

BUILDING BANGALORE'S COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

A CASE FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN CORPORATIONS AND THE CITY

MBE graduate thesis at TU Delft

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Colophon

Thesis Reflection

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A case for collaboration between
Corporations and the City

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Personal Reflection

This thesis reflects an interest in exploring urbanization of metropolitan cities, owing to business investments in these cities. Accommodation preferences of the private sector have spurred on migration to cities. My home town of Bangalore has been adversely affected, and their impact on the city, witnessed first-hand, has been the motivation for this research.

It is with the intention of exploring the dynamics of real estate development in the context of urbanization that I have spent this year researching government policy, planning strategies and private sector involvement. It has been enlightening to understand the growth of the city from an academic perspective, and after completing nearly a year of research, it is thought provoking to take a step back and reflect on the entire process.

This report will document the process, beginning by establishing the relevance of the research topic, and the methods chosen to conduct the research. Challenges and milestones along the way will convey the learning process, which has been exciting and trying in equal measure.

I. Relevance

For cities such as Bangalore that have adopted urban containment by means of a green belt, a debate of building up or out is prevalent in view of issues such as unaffordability and crowding in urban areas. Planners in Bangalore anticipate continued sprawl, but this pattern has displayed challenges with real estate development devouring the green belt. Even the green belts of London have been criticized for being the major cause for the lack of affordable housing in the city, by strangling the city just where land is needed the most (Cheshire, 2013a). Further analysis needs to be conducted to understand the implications of each kind of development in order to shape future real estate development.

Comprehensive research is also lacking when tracking changes in the environment of the city with respect to the private and public sector dynamics in the city. The thesis addresses a small portion of this by comparing cities with different collaboration models, in order to draw conclusions in this matter. The target group for this study thus includes policy makers of the city. The thesis provides a better understanding of the forces in play when considering economic geography, however does not make explicit any policy recommendations. Businesses form the backbone of the city economy, and the hypothesis being tested in the thesis is that they contribute to the urban structure of the city significantly. The various actors including policy makers, planners, developers and businesses should be equally aware and responsible for the contextual development of the city.

II. Research design and methods

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this thesis, which included extensive literature review through desk research, and exploration of previous research on similar topics. Many researchers have pursued business location decision patterns in Bangalore, and their studies have provided a wealth of knowledge about the private sector. To build on this understanding, interviews were also conducted to substantiate their findings a decade later, and to track structural changes that have taken place. This kind of study through time has been an engaging process, providing insight into how real estate development is highly contextual and often resilient in nature.

The thesis was approached as an empirical research, and the process has been iterative right from the P1 period. Each research paper and article led to several other relevant ones, spinning an intricate web of literature sources and topics that could be explored. Alas, it was easy to stray from the focus of the topic, and I found myself reshaping the research question and scope several times as more literature was explored. During some periods, the exercise often resulted in broadening the research scope rather than refining it and it was difficult to bring the focus back to the research intent. As counter-productive as this may sound, the process allowed me to be much clearer with my hypothesis and assumptions, while providing sufficient scientific basis to it at the same time. These months of reading have also allowed me to pick up some technical writing skills along the way. Though the literature review was academically necessary, it was also a highly enjoyable process because of my personal interactions with some of the cities and their residents. This allowed me to sustain discussions outside of the academic thesis, and helped me to learn much more than I expected to at the start of the year.

The case of Bangalore in particular was a challenge because of a lack of abundant research, specifically on the existing interactions between the private and public sector. The lack of literature can be attributed to the fact that Bangalore is a relatively young city, and development has occurred only in the last two decades. Furthermore, there is generally a lack of academic research inclination, or academic institutions in the city that pursue planning or real estate for that matter. The data was therefore gathered through several grey literature sources, not to mention interviews, which were subsequently used to build a comprehensive argument for the thesis. In this regard, personal observation and knowledge about the city helped fill in the gaps to large extent.

As mentioned previously, there was some back and forth with regards to the scope of the thesis. A significant milestone was the decision to narrow the scope to an extensive study of one case, instead of a comparative case study between cities. Looking back, this was a wise decision since researching two cities may not have resulted in any conclusive findings. This decision of depth vs. scope allowed a detailed understanding of the selected case of Bangalore, and permitted just enough time to collect and analyse the interview data. Given the lack of time, it may have been too demanding to conducting such a profound study had there been more than one case.

Pursuing a thesis for a year can be challenging because of the immense self-motivation it requires. However, speaking to consultants and interviewees facilitated a much needed breath of fresh air. Though the most trying time, conducting the interviews was immensely enjoyable as these discussions brought renewed life into writing on the topic, and sparked interest in further investigations. Many times, the interviewees were so enthusiastic about the topic that following an interview protocol became quite unnecessary as they supplied most of the information without being prompted.

Having said this, getting a foot through the door of the bureaucratic set up in Bangalore was the biggest hurdle. Interviews with government authorities were a crucial data source, and it took an exceptionally long time to make the right contacts. However, once the interviews were underway, the interviewees were glad to assist me with further professionals and authorities who could serve as data sources. Time has restricted me in pursuing all the leads I received, but every attempt was made to cover at least one representative from each relevant body. This is one aspect that I think has great potential in further research, as more data sources can only substantiate further findings.

Apart from the academic data that fed my research, the most important take away from the interviews has been to understand that growth in Bangalore has been a massive exercise in creating and investing in real estate, in the hands of both the government and the businesses independently. In such a scenario, planning takes a back seat as investment assets, such as land, become the deciding factor. It was illuminating to understand how this approach is reflected in the city we see today.

III. Learning Process

In the wake of the urbanisation witnessed in the city, there is much scope for research on several of the topics that were touched upon in this thesis. The nature of real estate development in relation to land prices, the effectiveness of public private partnerships in Bangalore, comprehensive growth strategies for the city etc. are all topics that are crucial to understand in the case of Bangalore. At a larger scale, understanding how other cities have tackled some of the urban problems through partnerships can help argue for or against a particular strategy for Bangalore. Although time was a restraint in pursuing these topics further, a general investigation was done for some of the cities to develop a frame of reference.

A peculiar feeling arose while speaking with the interviewees, since many of them sounded disheartened and frustrated with the direction of the city's growth. This one year of research has been thought provoking in understanding that Bangalore is still a budding city, witnessing significant growth only from 1990's. Many of the urban realities of the city that have been criticised in this thesis have also been faced by several other cities across the world in the past. However, since some these cities have been able to recognise and correct the issues, it is my hope that with sufficient academic research and implementation followed by accountability, Bangalore will be able to compete globally not just in the provision of IT services, but in the provision of a healthy city to live and do business in.