

Spatial dialogic

An integrative approach for urban development in rapidly transforming cities

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“Rather than opposing the ‘formal’ with the ‘informal’, or the ‘visible’ with the ‘invisible’, we need a more complex anthropology of things, forms, and signs in order to account for the life of the city in Africa. Analytically as well as in people’s daily experience, simplistic oppositions between the formal and the informal are unhelpful.”

Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, 2009

Walking through Ethiopia’s rapidly growing capital, Addis Ababa, seems to provide an outstanding illustration of the differences between informal and formal urban practices. On the one hand, the city resembles what many other urban centres might look like in periods of abrupt growth: a dense, ostensibly chaotic, congested and unsettled jumble driven in large part by so-called informal economic and construction activities.¹ On the other hand, Addis Ababa increasingly features a set of familiar urban elements through which it seemingly blends with more formal and organized urban environments, including the immense infrastructure projects, public transport facilities, mass housing, commercial districts and peripheral suburbs that have fundamentally transformed the capital’s urban fabric during the last two decades.

From simplicity towards immersion

This pointed and oppositional description of Addis Ababa’s urban conditions exemplifies a fairly common way of discussing international urbanization processes and practices. Thinking in dichotomies such as “formal” and “informal” is strongly related to a dialectical mode of analysis, which has not only been a long-standing, intrinsic part of Western culture and discourse, but has also always been an import-

ant historical frame of reference to position the West against other geographical entities.² One of the most recent and prominent translations of this attitude has emerged in the narrative of the “developed” and “less developed” worlds.³ Within this dialectical mindset, it seems logical to extend and reinforce this basic distinction with closely related sub-categories: concepts such as “formal” and “modern” are directly associated with the developed, whereas their counterparts “informal” and “traditional” are usually assigned to the less developed.

According to Harold Brookfield’s experience in the field of development studies, such frameworks also derive from a common human impulse to reduce the complexities we encounter, where “dichotomies, or polarized constructs, are basic to the simplest structuring of human perception into comprehensible order”.⁴ Although after an initial and potentially helpful analytical abstraction, more detailed and nuanced accounts of a subject matter might be necessary, he explains, one often retains “the simpler method – ‘as if’ there were only two classes”.⁵

Extending the analysis of such general dialectic constructs to urban studies, geographer Jennifer Robinson criticizes a dominant pattern of the past century through which cities, too, were assigned to so-called “developing” and “modernized” categories. Moreover – and in accordance with a general discourse that delimited the Western world from “the rest” – Robinson reasons that the “modern” metropolis could not have justified and positioned itself without its “traditional”, “to-be-developed” urban counterpart.⁶ Yet despite such criticism of simplistic and contrasting explanatory models, it still appears to be a rather demanding and time-consuming task to grasp what and why particular things happen in urban environments – which are, after all, one of the most complex formations generated by human activities. It is thus of no surprise that the planning of and discourse on cities has been particularly prone to conflicting assertions and simplified decision-making, especially when confronted with unknown phenomena in rapidly growing, and, in this case, low-income urban contexts. Further stressing the introductory and deliberately simplified interpretation of found realities in Addis Ababa, even the initial question of how generally to approach the analysis and planning of such a city can be easily divided into two fundamental options, or “two classes”: does one retreat to well-known explanations and solutions deriving



Condominium construction on the periphery of Addis Ababa

from abstract analysis and universally applied global concepts? Or does one invest resources into understanding and investigating the alleged disarray of everyday local practices more accurately and in more detail?

From control towards possibilities

Returning to Addis Ababa, the most recent paths taken by planning authorities have clearly pursued characteristics perceived as being formal and modern, while firmly neglecting meaningful interaction with, or adoption of, so-called informal and traditional practices. While these processes take place at almost every level and realm of the city, they can be best illustrated through two major physical elements of the recently built urban environment: a social mass housing initiative called the Integrated Housing Development Programme (IHDP), and Addis Ababa's intensified road construction activities represented by projects such as the Ring Road or Gotera Interchange (formerly known as "Confusion Square").⁷ Despite their typological differences, these applied housing and road-planning schemes share many aspects arising from the aforementioned notions of formal, allegedly controlled linear progress. Projected and executed in collaboration with different foreign actors – for the IHDP, the German development organization Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ); for the road developments, British engineers and consultants as well as Chinese engineers and contractors – all projects have been driven by fairly standardized, engineering-based solutions that are inspired by modern global planning processes and typologies rather than local and contextual specificities. Unsurprisingly, as spatial symbols of a "modern" city, the applied typologies mark a visible and physical separation from existing "traditional" – or more organically evolved – configurations within the urban fabric. Intro-



Large-scale infrastructure development in Addis Ababa

ducing multi-storey housing blocks, fixed apartment layouts, administratively compiled neighbourhoods, satellite towns, urban highways, car-oriented street layouts or large-scale and grade-separated intersections, the newly built structures convey an image of spatial planning and design "as if there were only two classes" indeed: one of control and one of disorder.

From this perspective, Gotera Interchange, for instance, has been



The pattern of condominium typologies throughout Addis Ababa



The pattern of infrastructure developments throughout Addis Ababa

transformed into a neat series of unidirectional fast lanes, while the housing programme converts single-storey, carpet- and maze-like structures into stacked, individually assigned housing units. Thus, for Addis Ababa and its citizens, there seems to be no room for something in between or beyond these contrasts, but only the choice of living in either a “traditional” sub-standard hut or a “modern” condominium; of either remaining pedestrians in an increasingly challenging spatial environment or becoming car drivers themselves; of either becoming part of an allegedly well-ordered modern and formal urban environment or staying – for a little while longer – in the “chaotic” world of informal urban practices. As exaggerated as this set of choices might sound, they do reflect, in essence, many of the tensions between the complexities of everyday lives and the imposed simplicity of “controllable” planning and design decisions.⁸ Ignoring given realities, these spatial interventions ironically spur behaviours that could be seen as informal: jay-walking on urban roads and highways that are designed for a modern motorized society with supplemental public transport, and therefore result in utterly insufficient pedestrian infrastructure; traffic congestions due to “irregular” deviations – on the part of both drivers and pedestrians – from the rules imposed by each road typology; or the unplanned “takeover” of social housing by the middle class because the intended low-income residents cannot afford their officially assigned apartments and therefore rent out their units in an emerging informal rental market. Thus, although these planning and design measures clearly convey a desire to eliminate physical (and social) forms of informality, the rigid strategies and spatial layouts produce contrary effects. Looking at such results, one can argue that the very construction of such polarities has hindered any naturally occurring and meaningful convergence of (“formal”) administrative potential with (“informal”) realities and possibilities. When exploring strategies for improving these conditions, it seems obvious that an effort should be made to either bring these two realms closer, or dissolve the distinctions between them altogether.

From nostalgia towards reality

One of the main reasons why these differences exist is that both the informal and the formal operate through powerful nostalgic narratives. On the one hand, the informal side often romanticizes informal practices as the only truly contextual form of organization. By doing this, firstly it ignores the fact that a large part of these activities occur in generally miserable circumstances and thus compensate for inexistent services rather than emerge from voluntary ingenuity – especially in the context of the urban poor. And secondly, it forgets that any “formal” institution has

its origins in some sort of basic human organization as well. The formal side, on the other hand, repeatedly glorifies its official organizational virtues and directive policies as the only way to introduce change and order. Through this, it dismisses the fact that social and spatial differences are an intrinsic part of human forms of organization, and ignores that institutions are not solely built on abstract, contextless grounds but derive from a multitude of everyday, once informal practices.

In contrast to such “simplistic oppositions” in describing African urban environments, Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s appeal for “a more complex anthropology of things, forms, and signs in order to account for the life of the city” focuses on a deeper understanding of essential human activities, practices and institution building.⁹ Indeed, contemporary postcolonial anthropology and the closely related fields of ethnology and sociology offer approaches that could bridge the gap between extreme discrepancies and commonalities. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, anthropology oscillates between the finding that – on a very broad level – “human life and human activity occur within structures that display characteristics in common”, such as building societies and institutional entities, designing tools and technologies, or developing languages, and the discovery that – on a more specific level – “human beings undoubtedly developed different cultures because of geographical distance, [or] the particular characteristics of the environment in which they found themselves.”¹⁰ Therefore, from Lévi-Strauss’s vantage point, anthropology “does not seek to draw up a list of recipes that every society could consult depending on its mood”, because “formulas proper to each society cannot simply be transported to any other.”¹¹ Rather, anthropology “invites each society not to believe that its institutions, its customs, and its beliefs are the only ones possible”.¹²

While Nuttall and Mbembe’s perspective on urban issues might be rather explicitly anthropological, the underlying call for a comprehensive and less anti-thetic way of thinking has gradually appeared within recent critical urban discourse as well. One could argue, for instance, that Robinson’s insights drawn from her criticism of urban studies fit seamlessly into Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological attitude: proposing a more “cosmopolitan” take on cities, she aims to describe every city as an “ordinary” entity in its own right, thus enabling more diverse, imaginative and comparative studies on a level playing field.¹³ Similarly, urban scholar Edgar Pieterse suggests compiling a broader illustration of – in his particular case – “African cityness”, which consequentially has to tap a multifaceted pool of knowledge, cultural mindsets, ideas, concepts, investigations, research and disciplines.¹⁴ To do this, Pieterse suggests to “cross-fertilise ethnographic texture, sociological patterning and topographies, spatial practices and registers and interpretive metaphors”.¹⁵

What these accounts clearly have in common is that they do not operate along the artificial distinctions between developed and undeveloped, traditional and modern, and formal and informal. Rather, by advocating for a mixture of different practices and disciplines based on the multifaceted realities observed on the ground, they go beyond these oppositional categories. In other words, instead of following given and formulaic questions, methods and solutions – and thus trying to fit a variety of insights into preconditioned categories – these approaches display a more pragmatic attitude, based on everyday, context-related observations and knowledge. For Pieterse this means that, in order to escape the many “a priori moral assumptions about what is good, moral and modern, and what is not”, one might have to follow a more “dispassionate approach”.¹⁶ As harsh as the term “dispassionate” might sound, it does not imply a loss of passion or empathy for urban problems and the related human challenges. Rather, it emphasizes the need to refuse the kind of passion involved in unreflective, dogmatic, biased and simplistic explanatory models. A dispassionate – or pragmatic – approach invests more energy in exploring “the real city, the real economy and the real social practices and identities of the majority of urbanites who are building our cities if we want to make sense of them”.¹⁷

From dialectic argument towards dialogic discussion

In view of such alternative propositions, it might be useful to revisit the concept of dialectic thinking and analysis – the basis for many of the oppositional frameworks criticized above. Naturally, dialectic problem solving includes more than just two opposites; it also seeks to find a synthesis, or a resolution between the two poles. As sociologist Richard Sennett explains, “In dialectic, as we learned in school, the verbal play of opposites should gradually build up to a synthesis... the aim is to come eventually to a common understanding.”¹⁸ In comparison with simple “either-or” solutions, finding such a common understanding can be beneficial indeed. Yet the general framework is still essentially dependent on an oppositional setup; without it, the construct of dialectic analysis and synthesis is non-functional. Setting up dichotomies is a precondition, regardless of whether it will result in synthesis or common ground. What is more, the duality of pure dialectic problem solving leaves practically no space for options outside the bipolar system. Although the process might feature iterative loops going back and forth between the two poles and the synthetic proposition, it is ultimately linear, moving from two opposites towards a goal.

In searching for more open and alternative frameworks, Sennett refers to the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who conceived the expression “dialogic”



Repetitive housing typologies on the periphery of Addis Ababa



Object-based condominium typology arrangements

discourse. In Sennett's understanding, the term is used "to name a discussion which does not resolve itself by finding common ground. Though no shared agreements may be reached, through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their...views and expand their understanding..."¹⁹ Dialogic discourse thus departs from the two-dimensional and linear nature of a dialectic argument, creating room for a multitude of vantage points that could be left as a collection of ideas, or, if possible, become a relational network of different perspectives. Consequentially, dialogic discourse does not exclude specific methods or define one framework as universally applicable; rather, it extends the possibilities of discussion, problem definition as well as problem solving – which, of course, can also include dialectic analysis if needed.

From status quo towards "what if?"

Although they do not refer to a dialectic process and the built urban environment directly, economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo ask for a similar open approach, particularly when it comes to engaging poor socio-economic environments. In *Poor Economics – A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, they promote an active, close and detailed understanding of the processes at work:

"If we resist the kind of lazy, formulaic thinking that reduces every problem to the same set of general principles; if we listen to poor people themselves and force ourselves to understand the logic of their choices; if we accept the possibility of error and subject every idea, including the

most apparently commonsensical ones, to rigorous empirical testing, then we will be able not only to construct a toolbox of effective policies but also to better understand why the poor live the way they do.”²⁰

Reflecting on this quote in light of their book’s title, what is “radical” is surely not some sort of pure ideology that defines itself against everything that it is not. By connecting an understanding of “informal” contextual logic with a more “formal” process of empirical testing – and accepting the inherent risk of making as well as acknowledging occasional errors – the authors effectively suspend simplistic categorizations and antipodes. In fact, the radicalness appears to be represented instead by the authors’ suggested toolbox, which would allow a variety of solutions, ideas and proposals, and thus, in spite of its name, foster an “out-of-the-box” attitude.

Despite the disciplinary differences, this method has a lot in common with calls for a more open, pragmatic and critical approach to urban studies, research and planning. Going further, what would a convergence of these different intellectual and disciplinary fields mean when facing the built environment? Or, in other words, what if the dialogic approach were applied not only to conversation, discourse or policy, but to the physical world as well? It might yield a “spatial dialogic”, as it were, that uses urban research in combination with physical objects and projects for an open-ended discussion, a dialogic process that in order to grasp the multitude of ideas, activities and practices would decrease dependency on decontextualized, ready-made solutions. What if a city in the making such as Addis Ababa assembled its own toolbox of design proposals deriving from contextual bottom-up practices, supported by official institutions and local administrations? What if the city of Addis Ababa allocated a small but steady amount of its overall construction budget to more experimental approaches, which could allow for developing, designing, testing, evaluating, adapting, adopting, improving or dismissing these propositions? What about a dialogic process for social housing, where a diversity of financial and spatial prototypes is consciously researched, designed, built and tested? How about applying a multifaceted, transdisciplinary design method for road transport systems that goes beyond the typical ready-made traffic lights, ways of accommodating pedestrians or traffic-flow calculations, integrating bottom-up knowledge from contextual techniques to regulate all current modes of traffic?

The array of thoughts and projects collected in this book demonstrates that what prevents such a discussion is not an absence of ideas and methods, but rather the lack of a truly integrative approach that could bring together and ultimately dissolve bipolar categorizations such as informal and formal. However, to feed such

an open and multipolar process, it is not enough only to learn lessons from informality; actors in informal sectors would have to organize, adapt and position their skills and knowledge within the terms of more official administrative entities as well. The kind of dialogic discussion explored in this essay of using proposals and built prototypes could offer a platform for beginning a more inclusive exchange on design, and economic and organizational practices. Finally, such an integrative arrangement could widen possibilities and improve conditions not only in the rapidly changing city of Addis Ababa, but also for a whole new generation of emerging urban centres. It would allow us to leave behind nostalgic dialectic exaggerations that consolidate existing biases and fixed perceptions, and at the same time could spearhead the production of original, innovative and contemporary urban practices. Spatial dialogic could enable a profoundly new way of organizing urban development and design processes, and contribute to more contextual, appropriate and inclusive urban environments as well.

Notes

- 1 Along these lines, African cities are dominated by both “informal” employment (over 70 per cent) and “informal” housing construction. The average growth rates of cities (4.58 per cent) was almost matched by the average growth of informal settlements (4.53 per cent between 1990 and 2000). Frederico Neto, Yejin Ha and Ananda Weliwita, “The Urban Informal Economy – New Policy Approaches”, *Habitat Debate* 13, no. 2 (June 2007): 4; United Nations Human Settlements Programme, “State of the World’s Cities 2008/2009: Harmonious Cities” (London: Earthscan, 2008), 19.
- 2 An illustrative example of this line of thought is given in Edward W. Said’s pivotal text *Orientalism*, in which he deconstructs and reveals the many layers by which the “occident” distinguished itself from – and therefore defined itself through – the other, namely the “orient”. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). Closely related to Said’s undertaking, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa* describes similar processes of opposing the African continent to and delimiting it from the rest of the world. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- 3 While such notions have been occasionally deconstructed and criticized, they still hold an important position within overall discourse and practice. See Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 4 Harold Brookfield, *Interdependent Development* (London: Methuen & Co., 1975), 53.

- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–12, 36–37.
- 7 For more detailed information on these projects see GTZ et al., “Integrated Housing Development Program, Volume 1: Management Manual” (Addis Ababa: GTZ, 2006); Peng Mo, Ryan J. Orr and Jianzhong Lu, “Addis Ababa Ring Road Project: A Case Study of a Chinese Construction Project in Ethiopia” (paper presented at the International Conference on Multi-National Construction Projects, Shanghai, 21–23 November 2008); and Construction Ahead Editorial Team, “The Solution to Confusion Square”, in *Construction Ahead* (Addis Ababa: Butterfly Publishers, 2005).
- 8 For the particular everyday social, spatial and economic impacts of the IHDP or the Ring Road on citizens see Teshome Tefera, *Measuring the Affordability of the IHDP: The Integrated Housing Development Program in Addis Ababa* (Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011) and Dejene Teshome, *The Effects of Urban Development in Addis Ababa: A Study of the Belt Highway Project* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2011).
- 9 Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, “Introduction: Afropolis”, in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 8–9.
- 10 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropology Confronts the Problems of the Modern World*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 5–6, 42.
- 11 Ibid, 43.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 1–12, 36–37.
- 14 Edgar Pieterse, “Cityness and African Urban Development”, *Urban Forum* 21, no. 3 (2010): 217.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Edgar Pieterse, “Grasping the Unknowable: Coming to Grips with African Urbanisms”, in *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities*, ed. Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2013), 28.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2012), 18–19.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 272.