans. As a growing number of new city projects now have residential populations³, there are new opportunities for field research and investigations on the ground, which further emphasizes the need to consider the methodological particularities of conducting research in new cities.

This paper reflects upon our experiences conducting field research in and on new city projects currently being built from scratch in Southeast Asia (Putrajaya, Cyberjaya, Forest City, Dompak), the Middle East (Lusail, King Abdullah Economic City, Masdar, Sabah Al Ahmed Sea City, South Saad Al Abdullah, Al-Mutlaa City), North Africa (Tamesna, Zenata Eco-City, Benguerir Green City), and Latin America (Yachay City of Knowledge). Our research broadly examines the global proliferation of new cities, and we have conducted research on the actors building, facilitating, and profiting from new cities, as well as the official rationales offered to justify new city ventures. Through individual new city projects, our research also examines the cultural politics of architecture and planning, the transnational circulation of urban policies and imaginaries about new cities, and the social exclusions these projects generate. Our field research has involved traveling to new cities in progress, meeting and interviewing people working in various capacities on the projects (new city directors or CEOs, city officials, planners, HR personnel, designers, and so on), and spending time with pioneering residents and those living near new cities under construction. Our field research has also included attending a variety of private conferences and events that bring together new city leaders and (largely tech-focused) corporations hoping to sell services for new cities, as well as UN conferences with sessions dedicated to examining new city projects.

Drawing on our fieldwork in new cities, this paper examines some of the particularities and unique challenges associated with conducting research on such projects. We do not wish to make universal claims or to overgeneralize: we use our field experiences across different geographic contexts to identify common themes and dynamics surrounding new city building and to draw comparisons across contexts, while reflecting on the ways in which our own positionalities have shaped our fieldwork experiences and attendant research challenges. In so

doing, we aim to initiate more deliberate reflections and discussions on the methodological dilemmas and opportunities of conducting field research on contemporary new cities, which are the focus of a growing number of researchers.

The paper is structured around four key themes, which we argue constitute some of the distinct challenges of conducting research in/on new cities. First, we reflect upon the international dimensions of new cities, both as a phenomenon currently proliferating globally and as hubs of transnational flows of capital, materials, and labor, and we address the methodological challenges they pose for researchers. Second, we discuss challenges of gaining access to people and information in the context of corporate-driven, high-stakes, private new city projects where stakeholders have a strong incentive to control the city's image and narrative. Third, we address safety and positionality in research by discussing power relations in new city projects, which are largely being developed in "closed" (Koch, 2013) authoritarian or non-democratic contexts. Fourth, we outline challenges surrounding field logistics in new cities, and the complexities of interpreting appropriate and legal behavior in spaces of exception (Easterling, 2014). We illustrate divergent experiences of site visits to cities under construction in which we are either solo visitors to projects in remote locations, or we are highly monitored guests chaperoned around by project officials. We conclude with a reflection on the unique aspects of new cities research and the importance of fieldwork for understanding the global city-building trend.

2. Researching the global dimensions of new city projects

The inherently international and connected nature of new cities poses a significant challenge for researchers attempting to elucidate new cities as a global phenomenon while being grounded in place through field research. New cities are "global" in two primary ways that shape our approach to studying them. First, most new city projects are nodes of global activity through which people, materials, and capital flow and congregate. Put simply, new cities are truly "global" constructions because they are built through the assemblage of these internationally sourced components. New city projects are international collaborations with actors from around the world involved in their design and construction, including city planners, architects, and consultants who are affiliated with world-renowned firms in Europe or North America, and rising firms in Asia including from China, Singapore, and South Korea (Moser et al., 2021; Ong,

2011). While projects may be domestically financed, most new city ventures rely on capital from investors around the world, particularly from the Gulf, North America, Europe, and East Asia. Essential building materials and resources including sand, metals, energy, and plants are sourced from an assortment of countries, while contractors come from such far-flung nations as Turkey, Dubai, China, or South Korea. Laborers involved in construction, landscaping, or security are migrants from countries including Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Indonesia, Pakistan, Thailand, Ghana, and Kenya. Accordingly, it is common to encounter multiple languages when speaking to the wide array of international stakeholders and actors engaged in new city development, with significant implications for research design and the types of research questions that can be explored by individual new city researchers. While members of upper management in new city-building operations are frequently proficient in English, and although hiring a local research assistant for translation purposes can mitigate the language barrier in some contexts and improve access to some stakeholder groups, proficiency or translation help in some languages will dictate the research focus on particular aspects of new city building over others and delimit the scope of the study. For example, in Forest City, Malaysia, speaking Malay has limited value when the migrant workers are largely from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, while contractors and sales or managerial staff are from China. The fact that construction workers, particularly those building projects in Southeast Asia and the Gulf, represent a highly international crowd with multiple language groups may be one of the reasons there have so far been comparatively few analyses of migrant worker realities in relation to new city building (although see Iskander, 2021 for an in-depth exploration of migrant worker realities in Qatar).

Second, new cities are global in the sense that they are proliferating worldwide and are shaped by transnationally circulating ideas and visions of urban futures, rooted in new city imaginaries, and sustained by networks of international city-building “experts”, a phenomenon that has more broadly been the focus of urban policy mobilities and assemblages research (McCann, 2011; Temenos & Baker, 2015; Temenos & Ward, 2018, Côté-Roy & Moser, in press). A variety of global agents, including international consultants, planning and architecture firms, government officials, and more, are actively circulating the concept of new cities as a viable development strategy through seductive 3D visualizations, websites, urban models, PowerPoint presentations and slick reports, and various other “policy artifacts” (Pow, 2014: 289) that represent “the ‘stuff’ out of which urban spaces and the lives of people in them are remade”

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(Bunnell and Das 2010: 282). Examining the transnational circulation of urban policies and visions that inform new cities poses challenges to researchers who rarely have the budget and timeline to figuratively and sometimes literally “follow” policies and policy actors, as well as trace the multiple contexts and histories through which policies travel (McCann & Ward, 2012). Although urban policy mobilities research represents a rich subfield of urban studies scholarship, there have been few discussions about how to overcome the methodological challenges it poses (Cochrane & Ward, 2012).

One strategy we have found productive in the context of our research is to attend industry and UN conferences and other events that attract key actors involved in new city projects to understand how global agents are circulating new city imaginings, as well as their motivations and influences. Such “mobility events” (Clarke 2012: 27) gather internationally dispersed policy actors to exchange and share ideas surrounding urban development and urban futures (McCann, 2011) and represent important spaces “where encounters with specific ideas have the potential to set agendas and provide direction and impetus for policy” (Temenos and Ward, 2018: 71) while also shaping the path along which policies will travel (McCann & Ward, 2012). Employed as an alternative to complex and costly multi-sited analyses that “follow” urban policies across transnational networks and spaces (Temenos and Ward, 2018), attending conferences provides important insights into the main actors circulating ideas on new cities and their methods, rising centers of new city-building expertise, emergent networks of urban knowledge exchange, and the general climate of discussions surrounding the development of new cities internationally. Through our research, we have more broadly investigated conferences as spaces of seduction and persuasion that are employed as platforms for powerful elites and organizations advocating for new cities as a strategy of development (Moser, 2019; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019). While the truly global and connected nature of new cities poses unique challenges for researchers, conferences act as “micro-space[s] of globalization” (Cook & Ward, 2012, p. 138) and can make complex and multiple transnational connections and influences legible all in one venue.

3. Researching fast, private, high-stakes projects: Accessing people and information

The increasingly entrepreneurial function and corporate role in new city projects underway worldwide imposes significant restrictions on actors and data, which significantly shapes field research approaches. New cities being built from scratch are high-stakes, high-

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profile endeavors of political and/or economic elites, who have the power to marshal vast resources (Koch, 2018). While contemporary new city projects reflect the enduring power of states and their involvement in urban development in many contexts (Chavez & Gaybor, 2018; Datta, 2017; Ponzini, 2011; Upadhya, 2020), new master-planned city projects are often initiated by state actors who then form complex partnerships with private corporations⁴, which have the technical expertise and capital to execute such massive and ambitious visions (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019). For researchers of new cities, one of the most significant differences between the current generation of new cities and those from decades ago is the increased role of private actors in various aspects of new city projects including masterplanning, architectural design, construction, and land reclamation (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021).

Beyond the common practice of outsourcing aspects of urban development to private corporate entities, or the formation of partnerships with companies for financing, sometimes new city projects are entirely built and governed by the private sector (e.g. Forest City in Malaysia is a project of Country Garden, one of China's top property developers) (Moser, 2018). In some new cities underway, private sector actors develop and run the projects using corporate management structures, with CEOs rather than mayors, and boards of directors rather than elected city councilors, while deriving most of their financing from private sources, rather than from the state (Datta & Shaban, 2017; Moser, 2020; Moser et al., 2015). David Harvey's (1989) concept of urban entrepreneurialism could not have anticipated some of the extreme neoliberal policies and forms of privatization found in the current wave of new cities in the Global South, where, in a number of cases urban services – and indeed cities themselves – are expected to be profitable. In the case of King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC), one of four new “economic” cities in Saudi Arabia, the city is run by a CEO and the corporation formed to develop the city is traded on the Saudi stock exchange (Moser et al., 2015).

This emergence of entrepreneurial corporate-driven new city projects, and the expanding role of the private sector even within state-initiated projects means that there is both a strong incentive to control the city's image and official narrative and new prerogatives to maintain secrecy surrounding city-building operations. While governments can be expected to maintain some level of transparency, accountability, and adherence to freedom of information laws (depending on the country), or at minimum may be pressured by the public to release data, corporations involved in creating new private cities have an extraordinary level of control over

information, people working on the project, and the land upon which the new city is built. Obtaining basic data about new city projects can be challenging as corporations have no obligation or incentive to share information relative to their activities, especially if it reveals failures or shortcomings that could have negative financial consequences, including lowering stock prices and eroding investor confidence. In our experience, information relating to, for example, the origin of construction materials (particularly sand) or the number of residential units that remain unsold is nearly impossible to obtain as it is in the city-corporation's best interests to conceal numbers that may reveal a risky investment opportunity. Accurate and detailed information about financing and sources of investment is also elusive and almost impossible to retrace through independent document research. Beyond the complex array of actors involved in new city projects, the identity of "corporate" players itself is at times challenging to elucidate, as they frequently operate through opaque subsidiaries of much larger corporations or holdings whose connections extend across many countries (Moser et al., 2021).

Given that corporations involved in creating the cities are responsible primarily to shareholders and investors rather than to citizens and residents of the cities, there is a vastly different dynamic in terms of accessing information than in public sector projects. While we have had access to many top officials working on new city projects, they may block access to information (Smith 2006) and often reveal little beyond what can be found on the official website or other promotional material. Furthermore, it is common practice for employees to sign confidentiality agreements that prevent them from discussing their views or sharing information about the project. In many instances, we find creative or alternative ways to access this information by bypassing the new city development corporation, for example by accessing new city plans through the companies or agencies that were involved in developing or approving them.

Furthermore, builders of new cities often intentionally release vague, misleading, or inaccurate facts to convince the public, investors, media, and scholars of the infallibility of the project, posing additional challenges for researchers trying to obtain reliable data and information on the status of a project. For example, when visiting Forest City, Malaysia, a new private city built on artificial land at sea level, the first author asked a city representative if they were concerned about climate change and rising sea levels, to which the representative stated: "the sea level is rising in other countries, but not in Malaysia" (Interview, 2019). The Chinese

property developers in Forest City also claim that nationals of over 30 countries have purchased units, a number that is highly suspicious, given that the visitors are overwhelmingly Chinese nationals, signs throughout the project are in Mandarin, and sales staff are predominantly from China (Avery & Moser, 2022). One of the most audacious lies announced to present a rosy picture of a new city project was in Yachay City of Knowledge in Ecuador, conceptualized to become the “Silicon Valley of Latin America”. As it became increasingly apparent that Yachay was a massive failure, and in anticipation of an imminent national election viewed by many as an indictment of socialist president Rafael Correa, Yachay’s management made an announcement that a private company called RedTech NickTesla Corp⁵ had decided to invest \$3 billion USD in an electric car “mega-factory”, along with the supposed support of Hewlett-Packard and Tesla Motors, that would be based in the largely unbuilt and unpopulated new “city”. The company and investment were revealed to be shams concocted in an act of political desperation (Chavez & Gaybor, 2018), demonstrating the lengths to which many builders of new cities go to maintain a façade of success.

It must also be noted that some, but certainly not all, new cities are a product of extreme corruption and state-sanctioned criminal involvement (Moser and Wilbur 2017). Mafia presence is in some cases so deeply embedded in the bidding process for contracts, the construction, and the political maneuvering to secure land and funding that digging into the financing of new cities can stir up a hornet’s nest and attract unwanted attention. This situation can pose a threat to the research activities and safety of the researcher and is something to keep in mind, particularly when students and assistants are conducting fieldwork in new cities⁶. Clarifying one is not a journalist is necessary and we have found through our research experience it helps to be a woman, which many elite actors interviewed perceive as non-threatening⁷.

We have also faced challenges accessing individuals and information through bureaucratic procedures and corporate sector-inspired gatekeeping strategies that use legal and administrative instruments to limit and control research activities. Beyond the standard permits needed to conduct research in many countries, there are often multiple gatekeepers that control access to the sites where new cities are being built, to information, and to people, particularly residents, laborers, and marginalized people at the peripheries of the projects. When interacting with management of new cities, it is clear to us that we are expected to demonstrate a degree of enthusiasm and admiration for the projects or risk being denied access to key people or even the

site itself. Given that a number of new cities are either gated, have controlled entry, or are in remote locations that are difficult to reach without formal assistance, being blacklisted is a genuine concern (Figure 1). In order to be permitted to enter the cities, a researcher may be asked to sign confidentiality agreements that restrict academic freedoms. When conducting fieldwork in a state-driven new city project, the first author has been pressured by lawyers working for the new city to sign non-disclosure agreements that state the researcher is required to send the lawyers a draft of anything they intend to publish for approval prior to submission. Conversely, city officials have occasionally attempted to bribe the first author with an envelope of cash in the hope that nothing negative would be written about the project. These activities, like others discussed above, provide a glimpse into the anxiety, the corruption, and the commonplace informal practices of upper management (Moatasim, 2019; Roy, 2009) that complicate processes of data collection in and on new city projects. Our experience conducting research involving corporate actors in private or increasingly entrepreneurial new city projects also draws attention to the widespread use of common corporate tools and strategies to control representations and discussions surrounding projects underway, while underscoring the importance of conducting field research to validate the “official” discourses and uncover discrepancies between rhetoric and reality that sometimes take on shocking proportions.



Figure 1: Example of security measures: gating and a checkpoint demonstrate controlled access to King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia. (Source: Authors)

4. New cities in “closed” contexts: Power, positionality, and ethics

An added layer of complexity surrounding field research in new cities relates to the political contexts in which new cities are primarily being developed, which pose specific challenges for navigating power relations and positionality, and raise safety concerns for

participants and researchers. As most new cities are being built in authoritarian contexts with little freedom of the press and frequently with the support of the political elite (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019), navigating power relations can be challenging, and repercussions can be serious for those who speak openly against ongoing projects. As such, it can be difficult to find people willing to speak frankly about a project or share information for fear of reprisals. This dynamic can change dramatically once the ruler driving a project is out of office and people feel freer to critically discuss the project.

An issue of *Area* edited by Natalie Koch (2013) examines themes related to conducting fieldwork in “closed contexts”, meaning authoritarian states and other authoritarian places that exist even within democratic systems. Each paper investigates how closed contexts can pose unique methodological problems that highlight ways in which field methods themselves have been shaped by assumptions about power, agency, and freedom (Koch 2013). In the introduction to the issue, Koch suggests that methodological tools have been developed for “open”, in other words, “Western” / democratic settings, which often fail to adequately translate to more closed or restrictive contexts, which have “distinctive configurations of power relations, subjectivities and technologies of government” (Koch 2013: 391). She goes on to question whether we can “conceptualize power and subjectivity without presuming a field populated by liberal subjects, agencies and norms” (Koch 2013: 393).

The papers in this special issue resonate with our experiences conducting research on new cities. New cities are top-down endeavors, many of which represent nation-building strategies and legacy projects of extremely powerful and often authoritarian leaders and financial elites (Koch, 2018; Vale, 2008). They are made possible only through the accumulation of massive tracts of land, often involving the illegal expropriation of long-term landowners and residents (Das, 2015; Datta, 2015). Those involved in accumulating the necessary land and attracting investors are local and foreign elites who are deeply invested in the projects and can be difficult to identify or access and may be unwilling to take part in interviews. Furthermore, the deep engagement of the state and state actors in the national economy, including through the ownership of major corporations, in many authoritarian or autocratic regimes engaged in creating new cities means that it is often difficult to unpack the state’s complex entanglements with the corporate sector, “where public and private melt together without clear-cut boundaries” (Acuto, 2010: 274). In some contexts, including Morocco’s national city-building activities and new city

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projects in the Gulf and MENA region, actors engaged in new city development have a “hybrid” configuration, encompassing features and responsibilities of both public and private sectors, and maintain pervasive ties to the monarchy (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2022). This means that even in the context of so-called private cities largely financed and planned by private capital and corporate interests, “corporate” actors may be unwilling to discuss aspects of the projects due to their strong ties with the centralized administration.

The “many layers of bureaucracy controlling access” (Turner, 2013: 5) frequently forces us to craft ways of gaining information that circumvent restrictions on speech, media, and publications. In some cases, we have been asked to submit questions in advance prior to interviewing upper management or a CEO of a new city. The CEO’s assistant may then send back edited questions and communicate which ones cannot be asked. It is constantly clear that there is a lot at stake for interviewees, who hint at their obligation to demonstrate loyalty to the project, their corporate employer or partners, the state (in authoritarian contexts), and various public figures involved, and adhere to confidentiality agreements. Government officials we have interviewed often dodge questions, provide vague answers, or tell us they would rather not discuss particular topics, presumably for fear of losing their jobs. As a result, in our research we try to find meaning in topics and information that is being omitted or avoided, or that cannot be discussed in depth without compromising the safety of research participants (Koch, 2013; Turner, 2013). While conducting interviews with the management of new cities, we need to determine what is out of bounds, the contours of which can reveal power dynamics at play. For example, during an interview at the corporate office of Forest City, every time the first author brought up the role of the local royal family the topic was changed, making it challenging to determine the role that members of the royal family played in the project. This obfuscation simultaneously confirmed the involvement of particular royal family members in the project while underscoring the sensitive and controversial nature of this fact in the local context, which constitutes an important finding in itself. As we have experienced in our research on new cities, the layers of bureaucratic control are multi-scalar, requiring researchers to navigate complex micro- and macro-political contexts (Koch, 2013; Nelson, 2013).

In several authoritarian contexts in which new cities are taking shape, the lack of separation between the state, media, and institutions is a persistent challenge, as is the common practice of banning journalists and researchers and issuing threats against those who dissent. As

Canadians working in Canadian institutions, we have a safety net unavailable to many local scholars, who could face negative repercussions for publishing critical research on new city projects backed by state and / or royal figures. Based on discussions with a number of local researchers in our field sites, the lack of freedom for scholars and the local political climate shapes the types of research questions they can ask or dissuades them from publishing critical material about the projects. This can also put local research assistants and collaborators at risk, some of whom have requested we refrain from publishing their names. Furthermore, while many former colonies are building new cities, as Canadians we are (ironically) not perceived as being nationals of a former colonizing country but are instead often viewed favorably as citizens of a benevolent state. This positive perception of our country of origin as well as our positionality as white, women researchers from a prestigious foreign academic institution has time and time again favorably impacted our ability to conduct research in new cities, a point we return to in the next section.

Despite our undeniable advantage in terms of research access due to our positionality, conducting interviews with powerful political or economic elites engaged in new city-building in “closed” contexts nevertheless carries a variety of risks to which we are not immune, and constitutes a reversal of power dynamics upon which academic ethics protocols are based. While a great deal of scholarship has examined how the researcher from the Global North holds power over research subjects in the Global South who are vulnerable to being taken advantage of and suffering lasting repercussions from the research process (Caretta 2015; Smith 2010), in our research on elites building new cities, we often find ourselves in a subservient position vis-à-vis elite research participants. We feel vulnerable at times interviewing extremely powerful and well-connected men who function as gatekeepers for our research, and we experience a constant fear that someone will decide to terminate our research assistants’ or our own access to a new city. This could effectively be accomplished by state authorities, city management or the corporate entity in charge, and since many new cities are intended as a legacy project of national-level politicians, we could conceivably be blocked from obtaining a visa and entering the country in some contexts.

5. Logistics and field experiences in new cities: Alone in the pre-urban wilderness, or under strict surveillance in spaces of exception

Conducting field research in brand new cities under construction entails unique logistical challenges that both impact research design and methods and shape divergent experiences on the ground, often with important ramifications for physical safety. Through our research, we have visited new city sites at different stages of development, ranging from construction sites to built-up spaces with businesses and a growing population, and adapted our research methods to each context. Through these different experiences across countries and projects, varying degrees of control and surveillance encountered in each site shaped our research activities and further highlights the unique aspects of new cities as a field of study, while underscoring the types of research findings that can only be obtained through field experiences.

New city projects tend to be geographically isolated from other towns and require private transportation to reach and navigate the vast sites, which are rarely adequately serviced by public transit options. Even Putrajaya, the administrative capital of Malaysia on which construction commenced in the early 1990s, is challenging to navigate, despite being one of the most populated of the current generation of new cities⁸. With a population of just under 100,000, there are public buses, but they are infrequent and do not follow a reliable schedule. Because of the isolation of new city projects, field visits often require hiring a local, usually male, driver to take us around for several hours on the back of a motorcycle, in a taxi, or in a private car. Hired drivers are often unfamiliar with the sites and have trouble finding them so we download Google maps and satellite images to navigate. Despite being promoted nationally as prestige projects, locals know these new cities primarily through the abstraction of billboards, television, and social media, have rarely set foot in the project, and are accordingly unfamiliar with the actual location, which may not have well-marked entrance points or even paved road access in the early years (Figure 2). While this strategy gives us access to otherwise inaccessible sites, it also poses gendered risks and concerns for physical safety, particularly for a solo woman researcher (Ross, 2015).



Figure 2: A driver is unfamiliar with the location of Rawabi, Palestine, and manages to drive into oncoming traffic. (Source: Authors)

The land allocated for new cities in their early stages is usually vacant, cleared of prior residents and buildings. Some have a handful of neighborhoods or buildings completed or under construction (e.g. King Abdullah Economic City; Dompak, Indonesia; Yachay, Ecuador), or are essentially massive construction sites with thousands or even tens of thousands of migrant workers (e.g. Forest City, Malaysia; Lusail, Qatar) (Figure 3). Because of the vastness and semi-built character of some new city projects, we have had to constantly adapt our research methods to each environment and have found that in many cases standard approaches were impossible to implement and had to be substantially altered or revised in response to the reality encountered in the field. For example, in many cities underway that have a small resident population, there is a lack of available and safe housing options to rent on site for researchers, making it complex to carry out ethnographic fieldwork through prolonged stays and immersion in the community⁹. Similarly, when the second author attempted to set up focus group interviews in a Moroccan new city project with an established resident population, she was confronted with a total lack of available spaces that could be used to conduct group interviews while maintaining a degree of confidentiality for participants, in a new city that had yet to provide public spaces. Furthermore, the lack of public transportation in the city meant that participants would unlikely be able to get to a designated meeting spot without substantial difficulty and time commitment. In some cities

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with a pioneering resident population, what has been built is sprawling and non-contiguous, meaning that the second author could not conduct walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011) as planned, and instead opted for driving interviews. This adapted approach to the walking interview methodology was highly revealing of the context of the new city and residents' challenging experiences of the site as one that is hostile to pedestrians and only rarely experienced on foot.



Figure 3: Visiting new cities, which are often construction sites at unprecedented scales, can pose navigational, logistical, and safety challenges, particularly for women researchers. Lusail, Qatar. (Source: Authors)

New cities also tend to prioritize controlled access and heightened forms of surveillance and monitoring through various mechanisms, both during the construction phase but even permanently in some cases. The remoteness of many projects and the lack of public transit options themselves indirectly act as forms of access control, restricting the number and variety of persons who can reach the sites. While Chandigarh and Brasilia were also considered to be remote locations when they were first built, they were designed to be open and publicly accessible (Vale, 2008). In contrast, some new cities being built today are physically gated and/or their access is controlled by security checkpoints where visitors must show identification, letters of invitation, or other documentation. In new cities without physical gating, and especially

those in authoritarian contexts, access to and within the city is sometimes monitored through formal yet covert forms of surveillance or policing by state authorities who are keen to control depictions of the new project. In new cities that have attracted negative attention, researchers may be stopped and questioned by local authorities to conduct similar identity checks and research permit verifications, an interaction that is often intentionally intimidating and intended to remind researchers that they are being watched.

Some new private gated cities, including those developed as special economic zones (SEZ), function as spaces of exception (Easterling, 2014) that are regulated and governed using distinct legislation and actors that are autonomous from the state. These new cities operate under different rules – both official and unofficial – from the rest of the country and are often patrolled by private security rather than a public police force. For example, in Forest City, Malaysia and KAEC, Saudi Arabia, local police are not allowed into the projects where all security is handled by migrant private security guards with minimal English skills and questionable training (Moser, 2020). In these spaces of “parallel” regulation, researchers are wholly dependent upon private security guards and their open interpretation of rules and guidelines, which can variably and unpredictably restrict their access to the new city site. Gaining entrance to such private new city projects is up to the discretion of the guards, who may demand to look at a visitor’s paperwork and appear to take into account other characteristics of visitors such as race and their perceived socio-economic status. On a number of occasions, we suspect our whiteness and our university name cards have helped us to gain access to private spaces from which many locals are barred. This suspicion was reinforced when one member of our team, an Arab graduate student, was expelled from Forest City by private security only for being young and non-ethnic Chinese, and therefore unlikely to be a potential property buyer, indicating the power of private security who freely interpret and enforce their perception of the city’s opaque rules, including through discriminatory practices that restrict access to the city.

With close security monitoring, CCTV cameras, and forms of controlled access being features in many new cities in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Ecuador, Malaysia, and sub-Saharan Africa, a number of sites we have visited provide the sensation of being under strict surveillance. However, new city projects designed as “zones of exception”, despite being closely controlled, can also act as spaces where we are completely hidden from the day-to-day apparatus of the state. Some activities that are allowed or tolerated in the rest of the country, such as informal

modes of transportation or hawkers, are strictly forbidden in the new cities, which conversely permit activities that are prohibited everywhere else (see also Ong, 2006). The “parallel” rules and alternative norms and regulations governing behavior in new private cities are often unclear to both residents and the researcher and it is often challenging to navigate the difference between the norms and expectations of the new city and those of the country, while still respecting national law. For example, while it is mandatory for women – both Saudi and foreign – to wear an *abaya* (long black robe) at all times in public in Saudi Arabia, in King Abdullah Economic City, the first author was told by members of the city management that women did not need to wear an *abaya* while in that city and were free to “rock a bikini on the beach”, something that would result in a prison sentence and corporal punishment anywhere else in the kingdom. Members of the city management also allowed women to drive years before it was legalized in the rest of Saudi Arabia and turned a blind eye to other activities that violated social norms or even the kingdom’s puritanical laws.

As another example of the dichotomous experience of being both under surveillance and unseen, in more isolated new city projects we are placed in the paradoxical situation of requiring city officials to provide us with transportation and security, while requiring a reasonable level of freedom to wander about unhindered. In some private projects, researchers are unable to explore without an official chaperone, who often take visitors only to places they want to showcase, effectively hiding parts of the project that are crucial to examine, such as failed aspects (collapsed buildings, vacant properties, abandoned construction projects, unmaintained areas), visible evidence of sensitive issues (problematic urban governance through lack of garbage pickup, ecological damage), and labor camps that are the antithesis of the “modern”, orderly, and futuristic identity that these new cities seek to project (Iskander, 2021).

In instances where we are able to visit sites unaccompanied, the vast tracts of empty lots and construction zones we find in many new cities in early stages of development can feel desolate and unsafe. Due to their remote location and the relative absence of passersby, security, police presence, and emergency services, many new cities in early stages of development can feel like wild, ungoverned, and lawless spaces. This is further reflected in the informal activities and unplanned and unauthorized uses of space by pioneering residents or residents of nearby sites in some cities, who make strategic use of the lack of oversight in projects underway. Some are occupied by squatters, shepherds and grazing animals, or are sites of guerilla gardening or

other informal activities (Figure 4). On the periphery of Putrajaya, an enterprising person excavated two pits and redirected a river to create two ponds, stocked them with fish, then opened a pay-per-hour fishing business. Similarly, the vast parking lots for civil servants in Putrajaya's capitol complex are taken over by illegal drag racing clubs on weekends. These examples, and other fieldwork experiences discussed, reveal that new cities are unevenly controlled through their stages of development and are overseen and effectively governed by varying sets of rules and entities, from the formal state apparatus to independent or "parallel" bodies of private regulation. These realities shape fieldwork experiences, characterized by the dichotomous experiences of surveillance and sense of lawlessness and attendant safety implications, but also underscore the importance of field research for investigating how these unique research contexts more broadly shape the lives of residents in new cities, and the forms of their interventions in urban space.



Figure 4: Guerilla gardening in Putrajaya, Malaysia; construction site turned into an informal pasture in Tamesna, Morocco. (Source: Authors)

6. Conclusion

This paper reflects on some of the challenges we face in conducting field research on new city projects, and the necessary adaptations of conventional field methodologies and approaches. In doing so, we aim to draw attention to the particularities of new cities as a field of study in which there are increasing opportunities for conducting field research. We provide insights into the complexity of contending with the global nature of new city projects; the difficulties of gaining access to sites, people, and information; the power dynamics between researcher and researched in "closed" contexts and our shifting positionality across different actors involved in new city projects; and some of the logistical challenges of doing research in environments that

are often either isolated and empty, or under strict surveillance. While many of these constraints are found in other research contexts, factors such as elite power dynamics, language barriers, the forms of control and censorship found in some authoritarian and corporate contexts, the restricted accessibility of urban enclaves or private developments, the unequal power relations and forms of privilege associated with being a northern researcher in the Global South, and the safety risks of working in remote settings all coalesce in the study of new city projects.

The challenges we outline reveal unique characteristics of many new cities and their on-the-ground realities, which are a far cry from the utopian visions depicted in promotional material that circulates globally in the media. They namely underscore the unfinished character and scaled-back ambitions of many new city spaces with a problematic absence of essential services including public transportation, the lack of accountability of corporate stakeholders toward residents and anyone beyond investors, and the complex layers of control that govern daily life in new city spaces. The research challenges we have experienced can also function as relevant findings that make evident the extent to which the status of new city projects is often a closely guarded secret, while shedding light on the various strategies employed by stakeholders and authorities to maintain control over the new cities' image and representation in written media, including scholarly research.

Given the high economic, environmental, and social stakes in these massive projects and how they are promoted as solutions to any number of urban problems, it is crucial that more researchers go into the field to corroborate statements from the media, officials, and corporations involved, and to analyze the new cities beyond the promises outlined in their masterplans. This is particularly important in "closed" contexts in which there is little freedom of the press, and also in the context of the bold lies some city builders are circulating about new cities underway. However, mounting restrictions on academic freedoms, including through heightened measures of bureaucratic sovereignty in some countries (Menga, 2020) make critical (field) research on elite-backed projects of national significance more and more difficult to achieve without putting local researchers and participants at risk. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the geographies of knowledge production, whereby urban megaprojects materializing almost exclusively within the Global South are in many instances difficult to analyze critically from within the region. Methodological considerations surrounding field research in new cities in "closed" contexts could also be extended to consider the variegated experiences and perceptions of authoritarian

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power and modes of control of “insiders” and “outsiders” in the field, and to reflect on resulting forms of self-policing and self-censorship in research (Menga, 2020).

The objective of this paper is not to offer universalizing recommendations about how to solve fieldwork challenges, but rather to bring some of them to the fore so that they may be acknowledged and reflected upon to flag some limitations of the context and individual positionalities, and to foster discussion around possible ways forward. The strategies of dealing with these challenges will be dependent upon individual positionalities, abilities, and contexts. Dozens of individual new city projects have not yet received any scholarly attention, despite the vast resources being poured into them. Notwithstanding the well-documented setbacks and challenges that many projects face, new cities continue to be announced with regularity, indicating that this trend has the enduring support of elites across the Global South. While analyzing official discourses about new cities, the developmental logics driving them, the emerging actors and networks of transnational urban policy mobilities, and other such aspects linked to the aspirations of their builders will continue to be relevant in the years to come, opportunities to conduct more ethnographic research will be increasingly possible as projects attract residents and businesses.

How residents adapt to new cities and reshape their masterplans in ways unanticipated by their builders will be useful in understanding these mega-developments from the bottom up rather than predominantly from the top down, and to center the role of residents as participants in the long-term development of new cities as they acquire a material existence beyond their promoted plans. Tensions and / or new types of collaborations between diverse residents will provide insights into how residents challenge or perpetuate social differences that originate elsewhere and are imported into master-planned cities. Beyond individual or group interviews, future research could investigate residents’ quotidian realities through participatory mapping methods and by integrating photography and film to produce alternative visual representations of the new cities to both complement and contrast circulating digital visualizations of new cities based on the vision of their developers.

Future research could also investigate the people living on the peripheries and hinterlands of new city projects and the sorts of activities that occur in these urbanizing spaces (see for example Leitner et al., 2022). Many new cities cast a long shadow both on the environment and on societies and more work could be done conducting fieldwork beyond the boundaries of new

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city projects to understand how new cities interact with broader urban regions, both spatially and economically. We hope our reflections will be a productive starting point for other researchers engaged in examining the proliferation of new city projects currently underway around the world and will help to spark discussion about innovative methodological approaches for conducting field research in similar contexts.

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Notes

¹ These promotional slogans are among the many we have encountered in our research on new city projects and are representative language employed to promote new cities worldwide as exclusive destinations for elites.

² While this article focuses specifically on the field research challenges encountered in the sites of new city developments, the particular nature of new cities also poses significant challenges for document research, where consistent access to up-to-date information on projects and plans is compromised by a lack of freedom of the press in many contexts, as well as the constant revamping or removal of city project websites by corporate actors who are responding to market trends and investor demands.

³ While a majority of new city projects built since the 1990s are still well under their population targets, several cities, including some we analyze in our research, are now partially inhabited by a resident population, including in Putrajaya, Malaysia (100,000), King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia (10,000), and Tamesna, Morocco (55,000).

⁴ For example, KAEC is the product of a partnership between Saudi state actors and Emaar, a private property developer from Dubai.

⁵ The RedTech debacle has been widely written about in the Ecuadorian media, and is an on-going source of jokes, anger, and mocking memes among many Ecuadorians (Anonymous, 2017; Pallares, 2018a, 2018b; Santos, 2018).

⁶ While not related to new cities, allegations surrounding local authorities in the case of Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge doctoral student who was brutally killed in 2016 while conducting field research on Egypt's independent labor unions, is a stark reminder that even uncontroversial or low-risk research topics can be interpreted as a threat in authoritarian contexts, posing a safety risk for researchers (Menga, 2020). The Regeni case was also a demonstration of the limits to the protection that foreign researchers' positionality affords.

⁷ As white women in the male-dominated world of new city projects in which CEOs, with two exceptions out of around 150, are male, we tend to be perceived as curiosities who are non-threatening, or even entertaining diversions.

⁸ Not including new city projects in China, many of which are completed and are serviced by public transportation, although more systematic research is needed on this topic.

⁹ The impossibility of extended stays in many new cities creates additional challenges: daily commuting to conduct fieldwork incurs additional costs and is more time consuming, which impacts overall research design and can have implications for the duration of fieldwork. In many new cities, even those with pioneering populations, the limited services and absence of restaurants or supermarkets makes mealtimes a challenge for someone who is just passing through, much like finding access to a restroom, which is a safety concern, particularly for solo women researchers.