



## Urban visions from Lusaka, Zambia



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### ABSTRACT

Economic growth in African cities has attracted the attention of international property developers and architecture firms seeking new opportunities as demand has waned in the shrinking economies of the Global North. Their interest has produced new computer generated master plans for African cities depicting modern utopias which would not look out of place in Dubai or Shanghai. The incongruity of these plans for cities where 70% or more of urban residents live on the margins in unplanned settlements raises important questions about the processes shaping the future of African cities.

Urban theories, in particular neoliberal ideologies of urban entrepreneurialism, offer compelling explanations for how these visions have come to be. What is less well understood is the local dynamics at play in the structuring of African cities and the role of local actors in the construction of these new master plans. This paper documents the attitudes of residents of Lusaka to market driven development in their city and new master plans for African cities. Making use of concepts of policy mobility – it explores the aspirations of those that live in the city and the extent to which these correspond to the promises of these grand new visions. The findings highlight ways in which these new visions of African cities are at odds with lives and concerns of residents in Lusaka from across the social spectrum.

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### Introduction

Many of Africa's capital cities are in the throes of change. Rapid urbanisation, globalisation and recent economic growth are having a transformative effect on city spaces. New projects in the form of gated housing complexes, mega malls, international hotels and business parks are changing the urban landscape. These already dramatic changes could take on an entirely new dimension if some of the new visions for African cities put out by international property developers and architecture firms are realised. As highlighted by Vanessa Watson's recent timely article, "African urban fantasies: dreams or nightmares?", these computer generated master plans for cities such as Kigali, Maputo, Kinshasa, Dar es Salaam, Nairobi and Lagos depict modern utopias which would not look out of place in cities like Dubai or Shanghai (Watson, 2014). The incongruity of these plans for cities where 70% or more of urban residents live on the margins in unplanned settlements raises important questions about the processes shaping the future of African cities. Although offering models for dealing with the South's rapid growth using concepts of sustainability, their potential

impacts on the residents of unplanned settlements are profoundly unsettling. The construction of these new 'eco cities' and 'smart cities' could lead to a significant rise in peri-urban evictions and the further diversion of limited State resources away from meeting the basic needs of the urban poor in cities (Watson, 2014).

A key question to ask is how these visions have come to be? In particular what policies and ideas have informed their creation and who has been involved in this process? On the face of it these visions appear to be the work of international firms of architects drawing on travelling visions of the global city that have sprung up in Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, Hanoi, Beijing, Guangzhou, Sao Paulo, Dubai and many other cities. Theories of policy mobility suggest a messier process: ideas are literally "assembled" through the layering of diverse influences, mutating as they travel through different cities, and fusing with the multiple agendas of stakeholders at their final destination. One hypothesis suggested by this theoretical perspective is that we should look more to the local context and agendas of local actors in understanding the development of these visions. To examine this perspective, this study explores the views and aspirations of residents in Lusaka to question whether their own urban imaginaries may correspond to these global visions.

To give a complete view, the paper first traces the debate in the literature on the limitations of current understanding of African cities, and the growing use of concepts of policy mobility to explore

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the relational and composite nature of urban policy making. An account of the context of Lusaka and the methodology used follows, and finally the paper describes insights that emerged from the study.

### Moving beyond neoliberalism

Economic globalisation – underpinned by the export of neoliberal policies that accompanied the introduction of structural adjustment programmes in the early 1980s – provides a compelling explanation for Africa's changing urban landscape and the emergence of these new visions. In this analysis, Africa's opened markets become the latest home to Harvey's (2010) surplus capital as property developers and international firms of architects flee the 2008 economic recession in European and American markets in search of new opportunities. From the perspective of neoliberal critics, one outcome is a 'convergence' in urban development (Armstrong & McGee, 1985; Sassen, 1991) that reflects new forms of pragmatic modernism from North Atlantic cities – one that responds to the interests of global corporations with iconic glass office blocks, (Sassen, 1991) and to consumers with fantasies of American suburban living (Dear & Flusty, 1998). For newly emerging African nations seeking to align themselves with established capitalist nations and attract the trading benefits of the global economy, the iconic high rise images of cities such as London, New York and Tokyo offer symbols of the global city with which to market their own city. The literature suggests a number of reasons for looking beyond this neoliberal critique:

First is the debate around the extent to which the analysis of cities in the Global South is overly dominated by the critique of neoliberalism and understandings of urbanism emanating from European and North American cities, which may obscure our ability to identify local processes at work in the structuring of cities in the South (Parnell & Robinson, 2012). As this debate develops, an increasing number of voices are calling for a rebalancing of urban theory to bring in the emergent theories from the global South (Robinson, 2011, 2006), with growing attention being given to the work of urban theorists whose thinking is inspired by the grounded realities of cities in the South (e.g. De Boeck & Plissart, 2004; Pieterse & Simone, 2013; Roy, 2005; Simone, 2010).

The second comes from new perspectives in comparative urbanism (Massey, 1991; Robinson, 2011; Ward, 2010) and policy mobility (McCann, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2010), which examine how the identity of cities is constructed relationally through their interaction with other places. This has moved the debate from a focus on how policy ideas may be transferred in their entirety from one territory to another to include an analysis of ways in which globally circulating policy ideas are translated, reinterpreted and transformed by city actors (McCann, 2011: 109; McCann & Ward, 2012: 3).

Inherent in both these strands of thinking is the more recent trend in urban theory towards actor orientated approaches to understanding cities, balancing the explanatory weight given to structure with greater understanding of the role of agency and the micro context of urban life (e.g. Shatkin, 2008; Markusen, 2004; McGee, 1991). This study adopts the approach taken by Shatkin, 2008; McGee, 1991 and others in focussing more attention on the role of local actors and the local historical context in understanding drivers of urban change. This perspective questions the view that these visions of African cities may be seen as another example of the way in which economic globalisation is resulting in the convergence of urban form through the top down imposition of 'western' models of urbanism. Instead it explores the extent to which local actors may have a role to play in the assemblage and embedding of these visions in African cities. The role of the political

and economic elite is something which is highlighted in the literature; Watson (2014) draws particular attention to the role of local politicians and governments, who may stand to benefit both in terms of political support and financial gain from the implementation of these visions. In the context of metro Manila, Shatkin (2008: 386) also demonstrates how the emergence of integrated urban megaprojects is not the outcome of the "blind adoption of 'Western' planning models", but rather the strategies of powerful local developers working in partnership with government to exploit the opportunities arising from the withdrawal of the State in city building.

Less discussed is what role ordinary citizens may play in the emergence of these visions. The reality of urban governance in African cities means it is highly unlikely that they have been consulted, or played any direct role. But in Africa's new democracies the value of their vote to local politicians gives the urban electorate some influence over city-building processes. Whilst for developmentalists these visions are unconscionable, offering nothing to the urban majority in need of basic services, there are a number of reasons why they may find favour with the urban electorate. To begin with is evidence of Africa's growing middle classes, who Watson (2014) notes may have aspirations for the services and "types of modern urban environment" these visions portray. In Kinshasa, De Boeck (2012: 325) also finds that poorer residents of Kinshasa rejoiced as much in the dream of a new modern city as the ruling elites, despite an awareness of the implications in terms of their own displacement. This was not a utopian visionary dream but rather for a new heterotopia – a new mythical space of possibility. Further afield in Manila, Shatkin (2008: 398) similarly finds that the response of low income groups to urban megaprojects in Manila has involved a certain level of acquiescence. In this case, it reflected both the power of the 'global city' imagery as well as the fact that the urban poor are also users of some of the new consumer spaces being developed.

This notion, that these global visions may reflect not only the ideas of influential policy makers but also the aspirations of those that live in the city, forms the focus of this study. The key question explored is whether the increasingly global free flow of images, culture and goods means that in places like Lusaka, travelling global city visions may encounter urban dwellers who are already, to a certain degree, acclimatized and accepting of global city imagery. Or alternatively, as the approach taken by McGee (1991) and Shatkin (2008) suggests, whether their attitudes to the global imagery are better understood as projections of their own views about their local context and how it needs to change.

### Lusaka context

The turnaround in Zambia's economic fortunes over the last 10 years has been profound, bringing to an end a long period of economic decline that began in the 1970s under the one party rule of Kenneth Kaunda and UNIP (United National Independence Party) who took power at independence from the British in 1964. The liberalisation of markets beginning in the mid 1980s, combined with a vigorous programme to attract foreign investment following the end of one party rule in the 1990s and multi-party elections, resulted in a significant increase in foreign direct investment. Together with high copper prices (Zambia's chief export), this has contributed to a sharp uptick in GDP – averaging growth of 6% over the last decade. Nowhere is Zambia's new found prosperity more evident than in the development of the capital Lusaka – home to 32% of the urban population. Here, under the rule of the MMD (Movement for Multiparty Democracy) who presided over liberalisation from 1991 to 2011, there has been a notable growth in largely private sector driven development.

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