32

THE MIGRATION OF SPACES

Monumental urbanism beyond materiality

Morten Nielsen

> For everything that accords with the values of what we call 'civilization', its cities and monumental architecture, its social classes and elaborate lifeways, its incredible technologies, mathematics and self-expression in the control and knowledge of writing and speech, amounts to an overdetermination of the containment of sense by itself.
>
> (Wagner, 2001:30; italics added)

In the now classic "The City in History", Lewis Mumford describes the monumental architecture of the citadels of ancient cities (1961). As an expression of the ruler's power, which almost equalled that of the 'mighty god', the purpose of monumental architecture exhibited through 'costly building materials and all of the resources of art' was twofold: To 'produce respectful terror' and allow residents to partake in the divine personality that was manifested in the institution of kingship (op. cit.: 64–70). With the urban monumental art of the citadels, cities could be scaled to awe the beholder and thereby codify a collective imagination in terms of an eternal cosmological order. As Mumford describes,

> Here art came in to establish and re-enforce, with an effect beyond that of mere words, all that the new order had brought in to alter the dimensions of the older, purely agricultural regime: above all, *the power of the disciplined imagination itself to translate the possible into the actual*, and to enlarge the humble habits of everyday life into structures of magnificence.
>
> (op. cit.: 68; italics added)

In other words, the monumental architecture of the citadels of ancient cities served not merely to articulate a deep sense of eternity; it also triggered new imaginary potentials – a transformative social and ontological force that offered itself to the beholder in and through the materiality of the thing but which was not necessarily contained by it (Bergson, 2005: 9–10). To be sure, monumental architecture could be considered a material medium for producing docile subjects, but it was as an engine of imaginary transformation that its true powers resided (see Nielsen and Pedersen, 2015).

In what follows, I want to use Mumford's discussion of monumental architecture as an experimental heuristic for thinking about global urbanism. My particular focus for this series of reflections will be the multistranded and heterogeneous implications of large-scale speculative urbanization projects in the Global South. During recent decades, there has been a massive upsurge of ambitious urban development projects being implemented throughout the Global South allegedly with the aim of converting existing cities into 'world cities' geared towards integration within a global economy that operates outside territorial state-defined restrictions (Houston, 2002; Shatkin, 2011; Watson, 2013). Many of these urbanization projects appear to have been launched as property investment strategies, which aim to benefit elite groups of financial and political entrepreneurs while doing little or nothing for the growing urban populations living under fragile conditions in informal settlements without access to basic services let alone civic rights (Goldman, 2011). In cities, such as Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Maputo (Mozambique), Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), Bangalore (India) and Singapore, massive urban development projects have been planned and some built with the explicit (or implicit) objective to generate financial growth from sequestered and privileged zones while disregarding the demographics of the broader socio-economic contexts. Often at the cities' peripheries where informal urban sprawl is most intense, land is being re-parcelled and legally redesigned in order to increase its financial value as expansion zones for new urbanization projects (Pitcher and Moorman, 2015). Not unlike the situation in many Euro-America cities, such recent urbanization projects have been driven by a desire to build new and detached urban satellites and enclaves rather than rehabilitating the existing built environment (Murray, 2015a). In doing so, financial investors allying with local city builders and state officials deliberately try to circumvent the mundane chaos of existing and poorly functioning city administrations so that the fortunate few can retreat to sequestered urban spaces with efficient infrastructure, up-to-date services and a comprehensive system of security based on surveillance and restricted access. That is at least the ideal. In reality, however, many speculative urban development projects have failed, thus causing wider economic and social disruptions with devastating consequences for local urban residents (Marcinkoski, 2015). And even in those instances where speculative urbanization projects do result in the building of segregated urban enclaves for the privileged few, it is rarely possible to maintain continuous detachment from the surrounding society. In Euro-America, the making of sequestered urban spaces has been predominantly described as a socio-economic effect of what Davis has called an endemic 'ecology of fear' (1998). By contrast, in many sub-Saharan African cities, for instance, the spatial lines of separation that isolate the affluent few from surrounding urban spaces follow a much wider and less coordinated meshwork of social divisions and political fissures and with deeper social, cultural and economic underpinnings (Nielsen et al., 2020; Pieterse, 2011).

But the lack of physical markers to distinguish privileged spaces from the wider social infrastructure of "incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used" (Simone, 2004: 407) does not mean that the materiality of the (non-physical) distinctions does not do its work. It simply needs to be understood differently. According to Ong (2011: 14), different cities may become connected through the circulation of 'urban models', which can be defined as particularly desirable global technologies and aesthetics that are disembedded 'from (their) hometown and adopted in other sites'. In many cities, physical spaces, built forms and sets of urban practices are reimagined and explored anew through the activation of desires and aspirations that are associated with urban milieu elsewhere. So, for instance, in Kinshasa, billboards all across the city make promises of an urban future that is no longer mirrored on a version of Belgian colonial

modernity but, rather, captures 'the aura of Dubai and other hot spots of the new urban Global South' (de Boeck 2011: 274). Here solidarity with and referencing to another place comes to affect the pace of certain spheres of Kinshasa without necessarily involving the exact blueprint implementation of a 'Dubai model'. What is at stake in such instances, rather, is the production of an urban sensitivity that infuses the city with new imaginary potentials through the gathering of outside elements, what Ong defines as 'worlding' (2011: 11). Although heterogeneous and always contested, worlding practices conjure up new worlds across existing urban milieu through the juxtaposition of spaces, aesthetics and ideas from distinct localities.

Hence I will venture to suggest that if there is anything inherently global about contemporary cities, it is this. With the circulation of ideas and ideals of what constitutes desirable urban worlds, disparate connections are forged between different cities, which carry concrete visions of new urban futures and thereby also a sense of experimental world-making that transcends the confines of specific local sites. To be sure, this does not imply that urbanism anywhere can be considered a reflection of a self-replicating universal form, such as speculative global capitalism (Roy, 2016). Rather than having a singular universal causality as its engine of genericity, we may argue that each city and every singular urban process produces their own abstractions, which are always more than the concrete spaces and specific aesthetic and social imageries from which they derive their directionality and force (Nielsen and Simone, 2016).

Global urbanism is, therefore, never equal to whatever the cities of the world may be taken to be. The 'dis-individuated' abstraction (Galloway, 2014) does not correlate with the particulars of the city in relation to which it has become an unmarked and generic universal. The urban abstraction is essentially a 'stranger' (Laruelle, 2011) to the concrete specificity of the city and that is why its legibility becomes problematic. Conventionally, legibility emerges from the fixation of things (Taussig, 1993). As people, concepts and spaces are conquered and momentarily stabilized, scales are invoked that offer a universal readability of those very same phenomena that were vital in the making of the former as a 'conjuring of a dramatic performance' (Tsing, 2000: 119). Any perspective of things requires a precise 'spatial dimensionality' (ibid.) by which to gauge the articulations of socio-material life and, from there, act proficiently in and on the world. But we also know that scales are not just neutral frames for somehow viewing the world objectively (Wastell, 2001). For while we may continue to insist that scales are set up prior to measuring the effects of actions, it is, in fact, by contextualizing, scaling, spacing that the idea of the scale itself is achieved (Corsín Jiménez, 2005; Latour, 2005). To be sure, we would never know what actions to gauge for their effects without the distinctions we impose upon them through the use of scales, and so the instruments we operationalize when measuring things end up also producing their particular qualities (Wagner, 1981).

The question is, then, what the implications might be for our understanding of the dynamics and modulations of global urbanism when it occurs through the workings of 'dis-individuated' abstractions? What happens, in other words, if we remove something from the constraints of legible scales and proportions – that is, if we move beyond the acts of immediate measuring and proportioning that seem to offer the most available form of readability of the city? What kinds of perspectives might be accessible if the contrasts, differentiations and distinctions that mark the deep physicality of speculative urbanization projects in the Global South were momentarily removed, and we had to leave the cities to their own devices? Would that even be possible? Here I think we need to return to Mumford's reflections on the relationship between 'the disciplined imagination' and monumental architecture. For is it not precisely the work of the 'disciplined imagination' that allows the materiality of large-scale – but still not built! – monumental urbanization projects to significantly affect and orient certain registers of social life in cities in the Global South?

Staying with Mumford's discussion of monumental architecture, we might speculate that its imaginative potentials derived not only from the 'respectful terror' that was evoked from the divine-like aesthetics of the physical buildings and monuments (1961: 65). Rather, the monumentality of the buildings triggered a transformative urge to lift out the materiality of the citadels of ancient cities certain visions of the world that arose from it but which it could not contain. The monumentality of urbanism that I am focussing on here has, therefore, less to do with its particular physical proportions than its considerable capacities for producing ideas and ideals of desirable cities that might circulate across different urban milieu. Obviously, it is not only very large speculative urban development projects which seem to have wedged into their physical structures a transformative capacity for producing portable visions of the world. But there is no doubt that the intensity by which desires and aspirations associated with such projects migrate across different urban terrains has a particularly pronounced effect on the pace of cities in many parts of the world and especially in the Global South. Although impossible to capture by any legible scale, the proportions of these phenomena are, indeed, monumental.

The Department of Urban Planning (DPU) at the Maputo Municipality in Mozambique has never operated as a well-oiled, efficient administrative machine. If anything, it is a slow-moving, somewhat dysfunctional but fairly stable vehicle, which lacks a workforce, financial resources and political attention (Andersen et al., 2015). Architect Anselmo Goveia has been with the DPU for more than 20 years and is now head of a small team that works exclusively on private construction projects near the coastal sections of the new ring road that was opened in 2015. While being constantly overloaded with work tasks, Goveia is excited about the prospects for the city and urban planning in particular, which new large-scale urban construction projects seem to carry. In the spring of 2016, I sat down with Goveia to talk about his views on the many planned but still unrealized urban development projects in and around the Maputo city centre.

> Well, this is much better than before! We are so few technicians working here, you know. We can't deal with all of the city and the Mayor knows that!…. So, we need condominiums (*condomínios*) like the ones they have in South Africa. Do you know how they build Waterfall City? The government hands over a piece of land to the investor and then they take care of business. That is what we want here!

Waterfall City, which Goveia explicitly refers to, is an impressive new property development located halfway between Johannesburg and Pretoria. With a total cost exceeding R45 billion, it is the 'most ambitious city-building project ever undertaken in Africa, let alone South Africa' (Murray, 2015b: 505). Similar to many other master-planned private cities that have been constructed in or near urban areas throughout the Global South during recent decades, Waterfall City involves a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between public administration and private investors where the latter increasingly come to perform the functions that are conventionally expected of municipal and state authorities. For all practical purposes, the mandate to govern the new city has been outsourced to private actors, who are obviously interested first and foremost in financial gains rather than social cohesion and wide-ranging urban integration (Murray; 2017; see also Acuto, 2010; Kanna, 2011).

It is significant to note that, at the time of our conversation, the construction of Waterfall City had not been completed yet, and so Goveia was reacting to the design of an urbanization project whose full realization was stencilled onto a future canvas, the texture of which was still relatively unknown. Still, the lack of physical coordinates did not prevent Goveia and many other officials with him from using the projected urbanization projects as an imaginary conduit for recalibrating

their understanding of what the city and urban planning might be. Indeed, whereas officials at the Maputo Municipality and elsewhere had generally considered urban planning as the main administrative strategy for providing a minimum of spatial regularity in the city as a whole, it now seemed that urban planning was in the process of being morphed into a transactional object, which could be negotiated and outsourced to private actors who would manage enclaved slices of the city (Easterling, 2016).

Consider, for comparison, the situation in Bangalore, India, where a project of 'world-city making' promoted by various parastatal agencies has given rise to a new art of urban government guided by neoliberal speculation (Goldman, 2011). Guided by an increasingly global 'master plan' agenda, the aspiration for 'world-city making' has generated widespread anxieties and social tensions, not least caused by accompanying processes of dispossession and mass displacement of poor urbanites living in areas destined for mega-city projects. But the introduction of global discourses on world-city projects has also produced imageries of alternative future scenarios, which already affect the socio-political dynamics of the city. In his discussion on 'speculative urbanism' in Bangalore (op. cit.: 559–560), Goldman describes a deal-making event at a beach resort in Goa where urban entrepreneurs from Bangalore and other potential Indian 'world cities' got together to discuss urban development. Seemingly inspired by the event, a city commissioner from the city of Jaipur took the podium to express his excitement:

> Thanks to these…meetings, I have begun to see my home city differently. When I look out from Jaipur's main railway station, I can see makeshift huts with women cleaning dishes and children playing and grazing their animals… But why couldn't we build right along the station a line of nice hotels, corporate centres and shopping malls? Now I can imagine that Jaipur too can become a world city that can generate jobs and money…. From this view, our cities are full of untapped value and potential, making them a very exciting place to be.

While the two contexts are seemingly too diverse to warrant comparison, it is, nevertheless, interesting to note how they both reflect a certain imaginative vibrancy prompted by projected large-scale urbanization projects. In both instances, the aesthetic monumentality of the future city does seem to 'awe and overpower the beholder' (Mumford 1961: 65) – not because it exists in a physical form but precisely because it does not. By not being captured by its physical form, monumental urbanism can roam freely. Whereas most cities remain where they are, monumental urbanism migrates.

In *Extrastatecraft* (Easterling, 2016), Easterling describes how a model of the economic free zone administered outside of recognized regulations has become an item of global export, which circulates between different localities 'beyond the reach of state jurisdiction' (op. cit.: 16). As a form of 'extrastatecraft', however, it does involve the activities of state agents, who seek to profit from the opportunities that offer themselves with the free zone. According to Easterling, the economic free zone has become 'the most popular mode for the contemporary global city, offering a "clean slate" and a "one-stop" entry into the economy of a foreign country" (ibid.). Similar to the free zone, which operates almost like a sovereign space irrespective of its locality, monumental urbanism conjures widespread desires for global city-making. But it does so in a slightly different way. In a sense, monumental urbanism only exists through its effects, as a series of speculative lines that are being drawn across existing city spaces with the force of future imageries. No urban models are being exported here other than as a longing for something that might not have existed in the first place. And it is this imaginary vibrancy that invests certain registers of urban life in the Global South with an almost staccato-like rhythm and urgency (Nielsen, 2016; see also Lefebvre, 1995).

If monumental urbanism cannot be property gauged by way of legible scales, its social, economic and political effects can, nevertheless, be determined with relative ease. Take Maputo, for example, where a partially virtual building frenzy has fundamentally reconfigured the configuration of the urban landscape. Already in 2012, there were more than 80 gated compounds in and around the city centre (Costa, 2014) and only within the last five years, 15 new complexes have been built along the picturesque Costa do Sol road bordering the coastline (Nielsen and Jenkins, 2020). And, still, very few if any of these ongoing building projects manifest the proportions of the urban development projects, whose monumental aesthetics they also reference. But as urban land is reimagined and surveyed and building projects are initiated without ever reaching their expected outcome, the imaginary infrastructure of the city also changes. Although this can be considered a 'worlding' process, which conjures new urban scenarios through the juxtaposition of elements from distinct localities (Ong, 2011), it is one which gradually reduces the imagery of the city to an agglomeration of detached enclaves.

Even when city planners fail to realize their grand visions of building global metropolises, the social and material fabric of the cities continue to reverberate with their desires and aspirations. In this regard, monumental urbanism is nothing but the process of contraction and expansion of the imaginary space that moves with these desires and aspirations across different physical localities and which only ceases to invest the cities with its unique qualities if and when it can be contained by a physical form. Monumental architecture returns to the specificity of the city in the form of a 'stranger' (Laruelle, 2011), whose unmarked and dis-individuated qualities are inserted in local urban domains by way of the difference they constitute in relation to what already exists. If the distance between urban abstraction and local specificity is reduced over time, the former can no longer maintain its apriorical function in relation to speculative urban development. It is no wonder, then, that large-scale urbanization projects activate the 'disciplined imagination' in an attempt to translate the possible into the actual (Mumford, 1961: 68). But it seems that a unique characteristic of speculative urban development is that this translation occurs precisely the other way around to what might be expected. The social and economic scaffolding of Maputo's urban territories cannot carry Goveia's lofty aspirations of transferring the model for Waterfall City from South Africa to Mozambique. And Goveia probably knows that. But the imagery of an autonomous zone one step removed from the chaos of everyday hassle has made its way to the city where it invests an interwoven cluster of spaces and relations, fissures and tensions with similar or at least analogue rhythms. In that sense, monumental urbanism operates backwards, as it were. The drive towards large-scale urbanization projects recursively acts on itself by progressively refusing to be contained by its own (physical) model (Wagner, 2001). The translation of the possible into the actual, in other words, occurs by relativizing the desire for large-scale speculative urbanization projects through a series of self-replicating transformations of the monumental urbanism that probably never existed in the first place.

Considered a modulation of monumental architecture, global urbanism is a mirror image that is constantly changing. It is always 'off', as it were, in relation to the cities, whose material aspirations, social desires and infrastructural imageries it is allegedly capturing. In cities as different as Maputo and Bangalore, speculative urban development is invested with the qualities of a series of apriorical abstractions that never seem to fully fit the specificity of these urban environments. And it is precisely because of this lacking adequacy that the pace of the cities can be constantly increased, not in order to reach eventual alignment between abstraction and specificity but, rather, to allow for the differential movements to play themselves out in an ever-more expansive speculative space (Simone, 2020).

References

Acuto, M. (2010) 'High-rise Dubai urban entrepreneurialism and the technology of symbolic power'. *Cities*, 27(4): 272–284.

Andersen, J. E., Jenkins, P. and Nielsen, M. (2015) 'Who plans the African city? A case study of Maputo: Part 1 – the structural context'. *International Development Planning Review*, 37(3): 331–352.

Bergson, H. (2005) *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books.

Corsín Jiménez, A. (2005) 'Changing scales and the scales of change. Ethnography and political economy in Antofagasta, Chile'. *Critique of Anthropology*, 25(2): 157–176.

Costa, A. B. d. (2014). *Condominiums and exclusive neighbourhoods in Angola and Mozambique* (Unpublished manuscript). ISCTE-IUL.

Davis, M. (1998) *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Metropolitan Books-Henry Holt.

De Boeck, F. (2011). 'Inhabiting ocular ground: Kinshasa's future in the light of Congo's spectral urban politics'. *Cultural Anthropology* 26(2): 263–286.

Easterling, K. (2016) *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space.* London & New York: Verso.

Houston, C. (2002). 'Corporate cities – urban gateways or gated communities against the city? The case of Lippo, Jakarta', in T. Bunnell, L. Drummond and K. C. Ho (Eds.), *Critical Reflections on Cities in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Times Academic, pp. 143–164.

Kanna, A. (2011) *The City as Corporation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Galloway, A. R. (2014) *Laruelle. Against the Digital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Laruelle, F. (2011) 'The Generic as Predicate and Constant: Non-Philosophy and Materialism', in Bryant, L., Srnicek, N. and Harman, G. (Eds.).

Lefebvre, H. (1995). 'Elements of rhythmanalysis', in E. Kofman and E. Lebas (Eds.), *Writings on Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 219–240.

Marcinkoski, C. (2015). *The City That Never Was*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Mumford, L. (1961) *The City in History. Its Origins, Its Transformations and Its Prospects*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.

Murray, M. J. (2015a) 'City Doubles': Re-Urbanism in Africa', in Miraftab, F., Wilson, D. and Salo, K. (Eds.), *Cities and Inequalities in a Global and Neoliberal World*. New York: Routledge, pp. 92–109.

Murray, M. J. (2015b) 'Waterfall City (Johannesburg): Privatized urbanism in extremis'. *Environment and Planning A,* 47(3): 503–520.

Murray, M. J. (2017) *The Urbanism of Exception. The Dynamics of Global City Building in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nielsen, M. (2016) 'Urban times : Temporal topographies and non-scalable cities'. *Ethnos*, 82(3): 393–405.

Nielsen, M. and Jenkins, P. (2020). 'Insurgent aspirations? Weak middle class utopias in Maputo, *Mozambique'*. *Critical African Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2020.1743190.

Nielsen, M. and Pedersen, M. A. (2015) 'Infrastructural involutions. The imaginative efficacy of collapsed Chinese futures in Mozambique and Mongolia', in Rapport, N. and Harris, M. (Eds.), *The Imagination. A Universal Process of Knowledge?* Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 237–262.

Nielsen, M. and Simone, A. (2016) 'The generic city: Examples fra Jakarta, Indonesia, and Maputo, Mozambique', in P. Harvey, C. Bruun Jensen and A. Morita (Eds.), *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Routledge Companion*. New York: Routledge, pp. 128–140.

Ong, A. (2011). 'Worlding cities, or the art of being global', in A. Roy and A. Ong, (Eds.), *Worlding Cities. Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 1–26.

Pieterse, E. (2011) 'Grasping the unknowable: Coming to grips with African urbanisms'. *Social Dynamics,* 37(1): 5–23.

Pitcher, A. and Moorman, M. (2015) 'City building in post-conflict, post-socialist Luanda: Burying the past with phantasmagorias of the future (Luanda, Angola)', in Pieterse, E. and Edjabe, N. (Eds.), *African Cities Reader III: Land, Property and Value*. Vlaeberg: African Centre for Cities and Chimurenga Magazine, pp. 123–135.

Shatkin, G. (2011). Planning privatopolis: representation and contestation in the development of urban integrated mega-projects in: A. Roy and A. Ong, (Eds.) *Worlding cities: Asian experiments and the art of being global*. New York: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 77–97.

Simone, A. (2004) 'People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg'. *Public Culture*, 16(3): 407–429.

Simone, A. (2020). '(Non)Urban Humans: Questions for a Research Agenda (the Work the Urban Could Do)'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 44(4): 755–767.

Taussig, M. (1993) *Mimesis and Alterity. A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge.

Tsing, A. L. (2000) 'Inside the economy of appearances'. *Public Culture*, 12(1): 155–144.

Wagner, R. (1981) *The Invention of Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wagner, R. (2001) *An Anthropology of the Subject. Holographic Worldview in New Guinea and Its Meaning and Significance for the World of Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wastell, S. (2001) 'Presuming scale, making diversity. on the mischiefs of measurement and the global: Local metonym in theories of law and culture'. *Critique of Anthropology*, 21(2): 185–210.

Watson, V. (2013). 'African urban fantasies: dreams or nightmares?' *Environment and Urbanization*: 215–231.