A kingdom of new cities: Morocco's national *Villes Nouvelles* strategy

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Declarations of interest:
none

Acknowledgements

Funding statement

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Abstract

Morocco is one of the most active countries in the world in building new cities from scratch. Nineteen new cities are presently underway across the kingdom as part of a national city-building strategy, launched to manage uncontrolled urbanization and to support economic growth. Morocco's city building is illustrative of the global trend in which states are creating urban mega-projects as part of national development strategies, but also reflects the unique local forces shaping new city building in the kingdom. This article provides the first overview of Morocco's new city strategy and projects, which we contextualize within the kingdom's recent extensive urban investments shaped by economic liberalism and persistent state authoritarianism. While new city building in Morocco is driven by the state and presented as a cohesive strategy in official discourse, it is characterized by ambiguity and confusion, introduced through the 'hybrid' role of city-building actors, an undefined policy status, and a lack of coordination among new city projects underway. By critically analyzing the national strategy's forms of ambiguity, we examine the state's modes of speculative interventions that maintain a 'useful fuzziness', raising issues of accountability, transparency, and disconnect in national development visions.

Keywords: new cities; urban entrepreneurialism; state-driven development; authoritarianism; speculative urbanism; useful fuzziness

1. A kingdom of new cities

Morocco's urban landscape has rapidly transformed over the last two decades, spurred by steady economic and urban growth, and shaped significantly by King Mohammed VI's accession to the throne in 1999. Since the early 2000s, dozens of urban mega-projects and infrastructure upgrading schemes have been launched as part of broader national development and poverty alleviation initiatives, and state-led reflections about how to improve territorial planning and development (Adidi, 2011). Among the diverse expressions of Morocco's rapid urban transformation, by far the most ambitious is the kingdom's commitment to new city building. In 2004, the Moroccan state launched the ambitious national 'Villes Nouvelles' (new cities) strategy, spearheaded by the Ministry of Habitat and Urban Planning (MHU)[1], which initially

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[1] The name and structure of this ministry was amended periodically in 2007, 2012, 2013, and 2017 (see Sitri and Hanzaz, 2016). To avoid confusion in our analysis of new city projects launched in the past 15 years, we refer to this ministry by the name it held when the city-building strategy was launched in 2004.

outlined the development of 15 brand-new cities across the kingdom to address uncontrolled urbanization and to bolster economic growth in Morocco. Since the Villes Nouvelles strategy's inception, construction has begun on 19 new cities[2] of different sizes and driving concepts, while being developed by an increasingly varied array of actors.

With 19 projects underway, Morocco is the African nation most enthusiastically embracing this approach to development, and after China, it is presently the country constructing the most new cities in the world. Morocco's national city-building strategy is illustrative of the appeal of new cities, which are increasingly applied as cure-alls for a range of urban challenges and normalized as a strategy of development across the Global South (Datta and Shaban, 2017; Moser, 2020; Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021). Since the 1990s, more than 100 brand new cities have been created in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and more recently in Latin America and Africa (Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021). However, the kingdom's unparalleled commitment to new cities as a mode of development also reveals new scales and scopes of speculative urbanism carried out at the national scale, and draws attention to inherent forms of messiness and ambiguity in the state-driven city-building initiative.

Introduced in 2004 as an innovative national strategy to 'resolve the problem of unhealthy housing and guarantee planned, balanced and controlled spatial development' (Ahmed Taoufiq Hejira, MHU deputy minister cited in MHU, 2004: 6), Morocco's national Villes Nouvelles strategy is materializing in a much less coherent fashion. Although driven by the state and presented as a cohesive 'strategic initiative', 'program', and 'policy' in official state discourse (Harroud, 2017a), since 2004 the Villes Nouvelles strategy has been taking shape through extremely diverse projects developed by a variety of actors with ambiguous roles, and supported by vague directives and regulations that obscure particular features of the 'official' Villes Nouvelles initiative.

This paper provides the first overview of Morocco's national city-building activities since the Villes Nouvelles strategy was launched in 2004 and contrasts the state's official discourse of

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[2] Interviews revealed the absence of an official definition of new cities and confusion surrounding the various labels attributed to projects underway. Projects labeled as new cities and ambiguously defined 'urban poles' are combined in this article's discussion of Morocco's 19 new cities to provide a representation of Morocco's overall city-building activities.

a coherent strategy with the messy reality of its implementation. In this article, we analyze Morocco's national city-building efforts rather than a single project to provide insight into how and with what effects new city building is both envisioned and deployed as a strategy of national development and territorial organization. We suggest that Morocco's city-building activities and the attendant ambiguity and lack of transparency surrounding the national strategy reflects the kingdom's urban entrepreneurialism and entrenched modes of centralized state control that characterize Morocco's recent urban investments, and King Mohammed VI's city-centric approach to economic development[3].Through an investigation of the drivers, actors, and projects of new city building in Morocco, we more broadly ask how and with what consequences ambiguity and disorder are manifested in a top-down national strategy conceptualized to foster more orderly urban development. We suggest that due to the 'hybrid' roles of city-building actors, an undefined policy status, and a lack of coordination among new city projects underway, the nationwide city-building initiative is introducing messiness, ambiguity, and confusion, with important spatial and political consequences for urban futures in the kingdom. We argue that the state's modes of interventions are opaque and speculative and maintain a 'useful fuzziness' (Narins and Agnew, 2020:809), which raises problems of accountability, transparency, and incoherence in national development visions. Drawing on a growing body of scholarship on contemporary state-driven mega-projects and new city-building endeavors globally, this paper is more broadly a call to complicate common assumptions of top-down, state-driven development schemes as ultra-planned, deliberate, and controlled interventions from a homogenous state.

While Morocco's ambitious city-building plans have captivated national media attention, they have received little scholarly attention. Despite growing academic interest in other types of urban mega-projects in Morocco, scholarship specifically on new cities is still underdeveloped. A handful of primarily French language publications examine Tamesna and Tamansourt, the earliest government-led new city projects, and their implementation (Ballout, 2017; Harroud, 2017a, 2017b; Rousseau and Harroud, 2019), yet no research to date examines more recent

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[3] The Kingdom of Morocco is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy in which the king is Chief of State. The Moroccan state reflects the 'the dual nature of Moroccan power' (Hachimi Alaoui, 2017: 4) embodied by the institutions and figures representative of Morocco's elected government, and those representative of central power and the king's administration.

projects, provides a broad portrait of Morocco's city-building activities, or connects the kingdom's new cities to the global new city-building trend. Our analysis is informed by 29 interviews with planners, architects, senior government officials, and new city directors conducted by the first author in summer 2016 and fall 2018, as well as fieldwork in three new cities: Tamesna, Zenata Eco-City, and Benguerir Green City. Our research also involved textual analysis of speeches, strategic planning documents, conference proceedings, official reports, and press releases on Morocco's city-building strategy.

This article is structured in five sections. First, we position the Moroccan case and its particularities within scholarship on past and more recent state-driven new city-building efforts, as well as recent attempts to complicate the narrative on top-down state-driven planning. Second, we examine Morocco's recent urban investments and broader city-centric modernization approaches, which paved the way for the current wave of new city building and shaped modalities of state intervention. Third, we investigate the official discourse, motives, and actors underpinning the national Villes Nouvelles initiative, and extensive resources mobilized to roll out this strategy of national development in 2004. Fourth, we unpack the forms and consequences of messiness introduced through Moroccan city building by critically examining the 'hybrid' roles of city-building actors with opaque ties to the state, the implications of the strategy's confusing policy status, and the lack of coordination among actors and city project visions for national development. We conclude by discussing the main contributions of the Moroccan case towards future research on cities built from scratch.

2. New cities for 'order' and national development

There have been many waves of new city building since antiquity, with notable peaks during periods of colonial expansion (Morris & Winchester, 2005), and post-independence nation-building (Vale, 2008). Morocco's new cities are part of a contemporary trend in global city building that is distinct from previous periods. Since the 1990s, more than 100 brand new cities have been created in over 40 countries (Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021). City building in Morocco is consistent with features of contemporary new cities under development around the world, which are disproportionately concentrated in authoritarian contexts (Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021). Unlike the civic ethos of state-driven post independence new master-planned capitals like

the iconic examples of Brasilia and Chandigarh that emerged in the 1960s (Hall, 2014; Scott, 1998), new cities underway internationally are predominantly motivated by an urban entrepreneurial logic, and driven by more complex entanglements between foreign and domestic actors with an increased engagement of the private corporate sector (Moser, 2015). Developed almost exclusively in emerging economies in the Global South (Datta, 2017), new master-planned cities today are increasingly normalized as a strategy of development, implemented by states as a way to leapfrog economic growth (Côté-Roy and Moser, 2019).

Accordingly, Morocco's new cities are illustrative of similar urban mega-developments emerging across the Global South, including prominently across the African continent, which are designed to 'tame' sprawling cities and fast-track national development by addressing housing shortages and a variety of other urgent urban challenges (Keeton and Provoost, 2019: Datta, 2015, Murray, 2015; Watson, 2014). Exemplifying the use of 'urbanization as a business model' (Datta, 2015: 8), recent scholarship more broadly draws attention to the increasingly risky and speculative approaches of 'entrepreneurial states' (Pitcher, 2012), where state-driven urbanization schemes such as these also often aim to derive economic growth from the conversion of rural agricultural land to profitable real estate developments, as exemplified in many of India's new cities (Datta, 2015; Goldman, 2011).

In contrast to recent research on highly symbolic contemporary new capital city projects and their role in nation-building,[4] scholarship on the economic drivers of contemporary new cities focuses on individual new cities conceived as a strategy to fuel the growth of the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector in such countries as Malaysia (Bunnell, 2002); Kenya (Van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018); South Korea (Mullins and Shwayri, 2016); India (Datta, 2015); and Palestine (Chitti and Moser, 2019). Other studies examine how new cities are created to support ambitious economic diversification strategies and the development of new sectors of investment. New city projects such as Masdar in the UAE (Cugurullo, 2016), King Abdullah Economic City in Saudi Arabia (Moser et al., 2015), and Yachay in Ecuador (Childs and Hearn, 2017) are designed to increase the resiliency of national economies and prepare for a 'post-oil future' (Moser et al., 2015). While the phenomenon is

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[4] See for example Moser (2010, 2012) on the creation of Putrajaya (Malaysia), Koch (2010, 2014) on Astana (Kazakhstan), or Seekins (2009) on the construction of Naypyidaw (Myanmar).

presently under examined, beyond strategic interventions through individual city projects, a number of states also have, like Morocco, announced the development of multiple new cities as part of national programs including in Indonesia (over 10), Malaysia (4), Kuwait (13), Saudi Arabia (5), and Tanzania (over 10) (Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021).

In analyses of new city building, the top-down execution of state-led plans for wholly new cities is often contrasted with the more messy and unpredictable evolution of established cities and typical piecemeal planning interventions (Murray, 2015). While research on top-down state-driven new city building tends to assume a homogenous state that has absolute control over urban development, two recent studies on city building challenge this 'clean' narrative of 'top-down' state-led planning schemes. Koch (2018), for example, unsettles monolithic imaginaries of the authoritarian state as a single entity with a unique and consistent vision and source of agency by underscoring its heterogeneous and dynamic composition. Through an analysis of 'spectacular' state-led urban development schemes in authoritarian states in Asia, she emphasizes that 'a city can never be the top-down imposition of an autocrat. Even the most centralized political system requires a tremendous network of individuals to come together to produce any idea as a material reality' (Koch, 2018:16). Similarly, Shwayri's (2013) investigation of the making of the new city of Songdo in South Korea unveils chaos and complexity behind the coherent veneer of a central government initiative. As a consequence of the shifting socio-economic context and political opportunism, Songdo's vision and masterplan was repeatedly altered and reshaped by incoming actors and stakeholders, which introduced a number of contradictions in what eventually materialized.

Fewer analyses have investigated the often strategic forms of disorder and ambiguity in state-led development plans. Among these, Narins and Agnew's (2020:810) recent investigation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its undefined nature due to a 'missing map' of official BRI projects, presents parallels with Morocco's ambiguous national city-building strategy. Introducing the concept of 'useful fuzziness' (Narins and Agnew, 2020:809), they suggest that the vague and undefined features of the state-driven initiative, and especially its geographic boundaries, may be intentional, allowing the state to maintain flexibility and openness in the development of China's geopolitical strategy. Through an investigation of Morocco's Villes Nouvelles initiative, our analysis sheds light on the national scale of master-

planned city building and the underexplored case study of a state that is rolling out multiple new city projects at once as a strategy of development. As we argue in the Moroccan context, similar to China's BRI, the state maintains a useful fuzziness in choosing not to clearly outline the details of the Villes Nouvelle strategy.

3. Modernization, persistent authoritarianism, and urban entrepreneurialism in Morocco

While Morocco's city-building reflects the global trend in which states are creating new cities to fast-track national development, it is also shaped by unique local forces and shifting modes of state intervention in the kingdom's urban realm. Upon his accession to the throne in 1999, King Mohammed VI made an explicit commitment to economic and political liberalization. His poverty alleviation programs such as the National Human Development Initiative (2005), infrastructure upgrades, and schemes to foster economic growth (Planel, 2009) raised hopes for a genuine process of political liberalization that would lead to democratization (Bogaert, 2018). Aligned with internationally promulgated imperatives of economic liberalization, these programs and reforms, under the guidance of international institutions such as the World Bank, have also sought to make Morocco a more competitive actor on the global stage and a more attractive site for investment (Kanai and Kutz, 2011; Zemni and Bogaert, 2011). Rather than ushering in a new democratic era, Mohammed VI's reforms have introduced new configurations of central state power and new modalities of state action rolled out most prominently in the urban realm (Bogaert, 2018).

As a distinguishing aspect of his reign, King Mohammed VI has encouraged the repositioning of cities as crucial nodes for economic development and the attraction of capital (Zemni and Bogaert, 2011). Over the last two decades, the national vision for Morocco's future has increasingly become entangled with entrepreneurial logics of urban development. Urban transformations have increasingly taken the form of ambitious 'prestige' mega-projects (Barthel and Planel, 2010), treated as 'the preferred vehicles to harness the perceived benefits of globalization through foreign investment, trade promotion and tourism-related revenue generation' (Kanai and Kutz, 2011: 347). Under King Mohammed VI, countless urban mega-projects have materialized across the kingdom since the early 2000s, popularizing a new form of intervention in urban space known as 'project-based urbanism' (*urbanisme de projet*) (Ballout,

2015; Cattedra, 2010; Mouloudi, 2014; Philifert, 2014). New urban mega-projects notably include transport infrastructure, most recently the Maroc LGV high speed rail line from Casablanca to Tangier; waterfront redevelopments, including Casa Marina and Casanearshore; large-scale commercial developments such as the Morocco Mall; urban port infrastructure and special trade zones such as Tanger-Med (Barthel, 2010; Barthel and Planel, 2010); and more recently, brand new cities.

Despite ongoing reforms introduced over the last decade to decentralize decision-making and urban policy development towards locally elected bodies of government (Philifert, 2010; Sitri and Hanzaz, 2016), project-based urbanism does not reflect a more transparent or democratic mode of urban planning, but rather a 'transition toward a more diversified and ad hoc planning of the city' (Bogaert, 2018: 80). In recent years, ambitious mega-projects in Morocco have been developed by increasingly diverse entities including PPPs, ad hoc planning societies or state-run limited companies, and new funds or holdings (Barthel and Zaki, 2011), with opaque ties to the centralized state administration, and varying levels of financial and decisional independence (Bogaert, 2012; Kanai and Kutz, 2011; Mouloudi, 2014). The introduction of these new actors of urban development has redefined modalities of state action in the kingdom's cities, through new hybridized institutional structures, indirect modes of control, and complex entanglements with central state power (Barthel and Zaki, 2011; Bogaert, 2012).

Project-based urbanism has normalized the privatization of urban project management and the increasingly complex international sources of funding that accompanied the liberal turn in Morocco's economy (Cattedra, 2010). Yet the recent surge of urban mega-projects across the kingdom also draws attention to the crucial role of the monarchy, which retains control over strategic development projects, and Morocco's vision for urban development more broadly (Cattedra, 2010; Mouloudi, 2014; Planel, 2009; Sitri and Hanzaz, 2016), indicating a 'shift towards authoritarian modalities of neoliberal government' (Zemni and Bogaert, 2011: 403). As an extension of project-based urbanism and localized mega-project interventions, Morocco's commitment to new city building represents a national-scale urban strategy that exhibits similar trends in urban development. We suggest that the ambiguity of the Villes Nouvelles strategy should be understood as another reflection of the persistent authoritarianism of Mohammed VI's reign and his entrepreneurial vision for urban development, which is deployed through

increasingly ambitious urban schemes advanced by a plurality of actors with varied ties to the state.

4. Rise of the new city solution: Motives, actors, and projects

Nineteen new cities are currently underway in Morocco (Figure 1, Table 1). While the Villes Nouvelles strategy announced in 2004 and spearheaded by the MHU originally outlined the creation of 15[5] new cities to be ambitiously erected by 2020, the national initiative soon took on new dimensions when more projects were launched in subsequent years by additional city-building actors who claimed to be developing new city ventures aligned with national development objectives. The projects are extremely diverse in their built form, geography, and driving concepts.

[Figure 1: Map of new cities in Morocco]
[Table 1: New city projects in Morocco]

Overall, new city projects under construction range from 1.2 to 20 square kilometers, with projected populations ranging between 12,000 and 450,000 residents. The new cities' main planning concepts are also diverse, and include eco-cities, technopoles, smart cities, satellite cities, industrial cities, knowledge cities, and the rather ambiguously defined 'urban pole'. Many project labels reflect the influence of globally circulating urban imaginaries promoting sustainable urbanization (Cugurullo and Ponzini, 2018; de Jong et al., 2015), including through 'smart' or 'eco' urbanism principles (Cugurullo, 2018). The engagement with such imaginaries varies across projects, ranging from more superficial engagements through branding and marketing in most new satellite cities, to their promotion as core components of urban visions and experimental masterplans in projects such as Zenata Eco-City. In the case of Benguerir Green city, which is envisioned as a 'green' 'knowledge' city with 'smart' elements, various

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[5] This number was, even at the time, somewhat arbitrary, as only 11 preliminary locations for new city projects were released in 2004 (Lahlou, 2015).

planning concepts and labels are employed interchangeably by city-building actors and political elites (De Jong *et al.* 2015).[6]

The initial plan to build 15 cities was estimated to require investments of 100 billion Moroccan dirhams (approximately $10.5 billion US) for a projected combined total population of one million residents (La Vie Éco, 2012). With the additional new city projects, total investments required are approximately 180 billion Moroccan dirhams (almost $20 billion US) for projects underway. The state also mobilized extensive land resources to enable new city construction nationally. Of note are the 100 square kilometers of agricultural land belonging to public agricultural development societies (SODEA and SOGETA) that have been redesignated for urban development with the state-sanctioned acquisitions of land through an agreement with the Ministry of Finance, thus ending the longstanding national priority of preserving fertile land for food production (Rousseau and Harroud, 2019). In other cases, land is being mobilized by state authorities through large-scale expropriations rendered possible through a royal declaration of a project's 'public purpose' (Law 7-81), as is the case in Zenata Eco-City, or through the controversial claim of 'collective lands' (Berriane, 2017), like in the new urban pole in Aïn Chkef. The hefty investments and the sizable mobilization of land illustrate the state's commitment to brand-new urban developments as 'an important component of the kingdom's national spatial planning action' (interview, 17 August 2016).

4.1 New cities to manage urbanization and promote economic growth

Morocco's Villes Nouvelles strategy was launched amid broader state-driven reforms surrounding approaches to territorial organization and spatial planning (Adidi, 2011). In order to address long-standing urbanization challenges and the uncontrolled expansion of cities across the kingdom, the king initiated the National Debate on Territorial Planning (*Débat National sur l'Aménagement du Territoire*) between 1999 and 2001 to promote a more coordinated and rational approach to territorial development and facilitate the creation of new national planning

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[6] Future research will shed light on the shifting discourses of individual projects that are adopting a 'carousel of labels' (Cugurullo and Ponzini, 2018: 150) in response to changing urban trends, as well as their relationship to actually materializing urban forms.

documents (Adidi, 2011). Launched in parallel to these reforms, the Villes Nouvelles strategy was promoted by its supporters within and beyond the government[7] as an innovative national planning intervention that could improve Morocco's territorial organization and fuel more organized urban development. The national program of new city building was presented as an attractive mode of 'prospective' planning, contrasting with longstanding forms of reactive 'emergency' or 'catch-up' urbanism (Harroud, 2017b), and promoted as a way to anticipate and organize urban growth to achieve more sustainable forms of urban development (MHU, 2004).

Echoing broader discourses circulating globally on the pressing need for new cities to address urban crises (Datta, 2017; Murray, 2015; Watson, 2014), city-building actors interviewed for this research believe that there are presently no viable alternatives to new city building that can address Morocco's urgent and widespread urbanization challenges due to a lack of funds and expertise to upgrade existing urban centers. Starting in 2004, new cities were enthusiastically promoted as 'the best solution to structure space and overcome pressures affecting the housing sector'[8] by government leaders who spearheaded the national initiative and initial new city experiments (ALM, 2004). Significantly, new cities were presented as a key strategy with which to address the national housing crisis and unplanned expansion of cities. As a consequence of rapid, uncontrolled urban growth since Morocco's independence, the country-wide housing shortage was estimated at 1.2 million units in 2002 (InfoMédiaire, 2012) and increasing at a rate of 100,000 units every year (MHU, 2004). In 2002, King Mohammed VI officially made 'decent housing' a priority for the kingdom's development, which spurred the creation of a series of programs, including one launched by then-Prime Minister Driss Jettou and his technocratic administration to construct 100,000 units of social housing annually, as well as the *Villes Sans Bidonvilles* (VSB, or 'Cities without Slums') program to eradicate all informal settlements in Morocco's cities. The national city-building initiative was launched in 2004 as an extension of these programs' objectives and as a timely strategy to achieve broader national development priorities (MHU, 2004: 7).

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[7] See Harroud (2017a) for his discussion of MHU minister Ahmed Toufiq Hejira's role as a crucial driving force behind the national strategy.

[8] Abdelhaï Bousfiha, Secretary General, National Housing and Urban planning Council interviewed in Aujourd'hui le Maroc, 21/12/2004.

City building is also officially promoted as a way to support new sectors of the economy, create employment, and attract investment (Lahlou, 2015; MATNUHPV, 2019). The initial new city projects also had the objective of spurring the creation of a private real estate development industry in Morocco and resulted in the rise of now-powerful companies such as Addoha, Alliances, and Chaabi, which are in turn creating housing and commercial real estate projects in many new cities in response to generous state incentives (interview, 25 August 2016). Through their promoted urban concept and plans, a number of new city projects strategically advertise their alignment with broader development priorities and programs in the kingdom, thereby reinforcing the framing of the Villes Nouvelles strategy as a national-scale planning intervention for the country's overall development. Launched to support and expand Morocco's industrial development in the north, Chrafate and Tanger Tech, for example, align with the *Plan Émergence 2020* (2020 Emergence Plan) and *Plan d'Accélération Industrielle* (Industrial Acceleration Plan), which are focused on sustaining national industrial growth. Other new city projects, such as Zenata Eco-City, branded as a 'model Eco-City for Africa', support Morocco's economic ambitions on the African continent by fostering bilateral city-building partnerships between Morocco and other African states (author, in press). Benguerir Green City, envisioned as a 'knowledge city' and business incubator, is being developed to advance research and innovations in mining engineering, agroindustry, and renewable energies, in accordance with the *Plan Maroc Vert* (Green Morocco Plan) for the development of sustainable agriculture solutions within the kingdom. Following Morocco's broader *Plan Azur* to expand the tourism sector, most new city projects also strategically promote their appeal for tourism, a lucrative industry that contributed more than 8% of Morocco's GDP in 2018 (World Finance, 2019).

4.2 Main actors of Morocco's new city-building

New city-building across the kingdom is facilitated by the emergence of new types of institutional actors specifically dedicated to their development (MHU, 2004). Morocco's new cities are being developed primarily by three broad entities that exemplify the new actors and entrepreneurial arrangements introduced under project-based urbanism: the Al Omrane Group, CDG Développement, and the OCP Group, all of which are involved in new city development through an array of subsidiaries. These three institutional actors and their subsidiaries have

divergent roles and prerogatives over Morocco's urbanizing spaces (Harroud, 2017b), but all three have become key players in Morocco's urban development over the last decade. As we will further examine in the next section, the creation of these actors and/or their subsidiaries is illustrative of the increased privatization of urban development operations in Morocco, but also exemplifies the persistent control of the central state through new modalities of intervention.

The Al Omrane Group is a parastatal agency in charge of implementing the state's vision in housing development and urban planning. Al Omrane was created in 2007 through a combination of four types of existing public institutions operating within the planning, territorial management, and construction sectors (Groupe Al Omrane, 2019a) to provide a more direct tool for action, free from ministerial politics (interview, 28 September 2018). The Al Omrane Group is under the authority of the MHU but operates as a financially independent limited company (Groupe Al Omrane, 2019b). The group, working in partnership with both foreign[9] and domestic developers, is currently building a number of real estate projects across the kingdom as well as four new cities and 16 'urban poles' across Morocco.

The CDG Développement Holding (CDG Dev) is a subsidiary that is fully owned by the CDG Group (*Caisse de dépôt et de gestion*), a public and state-owned national deposit and management fund created in 1959 to invest and manage pension funds in Morocco. The CDG is a central actor in the national economy and is among the kingdom's first public institutional investors (Oubenal and Zeroual, 2017). The privately managed CDG Dev was created in 2004 and is now a major investor in urban mega-developments, infrastructure projects, and new cities. CDG Dev oversees the construction of new cities through ad hoc subsidiaries for specific projects such as the SAZ (*Société d'Aménagement Zenata*), which was created in 2006 and is currently developing Zenata Eco-City near Casablanca, one of Morocco's largest new city projects, with a target of 300,000 residents.

Lastly, the OCP Group (*Office Chérifien des Phosphates*) is Morocco's phosphate mining corporation and the top global exporter of phosphates. The Moroccan state owns 95 percent of

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[9] For example, foreign real estate developers, including from France, Spain, Portugal, Qatar, and Malaysia were responsible for developing vast residential lots in the new city of Tamesna (MAP, 2017).

the OCP group, which became a limited company in 2008[10]. OCP is developing four new city projects through its ad hoc subsidiaries, including the SADV (*Société d'aménagement et de Développement Vert*), which is developing the new Benguerir Green City project near Marrakesh. The new cities are intended to diversify the mining company's activities and spur innovation in renewable energies and new technologies, as well as support the kingdom's sustainable development ambitions.

5. Building new cities: Chaos and confusion beneath a 'coherent' national strategy

The support and enthusiasm for the new city model in Morocco and the resources mobilized to roll out a purportedly cohesive national city-building strategy as a 'rational' territorial planning intervention for national development, stand in stark contrast to the reality of the strategy's implementation. In this section, we probe the murkiness inherent in the national strategy through a critical analysis of the 'hybrid' roles of city-building actors, the confusing policy status and lack of regulation over the national city-building initiative, and the city builders' uncoordinated and competing visions for national development. In doing so, we shed light on the opaque and speculative approach of the state, which rolls out ambitious urban development programs using public assets with little accountability, consultation, or oversight. Through a discussion of the uses and consequences of the national strategy's ambiguity, we draw on the concept of 'useful fuzziness' (Narins and Agnew, 2020: 809) to examine how the state benefits from maintaining various forms of vagueness surrounding the Villes Nouvelles initiative.

5.1 Ambiguous roles and conflicting responsibilities: 'Hybrid' actors of new city development

Moroccan actors of new city building frequently have a 'hybrid' role (Barthel and Zaki, 2011) and present a complex configuration of interests. Although Al Omrane, CDG Dev, OCP, and their specialized city-building subsidiaries have a corporate institutional status with the imperative to be profitable, their ties to the state and its national development priorities through affiliations with government ministries and the king's administration complicate their corporate

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[10] The remaining five percent is under the ownership of the Banque Centrale Populaire.

mission. By unpacking the hybrid roles and responsibilities of Morocco's city-building actors, we draw attention to the ruling elite's pervasive entanglements in new city building, and to the resulting ambiguity that characterizes the actors' mandates, affiliations, and interests pursued through new city ventures.

The commercial and entrepreneurial goals of the new city projects are stated clearly by actors of city building. In interviews with high-level executives involved in the development of Zenata Eco-City and Benguerir Green City, the new city projects were presented as a way to reposition Morocco on the global stage, and as the strategic capture of an untapped market. The description of Benguerir Green City's objective was, for example, to become a 'hotspot' to attract businesses and investment and as a strategy to 'unlock African potential' (interview, 15 October 2018). Although this has still not been achieved, officials at the Al Omrane Group stated their aspiration for the company to be officially listed on the stock exchange, further outlining their corporate orientation for profitability through their urban development missions (Ballout, 2014).

While actors appear to be private entities that are profit-driven, their role is complicated by the promotion of their 'public' mission for national and social development, a mission that is shaped by their subservience to the state. As explained by a senior official working on new city development at Al Omrane:

> Even if we have the status of a quasi-private company, we are not a purely private company. We are not a public company, we are a group with a balance sheet, with declarations, with turnover, with everything … but profit is not what matters most to us. (interview, 25 August 2016)

Al Omrane's sole purpose is to implement the state's housing strategy, and several interviewees referred to the group's role as the '*bras armé de l'État*', the state's 'striking force', tasked with implementing housing objectives including the creation of social housing. Al Omrane is under the tutelage of the state and counts various ministry heads on its board of directors. As the kingdom's top employer and main contributor to national exports and the GDP, OCP is also a central actor in Morocco's social and economic development (Bono, 2013). Accordingly, actors working for one of OCP's city-building subsidiaries, SADV, also claim that they contribute to

the social responsibility and economic development aspect of the new cities under way. A senior advisor in charge of economic development in Benguerir Green City stated that the goal of the new city is to simultaneously advance OCP's activities while boosting development in the surrounding economically depressed region (interview, 15 October 2018). Although the CDG Dev is not directly under state tutelage, the group brands itself as a key partner of the state in national development ambitions and public interest projects (Barthel, 2010).

The hybrid role of Morocco's city-building actors exemplifies strategies implemented by new African 'investor states' (Pitcher, 2017: 45), who reconcile developmental and market-based policy logics in their mode of entrepreneurial governance by using 'state assets or state companies to realize a return on investment either alone or together with private capital' (Pitcher, 2017: 47). Reflecting common tactics among entrepreneurial African nations (Pitcher, 2017) or other neoliberal authoritarian states in the Gulf or MENA regions (Hanieh, 2018; Koch, 2015), public pension funds and investment-driven parastatals or state-owned enterprises are a key part of public investment vehicles used in Morocco to implement the Villes Nouvelles strategy in the service of national development. As Zenata Eco-City's director of development described: 'we don't have a purely capitalistic mandate, we are supported by a nation, by a public pension fund, a long-term fund that allows us to do this' (interview, 26 August 2016).

The so-called private city-building actors' ties to the state also underscore the interventions of the kingdom's ruling elite and central administration in new city building, which further complicate and obscure the roles of city-building actors and blur the distinction between 'public' and 'private' (Figure 2). This phenomenon is more widely encountered in other centralized regimes in the Gulf, including in the United Arab Emirates, where 'the entrepreneurial city is more than a metaphor because the government is at the same time a public authority and a private enterprise' (Ponzini, 2011: 257; see also Acuto, 2010). In Morocco, although city-building actors are 'directly inspired by the values of economic liberalism, they nevertheless remain under the control of the central authorities, and [are] more specifically subject to royal monitoring and control' (Barthel and Planel, 2010: 182). These 'hybrid' roles are emblematic of the King's particular mode of 'globalized authoritarianism' in which 'Mohammed VI rules via holdings, funds, and specialized state agencies' (Bogaert, 2018: 92). Accordingly,

Barthel and Zaki (2011: 209) refer to Al Omrane and the CDG as 'holdings under Royal constraint'.

[Figure 2: Morocco's primary city-building actors]

With their CEOs nominated by the king, the CDG, OCP, and Al Omrane are close to the King's administration and are subject to his will and priorities. The CDG, for example, responds to the direct interventions of the King on important investment decisions (Oubenal and Zeroual, 2017), and as one of the CDG's subsidiaries, CDG DEV has been directly mandated by the King to develop numerous strategic urban mega-projects with national importance, including Zenata Eco-City (interview, Mohammedia, 2 August 2016). Similarly, the creation of a new Green City in Benguerir is widely portrayed as having benefited from the central administration's influence through Fouad Ali El Himma, one of the King's senior advisors and ex-parliamentary deputy for the region (interview, Marrakech, 21 November 2018). In other instances, the king has personally intervened to enable the appropriation of inhabited land to create a new city, as in the case of Tamansourt (Ballout, 2014: 246). The monarchy's broader symbolic influence can also be seen in the way almost all projects have been 'presented' to the king for his 'approval' and 'blessing', even those ostensibly being developed by the private sector.

The complex configuration of city-building actors, their hybrid 'public' and 'private' role, and their opaque ties to Morocco's centralized administration means that there is ambiguity surrounding where the role of the state starts and stops in new city-building ventures. This echoes Mitchell's (1991: 89) reflections on the 'limits' of the state and the 'permeability of the state-society boundary and the political significance of maintaining it', discussed through similar examples of parastatals or state-private relationships in various sectors including finance. According to Zenata Eco-City's director of development, the permeability or fluidity of the state's 'perimeter' (Mitchell, 1991: 90) is exemplified by their conflicting responsibilities: 'in Zenata, we wear two hats, which is a little bit…schizophrenic. We are asked to be both planners and developers, to both negotiate and coordinate, to be moderators. It's very complicated because we are torn between planning and development. (…) It is not a truly private status' (interview, 26 August 2016).

Furthermore, in Mitchell's (1991: 90) research on state-society boundaries he suggests that 'producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power', which conveys how ambiguity in the roles and responsibilities of city-building actors can serve a strategic purpose. Echoing the notion of 'useful fuzziness' used to describe China's BRI (Narins and Agnew, 2020: 809), the 'hybrid' status of Morocco's city-building actors suggests they have flexibility to strategically play up their 'public' and 'private' identity to their advantage. As entities that are at once inside and outside of the state, 'hybrid' actors benefit from the legitimacy of the state to support their urban interventions, while also having the ability to withdraw themselves from some of its more restrictive exigencies to facilitate their new city-building operations.

As a consequence of the ambiguous roles of actors, there is a lack of transparency and clarity surrounding whose interests are represented through new city development, and how such interests may be best served by fluid state boundaries in urban interventions. With their hybrid roles, actors of new city building are currently accountable to the market and to an increasingly entrepreneurial state, and more specifically, its centralized and non-democratic apparatus. In this configuration, there is little room for the representation and integration of citizen interests, and it is unlikely that democratization will materialize in urban governance despite officially promulgated priorities for the decentralization of public action (Philifert, 2010).

5.2 Bypassing accountability and debate: Rolling out new cities in a legislative void

Beyond the ambiguity that characterizes the hybrid mandate of city-building actors, confusion and uncertainty also stem from the national city-building strategy's undefined policy status, with implications for the development process of new cities and their future management. Although Morocco's city-building strategy is frequently referred to as a 'national policy' in public discourse and by new city-building actors and stakeholders, city-building activities underway across the kingdom are not currently supported by a formal state policy or specific legislation for new city development, despite several attempts to develop regulations.[11] The

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[11] In the early 2000s, plans were laid out by the government to make a new urban planning code by updating the legislative texts adopted in 1992 (Law 12-90 and 25-90). Under this new code, a section specifically on new city construction would have provided an official basis for the new

national Villes Nouvelles strategy originated through a simple ministerial circular, the least restrictive administrative document, and does not outline practical aspects of the national initiative, offering only vague, yet ambitious and far-reaching objectives for new city development (Ballout, 2017). New city projects themselves are not legally defined nor are they currently differentiated from other (smaller) types of real estate developments, which poses significant challenges for their financing and construction (interview, 28 September 2018). Furthermore, the so-called 'national policy' is not overseen or managed by a specific group or board and does not have a designated budget to handle city-building operations on a national scale (Rousseau and Harroud, 2019). Although the Department of Habitat and Urbanism created the 'inter-ministerial committee on new cities' in 2006 to address this issue, the committee is an unofficial entity without a judicial basis to define its composition, status, and mission (Harroud, 2017b). The committee has only met once in 2007 since the introduction of the national city-building initiative, illustrating its lack of influence over the kingdom's city-building strategy.

Without a substantive legislative framework surrounding new city building, the objectives of the Villes Nouvelles initiative are general and non-binding, and there are no regulatory mechanisms ensuring the oversight and evaluation of the overarching strategy or of individual new city projects. As a result, there is no formal system of accountability surrounding the national strategy. In the absence of specific legislation, arrangements for the construction and governance of new cities are made on a case by case basis, often through exemptions and exceptions to standard planning codes, processes, and regulations, an approach normalized through project-based urbanism (Mouloudi, 2014), which compromises transparency surrounding decision-making and the cities' development process.

Morocco's national city-building strategy is consistent with forms of 'bypass urbanization' (Bhattacharya and Sanyal, 2011; Datta, 2015) which, beyond the bypassing of extant material cities and their challenges by creating new 'parallel cities' (Murray, 2017: 31), also reflects the 'bypassing [of] planning instruments and territorial regulations, local actor

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city strategy. However, this initiative was abandoned in 2007 by the Secretariat General of the Ministry of National Territorial Management without public explanation (Harroud, 2017a). In December 2012, a new law on new cities (Law 24-07) was proposed but never adopted (Ballout, 2014).

constellations, and existing modes of everyday life' (Sawyer et al., 2021: 680). Although the official state discourse presents the national city-building strategy as a solution devised after a 'careful diagnosis of urban space' (MHU, 2004: 6), the initiative was preceded by rushed feasibility studies that were limited in scope and did not take into account the needs of citizens, according to several officials at Al Omrane. Several individuals working for Morocco's main city-building entities and within the government condemned what they perceive as an opportunistic logic guiding the construction of new cities nationally, primarily motivated by the 'availability' of large tracts of land that could be easily mobilized by the state rather than an informed vision on territorial development, and the pressing needs of existing cities with which new projects could come into competition for resources (interview, Rabat, 23 August 2016). The national city-building 'policy' was also launched after scarce consultation with relevant ministries, unsurprisingly leading to low governmental support for the Villes Nouvelles initiative's early projects. This lack of consultation with relevant ministries is currently jeopardizing access to fundamental services including healthcare, transportation, and education in several new cities. Despite being used as a basis to justify city-building operations, Morocco's national city-building agenda also contradicts formal recommendations included in the National Territorial Planning Scheme (SNAT), the central document of reference for national territorial planning in Morocco. Produced at the outset of the National Debate on Territorial Planning, the SNAT explicitly cautioned against building new cities to manage Morocco's urbanization (DAT, 2004: 35).

The legislative void surrounding the national city-building initiative has important implications for the future of new cities in Morocco as there is presently no new legislation regulating urban governance in the new cities, even where there is a rapidly growing resident population (interview, 12 September 2018). The troubling lack of attention to the future governance aspect of new city development is typical of the short-sighted, speculative attitudes of states and stakeholders who hastily roll out risky, ambitious plans for mega-projects by mobilizing extensive public assets and funds, yet demonstrate scant consideration and accountability for their long-term impacts, or the needs of future residents (Datta, 2017; Rebentisch et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2021). The unresolved future governance question also suggests that urban governance was not considered as an important variable when diagnosing

urban challenges in Morocco, which were primarily conceptualized as issues of housing and infrastructure to be resolved through investments in real estate (see also Côté-Roy and Moser, 2019). The narrow problematization of Morocco's urban 'crisis' that underpins the new city-building solution bypasses key debates and considerations for urban futures that were frequently brought up during interviews, including democratic governance, the protection of arable lands, and mounting challenges of water scarcity in the kingdom (interview, 24 August 2016).

While the legislative void and undefined nature of Morocco's city-building program has primarily been analyzed as a failure in state regulation and as a manifestation of 'profound dysfunctions in terms of planning and governance of urban spaces in Morocco' (Harroud, 2017b: 1), we suggest that the lack of clarity and transparency of the state's interventions in city-building operation could also stem from 'intentional vagueness' (Narins and Agnew, 2020: 829), sustained by the state to maintain a higher degree of flexibility and control over strategic new city-building projects and its mode of intervention in urban space. In the absence of supporting legislation, the Villes Nouvelles 'policy' more accurately embodies a strategic state discourse and rhetorical device that serves to legitimize the construction of urban mega-developments (Ballout, 2014) in the name of national development, and the modalities of state intervention to make new cities possible (Bhan, 2014; Goldman, 2011; Roy, 2009), including unpopular actions such as population displacement, expropriations, and the conversion of agricultural land in several new city projects (Berriane, 2017).

5.3 Project variation and competing visions for development

As a further consequence of the ambiguous 'hybrid' roles of city-building actors and the strategy's absent regulatory oversight, the great diversity of new city projects underway and the attitudes of their builders further reveal contrasting visions surrounding national development, how it should be achieved through new city-building, and most importantly, who should benefit. By examining the divergent and at times competing visions of city-building actors on national development through new city construction, we discuss benefits of this mode of uncoordinated intervention for the state, while raising concerns about the spatial impacts of an absence of coordination between actors and projects intended to enhance the overall territorial organization of the kingdom.

Moroccan media and city-building actors commonly refer to two generations of new cities under the national strategy. The first generation refers to the government-led projects under the purview of the MHU including Tamansourt (2004), Tamesna (2005), Chrafate (2009), and Lakhyayta (2009), all developed by Al Omrane. The second generation refers to the more recent new city projects by the CDG Dev and OCP's subsidiaries, which were launched mostly after 2010 and feature elaborate urban identities and branding that draw on global planning trends and aesthetics and reflect a more entrepreneurial ethos. In contrast to the first generation, which was government-led and focused on addressing the national housing crisis, second-generation new cities more explicitly attempt to reposition Morocco on the global stage. Taken together, the 19 new cities under construction in Morocco under the banner of the Villes Nouvelles strategy vary greatly in terms of their size, main design features, planning concepts and branding, as well as the primary audiences targeted since the national strategy was launched in 2004. In the context of Morocco's new city-building strategy, we suggest that this diversity reflects a lack of cohesion among city-building projects and actors and their vision for national development.

Planners and government officials interviewed demonstrated the absence of coordination among actors and project visions by frequently questioning and critiquing the visions, motives, and plans of other actors involved in new city development. For example, one senior official working on new city building at Al Omrane questioned the legitimacy of OCP's engagement in urban development by stating: 'We were a little unhappy when we saw that OCP was also starting to build new cities… that is not their job…we figured that in that case we would also go mine for phosphates' (interview, 25 August 2016). This critique was echoed by a number of actors working for Al Omrane and within various governmental ministries, who frequently suggested that unlike Al Omrane, which among other mandates has the mission of providing housing for low-income Moroccans, actors like the CDG Dev or OCP's subsidiaries and their approach to urban development is purely motivated by profit and their own business interests. The vision underpinning projects developed by the CDG Dev and OCP through their subsidiaries was critiqued by new city-building actors from Al Omrane, who perceived that their approach to national development through new cities is disconnected from Morocco's reality and more pressing needs. Referring to the new Benguerir Green City developed by OCP's SADV subsidiary, one senior official stated:

> They're very proud of Benguerir…this new jewel they're building… I don't want to disparage it, but cooling down the environment with sprinkler systems and semi-covered walkways… really, where are we living? We are in Morocco… we don't have the means for this, we don't have petrol or anything. (interview, 25 August 2016)

In another instance, Al Omrane's legitimacy and expertise in terms of new city-building was questioned by a director working for OCP's SADV office in Benguerir, who contrasted the group's subservience to pressing priorities and state politics with OCP's future-oriented vision for national development through Benguerir Green City:

> They [Al Omrane] are subjected to political pressure, and they need to respond to a need for social housing… Tamesna, Tamansourt, they're to ensure the safety and stability of the population like the state wants. With Benguerir we want to see a new city that responds to future needs: sustainability, digital technologies, human development, knowledge. (interview, 22 November 2018)

While all three institutional city-building actors are able to intervene in the urban realm in the name of Morocco's future through their connection to the state and its central administration, divergent visions for urban and national development among these actors exemplifies what Koch (2018: 17) refers to as the 'multiplicity and dynamism to the audiences and the cast of actors seeking to narrate a particular identity or set of priorities for the state', even in political systems where power is centralized. Echoing Koch's observations on authoritarian states in Asia, in Morocco's centralized authoritarian context, institutional city-building actors with ties to the central state nevertheless present divergent and multiple tactics to realize national priorities through new cities, as well as different interpretations of these priorities, which underscores the heterogeneity of the authoritarian state and the need for nuanced analyses of top-down urban development schemes.

The variety of city-building operations driven by institutional actors and the resulting confusion and ambiguity it generates within the national strategy can nevertheless be understood as fulfilling a strategic role for the state. As another manifestation of 'useful fuzziness' (Narins and Agnew, 2020: 809), the uncoordinated interventions of city-building actors in Morocco and the diversity of projects underway, which is sustained by the absence of overarching legislation to regulate and strictly limit the vision, scope, and procedures of the national strategy, also

allows for a degree of flexible experimentation with the new city model on the ground. In this sense, the state may deliberately encourage diverse, uncoordinated actions towards new city-building in the kingdom in order to gain information about the effectiveness of particular methods and projects over others, and as a way to gradually refine the 'official' vision and guidelines underpinning the national city-building strategy. In this sense, the uncoordinated and unregulated interventions of new city-building actors presenting a diversity of approaches to new city building and national development in the kingdom would serve to sustain a 'wait and see approach' towards the regulation of the national strategy, which parallels the logic of the Chinese state towards the BRI's strategically undefined status and boundaries (Narins and Agnew, 2020: 829).

However, the uncoordinated interventions and visions of city-building actors in their implementation of new city projects across the kingdom also raise important questions and concerns about the ability of individual projects to effectively work together to support claims surrounding new city-building as an approach for enhanced territorial organization. Without the support of an overarching regulatory framework and clearly articulated planning policy, and with numerous new city projects being rolled out simultaneously, there are presently no formal mechanisms in place to ensure that new city projects underway, which already face the challenges of attracting residents, investors, and businesses, do not come into competition with each other for these assets. As explained by an ex-employee of Al Omrane who worked as a project director during Tamesna's inception, despite the prevalent official discourse on the national city-building strategy associating the initiative with broader objectives of rational territorial planning for the kingdom, new cities were implemented as sectoral projects rather than by engaging in necessary coordinated action at the national scale (interview, Tamesna, 28 September 2018). While this approach can be understood as a strategic attempt by the state to foster productive forms of urban experimentation, the risks and consequences of the failure of these ambitious urban experiments are primarily borne by citizens.

6. Conclusion

Despite the shortcomings and setbacks of Morocco's initial new city experiments, which planners are only now slowly addressing (Harroud, 2017a), plans for new cities continue to be

rolled out as a key strategy for national development. Most recently, the Chinese-financed Tanger-Tech city, launched in 2019, is a partnership between the China Construction and Communication Company (CCCC) and the Moroccan *Société d'Aménagement de Tanger Tech* (SATT). More importantly, and despite mounting disillusionment among city-building actors and conflicting assessments of the overall success and benefits of the new cities, the Villes Nouvelles strategy is currently employed to promote Morocco's new city-building expertise beyond the kingdom's frontiers and to foster partnerships for the construction of new cities in Africa (authors, forthcoming). There is a pressing need to critically analyze the ongoing commitment to the new city approach to development in Morocco, how the national Villes Nouvelles strategy is transforming Morocco's urban landscape, and according to whose vision and priorities. This article is a contribution towards addressing these questions.

This article provides an overview of Morocco's Villes Nouvelles strategy, its main actors, drivers, and projects. It is the first attempt to identify, characterize, and map all new cities underway across the kingdom, and provides insight into the kingdom's broad city-building activities and their diverse materializations. As one of the most active city-building countries in the world, Morocco's new city experiments offer insights into common expressions of the global new city-building trend, while pointing out specificities of the kingdom's strategy and the unique local forces shaping new city building. In this article, we demonstrate that, despite being framed as a cohesive national policy, Morocco's Villes Nouvelles strategy is characterized by inherent forms of ambiguity, messiness, and confusion, which typifies Mohammed VI's mode of authoritarian rule and opaque state interventions in ambitious urban schemes.

Our analysis makes three main contributions to expanding research on the global city-building phenomenon and state-driven urban megaprojects, which are relevant beyond the Moroccan context. First, we draw attention to new proportions of new city building and a new form of engagement with the new city model of development, rolled out as part of a formal state-led development strategy at the national scale. The Moroccan case underscores the seductive power surrounding new cities that are employed as a cure-all for a range of urban challenges (Côté-Roy and Moser, 2019; Watson, 2014), and the consequences of the increased scale and scope of ambitions underpinning the growing commitment to this mode of planning, despite

limited evidence of its success as a strategy of development elsewhere (Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021).

Second, the Moroccan context demonstrates the relevance of 'unpacking the state' (Van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018: 1237) to identify new forms of authority and state power in urban mega-projects, as well as the challenges of delimiting the boundaries of the state's interior and exterior (Mitchell, 1991) through institutional actors with ambiguous 'hybrid' roles and configurations. The hybrid roles of Morocco's new city-building actors suggest that closer attention needs to be paid to who these actors are, and how they can be analyzed beyond the 'public-private' dichotomy and the overly general 'public-private-partnership' to account for their complex ties to a far-reaching central state. The new roles of city-building actors in Morocco also raise troubling questions about accountability in city-building operations and future governance that will require attention in future research as more projects materialize.

Third, and related to the previous point, our article provides insight into top-down master-planned city-building operations, often conceptualized as ultra-planned and controlled spatial interventions, by underscoring the place of disorder and ambiguity in state-driven plans, including in an authoritarian context where power is centralized. Crucially, we demonstrate that this ambiguity is maintained by the state and its modes of intervention in urban space, and emphasize the risks and implications of an absence of coordination and oversight in urban development strategies deployed at a national scale.

Despite the challenges of accessing actors, sites, and information when conducting research in authoritarian or non-democratic contexts (Koch, 2013), more research on state-generated ambiguity and 'useful fuzziness' (Narins and Agnew, 2020), with an attention to the actors who benefit from forms of vagueness in state plans will shed light on the various ways ambiguity can serve strategic purposes. We suggest that the themes explored in relation to Morocco's national initiative are relevant beyond the context of Morocco, particularly in comparative research on other countries that have launched nation-wide city-building, and more broadly with other state-driven new city-building programs in countries with strong centralized or authoritarian states.

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