

The uncharted foreign actors, investments, and urban models in African new city building

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Abstract

Over a dozen countries in Africa are currently constructing more than 70 new cities from scratch. Contextualized within rising foreign interest in the continent's untapped markets and the rise in foreign direct investment from increasingly global actors, there has been a recent surge of scholarship on the role of Chinese investors in urban projects in Africa, particularly as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, there are other powerful foreign actors from emerging economies engaged in new city building, including state-owned companies, that have received little scholarly attention to date, leaving a broader research gap on the implications of their growing role in contemporary African urbanism. In this article, we highlight some of these uncharted foreign actors and the urban models they are circulating and propose three directions for future research on: the mechanisms through which foreign actors have become powerful players in new city building in Africa; the types of urban models they are introducing and their local adaptations; and the geopolitics of foreign interventions in urban mega-developments across Africa.

Key words: new cities; African urbanism; urban policy mobilities; foreign investment; entrepreneurial states; urban models

The new scramble for Africa: Foreign capital, real estate investments, and new city-building

Over one dozen countries in Africa are engaged in building more than 70 new cities from scratch in what is the most active period of new city construction since the colonial era. Fueled by the resource boom of the early 2000s and attractive growth potential in domestic consumer markets premised on the prophetic expansion of the African middle class (Pitcher, 2012; Grant, 2015; Splinter & Leynseele, 2019), the African continent has recently benefited from a surge in foreign direct investment from increasingly diverse sources. Prominent global financial institutions such as the World Bank have promoted Africa as a place of highly profitable growth opportunities and unexploited markets (Turok, 2013), fueling seductive representations of the continent as the 'last piece of cake' (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019: 2394) and 'last development frontier' (Watson, 2014: 216) among investors. Reminiscent of colonial era dynamics, this context has generated a new type of scramble for Africa through rising corporate interest from multinationals, foreign financial institutions, and large-scale property developers (Pitcher, 2012; Grant, 2015). Following the 2008 global financial crisis, the construction of new cities in Africa

was also propelled by international investors seeking investment alternatives in markets less affected by the recession (Keeton & Provoost, 2019; Pitcher, 2012; Watson, 2014). Branded and designed as mirror opposites of established African cities that are facing an array of urgent challenges (Murray, 2015a), new projects are marketed as being spacious, clean, ‘smart’, exclusive, and most significantly, lucrative ventures for investors (Watson, 2015). For political and economic elites advocating for their construction, new master-planned cities represent key strategies of economic growth and infrastructure upgrading, which are often integrated into broader national development agendas.

The small but rapidly growing body of scholarship examining the recent proliferation of new cities in Africa focuses primarily on the socio-economic and environmental impacts of new city projects and highlights their role in exacerbating social inequalities and spatial fragmentation (Lumumba, 2013; Carmody & Owusu, 2016; van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018), their vulnerability to environmental risks associated with climate change (Ajibade, 2017), their contributions to the privatization of urban space (Murray, 2015b; Fält, 2019), and the prevalent practices of land grabbing enabling their inception (Zoomers, et al., 2017). Despite the necessity of highlighting the adverse effects of rising new cities on the continent’s urban development and populations, other dimensions of Africa’s city-building trend and the ways it is unfolding across the continent remain underexamined.

In light of the recent flows of international capital and rise in real estate investments sweeping the continent, this paper calls for more research on the foreign builders of Africa’s new cities, which we view as a significant yet underexplored driving force of new city-building on the continent. We suggest that unpacking the various identities and scales of intervention of these actors is crucial to understand the forms, motivations, ramifications, and broader entanglements of new city development in Africa. In particular, we contend that the growing role of corporations with ties to foreign states warrants more critical attention. After introducing some of these emergent foreign actors, their characteristics, and the urban models they promote in Africa’s new cities, we outline three areas for future investigation into: the means by which foreign companies have become powerful actors of urban development across the continent; the local interpretations and adaptations of ‘imported’ urban models in Africa’s new cities; and the geopolitics of foreign interventions in African urban mega-developments. In doing so, we

identify new prominent networks and agents of transnational urban policy circulation and raise questions about the implications of their growing role in contemporary African urbanism.

Emerging city-building actors in Africa: New partnerships, urban models, and circulations of expertise

Beyond ongoing investments from Euro-American companies with deep roots in the colonial period, emergent ties with other global players, particularly in emerging economies (Pitcher, 2012), are shaping African new cities and future urbanisms in ways that require more scholarly attention. New cities under development are sustained by ties with increasingly diverse global actors through networks of financing, consulting, or partnerships with foreign firms for their design and development. While scholarship and media articles have particularly focused on the growing Chinese presence on the continent including through the Belt and Road Initiative (Mlambo, Kushamba, & Simawu, 2016), the Chinese-built mega-infrastructure projects in at least a dozen African countries (Reboredo & Brill, 2019), and China's first extra-national military base located in Djibouti (Styan, 2020), the roles of Chinese companies in the construction of new cities is still relatively unexplored and even less attention has been paid to the many other foreign city-building actors from Asia and other parts of Africa.

Beyond being prolific developers of new cities in China, Chinese companies are also actively engaged in constructing numerous new cities on the African continent, including in Egypt, Morocco, South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Angola (Keeton & Provoost, 2019). Beyond China, there is evidence that many other foreign companies, including from South Korea, Turkey, and Morocco, are becoming prominent city builders in Africa. As Table 1 demonstrates, there is a wide variety of public and private foreign actors involved in city building in countries across Africa. While several private foreign corporations are involved in new city-building ventures, a significant number of foreign companies presently engaged in African new cities are state-owned corporations. Furthermore, the distinction between the public and private sector actors involved in new city projects, particularly those from the Global South and emerging economies, is often blurred as interests among actors are increasingly entangled (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019). Beyond their role in the financing and construction of new cities, foreign companies that are also involved in ambitious city-building activities in their home countries are shaping future African cities by promoting seductive urban development models and circulating new city-building expertise to African political elites. Further investigation is

needed into how the circulation of urban models from a new set of sources across emerging economies is disrupting entrenched patterns in the flow of knowledge and expertise, which, since the colonial era, have flowed unidirectionally from the Global North to the Global South (Clarke, 2012). While the global circulation of urban models from now-iconic global cities such as Singapore and Dubai are investigated in recent scholarship (Elshehtawy, 2006; Acuto, 2010; Pow, 2014), other urban models are also circulating globally yet have received little scholarly attention.

Table 1: Some of the major foreign builders of new city projects in Africa

Among these globally circulating models, the ‘Korea new town model’, exported internationally including to Africa by the state-owned Korea Land and Housing Corporation (LH), was developed and refined in the decades of rapid rebuilding after the Korean War, when the state built new towns outside of Seoul to alleviate housing shortages. LH advertises the ‘Korea new town model’ as a realistic and extremely fast development strategy in which a fully functioning ‘city’ can be created in 5-6 years (<https://www.lh.or.kr/eng/index.do>). The Incheon Free Economic Zone (IFEZ) from Korea has also sold its ‘ubiquitous city’ model internationally (Shwayri, 2013), leveraging widespread interest in smart and sustainable urbanism built from scratch. African countries are also beginning to claim expertise in new city building: The Kingdom of Morocco, having 19 new city projects underway as part of its own national city-building strategy, has now established partnerships for the construction of new cities by national institutional city-building actors and private companies in various African states, including in Senegal, South Sudan, and Ivory Coast. More recently, the Zenata Development Society (SAZ) has reinforced the kingdom’s claim to new city-building expertise by circulating a sustainable new city ‘model’ for Africa, based on plans for the unfinished Zenata Eco-City (Author, forthcoming). Turkey is also increasingly circulating urban planning ideas, consultants, and contractors to African countries under the national ‘expert-led’ strategy of ‘Turquality’, a state-led initiative to export Turkish goods and services globally (Ondrusek-Roy, 2020). Chinese urbanism and aesthetics, including the Chinese grid, have been introduced in several Chinese-led new city ventures on the continent, including in the new city of Kilamba (Angola) (Keeton & Nijhuis, 2019).

Mechanics, model mutations, and geopolitics

The actors building Africa's new cities have been analysed in an ad hoc way in articles that examine single projects (Murray, 2015b; Croese & Pitcher, 2019) or the broad categories of actors engaged in or enabling city building on the continent (van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019), yet little research to date has focused on the expanding role of foreign companies from emerging economies that are coming to Africa to design, build, and finance new cities. Investigating these foreign players is crucial to understand the forces and visions driving new city-building on the continent, the various ways new cities are materializing, and how these projects may be serving broader interests for those involved in their development. We propose three directions for future research on these foreign actors' growing engagement in Africa's new cities.

First, how bilateral ties are established between foreign actors and African elites and the power dynamics involved requires further investigation. This would shed light on the various political economic structures such as existing legislation and legal regimes that are facilitating new city-building partnerships. Given the scale and number of new city projects underway, research is urgently needed to understand how foreign actors have their projects approved, who benefits, and who is excluded or further marginalized in the rush to 'develop' and 'modernize' urban landscapes in Africa. What negotiations are taking place between foreign city-builders and local elites, where do the profits go, and what sorts of concessions and incentives are being awarded? With the pervasive forms of land grabbing and large-scale expulsions (Sassen, 2014) underpinning urban development globally, further analysis is needed on powerful foreign companies like Rendeavour, which owns over 12,000 hectares across five African countries, and how they are able to acquire land, establish local partnerships, secure permits to urbanize areas not always zoned for urbanization, and introduce new urban governance structures.

Second, beyond highlighting the engagement of new foreign actors and their dissemination of specific models of new cities in Africa, more research is needed on the origins of these models, the visions and assumptions on urban development that they carry with them, and how they are being interpreted and adapted through a variety of local forces. This would entail investigating these travelling urban models and how they are being marketed to African political elites by foreign actors: What is their appeal and perceived relevance for African cities

from the point of view of local political elites? What narratives construct the ‘success’ of these foreign models? Further research will shed light on the extent to which these imported new city models are being adapted and localized during implementation stages to yield new hybridized African urbanisms, and the role of residents in this process: Are residents in and at the peripheries of new cities reshaping new cities for new uses unanticipated by planners, and if so, how and with what effects?

Third, more critical attention should be paid to foreign state-owned entities involved in new city-building in Africa, and to the modalities and implications of their interventions into Africa’s urban development. Many state-owned companies building new cities on the continent are subsidiaries of much larger state-owned corporate groups, making it challenging to retrace who or what entity is behind projects and to understand the scope of city-building and investment activities from these foreign state-affiliated actors. More research is needed to understand the extent to which these companies with ties to foreign states are guided by and fulfilling national politico-economic interests through new city-building projects in Africa. Although several scholars have unpacked the role of states which, alone or in partnership with the private sector, are using public investment vehicles such as state-owned companies to invest in new city developments and real estate projects as part of ambitious national development strategies (Pitcher, 2017), considerably less attention has been devoted to the ways in which some states are using state-owned corporations to invest in urban development ventures beyond their national territory. As a number of countries currently engaged in new city development in Africa have also shifted their foreign policy towards the continent over the last decade (e.g. China, Turkey, Morocco), further research will illuminate how new city-building partnerships are inserted within broader networks of diplomacy and trade, and how foreign state involvement in African new cities through both public and private companies is part of national economic strategies and geopolitical motivations of countries eager to establish a foothold in African markets.

Conclusion

Although foreign actors are actively involved in urban megaprojects and new city-building globally, the new ‘scramble’ for Africa and pervasive depictions of the continent as a real estate investment frontier requires that we devote more attention to the foreign engagements

in urban development and new city building on the continent. This article is intended to draw attention to the many unknown dimensions of foreign city builders in Africa and to provide a starting point for researchers who seek to understand a new type of state entrepreneurialism enacted by an array of emerging foreign actors. The rise of powerful foreign city-building actors across the continent, including from Asia and other countries in Africa, disrupts entrenched North-South patterns of knowledge transfer and highlights the new reach of state-affiliated corporations from Korea, China, Turkey, and elsewhere and their significant influence in shaping urban environments and norms in Africa. Future research will clarify the new relationships and power geometries being established between foreign city-builders and African policy actors surrounding new city ventures and circulations of urban expertise on the continent.

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