NAIROBI: A city in which ‘contempt for the resident is everywhere apparent’

By Rasna Warah

“The people are the city.” – Citizens in William Shakespeare’s Coriolanus

At the crack of dawn, roughly between 5a.m and 7a.m, the “Great Trek” in Nairobi begins. Hordes of security guards, domestic workers, office cleaners, factory workers, vegetable hawkers, office messengers and jua kali artisans, among others, start their journey to work – on foot. It is a scene to behold. Thousands of people purposefully walking on roads meant for cars – sometimes for as long as three hours – to report to work by 8a.m., if not earlier.

These are the forgotten people, the ones the city’s urban planners have not catered for since Nairobi came into existence more than a century ago – when the city was planned as an apartheid city, built for a minority white elite that owned cars. Since then Nairobi has been characterised as a city that lacks pavements. Road builders either fail to build pavements during construction or pavements are so small or dilapidated that people have to use the road when walking.

However, even the roads meant for cars are failing the city’s residents. Traffic jams have become so normal in Nairobi that people plan their days around them. Moreover, recent proposals to have “car-free” days will not have the desired impact because those who use private cars are unlikely to walk to work or use public transport. To make matters worse, the frenzied construction of apartment
blocks in residential areas has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in the number of roads and pavements. On the contrary, the construction of office blocks and apartment buildings in many neighbourhoods has led to the uprooting of precious green spaces.

A World Bank study estimates that around 40 per cent of trips in Nairobi are made on foot. Matatus and minibuses account for 30 per cent of these trips while buses account for 10 per cent. Only slightly more than 10 per cent of the city’s population uses private cars. Unlike in many European cities, where walking is considered a lifestyle choice, and where pedestrian pathways and public transport is part of the transport infrastructure, in Kenya a large number of people walk because they can’t afford any other means of transport. Urban transport here is, therefore, not only deeply related to poverty and inequality but also to poor or non-existent transport infrastructure, including sufficient roads and pavements.

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According to Streets as Public Spaces and Drivers of Urban Prosperity, a UN-Habitat report published in 2013, Nairobi has allocated just 11 per of land to roads, which is way below the optimum level of around 30 per cent. (About a third of the land in Manhattan, for instance, is allocated to roads and pavements.) Moreover, the scarcity of roads is evident in both rich and poor neighbourhoods. For example, only 3 per cent of the land in both the up-market Muthaiga and the low-income Kibera is made up of streets. This is worrying because roads and pavements are not just important for mobility, they are also important for the development of related infrastructure, such as water and sewerage systems, which are usually laid down along existing road networks. According to the report, fewer roads and poor road connectivity make cities less prosperous.

Build it and they will come?

But will the construction of more roads improve mobility in the city? Not necessarily. Evidence suggests that more roads in urban areas can actually make mobility more difficult. During the Mwai Kibaki administration, for example, there was a concerted effort to build more roads and highways in Nairobi, ostensibly to ease congestion and improve transport infrastructure. The irony is that despite having more roads in the city, traffic in Nairobi has reached nightmare proportions.

This contradiction was predicted some years ago by Enrique Penalosa, the former mayor of the Colombian capital Bogota, when he gave a public lecture at Nairobi University a few months before the construction began. Penalosa said that expansion of the road network in many cities had shown that instead of reducing vehicular traffic, the traffic actually increased. This could be attributed partly to the “build it and they will come” logic that is based on the idea that the building of infrastructure is itself an incentive for more people to use it.

In Nairobi, there has also been a marked increase in the number of private vehicles and matatus on the roads. The construction of highways has also improved connectivity with satellite towns, which has increased traffic flow into the city. These are probably some of the reasons why, despite the construction of several bypasses on Mombasa Road, Uhuru Highway remains the most congested main artery in the city at all hours of the day. The construction of the Thika Superhighway has had a similar effect: the highway has led to urban sprawl as satellite towns have emerged along it, with the result that more commuters from peri-urban areas are now using the highway.
The former mayor of Bogota said that instead of making more room for cars, cities should make more room for pedestrians, cyclists and mass rapid transit systems. This would encourage residents to use alternative forms of transport, which would lessen traffic on the roads.

When he was mayor of the Colombian capital Bogota between 1998 and 2001, Penalosa created a bus rapid transit system featuring bus-only lanes. Penalosa will also be remembered for building an extensive network of bicycle paths and pedestrian-only streets at a time when cities such as London and Paris had not even thought of them. (Now both London and Paris are emulating the Bogota example.)

Penalosa believes that today’s cities need to be totally re-designed to cater for pedestrians and cyclists. In an interview with the online *Citiscopemagazine, he stated: “For 5000 years we designed cities for people without cars. When cars appeared, we should have begun designing totally different cities. We did not. We just made bigger roads.”

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**Streets as public spaces**

In Nairobi, planners and policy makers are planning for vehicles, not pedestrians. This is in sharp contrast to trends in Europe where citizens are reclaiming their streets as “public spaces” by re-designing streets so that they are accessible only to pedestrians and cyclists. For instance, London has made parts of the famous Trafalgar Square inaccessible to cars and many European cities, including Copenhagen and Amsterdam, encourage the use of bicycles. Apart from the health and environmental benefits, the reclamation of streets as public spaces has immense social benefits. Streets become the great levellers where people from all walks of life meet and interact. This promotes social inclusion.

The idea that streets should be public spaces gained momentum in the mid to late 20th century when American urbanists, such as Jane Jacobs, suggested that “you need to walk a city’s streets to see its soul”. More recently, the American economist Edward Glaeser suggested that the most successful cities in the world are those that “enable us to work and play together” in close proximity and through physical interaction. These interactions are only possible when people mingle on streets and public spaces.

Penalosa is also a great advocate of public spaces, such as parks and playing fields. He notes that New York City created Central Park in 1860 when the city was much poorer than it is today, and that London, a heavily built-up city, has 1,500 public football fields that are open and free to all residents. (In contrast, Nairobi County Governor Mike Sonko had at one time suggested that Uhuru Park – Nairobi’s largest public park – be turned into a matatu stage. Neither under Sonko nor under any of the city’s former leaders have there been plans to build more public parks in the city. What’s worse, in recent years land grabbers have even attempted to steal playgrounds in Nairobi’s public schools.)

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Nairobi, like many African and Asian cities, seems not to have learnt lessons from European and other cities where there is a growing “liveable cities” movement that emphasises reduced dependence on motorised transport by making streets more accessible to cyclists and pedestrians. Nairobi’s streets are clogged with cars, matatus and private vehicles, and pavements are fast disappearing or are in a dilapidated state. Many streets do not even have pavements, and those that do are often encroached upon by hawkers and even by motorists. As one Kenyan commented on Twitter, “If there were pavements in Nairobi, motorists would drive on them.” The lack of adequate pavements and bicycle paths has also resulted in unnecessary deaths of pedestrians and cyclists; in fact, cycling and walking are considered among the most dangerous forms of transport in Kenya.

Penalosa is also against the new trend of shopping malls (which has become a rage in Nairobi), which he says deprives city dwellers of walking in and enjoying their city. Local corner shops disappear as the rich flock to enclosed malls. In Nairobi social apartheid that separates the urban rich from the urban poor is now becoming increasingly apparent in these up-market malls and gated communities.

Kenya Urbanization Review, a World Bank report published in February 2016, says that Nairobi is at a particular crossroad and can go down one of two main routes: It can either build its way out of congestion by building more roads to serve the increasing motorisation rate, or it can invest in public transport networks to promote a more compact and environmentally friendly city. “Either way,” says the report, “the fundamental priority is to avoid a trade-off between access and sustainability” that will lock Nairobi into highly land-consuming and car-dependant development patterns.

Devolution: Challenges and opportunities

Like most African cities, Nairobi did not grow as a result of a grand master plan – much of the city has grown spontaneously and haphazardly. Even when there were plans, they were largely ineffective because they did not reflect the reality on the ground and did not anticipate the rapid urban growth rate (driven largely by rural-to-urban migration) after independence in 1963.

For instance, if urban planners and policy makers understood that a large proportion of the city’s 4 million or so residents walk to work (because they cannot afford public transport), they would be ensuring that there would be more and wider pavements in the city and more affordable mass public transport. Urban planners are also in short supply. According to the World Bank report, in 2011 there were only 194 accredited urban planners in the whole of Kenya, compared to 1,690 in South Africa.

Nairobi has ambitions to become a “world class city”, but these ambitions are being hampered by the city’s delusional sense of its own importance that fails to recognise that more than half of the city’s population lives in overcrowded slums with few amenities, such as piped water or electricity. It is estimated that only 36 per cent of households in the city’s informal settlements have direct access to piped water. The urban poor in the city also pay more for water than rich households, as water has to be purchased from water vendors who sell them by the litre. Slum dwellers in Nairobi do not even have access to sanitation and are forced to use makeshift pit latrines. It is estimated that only 18 per cent of Kenya’s total urban population has access to a sewer system; 70 per cent of urban dwellers rely on septic tanks or pit latrines.

Tunku Varadarajan, writing in Forbes in September 2009, described Nairobi (along with Lagos, Karachi, Lima, Cairo, Jakarta, Dhaka, Caracas and Manila) as “an utterly charmless city” – “edgy, aggressive and inhospitable”, a city in which “contempt for the resident is everywhere apparent” and where there are “few parks and sidewalks, and scarcely any of the amenities that comprise the
core of urban civilization”. Varadarajan’s assessment of the city may appear harsh, as other observers have commended the city for its vibrant culture and cosmopolitan nature. (*Lonely Planet*, for example, has described Nairobi as one of the best cities in the world, and has praised it for its “excellent nightspots and good music scene”). However, it is clear that Nairobi lacks the one thing world class cities have - a safe, affordable, reliable and well-regulated public transport system.

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Poor leadership and corruption have further contributed to creating an urban culture that lacks vision. If Nairobi was a place that catered for the majority of its residents’ needs, there would be more pavements, bicycle paths, public parks, public toilets and playing fields in the city. But a land grabbing frenzy has ensured that even the few green spaces (and even public toilets) in the city have now become concrete blocks.

The fundamental reason why Nairobi is so dysfunctional is because its dysfunction is self-perpetuating. Urban dwellers do not demand better infrastructure and services and expect little from the authorities, which leads of a vicious cycle of low expectations, little infrastructure investment and low productivity. When the city fails to provide services, such as garbage collection, those residents who can afford it hire private garbage collectors. The same applies to security, water provision and other essential services. This has resulted in widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Devolution may have actually contributed to the city’s woes as there is no longer a City Council or Ministry of Local Government to blame. The 1963 Local Government Act created 175 local authorities in Kenya, which were abolished under the new constitution that was promulgated in 2010. As required by Article 184 of the constitution, national legislation should provide for the governance and management of urban areas.

The Urban Areas and Cities Act (Revised 2015 edition) does provide for a system of city and municipal boards and town committees that are tasked with adopting urban policies and strategies, including on service delivery and land use. However, the criteria for the creation of these boards are rather restrictive, and could serve as a deterrent to the formation of such boards, especially in poor and largely rural counties.

One of the conditions for the creation of a city or municipal board is that the city or town should have the capacity to generate sufficient revenue to sustain its operations, which is difficult for many of the poorer counties that rely on the national government to carry out operations, including the building of roads that are not part of the national highway network. Nairobi, Kenya’s largest and wealthiest city, collected Sh11.7 billion in revenue in 2015/16, but it is the exception in a country where the majority of towns have populations of less than 250,000 and where urban-based activities are not the mainstay of largely rural economies. Another condition is to have the capacity to effectively and efficiently deliver services, which is a tall order for most smaller towns in Kenya.

One of the pitfalls of devolution is that urban areas may suffer under a system where devolved funds are being used to cater mostly for rural populations in the counties, rather than to the needs of urban dwellers. While this is understandable, given that the majority of counties are predominantly rural and considering the marginalisation of several regions under the previous centralised system,
neglecting urban areas may come to haunt counties in the future.

As the World Bank’s *Kenya Urbanization Review* report concluded, Kenya’s ambitious experiment in devolution holds great promise and comes at an important period but aspects of the process may weaken urban centres at a time when they need to be strengthened. “On balance,” says the report, “Kenya still has an opportunity to leverage urbanization to drive economic growth. It is in the early stages of urbanization, and evidence suggests that cities can drive economic development – especially when they are developed through a ‘system-of-cities’ approach and where devolution empowers counties…to develop strong urban centers.”

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**Urbanisation and economic growth**

The 2009 Kenya census shows that nearly one-third of the country’s population is now urban, but urbanisation levels are still way below those of other African countries. In fact, along with Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, Kenya has among the lowest urbanisation levels in the world. This has implications for the country’s economic prospects.

Nairobi, and Kenya as a whole, need an urban strategy that increases productivity and promotes inclusion. Studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between levels of urbanisation and economic growth – in general, most countries do not attain middle income status until they are at least 50 per cent urban. In 2009, the World Bank published a report by the Commission on Growth and Development that showed that there is a clear and robust relationship between urbanisation and per capita income in nearly all countries. The report stated that to achieve middle-income status, countries need to have at least half their populations living in urban areas and that “in all known cases of high and sustained growth, urban manufacturing and services led the process”.

The first challenge, of course, is to make cities and towns sites of high-productivity industries. The second challenge is managing the negative consequences of growth on urban areas, including congestion, pollution, inequality and slum formation. Both challenges require investments in infrastructure – but only if that infrastructure does not contribute to other problems (like pollution and congestion) and if it contributes to making productivity more efficient.

In its current state, the transport infrastructure in cities like Nairobi has proved to be an impediment to productivity as most workers spend more time commuting than engaging in productive activities. Over-dependence of private mini-buses (matatus) has also led to a situation where other forms of public transport have been crowded out, leading to increasing congestion and air pollution.

Building more roads has not helped either because the roads fail to cater for the majority of residents who walk, cycle or use public transport. As Edward Glaeser reminds us in his book, *Triumph of the City: How our greatest invention makes us richer, smarter, greener, healthier and happier*, “The folly of building-centric urban renewal reminds us that cities aren’t structures; cities are people.”
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