

Review

Garth A Myers (2011) *African Cities: alternative visions of urban theory and practice*. London: Zed Books

Nancy Odendaal

nancy.odendaal@uct.ac.za

In the final chapter (before its conclusion) of Myer's book, he explores cultural production as a means of gaining insight into the meaning of cosmopolitanism in African cities. He uses the 2009 Grahamstown festival in this small South African town as an example of an event where 'there are signs of the relational city' (184), where identity and shared futures are explored in the dramatic and visual arts. At the 2012 National Arts Festival I attended an exhibition entitled 'Retinal Shift' by photographer Michael Subotzky, a 4-channel film installation that interrogates the practice and mechanics of looking and understanding the history of Grahamstown and our contemporary surveillance society. In many ways Myers achieves the same with this impressive volume; like Subotzky he shifts our gaze towards ourselves in using African experiential knowledge in understanding the diverse intricacies of African urban spaces, beyond just looking, but actually seeing. His stated aim is ambitious: using case studies and examples to revise how African cities are understood and discussed through a relational lens. He succeeds admirably in doing this.

Myers calls for a radical vision that departs from the developmental and tormented views of African cities. In doing so, he weaves an elegant tapestry of urban stories that gives the reader insight into the complexity, diversity and layered exchange of African urbanity. He is generous in his appraisal of current writing out of Africa, often drawing on geographers and urban theorists that distinguish themselves by engaging with practice and theory. More poignantly, he uses literature and the arts in expanding his conceptual base from which he draws to build his theory of hybrid and

relational urbanism. This is not a theoretical text however. In keeping with his desire to cross the theory-practice divide, Myers uses an expansive lexicon of cases and documented urban histories to explore the five themes that assist him in fulfilling his aim of grounding theoretical debates and discussion through the demonstrated political and social practices of actors. His own experience and fieldwork informs much of this and the cities that he is familiar with are prioritised accordingly. It is a good range; in addition to Zanzibar where he did his PhD research and clearly has great insight into, he looks at Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Lilongwe, Lusaka, Dodoma, Grahamstown, and Cape Town. This is a good range in terms of scale and colonial histories as well as typology and settlements types.

The conceptual frame for understanding these spaces is inspired by the work of Ed Soja. In a similar way to which Soja uses Los Angeles to develop his postmodern geographies proposition, Myers uses the seemingly unremarkable Zambian capital of Lusaka to develop the five themes that essentially lend structure to the book. Postcolonialism, informality, governance, violence and cosmopolitanism are not only seen as conceptual anchors but they build on one another in that order. There is a subtle unfolding of dilemmas that emerge in practice in accordance with these themes; the manifestations of colonial and postcolonial features are countered through livelihood practices that challenge officialdom (informality) and so raises issues of governance and the role (and nature) of the state, resulting in spaces not subject to any formal mode of governance (Mogadishu is used as an in-depth example of a wounded city in Chapter Five), and many experiencing a steady outflow to other parts of the globe in an increasingly interconnected and global world. But this is also an intriguing methodological story (this is perhaps what impresses me more) as Myers moves between the many in-depth and secondary cases and their theoretical resonances with admirable ease. By decentering the reference points for understanding urban practice in Africa, he builds a solid conceptual base for understanding the manifestation of such practice on the Continent, and I would argue, elsewhere. These five themes are not new of course, but his discussion of them is critical enough to encourage reexamination.

Chapter Two on postcolonialism starts with an image of the author standing in front of the statue of Julius Nyerere in Dodoma, the capital city of Tanzania, with a billboard advertising South African multinational cell phone company Vodacom in the background. There are so many visual threads worth exploring in that picture. The remnants of colonialism and

features of postcolonialism are explored through examination of postcolonial planning – the largely discredited master planning tradition used in managing urban space – and ongoing patterns that persist despite many changes in governance regimes. In a justified critique of postcolonial discourse, Myers criticises the tendency to over-abstract and a lack of engagement with the material manifestations of this ‘temporal aftermath’ (45), in particular its spatial forms. He explores the diversity of colonial experiences and their legacies in Arusha, Lilongwe and Abuja. Of contemporary importance are the features of splintering urbanism as gated enclaves continue to multiply outside the messiness of the everyday. Those outside, unable to access land, jobs and housing are subject to ruthless imposition of unrealistic spatial plans, as eloquently illustrated with the example of the Abuja Master Plan. Even in Tanzania, where the Dodoma Master Plan is explored as a model of African socialist urbanism, are residents compelled to work towards their own version of *ujamaa*.

The inventiveness and inevitability of informality is sometimes overstated in the more general literature on African cities. Chapter Three in this book takes a more considered approach in exploring the logics of informality. I appreciate the effort taken to describe the evolution of informal living conditions in some of the cases; informality did not just appear! The chapter explores what it is to ‘live outside the plan’ (an idea developed in Chapter Two); the livelihood strategies and social networks that inform such. The notion of hybrid governance is foregrounded more significantly here as Myers explores the centrality of land delivery systems. Formal land titling procedures are clearly inadequate and inappropriate in dealing with overwhelming demand and require a more responsive and contextually appropriate response. In exploring alternative (and sometimes collaborative) governance systems, the author’s insistence that the relationship between formal and informal is not dichotomous, is well illustrated.

What then do contemporary African city governance systems look like? I tend to resist the framing of neoliberalism as the common enemy of the people and whilst there is a danger of that in this text, I think there is enough subtlety in exploring alternative governance models to resist such oversimplification. Myers is critical of the material critique of current systems of governance in that he argues such analyses may undervalue local invention and adaptation whilst post-structuralist frames run the risk of overemphasising contingency and fluidity. Inhumane applications of stringent planning rules and forced removals in the name of environmental

health and planning are documented and the changing governance terrain of service delivery given such constraints are recognised. I do wonder how many of these cases are uniquely African however, and how they travel across governance regimes. He also recognises that South Africa is different given its rights based constitution; relatively well capacitated state and active civil society organisations. The point is that the author does not fall into the trap of simplified categories; there is a nuanced reading of the formal and non-formal institutions of governance and relations between them. The discussion on Zanzibar is impressively rich in this regard. Appropriately the chapter concludes by considering Sen's idea of relational rights within particular social and institutional contexts. In looking at Zanzibar he examines the Muslim system of *Sisi-kwa-sisi* – consensus building at the level of the mosque community with its underlying principles of reciprocity and neighbourliness – as an example of alternative governance systems. Perhaps my one critique of this chapter is the limited discussion on the role of religion and religious-based organisations in organising community and facilitating resource access, a feature particularly predominant in West Africa and across the diaspora.

Chapter Five is aptly titled 'Wounded city'. Meyers explores Somalia and records profound stories of how the wounded city travels in contrast to what mainstream media and Hollywood portrays. Emerging literature of urban violence on the continent is explored and African literature is used to give the reader insight into the day-to-day realities of life in seemingly ungoverned spaces. This is where the work of authors such as the Somali author Nuruddin Farah is used to potent effect as the achingly sad dimensions of humanity in damaged spaces and its urban manifestations are recorded. But there is hope as the author draws our attention to counter discourses where creative visions for alternative urban futures emerge.

The African diaspora is noted throughout the book, and the value of drawing on literature in understanding contemporary urban spaces is introduced but it is in Chapter Six in understanding the cosmopolitan city that these ideas are put to full use. The dimensions and spatial manifestations of globalisation are explored in relation to democracy and livelihoods. Material links and connected nodes are recorded as the author again draws on his work in Zanzibar. The notion of the transnational reveals a paradox: connections across the globe are sometimes stronger for many than the ties that may exist in one place. What does this say about spatiality in the African city? Perhaps the answer is in creative explorations of identity and place

through the arts. I like the conclusion to this chapter; not only does the author argue that urbanists can learn from the connective energies that emerge through arts and cultural festivals in places as diverse as Grahamstown in South Africa and St Louis in Senegal, but such instances of global exposure are reminders that spaces of connection can happen in the most unexpected places.

I must admit to some disappointment that this journey does not end in a chapter of reflection and conceptual consolidation. The conclusion is fine and serves as a solid reminder of the book's quest but I think more elaboration on the notion of hybrid governance could assist the reader in identifying ways through which the notion of the relational city can travel to other contexts, or perhaps in framing comparative research. This does not, however, detract from my consistent awe at the ease through which Myers navigated seemingly divergent sources and conceptual frames in offering 'alternative visions of urban theory and practice' noted in the subtitle of the book. In doing so he resisted the usual categories and narrative techniques used to portray African urban practices. It is an engaging work, but it is also rigorous. Myers engages diversity in many ways: through ways of knowing and actual substance across disciplines. Finally I can say that Myers succeeded in decolonizing my mind and I would argue, that he did not need Soja's lead to do so. By his own admission: 'it might perpetuate the sense that we must learn about African cities by studying Western urban theory' (26), but then he defends this method by noting Soja's use of South African geographer Gordon Pirie's work in developing the American's own ideas. Perhaps it is time to move beyond the usual north-south binaries then and generate knowledge that is simply global... transnational. This book is an important step towards achieving that.