

Urban Planning and the Future of African Cities



It is a well-known fact that African cities face a challenging future. With some 65% of urban populations living in slum conditions and 70% in informal work, they are also set to double in size over the next 20 years, as much from natural increase as from in-migration. The already huge backlogs in basic urban infrastructure (especially sanitation and clean water) represent overwhelming challenges to

local governments which are underfunded and under-capacitated. Urban planning should be playing a key role in addressing these issues, yet it is being handicapped by a recent wave of interest by the international property development industry in turning valuable urban land into 'fantasy cities'.

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Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Dubai-lookalike visions for African cities have increasingly appeared on international property developer websites. Some claim that African cities have become the world's next 'property investment frontier'. Glass-box skyscrapers separated by swathes of green and rapid transit routes have seemingly not lost their allure, while the 'real' world of informal shack-dwellers and street traders is being erased from the map and from the consciousness of politicians and the urban elite.

New urban visions such as the one for Kigali, Rwanda (see Figure), prepared by a US firm of architects, assume that the current largely informal urban population can be 'wished away'. The new satellite cities such as those to surround Nairobi in Kenya, Hope City in Ghana and many others promise a modernised and sanitised living environment for the middle classes, far removed from the squalor and congestion of existing cities. Hope City, designed by an Italian architect who was evidently inspired by African beehives, is a particularly futuristic conception of buildings which contain all the facilities needed for their residents and working populations, seemingly removing the need to go outside at all.

Other cities are creating large land areas through infill to create new urban extensions. Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo is one of Africa's largest and poorest cities, yet a major land infill of the Congo River will support upmarket retail and residential developments – destroying the livelihoods of many small farmers along the banks of the river in the process. Eko-Atlantic is being created on an artificial island off the coast of Lagos; the island stretches for over 10 kilometres, allowing some 250,000 people to disengage themselves from the congestion and pollution of existing Lagos.

Adding to the selling power of the glitzy graphics, many of these plans also claim to be 'smart' or 'eco' and sustainable cities, thus drawing on fashionable rhetoric to justify designs that are very far from these concepts. Design has become a superficial exercise of cut-and-paste graphics along with copied text to give the impression that there is a concern with more than just profit.

But the real impacts will be felt in increasingly unequal cities in which the poor are consistently marginalised in both a spatial and functional sense – as they are pushed further and further towards the urban peripheries, and as public infrastructural and facility resources are redirected away from meeting basic needs and towards supporting the demands of the new enclaves of the elite.