

Uncertain rights to the city

by AbdouMaliq Simone

Actors in African urban environments have been trying to make collaborative social action work, to make collective responsibility enforceable, and to render instruments of power both effective and legitimate. These efforts have given rise to an uneasy tension between the adoption of normative discourses concerning urban management and control, the ways in which urban residents attempt to adapt to a vast range of new opportunities and crises, and the role of the city as a place of experimentation. Given this tension, what are diverse groups of African urban residents doing in order to make cities liveable and to exploit them as a means of enlarging the spatial parameters in which they operate? More importantly, what is the nature of their rights to do so?

Restructuring the South African urban landscape

Let us take urban South Africa as basis for some reflections. During the past decade, South African urbanism has, for the most part, reflected some of the most innovative policy and institutional narratives and manoeuvres that have ever been seen. From integrated development planning to the cross-subsidization of urban services, and from the massive overhaul of local authorities to the selective deployment of infrastructure projects to facilitate social integration, intervention has substantially restructured the urban landscape with limited budgets, and met the enormous challenges that exist in highly fractured and discordant cities. Yet in many ways, perhaps even more important than the reconciliations and innovations of the past decade is the role that these former apartheid cities play as indicators of our urban future in a global schema.

Cities everywhere demonstrate a capacity to have a smaller percentage of their productive capacities; populations and physical territories generate a significant portion of their economic product and thus viability. And cities everywhere are increasingly skewed in terms of their spatial development, resource investment and infrastructural composition. As domains of advertising, as arenas of socialization and national belonging, and as facilitators of social cohesion among heterogeneities of all kinds, cities in general, throughout the world, have been substantially eroded during the same decade that those in South African cities have been attempting to become more coherent, contained urban systems, and better connected to regional and global economies.

The intensified divergence of these paths – more compact and integrated urban systems on the one hand and a greater integration of those urban systems in multiple networks of decision-making and economic transaction on the other – have posed critical dilemmas for South African urban policymakers. For despite local and national frameworks, practices and interventions, the re-orientation of the country's largest urban areas to various facets of region-wide management and service provision generates its own fracturing effects that compel the need to rethink what the "right to the city" actually is. Globally, cities are becoming increasingly articulated and interwoven. At the same time, the internal coherence of smaller cities is substantially fractured, in part, by these same articulations, and, as such, many unanticipated threats, which are difficult to detect and track, can have effects far beyond the administrative border and ecological domains of a given city.

Such a notion of the right to the city has to be rethought in terms of three levels of technological change. At the first level the greater capacity for cities to both extend their confines and to consolidate spaces of economic capacity and breadth, regardless of the histories, livelihoods, and aspirations of the majority or urban residents. At the second level, the fragmentation of cities, and the unravelling of public infrastructure, service delivery systems and institutional life in general, generate a wide range of local initiatives aimed at the low-cost provision of essential urban services through the deployment of appropriate technologies. The development of such initiatives almost exclusively takes place within carefully designated territorial parameters that tend to reinforce notions of urban community in cities which largely operate against the sustainability of community life. At the third level, the disarticulation of urban spaces and the increased inability of key state and municipal institutions to engender frameworks of governance applicable to cities as a whole, generates a vast array of economies centred around repair, the illicit or unconventional use of built and institutional environments, and piracy driven by peculiar amalgamations of technology that facilitate these economies. While remaining largely within the realms of local survivalist orientations, these economies can also attain a significant transnational impact.

These levels of technological change generate specific modulations in the relationships between residents and the urban environment, between different cities, and among the movement of goods, information, capacities, and powers. They institute their own specific rhythms, speeds and time frames, reworking the value of urban financial investments, infrastructure, space, and human resources in terms of the various interactions that can be brought together between different markets, production systems, money trains, consumption styles and media. In its simplest terms, the value of a given property, a given life, or institution and skill can radically change depending on how its relationship to other sites, structures and lives in that city and, increasingly, further afield. Changes can be made without precedence and everything that exists in a city can potentially be a subject of speculation. At times it appears that the only options for urban residents are to quickly do whatever they can to normalize themselves according

to standard levels of middle class consumption, or else to become marginalized and disappear off the radar screen.

Urban environments are increasingly dependent on complex information and communication systems and on infrastructure inputs tailored to enabling economic transactions conducted in real time. Yet this dependency ultimately maximizes the potentially countervailing and destructive effects of low technology, readily accessible to most urban residents. In urban environments which concentrate investments in privatised premium infrastructure, public grids and reticulation systems are falling increasingly into disrepair, and as municipal institutions find it increasingly difficult to offer and enforce a comprehensive administration of the urban system, the different populations which make up the city are left to "go their own way". Many compensate for the lack of public infrastructure and production opportunities through economies of repair, privacy, subversion, and "heretical" uses of the urban environment. Such uses of the urban environment, facilitated by the variable interaction between high and low technologies in relation to communications, transport, repair, and power far, exceed the ability of urban government to specify how the city should be used.

In South Africa, urban policymakers have tried hard to fill in the gaps engineered by apartheid – the gap between a modern urban existence for a few and the life of a refugee camp for the majority. Considering the enormous resources spent to enforce a fractured urban landscape, ten years is hardly a sufficient amount of time to re-construct this architecture, and thus the question posed is, with such limited resources how does one proceed in the re-building of South African cities? What kinds of timescales are involved? Which are the strategic areas of intervention which will bring the maximum potential impact? To what extent can and should the infrastructures of connection – between the township, the peri-urban, the downtown, the economic enclave and high and low-density residential areas – be specified, and by whom? Given the extent to which the landscape remains highly fractured and has been re-constructed in new spatial dimensions, what kinds of connections can be made between different facets of the urban environment and over what period of time? What kind of timescale are we dealing with in the eastern Central Business District (CBD) of Johannesburg where illegal housing in mothballed office buildings meets an emerging regional fashion district, meets the fortified enclave of the ABSA Bank district, meets the refashioned multi-market, meets new social housing developments, meets the largely informal appropriation of the former light manufacturing district for artisan production? As the central business district sees the hemorrhaging of business headquarters to the Northern suburbs at varying rates, the entrenchment of Anglo American in a particular corner of the western CBD opening up to a reinforced cultural precinct and the continued occupation of commercial office space for residence, how are these divergent trajectories going to meet over time, and, again what kind of timescale is involved? Similar questions can be asked of Douala in light of its own visions of urban development, such as the plan to link Bonanjo and Akwa, and to develop new upper-end residential and commercial zones along the city's riverine areas. How does the infrastructural re-modelling of the city actually corroborate economic and social articulations between, for example, Bapenda and New Bell; Bonapriso and Nylon?

The right to pursue aspirations

Throughout urban Africa, the discernment between night and day, present and past is minimal for many youths. Without any prospect of employment, there is no platform from which to mark the progression from youth to adulthood, little likelihood of viable social reproduction – of family, cultural values or memory. Their lives are analogous to those of refugee camps – an endless present excluded from politics, excluded from the development of institutions and ways of life which mark the passage of time, and which impose a larger framework of purpose and meaning upon what one does today.

The right to the city cannot ultimately be reduced to the right to be maintained in the city, to be housed and serviced. Rather, these are critical elements of the right to use the city as an arena in which one can realize specific and usually changing aspirations without necessarily having to recompose the characteristics of those aspirations in terms of others at work in the city. While accommodation is necessarily viewed as a spatial issue, the right to pursue aspirations is, perhaps more fundamentally, a question of time. That people have time to pursue particular ways of living and being that are not judged as having a definitive value or efficacy according to specific imposed temporal frameworks. In other words, a spatial performance that is allowed and enabled to interact with other performances in such as a way to acquire the experience and capacity for a confident self-fashioning.

Critical to this unfolding of different ways of existing in the city and of using it as the means of realizing certain aspirations is the divergent composition of the city itself – its own movements toward decline and ascendancy, its varied juxtapositions of planning and improvisation, of business and residence, of security and insecurity. Viewing the right to the city as the right to pursue multiple aspirations ensures that no structure of governance can ever really manage the activation of this right. In other words, it can never grant the resources or a basis on which different kinds of residents in the city can pursue their aspirations on an equal basis. While urban government may guarantee as best it can that the pursuit of aspirations entailed neither harms, injures nor marginalizes specific residents, it cannot provide specific aspirations nor be the universal patron of aspirations.

This pursuit of aspirations again largely depends on what kinds of connections residents can make

between the diverse infrastructures, spaces, populations, institutions, and economic activities of the city. This fashioning of connections is largely an aesthetic practice – i.e. based on the sensate, even intuitive capacities of actors in the practices of everyday life to create experiences of reciprocity and structures that stimulate actors to better anticipate each other. The result is what Nigel Thrift calls a practice of “artful conduct” that in turn can shape a specific consciousness of the city. The more governments attempt to specify those connections and attempt to develop a fixed, comprehensive blueprint of just how integration is to take place, and how spaces are to be used, the more it tends to restrict the possibilities that individual residents have of finding a way to pursue this right. This pursuit stretches over varying time spans, and encompasses many changes along the way. When cities specifically ask residents to fix themselves to a long term commitment to a particular way of living urban life – whether it be by encouraging home ownership with long-term bonds, or by requesting that residential space not be used for commercial activity – a wide range of claims are made on the future, which in turn deprives it of resourcefulness and flexibility.

While urban policy, infrastructure and economic development interventions are important tools to bridge the gaps of disarticulated cities, it remains the presence of urban residents themselves and their varied uses of each other as instruments to realize particular aspirations and visions that constitute the most significant form of urban connectivity. Urban individuals mark both the gap and the connection in interwoven economies – material, symbolic, and spatial. The gap exists between what buildings, people, spaces, objects, and gestures can be normatively or customarily used for and how they can be put to task to do more than what is specified. At the same time, individuals act as connections between disparate uses and users. Here, urban inhabitants become essential elements in all kinds of operations concerning transport, eating and drinking, supplying, or theft, and involving a range of specific technologies, from cell phones, to religious media, to divination rituals, to electronic equipment, under a nearly constant state of improvised repair.

Citizens in the city

If we take the inner city of Johannesburg, residence often means living in buildings that frequently lack basic amenities and security, or where the provision of both requires substantial financial and personal investment. In addition, inner-city residents are prey to trickery and deception. Solid relationships of mutual dependency are essential to help make ends meet, but such dependency also translates as vulnerability. Fellow residents who might otherwise look out for each other may give information to thieves about those who might not be in their apartments at certain times. Sexual partners are especially held in suspicion as the rights that each individual in a couple would normally be granted again leaves them vulnerable to being taken advantage of. The desperation for jobs has encouraged a vast industry of fake employment agencies and shakedown schemes. Residents are conscious about displaying any weakness, and continuously watch what they say, what they wear, the routes they travel, and the company they are seen with. Even in cursory relationships with neighbours or associates, a person cannot be construed as having significant relationships lest others to whom these associates may owe money or are perceived to have harmed in some way decide to hold an acquaintance as somehow culpable. What will the long-term effects of this be? What kind of urban citizen is being formed? How will new forms of sociality be created, and how much time will it take?

Even basic rituals of everyday life can be a area of interventions. In Douala, the benskieneurs, motor bike drivers who provide the bulk of the city’s transportation, often point out that it is important to pay attention to how one eats. While meals are frequently taken at home and in each other’s company, there is also a deliberate practice on the part of many individual benskieneurs to eat in a new place, with a new audience, and in a new neighbourhood. Wherever one is and whatever one is doing, one must stop to eat, and, in this context of eating in public, of sitting down with others in the thousands of make-shift restaurants across the city, conversations are not only overheard, but openings into different lives are also potentially opened up. As my benskieneur informants would indicate, this is not only about witnessing the terroir, but of continuing to “steer the roads” - i.e. of directing others’ conversation in particular directions, suggesting possible entry into other’s dilemmas, stories, or activities.

Of course, those who stop to eat must be careful about what they say. Often they may share their food, but they will make sure to say nothing to give themselves away. Sitting down to eat is then engineered with a complex toolbox of declensions, fragmented words, smirks and grunts, tongue clicks and glottals. But at the same time, my informants would say that the event of strangers eating with each other is also an opportunity to “get carried away.” Unlike meals with households there is no discussion about daily earnings and obligations, of responsibilities met or unfulfilled. They therefore try to use a battery of jokes, jousting, and stories to get those hurriedly working their way through the food to make a comment about what someone else has just said, or to offer some advice or information.

One benskieneur described a recent meal and the company: a captain who has just slept with the fifteen year old daughter of his commanding officer in a bleak backstreet hotel; a university student who has packed a small bag and is meeting a truck that will deliver him across the first of many borders that lie ahead; a director of a women’s marketing group faced with a choice of taking a small grant from a European country to send her daughter to university in France; a thief who was worried that his father

would identify him as the one who held up his office a few hours before; the director of the recently opened stock exchange who was delivering a crate of chickens to the aunt whose cooked at this location for four decades. All were together, an unpredictable animation, each on the cusp of the others' lives, somehow ready to move and be moved.

At the smallest of levels, the benskineurs were explaining a particular political practice which uses the basic event of eating as an opportunity for potential circulation, of getting to know the wider city better, of trying to provoke people from different walks of life to make some uncertain, unanticipated connections with each other, of trying to operate outside the accustomed discursive sites of sociality, of family and neighbourhood conviviality. Although these latter continue to exist and remain important, benskineurs are clearly indicating a need to go beyond these familiar domains and routines.

In some areas, such as the inner city of Johannesburg, the extent of demographic shifts is certainly unprecedented in contemporary urban history. Also unprecedented is the degree to which social boundaries are marked by spatial arrangements in high-density quarters and the ways in which the physical trappings of wealth and security can be penetrated by "roving bands" of "opportunists" taking whatever they can. The intense disputes over who has the "right" to do what in South African cities produces a situation where things can happen very quickly. Urban dwellers don't, as a result, feel constrained by the sense that specific places and resources belong to only certain kinds of uses or identities. There are constant and often violent arguments in apartment blocks, on streets, in taxis, in schools, and in stores about who can do what where. Such discussion can open up places and create greater flexibility in their use, but it also can break down their integrity and sense of propriety, which in turn, makes them vulnerable to incursions and distortions of all kinds.

Drawing on urban survival strategies used during apartheid to avoid pass laws and other forms of state surveillance, populations proficient in sending the "wrong" signals can continue to do so in order to "win" areas of autonomous action. Who are the "real" policemen, security guards, domestics, gardeners and delivery men, and who aren't is not only increasingly hard to discern, but in many cases doesn't matter, as levels of complicity between the real and the "pretender" intensify. At other times, things move slowly, since urban residents know that many people are paying attention to what they do, and they then try to conform to some sense of what can pass as conventional in order not to stand out. So in South African cities, spaces can change very quickly or not at all. Again, this is the elaboration of space as a performance. It is a performance that depends upon the intersection of anomalies and disjunctions, using the urban environment in ways that do not readily make sense, and that are not easily represented. Urban actors "feel" their way "through" each other, never able to take each other at face value, but nevertheless always seeking to maximize engagements and forge collaborations based on the development of a potential that has no pre-definition, but which, again, is the product of artful conduct.

The intersections of low-level computing and telecommunications with the capacity of many urban residents, out of the loop of regularized formal employment, to developed a finely-tuned sense of the movement in the city – people coming and going from residences and businesses, changing shifts, loading and unloading trucks, flows of cars from parkings – give rise to unexpected ways of intervening into urban space. Whatever their legal nature, however fraudulent the intent, the remarkable proliferation of scams and schemes of all kinds across urban South Africa not only points to the desperation people feel when searching for employment and places to live, but also to the capacity of residents to converge in all kinds of combinations and to generate money on the basis of almost nothing. While I am not encouraging the elaboration of such illegality per se, it does point how generative other kinds of experimentations with minimal technological investment could be in converging different kinds of actors under a variety of circumstances. This is particularly the case as more and more people do not live as conventional families, do not have conventional jobs, and see themselves as prepared to be many different kinds of things for many different kinds of people. It is similar to what Franz Fanon talked about in the *Wretched of the Earth* – the notion that the time lost in allowing people to find their own vernaculars and practices for realizing themselves as creators of life, and not just consumers or victims of it, is recuperated in the advent of real collective change.

For all of the suffering it generated, for all of the ways it ripped off the best years of entire generations and deprived people of having aspirations to pursue, the very fracturing which is the unavoidable legacy of many South African cities may actually be a blessing in disguise.

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