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Urbanism Beyond Architecture

African Cities as Infrastructure

Vyjayanthi Rao, in conversation with Filip de Boeck
& Abdou Maliq Simone



Marie-Françoise Plissart ©



IN KINSHASA: TALES OF THE INVISIBLE CITY, Filip de Boeck writes:

In spite of the fact that an analysis of the different physical sites through which the city exists and invents itself helps us to better understand the specific ways in which the materiality of the infrastructure generates particular sets of relations in the city, I would submit that in the end, in a city like Kinshasa, it is not, or not primarily, the material infrastructure or the built form that makes the city a city. The city, in a way, exists beyond its architecture . . . the infrastructure and architecture that function best in Kinshasa are almost totally invisible on a material level.¹

This understanding of the city, expressed so succinctly by de Boeck, is shared by all three of us. But as anthropologists speaking to architects, we are also concerned with exploring the relation between visibility and invisibility and with the ‘networks of concrete becoming,’² as Simone puts it, at once engaging and going beyond the artifice of material infrastructure and physical site. Built form may be, as de Boeck states, ‘produced randomly in human sites as *living space*.’³ As urban studies have taken a ‘southern turn,’⁴ with an increasing number of works in mainstream urban studies focusing on cities of the global south, this contrast between built form and living space is indeed critical. But equally central, it seems, are questions of global scale and the possible political and spatial descriptions of particular cities, especially these cities of the southern hemisphere, at the global scale.

For this conversation, we take as our point of departure the multiple uses deriving from the Latin root *capitalis* (chief, principal, in the sense of sovereign power), which is both the root of capital as well as of *capitellum*, meaning small head, or the top of the column in the architectural sense.⁵ By juxtaposing these multiple uses, we enter into a contradiction: we are speaking both about the sense of a vanguard and of fixing, of that which tops off and shows off the solidity of the architecture as well as that which circulates and controls the expression of sovereign power in the political sense insofar as it is able to circulate.

1. de Boeck, Filip *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2004), pp 233 - 235

2. Simone, AbdouMalik “The Visible and Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa,” in *Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos: Documentati_Platform4*, p. 24

3. de Boeck, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2004), p. 233

4. Rao, Vyjayanthi “Slum as Theory” in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 30 (1), 2006.

5. Source: Webster Dictionary online.

We are especially concerned with where we can situate ‘networks of concrete becoming,’ both in terms of forms of accumulation and in terms of the possibilities for articulating political power in a continent that is increasingly subjected to global flows of finance capital, resource extraction and migration. We found that the best place to begin was with the transformations of the physical environment of African cities. While Simone unpacks the developments in and around Dakar and their political effects on other Senegalese cities, speculating on the causes of such massive investments in construction, de Boeck reflects on the intensification of *urbanity without architecture* throughout Congo, in part as a result of the diamond trade. The relationship between what de Boeck calls the ‘ejaculation’ of wealth and the accentuation of non-investment in the physical space of Kinshasa is contrasted, for example, with the imaginary ‘urban planning’ encouraged by the various churches that have gained enormous popular appeal in the Congo. Can a conventional understanding of architecture sustain the weight of this imaginary planning? Can one think of the city outside of material forms of representation and aspiration such as those of architecture? These questions also motivate de Boeck’s explorations of Kinshasa at the 2004 Venice Architecture Biennale and his more recent exhibition, *Kinshasa, The Imaginary City*, in Johannesburg (2006).

Non-investment in material terms might also be linked to a return of the colonial *comptoir* economy, the economy of the trading post and the generativity of certain kinds of urban performance. These performances center around the ‘hunter’s landscape,’ in which capital works only through its incessant expenditure and circulation rather than through a logic of accumulation and maximization of profit. It works, in other words, through the creation of social networks that make investments work for the urban hunter. In this landscape, colonial histories seem to endure inasmuch as the city continues to be seen as a site of exclusion by the vast majority of the people who developed Kinshasa outside its colonial boundaries. It is therefore a place where everything that comes from elsewhere – from outside the ludic spaces of social networks in formation – is thought of as being there to be ‘ripped off.’

Thus, the concentration of political power in the realm of the capital city is challenged by its circulation in and through diverse spaces and amid those networks that constitute the invisible architecture of connections of the contemporary African city. The physical aspect of the city, especially as the signal of a growing densification and convergence of trajectories, has, however, also become crucial. A history of Dakar, from its origins in the *comptoir* economy and its territorial incorporation into France that defined its relations with the other cities in the Senegalese metropolitan system, reveals these new trajectories. These trajectories are at once global in their reach—controlled by actors from the Senegalese Murid Diaspora as well as the Lebanese Diaspora—while also having effects at the level of the nation, expressed in the investments that new actors from the hinterland are making into the landscape of Dakar, gaining new visibility for their activities.

We explore here these dispersals of capital (financial and human) and their relation to these capital cities (Dakar, Kinshasa, Khartoum) and in the peculiar relations that cities like Lagos have to capital in both senses, economic and political. In other words, we try to open the question of the location of capital in this conversation. In so doing, we attend to other forms of invisibility as well. For what happens in the course of the circulation of capital across Africa is the generation of capital and of urbanity outside of known forms, outside of the structuring contexts of architecture and the planned insertion of material infrastructure. “These cities are often invisible to the outside world,” de Boeck says, because “they function in ways that we are not used to seeing and therefore go unnoticed.” Thus we face the question, “where should capital/the capital city be located?” by asking, “what is the scene/site of urban action?” We face the question, “what conduits of access are being developed in order to facilitate investment, expansion, accumulation or “ejaculation” of capital?” by asking, “what forms of social complexity are being explored in the development of these conduits?” What sort of etiquette is being developed by residents of these cities in the drive of their residents to becoming visible in order to enable social being? We turn to situations of boundary maintenance in Abidjan and in Khartoum, and we also turn to the emergent play of aspirations that reach for under-coded territories. Recent Malaysian investments in Senegalese social housing in the name of an ethical Islamic practice as well as Chinese investment in a transcontinental railway system represent gestures of a new kind of global play. In this conversation, we think these contradictions between the material and the non-material, the visible and the invisible, the push for material infrastructure in Africa and elsewhere today and the relationship that this push articulates between political power and capital, in the sense of the ‘topped off,’ aligned and accumulated stashes of wealth in its multiple forms.

Vijayanthi Rao

Capital/City

Imaginary Urban Plans

Vyjayanthi Rao: *What are the spatial expressions of capital in contemporary Africa? How do these expressions relate to expressions of political and subjective power?*

Abdou Maliq Simone: Currently, in Dakar, you have the rather recent and still opaque project of building a new capital, for the moment designated as ‘Dubai sur Atlantique,’ some sixty kilometers to the north. Partly this reflects the generalization of the reinvented logic of the entrepôt associated with Dubai; partly it emerges from the fact that there exists a kind of conurbation that leaves Dakar and then begins to link what were some major small cities like Thies and M’bour. In some ways you have this residue of a kind of colonial bifurcation. Fifty years ago, Dakar started to become too overcrowded, becoming too much of a threat to certain kinds of order and processes. Dense quarters were displaced to Pikine and Guediwaye, and that in some ways, culturally, became the real Dakar. Outside of colonial specifications, these areas reflected many of the tensions of urban spaces attempting to articulate temporal and spatial divergence. The same for Freetown, the same for Conakry, the same for Dakar and to a limited extent for Abidjan, you have coastal capitals where, geo-morphically, it’s quite limited in how they can grow. You have this kind of concentration in these very limited physical spaces. It becomes impossible to navigate. This kind of trajectory of expansion then makes it quite physically difficult to access the centers of power and centers of commerce. So, in terms of President Abdoulaye Wade saying we can no longer have the airport where we have it, we can no longer have ministries where we have them, we have to relocate, we have to bring them out to make them more accessible, to recenter, to reconstitute somehow the gravitational field of the capital means in one sense this old reiteration of new grand, grand works. Still, the former center, Plateau, continues to be a huge building site. You still see these immense kinds of constructions taking place there.

Filip deBoeck: It’s incredible. I just drove through it a couple of weeks ago. Whose money is driving this?

AMS: In some sense the appearance of continuous development signals a certain availability of this area to investment of all kind, and this plurality itself can constitute a platform for real occupation. Whatever is put up will in the end be used in some way. So residents in Dakar don’t usually have the sense that this is something that’s being inflated. Spaces are being bought. There’s a market. People are buying these things: office space, apartment space...

VR: *In other words, it’s somehow not virtual?*

AMS: I can’t say for sure, but there’s a kind of popular understanding that there are real buyers for these things, real occupancy.

FdeB: I think that is the difference with a place like Congo. Clearly in Senegal or in Dakar, you have a middle class or upper middle class of people, merchants with financial means who are doing their own trade and commerce and investing in their own city. In Congo, such a local middle class is absent, and there are, of course, historical reasons for that. For a long time the whole country was run by a small group, a power elite around Mobutu. There was no middle ground between the very poor and the very rich.

Mobutu’s downfall created a void in that respect. Those with money left. In Kinshasa, as a result, the housing market just collapsed. Those who remained in the city could afford to buy housing. Today, real estate is booming again as never before, but the boom is not caused primarily by Congolese. The capital flowing into the city comes through ex-pats and foreigners. The latter often Lebanese—people from outside, who start to redevelop the city but only to a certain and very minimal extent.

VR: *What about the diamond trade in the early 1990s and the kind of wealth it generated? Was it at all reflected in what was happening to the physical space of Kinshasa?*

FdeB: Well, on the one hand, it just accentuated the level of non-investment in physical space because all of that money would leave. Very little of it would be invested in infrastructure. On the other hand, it did have a huge impact in other ways because the informal diamond economy allowed for local actors to all of a sudden gain access to a lot of money. People, often youngsters, would go to Angola to dig diamonds, and often they would come back with \$1,000, \$10,000 or even \$100,000.

VR: *What would they do with this newly generated wealth?*

FdeB: Well, most of the time it was very quickly ejected and spent—kind of ejaculated, really, all over the place. Few were those who invested it in building, in houses, in plots of land. But some areas of certain neighbourhoods in Kinshasa did witness a modest construction boom thanks to that kind of money. But already, when you talk about the capital of Kinshasa, the question immediately is, *the* capital for whom? or who defined what the capital is, and who has access to it? In Dakar, it was merely a discussion of *where should it be*. In Congo, the colonial city really emerged as a non-place. It was defined as a ‘centre extra-coutumier,’ that is, the city placed itself right from the start outside of all locally existing cultural, social, and political frameworks. In the postcolonial period, Kinshasa became a major political centre. But in recent years, even that role has slightly changed. In the late 1990s we saw how regional players (Rwanda, among others) tried hard to make the capital move eastward, away from a Francophone sphere of influence. In the end that hasn’t worked, if only because of the sheer size and weight of Kinshasa as a cultural centre. And it has, of course, also remained an important political centre, but contrary to an earlier period, it is perhaps no longer exclusively the only political centre. There are other centres of power as well. With the Kabila dynasty, Lubumbashi, for example, has once again become more important.

And, second, the capital, already when the city was founded or when it grew out of really a *comptoir* economy, it was a trading post originally and then transformed into a huge labour camp. The city that the Belgian colonial administration developed was a deeply segregated one, certainly in terms of race but also in terms of gender, for example. Basically, it was a depot of cheap labour force. Access to the city was strictly controlled. The city itself was dual: there was ‘la Ville,’ the exclusively white, colonial heart of the city, and then there was “la Cité,” the vast, indigenous peripheral city, inhabited by Congolese. The city in itself has always maintained a state of exclusion, even today. For example, where the colonial borders of the city end today, the real city starts, much like Pikine. But in Kinshasa, you have a colonial city with a very small heart, which stopped growing in 1960, when Kinshasa’s population did not exceed 400,000. Afterward, 4 million to 6 million people have been added onto that, but in areas that have not been urbanized along formal lines.

Today, one of the access points into the old colonial Ville is marked by a statue, which Father Kabila erected in memory of Lumumba, Congo’s first prime minister after independence. The statue itself is of a Lumumba who stands with one hand raised. And there are all kinds of popular interpretations of that statue. First of all, in Congo, there is no real culture of statuary in public places, so its sudden appearance generated all kinds of comments. Painted in gold, the huge and heavy statue reminds one of the former Soviet Union’s aesthetics. The first remarks people made were, “This is going to be heavy to move and steal when another wave of looting sweeps through the city.” And second, “why is he standing there with his hand like this?” He’s basically saying, “Stop, you can’t get into the city.” To all of the multitudes who live in the peripheral city that has become the real city, the statue says, “You’re not allowed to come in.” It’s basically perceived as the government denying access to all these people who want to get into the city but who are not allowed to, who can’t afford to, who can’t make use of it, who are blocked and excluded.

The areas and neighbourhoods that extend beyond the statue are referred to as ‘La Chine populaire,’ or the Peoples Republic of China, because they are so populous. They are called “*Bana terre rouge*,” or the children of the red earth, in reference to the dusty and un-asphalted roads in those areas. The people living there have never had a real sense of the colonial city as their own. Very often, I think, they don’t feel as if the city belongs to them. It’s not their city.

Father Kabila, I believe, understood that very well and tried to decentralize the urban space, much like Wade. As an alternative to the Central Market in the colonial centre, Kabila ordered another market to be built in the city’s newer periphery. But even then that market picks up only very slowly because people do not really consider it their own: it is a top-down government initiative. It has been there now for almost ten years, and the feeling about that market is not good. People start working and functioning around the market, but the market itself as a constructed space by the government has never really been fully adopted.

So that other city, that peripheral city that is the real city, has developed according to its own notion of what capital might mean, or what forms of accumulation might mean. In order to exist socially in a city like Kinshasa, expenditure, circulation, and conspicuous consumption are far more important than accumulation or maximalization of profit. Accumulation requires a directionality, a teleology, a specific temporality which is not the temporality of the city today. The city, on the contrary, is a space of the sudden, the unforeseen, the unexpected and fleeting moment. In order to survive in it, one has to know how to capture that moment. It is this praxis of capture and seizure that determines life and survival in the city, which itself is often compared to the space of the forest. As such, the city does not function according to a standard capitalist logic as we know it. The city, essentially, is a hunter’s landscape. In order to survive in this

forest-city, one has to be a good hunter, that is, know how to seize an opportunity and know how to make that known. The new figures of success within the city, whether it be preachers, politicians, or musicians, are, in a very real sense, the city's best hunters: those who know how to capture wealth, inject it again in social networks, and gain social weight through it.

That also means that the urbanscape is not so much shaped by the dynamics of modernity but rather that it is constantly infused with all kinds of other notions and moralities that often have longstanding, rural roots.

The practices of seizure and immediate expenditure make for the fact that there is no build-up of any surplus; the notion of accumulation is absent. Everything you have or everything that is sold in the market is everything that can be contained by one's belly, everything that can be eaten and digested immediately in the moment. There is no use in buying ten cans of something because you don't know whether on the tenth day you will still be there to drink it. So you buy what you need in the moment. You don't buy a whole bar of soap, but you buy just a third of it, enough to wash yourself with this one time. You don't buy a whole pack of cigarettes; you buy just one or even half of one cigarette. And so all the heaps of foodstuffs that you see at the market are measured by the quantity of the belly, the quantity of the stomach. Capital in that sense starts to mean something else; it becomes something else, away from standard notions of accumulation.

VR: *If notions of accumulation are displaced from the logic of capital in the urban practices of the Kinosis, is there a different sense or understanding of investment as well?*

FdeB: Well, there is a lot of investment in social relations and in one's self-realization through these relations, but far less investment in material infrastructure. Not in buildings, not in a city that is still perceived as something that is not fully ours after all those decades. And since it is not fully ours, it means there isn't a sense of responsibility about it: the material infrastructure and everything that comes from above and from outside is there to be ripped off, to be captured and taken advantage of, whether legally or illegally. The term now is *kisanola*, or 'combing your hair.' 'Combing' in the sense people now give to it means stealing, looting, ripping off. If I, as a white person, walk through the street, people will make the *kisanola* sign, by which they indicate 'You are there to be ripped off,' basically because I don't belong there and can therefore be taken advantage of without any moral objections or feelings of guilt or wrongdoing. Similarly, a money changer in the street might advertise 'double *kisanola*,' meaning, 'Here you will be ripped off twice.' It indicates that the money changer you are dealing with knows what he is doing, that he is shrewd and streetwise. Paradoxically, the fact that he is not to be trusted is a sign you can trust that guy. Another image people use is that of an injection. In order to socially exist and survive in this urban environment, one has to know how to stick a needle into someone and suck the victim's blood. So that's the way in which capital moves in the city, that's what it is about. It's not about accumulating, it's not about maximizing. It is not about having but about being, not about possessing but about consuming, about singularizing oneself by immediately putting capital in constant circulation.

VR: *If these actions do not have a standard capitalist notion of investment, which is typically directed toward future profitability and to something that might materialize at some other point in time, then what kinds of future are being imagined by the Kinosis?*

FdeB: Such a sense is emerging today but in the religious sphere, where money has come to mean something very specific. Within Pentecostalism and other 'prosperity churches,' you see how the switch toward a capitalist notion of money and of accumulation is made. There you also witness the introduction of new notions of individualization. These churches turn away from older collective identities based on kinship or ethnic belonging. Within that new religious public sphere these former group identities are disfavoured. On the contrary, one becomes an authentic Christian as an individual and through one's own work and effort. And that's the constant message of these churches. Here one witnesses the introduction of a new subject formation, the introduction also, of a new work ethos and of new notions of accumulation. In these churches accumulation is no longer something that is socially negative. It is, on the contrary, something that is favoured, even though the fruits of that labour and accumulation are often not harvested instantly in this life. When people give money and goods to the church and to their preacher, they do so because they believe that God will multiply these gifts and return it to them. During Masses and prayer meetings the believers often listen to testimonies by people who died and were resuscitated through the force of prayer. Often they report back to the church community about what they witnessed in Paradise: "Everything that we give to the church, everything that we give to the preacher, is being invested for you in heaven," they would say. "And with the money you give they are already building your house and your villa in paradise. When you

die, your house will be there, a house that you were never able to afford here on earth.” So ‘giving’ in this religious context has become an investment in real estate, even though that real estate is located in heaven. In this sense, the churches do contribute to a new form of urban planning, but it is an imaginary urban planning in the hereafter.

In those churches, within these new forms of Christian fundamentalism, you clearly see how the switch is made from the notion of the gift toward a notion of capital, with all of the fallout that it produces too—because it means that stress is put on individual success and not on group solidarity. And it means that the notion of the group, of what ‘family’ is, for example, is being redefined at the moment away from the reality of the extended family toward the new and more restrictive notion of the nuclear family. In the process, people whom one would have defined as kin before are now being labelled as outsiders, strangers, or even witches. These are radically new geographies of inclusion and exclusion that emerge within the urban locale and redefine the boundaries between inside and outside, kin and stranger, endogamous and exogamous.

A city like Kinshasa has really become the fault line where these two different logics—the logic of gift- and kin-based reciprocity and the logic of money—meet, so far without really merging, and that produces huge upheavals.

VR: In the book, you talked about the idea of the jungle, and how it’s becoming part of the landscape of the city. The growth of the city seems to be premised upon the encompassing of this forest through new forms of action such as those in the religious sphere.

FdeB: Well, as I said, it’s again about the hunter. In the forest, in order to survive, you have to know how to hunt. In the city, in order to survive, you have to know how to hunt. Well, that means, what does the hunter do when he goes hunting? He comes back with meat and then distributes it according to specific roles and rules that indicate what one should give to one’s maternal uncle, first wife, the owner of the gun, the owner of the land where you shot the animal on, and so on and so forth. And that’s how he makes that capital gain, in this case, work for him. He gains in social prestige by investing in social capital.

In order to survive in the city, you have to do the same thing. You have to constantly make sure that you create and invest in certain networks, which are no longer the network of the household, maybe, or of your ethnic group or your village, but different kinds of associations, different kinds of groups of cooperation—maybe a gang, maybe all kinds of groups. But you constantly have to invest, you constantly have to be present, constantly have to exchange, constantly be “in touch” with others. In order to survive in the city you have to know how to do that.

When people speak of the city as forest, they refer to a specific kind of forest. It’s a forest in which you can become modern, where you can attain and access a certain modernity, even if it’s only in imaginary or oneiric form. I gave the example of the church, but the bar is another concrete example of a space where you can do that, and the church and the bar overlap to a certain extent. They are basically the same ludic spaces.

VR: I was also interested when you talked about the hollowing out of political power in Kinshasa—the colonial Kinshasa, not the other Kinshasa that has developed later on—and the concentration of that power in other cities, like Lubumbashi. What is the relationship between these various concentrations and expressions of power? What is the kind of impact they have on the landscape of the capital city?

AMS: Looking at some of the overlaps and divergences of Dakar may be somewhat interesting. Because one has to keep in mind that Dakar and other Senegalese towns were actual—

FdeB: Those were *comptoirs*.

AMS: They were *comptoirs* and also part of France at one point. Dakar was literally integrated into French territory and done so in a way to mark the strong divide between the city, the urban and the hinterland. The hinterland was the province of the *Marabout*, a kind of religious power that had to be contained, that had to be marked. I don’t know a lot about that history, but it is a clear history with ramifications to this day. In some ways, outside of Kinshasa is a hinterland that is teeming with certain possibilities. It teems with both an excess of life and death. Whereas outside of Dakar is increasingly a hinterland that is over. It’s wasted.

But what’s interesting, too, is the fact that you have Touba. It was a religious city and was at one time exempt from taxation and had no kind of local municipal structures. The buying and selling all was concentrated as a kind of terrain of the Murid social structure and also exempt from certain kinds of applications of customs law.

Touba really grew a lot through trade, so it was a kind of entrepôt masked as sacred city. Then, when people began to realize that it was a sort of booming commercial centre on the basis of illegal trade, there was the attempt to domesticate it in some way. The domestication, the complex negotiations to bring its urban economy, which was not just an economy of Touba, but a transnational economy— that somehow symbolically and administratively was administered from Touba. The complicated negotiations to try to bring it into the ambit of the state meant that certain deals had to be worked out. And an important deal was that Plateau, the commercial, administrative, colonial centre of Dakar, became—through many different policies, many different deals—increasingly available to the Murids. So, the Murids began to take over. They began to take over certain Lebanese commercial interests, particularly that kind of intermediary between wholesaling and retailing. What was interesting is that the Dakar's urban economy in some ways became an extension of Touba. But you have then a kind of indigenous entrepreneurship that really is within an urban economy and is really strong, unlike in many other places.

FdeB: That's really different from Congo. I mean, in terms of indigenous entrepreneurship, what has worked well in the past decades are those parts of the country that knew how to evade Kinshasa. A very good example are the Nande cultivators and traders of coffee in a secondary city such as Butembo, in eastern Congo, who through their own networks managed to really inscribe themselves in transnational commercial movements which link them to Dubai and Asia. Very wealthy, a whole new form of urbanization, a kind of very provincial urbanism, all of it because they are not under the control of the capital city and know how to evade the state. Otherwise, it would never have happened. The real urban growth and the notion itself of urbanity often develops, I would say, outside of Kinshasa, as long as it's not controlled by the capital.

The same is true of the diamond trade. Even though materially they do not represent much, little diamond towns that spring up along the border with Angola, for example, or the gold mining towns in the East – those are the places where the idea of capitalism and urbanity is most fully generated. But again, materially, these cities and towns do not correspond to the form of what we think of as a city. And yet they are much more urban in a way in their dynamics than what goes on in the 'real' city.

AMS: In Senegal, in some ways, the predominant mode of urban accumulation can be attributed to what goes on outside of Senegal. There's nothing within the nation of Senegal itself that could account for the kind of—

FdeB: No, but within Senegal, there are local autochthonous groups that have the capacity and strength to impose themselves and become key players and control that game. In Congo, you often don't have these, in that sense. Whether small trade and commerce or industrial activities in the fields of mining or wood-logging today, these activities often were and still are not in Congolese hands but are controlled by the Lebanese for example or the Chinese, for that matter. Even in the early years of Kinshasa's existence, the trade was not in Congolese hands but was often controlled by what were called the 'Coastmen': people coming from Freetown or Dakar or later the Greeks and the Portuguese and now the Lebanese and the Pakistanis and so on.

When it comes to the broader geopolitical game, I mean, why is Uganda there? Why is Rwanda there? It seems to be Congo's fate to always be exploited by and profited from outsiders. Congolese, even the Congolese government, tries to get its hands on some of the crumbs that fall off the table, but it never fully controls the game, it seems to me. Whereas these Murid are in control of what they're doing, to some extent.

AMS: And increasingly so.

FdeB: And increasingly so, yes, increasingly taking over the state.

AMS: So that sort of division, of keeping the state separate from capital, Dakar separate from Touba—

VR: *In practical terms, it seems to be blurring. This relation between the capital city as the expression of political power and as the space for capital as economic field of operation —*

AMS: It's not there. For example, during the periods of intense religious ceremony in Touba, you can walk down the main street of Dakar and have almost no traffic. Otherwise, streets in Dakar, where I used to live not far from Plateau, which used to be a 10-minute taxi ride, today takes an hour and a half.

FdeB: Absolutely. Or even longer now, because of the road works.

AMS: But also because there are limited feeder roads, because of the increased densification. In some ways, what accounts for that kind of densification? All right, many of the Lebanese have gone away, have been displaced. So they go, but many of the Lebanese also continue to have important kinds of economic circuits. As they're displaced from certain kinds of economic activities but because of the ways that many of those Lebanese networks were implicated within the socialist party, they simply take another form of accumulation, which is through extending their real estate. So, you have these big Lebanese investments in building.

Now, the Murid are also capable of doing that. I mean, it's not that the particular form of economic activity is anything different from a kind of corporate structure. They do that as well. But there is something important about the market. There is something important about the logic of the way in which the market operates, as an intensely mutable form. There's something very material about the way that this market operates: small traders who are more than small traders, of shifting alliances that are made visible, of a form of visibility where people can watch, observe, see what's going on, who's dealing with whom. But that has to be serviced, so you have big trucks coming in and traffic.

It becomes a densification by virtue of multiplying these trajectories in a way that's partly symbolic, partly a kind of nerve centre. The antecedents want to reproduce themselves spatially, yet veer off and transform into a sort of Murid version of corporate headquarters—big buildings, because they're investing in that as well—and also the way in which Dakar is increasingly implicated in other economies elsewhere. For example, the political crises of Abidjan during the past several years has meant key corporations, multilaterals, move from Abidjan to Dakar.

But what's also interesting is the attempt to host the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Dakar, something that was supposed to have already taken place. It has been postponed now three times. Wade always says the reason for this delay is because Dakar needs adequate infrastructure in order to sufficiently host the meeting. For him, that means the construction of eight new five-star hotels on the Corniche.

In some ways the infrastructure of hosting this meeting already exists. It already exists in tourist areas outside the city. But in some ways, that's too much a kind of budget tourism, bordering on some sleazy activities that can't really be the site to host an Islamic meeting. Maybe any other meeting could take place there. But because this is the Organization of Islamic Conference and as the basis of accumulation of the Murids, Senegal has always in some sense been marginal to the rest of the Islamic world, there is some perceived need to use this gathering as a way of normalizing Senegal's relationships with the Muslim world.

Not that Senegal itself hasn't always been seen as part of the Muslim world. But increasingly, as the Murids assume more political and economic power and then become available as an expression of a certain kind of national cohesion, signalling the distinctiveness of Senegal as a nation but also its integration into a larger theatre of operations. "We're Muslims, we're clearly Muslims, we take Islam seriously." Singularity is very much wrapped up historically into a sense of national identity, a sense of national cohesion.

In some ways, the hosting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference signals almost the normalization of Senegal's position within the Islamic world, so it has to be done right. But to be done right means that you have to make this big intervention into the built environment. The money is coming from Dubai, from Kuwait. These hotels basically belong to them, and what is their interest? What is the interest of the Emirates in the Gulf? The financially ambiguous role of Dubai World and its real estate arm, Limitless, in the proposed construction of the new capital simply accentuates the impression that the country is being brought into a particular field of orbit that is being elaborated through major urban and financial engineering projects managed by Gulf companies across the Maghreb.

Somehow there's something about locating what will be Gulf-owned pieces of real estate on the Corniche, facing the Atlantic in the westernmost Islamic country. A six-hour flight from New York—there's something about that.

FdeB: Are you saying this, or is this the way this has been perceived?

AMS: On the street in Dakar, there's this kind of talk, you know?

FdeB: Like we're in the middle of—

AMS: All I'm saying is that when you look at the relationship between capital and the capital city, the kind of project of centralizing, the kind of expression of the capital, of the national cohesion—

VR: *The way I'm hearing it is that there's some relationship between being aligned to these other sorts of flows—from Dubai or elsewhere—on the one hand, and to the regeneration of the city, of the nation on the*

other hand, which cannot any longer be expressed without this alignment? Without this movement toward bringing those elements into the space of the city—in a very concrete expression. The buildings almost become that medium as it were, where—

AMS: Yes, but combined with a very old story too. Wade is a very old guy. He's in his early 80s. He's just begun his last term in office at what may be a high political price for the country. He knows that time is running out, and he's waited to be in power for a long, long time, and somehow the notion of the *grands travaux*, the big works—

FdeB: Very French. Like a French President.

AMS: To make the mark, to leave the trace, with also very old ideas about making Senegal really a modern nation—that's reflected in this. It's an old story.

Invisible Infrastructure

VR: *Turning to a related but different question, I want you both to elaborate why the notion of invisibility seems so analytically central to thinking about the contemporary African city?*

FdeB: The question seems to be the things that Maliq was talking about: urban networks and how people move through the city, make use of the city, and create the city and generate the city while doing so. How can you capture that? How can you start to understand, capture, contain, and represent urban life? How do you represent an urban reality like that? You cannot. All the means that we have at our disposal to do so, whether it's writing or whether it's photography, seem to be in a way not sufficient.

VR: *So the question is also about epistemology having to do with the urban as object. It seems that writing about invisibility is a productive way of describing what's happening in African cities. And part of the interest is also to understand whether those forms of description are particular only to Africa or if they can travel to other urban conditions.*

FdeB: Well, invisibility can mean many things. There is invisibility on many levels, of course. There is the fact that these cities are invisible to the outside world because people don't know much about African cities. There is the fact that these cities function in ways we're not used to, and that we therefore do not see, that go unnoticed. There is the fact that forms of urban planning and so on continue in very much literally invisible ways, like the urbanization that I was talking about - urbanizing in Paradise rather than the real life. Invisibility might mean a number of things.

AMS: I agree. As part of this New School grant, there has been this project in Douala for the past eighteen months. One piece of that was to have a working group of young, middle-class kids in a middle-class area of Douala, Bonamoussadi. They meet once every two weeks for eighteen months. This notion of invisibility was something that was on their minds as well. It was a word that was used, it was a concern that they had, it was a very particular kind of concern because these are middle-class kids. They come from families that are civil servants or lawyers or teachers, professors, business people, and live in a quarter of Douala that has maybe 300,000 people. It's not small; it's a significant chunk of the city.

When they talked about the changes that they have seen taking place over the past couple of years, the discussion started on the level of something very visible. That is, the changes in the built environment and the way in which there was this popularity of a certain kind of tile that was being put on the houses. Old houses were being torn down, and on the façades of these new ones that were being built was a particular kind of tile—white tile. They started to talk about the way in which this was a kind of uneasy thing, an unsettling thing, for them because it had these connotations of the cemetery, the mortuary, of death—the kind of the white that you would put on graves.

They would talk about the façade as some kind of death. In many of the new constructions, people would spend so much money putting the tile on the façade that they didn't have enough money left over to furnish the house inside. You'd have these beautiful, nice façades but inside something that—

FdeB: Emptiness.

AMS: Emptiness. So, again, sort of intensifying this kind of connotation of death. They would see their neighbours, but the concern was, “Okay, this is the built environment, it’s a nice house, but who is inside?” This thing about being visible in the built environment was also a kind of concern about with whom do we live? The sense about living with people you don’t quite know.

And then, of course, the notion of the living dead—those who are able to operate in the city without being interrupted, whose operations cannot be made visible, rendered visible. We don’t know how someone’s gotten their money. All of a sudden they have a lot of money, or all of a sudden someone loses a lot of money. Or all of a sudden, people move from a house without anyone knowing.

In some ways, their concern was “Okay, we’re all sort of middle class in this boat. We all have sort of narratives about how we got here. My mother, my father, they went to university . . .” But they would talk about going to shop at a new mall, a new supermarket. They would talk about the anxiety of with whom would you be shopping, because you never know who it is that these people are. So the concern was always to make that which is invisible visible—to interrupt it, to trip it up, to find ways of trying to slow down possible neighbours who could operate with such speed through the city that they wouldn’t be visible. How do you make them visible? How do you trip them up? How do you set up roadblocks?

They then went on to talk about what people they knew were actually doing to try to trip them up. The stories get quite complicated and quite political and involve other territories and people in the city that they would never deal with. The notion sometimes of visibility and invisibility is a concern that people themselves raise. It’s a kind of language that they themselves bring, so it’s not an analytical thing necessarily imposed. It can be that, but...

FdeB: It’s a natural thing that comes out of the reality that people inhabit. In Kinshasa, the same. The relationship between visibility and invisibility is a very weird one, in a way, because on the one hand, in order to exist socially in the city it is all about being as visible as possible. It’s about appearance. That’s why you have that whole popular urban culture of *sape* and elegance, about the clothes you wear. It’s about knowing how to put yourself on stage, and it’s the only way to acquire social weight and impose yourself in public space. All of a sudden there is this person emerging, this preacher, politician, musician, or businessman, very theatrical and very physically present, although you never see how he got there. The modes in which visibility was achieved remained rather invisible.

Performing Urbanity

VR: *So are there particular forms of etiquette associated with becoming visible?*

AMS: I am thinking about the work I did in Lagos, which was some time ago. It was in a particular neighbourhood in Lagos, which was very peculiar to Lagos, very particular to Lagos. There, the questions of visibility and invisibility were largely about witnessing. How do you turn yourself into a receiver of the kinds of information that might be useful to you in order to know how to insert yourself into some kind of emerging deal or scenario? Because all that this neighbourhood had was its deals: the deals that didn’t take place inside but always outside. There was always this kind of incessant process of visiting each other, showing up, visiting, making oneself visible, to go to a store where other people are showing up. But then as other people are showing up, how do you not insist upon your agenda? How don’t you dominate this space, this scene, but how do you become visible and almost disappear in the face of others who are also there, in some sense, for the same agenda?

Because this was largely a Hausa neighbourhood within a Yoruba city—or a Muslim place, West African Muslim place—it wasn’t that there weren’t visible associations and visible rules and visible representatives of the emir and his business interests. Somehow, in order to make the thing work, people had to put together new crews with new kinds of skills, with different kinds of experiences and trades than in the past, because you’re trying to take on something new. You’re trying to configure new kinds of deals now, you’re trying to go to new cities, you’re trying to buy new commodities, you’re trying to relate to other kinds of syndicates.

So, I want to put together a new crew, but how do I do that? But also, how do I *not* enter? It’s complicated because this is a spatial arena that knew it had to survive in some way because Babandiga and the military wanted to seize it because it’s an interlocked, an interstitial zone between Lagos island and Victoria. It was ceded by the British to the Hausa as a kind of space of operation, so there are very visible solidarities that had to be maintained. You can’t include everyone, but you can’t be seen excluding people

in particular. How do you create the sense that your new crews are in some sense self-selected, that you're not the one who's excluding?

So it is just a complicated kind of elaboration of a social etiquette in a way, a kind of business practice that had to keep channels of information open, had to not keep secrets, but had to have an informational economy where you minimized competition. It was all done through these quotidian practices of having sites that apparently didn't sell much of anything but were places of reception. There's a way of managing an economy of visibility and invisibility, where the two had to be brought together in some kind of functional calibration and recalibrated all of the time.

Within the larger scope of Lagos, given the fact that there are usually eight people to a room, always in very dense quarters, how can you keep something to yourself? How can you keep something away? Is there, in any sense, privacy? Privacy doesn't really exist spatially. It has to be a calibration of not seeing what you see, and also seeing what you don't see, because you have to be able to see.

Even in the everyday cognition of this kind of density, visibility and invisibility are day-to-day matters.

FdeB: But you also need to be invisible or to know how to disappear and reappear at a good time.

AMS: Timeliness.

FdeB: Time is very important.

AMS: The calculations of acting in a timely matter...

FdeB: That's why everybody also seems to be waiting all of the time, I think.

AMS: Given the sort of big-man or big-woman syndrome, particularly in a place like Lagos, you need a protector, you need a patron, you need someone you can have recourse to, you can appeal to, who can arbitrate, who can make a decision so that you don't have to: "Okay, I know the one that I appeal to, that I regard, that I owe, that I depend on . . ."

This person has a lot of other people around. What happens if we all show up at the same time? How do we know how not to all show up at the same time?

VR: *How do we know not to crowd the space?*

AMS: To crowd, yes.

AMS: In this one area I lived in when I was living in Khartoum, people from Darfur were living with people from the South in a complicated relationship with lots of tension but lots of complementarities. As the area was growing, so were demands for space and services. But it was always interesting because the households from Darfur were saying, "Implement Sharia. We want Sharia, we want to live in terms of Islamic law. We want this to apply to ourselves."

And so these people working in the area—local NGOs, activists—were always concerned that in some way this would create a legalistic divide with people from the South, who would not fall under Sharia law. The people from Darfur were saying, "No, you don't have to apply it. But we want to live under it. Please make it applicable for us; we want it." There was always the concern that this would polarize relationships more and really intensify conflict.

But because people from Darfur would then say, "No, this is not the point. We want Sharia for us. We want to mark the difference with our neighbours even more, because it will allow us to deal with them in a much easier way." When I then do all these other things, it's not that I'm doing it as part of my zone of operation, but I'm becoming part of their zone of operation. So I'm then exempt; I don't have to implicate myself. I can retain my sense of being a good Muslim, because that's my operation in their zone.

In some ways, the desire for the legalistic divide wasn't a desire to cut off contact but, quite on the contrary, to maintain a sense of a certain kind of integrity.

VR: *It seems that there is an interesting contradiction here with laws in the municipal, urban planning sense, and these other understandings of law, which don't quite territorialize in the same way, which are universal at some level. In other words, not quite cutting off or zoning behaviour and restricting it to a particular sphere of operation; instead, which allow universalization, based on that which is mobile, which*

can be carried around, through the person, through their ability to act and be governed by a set of invisible structures, rather than visible barriers of the ways in which cities are normally understood: barriers of neighbourhoods or barriers of access or transportation, infrastructure of various kinds, and so on.

FdeB: But at the same time [these barriers] do exist.

AMS: This is the claim that's made by my friend Ousman Dembele, who is an urban geographer in Abidjan. If you're in Kumasi [a quarter of Abidjan is largely populated by Ivorians from the North of the country] and the kids are stuck in Kumasi for the most part because surrounding them if you go to Marcory, it's dangerous territory. You could be killed, you could be beaten up. These territories of operation depend on where you're from, your religion, your region, and your political affiliation. The territorialization is really strong.

But what Dembele describes is that in some ways it's impossible for this kind of strict territorialization to be maintained. Somehow there's a sense of boundaries, and the boundaries are dividing lines but also works-in-progress. They become spaces of revision, trying to come up with new terms of connection. But, of course, this is somewhat invisible work. He claims that at these boundaries, there's a lot of boundary maintenance work taking place. The maintenance is not to keep the division in place necessarily, but to work out what are the terms through which there is interchange. It's impossible for people to stay put necessarily.

We know that there's a lot about urban life that increasingly enables the capacity to stay within segregated spaces but, we know, also risks atrophy overall. It risks the kind of urbanizing trajectories that an urban system needs in order to be able to function. We also know that these kinds of spaces of segregation are dysfunctional in some ways. In some way, the boundary becomes a kind of place where it's transgressed, not just about transgression, but about trying to come up with something that you don't necessarily commit yourself to, which is continuously revised, worked out—a language, a terrain of transaction itself.

Dembele claims that the relationship between contiguous areas with very different histories of inhabitation, where everyone is an enemy to each other, when you look at it as a kind of system, that system can't function just simply by being. There are these points of intersection at boundaries, but you can't make them too visible because you know that people might be looking, you could be killed. There's something else that does take place.

From Colonial to Global

The Capacity for Networking

VR: *If we were to return to our original point of departure and think about the problem of the visible again, we have to also confront these various global trajectories of investment in Africa that are increasingly visible now.*

AMS: The Chinese will probably end up putting in one billion dollars to Lagos, and much of that will go to the cultivation of a kind of Chinese entrepôt. I'm not sure if this is still the case, but at one point this was to be the site of Chinese personnel, of services, businesses and residents—of those that are responsible for managing West Africa.

It is almost like a large, gated community, but it is also more than just a kind of residential facility. So what happens? Always the thing is that unlike colonial relationships of the past, where the ability to operate was predicated on all of these other, ancillary activities like civilizing missions and destructive—

VR: *The display of excessive power...*

AMS: Yes, but this is: "We'll leave you alone if you leave us alone." It's a kind of capacitation of a kind of parallel play, of a quid pro quo. You allow us to bring our engineering teams, our staff, our personnel; you allow us to evacuate particular kinds of resources, again using our infrastructure, then we will pay you for the right to have done that. Part of that payment is, once again, investment in infrastructure. This is a kind of connection that will have really massive implications.

VR: *Yes, that's something that I want to bear more about, especially in the light our discussion about the operation of very low-end Chinese merchants or retailers in places like Douala and smaller towns in*

Africa—the ways in which they integrate themselves into local networks, markets, and economic flows, and so on. How do you think this massive infrastructural investment and capacitation that arises from that is different from the operation of these merchants? Or maybe it's not different. What is it going to do to the shape of the city or the future of the city?

For example, I'm thinking of the way that Khartoum is being transformed, not from the West but from India, from China, and not in the traditional forms of trade, which are historic. You have had Indian merchants in Africa for centuries, coming in through the Indian Ocean trade, and similarly the Chinese as well. But this is something new. This is Capital, with a big 'C,' coming in from the East. That's not so much built of these human networks, but built of something more inhuman, a creation of an inhuman platform. It probably has great ethical implications for the way that architecture, especially, inserts itself into the city.

AMS: Yes. The Malaysians, for example, wanted to make this deal with Wade where they would build 30,000 units of social housing, but they had to be built within one year, and it had to be done under particular kinds of conditions. And in some ways, it was. It was a Malaysian company that specializes in quick housing construction for lower-end consumption, from which they think they can profit. It has antecedents in a particular kind of Malaysian aspiration, which is that Malaysia can embody a kind of progressive, Islamic capitalism that is able to take certain kinds of risks but yet has an interaction with other fields of possibility.

It's still a playing field. In Cabo Verde, Irish investors want to build 15,000 units of retirement housing for European investment. In some ways, there is this sense that there is no place that can't be inhabited, there is no place that can't be potentially occupied, there is no place that is in some ways off-limits. Because you still have these kinds of undercoded territories, they also can become playgrounds for ideas and aspirations and of a variety of different external actors.

The Chinese juggernaut is the most dominant, the most visible kind of actor in this, but there are others.

VR: It's perhaps appropriate to end here with this gesture toward these singular projects that have great potential for generating urbanism beyond the city in ways that are perhaps different from those projects for renovating the capital city that we began with. Thanks very much to both of you for your time and energy.

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