

MEXICO CITY AIRPORT CONTROVERSY

Mexico City Metropolitan Area (MCMA): An Overview

- MCMA = political, economic and social center of nation (more than 20 million inhabitants)
- Spans several jurisdictions: Federal District (DF) and States of Mexico, Hidalgo, Morelos, Puebla
- Mid-1990s: New Federalism: commitment to decentralization and opening of Mexican economy
- Heightened political competition, PRI long-standing party defeated by PRD in 1997 in DF, In 2000 presidency captured by PAN. PRD governs DF; PRI governs State of Mexico; PAN governs the nation as well as many of the MCMA municipalities in the State of Mexico. Finding common projects of agreement has been difficult. One of biggest struggles between PAN, PRI, and PRD: capacity to capture power in DF.

Plan for new airport

- Plan for new airport almost 30 years old – revived when Fox becomes president
- Fox's Secretary of Transportation (i.e. national cabinet minister) commissioned studies and made announcement for the airport

Rationale for the Airport Plan

- Old airport near saturation
- Good for the economy (global city = local and national gains)
- Support for Business-related Services
- Boost for the Construction Sector
- Mexico City a regional “hub” for Latin America

Issues at Stake in Planning Report

- Location
- Cost (superficially)
- Environment (narrowly)
- Benefits assumed more than proven

“Silent” Issues at Stake

- Expansion of MCMA northward (population, shift in income-generating activities and tax revenues)
- “Macro-environmental” Issues (water, air pollution owing to either air transport or sprawl)
- Project’s Impact on Agriculture and Industry
- Empowering PAN and PRI (at expense of PRD)
- Shifting population, economic, and social focus of MCMA to a new physical location

A Failed Project?

- Widespread citizen protest, which led to cancellation of plan
- Plan itself was highly questionable in terms of motivations and root aims
- Project was not articulated in terms that were convincing to a wide enough array of significant political supporters
- Little sense of how to proceed now (back to the drawing board, no clear alternative)

What The Planners Failed To Do

- Serious evaluation of the national economic impact
- Serious evaluation of the impact on air traffic
- Credible evaluation of other sites
- No evaluation of the economic or employment impacts of displacement on local residents
- No public forum; no negotiation
- In short, a done deal

How Much Owes to the Nature of the Problem Itself

- The Challenges of Developing a Project with Local, Regional and National Constituencies (with multiple stakeholders at each level)
- The Challenges of Doing So Without a Well Developed Institutional Infrastructure for Identifying and Bringing These Constituencies Together

How The Problem Was Framed

- Main Issue
 - Economic growth for nation
 - Local economic development around site
- What is Missing
 - Concerns/cognizance of larger urbanization patterns or problems
 - Local (non-construction) employment impact

The Reality

- Planning reports used to justify pre-determined outcome (mainly private sector interests)
- A failure to define the problem in such a way as to include residents or citizens
- Result: planners were “held hostage” to a process that unfolded without their autonomous participation

Planning “Autonomy”

DEFINITION:

Institutional and Political Capacity to Act
Independently of Overbearing External Influences
(whether they come from citizens, private sector,
or other levels of the state)

Planning Autonomy: Questions and Caveats

- Not the same as rational planning. There is no fully neutral technical solution to most social problems. All planners work in a social, political, economic, and institutional context. They all have constituencies (i.e. clients and bosses). Thus they have to be realists in some sense. But the question is whether there should be limits.
- Should planners merely be implementers of others' plans? Or are there conditions under which they should help “frame” problems and offer solutions in ways that address the “public good”?

Why So Little Planning Autonomy?

- History of State Centralization (hierarchical decision-making structure for big projects)
- Competing Territorial Jurisdictions
- Competing Political Actors/Institutions
- Lead to absence of viable institutions of metropolitan coordination
- This absence further prevented any of the planners from “thinking metropolitan”

What This Says About Planning in Mexico

- Politics got in the way of the process
 - few local supporters; many opponents
 - decision makers then thought politically: more losses than gains
- Planners themselves had very little autonomy to counterbalance or sway the politicization of the process, even before it got to this point

Significance of Limited Planning Autonomy

- The terms on which the project was to be accepted or rejected were highly polarize if not purely political (Zapatistas/PRD versus the private sector/State of Mexico leaders)
- No serious site alternatives or no new mechanisms proposed to bring citizens to the table because there were essentially only two options: yes or no.
- This led to a political conflict, making the project appear as a zero-sum game, and a final decision to respond to citizen protest and can the project

Questions about Planning Autonomy: WHO HAS IT and HOW TO GET IT

- Would planners at certain scales (local versus regional versus national) tend to have more or less autonomy; and would recognition of this affect the planning process?
- How might planners create autonomy to act (or is that a contradiction in terms)? Or, are planners always “hostage” to the larger political
- Is planning autonomy desirable (under what conditions & why or why not)?

Possible Points of Comparative Reflection

- Ways that defining the problem can foreclose certain options and favors others in terms of:
 - plan content
 - which planners involved
 - identification of stakeholders (and thus how the entire planning “process” unfolds)
- Ways that the impact or role of local participation might vary depending on scale or scope of plan
- Source of different degrees of “planning autonomy” and how this affect planning content and process