RAPID URBANIZATION: THE CHALLENGE OF MEGA CITIES – TOWARD THE PRODUCTION OF LOCALITY

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ABSTRACT

The advent of mega cites is a phenomenon confronting all nations competing in the current wave of globalization. They have emerged as a result of rapid urbanization accompanying current economic shifts and serve to compound the problems associated with urban concentrations. Despite that South Africa has not yet an ‘official’ mega city, we are confronted by similar challenges to other States. However, in South Africa this is compounded by local exigencies, most specifically the legacy of apartheid with its spatial and demographic segregation.

Consequently a concomitant extreme poverty, inequity and underemployment complicates the problems that accompany mega city immigration, posing a significant challenge to the future development of SA cities. Yet, the relative smallness and our distinct spatial character afford opportunity to simultaneously manage and leverage urban growth toward socio-economic and developmental advantage. It is time for South Africa to become serious regarding the re-imagination and shaping of its spatial future.

The National Planning Commission’s National Development Plan’s vision for 2030 directly addresses these concerns, particularly with regard to national re-spatialisation through strategic Human Settlement. However, it is now two years since its publication and remarkably little progress has been made in
implementing it as a program of action. Whereas S A cities might still become mega conurbations, there is evidence its realization through of our own local production, demonstrating both capacity and political will to engage spatial transformation.

The task of effecting this at a national scale will require considerable capacity and creative innovation, particularly in reassessing and transforming existing [institutional] approaches to spatial design and delivery. The diversity of experience represented by the BRICS cohort could afford productive ground for collective cross-learning.

**KEYWORDS:**
Mega City, spatial transformation, / innovation, human development, infrastructure, city-region, local production, National Development Plan.
BACKGROUND

The turn of the century was marked by two significant but antagonistic forces which have had a singular impact on the shape and size of urban development in South Africa. On the one hand the advent of democracy and the prospect of a more equitable society within which difference might co-exist, and on the other, the advent of globalisation and its attendant drive for heightened capital accumulation and material consumption at particular nodes within a collection of highly networked cities across the globe.

The multiple opportunities afforded by cities renders them as attractors of human migration, with adverse effect for rural areas, peripheral towns and less developed countries. One of the main consequences of these forces has been the intense pressure and demand on cities to perform in ways for which they were not originally designed. This intensification has enforced rapid change in the shape and size of cities with the emergence of Mega Cities across the globe. The concomitant technological innovation and global connectivity is likely to permanently alter the nature and experience of human settlements, with adverse effects for a growing underclass, unless strategic interventions are affected timeously.

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Consequently, concomitant extreme poverty, inequity and underemployment complicates the problems that accompany Mega City immigration, posing a challenge to the future development of South African cities. Yet, the relative
smallness and our distinct spatial character afford opportunity to simultaneously manage and leverage urban growth toward socio-economic and rapid developmental advantage. It is time for South Africa to become serious regarding the re-imagination and shaping of its spatial future.

THE MEGA CITY AND THE SA CONDITION.

A megacity is conventionally defined as a metropolitan area with a total population in excess of ten million people. A megacity could be a single metropolitan area or two or more metropolitan areas that converge, with the terms conurbation, metropolis, and metroplex being applied to the latter. These mega cities are rapidly emerging as a consequence of global interconnectivity and its facilitation of rapid urban immigration.

Currently Africa has only two megacities; Cairo in Egypt and Lagos in Nigeria, comprising populations of 16 and 13mil. people respectively. South Africa has a population of approximately 50mil. people. Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban represent its three major metropolitan areas, however, with populations ranging between 3.5-4.5mil. people, they are still approximately only one third of the size of Africa’s mega cities.

**Fig. 01. Population statistics for SA cities – [Statistics SA; Census 2011]**

Despite this, South African cities still display most of the characteristics of megacities; informal settlements, homelessness, built environment sprawl and a disconnection with the rural, inequity and segregation, extreme congestion impacting on ease of movement and mobility, and significant environmental problems – pollution, service delivery problems [sanitation, water supply and refuse removal], conditions that are severely exacerbated by the spatial legacy of apartheid. This phenomenon is predominantly accountable to the rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation that we have experienced to in the past two decades and the current wave of civil unrest.
Whereas South African cities are not expected to reach the population size of the global leaders, an overreliance on measures of economic progress, as opposed to human development, has exacerbated certain contradictions that confront emerging countries such as ours. Increased poverty, inequality and underemployment have become the primary indicators or byproducts of globalization. Most notably urban immigration is rapidly causing rural areas to lose their economic and cultural base thereby contributing to a vicious cycle of accelerated urbanisation.

THE PRODUCTION OF LOCALITY.

In recognition of conditions such as this, the Government of South Africa established the National Planning Commission [NPC] to undertake research and position a National Development Plan [NDP] – a vision for 2030 to identify and guide critical development. Chapter 8 of this document addresses the issue of the transformation of human settlements. Representing the most ambitious and coherent policy statement to come out of post apartheid SA, despite any imperfections, the NDP identifies the importance and the role of space as a socio-physical phenomenon in shaping and informing the experience of citizen's lives. Most particularly it identifies this as a national problem that requires macro intervention to afford a transformed spatial economy for the country.

The value of urban agglomerations, as places of economic and livelihood opportunity, is recognized as fundamental in the dislocation of rural areas, and the consequent challenge this has brought to agricultural production and national food security. Consequently, the prospect of the NDP must be considered in the face of a culture of inferior spatial planning discourse and the associated inability of local governments to deliver and implement policy. Furthermore, whilst the NDP represents a long-term spatial project, one of its primary tasks is to identify the absolute non-negotiables that will ensure its temporal rollout.
In his publication *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai devotes a chapter to the *Production of Locality*. In his critique of the modern project Appadurai elevates the cultural, as contextual and relational practice, as the critical dimensions of human action, above those of the spatial and the scalar. The shape and size of things becomes subservient to the flows and connections necessary to structure human existence. Complementing this sentiment, Maliq Simone has argued – *For the City Yet to Come*, opining for a privileging of the socius over the physical. Implicit is a proposition that the *building of community* should precede that of the building physical fabric. Where community pre-exists, it should form the basis for interpreting and implementing the NDP.

This approach suggests that we avoid the ‘best practice’ one size fits all approach to problem solving and engage in a process of local production whereby our own history, memory and existing situation become critical informers of policy interpretation and implementation. Solutions should be grounded and not imposed.

**SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION: TOWARD SPATIAL RECONFIGURATION**

What seems lacking from discourse around the Mega City is interrogation of its spatial form. This consideration is fundamental to the South African condition where spatial dislocation negatively impacts on both economic and human development. The rise of informality and the loss of coherency in Mega City environments can be directly associated with the failure of city form to respond transformatively. Shape and size are interconnected and their separation has negative consequences for sustainability and inclusivity in urban growth.

In the absence of concomitant spatial questioning, a process of systemic improvement, as opposed to systemic innovation, drives urban development. In achieving innovation we require a reconceptualisation of the spatial economy of
human settlement predicated on the revisioning of the built environment as an integrative terrain or fieldwork of interconnectivity; that is – urban form as infrastructure fabric and not a series of intensifications connected by transport routes.

To reimagine a different form of conurbation as a horizon of interconnectivity, rather than a hierarchy of places? This requires a moment of interpretation which resides in spatial literacy, and not simply in the application of conventional technical and economic planning skills.

SOME EXPERIMENTAL POTENTIAL IN THE SA LANDSCAPE; THREE INTERRELATED SPATIAL PROJECTS:

01. Gauteng: City-Region / Johannesburg-Ekhurleni-Tswane*[urban morphology]

Fig. 02. Proposed Gauteng City Region [GCRO; 2013]

In South Africa, the potential of its densest and richest province, Gauteng, to establish within itself a city-region conurbation renders it as an emerging South African situation whereby a Mega City might ‘come into being’ though design intent. Predicated on re-territorialisation of separate local areas, it proposes a pro-active response to rapid urbanization, whereby government leads on the ground⁴. This pro-action is aligned with the NDP and could support a cross-integrative approach to urban reformation. Capable of comfortably enmeshing competing municipal areas with diverse but segregated functions, its innovative spatial transformation would integrate transport and public space, living and working, learning and recreating and etc. to become productively entangled at the scale of a region. Establishing ground for more settlement coherence, it could affect human interrelations and the necessary security for productive
existence, particularly with respect to abandoned mining sites, disused industrial zones and underproductive agricultural and.

This type of intervention relies on Terrain Innovation Modelling [TIM] to reconfigure terrain vi, enabling potential for multiple individual interventions to cohere through their morphologic connectivity. When exercised through systemic innovation [as opposed to systemic improvement] this type of thinking and making could be exercised at a national scale. One necessity will be the evolution of new institutional relations as frameworks for expediting and managing terrain configuration, and thereby potentially reimagining the nation as fieldwork of difference, as opposed to separate geographically bound provinces competing with each other.

The Gauteng Province’s leadership in this field is intimately associated with its economic power. In replicating this, our other regions require economic support, intellectual leadership and spatial innovation, for it is only through the creative translation of policy into built form and new institutions that peoples’ lives become transformed.

02. Western Cape: Township / Khayelitsha – VPUU [urban typo-morphology]

The Violence Protection through Urban Upgrading [VPUU] project in Khayelitsha vii, South Africa’s second largest township after Soweto in Gauteng, represents an attempt at system innovation through co-production. An alignment exists between the City of Cape Town [CoCT] as local government, the German Aid Agency - KfW as foreign donor and the Khayelitsha Development Forum [KDF] as community representation. Working at the neglected wasteland of the townships interstices, the project seeks to reinforce and develop community through collective action operating across five interrelated developmental measures;
1. Infrastructure development [as a means of establishing safe places];

2. Social development [in support of victims of violence and future victimhood];

3. Institutional development [to manage local community delivery of services, training and mentoring];

4. Community participation [through Community Action Plans [CAP’s] to evolve partnerships in development between stakeholders]; and

5. Knowledge management [for monitoring and evaluation with the purpose of capacity building and experience sharing].

The VPUU project has achieved considerable success and recognition for its integrative approach to urban development and interventive upgrade. This community action based model has demonstrated productive capacity in building community through infrastructure delivery. Currently it is being replicated in other townships across Cape Town, to provide a viable alternative to the conventional hierarchic disciplinary and sector driven approach. In establishing a horizon of interconnectivity it has enabled equitable networking between a range of stakeholders who might previously have been marginalized or excluded.

**Fig. 03. Violence Protection through Urban Upgrade [VPUU], Khayelitsha -[SUN; 2012]**

Its success is predicated on the pre-existence of community structures [KDF] which have the capacity to negotiate with the power of government and financial sectors. Its careful urban renewal approach is locally grounded and fosters resilience and strengthens community interaction with direct benefit for inclusivity and longer term sustainability. This form of urban development may
be construed as typo-morphologic in that its form transcends the type/structure divide, effecting hybrid innovations that are highly situated and specific to a particular space-time conjunction.

03. Johannesburg: Social Housing Block/ JHC [urban typology]

The Johannesburg Housing Company [JHC] was established in 1995. One of its primary intentions was to engage the transitionary social flux of the post-apartheid moment in order to support urban inclusivity through the development of viable inner city social housing. Through the identification of abandoned sites and buildings, a process of careful urban renewal has introduced 4,000 low income rental units into Johannesburg's inner city. In addition to re-presencing the absence of previously marginalized communities, this project has increased density and aided economic development by attracting additional investment and transforming blighted areas whilst boosting property value. Reliance on building conversions and slum clean-ups has promoted entrepreneurial activity and produced a range of experimental projects that demonstrate design innovation as well as socio-economic sustainability.

JHC’s track record has ensured sustained public private investment resulting in new partnerships between government and civil society. The Social Housing Institute [SHI] provides a mechanism through which to mediate conflict whilst enabling local communities to flourish through sponsoring social negotiation around common interest.

Fig. 04. Brickfields Social Housing intervention, Johannesburg Housing Company [JHC; 2009]

This model of urban intervention privileges the production of individual building complexes as mixed-use and self-regulating hybrids. This typologic approach
supports the necessary ‘re-writing of architectural type’ as a direct reflection of the transformation of society and urban space.

These three approaches demonstrate projects that represent urban experiments expedited under the rubric of spatial transformation in post apartheid South Africa. Not subscribing to any meta-approach to policy interpretation and implementation, they may be considered as catalytic experiments whose cumulative experience is capable of contributing valuable knowledge in the research and development [R&D] required to translate the NDP into action plans. Furthermore, their value lays in the demonstration of both a capacity to apply policy change and innovatively integrate across traditional divides, as well as to concretising the reality of democratic practice in South Africa in fulfillment of our constitutional responsibilities.

Some Conclusions

In the absence of a critically transformed conception of urban development, the advent of the Mega City in South Africa will emerge from the predominant global model. Privileging capital accumulation over human development, it will most likely continue to reinforce the excessive disparities between rich and poor, ghetto-ising them to the periphery and excluding them from ordinary practices in everyday life. This form of development will exacerbate civil unrest, reinforce the urban-rural divide and undermine human and environmental sustainability. In contesting the inevitable, South Africa needs to reposition space as a medium in socio-economic development and re-imagine a transformed political economy for its national reconfiguration, aligned to the principles of democracy and the freedom charter.

The National Development Plan and South Africa’s emphasis and investment in infrastructure development could provide the impetus for such a shift. However,
the prerequisite to its success will require new institutional instruments and critical agency in order to counter the threat to established practices.

What is the role of city making in transforming the spatial legacy of apartheid and achieving a transformed territory that integrates, as opposed to segregates? How can we productively engage the reality of the Mega City whilst continuing to participate in the global economy? Whereas the National Development Plan’s vision for 2030 addresses these concerns, it is now two years since its inception and remarkably little progress has been made in implementing it as a program of action. Given the history of the country’s inability to translate policy into action plan, South African ‘cities yet to come’ might indeed become vast, sprawling mega conurbations.

These experiments demonstrate the value of alternative institutional approaches, ones that consciously integrate sectorial difference through the promotion of creative human agency. This shift is considered as a precondition in genuinely re-imagining new spatial arrangements grounded in critical alternatives within the necessary interpretation of the NDP?

The task of affecting this at a national scale will require considerable capacity and creative innovation, particularly in reassessing and transforming existing [institutional] approaches to spatial design and delivery in the built environment. In shifting from a technocratic toward a more humane process, social activism can become the means for attaining inclusive and sustainable development. Whereas South Africa has time on its hand, the diversity and experience represented by the BRICS nation cohort could afford productive ground for sharing across nations.

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vii  isiXhosa – translates as: ‘new home’