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Tracing the Links between Infrastructure-Led Development, Urban Transformation, and Inequality in China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the links between infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). I theorise the BRI as a spatial fix to the overaccumulation problems of Chinese capitalism and I pay particular attention to the role of urbanisation. By drawing on postcolonial geographies, my goal is to offer a relational analysis of divergent trajectories of socio-spatial urban change driven by BRI projects in Athens, Colombo and London. My key argument is that urban transformation driven by the BRI signals the emergence of a new form of infrastructure-led, authoritarian neoliberal urbanism. This engenders both new urban formations and new urban politics that, despite variegated expressions across different contexts, are reconfiguring urban space and are transforming the social geography of each city by creating, facilitating or exacerbating spatial fragmentation and social segregation.

Keywords: New Silk Road, spatial fix, socio-spatial change, authoritarian neoliberal urbanism, gentrification, postcolonial geographies

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also called the "21st century Silk Road" and the "project of the century" (Financial Times 2017a), is the largest infrastructure project since the Marshall Plan and perhaps the most ambitious in human history with conservative estimates suggesting that its cost will reach US$1 trillion (EBRD 2020). Ideas for New Silk Roads have been spreading at least since the late 1990s. Key moments include a conference in 1998 in Baku on the Restoration of the Historical Silk Road co-hosted by the EU (Starr et al. 2015) and a proposal for a New Silk Road Initiative in 2011 by the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a speech in Chennai, India. The BRI followed the announcement of these initiatives that have never been materialised and, even though it has been introduced rather suddenly in October 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, it managed to rapidly sideline them.

To date, over 125 countries have signed memorandums of understanding with China expressing their willingness to be involved in the initiative either in their territory or in other countries along its route (Cheng 2019; Goodman and Hillman 2019). BRI projects involve almost anything: from railways, airports, ports, pipelines, industrial parks, special economic zones (SEZs), real estate and commercial projects, to free trade agreements and treaties to boost foreign investment and market liberalisation (Blanchard and Flint 2017). The initiative is organised around six main economic corridors: the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, the China-Central Asia-Western Asia Corridor, the China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor (OECD 2018). Despite their rhetorical depiction as continuous surfaces, the spatial configuration of the flows of capital, goods and people are expected to predominantly occur across a network of *urban nodes* (Summers 2016) with several projects strategically placed in selected cities across the globe. As I aim at showing in what follows, even though the latter indicates that BRI's potential to alter urban geographies is immense, despite few exceptions (e.g. Schindler and Kanai 2019; Wiig and Silver 2019; Williams et al. 2020), the literature has so far left largely underexplored the way the initiative may drive urban transformation influencing patterns of urban inequality. The latter encompasses not only hinterlands (Brenner 2019; Williams et al. 2020) but also urban centres reflecting the contradictions of capitalist urbanisation where adverse impacts occur within the heartlands of capitalist economic activity, including megacities whose expansion and repositioning in the world order coexist with poverty exacerbation, urban marginality and infrastructural decay (Harvey 2012; Sassen 2002; Thieme et al. 2017).

In this paper, my goal is to address this gap by tracing the links between infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality in China's Belt and Road Initiative. I theorise the BRI as primarily a spatial fix (Harvey 2016) to the overaccumulation problems of Chinese capitalism and I pay attention to the role of urbanisation while acknowledging the dialectical relation between the territorial and the capitalist logics of power (Gramsci 1971; Harvey 2005; Lee et al. 2018). I draw on Marxist postcolonial geographies (Hart 2006, 2018) to offer a relational analysis of divergent trajectories of socio-spatial urban change driven by BRI projects currently under construction in Athens, Colombo and London. By exploring how the BRI is set to reconfigure the production of local urban space (re)making places, socionatures and the geographies of everyday lives, I aim at contributing to recent critical geographical scholarship on the BRI while also engaging with broader research on post-crisis neoliberal urbanism and the uneven production of urban space (Brenner 2019; Castells 1977, 2010; Christophers 2011; Harvey 2012; Lefebvre 1974; Massey 1994; Smith 2008; Theodore et al. 2011). My empirical material comes from primary research consisting of both on-the-ground and virtual ethnography, including 38 in-depth interviews with policy-makers, workers in the BRI projects, and local activists, as well as a document analysis of governmental reports and online sources. Activists included members of community groups found through their social media accounts, recommendations from other interviewees and personal contacts. I selected these cities not only because they allow me to explore BRI's unfolding in two continents with a major role for it (Starr et al. 2015), but also because in all of them the BRI is expected to profoundly remake urban space via a combination of new transport infrastructure, real estate projects and the establishment of special economic zones. The three cities also share a long history of urban community activism that is being currently sidelined to legitimise the re-inscription of urban dwellers' collective imagination regarding the future use of urban space.

The key argument I aim to advance is that urban transformation driven by the BRI signals the emergence of a new form of *infrastructure-led, authoritarian neoliberal urbanism*. This engenders both new urban formations and new urban politics that are reconfiguring urban space and are transforming the social geography of each city by creating, facilitating or exacerbating spatial fragmentation and social segregation. Despite variegated expressions across different contexts, the BRI-driven deepening of urban marginality and social inequality in places as different as Colombo Port City and the London Docklands also opens up the potential for new spatial resistances and local-global alliances generating novel possibilities for urban socio-spatial change.

Infrastructure-Led Development, Urbanisation, and Postcolonial Geographies in the New Silk Road

The BRI can be seen as the latest moment in the process of geographical expansion and spatial reorganisation that has characterised China's transition to a capitalist mode of production since the late 1970s (Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019). Its roots can be found in the particularities of the Chinese economy and the key role of infrastructure in its export-oriented industrialisation model as well as in the wider international political-economic context after the 2008 financial crash. China's economic growth and increased competitiveness have been underpinned by massive investments in infrastructure coupled with the development of SEZs (Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019). Even though this has facilitated industrialisation and trade gradually making the Chinese infrastructure market the largest in the world, it had significant limits already noticed in the 1990s in several sectors' decreasing profitability. These problems have intensified in the post-2008 era: the decline in demand due to the financial crash in US and EU markets led to a 30% contraction of China's exports (Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019; Schindler and Kanai 2019; Tooze 2018). The Chinese government responded through a state-funded massive economic stimulus package of US$586 billion, the "first truly large-scale fiscal response to the crisis worldwide" (Tooze 2018:243). 38% of this package supported infrastructural development (Jiang 2015) and, particularly, domestic urban infrastructure leading to the expansion of roads, airports, shopping malls and apartment complexes profoundly transforming urban geographies across China. Massive investments in the built environment along with the post-2008 construction boom resulted in oversupplies evident, inter alia, in the creation of ghost cities (Jin et al. 2017) and the excess productive capacity in industrial sectors from steel to cement (Cai 2017; CSIS 2020; Webb 2019). The post-2008 era also signalled the emergence of an infrastructure-led development paradigm worldwide (Schindler and Kanai 2019) with the World Bank embracing, under the leadership of Chief Economist Justin Yifu Lin, an advocate of a global Marshall

Plan, state-led spatial planning as a key response to the economic crisis. The need to extract new raw materials, minimise the distance between areas of resource extraction, production and consumption and access cheap and skilled labour and favourable regulatory environments (Hildyard and Sol 2017; Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019), along with the availability of cheap capital and low interest rates by major economies, including the US and China, fuelled a global infrastructure rush (Tooze 2018). Hildyard and Sol (2017) characterise this period as the era of extreme infrastructure that is remaking places and socionatures to establish capital-friendly tradescapes (Kuykendall 2008) and mega-corridors.

It was in this context that the BRI was launched with the goal to revitalise economic growth by facilitating geographical restructuring and expansion confirming that capital's life-process consists in its constant movement (Marx 1976).[1] The BRI gradually became an exemplary case of the near global hegemony of infrastructure-led development by acting as a major spatial fix to capital's global overaccumulation crisis (Harvey 2016; Summers 2016). Urban development had from the beginning an upgraded role within the BRI primarily due to its ability to absorb surpluses that would otherwise be devalued (Christophers 2011; Harvey 2018; Lefebvre 1974; Smith 2008). These entail a "combination of surplus capital looking for productive investment, surplus commodities looking for buyers, and surplus labour power looking for productive employment" (Ekers and Prudham 2017:1374). Indeed, since 2013, China spent billions on BRI projects to absorb capital and labour surpluses and redirect its domestic overcapacity and capital for infrastructural and urban development. The initiative facilitated the exportation of products (steel, cement, aluminium) to support the construction of overseas infrastructure (railways, ports, highways, malls, housing) allowing Chinese goods and services to enter new, overseas markets in line with the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) while offering opportunities to improve trade relations with Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Europe.

Cities have been attributed a central role in achieving BRI's priority goal, namely reterritorialisation via increased connectivity (Flint and Zhu 2019). The way the initiative is organised around six main corridors shows this well and testifies the attempt to integrate subnational urban systems into transnational territories through networked infrastructure mega-projects (Schindler and Kanai 2019). On the one hand, the Belt is designed to facilitate the land-based integration of Central Asian, African and European techno-territorial constellations via newly assembled rail and road corridors (Eder 2018; Summers 2016). On the other hand, the Road targets the maritime regions of Southeast and South Asia, the Middle East, East Africa and the Mediterranean by building or expanding ports to create a maritime corridor (MERICS 2018). The key role of urban nodes is supported by both the BRI's Vision document (National Development and Reform Commission 2015) and its reference to major cities within China, including port construction in coastal cities and international airports in Shanghai and Guangzhou, and in the location of strategic BRI investments (MERICS 2018) and reflects a spatial paradigm that reproduces hegemonic capitalist developmental ideas (Summers 2016). The attempt to link urban-economic centres and combine infrastructure projects with investments in the built environment is evident in recent remote sensing data (Linlin et al. 2017) demonstrating that urbanisation has already intensified alongside BRI's infrastructural corridors (Derudder et al. 2018). The latter are, therefore, expected to inscribe new purpose in established urban regions and create new links between them, transform existing cities as well as create entirely new cities within and beyond China (Wiig and Silver 2019) to initiate novel transnational trade relations. This is already remaking not only the Chinese urban landscape but also urban and social geographies across the global South and North in a historically unparalleled scale. Evidence of that can be found not only in Asia (Linlin et al. 2017) but also in a number of European cities, as the ones explored in the next section, where Chinese-led railways construction, ports' expansion and real estate projects are looming. This largely reflects the practice of Chinese urbanisation that has ranged in the last decade from setting up special economic zones and industrial parks to creating new urban and central business districts, prompting real estate development and urban renewal (Wu et al. 2016).

Acknowledging BRI's role as a spatial fix should not lead to an underestimation of its territorial and geopolitical dimensions. The territorial and the capitalist logics of power may be distinctive but are also deeply intertwined (Harvey 2005). Indeed, even though its drivers can be primarily found in political economy, the Silk Road's revival clearly aims at advancing China's regional and international influence particularly in the context of a global economic crisis and US's hegemonic decline. And while the BRI is a class-based development project that enlists Chinese capitalists across its route, it is also mediated by the balance of class power and hegemonic politics in recipient countries (Lee et al. 2018; Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019) and hegemonic politics along its BRI (Lee et al. 2018). As the three cities explored here clearly show, a decisive aspect of class struggle involves the contestation of subordinated classes against infrastructural mega-projects.

It is precisely on all the above dynamics that I now turn my attention by exploring how BRI projects in Athens, Colombo and London reconfigure urban geographies, recalibrate local economies and are implicated in the (re)making of places, socionatures and geographies of everyday lives. By offering a relational comparison (Hart 2006), I show how developments in each of them are the products of intertwined socio-spatial processes that bore both remarkable convergences and divergences. As Hart (2018) explains, relational comparison is grounded in Lefebvrian conceptions of the production of space, place and scale. Places are conceptualised as nodal points of connection in wider networks of socially produced space, reflecting what Massey (1994) calls an extroverted sense of place. The urban places explored in the next section are, therefore, seen as articulated moments in complex networks of social relations, socio-spatial trajectories, histories, experiences and understandings, a large proportion of which are construed on a scale that exceeds each city's boundaries (Massey 1994). This approach is crucial for dismantling methodological nationalism (Goswami 2002) and shares similarities with both postcolonial comparative urbanism (Schmid et al. 2018) and countertopography (Katz 2011) by invoking unexpected connections among disparate places allowing the production of spatialised abstractions that are necessary for grappling with the various ways the BRI remakes urban space across the global South and North.

A Tale of Three Cities

Albert Royal Docks: Building a (Chinese) City within the City of London

"Silk Road freight train from China arrives in Barking" was the title of a BBC article published in January 2017 to refer to the arrival of the first train from Yiwu, a trading centre in China's east coast, to London in 18 days[2] to deliver Chinese goods (BBC News 2017a, 2017b; Brunel Shipping 2018). This is the second longest distance freight rail route from China to Europe that forms part of BRI's Eurasian Land Bridge. Three months later, within the context of escalating debate about UK's post-Brexit future and increasing talks between the UK and China about ways to build a closer economic partnership, the first UK to Yiwu export train departed from DP World London Gateway's terminal including UK products (DP World 2017). The UK Minister for Trade Policy characterised the new rail link as a "boost for Global Britain" and a "great step for DP World's £1.5bn London Gateway Port" that "following the ancient Silk Road trade route" would carry British products around the world. The Chairman of Yiwu Timex Industrial Investment Co. was also present in the inauguration to celebrate the Silk Road's restoration "as a means by which China, North Europe and now the UK can exchange goods" (ibid.). The railway terminal is a component of DP World London Gateway (Wainwright 2015), a fully integrated logistics facility that opened in 2013. This comprises a deep-sea container terminal whose construction required the creation of artificial land that extends 400 m beyond the shoreline profoundly transforming Essex's coastline near Stanford-le-Hope by, inter alia, moving thousands of species 140 miles away, the biggest ever animal and habitat relocation project in the UK (Bormpoudakis et al. 2020; Evening Standard 2012; Morris 2011).

Even though the efficiency of the new train route is a matter of controversy (Devonshire-Ellis 2017; Mardell 2019), it reveals a bigger story about Chinese investment in UK's public and private sectors over the past decade, such as UK energy (including the nuclear energy sector with the primary example Hinkley Point nuclear power plant; Harper 2020), manufacturing, telecommunications, education, and transport (Ambrose 2020), and particularly about Chinese interest in London's Royal Docks. The latter involves the transformation of a 35-acre area at the Royal Albert Dock from a derelict, post-industrial site (ABP 2017; Goh 2013) to a hub of Silk Road Urbanism to borrow Wiig's and Silver's (2019) term. Albert Dock's regeneration is supported by a major investment from Chinese developer ABP (Advanced Business Park) that aims at transforming the area to a new financial district and tech hub (New York Times 2014; Royal Docks 2020a). The project is linked to the Yiwu-London train route and a number of transport upgrades whose importance has been repeatedly emphasised by ABP's owners, including a £500 million investment in London City Airport and Crossrail's new terminals (Bechtel 2020; Mallett 2019; Morton 2019). Albert Dock is part of the wider transformation of the historical Docklands to a new "boom town" and it totals 4.7 million sq. ft. of office, residential, retail and leisure (Bloomfield 2020; Royal Albert Dock 2019a). The first phase of the £1.7 billion development was completed in 2019 and entailed the creation of 460,000 sq. ft. of office space across 21 new buildings with "The Townhouses" and the "Altitude" already available for sale or rent (Royal Albert Dock 2019a, 2019b). The second phase will include more offices, flats and a membership club. ABP's vision includes creating an "Asian business port" transforming the area into London's third financial district (South China Morning Press 2013) whereas the whole scheme is expected to complete after 2030.

As local residents explained to me, the Royal Docks have a long history of grassroots activism against controversial regeneration plans.[3] The Docks' final closure to commercial traffic in 1981 led to massive unemployment, environmental degradation and rising social and economic inequality across East London. This marked the commencement of a regeneration program that was met with major public opposition for ignoring social needs and local environmental conditions (Church 1990). A significant moment in public resistance has been the formation of People's Plan in 1983 that opposed STOLport's (Short Take Off and Landing Airport; today London City Airport) creation while offering an alternative vision for the Docks (Brownill 2018). The Plan expressed local communities' desire to gain democratic control over the area's future: it proposed the public ownership of land and community participation in urban planning. However, following concerns about the high proportion of public housing in the area and cuts to the housing program under Thatcher's government, a shift towards prioritising private sector investment gradually occurred. As involved officials stated back in the late 1990s, looking "too exclusively to the aspirations of the existing population" (LDDC 1998) was a key problem for the area's regeneration since investors would invest only if there was an availability of private housing. It was within this context that the London Docklands Development Corporation decided to appropriate public land and sell waterfront property to private developers, with the Toronto-based company Olympia and York taking a leading role (Henneke and Knowles 2020) before its bankruptcy in 1993.

The ABP investment should be seen as the latest stage in the process of market-led urban regeneration that since the 1980s mostly stood against people's demands to favour specific corporate interests. In 2013, a Development Agreement was signed between the Greater London Authority (GLA) and ABP, supported by the Mayor of London at the time, Boris Johnson, granting the company the tender to develop the 35-acre estate. This followed the transfer of public land to the GLAP, a commercial subsidiary of the GLA, under Localism Act 2011. Despite the hegemonic rhetoric of transforming a "wasteland" to a new "global village" (ABP nd a), the agreement was criticised by grassroots groups, inter alia, due to ABP's limited record as a real estate developer, concerns about its alleged involvement in forced evictions in Beijing, and the absence of any meaningful public consultation (Crick 2013; Financial Times 2013). Local activists were critical about the company's vision that consists of the privatisation and transformation of (public) derelict land to financial districts, smart eco-cities and elitist green enclaves.[4] Indeed, since the agreement was signed the area is becoming an enterprise and real estate zone that primarily targets high tech leaders and wealthy investors as the prices of available offices and nearby flats demonstrate.[5] Importantly, similarly to Piraeus and Colombo, the area is subject to specific economic conditions. The Royal Docks are one of London's Opportunity Areas and its only Enterprise Zone (Royal Docks 2020b) formed as part of the "war on red tape" led by the 2011 Coalition Government (Apostolopoulou 2020a; Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015). This means that it provides tax breaks and business incentives to attract foreign investment, including simplified planning procedures and business rate uplift retention for 25 years.

The regeneration project also includes the creation of seven new public squares and a waterfront walkway. Contrary to the cases of Colombo and Piraeus where public participation has been non-existent so far, ABP has run several public workshops to discuss their development but it is not yet clear who will manage these areas and which activities will be allowed. As local residents and activists explained to me despite the outcome of ongoing consultations, Albert Dock is already being transformed to a privatised public space welcoming to new enterprise communities and start-ups but hostile to public gatherings and non-commercial activities (Kennard and Caistor-Arendar 2016). The project, as its master planner explains, "realises the dream of an unrivalled waterfront destination that places powerful international business alongside open public squares allowing space for relaxation and contemplation". The framing of the latter as a "potent mix" that is desirable by all, reflects well the project's marketing and advertising strategy (ABP nd b). The new ABP development claims to reinvent an abandoned land by transforming it to "1,142 hectares of opportunity" for investors; its aspiration is not to simply modernise or improve a run-down area, as Hancox (2014) aptly argues, it is to wipe it out in a "regeneration supernova".

Recently, in the Belt and Road News (2019a), the investment has been celebrated as a saviour for the area:

> Thanks to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) … the dock and its surroundings are no longer in decline and despair. The whole area is now humming with international commerce and culture, home to London's only enterprise zone, known as the Royal Docks Enterprise Zone. It will soon create more than 20,000 new jobs to act as a gateway to the United Kingdom for Chinese businesses, and through investment in housing, leisure facilities, and transport connections.

The narrative of prosperity and employment opportunities has been powerful, especially as it is framed as the only alternative for the ethnically diverse East London that has one of the highest unemployment rates in the capital and has been hardly hit both by prolonged austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic as local activists emphasised during our discussions. It nonetheless neglects to mention that despite the rhetoric of job creation available evidence suggests that so far Chinese companies play the key role in the project (Heiduk 2018). It also ignores that the area's regeneration is not only dispossessing the public from the potential of an open, accessible and truly welcoming urban space but it could also bring the displacement of low-income people that has been a defining characteristic of gentrification processes within and beyond the Docklands. This does not only refer to physical relocation due to rising rents but also to urban marginality in an area where the collective imagination of its potential reappropriation for the people of London seems miles away from today's hegemonic regeneration narrative.

Piraeus Port in Athens, Greece: The Head of the Dragon

Piraeus is the largest port in Greece located six miles from the centre of Athens and has 37.7 km of quays and port facilities that cover four municipalities. Characterised as the Head of the Dragon by the Chinese President Xi Jinping (Belt and Road News 2019b),[6] Piraeus has been a key investment for China due to its strategic geographical position that renders it a gateway for Chinese products to enter Europe. It also serves as the hub for the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Line and the Hungarian-Serbia Railway (Li 2019).

COSCO, a Chinese state-owned shipping and logistics supplier company, obtained in 2008 a 35-year concession from the Greek government to operate part of Piraeus' container terminal (Piers II and III) and established Piraeus Container Terminal (PCT). The controversial decision to privatise Piraeus' most profitable sector was supported by major Greek shipowners who were expecting to gain favourable loan conditions from Chinese banks by agreeing to use Chinese shipyards. The concession contract included various terms that permitted COSCO to establish a hegemonic position in the market with an indicative example being the agreement between Piraeus Port Authority (PPA) and PCT that no container terminal could be developed in an area of 200 km from the port without COSCO's permission. In 2016, COSCO signed an agreement with the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF) to acquire the majority (67%) of PPA's shares, becoming the primary port operator (China Daily 20162016; National Herald 2019). The deal has been ferociously fought by trade unions and dockworkers that have historically played an emblematic role in the Greek labour movement.

Similarly to Albert Dock, in response to escalating social contestation both Greek and Chinese officials argued that transforming the port to a key BRI hub is a win-win deal that would bring jobs and prosperity (China Daily 2016) with HRADF's president stating that the day COSCO acquired the majority marked a turn of the Greek economy towards growth (ERT International 2016). What the privatisation undoubtedly brought was a profound increase in the port's scale of operations: in 2017, annual throughput capacity has exceeded four million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), an increase of over four times compared to 2010, making Piraeus the 36th biggest port globally and the second in the Mediterranean (National Herald 2019; Xinhua 2018) with media reports celebrating its "renaissance" since its takeover from COSCO (Nightingale 2019). In July 2017, during a visit of the former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to Beijing, China's President announced that Piraeus would become the largest container trans-shipment harbour in the Mediterranean, a landmark of sea-land transportation, an international logistic allocation centre and a key pivot of the BRI. Greece has been portrayed as a key communication bridge between China and the EU and Piraeus a "home port" for Chinese tourists (National Herald 2019). COSCO's new plans reflected these aspirations: as described in the €611.8 million masterplan, that has been partly approved by Greek authorities in 2019 (Bellos 2019), the port's new expansion, inter alia, includes an additional cruise-ship terminal, four luxury hotels, a logistics centre, and a shopping mall in a new artificial "island" that if built will profoundly transform the area, and particularly Peiraiki, the coastline of Peiraus. Chinese investment is not limited in Piraeus; it is also profoundly transforming real estate in Athens as evidenced in rising rents causing increasing housing insecurity for city's low income residents. Similarly to the UK and Sri Lanka, Chinese investment has been fast growing in Greece in the infrastructure, energy, telecommunications, tourism and real estate sectors (Tonchev and Davarinou 2017). The latter relates both to the strategic interest of the Chinese government in creating a cross-border transport and trade corridor from the Mediterranean to Central Europe and Greece's willingness to receive Chinese investment, and international financial aid more broadly, due to its prolonged debt crisis (ibid.).

Despite the Chinese rhetoric of cooperation and Greek government's reassurance that the agreement would be beneficial, empirical evidence shows that COSCO's concession has facilitated processes of accumulation, dispossession, and exploitation that extend far beyond the usual dynamics of terminal privatisation (Neilson 2019) exacerbating inequality and labour precarity. It is indicative that the concession agreement included no reference to workers (Frantzeskaki 2016) and that when COSCO acquired the two Piers at least 500 full-time workers lost their job through the imposition of an early retirement scheme. COSCO also used a combination of direct hiring (for the 20% of the workers) and subcontracting (for the 80%). But even the workers who are directly employed by COSCO have different employment contracts, benefits and wages than other workers in Piraeus, a common practice in work areas where collective bargaining agreements have been dismantled. As employees in Piraeus port explained to me a number of issues related to maximum working hours and health and safety regulations have also emerged with dockworkers called to work 90 minutes before their shift and often overtime without being paid. These practices did not come as a surprise: they have been strategically used to curve trade unions' power in other cases of public asset privatisations at the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015). However, in the case of Piraeus, workers also have to deal with COSCO's top management who are unreachable to collective demands. Similarly to Albert Dock, Piraeus' privatisation has so far created a limited number of new jobs with COSCO importing most of the necessary technology from China while enjoying tax exceptions under Greek law and benefiting from Piraeus operation as a European Commission Free Zone-Type II (Logistics as Global Governance 2013; Piraeus Port Authority 2018).[7] To add to that, the rent that COSCO/PCT was paying to PPA for the container terminal under its management is now received by COSCO, namely the company is buying back the revenue stream of its own concession at much less than face value. COSCO is also using EU funding that the PPA secured before the privatisation to implement its business plan, including a €140 million loan from the European Investment Bank (Reuters 2019).

Importantly, and relatedly, the environmental impacts of COSCO's operations, including a major increase in atmospheric and noise pollution that disproportionally affects the adjacent neighbourhoods with people living in particular areas forced to tolerate a 24-hour exposure to light and noise pollution, have never been seriously addressed. The new expansion is expected to aggravate the situation and has been strongly resisted by grassroots groups for causing major accumulative environmental pressure in the area. Despite escalating opposition and amid calls from environmental NGOs that COSCO's operations are threatening Saronikos' marine ecosystems and fishing grounds as well as public health, in March 2020 and despite the lockdown that has been imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, construction work for the new cruise terminal commenced without the approval of the Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment.[8] Grassroots organisations and local citizens committees strongly opposed the latter and along with members of the local administration convinced Piraeus muncipality in April 2020 to ask for the pause of the constructions until the assessment is approved. But even this would not resolve the issue since the assessment has already been criticised for underestimating the impacts of COSCO's masterplan, including public health risks due to the release of hazardous waste in an area adjacent to primary schools, homes, and playgrounds.[9] As a local resident and activist told me, "they don't want to just take the port, they want to make everything to function according to specific rules regardless of environmental or social impacts; what we fear is that Piraeus is being transformed to a COSCO town".

As with London's Docklands, Piraeus history and social stratification is important for understanding what the above mean for local people. The areas mostly affected, Keratsini, Drapetsona, and Perama, are part of a former port-industrial zone whose emergence has been linked to an incoming wave of industrial workers and refugees in the 1930s and the expansion of poor quality housing. Surrounding areas have been converted into working class neighbourhoods with a record of radical community activism. Urban development eventually took the form of blocks of flats due to Piraeus' transformation into an important shipping centre and the area's industrial development (GRECO 2020). However, as in the London docklands, the decline of the industrial and shipbuilding zone led to massive unemployment and abandonment.[10] The financial crash of 2008 further hit industrial units and shipyards causing a sharp rise of unemployment leading many to economic despair and creating the ground for COSCO's promises to convince a part of the local community to accept the privatisation.

Recently there have been governmental promises that the port's expansion would be accompanied by a major regeneration plan. This includes a new international business centre and innovation hub in the municipality of Keratsini-Drapetsona, one of the five "emblematic" projects that the new Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced in 2019[11] echoing a type of urban regeneration similar to London's docklands[12] that is relatively new for Greece. This consists of the creation of gentrified post-industrial enclaves on the outskirts of city centres with questionable social benefits and a high possibility to enhance instead of tackling inequality. Regeneration promises have not so far convinced grassroots groups whose ongoing struggles have been recently suppressed by the police. In one of my last meetings with them, they reminded me that Piraeus never had suburbs desirable for the upper classes (see Thomas 2017) and has always been a symbol for the working class, adding that what they advocate for is social-environmental justice for Piraeus, one of the most emblematic areas in Athens where social and spatial inequality is inextricably linked to environmental inequality.

Colombo Port City: Sri Lanka's New Dubai

Colombo Port City has been one of the most controversial infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka that was met from the beginning with local opposition. Even though the original proposal goes back to the 1990s, the project was launched in 2014 with then President Rajapaksa stating in the inauguration ceremony, where the Chinese President was also present, that it is "with the help from Chinese friends" that "the Sri Lanka people are able to make their dream come true" (China Daily 2014). This followed the signing of a concession agreement between the Rajapaksa administration and China Harbour Engineering Company, a unit of the state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) that undertook the construction. Similarly to Piraeus, it was agreed that Sri Lanka's Government would not undertake competing infrastructure projects within a 20 km radius of the Port City (Gunawansa 2018). CCCC was given the right to choose the contractor and no call for competitive bids occurred despite the official guidelines for public procurement projects (ibid.).

The new city is connected to Colombo Central Business District and is expected to become a key hub for the Maritime Silk Road. The expected overall investment reaches US$15 billion consisting of the largest single foreign direct investment in Sri Lanka's history. Colombo Port City, recently renamed the Colombo International Financial City (CIFC) by the new government, is based on a sea reclamation project that is already profoundly transforming Colombo's urban landscape and consists of five precincts: Central Park Living, the Financial District, Island Living, the Marina, and International Island (Port City Colombo 2020a).[13] It is estimated to include 5.65 million m^2 of build up space, including luxury hotels, shopping malls, high-end flats, beachfront villas, office towers, casinos, embassies, and skyscrapers with recent artistic impressions showing a cityscape comparable to Dubai or London's Canary Wharf (Grant Associates 2017; Safi 2018). A 1.5 km in length and 50 m in width artificial beach is also projected to open soon and a yacht marina with water sports facilities entered its final construction stage (Port City Colombo 2020b). The city is supposed to include public space but, as interviewees explained to me, similarly to the ABP development in London, there is so far no specific information on who will manage this space or have the right to access it with the development's exclusive character creating concerns that access will be seriously restricted. As a local resident and activist queried during our discussions, "will people from other areas have access in the Port City? We have serious concerns that they won't".

Foreign influence in shaping Colombo's urban future has been evident before the Port City with the primary example being the construction of luxury apartment complexes, such as the Astoria complex, a project by the Chinese state-owned Aviation Industry Corporation, located less than a mile from Colombo Port City.[14] Astoria reflects a model of urbanism already prevalent in China: towers of luxury apartments with exclusive clubs, famous commercial brands, swimming pools and private gardens and is advertised as a "smart" investment for entering Colombo's real estate.[15] Moreover, as in London and Athens, Chinese investment expands far beyond Colombo. In the case of Sri Lanka, the latter appears much more intense with massive public investments in infrastructure, including roads, motorways, ports and airports, funded by foreign loans coming mostly from China since 2005. This included selling 80% of Colombo's International Container Terminal that is adjacent to the Port City to a Chinese company. Similarly to Piraeus, the privatisation led to a sharp reduction of the workforce with workers being hired from subcontractors at lower wages and fewer labour rights. The exact details of the agreement have never been publicly available and the number of workers in the area remains unknown. As a local activist told me, "it is almost impossible to find accurate information about the project; everything is obscured and no one knows exactly what is happening and this weakens opposition".

Chinese and more broadly foreigner interest in the island nation of Sri Lanka relates to its strategic location in one of the busiest trade routes globally offering a gateway between Southeast Asia and the Middle East, Africa and Europe. The City Port along with Hambantota Port are of key importance for the BRI as major access points in the Indian Ocean (Financial Times 2017b). Colombo port is expected to become a maritime interchange for cargo and the CIFC an offshore financial centre operating under a British-style legal system with a new SEZ established to facilitate arbitration and settlement of international contracts transforming the area to a financial, tourist and trade hub (China Today 2018; Safi 2018). Importantly, the Port City does not reflect only Chinese inspirations but has been a key part of controversial urban regeneration plans from Sri Lanka's governments following the end of the 26-year civil war (in 2009) and aiming at transforming Sri Lanka to a liberalised economy open to foreign investors. These included the Western Region Megapolis and the City Beautification Program (Ruwanpura et al. 2020) whose implementation required military's involvement and entailed mass evictions of the urban poor (Radicati 2020), demolitions (Colombo Gazette 2015; Van Dort 2016) and forceful slum clearance continuing Sri Lanka's long history of displacements of low-income, multi-ethnic and multi-religious urban communities from city centres.

The above context is important for understanding the opposition with which the City Port was met by grassroots groups, students, trade unionists, urban activists, fishing communities, clergy members and environmentalists. Similarly to Piraeus, both the environmental and the social impacts of the new port city were central to the opposition, with scientists and activists arguing that sand excavation would destroy Colombo's coastline, coral reefs, and fishing breeding areas posing threats of erosion and flooding to an area prone to natural disasters while affecting the livelihoods of people living in Colombo's beaches and depending on fishing.[16] There were also concerns about land grabbing and dispossession, inadequate compensation for lost income and housing damages, and criticism for the project's exclusive character that was expected to favour wealthy elites, with protesters arguing, as in the case of Piraeus Port, that no comprehensive impact assessments have been conducted prior to the project's approval.

Amidst increasing criticism, the project was temporarily suspended after the 2015 elections and the new Sirisena administration announced that the agreement would be scrutinised. However, in March 2016, within the context of a rising national external debt, a significant part of which was owed to China, and increasing recognition that reconsidering the agreement would not be financially feasible, the Sirisena administration gave permission for the project to resume citing its importance for Sri Lanka's economy and confirming that CCCC's project was aligned with governmental aspirations (Gunawansa 2018). Restarting the project did not remain unchallenged. A civil organisation, called the People's Movement against Port City, a coalition of fishing communities, religious leaders and civil society groups, that has opposed the project from the beginning, organised several protests (Brown et al. 2018; Perera 2016). In October 2016, fishing communities went on strike protesting for the loss of houses and livelihoods, and in August 2017, women from fishing communities organised a protest under heavy policy presence (Colombage 2016; Perera 2017). Sri Lankan urban activists raised concerns about CCCC's role as the "landlord" of the Port City with the former Urban Development Authority director stating in *The Guardian* that the "Port City will be a separate entity where only a certain class of people will live" (Safi 2018). Moreover, there were increasing concerns about the impacts of the Port City to the iconic Galle Face Green, a 5 ha ocean-side urban park that is Colombo's largest open space and a popular destination for the working class.

As activists explained to me, even though opposition was significant, it has not so far been commensurable to the scale and impacts of the project. This is partly due to the fact that the rhetoric of economic development convinced a part of the unprivileged working class who saw in the Port City the possibility of a better future for their children. The announcement of the BRI played a key role in this as it was used to convince local stakeholders about the potential benefits of controversial large-scale BRI-related projects funded by Chinese capital, particularly amidst increasing criticism about Chinese-funding acting as a possible "debt trap" for Sri Lanka. Public opposition eventually led to an agreement to move the dredgers farther offshore and promises from the CCCC to give 500 million Sri Lankan rupees ($3.2 million) to the fishers' income support programme (Prasso 2018). In 2019, the project's first phase was completed, including the reclamation of 269 ha of land from the ocean. Even though the first compensations have been already given gaining the consensus of some members of the local community (Daily News 2019; Xinhua 2020), protesters still argue that the project will lead to massive displacements and destroy Colombo. The Port City is projected to double Colombo's population and reflects a development model that by ignoring prior land uses, social needs and environmental risks creates a battleground between residents, investors, politicians and the working class (Brown et al. 2018). Its contested vision consists of a revived colonial view for making territories accessible, useful and visible within global production and trade networks (Enns and Bersaglio 2020) mixed with neoliberal dreams of offshore financial hubs and low-tax heavens designed to create exclusionary city enclaves targeting by definition only a particular economic and business elite.

The New Silk Road and the Re-Engineering of Urban Geographies

Infrastructure-Led Development, Authoritarian Neoliberal Urbanism, and the Deepening of Inequality

The tales of the three cities despite their striking divergences are illuminating how BRI-driven urban transformation articulates with local and global processes to produce distinct urban and social geographies. Relational comparison allows us to see that these geographies may be fashioned by local social relations and power struggles but are conditioned by broader socio-spatial processes (Hart 2018), namely their repositioning within an increasingly interdependent and hierarchically organised global space-time (Goswami 2002), novel infrastructural linkages and core-periphery relationships (Mayer and Zhang 2020) due to their role as urban nodes of the New Silk Road. These dynamics lead to the emergence of new urban formations[17] that exemplify both the pivotal role of global infrastructure as a driver of contemporary urban transformation (Wiig and Silver 2019) and the near global prevalence of an urban-oriented regime of capital accumulation (Wu et al. 2016). These formations, in turn, bear distinct characteristics that signal the emergence of a new form of *infrastructure-led, authoritarian neoliberal urbanism* that is supported at an unprecedented scale by novel urban growth coalitions that are both place-based and exceed beyond specific places (Wachsmuth 2017) creating particularly unfavourable conditions for urban dwellers. Even though this form of urbanism shares commonalities with similar processes stressed by other scholars (see Bruff 2014; Büdenbender and Zupan 2017; Kuymulu 2013; Tansel 2019; Zhang 2017), it also differentiates from them because it is defined by BRI's entanglement with communities, places, socionatures, power and labour relations and the contingent ways the initiative transforms social and economic geographies, urban space and social relations (Lefebvre 1974).

The first element that makes BRI-driven urban formations distinct is that they are the outcome of changing political-economic relations and dynamics of global capital accumulation, and particularly, an astonishing manifestation of China's rising hegemony and its attempt to render infrastructure a hallmark of its "inclusive" globalisation model (Chen 2018). Even though China has invested 8–9% of its GDP in infrastructure, meeting a disproportionate part of the global infrastructure gap (ibid.), and has promoted the BRI as a supporter of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and free trade offering an alternative path to US's protectionism under Trump (Elliott and Wearden 2017; UNDESA 2020), it has also clearly benefited specific enterprises with 90% of contracts going to Chinese companies (Webb 2019). This is evident in all the three cities explored here where BRI projects embody the decisive role of foreign investment, and predominantly of Chinese state-owned enterprises, in shaping urban geographies as well as the transfer of strategic public infrastructure under Chinese ownership and/or management in the heartlands of capital cities. In that sense, I argue that BRI projects in Piraeus, Royal Docks and Colombo are enabling the making of new bordered territories generating "structural holes" inside the tissue of national sovereign territory (Sassen 2013:23). On the one hand, these local-global urban territories indicate a deeper integration of regions and countries across the Euro-Asian continent (Mayer and Zhang 2020) placing China, and more broadly the Asian region, in a more competitive position vis-à-vis the US, a tendency already identified from the early 2000s (Harvey 2005). On the other hand, the interests involved in BRI projects unravel a more perplexing picture that does not invalidate China's emerging hegemony but nonetheless illustrates the heightened role of multilateral agencies, corporate actors, transnational capital and infrastructure developers (Mayer and Zhang 2020) and the realignment of diverse interests under the common goal of imposing their agenda in national and regional urban planning (Hildyard and Sol 2017; Kanai and Schindler 2019; Schindler and Kanai 2019). BRI's global outreach and convoluted local-global partnerships are evident both in its funding mechanism (Henneke and Knowles 2020; Liu and Dunford 2016; OECD 2018) and the way BRI-related diplomatic discourse in Greece, the UK and Sri Lanka has so far accentuated the win-win outcomes of novel infrastructural corridors, new trade relations, and free capital movement. Even though the initiative's potential to benefit companies and governments beyond China highlights the complex dialectics between the territorial and the capitalist logics of power (Gramsci 1971; Harvey 2005), it should not create the illusion of a rosy picture that signals the end of intra-capitalist competition. Emerging alliances are mostly opportunistic and in all the cities explored here, both Chinese and national political-economic elites struggle to turn BRI projects in their favour (Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019) and if their interests do not meet, conflicts will probably arise. Indicative examples include ongoing tensions in UK–China relations related to the use of Huawei's 5G equipment in the UK (New York Times 2020) and potential constraints coming from the economic relations of the UK with the US and the EU (Crookes and Farnell 2019) as well as the cases where Chinese investments have met difficulties in Greece due to red tape and EU competition rules (Tonchev and Davarinou 2017).

Secondly, and relatedly, these novel urban formations owe their existence first and foremost to their potential to act as spatial fixes. As such, they are palpable expressions of the aggressive prioritisation of private profits, corporate interests and multinational, cross-scale growth coalitions over the infrastructures of social reproduction (McFarlane and Silver 2017; Wiig and Silver 2019). In the three cities explored here, BRI projects managed, albeit differently, to agglomerate (cheap) labour and capital and facilitate capital circulation through the combination of transportation with real estate and commercial projects. In all cases, these projects are concentrated in urban centres reconfiguring cities as nodes of wealth, cosmopolitanism and entrepreneurship (Jessop 2019; Sassen 2002) epitomising the departure from the spatial Keynesianism of the mid-20th century (Brenner 2004). But this did not come from parthenogenesis. Rendering urban space an arena for market-oriented growth and elite consumption practices has been at the core of framing the city as a growth machine (Logan and Molotch 1987) and a hallmark of the neoliberal urban regeneration of the last two decades (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2015, 2019; Harvey 2012, 2019; Peck and Tickell 2007). BRI interventions built on prior legacies, current governmental agendas and hegemonic narratives and exacerbated in all cities, albeit at a different scale and speed, already unfolding uneven geographies of urban gentrification and displacement. They rechannelled investment into the built environment, reduced spatiotemporal barriers and ensured privileged access into new markets deploying all possibilities of acting as spatial fixes (Christophers 2011; Harvey 2018; Smith 1987).

The third distinct characteristic of infrastructure-led, urban formations, that is a direct outcome of the above two points, is that they engender a new stage of revanchist and authoritarian urban development that deepens spatial fragmentation, territorial stigmatisation and social segregation. This does not only intensify existing regeneration and gentrification trends; it supersedes them by pursuing a complete remaking of cities that prioritises capital accumulation above any other social and spatial planning consideration and, therefore, is deeply uneven, socially and spatially. In cities of the global North, like Athens and London, Chinese investment perceived an upgraded role within a context of prolonged crisis, privatisations, public disinvestment, prioritisation of housing's exchange (instead of use) value and austerity politics (Apostolopoulou 2020a, 2020b) and further fractured public infrastructures of social reproduction entrenching urban marginality. This is evidenced in increasing housing precarity and inequality, and the creation of new transport infrastructure designed to facilitate transnational trade and commercial and real estate projects and not urban dwellers. Similar trends have been manifested in Colombo where the Port City enhanced class-driven gentrification aggravating the displacement and dispossession of Colombo's working class under the rhetoric of building a new city based on a neo-colonial speculative imaginary for world-city investors and professionals (Goldman 2011). This remaking of cities by fetishising consumption and disregarding both the urban commons and social needs returns the places it touches to "a year zero" (Hancox 2014). Annulling prior legacies and people's histories is necessary to enable a spectacular re-inscription and reconfiguration of urban spaces as spatial products of homogenisation, entrepreneurship and consumption, ideal to host newly emerging urban enterprise communities and re-invent the city for corporate investors.

Authoritarianism, therefore, is manifested as economic coercion (Apostolopoulou et al. 2014): infrastructure-led development reconfigures cities as nodes of wealth in broader transnational networks and as sites of capital accumulation, free trade, foreign investments and luxury (Ong 2006; Sassen 2002) escalating already identified trends of neoliberal urbanism (Theodore et al. 2011). Colombo Port City is renamed the new Dubai, Albert Dock the new Canary Wharf and Piraeus the new Docklands. But if capital, technology and elites benefit from easily flowing across metropolitan regions (Castells 2010; Summers 2016), the same cannot be said about labour: imposing positive exceptions for the capitalist class has been accompanied by unfavourable conditions for the working class and those living at the urban margins as evidenced in the dismantling of labour organisation and workers' rights in Piraeus and Sri Lanka, the facilitation of the privatisation and outsourcing of public infrastructures of social reproduction and urban space in London, and the replacement of collective rights (to the city) by contentious "opportunities" arising from bringing the urban poor close to wealth and luxury. Economic coercion finds its epitome in the way BRI projects have been linked in all cities explored here to the creation of lawless, special economic and financial zones creating neoliberal urban spaces of exception, graduated sovereignty, nature's exploitation (Tracy et al. 2017) and workers' precarisation (Hildyard and Sol 2017; Ong 2006). These zones have a long history in Greater Mekong Subregion characterised by limited transparency, forceful displacements, labour exploitation and flawed environmental impact assessments (Thame 2017).

The creation of new zones of exception within the ubiquitous life of the city means that authoritarianism also entails coercive and undemocratic urban politics. These differ across different cityscapes, as the tales of Athens, London and Colombo show, but nonetheless are manifested in the increasing hegemony of the following four practices. Firstly, the negotiation of the direction of urban transformation through processes and forums that attribute privileged access to corporate elites and exclude social movements and grassroots organisations (see also Swyngedouw 2000, 2005). Secondly, the devaluation of public consultation and collective bargain and its replacement either with informal participation in workshops with no decision-making power, as in London, a city used to consensual politics that is the result of the class victory of neoliberal forces (Massey 2007), or with a tightly circumstanced participation as in Piraeus. Thirdly, the astonishing neglect for the public interest that is accompanied by the attempt to insulate BRI-related agreements from public protests. It is indicative that the Chinese government has clarified that it sees BRI developments as "commercial cooperation projects between companies" (Chunying 2018) and that issues related to their environmental and social impacts should be resolved through negotiation by "relevant business partners". Fourthly, the (often violent) suppression of social struggles that ranges from imposing a heavy police presence in demonstrations in Athens to forced evictions and violations of housing rights in Colombo (see also, on similar trends in Turkey and Shanghai respectively, Tansel 2019; Zhang 2017).

Importantly, in Athens, London and Colombo, there is a common narrative of prosperity that combined with the Chinese rhetoric that overemphasises the links with the ancient Silk Road, a historical network of trade routes started during the Han Dynasty, to support the benevolence of the contemporary Belt and Road (Mayer 2018; see also NDRC 2015; OLGBRI 2017), has partly managed to trap the urban poor into the imaginary of the elite. The monumental interests involved and the project lifetimes that make it hard for people to realise how exactly upcoming socio-spatial change will affect their future, makes it even harder to challenge these narratives. Nonetheless, infrastructure-led, authoritarian neoliberal urbanism is also a product of neoliberalism's decreasing legitimacy (Fraser 2015; Harvey 2019) as it aims at disciplining resistance and insulating multibillion projects from social and political dissent (Bruff 2014) to enforce exclusionary urban development models that contradict people's historical demands. But cities cannot be governed according to profitable investment portfolios. There is an inextricable link between urban planning and social movements (Castells 1977) and between urban revolutions from above and urban revolutions from below (Sheppard et al. 2015). The current prevalence of the teleological imaginary of neoliberal urbanism, vividly expressed in the consensus that all governments—including a left wing and a right wing government in Greece with very different pre-electoral agendas—have shown to the materialisation of BRI projects in Athens, Colombo and London, does not negate the fact that political struggle is internal to the formation of any spatial fix (Ekers and Prudham 2017). New contradictions will arise because geographically immobilised forms of fixed capital, as new spaces of capital accumulation, will need to find ways to absorb the surpluses they generate through further geographical expansions (Smith 2008). Spatio-temporal fixes are material and social relations and their evolving (re)configurations lead to conflicts and class struggles that ultimately determine how urban space is produced (Harvey 2012; Klinger 2019; Lefebvre 1974).

BRI projects, despite enmeshing everyday lives in economies of anticipation (Murton and Lord 2020), are thus exposed to struggle and contestation over their trajectory and legitimacy. Our relational spatial lens allows us to see that the deployment of global infrastructure in urban space materialises in contingent ways (Wiig and Silver 2019) and struggles against BRI projects are intertwining with local struggles around housing, employment, public health and social, spatial and environmental justice that will intensify in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rose-Redwood et al. 2020). These struggles show that there is no single space/spatiality; places are processes whose identities are multiple, shifting, and potentially unbounded and as such they are defined by conflict over both their present development and their future (Massey 1994). It is through such struggles and conflicts that new forms of urban, collective solidarity may emerge reclaiming a radical re-appropriation and re-inscription of urban places by its citizens as spaces of protest, heterogeneity and differentiation (Lefebvre 1974; Watson 2006) opening up new pathways of transforming urban politics and engendering a new global sense of place (sensu Massey 1994).

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Endnotes

[1] The imperative to annihilate space by time is evident in the 2009 World Bank Development Report without of course attributing the concept to Marx (Hildyard and Sol 2017).

[2] A large cargo vessel needs about 30-45 days of sailing to go from East Asia to Northern Europe.
[3] On the Royal Docks' history more generally, see Royal Docks (2018).
[4] See http://www.abp.cn/en/beijing and http://www.abp.cn/en/news/detail/act/video/infoid/1521/
[5] See https://rad.london/gallery One-bedroom flats at Gallions Point start at £353,750 and two-bedroom flats at Royal Warf at £588,000 (both areas are at about 30 minutes walk from Albert Royal Dock) (Bloomfield 2020; Royal Wharf 2020; Telford Homes 2020).
[6] "Dragon" refers to the Belt and Road Initiative.
[7] This means that goods transferred between ships do not pass customs.
[8] See https://archipelago.gr/xekinise-anexelegkti-aporripsi-chiliadon-tonon-toxikou-izimatos-sta-alieftika-pedia-ke-ikosystimata-tou-saronikou/?fbclid=IwAR1hUmKlBf 6sx9CvnQn2CjJt9O7Eoc9cI2chVO2tVXiomdremsP7focmUV8
[9] See http://epohi.gr/nees-thhriwdies-epektaseis-sto-limani-tou-peiraia/
[10] 1663 industrial and commercial enterprises closed in the greater Piraeus area only between 1992 and 1996.
[11] See https://www.kathimerini.gr/1034899/article/epikairothta/politikh/pente-nea-erga-anakoinwse-o-kyriakos-mhtsotakhs
[12] In the Greek Press the regeneration plan was accompanied by the area's characterisation as the new "docklands"; see https://gr.askmen.com/economy/1097184/article/drapetsona-to-neo-elleniko
[13] See https://www.portcitycolombo.lk/gallery/#birds-eye-night and https://twitter.com/PortCityColombo
[14] See http://www.astoria.lk/
[15] Ibid.
[16] See https://panap.net/2017/10/debt-destruction-china-funded-projects-sri-lanka-stir-controversy-conflict/
[17] I consider these new formations urban not only because they occur in the city but also because they encompass the intensification of land uses, large-scale infrastructure, residential density, increased connectivity and social-environmental metabolism, all expressions of what pervades the urban ontologically (Brenner and Schmid 2014).

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