Claiming the City
Civil Society
Mobilisation by the Urban Poor

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Contested urban visions in the global South

Introduction

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The African urban present provides a suitable juncture to examine important issues concerning competing and often antagonistic urban visions in the global South. However, bracketing this as a problem that is specific to the global South – as this amorphous term is more usually thought and defined – is misleading. Not only do these issues increasingly preoccupy urban researchers, urban planners, urban managers and not least urban populations in both North and South, but so too is perhaps the analytical utility of the North/South distinction losing any sharpness.¹

Prevalent in the Northern context has been a critique – especially among critical urban theorists – of the complicity of neo-liberal urban governance regimes (often private-public partnerships) in ‘reclaiming’ and ‘sanitising’ central city areas and public spaces from groups deemed detrimental to the task of attracting global capital; that which Neil Smith (1996) has influentially termed ‘revanchist urbanism’ (see also Brenner et al 2012). In the Southern context, a dominant theme in recent diagnoses of the African urban condition has been the claim that the continued hegemony of Western urban planning models precipitates ‘conflicts of rationality’ between the dictates of formal planning and land-use management and the rationality of ‘making do under conditions of poverty and inequality’ (Watson 2009, p 187; see also Simone 2010). More recently, these two bodies of research – both essentially homing in on fundamental issues of socio-spatial justice and contestations over how and by whom urban space should be planned and used – have begun to coalesce, as the quickening pace of displacement of traders, slum dwellers and other ‘undesirables’ from central urban areas in the South is seen as evidence that ‘Revanchist urbanism heads South’ (Swanson 2007; see also Crossa 2009). However, this invocation of revanchist theory in the Southern context, just as some have claimed for the Northern context, does risk reading all urban displacement as an effect of a neoliberal rationality (Van Eijk 2010).
What can be said with some assuredness is that cities in the Global South continue to be widely represented as sites of disorder, decay and lack. Irrespective of the accurateness of such claims, this doggedly perseverant narrative has important consequences, not least in terms of circumscribing the respective range of urban visions that get implemented, especially in centrally located urban areas (see the chapter by Myra Mabilin in this volume section, p 133). More specifically, these visions tend to be informed by Western planning ideals and to emphasise economic growth and competitiveness. Internationally circulating ideas of best practice in, for example, the fields of urban planning and governance, articulate with state actors’ rationalities and set into motion interventions aimed at modernising and (re)ordering or displacing the informal city. Investments in high-profile infrastructure and urban renewal projects seek to attract investors and are seen as the means to materialise ‘world-class city’ aspirations (see the chapter by Onur Ekmekci, p 139).

Indeed, it is not difficult to see why urban solutions based on urban and economic theories that do not seriously question the heavy-handed involvement of the West in guiding and building the South’s urban futures are attractive to many Western governments. Black and white statements, such as those voiced by the prominent national economist Paul Romer at a recent symposium organised by the Swedish Ministry of Aid – such as ‘Bangkok and Kinshasa are badly planned, New York is well planned’ – are as simplistically attractive to some as they are simplistically Eurocentric to others. But, as James Scott (1999) – among a great many other scholars – has been at pains to argue, urban plans that rely entirely on technical rational knowledge (techne), and which bracket out local lived and practiced knowledge (metis), seriously risk creating even more Brasilias and cementing deeper spatial, socio-economic and political fragmentation of cities and their populations.

Here it is important not to lose sight of the manner in which the terrain of power relations, discourse and urban politics and planning is, at least according to some commentators, changing in ways that may seriously constrain the potential for the spokespeople and practitioners of local lived and practiced knowledge to successfully mobilise, promote and actualise alternative urban visions. Indeed, recent theoretical contribu-
tions by, for example, Li (2007) and Mouffe (2005) raise crucial issues pertaining to the ‘post-political moment,’ arguing that alternative visions are foreclosed by appealing to consensus, the common good or, as Iverson (2007) has argued, by appealing to the ‘good of the city.’ In for example my own research on contested urban visions in Uganda, it was palpable how resistance to a government discourse that seemingly legitimated the redevelopment of any state-owned land (and displacement) was trumped by discursively labeling such resistance as being against societal ‘progress’ and national ‘development’ (Byerley 2013).

However, as was indicated above concerning the need to avoid uncritical applications of concepts such as ‘neo-liberalism,’ care is needed to avoid reifying and/or misreading causes, consequences and challenges pertaining to current processes of urban transformation and city visioning. The chapters by, for example Custódio (p 148) and Carolino and Quaresma (p 155) offer examples from both North and South – depending on whose definition one follows – on how informal and formalised networks and associations of the urban poor mobilise to circumvent, alter or challenge powerful urban visions, often in novel ways.

Notes
1. On the increasing eviction and displacement of urban populations, particularly from slum and degraded urban areas, see United Nations 2007.
2. On ‘mobile urbanism’ see Ward 2010.

References
Iveson, Kurt, 2007. Publics and the City, Oxford: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.


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