

Economic heterogeneity and the return of the central city

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Notions of the 'central' – as a dense core – have dominated the sense that urbanisation is replete with the possibilities of accessibility, concentration, efficiency, and productive power. The city was thought to culminate in a centre, an almost mystical gravitational pull that would pull materials and bodies into its regard. If there were any doubt as to the existence of such an overarching organizational force, its location was marked with excess – as the physical dimension of the built environment and valuations of all kinds would inflate. In some respects the affirmation of a centre as far as cities are concerned would prove somewhat counter-intuitive to urbanization processes seemingly more inclined to disperse, multiply and fragment rather than gather up. Distinctions between a clearly discernible centre and periphery, and other such gradations, historically have proven ambiguous as indicators of a capacity to make things happen. Centres have always seemed unduly aided by various administrative sleights of hand, things that would seem to slow down rather than quicken urbanized relations (Pacione 2009; Parker 2006; Soja 2000).

My concern today is not so much with these conceptual themes than a more prosaic issue – which is the irony where the central city in many regions of the Global South becomes a space of invisibility. Much of what takes place in central cities across the South is increasingly opaque, or simply not paid attention to. When centres are visible, they usually appear as spaces of inevitable decline or an obsessive resurgence. Such concerns to remake central cities seldom employ imaginations or policies to make them centres of anything, and instead participate in a cloning process which opts for the maximization of ground rent through the usual array of financial centres, high end residential and shopping complexes, leisure centres and premium technical and physical infrastructure – areas largely detached from the everyday economic life of the larger urban systems they supposedly are part of (Robinson 2006). They would seem then to operate outside questions about how growing urban populations are employed, housed and fed. In such circumstances, our popular discourses on efficient, democratic urban governance, sustainability, and security seem to displace the political and economic practices that make urban life at least minimally viable for that majority. In light of the steady growth of urban middle classes across the Global South – for which the discourses of civil society, accountability, transparency, and good governance have particular appeal – there is a need to reconsider the economic heterogeneity of cities as the very conditions in which any consideration of rights to the city can be imagined, let alone concretised (Bayat 2009; Roy 2003).

For much of Africa the fictions of the centre have special importance. Africans have always wanted many things from city life. But for a long time, the process of actually living in cities could never really bring about most of what was wanted. Even when cultural life and social economies were radically changed by urban life, many of

the efforts that were made to link emerging networks of social practice, economic specialization, and cultural reformation were blocked. There were few ways to institutionalise important experiments in what people could do with each other. This was largely because there were few public spheres that were not heavily scrutinized or repressed by existing regime (Burton 2002; Cooper 2008; Goerg 2006).

Therefore, these urban attainments were usually dispersed outside of the city, invested in transitional populations situated in-between the distinct forms of rural and urban rule or moving back and forth among them. The city became a site of deferral where locally honed aspirations, emergent institutions and economies capable of extending and deepening African uses of urban space were, for the most part, readapted toward deflecting the impositions and segregation of colonial rule. Simultaneously, African skill was applied to maximizing the potentials of under-regulated spaces of operation at the peripheries of cities (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1991; Gervais-Lambony 2003; Meyers 2003; Roitman 2004). But since they were peripheries they didn't really have the economic and social complexion necessary to fully incubate and develop these nascent urban orientations and practices.

At the same time, colonial rule was always partial and heterogeneous; always rearranged or distorted through the ways in which it was implemented. Therefore, urban Africans always looked for openings to actively 'partialize' and distort imposed rule, to make it work for their own agendas. This often meant large measures of dissimulation, of enacting what on the surface may have looked to be highly traditional or parochial practices as a cover for emerging urban styles (Bayart & Warnier 2004; Bellagamba & Klute 2008; Mbembe 2001).

Today in postcolonial time, instead of a built environment simply haunted by ideological struggles and the need to promote civic virtues and virtuous economies, cities do bring about a kind of conviviality, a certain density of economic and affective relations. There are different unfolding of time, of gentrification and decay, tightly bounded enclaves and wide open resettlement, all taking place side by side. As such, the built environment reflects its availability to being remade in various ways. If central cities are those parts of urban systems thought to have to the greatest reach into the larger world, to be those areas where external worlds are most extensively folded in to the city, then for Africans, too, the urban centre is critical as a way of being in a larger world. Yet, there are important questions about how various centre remaking projects across the region actually accomplish this. Enrolling capital and engineering expertise from China and the Gulf States, in particular, almost all African cities have megaprojects in the works – from the Dubai sur L'Atlantique, Eko Atlantic, New Cairo City and la Cité du Fleuve.

As urban infrastructure investment in Africa encompasses new circuitries of capital, commodity, and knowledge flows, there are critical questions about the relationships between how infrastructure gets built and how it gets run. As investment instruments diversify – from concessional loans, equity-development funds, joint ventures with private financial institutions, regional networks, often coordinated by multilateral banks, and private public partnerships – decisions about risk and profitability have to take into consideration how assets are actually used, what kinds of actors assume the risk of making sure there is a sufficient demand, as well as the kinds of local public institutions and entrepreneurial networks associated to such projects. These concerns are particularly critical as the global economic downturn persists where, for example, China (through the China African Development Fund, China Exim), wants to maximize the potential long-term capacities of infrastructure to expand trade circuits across sectors, manage accumulating African assets, promote domestic capital formation, and coordinate interactions among discrete economic spaces, policy frameworks, and production systems. Instead of simply re-dividing up territories in terms of competing concessions, spheres of influence, and sectors, China, India and Gulf states are looking at how synergies can be generated from their investment projects – synergies usually associated with notions of the central city (Brautigian 2009; Broadman 2007; Carmody 2009; Large 2008; OECD 2008; Orr & Kennedy 2008).

As various kinds of finance, actors, networks, interests, commodities and production plants attempt to come together, what kinds of relationships actually take place? Can these relationships better link a particular city in its entirety to the larger world? Or, do they simply compensate for greater precarity elsewhere in the urban system by trying to jack up the production values in highly circumscribed, well-managed and guarded sub-territories of the city? Do they put together centres that refer only to themselves and to those centres in other cities which they increasingly mirror in look and function? What are the relationships between various national, municipal, and regional government departments in terms of the apportioning fiscal and political responsibilities, and how do these different departments forge relationships with the financiers, managers, consultants, and technical experts involved in linking money to infrastructure to transport to public relations, and so forth? To what extent are the long-term, more informal networks of entrepreneurs and brokers that have been relied upon in the past to

negotiate barriers posed by inefficient national regulatory frameworks and other externalities marginalized or renewed in this process?

These megaprojects advertise a sense of mobility, of being able to operate in a larger universe. This coincides with a key motivation for megaproject development which has been to go beyond the supposed parochialisms of existing central districts – go beyond their entrenchment in limiting histories of use, identity politics, patron-client relations and minimal upkeep. This need to exceed local specificities is incumbent upon cities whose viability is staked to a capacity to participate in global urban networks – where growing transactions among cities, particularly those in the Global South, need a materialized sense of commonality and mutual recognition. When cities look upon each other, then, they can recognize in these new developments a trajectory where they are moving in concert, and where the ability of economic actors to operate from one place to another does not require substantial adjustments. Yet these developments often marginalize the very features of the urban landscape the enabled residents living and working in different parts of the city to navigate the city as a whole (Flyvbjerg, Nils & Rothengatter 2003; McFarlane 2007; Ong & Roy 2011).

For this ability of residents to 'go out into the larger city' is situated in the messiness of built environments, the seemingly haphazard, incomplete and strewn out arrangements of buildings, infrastructure, and activity that continue to persist in many cities. Physical and social architectures have a kind of compatibility. Both appear incomplete, where the lines dividing construction and ruination are ambiguous. This is important. For, this environment provides a visible rendering of what things are and what people are up against dealing with them. It shows how water and power appear and disappear; it shows that people living, playing, working, eating, sleeping, moving, and interacting together have an effect on places – the land, the buildings, the air. It shows how residents crisscross and side-step the markings and physical traces of all these different activities, movements. When a place shows all of its wears and tears, its memories, and the impacts of what people have done it, the place then shows that it is always available to deals, small initiatives and renovation. It is a messy environment, and people have to step through and around each other, but it is an environment that is available to be 'messed with' – that, open to engagements of all kinds. This opening to engagements has been the way most African residents have been able to be mobile.

This is not to detract from the formidable problems facing African cities. Physical, built and social environments are progressively eroded by overuse, the lack of money for repair and rehabilitation, the incessant short-cuts and improvised uses of objects, tools, and spaces, with little being replenished or renewed, and where the discarded remains in plain sight. In market areas with a protracted history of countless performances, where so many attempt to make their existence relevant to so many others, interference has become a legacy. For everything that is attempted, it is not clear just who the endeavour will implicate, and it is never certain just who has to be looked out for, who will demand a cut of the proceeds, or who will see it as their duty to remind the enterprising individual of his or her obligations.

In economic sectors that have become vastly overcrowded, and thus where the need to come up with something new is incumbent upon anyone who wants to emerge from the crowd and eke out a little bit of profit, improvisation stands out like an ambulance on a choked highway, where everyone subsequently tries to follow the path-breaking move. Again, under such conditions, it is difficult for residents to make plans, to project into the future, to pace oneself with a series of advancing steps geared to some overarching objective, particularly when the state, at all levels, no longer cares what happens and where trickery is everywhere.

Still, in many central cities of Africa and the Global South, heterogeneous districts continue to survive. Zamalek, Bab al-Oued, Grand Dakar, Chicago, Adjame, Nima, Yaba-Surulele, Kosangis-Mexico, Bandal, New Deido, Molobo, Poto Poto, Eastleigh, Xipamamine, Bole and Lingwala. Streets have a different mixture of colonial bungalows that have remained the same for decades and then varying gradations of rehabilitation, rebuilding, new construction that have ensued from new residents progressively buying out former residents over the years or long-term residents deploying their savings. The provision of temporary rental accommodation of all standards across central districts is booming – from studios equipped with television and wi-fi for single professionals, large rooming houses for service workers to one-level dormitory rooms built in the rear of dense low-income compounds for new migrants. Residential and commercial spaces are commonly folded into each other, as are various uses of commercial space – i.e. retail, repair, storage, and production. Distinct forms of residential areas – from leafy middle class pavilions, to mazes of lanes where overhanging third and fourth story additions, to narrow slivers of houses seem to shut out the sky – open up onto each other in jarring proximities (Hilgers 2009; Konings & Foeken 2006; Marie 2007; Warnier 2008).

Urban heterogeneity is not simply a diverse composition of readily identifiable income levels, life styles, aspirations and settlement histories. Almost all the major cities of the Global South continue to be replete with districts where different capacities, inclinations, purchasing power, and orientations are thoroughly intertwined in dense proximity. Here, precise categorizations of what people are – their class backgrounds, their ways of making decisions and using available resources – are not so clear.

Even when classifications are generated in well-elaborated local vernaculars, these tend to continuously change – so it is not clear who is poor and what criteria constitute the poor, or middle class, for there are prolific gradations. This relative absence of certain categorization tends to make people more willing to pay attention to each other, to take certain risks in their affiliation, and to try out various ways of using local spaces. From this willingness stem a plurality of local economies – i.e. different scales at which things are made, distributed and sold – from furniture, textiles, foodstuffs, building materials, and household items. Different potentialities of consumption are concretized through the ability to access different quantities of goods and services within a district. This doesn't mean that everyone necessarily gets along or talks to each other. It is not a social economy based on easy reciprocities and well-honed collaboration. Rather, it stems from often highly opportunistic maneuvers that use the very tensions incumbent in such heterogeneity to continuously remake temporary accords, deals, and trade-offs that remake the local built and social environment, and where this remaking brings about new tensions and accommodations (Blundo 2006; Charton-Bigot & Rodriguez-Torres 2006; Marie 1997; Marin 2006; Nielsen 2007; Tonda 2005).

Even in the conflict battered city of Abidjan, the district of Adjame has remained a place where Lebanese Shi'a merchants play table tennis with the local Christian gendarme in the basements of Pentecostal churches; where seemingly illiterate Mauritanian stall owners are entrusted to sell low-priced stock options for major Ivorian companies, where Muslim and Christian bankers gather in make-shift bars set up in the parking lots of local municipal offices, and where the most important human rights organization has taken over the largest baby supplies shop in the area. These are not an assemblage of discrepancies, but rather the concretization of the intersection of elements that retain their very different properties and logics in a larger environment where actors seem to be 'fighting it out' about everything.

This does not mean that major cities in the Global South do not contain large areas where it is more than obvious who the poor are and the kinds of terrible conditions they find themselves. Certainly cities contain large homogenous areas where diversity is hard to come by, even if they are full of minor differences in terms of the choices made in putting available resources, no matter how limited, to work. But what often happens in the attention paid to slums, informal settlements, shanties, *bidonvilles*, *quartier populaire* is that these other highly mixed districts of the city fade from view. It is as if observers do not know quite what to make of or do with them. Whereas injunctions concerning the 'right to the city', the mobilization of collective action, the valorisation of the self-construction of the poor, and the resilient informal city correspond to the shape and character of low-income settlements, they retain an uneasy fit with more heterogeneous districts.

For, a politics that focuses on activating citizenship on the part of individuals of various backgrounds and using citizenship as a means of equilibrating differences under the provision of rights and services, while obviously important to districts of any composition, does not really address the dynamics of these districts as economic spaces.

Here, building lines, plot size, distribution points, service reticulations are systematically violated – sometimes in the interest of greed – but more often as mechanisms to keep different kinds of residents in close proximity to each other. Equations that link training to skill, skill to occupation, occupation to set modalities of entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship to specific forms of spatial encapsulation can themselves be thoroughly mixed up. Districts known for furniture production, auto repair and parts, printing, floral decoration, textiles, or ceramics usually contain a wide range of plant sizes, technologies, specialisations, and degrees of formal and informal organization. There are many venues and instances of collaboration and clustering, as there are differentiated approaches and competition. Still, even under the rubric of a common sector, these activities are difficult to organize as associations, chambers, or unions – subsumed to a formalized set of business practices and representations. For example, in the car parts and repair business, which has the facilities, the contacts, the skills, the money, the capacity to organize workers, shipment, and sales are seldom the same set of people over time, as they move in and out of different facets of the business. Shops, homes, streets, offices take on many different simultaneous or alternating functions. Services and parts are bundled in different ways and quantities from many different sources depending upon the situation and consumer. Interdependencies and calibrations among discrete facets of the production and commercial systems of textiles, furniture, foodstuffs, household

items, and electronics are so intertwined that conventional tools of regeneration, agglomeration, and regulation would likely disrupt their functioning altogether.

These are districts with different kinds of people, backgrounds, skills, trades, and economic practices. But these differences do not easily translate into differences in advantage, authority and access to resources. What these differences mean in the intersections of labour, space, tools, time, abilities, and networks does not directly stem from the apparent visible and hierarchical distribution of capacities and privilege. Relationships are simultaneously exploitative and excessively generous, competitive and collaborative. There are unpredictable oscillations of accumulation and loss which introduces a dynamic egalitarianism over a long run that no one individually has the power to define or measure, even if in the present glaring disparities can be documented everywhere.

This doesn't mean that rationalisations of various kinds aren't necessary. Legality, land use planning and spatial regulation can be important instruments to sustain economic and social vitality. But usually these tools are useful only as a means of mediating among different ways of doing things, of drawing plausible lines of connection and mutual responsibility, rather than as the imposition of order and imagination. These instruments can become a means for the diverse capacities and practices within districts to become more visible to each other – take each other into consideration and make productive use of their respective knowledge and potentials.

The post-colonial conundrum has always been how to demonstrate that cities of the Global South will be both viable and worthy cities yet different from the urban logics that subjugated them. The difference that would most clearly embody such a break lies in the relatively invisible piecing together of aspects of city life – people, things, spaces – that are not conventionally thought to be associable. But how can such a difference be demonstrated, and at what cost? Whether cities completely mirror the purported efficiency of those of Europe or North America, exceed them in the spectacular quality of new built environments, or are full of gang wars, ethnic conflict, parochialism, patronage, and other signs of an impending implosion, none of these aspects serve as evidence that 'different' forms of collective life are being definitively ruled out.

The convergence of actors, things and spaces that are not easily seen as having a basis to associate, is something then that always must be demonstrated. In other words, to use Bruno Latour's (2006) language, it must be made a matter of concern, a matter which mobilizes attention and publicity, assembles an audience, and generates a willingness to remain engaged, to take seriously that which is demonstrated as a matter of reality and that opens up new discussions and explorations. Demonstration has to be an indication of something that really exists. This is not simply to reiterate a matter of accepted fact but to open up a space where new connections among disparate elements and events can be debated and recognized. Focusing on the heterogeneity of urban economies within and between cities of the Global South thus seems necessary in order to demonstrate how residents of growing cities will be housed and employed.

If cities embody different possibilities of both inclusion and exclusion, of life and death, of power for and power against, then addressing the political challenges of urban life does not have a single address. This means that the demonstrations of intersections among different districts, actors, economies and ways of life do not simply exist as evidence for the invocations of cosmopolitan urbanity, for more efficient urban governance, or for rectifying fundamental inequalities. Rather, such demonstrations open up new questions about unacknowledged relationships and forces acting upon the city that in the long run may make cities more just, somewhere where all residents might feel at home.

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