

“Fast urban model-making”: Constructing Moroccan urban expertise through Zenata Eco-City

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Abstract

This paper explores Morocco’s ambitions to become a city-building “expert” in Africa through Zenata Eco-City, a project being built near Casablanca as part of Morocco’s national new city-building strategy. Despite being in early stages of construction, Zenata’s builders enthusiastically promote the future city as an urban model for Africa and have begun to export it long before the project’s completion. Building on urban policy mobilities literature and research on emergent new city models, we examine Zenata as an example of “fast model-making”, and analyze how authority is constructed for a model based on ideas rather than on a completed city. We explore the process of policy research and “learning” used to create and legitimize the model and investigate how promotional strategies to export it produce narratives about the city’s success and the expertise of its developers. We raise concerns about Zenata’s fast model and the circulation of expertise without content.

Keywords: policy mobilities; urban models; fast urbanism; new cities; Morocco

Introduction

Since Mohammed VI’s accession to the throne in 1999, initiatives to boost Morocco’s economic competitiveness have largely been concentrated in the kingdom’s cities, viewed as key spaces of intervention in the global race to attract foreign direct investment (Kanai & Kutz, 2011; Zemni & Bogaert, 2011). Actions to improve Morocco’s cities have increasingly taken the form of large-scale “prestige” urban mega-projects such as tourism infrastructure, commercial developments, new marinas (Barthel & Planel, 2010), and, more recently, new cities built from scratch. Since 2004, the Kingdom of Morocco has been engaged in vast new city-building activities, including through the ambitious state-led “Villes Nouvelles” (new cities) strategy, introduced to address challenges related to rapid urbanization, housing shortages, and to support economic and industrial development across the country. With 19 new city projects currently underway, Morocco is among the most active countries in the world building new cities from scratch after China (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2022).

Morocco’s new city-building is part of a global trend in which over 150 wholly new cities have been erected in 40 countries since the late 1990s, primarily as strategies to “leapfrog” national development and bolster economic growth (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021). Conceptualized

as a form of “fast urbanism”, new master-planned “instant” cities embody ambitions for “fast” development through expedited construction processes and modes of regulation and are legitimized as rapid fixes to contemporary urban crises (Datta, 2017). Globally, the proliferation of these new city projects is increasingly facilitated by emergent South-South networks of urban expertise and the rise of (new) city models and ideas actively circulated by policy actors to policymakers and political elites in emerging economies (Moser, 2019).

In the context of the rapidly expanding new city-building trend across African countries (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019; Van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018; Watson, 2014), and Morocco’s current economic and diplomatic pivot to Africa (Moisseron & Daguzan, 2017; Royaume du Maroc, 2015), the kingdom has been progressively asserting its expertise in new city building on the continent by establishing partnerships to construct new cities in various African states. More recently, national institutional city-building actors have explicitly expressed ambitions for Morocco to become a new city-building “leader” and urban “innovator” on the continent through the decision to fashion Zenata Eco-City as a model for African sustainable urban development.

Launched in 2006 as part of Morocco’s national city-building strategy (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2022), Zenata Eco-City is a wholly new city presently under construction in the greater Casablanca area. Officially declared a “public utility project” by royal decree in 2006 (SAZ, 2013), the new city embodies Morocco’s ambitions for national development, and is part of broader state-led initiatives to reposition the kingdom as a rising economic actor on the global stage and on the African continent. Despite being in the early stages of construction, Zenata’s developers claim to have “cracked the code” of new city development and are actively promoting the project as an exportable model.

This paper investigates the promotion of Morocco’s city-building expertise, and the kingdom’s participation in broader networks of urban knowledge exchanges through a critical analysis of Zenata Eco-City. While it analyses the case of a new eco-city, the focus of this paper is not specifically on eco-urbanism and the validity of the new city’s “eco” credentials, but rather on Zenata’s unique construction as a successful and replicable urban model for export long before the city is built. Drawing on and contributing to urban policy mobilities literature and expanding research on the global city-building trend and the rise of new city models, this paper suggests that the case of Zenata represents an example of what we term “fast urban model-making”, in which the new city’s official role as an exportable model is detached from the city’s

(un)built reality. Unlike other urban models circulating globally that are preceded by actually existing “originary” cities (Ong, 2011, p. 14) and widely acknowledged “success stories” on their urban transformation or policies (Kennedy, 2016; McCann, 2013), the Zenata Eco-City model is being developed, packaged, and circulated well before substantial progress has been made on the project. We suggest Zenata represents new trends in the constitution and circulation of urban expertise and models that are relevant beyond the context of eco-cities, and which are shaping urban futures in the Global South.

This analysis is informed by site visits to the new city and its development offices, as well as nine semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author (2016, 2018) with elite actors involved in the city’s development. The actors interviewed, including the city’s CEO, heads of marketing, financing partners, urban planners, and architects, represent the agents engaged in forms of knowledge exchanges, policy learning, and idea circulations supporting the assemblage of Zenata as an exportable model. We also draw on the textual analysis of official documentation developed by Zenata’s planning agency, including websites¹ and social media publications, press releases, and public relations documents, as well as marketing and advertising campaigns, from which we “draw out aims, emphasis, intentions, and themes” (Temenos & Ward, 2018, p. 72) relating to Zenata’s promoted vision and modeling ambitions. We understand these materials as the “representational terrain” through which Zenata and its urban model are “being actualized, visualized and can be touched and felt *in the absence* of any substantive material city” (Jazeel, 2015, p. 28).

This paper critically analyzes *how* Zenata is constructed as an urban model promoting Moroccan city-building expertise in a way that can be characterized as leapfrogging over the city’s implementation. In doing so, we draw attention to how legitimacy and authority are constructed for a “fast” urban model developed without a city. First, we provide an overview of scholarship on the global circulation of urban models and emergent research on rising nodes in the transnational circulation of new city plans to situate Zenata as an example of “fast model-making”. Second, we contextualize the ambition to develop Zenata into an urban model for Africa as a strategic venture that aligns with the kingdom’s politico-economic interests on the African continent. Third, we explore the unique process through which Zenata is conceived and

¹ Since writing this manuscript, the new city’s official website, which informs a part of this analysis, has been taken down and replaced by a new version.

legitimized as an urban model well ahead of the city's completion. We retrace the urban antecedents and extensive process of policy research and "learning" (Temenos & McCann, 2012) that Zenata's developers present as legitimation for their urban model, and we analyze how the new model is being packaged for circulation through "urban policy artifacts" (Pow, 2014, p. 289) that construct the project's success and validate the "expertise" of its developers. Fourth, we reflect on the implications and risks of Zenata's fast model-making strategy and the circulation of expertise without content. We conclude by raising further questions surrounding the fate of Zenata's fast model, which we suggest was created "for Africa, by Africa" in the context of global circulations of urban policy and demonstrate that this is not an isolated case of fast model-making

Models in motion: Mobile policies, urban modelling, and emergent new city models

Practices of urban modeling, the circulation of city models, and instances of urban emulation have been explored through the expansive urban policy mobilities and assemblages literature in urban studies and geography. This growing body of research focuses on how, why, and with what effects urban policies, models, and planning ideas are mobilized globally and (re)shaped through various local and international actors and instances of circulation (McCann, 2011a). Among analyses of contemporary urban policy circulation, scholars have outlined how a small subset of cities globally acquire a model status and become widely perceived as successful examples of urban development that are emulated and adapted in a variety of contexts (González, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010). Cities such as Bilbao, Barcelona (González, 2011), and Vancouver (McCann, 2008, 2013) have been materially and discursively constructed as "models of best practice in urban development" (Kennedy, 2016, p. 103), and their urban innovations, detached from the original city and packaged into a set of best practices and recommendations, are widely circulated and exported to aspiring cities around the world (Ong, 2011).

Fueled by "fast policy" and the high demand for "best practices" and "policies that work" among cities competing for investment (Peck & Theodore, 2015), cities discursively constructed as models represent key resources for policymaking and urban development, whereby the process of urban modeling "sets a symbolic watermark of urban aspirations on the one hand, and provides achievable blueprints for urban renovations on the other" (Ong, 2011, p. 14). The

process by which some cities become constructed as desirable and achievable urban antecedents or models and circulate internationally is eminently political and highly uneven (Bunnell, 2015; McCann, 2013), favoring cities, historically located in the Global North, which have the resources to be influential within transnational networks of urban policy knowledge (McCann, 2013). By embodying purportedly “successful” forms of urban interventions, urban models have an “ordering capacity” (Temenos & McCann, 2012, p. 1399) that effectively situate cities within a “global matrix of comparisons” (McCann, Roy, & Ward, 2013, p. 582), forming a hierarchy between cities that are “exporters” of urban policy and ideas and those that are “importers” (Khirfan, Momani, & Jaffer, 2013; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Robinson, 2006).

In recent years, researchers have unsettled longstanding assumptions on the “North-South” directionality of urban policy exchanges within urban studies literature by outlining the growing importance of “South-South” policy circulations, and the emergence of influential new centers of urban innovation beyond Euro-America (Bunnell, 2015; Harrison, 2015; Moser, 2019). Growing attention has been devoted to new points of reference for urban development originating in emerging economies, viewed as more politically aligned and achievable templates for rapidly urbanizing regions of the Global South (Bunnell, 2015; McCann et al., 2013; Pow, 2014). For example, significant attention has been devoted to the “ascendancy of Asian powerhouses, from the Gulf States to India and China” (McCann et al., 2013, p. 585) and to their circulation of urban models within and beyond Asia. Among these, much attention has been devoted to analyzing the construction of the “self-stylized” Singapore model (Pow, 2014, p. 288) and its various delineations and interpretations (Shatkin, 2014), and to the actors, activities, and investments involved in the commodification, packaging, and dissemination of the city-state’s urban (and other) expertise through a lucrative consulting industry (Chua, 2011).

More recently, burgeoning scholarship on the global new master-planned city-building trend has similarly highlighted how a handful of countries not historically considered as points of reference for urban planning innovation are involved in new city-building ventures, and how the builders of these projects are positioning themselves as “leaders” in city development. Saudi Arabia has, for example, actively promoted its expertise in master-planned city building based on its development of four new “economic” cities (Moser, 2019) while Palestine is promoting the new city of Rawabi as a new model for urban residential development and entrepreneurship to be replicated across the West Bank (Tayeb, 2019). In response both to real environmental priorities

and competitive pressure to match policy innovations and trends worldwide (McCann, 2017), a number of new city projects, like Zenata, are more specifically branded as models of “sustainable” urban development. While the conceptual roots of the “eco-city” are in the Global North (Rapoport, 2014), ambitious “eco-city” models increasingly originate from non-Western contexts (Keeton, 2011). For instance, South Korea has invested in the export of a new “ubiquitous-eco-city” model based on Songdo and other urban mega-developments (Park, Shin, & Kang, 2020), while in the UAE, the new city of Masdar was ambitiously heralded as a “model of sustainability and the blueprint for the city of the future” (Cugurullo, 2013, p. 28). A number of these new eco-city projects are also being developed as prototypes with ambitions of mass-replication if the original development is successful. The Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City project was envisioned as a template for the hundreds of planned new towns in China (Keeton, 2011), while Lavasa, a failed private master-planned “eco-city” in India was also initially intended to become a “replicable model” for urban development in India and beyond (Parikh, 2015).

The ambition to fashion Zenata into a model for export exemplifies trends in rising South-South networks of urban expertise and the emergence of new nodes for the circulation of new city ideas, including proliferating new “eco-city” models. It also draws attention to an uncommon case of an urban model developed by an African nation specifically for the African market. However, the construction of Zenata’s model is particularly unique because it disrupts the expected steps and sequencing involved in the development and circulation of urban models globally. Scholars of policy mobilities emphasize that urban models are relational constructions, and a city’s ability to become a model is dependent upon external appreciation and validation of its urban innovations and success (Hoffmann, 2011; Kennedy, 2016; McCann et al., 2013). As Hoffmann (2011) argues, “urban modeling requires both that a model exists – that is, that a place presents itself as a model – and that other places turn to this site as an example to follow” (p.57). As a “self-stylized” (Pow, 2014, p. 288) urban model without an existing originary city, preemptively developed and packaged for circulation ahead of the new city’s construction, we suggest that the Zenata Eco-City model represents an example of fast model-making, which we conceptualize as one more expression of trends in “fast urbanism” fueling new master-planned city development in the Global South (Datta, 2017).

Zenata’s national goals and global modeling ambitions

Zenata Eco-City is one of Morocco’s largest and most high-profile new city ventures currently under development as part of the national Villes Nouvelles strategy. Upon completion, the new city is to have 300,000 residents and will span 18.3 square kilometers along the Atlantic coast near the established city of Mohammedia in the greater Casablanca area. The project is overseen by the privately managed CDG Développement Holding (CDG Dev), through the SAZ (*Société d’Aménagement Zenata*) development company, an ad hoc subsidiary created in 2006 to manage the new city’s development, and is financed through a combination of national and international funds including from the French Development Agency (AFD), the Bank of European Investment (BEI), and the European Union (EU).

Like other new city projects underway in Morocco, Zenata Eco-City was envisioned to provide a solution to mounting urban challenges. Regionally, the new city is meant to resolve the persistent socio-economic imbalance between the Eastern and Western part of the greater Casablanca area (AUC, 2015), and to cater to the needs of Morocco’s expanding middle class with affordable housing options. Conceptualized and branded as an “eco-city”, the Zenata project is emerging alongside similarly branded flagship projects built from scratch that have captured international media attention in the last decade. Unlike a majority of these large-scale contemporary eco-cities (Rapoport, 2014), Zenata does not promote a “smart” and tech-driven approach to the achievement of sustainability goals (Joss & Molella, 2013), nor is it intended as an experimental site for the development of innovative “clean-tech” (Cugurullo, 2016). While the new city’s vision has been enthusiastically referred to as a “small revolution in Morocco” by its developers (Zenata’s CEO interviewed in Kadiri, 2017), plans for Zenata do not reflect the ambitions of other eco-city projects to transcend global standards of ecological urbanism, exemplified by Masdar’s initial aspiration to create the world’s first zero-carbon city (Cugurullo & Ponzini, 2018).

Promoted as a “land of opportunities”, Zenata markets itself as a modern and dynamic service-based city developed on a human scale, rooted in the three pillars of sustainable development (SAZ, 2013). Based on the concept of the “bioclimatic city”, the new city’s “ecological” vision rests on the familiar objective of creating a “contemporary city in harmony with its natural environment” (AUC, 2015, p.14), which has shaped several generations of eco-cities worldwide (Roseland, 1997). The city’s approved masterplan employs “wind corridors” to

naturally cool the city down, as well as natural irrigation processes using water retention basins to sustain the city's large park networks. The organization of socio-economically mixed neighborhoods into compact autonomous "living units" with all necessary amenities, and the 44-kilometer network of pedestrian and biking paths aim to reduce car use within the city (AUC, 2015). With the central objective of creating 100,000 jobs onsite and boosting the greater Casablanca region's status as a global metropolis and competitive hub of economic activity, Zenata aligns with the thesis of ecological modernization underpinning most contemporary eco-city projects that "work within, rather than challenge, growth-oriented models of urban development" (Rapoport, 2014, pp. 141).

Officially launched in 2006, construction started in 2012 (SAZ, 2013), and during site visits conducted in 2016 and 2018, large tracts of land were still under acquisition² and the new city's landscape was still dominated by empty building sites³. While construction has progressed since 2018, particularly with the launch of real estate developments by private partners, and although the city has about 300 households, the project is still very much under development and is far from being a fully functioning city, according to its own developers.

Although the city is still under construction, in interviews, media statements, and official and promotional documentation, Zenata's builders refer to the new city as an "innovative eco-city model" (SAZ, 2013, p. 12), an "adaptable model for countries of the South" (SAZ, n.d.), and an "innovative sustainable city model for Africa" (Aujourd'hui le Maroc, 2016). During an interview, a senior executive member of the SAZ development company further clarified the new city project's ambitions: "We want to make Zenata an exportable model for Africa, for similar countries and contexts" (interview, August 2016). While Zenata's CEO specified during interviews that he wants to "ensure that the eco-city project is a project with an international positioning and visibility" (interview, August 2016), objectives for the circulation of the Zenata

² Enabled through the project's public interest status, expropriations started in 2008 and are ongoing. Over 20 informal housing settlements will be cleared, and onsite relocation is planned for 50,000 residents from these settlements (SAZ, 2013).

³ In 2018, built components of the city included: the primary motorway access and large arteries of the city's road network, the brand-new Ikea store, phase 1 of the Al Mansour-Zenata neighbourhood for informal resident relocation, and main sewerage, electricity, and drinking water networks.

Eco-City model are largely focused on the African continent, a strategic market into which Morocco has been expanding its investments and interests over the past two decades.

Zenata as model: A strategic venture for Morocco

Zenata's promotion as an urban model for Africa and the ambitions for its circulation on the continent should be interpreted as an entrepreneurial and politically strategic venture, contextualized in Morocco's recent pivot to Africa. Under King Mohammed VI's leadership the Moroccan state has strengthened political and economic ties with the rest of the continent (Moisseron & Daguzan, 2017; Royaume du Maroc, 2015), promoting policies that will foster new economic partnerships, and new means of cooperation with African nations (Royaume du Maroc, 2017). With the ambition of becoming a major investor on the African continent, the kingdom has been lobbying several African monetary organizations, resulting in its recent acceptance into the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2017, and a successful reintegration into the African Union the same year (Moisseron & Daguzan, 2017). Increased engagement on the continent is also exemplified through the kingdom's religious diplomacy across several Muslim African states (Baylocq & Hlaoua, 2016), and forms of development assistance and infrastructure gifts extended to African nations, such as Tanzania's new football stadium (Doba, 2017) and the construction or refurbishment of mosques in Mali, Guinea, Senegal, and Benin (Baylocq & Hlaoua, 2016; Moisseron & Daguzan, 2017).

Over the past several years, the kingdom has also provided urban development assistance to a number of African states engaged in urban revitalization and new city construction. Promoting Morocco's city-building expertise, several private and state-affiliated urban development and real estate companies including Zenata's parent company, CDG Dev, have expanded their activities to emerging African markets and are presently involved in a number of urban development ventures beyond Morocco. In support of the kingdom's attempt to claim a more prominent role on the African continent, Morocco has been circulating urban development expertise and establishing partnerships for the construction of new cities in Africa, including in Diamniadio (Senegal) and Akwaba City (Ivory Coast), where Moroccan company Alliances has contracts to build significant portions of the planned projects (Médias24, 2014; Tali, 2014). King Mohammed VI also announced Morocco's involvement in the construction of Ramciel, South Sudan's new master-planned capital, through state-affiliated developer Al Omrane, a central

institutional actor responsible for building new cities in the kingdom (Global Construction Review, 2017).

Supporting the idea that there is “an intrinsic politics to the policy transfer process, which is rarely, if ever, just about transferring policy knowledge and technology from A to B” (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 169), several actors involved in the Zenata project interviewed emphasized that the new city’s modelling ambitions are intrinsically motivated by and wholly reflect King Mohammed VI’s and the Moroccan state’s diplomatic cooperation policy based on strengthening ties in Africa. Quoted in a recent feature article on Zenata in the French magazine *Le Monde*, Zenata’s CEO mentioned: “we are particularly committed to help African countries, our brother countries, to build the sustainable cities of tomorrow with the urban toolkit we have created” (Kadiri, 2017). Beyond the strategic alignment with Morocco’s diplomacy on the continent, Zenata’s developers also view the creation and circulation of a new urban model in Africa as a business opportunity that could position Morocco as a leading urban innovator in the region. More specifically, Zenata’s developers hope that their urban model will fill a void in the market for urban policy ideas by introducing a model that is specifically tailored to the financial and technical context and resources of emerging African economies by proposing a purportedly more achievable urban development option than globally circulating models originating from countries with strong economies. A senior executive member of the SAZ development company specifies the market strategy for Zenata’s model: “we are positioning ourselves as a model for emerging economies. Singapore is a model for developed countries... for rich countries. I think there is an opportunity to grab.” (interview, August 2016)

Through the creation of a new urban model intended for African economies, Zenata’s developers are strategically capitalizing on the existence of pre-constituted markets for particular urban ideas to increase the model’s appeal and to profitably mobilize it (Peck & Theodore, 2010). The idea for Zenata’s model in this sense reflects the globalization of sustainable urban development ideals and rising demand for “green” and “eco” urban solutions and plans worldwide (Rapoport, 2015), while also responding to the growing popularity of ex nihilo city development across the African continent in recent years, which is increasingly normalized as a strategy of development (Watson, 2014). Promoted as urban expertise effectively developed for Africa by Africa, the Zenata Eco-City model also presents a seductive proposition for increased urban knowledge exchanges and urban policy circulations among African nations in an era of

reinvigorated Pan-African nationalism and widespread narratives on Africa's rise (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019).

Making a model before a city: Unpacking Zenata's model-making strategies

The unconventional fashioning of Zenata into an urban model before the city is built bypasses the stage of implementation and experimentation of the model's core city-building principles and ideas and raises questions surrounding how Zenata's urban model is envisioned, how it was developed, and how legitimacy and authority are constructed for an urban model without a city. In this section, we turn to these questions, by investigating the process of active policy research involved in the making of the Zenata Eco-City model, and the strategies deployed to package the model for circulation.

Zenata Eco-City's model as a "veritable invention" and policy learning as legitimation

In order to develop plans and a vision for the new city, Zenata's developers carried out a process of active policy "research", which was key in paving the way for the construction of the new city as a model. Zenata's model in this sense represents a "veritable invention", defined by McCann (2011b) as "purposive assemblages of parts of here and elsewhere that both shape and serve certain purposes at certain times" (p. 145). Adopting the role of "policy entrepreneurs" (McCann, 2008, p. 9), Zenata's developers spent several years engaging with international policy actors, searching global policy landscapes for best practices and inspiring urban models and innovations in sustainable urban design (McCann, 2013; Peck & Tickell, 2002) to inform the project's concept and plans. Beyond representing a "practical" resource (Temenos & McCann, 2012) for the assemblage of Zenata's plans and urban vision, we suggest that the forms of policy research, and more specifically the process and outcomes of policy "learning" (McFarlane, 2011; Temenos & McCann, 2012), are employed as a "political" resource by Zenata's developers to build legitimacy for the new city's promoted model in the absence of evidence and experience-based narratives about the city's success.

The policy research process behind Zenata's plan and model reflects the complex circulation of urban ideas through multiple directionalities that transcend a North-South binary and bring together a plurality of increasingly dispersed reference points globally, through both institutional and serendipitous connections and actors. Among the various forms of policy

research carried out (Table 1), Zenata’s developers engaged in extensive policy tourism (González, 2011), attending numerous organized urban study tours to draw inspiration and gather information on other cities’ successes and best practices in areas of relevance to Zenata’s own urban vision. Beyond visits to older generations of new cities, including several postwar new towns in England and France, Zenata’s developers visited several European and Scandinavian cities and eco-neighborhoods to gain insights into technical planning aspects including water and waste management and landscape design.

The organization of these study tours, and the subsequent creation of formal knowledge-sharing partnerships with European organizations, was significantly shaped by the city’s primary financing partner, the French Development Agency (AFD), which represents an important “informational infrastructure” that “mediates urban policy mobilities and constructs global spaces of comparison and commensurability” (McCann, 2011a, p. 119). Beyond financing development initiatives aligned with the agency’s priorities, the AFD’s mission is to “promote exchanges of experience and expertise on themes such as sustainable cities, mobility, and eco-neighborhoods” (interview, November 2018), which it fulfilled by connecting Zenata’s developers to their own network of international, mostly European/French experts⁴.

[**Table 1.** Forms of policy research carried out to assemble the Zenata Eco-City project and model]

The sites that Zenata’s developers visited also reflect the rise in importance of South-South networks of policy circulation documented in scholarship, in which Asian cities in particular were presented as influential antecedents guiding the project’s strategic vision and modeling ambitions. While Zenata’s developers studied Singapore as an inspirational case of an established “living eco-city” and employed it as a useful reference for Zenata’s similar ambitions to export their urban model, they also singled out Malaysia’s ambitious urban mega-developments as a more relatable urban antecedent for their own new city plans. Viewed as a successful example of urban development pioneered by an emerging economy, Zenata’s

⁴ The AFD’s role in Zenata’s development also reflects the path dependency of some urban policy flows and the enduring importance of ties with France, which was similarly engaged in new city development in Morocco during the protectorate (1912-1956).

developers were particularly interested in Iskandar Malaysia's Medini City, a new mega-development within the Iskandar Special Economic Zone that includes similar activity clusters as those envisioned for Zenata. Following study tours in the region, Zenata's developers struck a formal knowledge-sharing partnership with the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA), the federal agency developing Iskandar Malaysia, in 2016.

Zenata's developers also carried out policy research activities with the involvement of global urban planning and business consultancies. Sometimes referred to as members of the global intelligence corps (GIC), these international consulting firms are increasingly viewed as important agents of policy circulation worldwide (Rapoport, 2015), and key forces shaping urban agendas and development plans, including through the promotion of new city building as a development strategy (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019; Watson, 2014). Zenata's developers sought out the expertise of global firms including the Boston Consulting Group, Laurent Berger, Landor, CBRE Group, and McKinsey and Company, many of which are involved in other new master-planned city ventures worldwide (Bunnell & Das, 2010; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019), to help benchmark Zenata's ambitions as a new city and further define the city's concept, vision, and brand.

Several individuals affiliated with global consultancies or urban-focused foundations also played more direct and determining roles in the development of Zenata and its early ambitions to become an urban model. Jan Dictus of GOJA consulting is one such global urban expert who was often mentioned in interviews for his pivotal role in the development of Zenata's "eco" planning concept and urban model. Now an official advisor for Zenata, Dictus became involved in the venture following an unplanned encounter with Zenata's CEO at the EcoCity World Summit in Nantes (France) in 2013, attended by Zenata's developers as part of their policy research strategy. The EcoCity Summit is an example of a "mobility event" (Clarke, 2012, p. 27) that gathers international experts, thinkers, and policy actors and functions as a powerful zone of seduction and node through which particular urban visions and plans are circulated (Cook & Ward, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2012; Moser, 2019). In recounting the deciding meeting, Zenata's CEO explained that his interaction with Dictus at the conference profoundly shaped the ambitions and vision for Zenata, which he subsequently officially began to conceptualize and promote as an "eco-city". This encounter also reflects the importance of spontaneous interactions enabled by such conference spaces and "situations" (McCann & Ward, 2012b, 329) of policy

circulation, which play a central role in the mobilization of particular planning knowledge and ideas (McCann, 2011a; McCann & Ward, 2012a).

Echoing broader findings within urban policy mobilities scholarship, the policy research process behind the development of the Zenata Eco-City project and model reflect the growing prevalence of commodified urban policy and knowledge exchanges and the role of international policy actors and external “expertise” in shaping local urban policies and plans (McCann, 2011a; Peck & Theodore, 2010). However, it is important to consider how this reliance on international expertise is (re)interpreted by Zenata’s developers and used to legitimize Zenata as a model, in a way that foregrounds the development of Moroccan expertise obtained through the work of policy learning.

Despite being primarily on the “receiving end” of international expertise and ideas from elsewhere through this process of policy research, actors involved in Zenata’s development represent themselves as “active” importers of urban knowledge, with a high degree of authority over the policy research process and its desired outcomes (Khirfan et al., 2013). For example, during an interview, Zenata’s CEO emphasized their agency and influence in the city’s development by stating: “you need to be wary of consultants who come with ready-made models and absolutely want to impose them” (interview, August 2016). Engaged in what they view as a form of “import-led transfer”, where “it is the indigenous acquiring agents who initiate knowledge transfer” and “identify the problem and the relevant knowledge that should be acquired according to their own needs” (Khirfan et al., 2013, p. 3), Zenata’s developers represent their engagement in policy research and the seeking out of external international knowledge as a process leading to the development of domestic urban expertise:

On projects like this one, we are learning, and if we add up international trips and work with international experts, the know-how is mostly located internationally. But on the other hand, there is a real transfer of skills. I joined the team nine years ago when there were six of us. Today we are more than 50, and these 50 people have really acquired experience through this contact with multiple experts and multiple studies, and today I think that Zenata has clearly developed an expertise on urbanism and urban strategy. (SAZ senior executive, interview, August 2016)

Beyond representing a practical resource that was used to develop Zenata’s plan and vision, the policy research process and the role of Zenata’s developers as active “policy entrepreneurs”, are

mobilized in boosterist narratives surrounding Zenata's model. Through such discourses, it is more specifically the policy "learning" process understood as including forms of knowledge mobilization and the "translation", adaptation, and "embedding" of ideas from elsewhere (Cook & Ward, 2012; McFarlane, 2011; Temenos & McCann, 2012) that is used to construct legitimacy for the new city model, which is developed and circulated before the city's material existence. As explained by one member of the city's development team:

Today we have about 10 or 12 years of field expertise, of reflections that were conducted with experts but that were shaped internally, that were absorbed, that were really reappropriated, and we wanted to make them into a coherent whole. We weren't just at the mercy of consultants that worked with the SAZ. And today we have come up with a model that is completely coherent and makes sense for the challenges that we identified. (interview, September 2018)

This narrative, reflected in promotional documentation and echoed by other members interviewed at the SAZ development company, evokes policy *learning* rather than grounded experimentation as a basis for the "expertise" of Zenata's developers, and the relevance of their new innovative urban model, validated through years of policy research and engagement with globally circulating "best practices".

Packaging the Zenata model for circulation: Enactments of expertise and self-constructed narratives of success

Similar to McCann's (2013) observations about the boosterist discourses surrounding Vancouver's policy model, Zenata's developers construct legitimacy for the new eco-city model by presenting it as "an innovative design hybrid" combining various antecedents and "parts of elsewhere" in a novel assemblage presented as "a competitive advantage they can mobilize across wider geographic fields" (p.13-14). This is particularly evident in the way Zenata's developers position and promote the project as the first eco-city model for African cities, inspired by international urban development norms and trends, but specifically adapted to the context of emerging economies (Kadiri, 2017). Unlike Vancouver's model however, in the context of Zenata Eco-City, "parts of elsewhere" are yet to be successfully assembled into a material construction (i.e. a city), but have already been (re)made into another abstraction, an urban model, intended for broader circulation.

In order to enable its circulation ahead of the new city's construction, the Zenata Eco-City model has been "packaged" as an "assemblage of policy artifacts" (Pow, 2014, p. 287) embodied by two primary components: Zenata's "eco-city reference framework" (*référentiel éco-cité*) and the "eco-city label" (ECL) certification. These two components represent the essence of the Zenata model and the main ways in which the new city's model-making ambitions are "enacted and materialized" (Pow, 2014, p. 287) in the absence of a built city to showcase Zenata's touted urban innovations. Zenata's eco-city reference framework is a set of planning, development, and management principles that together make up the vision for the project and represent the foundation of the new city's purported model⁵. This vision is synthesized through six core values of sustainable development imagined by Zenata's builders: nature, proximity, optimization, flexibility, co-development, and diversity (SAZ, 2017), which provide "an easily digestible appetizer for potential emulators elsewhere" (McCann, 2013, p. 12). More specifically, the project's website defines Zenata's eco-city reference framework as "a concrete and measurable action plan that allows the steering of the city according to selected indicators throughout the city's life cycle, from planning to the welcoming of first residents" (SAZ, n.d.). The reference framework is organized around three pillars, 15 themes, over 60 objectives, and more than 150 indicators, which function as an adaptable urban toolkit for eco-city development and facilitate the circulation of Zenata's model by reducing the city to a set of legible, measurable, comparable, and therefore more easily replicable principles and ideas (Temenos & McCann, 2012). This intention was echoed during conversations on Zenata's model with the city's CEO: "Do we want to export it? Is it global? Yes. But to give it a global reality we need to standardize it" (interview, August 2016).

In addition to the eco-city reference framework, the Zenata model is given legibility through the development of a new urban planning environmental certification. The HQE-Eco-City Label (ECL) is a new certification and urban development norm for sustainable construction that was jointly developed by the SAZ development company, and French certification agency Cerway, operator of HQE (High Environmental Quality) certification products (<https://www.behqe.com/cerway>). The new ECL certification is based on Zenata's

⁵ Zenata's Eco-City reference framework does not have a legislative or regulation role, nor is it intended to regulate the attribution of a centrally determined eco-city status like with China's national eco-city framework (Li & Qiu, 2015).

aforementioned “eco-city reference framework” that is envisioned as a new planning standard for cities in Morocco and internationally, and is to be administered and promoted by Cerway. According to Zenata’s developers, the ECL certification is inspired by the sustainability requirements of the HQE Aménagement certification but is inherently more flexible in its modes of application, making it especially appropriate and accessible to cities in emerging economies undergoing transition. As explained by Zenata’s CEO, this certification is one of the key ways in which Zenata is attempting to position its model internationally:

We don’t want to only keep this eco-city framework for Zenata. We want to give it a national and international momentum and allow it to be adapted to other projects. We remain a unique example in the world in that sense, and we hope that the certification will legitimize our international standing for projects of this size. (Interview, August 2016)

Beyond facilitating policy mobility, the ECL certification plays a broader performative role in the legitimization of the new city project and model, and the “expertise” of Zenata’s developers. Following the signature of a memorandum of understanding between the SAZ and Cerway in 2015, the new ECL certification was announced to the public in October 2016 during an official ceremony at the COP22 United Nations Climate Conference held in Marrakech. During this highly publicized event organized by the city’s development company, Cerway awarded the new ECL certification to the Zenata Eco-City project, thereby making it the first city in the world to reach this new planning standard, an achievement since proudly promoted across the project’s various media platforms and through ad campaigns. This “boosterist event” (McCann, 2013, p. 12) acutely conveys the dual facets of the ECL certification’s performative power, which allows Zenata’s developers to build authority for their new urban model. On one hand, the new certification presents Zenata Eco-City as the successful antecedent on which this new planning standard is based, repositioning the city’s developers as experts on urban sustainability. On the other hand, the attribution of the new ECL certification to the Zenata project by the certification agency also constructs the project’s success as an “eco-city” despite the city being under construction and far from finished. Much like the dynamic Cugurullo (2017) observes in the making of Masdar, the ECL certification embodies an example of “fast regulation” (p. 76) of the city’s “green” ambitions, where Zenata’s developers have effectively invented their own indicators of “success” and criteria for evaluation.

By commodifying the urban innovations of a new city that has yet to materialize, the new ECL certification provides a “veneer of internal coherence as well as a readily identifiable visual marker” (Kennedy, 2016, p. 104) for the new city’s urban model, facilitating its circulation whilst showcasing the achievement of its developers. As explained by one senior member working at the SAZ development company:

A city, or any element you create needs recognition. And recognition often comes through certifications ... So, we set off with the French certification agency and they thought it would be great to create a certification that would bring recognition to the SAZ, but also allow us to export our model. (interview, September 2018)

As components of Zenata’s “modeling technologies” (Ong, 2011, p. 15), the eco-city framework and the ECL certification represent “enactments” of Zenata’s urban expertise and means through which Zenata’s aspiring “leaders” of new city development “continuously work to authenticate themselves as experts as well as to authenticate the objects of their expertise” (Carr, 2010, p. 21) in the absence of a functioning city to support their claims of urban planning innovation.

Fast urban model-making and expertise without content?

Since the official release of the ECL label in 2016, Zenata’s development company has increased efforts and initiatives to promote the new city model and circulate it through various means, reinforcing their claims of urban expertise. For example, an ambitious media and communications campaign in 2017 specifically promoted the new city as an urban model for Africa through promotional videos and increased press and social media presence (SAZ, 2017). Zenata’s developers have also attended several international conferences to present the new model, including the EcoCity World Summit in 2017, as well as the Climate Chance World Summit held in Agadir (Morocco) in 2017 and Accra (Ghana) in 2019, where Zenata’s developers collaborated on the launch of the African Alliance for Sustainable Urban Development. Members of the Zenata planning team were also scheduled to take part in the 28th Africa-France Summit on Sustainable Cities and Regions in Bordeaux as well as the 2021 Innopolis Expo in Paris as part of the steering group on Africa, which includes other new city ventures currently under development across the continent. In 2016, the Zenata Eco-City project was also a finalist for the Innovative Global South Award, one of the World Smart City Awards given by the Smart City Expo World Congress, demonstrating that the new city is gaining

growing attention as the first eco-city in Africa and a model for sustainable urban development across the continent.

As an urban model conceived ahead of the “originary city” which informs it, the case of Zenata embodies what we have termed fast model-making, which we conceptualize as one more expression of trends in “fast urbanism” that are shaping new master-planned city development in the Global South (Datta, 2017). Zenata, which has been under construction for several years already, is not fast in terms of the “rapid production and assembly of urban fabric” (Cugurullo, 2017, p. 67). However, the city’s anticipatory model-making activities exemplify ambitions for “fast” success and the rapid acquisition of expert status by bypassing steps in urban development processes to “leapfrog” to end goals, both characteristics of “fast urbanism” (Datta, 2017). As a fast new city model, the case of Zenata suggests a profound “reordering of urban temporality” (Murray, 2017, p. 34), both in terms of the constitution and circulation of urban models, which challenges several assumptions within urban policy mobilities scholarship. First, Zenata’s model presents an unusual case through which the model’s developers, and the new city project itself, take on the simultaneous role of “consumer-emulators” and “producer-innovators” (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 169), highlighting the high degree of fluidity and overlap between two roles frequently conceptualized as chronologically distinct and often mutually exclusive. Second, and related to this point, this dual function is intertwined in the construction of authority for Zenata’s “innovative” urban model, where policy “learning”, rather than experience-based policy ideas or forms of grounded experimentation, is used as a basis for expertise to validate the new model. Third, unlike globally circulating urban models of existing cities like Singapore, Vancouver, Bilbao, or Barcelona, which “only become models when they acquire and articulate ‘outside’ disciples and admirers” (McCann, 2013, p. 10), Zenata’s eco-city model is solely engineered through self-constructed validation and urban success narratives designed to give the *appearance* of external validation and praise.

Detached from the lessons learned from implementation, the Zenata Eco-City model, despite being informed by selective “best practices” elsewhere, cannot claim to possess “sure-bet”, “quick-fix”, “off-the-shelf”, “policy solutions that work”, which is the appeal of many urban models circulating globally (McCann, 2011a, 2013). Rather, in its current form, the Zenata Eco-City model can best be understood as the promotion of a carefully packaged normative vision for urban futures, whose function is to “direct attention to certain definitions of problems

and legitimate specific types of policy solutions” (Temenos & McCann, 2012, p. 1389), which in this case are drawing on sustainable urbanism ideals as well as the new city approach to urban development.

In this respect, the normalization of the “new city” and “eco-city” imaginaries through the Zenata Eco-City model, and the declaration of expertise of Zenata’s developers in the absence of a finished city stand out as audacious and premature especially in light of the growing list of new master-planned city “failures”, many of which were promoted as “eco-cities” (Rapoport, 2014). Specifically, the documented and repeated tendency for ambitious projects worldwide to significantly scale back their ambitions or to fall short of or compromise sustainability targets at the stage of implementation (Cugurullo, 2016; Datta, 2017; Rebentisch, Thompson, Côté-Roy, & Moser, 2020), raises concerns that the promotion of a new city model not rooted in experimentation amounts to the circulation of a form of “expertise without content”. More grounded critical research on the complexities surrounding the implementation of new city projects is needed, since “it is precisely these complexities that we need to understand if the experience of existing projects is to be usefully applied elsewhere” (Rapoport, 2014, p. 145). By avoiding the burden of “proof of concept” surrounding the feasibility of the proposed urban plan, Zenata is catering to the global market for urban models and seductive urban ideas and planning principles, rather than materially demonstrating the desirability and feasibility of its touted urban innovations. In this context, speed compromises accountability (Cugurullo, 2017) for agenda-setting urban visions based on an untested model.

Conclusion

As Montero (2020, p. 2269) suggests, “models and ‘best practices’ travel not because they are best but rather because they have been constructed as ‘best’ at a particular moment of time”. This article demonstrates the ways in which this observation is embodied in the Zenata Eco-City project. Our contributions to the urban policy mobilities literature and emergent research on new city models are threefold. First, our analysis of the Zenata case sheds light on the emergence of a new model “off” the conventional “map” (Robinson, 2006) of urban studies that has emerged as a novel node in the transnational circulation of new city-building ideas. Adding further nuance to analyses of South-South circulations, our analysis of Zenata’s model moves “beyond the limitations of the global scale of transnational activities” (Robinson, 2006, p.

102) to reveal important regional dynamics and connections through emergent examples of intra-African urban policy transfers, which are still underexplored in urban studies scholarship. Second, we emphasize the entanglements of urban policy mobilities in political economic structures by suggesting that the promotion of a Moroccan city-building expertise is aligned with strategic economic and diplomatic goals of the kingdom on the continent. Third, we identify a new expression of “fast urbanism” in the form of fast urban models, which exemplify expectations for “rapid” recognition of expertise and the elevation to the status of urban “innovator” while bypassing the typical steps involved in the development and circulation of urban models. In so doing, our analysis of the construction process of Zenata’s model also draws attention to the increasingly complex, multifaceted, and globally dispersed circulation of urban ideas employed in contemporary urban megaprojects, which we locate beyond world city networks (Bunnell, 2017).

Despite the extensive efforts of Zenata’s developers to transform the project into an exportable model for urban development in Africa, and despite several recent attempts to circulate it beyond the kingdom, many questions remain surrounding the fate of Zenata’s fast model. First, it remains to be seen whether the Zenata model will be adopted and how it will be adapted in other contexts. Will Zenata’s model, detached from an actually existing location and in the absence of “stylized but ground-truthed claims” (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 171) about its origins imbue it with sufficient “license to travel”? (Pow, 2014). Second, in what ways is the model likely to be affected by the city’s progressive materialization? As Zenata’s claims surrounding the sustainability of the project have already been challenged in the media and by local populations following an illegal dumping of polluted water on site (Senhaji, 2020), could reality catch up with the rhetoric, and discredit the model and attendant claims of city-building expertise promoted by Zenata’s developers? Conversely, could the model take on a life of its own, as so many other models have (Bunnell, 2015; González, 2011), and as such remain impervious to the realities, critiques, and contradictions emanating from its original context of inception?

Beyond the “speed” of Zenata’s model, and the novel geographies of idea circulations produced by its promotion in Africa, our discussion of how the model is promoted “for Africa by Africa” also evokes shifting power dynamics and new modes of legitimation that support the emergence of African “referencescapes” (McCann, 2017, p. 1816) to reimagine urban futures on

the continent. While Zenata is promoted as an “African” model despite being a global assemblage of antecedents originating outside Africa, the promotion of an urban model crafted “for Africa by Africa” is a seductive narrative that evokes “intertwined spatialities and temporalities” (McCann, 2017, p. 1816). This narrative produces a common (continental) geography and a shared history of colonial occupation and exploitation as legitimation for the model’s particular relevance and suitability on the continent. The case of Zenata highlights how it is productive to move beyond the analysis of models themselves to investigate the narratives and rhetoric that facilitate the circulation of models to particular audiences, revealing new politics of policy circulation.

With the seemingly unrelenting appeal of new cities as a development strategy worldwide, and the steady announcement of more new city ventures across the Global South (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021), there will be opportunities to further assess forms of fast urban model-making in the years to come, as well as the consequences of this phenomenon. Beyond the case of Zenata, other recently announced new city projects embody characteristics of fast model-making, demonstrating the relevance of this concept beyond Morocco, as well as the existence of a receptive audience for new models that are perceived to be viable for Africa and which have been developed by Africans. In 2018, Akon, an American R&B artist whose parents are from Senegal, announced his intention to construct Akon City, a futuristic smart city, near Dakar’s airport. As fantastical as the renderings are and as unlikely the project is to be realized as planned, the Ugandan government has recently invited Akon to build a second Akon City in Uganda. While the original Akon City in Senegal only broke ground in 2020, the Ugandan government has already offered a parcel of land for its own Akon City (Noori Farzan, 2021), demonstrating the presence of forms of fast model-making elsewhere in Africa. Future research surrounding examples of fast model-making within and beyond Morocco will shed light on the variety of actors – government, state, private, and celebrity – involved in fueling the emergence and facilitating the circulation of fast models.

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