

The real lives of urban fantasies

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ABSTRACT This paper is a response to and a commentary on Vanessa Watson's paper on "African urban fantasies" in this issue of the Journal, which analyzes new urban master plans developed by international architectural firms and property development companies for many cities in sub-Saharan Africa. Taking Watson's argument as an opportunity to think about current urban fantasies in Indian cities, this response offers three reflections. The first looks at the scale of renewal in the plans for African cities and argues that they represent a different order to similar imaginations of special enclaves, zones or gated communities that have become common in cities in the global South. The second reads these plans as a yearning not just for particular built environments and the economic lives they represent but also for a controlled and orderly city free of the messiness of democratic politics, guided by the visions of authoritarian city states such as Dubai and Shanghai. The third theme discusses the critical and exclusionary consequences of these plans in cities across the global South, whether or not they are implemented. Implementing them would realize the disconnect between these plans and the actual citizens of the cities they seek to reshape. Yet even if they just remain on paper, these plans play an important political role in shaping aspirations and urban futures, as well as the possibilities of a more inclusive urban citizenship in the present.

KEYWORDS African cities / Indian cities / master plans / planning / southern urbanism / urban futures

I. INTRODUCTION

Vanessa Watson's astute and timely analysis of a set of conceptual master plans drawn up for African cities opens up the opportunity for a valuable conversation about urbanism in the rapidly transforming cities of the global South. This response takes up this conversation from a particular location, namely the dynamics of contemporary Indian urbanism, which Watson is already engaged with. In speaking from "here", it offers three reflections sparked by Watson's argument and is an attempt to see how her ideas travel as well as what they allow us to say about southern urbanisms more broadly.

II. REFLECTION ONE

In the past two decades, Chinese and Indian urbanization have posed a significant challenge to urban theory by forcing us to think through what it means for large-scale urbanization to take place through the production of enclaves, special economic zones and spaces of exception. Such urbanization – more than apparent in the large-scale master plans for



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1. Graham, S and S Marvin (2001), *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*, Routledge, London and New York, 512 pages; also Shatkin, G (2008), "The city and the bottom line: urban megaprojects and the privatization of planning in southeast Asia", *Environment and Planning A* Vol 40, No 2, pages 383–401.

2. Simone, A M (2004), *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 312 pages.

3. See <http://www.dmicdc.com>. The project is managed by the global planning firm AECOM, and features seven "cities" that are, in line with Watson's argument, intended to be "smart cities"; see <http://www.tinyurl.com/p395uuz>.

satellite cities and greenfield towns described by Watson – suggests that what have been seen as "enclave", "splintered" or "bypass" urbanisms⁽¹⁾ perhaps need to be interrogated at an entirely different scale, where they represent actual modes of urbanization. What does it mean for the city to be born as an enclave, for it to seemingly eschew any notion of historical settlement and evolution? Particularly, what does it mean for the plans of such immense new cities to be born not of the nationalist imaginations of Brasilia and Chandigarh but as a footprint of a certain kind of concentration of global capital?

From "here", there is something both different and familiar about the master plans for African cities that Watson describes. The difference lies in the fact that (with some exceptions) the degree of renewal and erasure in the imaginations of these plans seems to be of a different order to that in similar plans for Indian cities. Plans that seek to remake whole cities – for example, for Kigali – or build new satellite towns of a size of those imagined for Nairobi and Kinshasa produce a scale of intervention markedly different from similar plans in the Indian context. How do we read this difference in scale? Perhaps it suggests that the African city – what Watson describes as the "last development frontier" – still circulates in global imaginations quite literally as that: a frontier. Frontiers are regions where rules are yet to be made, territory still to be claimed. They belong to no one and can be presented erased of context and history. Frontiers, to play with Simone's evocative phrase, are places "yet to come".⁽²⁾ They can thus be made, planned, rendered and, quite literally, produced in their entirety as each of these plans attempts to do. The imagination of these plans then is not renewal but, in fact, an origin. They are scaled as such.

In India, plans of such scale do appear, however, in a particular location – the new attempts at corridor-based urbanization along, for example, the Delhi–Agra expressway or the Delhi–Mumbai industrial corridor. Here, the plans shown by Watson seem eerily familiar. A series of new "cities" planned along the Delhi–Agra expressway will indeed be built and born as enclaves.⁽³⁾ These new cities draw precisely upon a frontier mentality. They are ostensibly "planned" but locate their physical master plans carefully in the liminal zone between jurisdictions and scales of government, to confront us with a new form of urbanization that, as Watson rightly argues, current understandings of cities, citizens and urban governance cannot readily explain.

III. REFLECTION TWO

One way to imagine these new forms of governance is to take these plans quite literally at their word (or their rendered image, as the case may be). Watson often refers in these plans to the aesthetic inter-referencing to Dubai, Shanghai and Singapore. I would argue that this referencing is not just to the built environment of these cities or even the economic life that the glass-towered CBDs hope to both portray and generate. It is also, in fact, a kind of yearning for a particular rationality and *techne* of "firm" or "semi-authoritarian" governance that lies behind and finds expression in a controlled and orderly city. Narratives of the "orderly" city are, as Watson argues, also narratives of a particular kind of "good governance", one that pierces through the "chaos" of the contemporary African city to enable capital, discipline and order to reign simultaneously.

Such inter-referencing is increasingly common across contemporary urban India. The new urban Indian idols are cities free not just of infrastructure struggles but of the messiness of democratic politics. Across Indian cities today, democratic and popular resistance is commonly dismissed as “politics” – the colloquialism that marks the same sense of unwanted disorder that Vyjyanthi Rao once argued was the essence of the definition of the “slum”.⁽⁴⁾ “Politics” stands in the way of a particular conception of economic growth. As a new political economy, which Gidwani and Reddy describe as a “post-developmental formation”,⁽⁵⁾ has emerged in urban India, increasingly cities are seen only as what the country’s largest urban renewal programme in its history describes as “engines of growth”.⁽⁶⁾ Worlding practices, to use Roy and Ong’s phrase,⁽⁷⁾ which refer to particular political as well as spatial forms are also then calls to a firm hand in urban governance that makes evictions, renewal, erasure and remaking possible despite democratic resistance.

Watson uses Goldman to suggest that perhaps a city like Bangalore offers a blueprint of how this game might play out. She argues that it may well be that “... systems of governance will be reconfigured in order to facilitate speculative urbanism”, as Goldman argues they have in peri-urban Bangalore.⁽⁸⁾ This may well be so, and even as the impacts of such plans (if ever realized) will be, as Watson suggests, “... complex and contradictory”, it is indeed likely that “... a majority of urban populations will find themselves further disadvantaged and marginalized.” Yet, if Bangalore does offer a flash-forward for Luanda, Kinshasa and Nairobi, one caveat is in order. While the processes of “speculative urbanism” that Goldman points out for Bangalore are indeed evident in many Indian cities, it is also true that the “blockade” is as much a part of this story. As Roy argues, imaginations of “... urban developmentalism ...” in Indian cities “... remain damned by the very deregulatory logic that fuels them.”⁽⁹⁾ In other words, attempts to rewrite, remake and renew the Indian city have always been partial, fragmented and, often, undone. This fragmentation is not just the reality of resistance that is more readily apparent as a blockade to such plans; it is also, and this is the crux of Roy’s argument, that the planning regime in India is itself an “informalized entity”, one unable to carry out a speculative, territorialized urban renewal and regeneration. In other words, it is precisely the nature and ambitions of these plans that will be their undoing, for the “chaos” that they seek to evade is precisely the context in which they must take root.

IV. REFLECTION THREE

Yet even if undone by their own terms, these plans are also ends unto themselves. Michel Foucault once wrote that things rarely happen as laid down in programmers’ schemes. Yet he insisted that schemes are not simply utopias “... in the heads of a few projectors.” They are not “... abortive schemas for the creation of a reality ...” but “... fragments of reality” itself. They “... induce a whole series of effects in the real.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The conjuring of these images and imaginations alongside their circulation shapes urban politics. It claims the space and form of aspirations and futures just as it guides how one thinks about the present. The “symbolic power” that Watson speaks of is a critical part of contemporary urbanism in each of these cities. As Watson argues, the exercise of this power involves

4. Rao, V (2006), “Slum as theory: the South/Asian city and globalization”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol 30, Issue 1, pages 225–232.

5. Gidwani, V and R N Reddy (2011), “The afterlives of ‘waste’: notes from India for a minor history of capitalist surplus”, *Antipode* Vol 43, Issue 5, pages 1625–1658.

6. India launched the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) in 2005; see <http://www.jnnurm.nic.in>.

7. Roy, A and A Ong (editors) (2011), *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, 376 pages.

8. Goldman, M (2011), “Speculative urbanism and the making of the next world city”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol 35, No 3, pages 555–581.

9. Roy, A (2009), “Why India cannot plan its cities. Informality, insurgency and the idiom of urbanization”, *Planning Theory* Vol 8, No 1, page 87.

10. Foucault, M (1980), “Questions of method”, in G Burchell, C Gordon and Peter Miller (editors) (1991), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, page 81.

“... the production of narratives promoting the city and addressed to global elites; it also implies a concern with the importance of a city in relation to other cities rather than the extent to which it functions for its citizens.”

It is important to understand the particularity of the many ways in which such aesthetic regimes create the disconnect between cities and citizens that Watson diagnoses. In Delhi, for example, imaginations of the “world-class city” have become hegemonic in the past decade. Like Watson’s master plans, visions of the “world-class city” have created what Ghertner has called an “... aesthetic governmentality ...” where “... the *visuality of urban space itself is a way of knowing its essential features and natural standing.*”⁽¹¹⁾ From within what he calls a “grid of norms” – standardized aesthetic norms that determine legality as well as status – a “rule by aesthetics” emerges. Fantasies or not, the repeated circulation of particular urban futures is an “aestheticization”, i.e. a reduction of the relationship of the viewer and viewed to one of aesthetics rather than politics.⁽¹²⁾ Such an aestheticization of urban space crowds out imaginations of other, more egalitarian urban futures. It challenges the possibilities of urban citizenship and belonging. It creates regimes and hierarchies of valued and unvalued spaces and, in the end, of the citizens that inhabit them.

Of all the plans that Watson shows, it is the image of Hope City in Accra that sticks in one’s mind. Unlike the sharp, bright and precise digital rendering of the other plans, the buildings in Hope City are blurry and distant. Undoubtedly intended to evoke ideas of a future whose technological possibilities are not yet fully known, they instead appear hazy and unattainable; a phantasm rather than a fantasy. The space around them is empty and dark, the colour of a rusted, scorched earth. Seen in another context, the image seems almost a mockery of itself and of the attempt to envision and conjure future cities that remain blurry even on the drafting table.

11. Ghertner, A (2011), “Rule by aesthetics: world-class city-making in Delhi”, in A Roy and A Ong (editors), *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, page 281.

12. See Bhan, G (2009), “This is not the city I once knew: evictions, urban poor and the right to the city in Millennial Delhi”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 1, pages 127–142; also Roy, A (2004), “Transnational trespassing: the geopolitics of urban informality”, in A Roy and N AlSayyad (editors), *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America and South Asia*, Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, 352 pages.

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