

“International Aid Cities”, a By-Product of Reconstruction in Post War Cities

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Abstract

In the lime lit process of reconstruction of a post war city, what goes un-noticed, is the metamorphosis of a seemingly temporary and side effect- urbanism that has somehow been “happening” parallel and simultaneous to this reconstruction process. Characterised by imported urban and social values, it remains an insoluble bubble within the fluid of the almost dying, victim city e.g.: Kabul. The needs and the luxuries for the numerous UN agencies and INGO’S inject delirious, western urban elements and symbols in the “hungry for basic infrastructure” city of Kabul. Apparently temporary in nature, “they” creep in as a package with complete infrastructure, expensive multi cuisine restaurants, bars, and golf courses, thus generating “ ex-territories”, “restricted “-public and private territories within the city. The contrasting urban dynamics of this international aid community results in astronomical real estate values- un-imaginable and inaccessible for the local masses, abnormal traffic scenes and total destruction of indigenous public spaces.

1 Introduction

The post war situation, very often followed by the reconstruction phase, gives way to enormous activities that re-structure the urban fabric of the city. This phase brings in the international aid community, both as providers and consumers, creating a breeding ground for new trades, economies, politics, lifestyles, cultures and traditions to flourish. This generates a new, “side effect urbanism”...an urbanism with introvert dynamics of its own, an urbanism, which responds to the western standards and needs... an urbanism that gives birth to a “temporary city”, called the “International Aid City” which coexists within the, “to be reconstructed, host city”. This paper tries to analyse the structure, character and dynamics of such “temporary” Aid cities, their effects and latent potentials for the host cities.

2 The metamorphosis of Aid cities:

2.1 Theory of packets

In the reconstruction of post conflict cities what officially creeps in first, is the United Nations. It comes not as a single entity, but rather as a package, with a never-ending series of packet within packet, thus revealing the metamorphosis of a huge organism - **The International Aid City (IAC)** as shown.

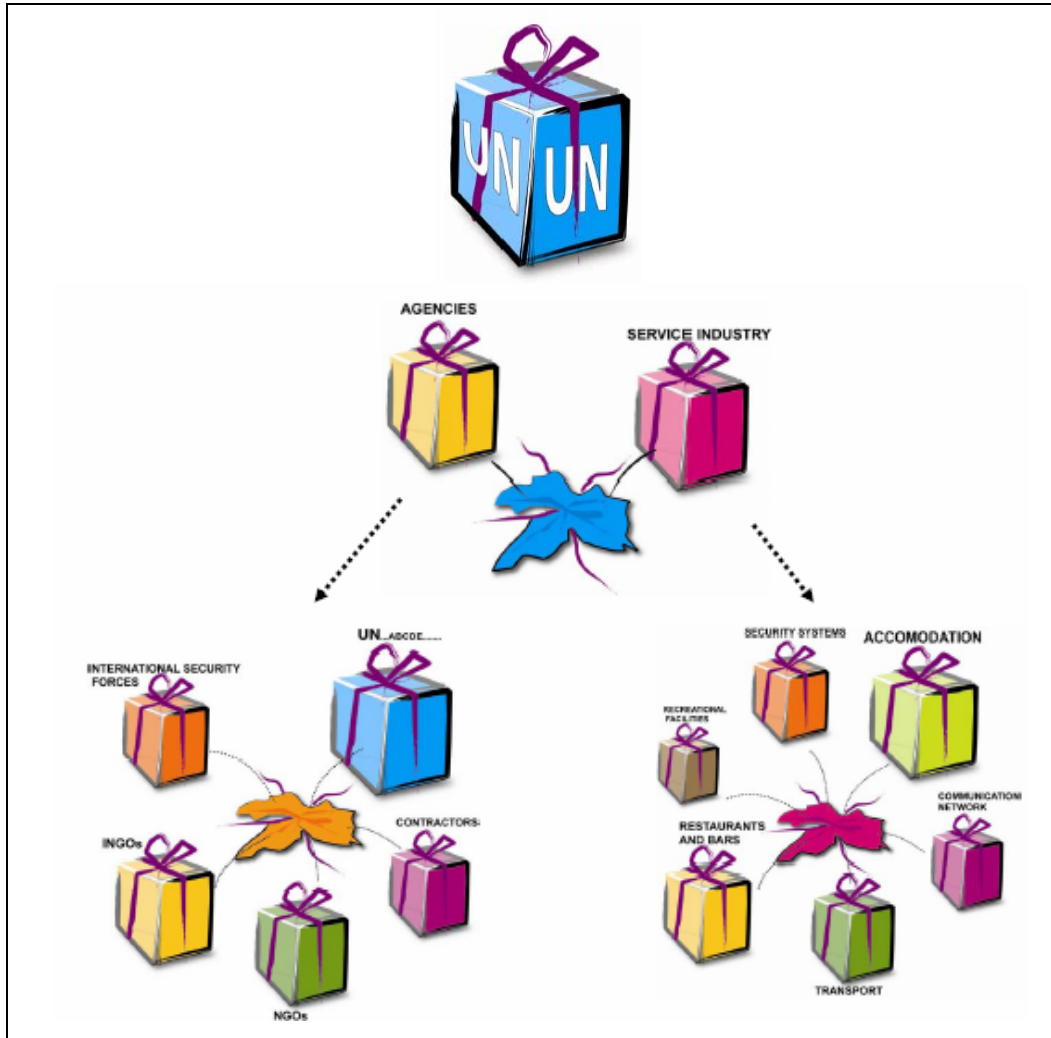


Figure 1: Theory of packets illustrating the metamorphosis of International Aid Cities
(Source: authors illustration, 2006)

2.2 The dual layered dynamics of post conflict cities

With the advent of the international aid community, the post conflict city transforms itself into a dual layered structure – one of the Aid city and other of the Host cities, which coexist with each other and have contrasting characteristics and living conditions. Kabul, Afghanistan is a living evidence of such a dual layering.

Facts and figures of the dual layered city of Kabul

1. Whereas only 14% of local population has access to piped water, 35% to safe drinking water and 23% to sanitation^[1], the “International Aid city” of Kabul boasts over 50 lavish, private swimming pools within a 3 km radius of the posh and “safe” Wazir Akbar Khan and Shar-e-Naw neighbourhoods where more than 200 NGOs, INGOs^[2], and 19 UN offices^[3] are located.
2. While 94% of Kabul has no access to electricity, the international guesthouses, clubs, multi cuisine restaurants, bars and (US puppet) Presidential palace bathe in light^[4].
3. 68% of the local Kabulis dwell on the hillside informal settlements^[5] amidst inadequate and intolerable living conditions, with oil lamps and plastic sheets to keep out the afghan winter. The IAC dwells in expensive and luxuriously furnished houses and hotels. Swiss chalets worth \$183,000 each, prefabricated in Switzerland and visions for a ski resort in Kabul are on their way^[6].
4. Due to lack of public transport the locals Kabulis are poorly connected to the rest of the country. At the same time, the Kabul international airport connects the citizens of the aid city with all major cities of the world, for business as well as tourism.
5. A single meal, in one of the numerous multi cuisine restaurants in Kabul, costs half a month’s salary of a local afghan govt official.
6. **Fashion:** Revlon, L’Oreal, Clairol and Vogue have generously assisted the beautification efforts of Kabul. The International aid community in Kabul is pampered with Thai massages for \$25 an hour, and manicure-pedicure by beauticians imported from Kyrgyz Stan^[7].
7. **Media - a community space:** With all the stress at work, the “Aid workers” too need a day out. **Afghan Scene**^[8], a monthly magazine meant exclusively for the IAC of Kabul, is a regular update of major events, parties, festivals, tourism and other information. Flooded with advertisements for the most expensive cars, luxurious accommodation, eating out, recreational, beauty and health facilities for the “aid workers” it serves as a social network and a community space for the international aid community in Kabul. This glossy multi colour English magazine portrays a completely unimaginable image of a post conflict city. Though it conceals its bitter realities, it gives a crystal clear picture of the “temporary”, International Aid City in Kabul.

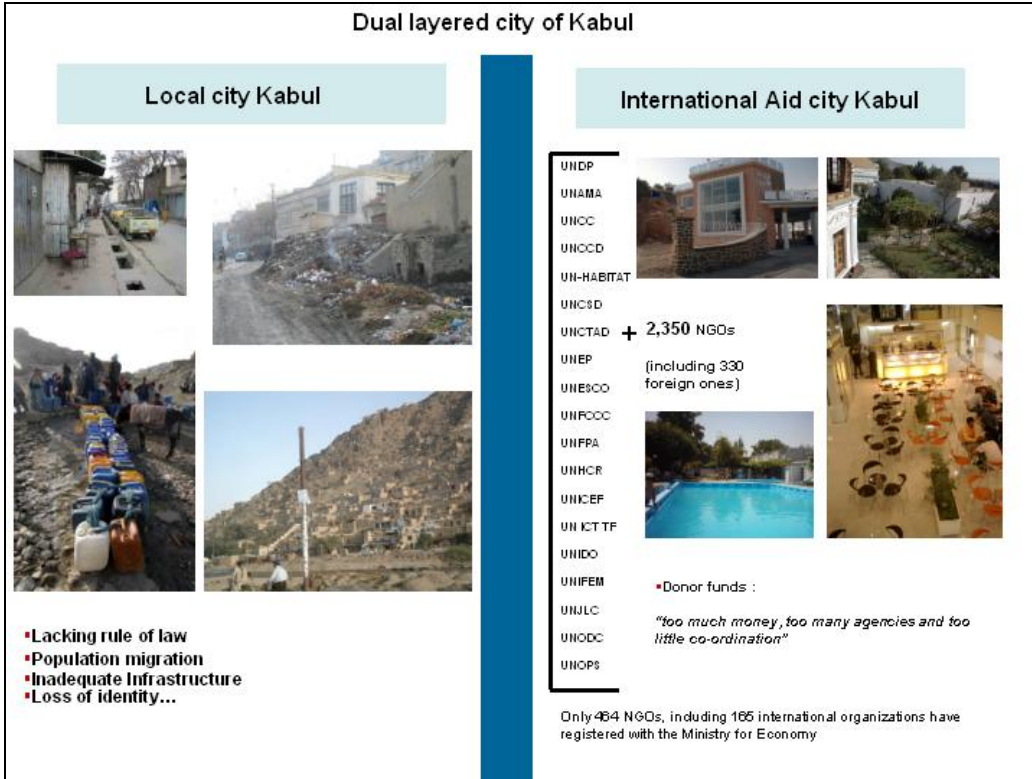


Figure 2: Dual layered city of Kabul

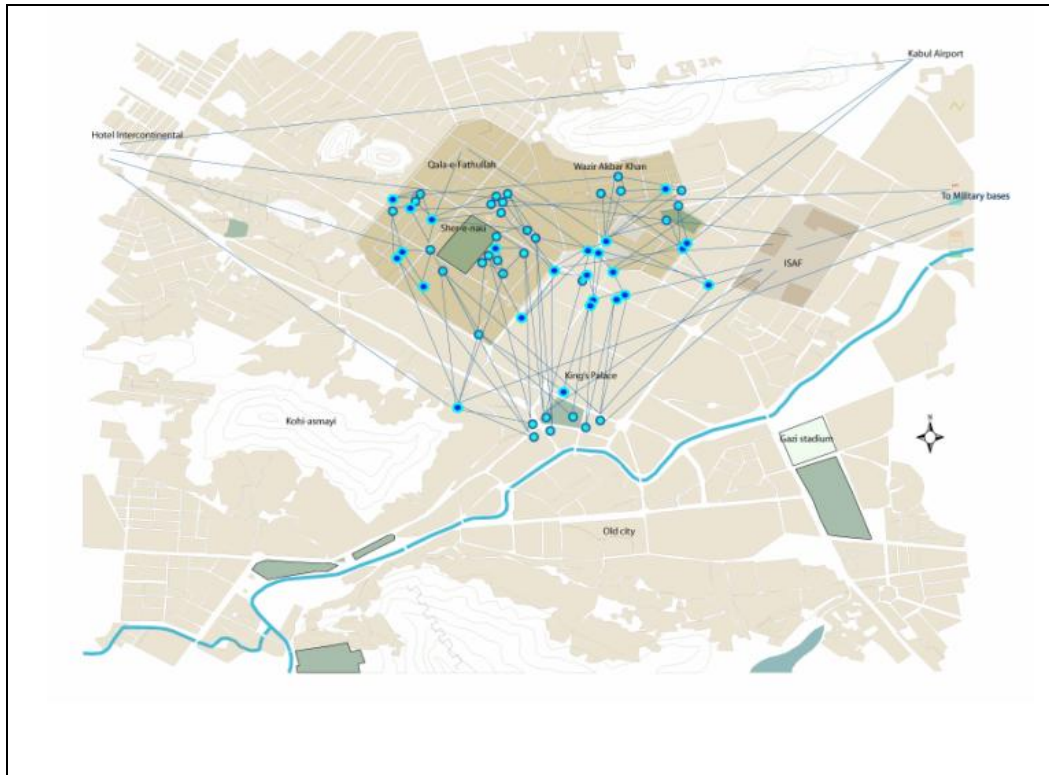


Figure 3: The International Aid City of Kabul juxtaposed on the local fabric^[9]

3 Anatomy of the International Aid City

The Aid city is analogous to an insoluble bubble like organism, which creeps in the almost, dying body of the host cities. It not only clings to it but also grows like a cancer within it pushing the life of the host city into an unknown direction. *This organism is of another species, of another nature, of another origin.* It can be abstracted into a series of biological cells of different categories, linked to each other with tube like connectors that are animated by fast moving, capsule like SUVs.

3.1 Cells

These are the basic units of the organism with a definite “cell wall”, “nucleus” and “plasma”. The nuclei are the activity cores surrounded by plasma, which constitute the supplementary, support, services and recreational spaces. These special constituents are cut off (physically and informatively) from the surrounding, contrasting local fabric by highly impermeable “cell walls”.

Typologies of cells:

U cells

(UN, NGO, INGO compounds and office spaces)

The Wazir Akbar Khan and the Sher-e-Naw neighbourhoods with astronomical rents ranging from US \$1000 to US\$ 15000 a month^[10], are the favourite areas for the International Aid Community. With complete infrastructure, lush green gardens, pools, generator-supported uninterrupted power supply, advanced security, heating and air conditioning systems based on western standards and sometimes even more luxurious, these homes and offices serve as perfect oasis for the “aid” worker.

R cells

(Recreational facilities)

These include luxury hotels, Amusement parks, boutiques, golf course, multi cuisine restaurants, steak houses, Irish bars serving imported alcoholic beverages in an Islamic state and even more. All these cater to the international “aid workers” and peace keeping forces, who are also, to have their morale raised, further entertained with a fully fledged, Chinese red light district^[11].

S cells

(The “foreigners-only” super market)

These cells make the local people, outsiders in their own city. They include tax-free PX shops where no Afghans are allowed. They offer the same range of products as large European supermarkets, with everything from food to clothing, to screws and nails (eg; Supreme PX shop in Kabul). Another example is the upcoming, DCS group’s, 28000 sq mts independent warehouse compound near the Kabul airport with 5500 sq mts warehouse, tax free shop, offices, café and housing^[12].

M cells

(Military compounds of the US and the ISAF “Peace keeping forces)

Like a city within a city, with complete infrastructure, on-base facilities like housing, recreation, gift shops, theatres, laundries, sports and religious facilities, these compounds have created huge pools of ex-territories within and outside the city of Kabul.

3.2 Walls- visible and invisible

Walls are the most important features of aid cities. For security reasons or what so ever, they exclude the aid city from the local fabric, both physically and metaphorically. They appear as high, barbed wire fences, and jersey barriers along main roads, restricted transit zones or very often simply as invisible economic barriers making the various facilities for the IAC inaccessible to the locals. This creates restricted public territories, restricted private territories and ex-territories.

3.3 Connectors

As captured by the Outside magazine (December 2003)

“When the world community of do-gooders come to rescue a nation from itself, the first sign is the blinding white traffic jam. White land rovers stack up thick at the airport; white Nissan pathfinders block the streets at lunch; miraculously white on white Toyota land cruisers choke the traffic circles of the lucky target country”

The various cells of the aid city are inter-linked with these capsules like “connectors” which add to abnormal traffic scenes within the city.

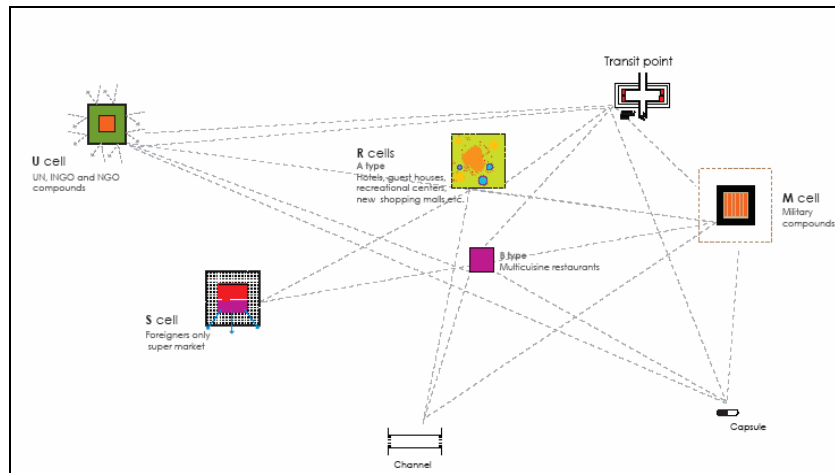


Figure 4: Diagram of Anatomy of the International Aid City (source: author's illustration 2006)

4 Dynamics of aid cities

Major donor funds are being poured into Kabul for high profile reconstruction projects, results of which are hardly evident. Projects are often duplicated in the same locality by different Aid agencies instead of catering for other urgent needs around the country. Everything is intended for publicising their participation in the reconstruction process. Thus the Aid city has its own dynamics, priorities, interests and competition, regardless of what needs to be reconstructed where.

4.1 Bubble Economy of Aid cities

The economy of the aid cities is fuelled by import-based consumption. There is an abnormal scale of foreign investment by donor countries having vested interests, in various economic sectors of post conflict city. Therefore the Aid city “aids” donor country economies rather than the “local economies”, which is supposedly their goal. The country of Afghanistan runs enormous current deficits with imports at \$ 3.87 billion (2005) and exports a piddling \$478 million. International pledges made by more than 60 countries and international financial institutions at the Berlin Donors Conference for Afghan reconstruction in March 2004 reached \$8.9 billion for 2004-09^[13].

4.2 Real estate boom

The emergence of Aid City results in astronomical boom in the real estate market making the locals, aliens in their own land.

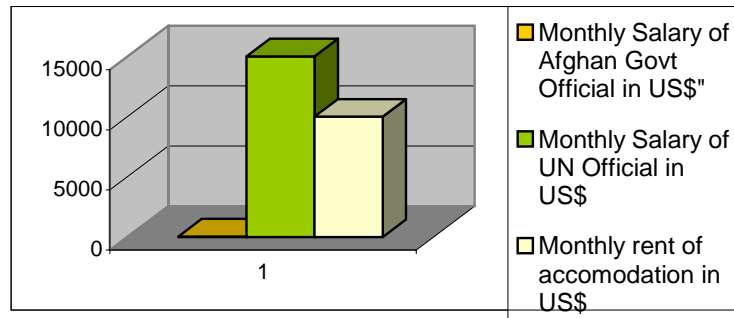


Figure 5: chart showing the astronomical real estate rates^[14]

5 Conclusion

5.1 Dichotomies of temporality

“In some way that is incomprehensible they have pushed right into the capital. At any rate; it seems that every morning there are more of them ”^[15],

Unlike other temporary urbanisms that are event based and promise their temporality, this one seems to be the most exceptional and unconvincing. With immense geopolitical and economic ambitions, contrasting characteristics, and an ever-increasing cancerous growth, Aid cities seem to be changing their temporality into permanence. Therefore they paradoxically create an effect of colonial occupation, which is reflected in the response from the host city.

The needs and the luxuries for the so-called *“temporary” Aid cities* inject delirious, western, urban elements and symbols within the “hungry for basic infrastructure, *“dependant” Post war city*. They push the host city into a state of identity crises, very often resulting in formation of urban hybrids.

Such nomadic urbanism, neither a part of the state apparatus nor the local fabric, having an exteriority of its own, leaves the outsider as well as the local, perplexed at every moment, about its temporality, self-contradictory characteristics and function it serves.

5.2 Latent potentials of Aid cities

The organism of the Aid city has high standards, introvert behaviours and at the same time contagious, positive potentials. These potentials are held within walls, and are in stark contrast to the host body. Given the right direction, character and channel for leakage as well as exchange, these contagious potentials, with their economic and political power, could positively transform the host body. It would therefore, permanently leave behind a well organized, futuristic and self-sustainable local city, set on a way of long-term development, and at the same time serve as a Role model for all Temporary Aid Cities throughout the world.

Literature review

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