Invisible Urbanism in Africa

Vyjayanthi Rao
in conversation with Filip De Broeck and AbdouMaliq Simone
Capital/City: Imaginary Urban Plans

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

AbduMajid Simone: Currently in Dakar, you have the rather recent and still opaque project of building a new capital, for the moment designated as “Dakar sur Atlantique,” some sixty kilometers to the north. Partly this reflects the generalization of the reinvented logic of the exotism associated with Dubai, but partly it emerges from the fact that there exists a kind of contamination that leaves Dakar and then begins to link what were some major small cities like Thea and Mbour. In some ways you have this residue of a kind of colonial bifurcation. Fifty years ago, Dakar started to become too overwhelmed, becoming too much of a threat to certain kinds of order and processes. Dense quarters were displaced to Pikine and Guédiawaye, 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 Freeston, the same for Conomay, the same for Dakar and is to a limited extent for Abdijalil—where 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 power of centers 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 do have to relocate, we do have to bring them out to make them more accessible to, to be reconnected, to reconnect somehow the grandiose field of the capital means in one sense this old reiteration, of new, grand works. Still, the former center, Plateau, continues to be a huge building site. I mean, you still see these immense kinds of constructions taking place.

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

AM: In some sense the appearance of continuous development signifies 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 somehow being racialized. Spaces are being bought. There’s a market. People are buying these things: office space, apartment space.

VR: It’s 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. So I think that is, if 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 mid-

This understanding of the city, expressed so succinctly by De Bocic, is shared by all 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,” as AbduMajid Simone puts it, at once engaging and going beyond the artificial material infrastructure and physical sites. Built form may be, as De Bocic states, “produced randomly in human sites as living spaces.” As urban studies have taken a “south turn,” 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 social and spatial descriptions of particular cities, especially cities of the South, at the global scale.

For this conversation, we take as our point of departure the multiple uses deriving from the latent root capsules (chief, principal, in the sense of sovereign power) which is both the root of capital as well as capital, jum, meaning “small head,” or the “top of the column” in the architectural sense. By juxtaposing these multiple uses, we enter into a contradiction: we are speaking both about the sense of seeing, of the vanguard, of that which tops off and sheds off the solidity of the architecture as well as that which controls and constrains the expression of sovereign power in the political sense, insin as it is able to circulate.

We are especially concerned with where we can situate “networks of concrete becoming,” both in terms of forms and accumulation and in terms of the possibilities for articulating political power in a continent that is increasingly held hostage 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 massive investments in construction, De Bocic reflects on the intensification of urbanity in the continents. We are moving from the reproduction of the diamond trade. The relationship between what De Bocic calls the “accumulation of wealth” and the acceleration 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 forms of representation and expression, such as those of architecture? These questions also motivate De Bocic’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 to the colonial commodity economy, the economy of the trading post and the generativity of certain kinds of urban performances. These performances are centered around the “hunter’s landscape,” in which capital works only through its incessant 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 of colonial boundaries. It is therefore a place where everything that comes from elsewhere, from outside the juridical 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 among these 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 colonial 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 Mudir di sapora as well as the Léb茧e diaspora—while also having effects at the level of the nation, especially 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 dispersed landscapes of (capital and financial) and their relation to these capital cities (Dakar, Kinshasa, and Khartoum) and in the peculiar relations that cities like Lagos have to “capital” in both sense—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 Bocic 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/city be located by asking, what is the scene/ide of urban action? We face the question of what conduits of access are being developed on order to facilitate investment, expansion, accumulation or “spacularization” of capital by asking, what forms of social complexity are being explored in the development of these conduits? What sort of entitlement is being developed by residents of these cities in their drive to become visible in order to enable social being? We are interested in the articulation of space and time, but also of the manner in which the functions that are carried out in these spaces and times are managed and enforced. We are also interested in the emergent practices of the economy of the urban everyday, in the present of the economic in the microcosm of the city, of the transformation of the everyday into the everyday.

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 and the visible and the invis- ible, articulates the relationship between political power and capital and reveals aligned and accumulated wealth of in multiple forms.

Vyjayanthy Rao

Kalhoun

Dakar

Kinshasa


War and Democracy in Africa: The henry david thoreau, a call to the woods, baraka alinock eliekouo, cental Kinshasa, july 2016

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

Well, on the one hand, it just accentuated an already existing 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 young people, would go up to Angola to pick up diamonds and they would come back with $1,000, $10,000, or even $100,000.

VR: And they didn’t know what to do with it?

Well, most of the time it was very quickly injected and spent—kind of recklessly, really, all over the place. Few were those who invested in building, in houses, in plots of land. But some areas of certain neighborhoods 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 who wouldn’t do it. In Congo, the capital 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 and economical city, but to a great extent, it was a place where you could go and any kind of profitable activity would be extreme.

And the second, already the capital when the country was founded or when it grew out of a complex economy, it was a trading port originally and then transformed into a huge labor camp. The city that the Belgian colonial administration developed was a deeply segregated one, certainly in terms of income, where we could see that there was a depot of cheap labor force. Access to the city was strictly controlled. The city itself became an extension of the Belgian colonial heart of the city, and then there was “la Cité,” the vast, indigenous peripheral city, inhabited by Congolese. The city itself has always maintained a status of exclusion, even today. For example, where the colonial borders of the city today, and the colonial city, really exist, much like Plein. But in Kinshasa, you have a colonial city with a very small heart, which stopped growing in 1960, when Kinshasa was destroyed. There was just a constant growth in the periphery, and when in 1960, 4 million to 6 million people have been added onto that, but in areas that have not been urbanized.

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 Lumumba who stands with one hand raised. And there are all kinds of popular interpretations that kind of art that warms itself with this one moment of history, this one statue in public spaces, so its sudden appearance generated all kinds of comments. Painted in gold, the huge and heavy statue remains one of the former leaders of the Congolese revolution, yet he is not collected. Those who remain in the city could afford to buy housing. Today, real estate is booming in Kinshasa. It is booming as neocapitalism, primarily with Congolese. The capital flows into the city through expats and foreigners (the latter often Lebaphones)–people from outside who start to redefine the city. They are not allowed to become part of the local extent. It’s being perceived as the government denying access to all these people who want to enter into the city who are not allowed to, who can’t afford it, and who can’t make use of it, who are blocked and excluded.

The areas and neighborhoods that extend beyond the statue are referred to as “La Chine populaire” or the People’s Republic of Congo. These areas, which are not seen as the city’s own very often, I think, they don’t feel as if the city belongs to them. They’re not part of the people who make the Kinshasa sign, by which they indicate “You are here to be ripped off,” basically that I don’t belong there and therefore can be taken advantage of without any moral objections or feelings of guilt or wrongdoing. Similarly, a money changer in the street might advertise “double Kinshasa” meaning, “You will be ripped off right now.” It indicates that the money changes you deal with knowing 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 money user is the idea of an injection. In order to socially exist and survive in this urban environment, one has to know how to paint, one has to know the city’s roots, one has to understand the city’s blood. So that’s the way in which capital moves in the city, that’s what it is about. It’s not about accumulation, it’s not about making it. It is not about having but about being, not about possessing but about consuming, about singularly oneself by immediately putting capital in constant circulation.

VR: So it doesn’t have this capitalistic notion of investment, which is directed toward social structure, directed toward something that might materialize at some other point in time.

Well, I would say, 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 rules and roles that indicate who 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 it worked. It makes that capital gain, in this case, work for him. He gains in social prestige and power. And money.

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 not the role of the hunter, or the hunter’s role, in the rural world, or your village, but different kinds of associations, different kinds of groups of cooperation—may be 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 exchange.

When people speak of the city as a forest, they refer to a specific kind of forest. It’s a forest in which people and things are constantly exchanged. It’s a forest of access to a certain modernity, even if it’s only in imaginary or onerous kind. I gave the example the church, but the bar is another concrete example of a space where you can do that, and the church and the bar overlap, but I would say, their overlaps, 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
A statue of Patrice Lumumba erected by Janot Kabila and an unfinished tower built during the Mobutu years have drawn Joué Pierre Bemba supporters as they make their way to a rally in Kinshasa, July 2006.
other Kinshasa which has developed later on—and the concentration of that power in other cities, like Lumumbashi. What is the relationship between the concentration of that power and the expressions of power? What is the kind of impact they have on the landscape of the capital city?

AMK: Looking at some of the overlaps and divergences of Dakar may be somewhat interesting in order to keep in mind that Dakar and other Senegalese towns were actually—

FDK: They were comparators and also part of France at one point. Dakar was literally integrated into French territory and done in so a way to mark the strong divide between the city, the urban and the hinterland. The hinterland was the province of the Morabou, 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 seems with both an excess of life and death. Whereas outside of Dakar is increasingly a hinterland that is over. It’s wasted.

But it’s also interesting, too, is the fact that you have a true. 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 tendency of the Murund structure and also exempt from certain kinds of applications of custom law.

To go back to the idea of the transnational trade, it was a kind of antiexport masked as a symbolic. Then, when people began to realize that it was a sort of becoming commercial center on the basis of illegal trade, there was the attempt by the state to domesticate and also, the complexity to get its urban economy, which was not just an economy of trade, but a transnational economy.

VR: The Mururs?—I was wondering what the religious and administratively was administered from Trapala. 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 what the state, in its usual center of Dakar—became through many different policies, many different deals—in creating the domestication of the state, the 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 urban economy in some ways became an expansion of Trapala. But you then have this kind of indigenous entrepreneurship that really is within an urban economy and is really strong, unlike in many other places.

FDK: That’s really different than Congo. I mean, in terms of indigenous entrepreneurship, we have to think of a settler colonialist society in urban areas that 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 western Congo, who through their own networks managed to really inscribe themselves in transnational commercial move- ments that 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 not have been as smooth and the notion itself of urbanity often develops, I would say, outside of Dakar, 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 sprang up along the border with Angola, for example, or the gold mining towns in the east, are the places where the idea of capitalism and urbanity is most fully gener- ated. But again, materially, these cities and towns do not correspond to the form of what we think of a city. And yet it is much more urban in its dynamics than what goes on in the “real” city.

AMK: In Senegal, the wealth that is generated in urban agglomerations 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-

FDK: This has been postponed now for many, many times so, now it’s to take place at the end of 2007. Wade always says the reason for this delay is because Dakar needs adequate infrastructure in order to suf- ficiently 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 of a kind of budget tourism, bordering on some earlier activities that can’t really be the site to host an Islamic meeting. Maybe another meeting could take place there. But because this is the Organization of Islamic Conference as the basis of accreditation of the group of the Mururs has al- ways 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 Mus- lim world. But increasingly, as the Mururs assumed increased political and economic power and then become available as an expression of a certain kind of national cohesion, the distinctiveness of Senegal as a nation but also its integration into a larger theater of operations. “We’re Muslims, we’re clearly Muslims, we take Islam seriously,” but the role of Senegal in the Islamic world is always very much an uncertain kind of Muslims”. Singularly 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 Islamic Confer- ence 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 people who have the means to do it. What is the interest of the Emirats in the Gulf? The financially ambiguous role of Dubai World and its real estate arm, Limassol, in the proposed construction of the new capital city of the Mururs, was that Pétroleux, has certainly been a part of a particular field of orbit that is being elaborated through major urban 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 western-most Islamic capital. A six-foot tallig from New York—there’s something about that.

FDK: Are you saying this or is this way this has been perceived?

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

FDK: Well, that’s not surprising. That’s what the public discourse is.

AMK: 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 some other sorts of flows—from Dubai or elsewhere—on the one hand, and on the other hand, to the re- generation of the city, of the nation, but which gets expressed in this particular relationship between the two.

AMK: Yes, but combined with a very old story too. Wade is a very old guy.

FDK: Very French, like a French president.

VR: 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.
Performing Urbanity

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

AM: I am thinking about the city as something that was some time ago, it was in a particular neighborhood in Lagos, which was very peculiar to Lagos, very peculiar 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 a some kind of emerging deal or scenario? Because all that this neighborhood had was 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, how do you become visible and almost disappear in the face of others who are also there, in some ways, for the same trap. Becoming an urban neighborhood within a Yoruba city—or a Muslim place, Western African place—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 crewe and with new kinds of skills, with different kinds of experience and trade than the 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 places, 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 we not enter? It’s complicated because this is a spatial area that knew it had to survive in some way because Babangida and the military wanted to seize it. How do you invite them in? How do you turn them up? How do you set up roadblocks? And then you want to talk about what people knew there were actually doing to try to trip them up. The stories get too complicated and quite political and involves other territories and people in the city they that would never deal with. The notion sometimes of visibility and invisibility is a concern that people themselves raise. It’s kind of language that they themselves bring, as if not an analytical thing necessarily imposed. It can be that, but …

FD: 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 word one, in a way because on the one hand, in order to exist socially in the city is all about being as visible as possible. It’s about appearances. That’s why you have all that popular urban culture of sapa 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, businessman, very theatrical and very physically present, although you never see how he gets there. The modes in which visibility had achieved remained rather invisible.

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

AM: Timelessness.

FD: Is it very important.

AM: The calculations of scaling is a timely matter …

FD: That’s why everybody also seems to be waiting all the time.

AM: 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 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, I love, that I depend on …”

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

VI: To crow the space?

AM: To crow, yes.

FD: In this one area lived in when I was living in Kharautoum, 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, “Imperialist 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 intensely conflict.

But because people from the west would then say, “No, this is not the point. We want Sharia for us. We want to mark the difference with our neighbors 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'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.

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 also increasingly visible.