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SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

From Models to Methodologies: New Approaches to Development in African Cities

Shakirah E. Hudani. ***Master Plans and Minors Acts: Repairing the City in Post Genocide Rwanda***. University of Chicago Press, 2024. 258 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. $32.50. Paperback. ISBN: 9780226832722.

Andrea Rigon, Joseph M. Macarthy, Braima Koroma, Alexandre Apsan Frediani, and Andrea Klingel, eds. ***Urban Transformations in Sierra Leone: Knowledge Co-Production and Partnerships for a Just City***. UCL Press, 2024. 398 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. £30.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9781800086869.

Mehita Iqani and Renugan Raidoo, eds. ***Johannesburg from the Riverbanks: Navigating the Jukskei***. HSRC Press, 2025. 244 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. $45.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9780796926883.

Singumbe Muyeba. ***The Homeowner Ideology: Economic (F)Utility of Real Property Rights in Four African Cities***. University of Michigan Press, 2025. 251 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. $29.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780472057320.

African cities are sites of intense contrast and contradiction. For urban residents, they are defined by opportunity and desperation, mobility and immobility, poverty and wealth, history and innovation, organization and disorder. For those who navigate these complexities on a daily basis the contradiction is often the rule. It doesn't necessarily exclude or separate; it often enables in ways that defy the planning logics, development models, and academic theories of Western observers, international organizations, or bilateral donors. For those who live at the extremes, it seems like these contradictions represent "two worlds"—a physical manifestation of the extreme income inequality in which residents at different ends of the socioeconomic spectrum operate in spheres completely distinct from one another. If the poorest urban residents cannot afford to or don't feel comfortable in elite spaces, the wealthiest can easily find themselves insulated from the realities of the streets, separated by a pane of glass, the comfort of air conditioning, and the sound of a radio or TV.

More than a decade ago, I observed that the narrative about African cities was being increasingly defined by this "two worlds" notion (Hart 2015). "Africa Rising" and #theafricathemedianevershowsyou promoted an image of growing middle-class and elite populations, providing important correctives in journalistic coverage

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and on social media that challenged negative stereotypes and assumptions about the continent. At the same time, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) introduced in 2015 inspired renewed calls for "development" that reenforced dichotomized frameworks for viewing city life in Africa as "formal" or "informal." The suite of development strategies—from "slum renewal" to bus rapid transit—that were pushed by consulting companies, planners, and donors, sought to "formalize the informal," wiping out the contradictions and contrasts that defined many cities on the continent and replacing them with a more "international" model of urban development that was being pushed in postindustrial cities like Detroit or Baltimore just as much as it was in Accra or Lagos.

In the decade since, we have seen little evidence that these visions of "sustainable development" in cities (i.e., SDG 11) is working. The most recent report from the UN notes that "the current pace of change is insufficient to fully achieve all the goals by 2030" (United Nations 2025). For many urban residents, "sustainable development" over the last decade has looked more like hardship and devastation. Oxfam notes that since 2020 income inequality has only increased as "the average income of the richest 1% in Africa has increased five times faster than that of the bottom 50%" (Kamande and Hallum 2025). Large infrastructure projects, funded by loans from the World Bank, have failed to achieve their desired results (or even full implementation), leaving buses sitting abandoned and rusting in parking lots (Fuseini 2026). Residents find themselves displaced, the institutions of social security and vitality—from community centers to orphanages to markets—displaced and destroyed in communities like Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana (Grant et al. 2024) or Makoko in Lagos, Nigeria (Benjamin 2026) where "slum clearance" is invoked as justification for the large-scale demolition of established "informal" settlements to make way for new upscale waterfront development and tourist infrastructure. "Why," we should be asking ourselves, "is this not working?"

Keith Hart (1973) coined the term "informal economy" to describe the vast range of economic activity among Accra's poorest residents that "escaped the enumeration of the state" because they did not fall in conventional categories of employment and government regulation. Today, however, "informality" and its counterpoint ("formality") have become an inescapable and often normative dichotomous lens through which all urban life is understood and judged. What was, for generations of scholars, an invitation to expand the scope of our work and the questions we seek to understand, has often been appropriated by policymakers in reductionist ways that cut off inquiry and flatten communities, both literally and figuratively (K. Hart 2020). "Informality" has come to stand in for urban poverty—a vast oversimplification that ignores the complicated ways in which people from all socioeconomic classes and walks of life are often operating outside of the boundaries of state sanction and conventional market logics (J. Hart 2024; K. Hart 2020). While, as academics, we may still be seeking to understand the lived experiences of those who most frequently navigate the zones of contrast and contradiction in cities with curiosity and complexity, too often in the development and policy sectors these communities are seen as prime targets for "improvement" and "investment" initiatives that ask few questions. Where does any of this come from? Why does it matter to the communities

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concerned? How might that help us think about African cities (and cities in general) in new ways that could advance a model of sustainable development that is more inclusive and just?

Importantly, at the same time, a growing group of scholars have increasingly been embracing the contradictions of this moment to rethink the ways that we analyze and understand the development of and life in African cities. The authors of the four books discussed in this review essay represent a broader scholarly movement that seeks to question the fundamental assumptions and conceptual tools that underlie our scholarly analysis and applied practice. That work embraces the contrasts and contradictions that accompany what AbdouMaliq Simone describes as the "turbulence" of African cities' pasts, presents, and futures to try to understand what *is happening* on its own terms so as to better envision what *could be* (Hart and Marr 2023; Simone 2023). Instead of trying to fit African cities into a preconceived box, shaped by Western assumptions and theories and policies about urbanity, it seeks to understand what African urban life is like and why—what Shakirah Hudani describes as "the politics of reinhabiting the present rather than erasing its vestiges" (1), whether they be historical, cultural, or traumatic—and what it would look like to seriously and productively engage with African urban residents alongside the typical policymakers and stakeholder representatives to craft a vision of the city that is shaped by the lived realities and values and cultures and practices of the people who live in it. That's not a threat—it's an opportunity that has urgent scholarly and practical implications for all of us.

The four books described in this essay take up the opportunity presented by this scholarly movement in unique ways, defined by the unique contemporary and historical conditions of their sites and the politics of their transformation and governance. Perhaps the most historically grounded of the four, Shakirah Hudani's *Master Plans and Minor Acts: Repairing the City in Post-Genocide Rwanda* explores the ways in which cities have transformed through the "material politics of cohabitation," through which urban residents in Rwanda attempt to grapple with the "politics of reinhabiting the present" in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide (1). These cities, she argues, are "traumatized geographies" (1) where urban development requires attention and sensitivity to the history, culture, and trauma connected to place. Large-scale, top-down spatial plans fail to capture these material politics. Rather, she argues, "spatial repair" helps us understand "how repair and conciliation are enacted, and how political expression and belonging are reconfigured around place" (1). Tracing postgenocide planning initiatives across the country, Hudani explores the tension between the acts of erasure and reordering achieved through large-scale state-led planning programs—the "master plans"—and the range of "minor acts" being undertaken by urban residents who attempt to navigate the present through repair and reconciliation. What emerges is a much more complicated and nuanced understanding of what meaningful change in a postconflict city might look like despite the violence and erasure of large-scale urban transformation. Rooted in nuanced ethnographic research over the decades since the genocide, this book provides a deeply thoughtful and compelling account of life in postgenocide Rwanda—one that challenges the oversimplified narratives about clean and

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well-ordered city streets in international development discourse. Undoubtedly the concentrated trauma of Rwanda's genocide, its significance for the lived realities of urban residents, and the challenge of moving forward in its aftermath are particular to Rwanda and represent an unimaginably extreme circumstance of urban transformation. And yet, the notion of "master plans" and "minor acts" and Hudani's attention to the interpersonal needs and actions of urban residents provide us with new tools through which to understand the city.

The edited collection *Urban Transformations in Sierra Leone: Knowledge Co-Production and Partnerships for a Just City* highlights the kinds of urban transformation that might be possible if planners take Hudani's critiques and observations seriously. Growing out of a decade of work in the Sierra Leone Urban Research Center (SLURC), the contributions in this book explore the coproduction of research, planning, and practice that advances inclusive and sustainable urban transformation in African cities. The editors argue that Sierra Leone provides unique challenges, defined by the rapid pace of change in cities like Freetown. The research projects described in the book, which are drawn from the work of the SLURC and its research partners, ask how we manage that change in ways that are just and equitable, building new kinds of partnerships and developing new systems and processes through "rigorous inquiry and community engagement" (xxxiii). The contributors demonstrate the power of this form of community engagement in developing solutions that are tailored and responsive to the specific needs and realities of the city of Freetown—or any city. In doing so, they describe a method, not a plan, through which we can understand the city and, in the process, better plan its future. Divided into four main sections, the book seeks to center the well-being of those living in "informal settlements," shifting attention from the drivers of change to their impacts. The methodology of knowledge coproduction presents both challenges and opportunities, and the book's chapters represent an honest accounting of both, while also presenting a critical reflection on the role that higher education research institutions—particularly when organized around equitable partnerships—can play in shaping national and international development. The result is an unprecedentedly detailed and thoughtful accounting of applied academic and community-engaged research at work, narrated through a wide range of contributors and collaborators that reflect the full scope of the work and its impact. Here, the researchers have placed the "minor acts" Hudani describes at the center (or at least more noticeably and powerfully part of the unfolding) of planning processes.

The edited collection *Johannesburg from the Riverbanks: Navigating the Jukskei* further nuances this argument, highlighting how important the entry point is when we seek to understand a place. By centering the Jukskei River as a lens or frame through which to understand the history and culture of Johannesburg, we recast the city as intertwined with nature, rather than opposed to it. The contributors highlight the various ways in which the Jukskei refuses to fit our expectations of the relationship between nature and the urban landscape. It is neither unspoiled nor organized/manicured. It is wild and temperamental, polluted, and ugly. And yet, they demonstrate that it continues to play an

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important role in the lives of Johannesburg's residents, whether as a site of spirituality, recreation, or income. It also continues to connect the city to the wildlife of the "bush," which continues to assert itself through the wildlife that live within and along the river. As a place of complicated, layered, and often contradictory relationships, the river again highlights the importance of "minor acts" in shaping meaningful urban transformation—here via both human and nonhuman relationships. In the case of the Jukskei, however, we can see very clearly the ways in which the "master plans" Hudani describes are just as often subject to the "needs of capital," which sees both the natural environment and humans as "surplus" (x). The ability of urban residents to form relationships of care in spite of these dehumanizing forces is striking and further reinforces the call that this collection of texts makes to center the interpersonal relations that shape urban life and drive urban transformation, over and above the models of planners and development experts. Through their investigation of "riparian urbanism," the contributors also highlight the potential that truly interdisciplinary collaborations and conversations have for reshaping our approach to the city, here putting ecology and hydrology in conversation with history and sociology to think more carefully about what the river's future might be within the city in ways that are more realistic.

The Homeowner Ideology provides a different sort of challenge to the urban studies status quo. Backed by extensive quantitative and qualitative research, Muyeba seeks to understand why "the homeowner ideology"—the preference for private homeownership—remains the "tenure of preference" in many African cities, despite the economic realities that seem to militate against it in those cities. Muyeba argues that this economic irrationality is the result of a social production of "the homeowner ideology," reinforced through neoliberalism, the state, and the family. Throughout the book macro-level quantitative analysis is complemented and reinforced through carefully selected stories from four different African cities that highlight the striving of urban residents to achieve the goals of private homeownership and the costs of their pursuit for themselves, their families, and their communities. Ultimately, he argues, in prioritizing homeownership, international development organizations and state officials have, wittingly or unwittingly, produced the conditions in which "slums" flourish and sprawl, as rapidly expanding urban populations seek to secure their own piece of property within the city—a form of investment that has little return for the urban poor who are most frequently targeted by land and housing reform policies. Muyeba urges us to think more carefully about the ways that the ideologies and assumptions of neoclassical economics manifest in African cities and embrace the possibilities of alternative social and economic formations—in his case, of usufruct rights as the foundation of urban property holding—in shaping urban policy. He shows that, even if we use the same tools, a willingness to suspend assumptions and closely examine the evidence can produce conclusions that challenge the status quo and push us to think far more carefully about what urban transformation might look like in many African cities, both as a general methodology as well as in the specificities of case studies.

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In a collection of essays on "Urban Theory from the Global South," Simone (2023) urges us to stop searching for a new hegemonic order and to instead embrace disorder as both an urban reality and a scholarly practice. The books here—and the scholarly conversations and practices of which they are a part—do not intend to propose a new model or theory. Nor do they see themselves as branches off or exceptions to an "urban theory tree" (Hart and Marr 2023). They are both methodological and theoretical interventions that encourage us to embrace contradiction and contrast as a point of contact in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, an opportunity to work together to ask new questions and embrace new possible answers, and examples of what is possible when you look past the normative assumptions of perceived disorder to understand what is actually happening. As such, the work of these authors—and the work of this broader, interdisciplinary group of Urban Studies scholars—not only has significant implications for the way that we understand the past, present, and future of African cities, but also of cities and the practice of urban development more broadly.

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