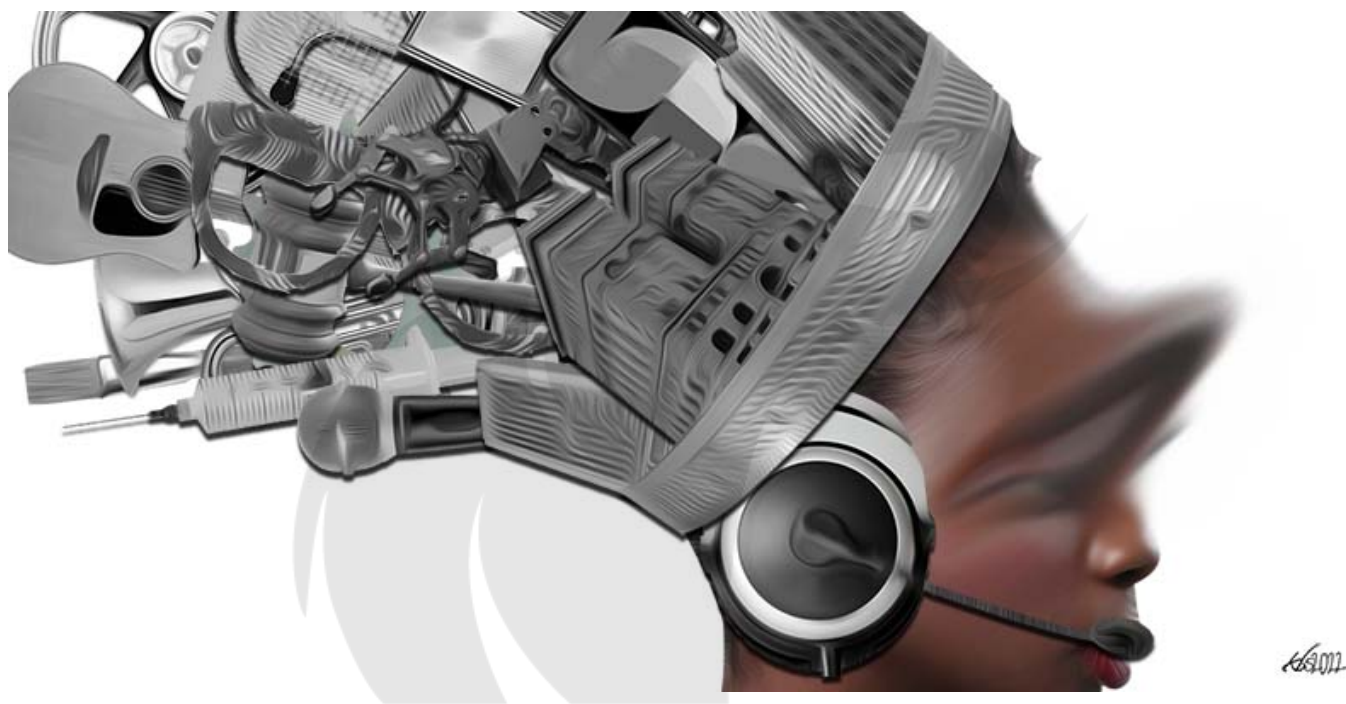




Insights for a Different African Urban Future: A Reflection

By Kalundi Serumaga



From recent developments, it would appear that there are four contenders vying for ownership of Africa's urban spaces: the international financial system, the operators of the informal economy, the new elite still holding on to the post-colonial dream of building shiny new metropolis, and finally: Mother Nature.

Beginning with the last: she only recently staked an angry claim to the low-lying areas of Kenya's capital Nairobi, in a stunning six-hour rainstorm that overwhelmed the city's road and drainage system. The usually congested evening commute traffic jam was escalated to a biblical disaster. On top of a resultant widespread power outage, large numbers of motorists had to spend the entire night marooned in their immobilised cars.

The nightmare of that evening became even more horrifying when many of those parents received news that their children were trapped in school-buses on their way home. With police cars, fire engines and ambulances also immobilized, those children spent much of the night inside the buses, watching the rising tides of rainwater inching up to bus-window level.

In the end, at least 10 city residents were reported to have died due to the floods, millions worth of property destroyed, and what remained of the city's reputation as perhaps the most long-standing

“modern” sub-Saharan city outside South Africa, had become bogged down in less than useful official explanations.

Perhaps the greatest indication of how devastating the incident has been was the very rare sight of a Kenyan public official – in this case the Governor of the City – actually making a public apology to hard-bitten Nairobiens.

The same scenario played out even in Accra in early June last year, and in Lagos. For the city-zens of Accra, the recent floods have had nasty political aftermath. When many pointed out that the flooding was the result of informal constructions along the city’s drainage system, the authorities diagnosed the problem to be the old Sodom and Gomorrah slum. Attempting to mow it down provoked the worst riots witnessed in the the city’s recent history.

Urbanisation is the dominant trend on the continent, albeit not as quickly as for other parts of the world. The key question therefore is no longer if, but rather: how, and to benefit whom? Who will be the owners and shapers of the emergent African urban spaces, and what will be their ambitions for it?

In his book, *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five centuries in the Pillage of a Continent*, the radical Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano dissects the meaning of the patterns of infrastructure there, particularly the road and rail networks, to reveal a legacy of exploitative intent. The networks, he explains, were laid down in such a way as to primarily serve the extractive agenda of the imperial powers that brought them. In short, the roads and rail network were like slashed veins bleeding treasure from the interior out to the coast by the shortest possible route, for onward relaying back to Europe.

Similar questions could be raised about many major urban centres in Africa. In name and in nature, most seem to have been established in locations logical only from the perspective of the dominant empire of the day – whether Arab or European.

As Kenyan journalist Christine Mungai explains in her May 2015 Mail and Guardian article ‘Not just trees’, even the vegetation on these spaces was often initially imposed from other eco-spaces.

Many cities are the product of the process somewhere between initial encounter and eventual occupation, in the narrative of colonialism. Some, like Nairobi, were essentially way-stations along the continuing journey further into the interior.

Others were mission stations, or trading posts or the colonial forts near which the last battles that defeated then-to-be colonised natives were fought. In all events, they owe their existence more to the arrival of new power than to the aspirations of the old one.

It is for this reason that they tend to have European names – “Lagos” is Portuguese for “bay”, for example – or the names of the monarchs, founders (or of their spouses, and sometimes hometowns), favoured saints and even immediate bosses of the time, originally.

What they all tend to have in common is a spatial and cultural disregard for the sensibilities of the people among whom they were planted. The real native African urban settlements were often either subsumed into this new reality, or left to atrophy and die out in what became “upcountry” spaces.

Therefore, with very few exceptions, the contemporary idea of an urban space in Africa comes infused with notions of new beginnings, a thing quite separated from the past (of which the hinterland is seen as a remnant) and not really answerable to it in any tangible way.

The rising urban middle class fortifies this space. After all, it is a cultural value established by, and

enshrined in the dreams of post-colonialism. A modern, buzzing city was the perfect symbol of one having earned one's place in the modern world. Literally square pegs in round holes, our cities thus speak of our elite aspirations of arrival rather than as melting pots of genuine human interaction. As such, much of the work of city administration is a civilizing mission to discipline the unruly natives into fitting into the idea. It rarely ever works the other way around.

Nigerian journalist Dolapo Aina reflects this posture with his opinions on what ails Lagos, from its days as the capital. The space is wholly segregated between a settled wealthy elite whose water and power supplies long separated themselves from what the Nigerian state had to offer on the one hand, and a large mass of struggling poor, often newly arrived citizens referred to as "JJC" (Johnny Just Come). The clear inference here is that it is the duty of the JJC to conform to the norms of the city.

Policy for Kampala is currently being driven by a similar thought process. Whatever the future of the city, its current managers seem to feel that the presence of the urban poor, owners and operators of a vast informal economy, should not be part of it.

This makes one thing clear: the actors in the informal economy are the one category of claimant who find themselves in retreat. In a pattern reflecting what is happening also in some parts of major European cities, notably London, a process of "gentrification" is driving out the hawkers, stall-owners, low-income transporters from the more financially lucrative parts of the cities.

In what is essentially a more sustained expression of the same spasmodic impetus to rid the cities of their visible poor - usually the impulse for these Potemkin visions are provoked by the hurried preparations to host one international event or another - "idle and disorderly", vagabonds, street beggars and other failed entrants to the modern project would, especially in the autocracies of the '70s and '80s, be forcibly rounded up and "disappeared" for the duration of the event.

The figurative descendants of those poor are the participants of the large informal economies - the anonymous millions of the sprawling megapolises we see today. Notably, they have become a distribution network of sorts for the massive influx of cheap manufactured goods flooding in from the factories of South Asia; and the tonnes of freshly harvested upcountry produce brought daily into the city. It is because of their capacity to endure transport hardships and pre-dawn market indignities; a certain native intelligence has developed, and is now deployed usually at below-market rates, to 'push product' down the capillaries of the system.

The modernists thinking holds a very determined vision to create cities that, in terms of infrastructure, architecture and amenities, would rival the post-colonial wonders of the Far East (Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, etc.). The critical gap in this plan is frankly, the absence of large, more ruthlessly exploited natural resources and economies. The irony here is that the national state, acting on behalf of the local business elite, may have putative control but in real terms possesses neither the discipline nor the wherewithal to support such long-term capital investment.

This is indeed where another of the abovementioned potential "claimants" to the African urban space comes in. Chinese largesse aside, there is a growing appetite among the technocracies managing our cities to finance their new ambitions for large infrastructure projects by floating municipal bonds on the international markets.

South Africa's Cape Town and Rwanda's Kigali, as well as the venerable Addis Ababa have already done so, with the latter even being heavily oversubscribed. Kampala now seeks to get in on the act. The city's technocrats recently made an application to have the national government allow them to issue bonds worth \$500 million on the global market, according to the financial news agency

Bloomberg.

Clearly, there will be a process to every option, And with every option, an attendant risk.

For those seeking the modern “shining city on a hill”, the price paid for this will be democracy and demographics. In Kampala it has led to the locking out of the hugely popular Mayor of Kampala City, who probably drew the largest-ever majority in the last election. Alarmed by his popular mandate, the national government swiftly replaced him with a selected city commissioner, whom they could more readily control.

Reports from Cape Town indicate a creeping, unspoken policy of fiscally – and therefore as a by-product, racially – resegregating the city.

For the global financial markets, this view of Africa’s urban spaces as viable loan destinations through the municipal bonds market may well presage the kind of scenarios that led to the Debt Crisis of the early 1980s – or closer to home, present-day Greece. Where national coffers were affected and citizens shocked into austerity, exposing cities to the vagaries of the international bonds markets well threatens the onset of a similar crisis.

Is anybody asking what ‘conditionalities’ were given for municipal loan repayments? How were the loans structured, and who will bear the cost of repayment?

A worst-case scenario may see beleaguered city governments employing brutal means to ensure uninterrupted (taxable) production, such as the 2012 bloody suppression of the miners strike at Marikana.

For the owners of the informal economy and its markets, the spectre of a new economic apartheid looms large: the creation of a regulatory regime that, deeming their ‘business models’ unsustainable, will seek to banish them from the spaces they currently occupy.

And so in this emerging era of the privatized city, what is to happen to the urban poor? Can a city really exist without them? After decades of practice inspired by a similar “brave new world” ethos, modern medicine has come to realise the importance of balance. The mass use of antibiotics has precipitated a crisis in how the human body manages infection. Put simply, western and westernized bodies were becoming so internally sanitised that the entry of any foreign organism could set off a physical crisis. This has led to the practice of “probiotics”, whereby organisms once considered to be merely germs, are actually re-introduced to the over-sanitised body so as to revive the patients natural resistance system.

A parallel can be drawn with the thinking that the “un-rich” automatically constitute a blight on the cityscape. Just as the body needs what were mistakenly regarded as mere germs, a living city may also need low-income citizens, and less-than-aesthetically-pleasing settlements, to keep the economy healthy.

Those who feel nature must make way for “progress”, seem to still be guided by the thinking of the industrial revolution which guided the original planners of the colonial cities who planted them right on top of spaces that should have best been avoided.

Much of eastern and southern Kampala – also a city prone to floods – is actually drained and filled-in swampland and waterways, as even the original local language place-names imply. A similar situation existed in Lagos where a collection of swampy islands became joined together in decades of traffic-jammed misery, until the KAYEMBA people seven hundred kilometres to the north, were displaced to enable the creation of the new capital Abuja in 1991.

With the arrival of the aspirational, and even acquisitive and avaricious middle class, this process is also gradually continued on a retail basis, with well-connected individuals now encroaching on the remaining river basins, swamps, urban woodlands and nominally “protected areas”.

As many angry commentators on Nairobi social media pointed out, this was the primary cause of the devastating floods that paralysed the city. Encroach and build where you may, they pointed out, but rainwater will still insist on finding its level.

Compounding an error, by building further on the places created by another culture for very different imperatives, may not be the wisest of the decisions that modern Africa’s governments are committing to.

Alternatively, there could emerge a leadership that seeks to respect each ambition, and find a happy medium between them, by first addressing the question: what are these cities for, and how will they feed and maintain themselves? However, the necessary re-think - which compels us all to reconsider our assumptions about what “development” should actually mean in the African context - may threaten many of these entrenched interests.

As for Mother Nature, She will continue to rain on all of man’s aspirations.

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