Chapter 31

The Politics of Urban Intersection: Materials, Affect, Bodies

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Coming To Deal

They show up, although they are not sure quite why; still with a sense of necessity – activists, city councilors, local thugs, entrepreneurs, fixers, religious figures, NGO workers, and some concerned citizens. In the back banquet hall of an old restaurant food and drinks are served, and there is no real agenda. It is late, and no one knows quite what the outcome will be. But a deal will be hammered out; no one will like it very much; no one knows quite how it will be enforced or what the long-term implications will be. It is likely people will return soon, perhaps not here, but to some other fairly anonymous place that everyone knows. Still, it is an occasion when no particular expertise or authority prevails; there are openings to make things happen across a landscape of gridlock, big money, and destitution.

These are gatherings that take place across many cities of the world; usually at off-hours and usually under somewhat vague pretenses and aspirations. Neverthe-less, it is an urban politics at work, engaged in the arduous task of bringing some kind of articulation to increasingly divergent policy frameworks, administrative apparatuses, money streams, and authority figures that intertwine at abstract levels but whose mechanics of interdependency are too often opaque within day-to-day routines of navigating and governing cities.

Competencies and jurisdictions are often demarcated and institutionalized in ways that entail clear limits to what any given agency, organization, or company is entitled and available to do. Therefore, projects and programs that require the application of many different kinds of entities at various times often require admin-istratively complex negotiations and scheduling pertaining to the way these entities work together and apply their abilities to a particular site of intervention.

Organizational structures tend to emphasize the efficient replication of responses through standardization. For what they do has to be applied to many different kinds of clients and situations. So those who can offer, for example, the ability to put together construction crews, cartage, waste removal, cut-rate overtime, supplementary finance, political connections, and media spin in one, on the surface, seamless package are vital to municipal administrations, and have to be rewarded in ways that are often difficult to accommodate within prevailing rules and norms.

Urban heterogeneity is not simply a diverse composition of readily discernible income levels, life styles, aspirations, and settlement histories. Almost all the major cities of the global south continue to be replete with districts where different capacities, inclinations, purchasing power, and orientations are thoroughly intertwined in dense proximity. Here, precise categorizations of what people are – their class backgrounds, their ways of making decisions and using available resources – are highly under-coded.

Even when classifications are generated in well-elaborated local vernaculars, these tend to continuously change – so it is not clear who is poor and what criteria constitute the poor, or middle class, for there are prolific gradations. This relative absence of certain categorization tends to make people more willing to pay attention to each other, to take certain risks in their affiliation, and to try out various ways of using local spaces. From this willingness stem a plurality of local economies – i.e. different scales at which things are made, distributed and sold – from furniture, textiles, foodstuffs, building materials, and household items. Different potentialities of consumption are concretized through the ability to access different quantities of goods and services within a district. This doesn't mean that everyone necessarily gets along or talks to each other. It is not a social economy based on easy reciprocities and well-honed collaboration. Rather, it stems from often highly opportunistic maneuvers that use the very tensions incumbent in such heterogeneity to continuously remake temporary accords, deals, and trade-offs that remake the local built and social environment, and where the remaking precipitates new tensions and accommodations.

This ability to mobilize certain potentialities inherent in the heterogeneity of the city is usually incumbent in those operations that are able to manipulate the networked effects that scale enables. Yet frequently, such operations emerge from highly localized yet intensive positions within specific sectors or neighborhoods that capitalize on apparently incommensurable relations – i.e., the intersection of social identities, functions, and domains that usually wouldn't be expected to work together. So deals that can connect, for example, religious leaders, gangsters, financiers, professionals, journeymen, and civic associations begin to cover a lot of ground and spread out across other territories. While big players such as multinational consultancy firms, technicians, contractors, and property developers may have the size and coverage to deliver unrivaled efficiencies, they may not have sufficient local knowledge to expedite getting things done.

Between What Is and What Is Not: Navigating Urban Politics

In Africa, ordinary citizens have a major role producing the built environment, particularly those who take over pre-existing buildings and transform them to suit the

needs of emerging and underserved communities. These "projects" emphasize agency and desire and lend voice to multiple, overlapping languages – of politics, aesthetics, irony, and hope. This does not minimize the difficulty of living in spaces stripped of even the most basic amenities, hostages to sewage and detritus, state violence or extreme divides of wealth and power. Yet, they highlight the way that notions of "regularity" and "tenure" – basic elements of stabilization and coherence – are enacted and secured through a highly mobile interrelationships between labor, the spaces that house it, and the activities and sites residents depend upon for their livelihood. Inhabitation does not mean a clear separating out of work and home, of marketing and producing, of clear demarcations among various modalities of social exchange.

At the same time in many African cities, as indicated before, it is often not clear who residents "really" are. The relationships that produce the conditions of their existence are increasingly difficult to trace and account for. Hundreds of new words and gestures appear in cities on a weekly basis. "Time zones" proliferate – where some individuals live literally in the end of days (the Apocalypse), others in some futuristic warp, and still others in an endless present of putting bread on the table. Actions can be excessively generous or cruel without apparent reasons, as is the coupling of bodies and materials. The interrelationships of these conditions give rise to urban actors to which the usual attributions perhaps make little sense.

All of these intersections of varying usages of space and materials within intense proximity cannot be apprehended – in the sense of both being understood and being captured – by prevailing frameworks of law or state policy. But they, nevertheless, are subject to such apparatuses, fall under their purview, and are compelled to have some kind of a relationship with them. The everyday tensions and challenges that arise from the elements of these intersections working or not working together are managed largely by the improvised mechanisms necessary to deal with constantly shifting dilemmas.

At times, dilemmas are simply lived out in highly fractured performances, where residents dramatize the inability to be discernible subjects or citizens of any kind. Take the city of Kinshasa, widely expected to grow from its estimated population of 10 million to become Africa's largest city in the next 20 years. Its annual budget of US$ 23 million means that almost nothing can be done – no capital investment, no municipal services. Personal effort almost alone is the vehicle to survival.

Kinois live between veracity and exaggeration, the empirical and the baroque. Like everywhere, many topics are not easily talked about, and allusion and euphemism abound. But there is also a pervasive matter-of-factness and precision in people's speech. A woman will quickly arrive at the number of loaves of bread she has sold in the past six months; a resident in Bayamu will point out the overcrowded tenements on a random street and tell you the various prices of the rooms without hesitation. Minute details are invoked with great confidence. Whether the content of the assertions are really true is not the point here. Rather it is the attention to detail. How many sticks of cigarettes did a child street vendor sell on a particular night on a particular block in comparison with the 10 other kids working the same turf? How many glasses of whiskey did the commanding police officer buy the night before for the relatives of the *chef du quartier*? What is the exact time the manager

of the warehouse for the beer company Primus arrived at the house of the sister of the head of state?

A drug wholesaler in Matete, in a matter of 15 minutes, identifies the different routes that heroin, cocaine, and amphetamines enter the city, with an outline of the prices entailed in the many transactions along the way. He can recite the consumption patterns of each of his 657 clients and generates a rapid analysis of exactly how his prices have fluctuated according to different supply trajectories over the past three years, as well as the full names of hundreds of people associated with the various policing authorities he has had to pay off.

All of the details are recited without emotion or hesitation, as if whatever is being spoken about is fully within the natural order of things and could have easily been spoken about with equivalent authority by anyone else. Everything that occurs may somehow be important, if not now, then later on. In a city of few luxuries, and where survival requires constant decisions about what is really important in the hundreds of conversations, events, and words that surround the individual on a daily basis, this almost promiscuous attention to the mundane would seem to be impractical, if not impossible. In a city of incessant trickery, where everyone is trying to take some advantage of each other, it would seem more rational for people to ignore much of what is going on and focus on what really matters – i.e. to the specific details of their current situation. But where individuals are implicated in the lives of both so many known and unknown others, and where it difficult to get a handle on what is likely to take place in the very immediate future, this kind of paying attention is a constant means of hedging one's bets. It is a way of finding new angles to earn money, and get information and opportunity.

This approach to the empirical, of taking into account the smallest details of transactions of all kinds, makes it possible for individuals to also act as authorities in many matters. It is the basis from which people can speak to various situations, on the street, in the bus, bar, or office so as to possibly shape the outcome. In this way they do not leave themselves vulnerable to the impact of other people's actions. It provides them with a basis to intervene in situations that on the surface would not seem to be their "business" or concern. This is not the act of nosey arrogance, but stems more from the uncertainty as to what one's "business" really is, after all. For the boundaries between matters that concern an individual directly and those that may have only a tangential relevance are often fuzzy. No matter how distant they might be, it is often not clear what events will come back to haunt one. And so it is often better to be proactive in advance – not with the speech of opinion but with "facts," which in the end may be nothing more than speculation rendered with cold calculation.

At the same time, Kinshasa is renowned for being a city of fakery and exaggeration. Despite the capacities for resilient interactions with others, for changing gears, and finding new opportunities in new affiliations and scenarios, the daily grind for most Kinois is a repetitive search for small money, for drinking beer, and going to church. The details are banal and there is not much basis to make claims for anything else. The precariousness of existence would seem to indicate an overarching need to be precise, to keep things focused and functional. But this is where the exaggeration kicks in. What could be expressed in a simple phrase becomes a highly decorated discourse full of ironies and *double entendre*. The movements of the body,

particularly the hips and the buttocks, during dance, exaltation, and everyday meandering are accentuated to the obscene.

Music is everywhere, and is perhaps the one constant of Kinois life. Rooted in the rumba, it changes only slightly as it becomes the key instrument of what residents have in common. Thus, it is the backdrop against which they can safely display a sense of singularity and express the raw desire to exceed whatever the individual experiences themselves to be. For in the daily grind of looking for money, of dealing with hundreds of others where words must be chosen carefully, of boarding over-crowded vans, and carving out small spaces of safety and health, individuals are always having to "rub shoulders" with others, always having to signal that one knows one's place, even if there are no clear maps to refer to. And so always the obverse is not far away in this practice, the sense that all of these bodies in close proximity – barely arranged and activated in ways that provide a functional separa-tion, a set of functional roles and responsibilities – could converge in some wild assemblage.

Thus the exaggeration of the body and speech – particularly the exaggeration of the sexual – becomes the mechanism to handle a kind of permanent state of excita-tion that the city by its very definition offers. When the reproduction of family life becomes increasingly difficult, when having a chance in life means having to leave the country and go somewhere else, and when working hard at school or work promises almost nothing, there are few mechanisms to counter individual desires to simply abandon the familiar forms of selfhood and belonging. At the same time, the dangers of physical desire are well known. The seemingly endless stories of jealousy and witchcraft, the rampant problems of sexual abuse and HIV, and the long history of the use of physical violence in the city on the part of authorities of all kinds, make the expression of desire dangerous. So the often baroque forms that personal expression assumes, particularly in front of the music, become a way of dealing with this dilemma, but in a way that has little to do with personal efficacy, talent, or skill.

For example, Werrason, aka "King of the Forest", remains Kinshasa's foremost band leader – a position he has maintained now for over a decade. By all conven-tional aesthetic parameters, Werrason cannot really play musical instruments, dance, or sing – yet he is at the top. While there is a long history that can be told about this, what Werrason's voice and words convey (when he actually does use them, which is increasingly less frequent as he turns over much of the work to the sup-porting cast) is the rawness of that expression of desire, full of its complications, full of its burdens. Yet, it remains a powerful invocation of something that cannot be captured or tamed, something that cannot be made into aesthetics, even if the image of Werrason dominates all kinds of advertisements. It is an expression that ends up counting for a lot in Kinshasa because it can't be counted. It can't be subsumed as a social event or a pure uninhibited cry for life. Rather, it is full of the detritus of the city, and yet it doesn't care, it proceeds to act as if there is nothing in its way.

Keeping the City in Line?

Despite the precarious conditions under which the majority of urban residents in Africa live, the urban fabric is always changing, driven by the relative lack of

"cemented" trajectories and networks of relations among materials, people, events, and space. This is a process partly driven by a complex municipal politics of everyday regulation, where different actors who share communities, quarters, or districts attempt to work out incessantly troublesome connections between land, housing, services, and livelihood that are not held in any stable and consistent relationship with each other (Magnusson, 2006). Cities must continuously rework how people, things, infrastructures, languages, and images are to be intersected and pieced together. These are efforts that self-conscious planning may provide representations of but which are generated by maximizing the vast potentials within the city itself – potentials for relations among all kinds of things for which there exist no prior maps, inclinations, or even apparent possibilities.

So called modern cities have always taken the energies, experiments, and styles of their different human and non-human inhabitants and "contracted" them, both in the sense of truncating these practices and establishing contractual relationships defining the rights and responsibilities of urban citizens. This "contraction" may provide urban actors with new opportunities for looking, understanding, and organizing themselves. It may provide a framework for how to pay attention to all that goes on in the city and for understanding what it is possible to do and how to do it. But it also takes from them sensibilities, inclinations, and a vast set of provisional "accomplishments" for working with others and using the city and "repackages" them in ways that are then difficult to recognize and be reclaimed as their own.

Therefore we are left with the seemingly endless conundrum of development paradigms where governing cities is the issue of the political management of complex trade-offs that must be made by all cities in a context of sometimes painful global exposure. The trade-offs concern to what extent, for example, fiscal soundness takes precedence over the equitable delivery of urban services, or the extent to which managerial proficiency supersedes expanded popular participation in decision-making. The critical issue is how these trade-offs are defined? Who is involved in negotiating them? What are the appropriate forms of community organization and mobilization in a context where urban government is increasingly less capable of meeting the demands of all citizens? How does one combine, relate, and balance different forms of participation, negotiation, contestation, and partnership to ensure vibrant politics and constructive collaboration to solve real problems. Part of the problem is that not enough attention is paid to the hundreds of small deals, small transactions, and provisional accommodations worked out in backroom banquet halls, behind food stalls in night markets, in glitzy rundown casinos, and in the courtyards of neighborhood mosques – all places where different claims, tactics, and senses of things intersect.

This process of intersection doesn't necessarily mean that everyone has to take each other into consideration, has to meld their actions into some kind of hybrid way of doing things that incorporates bit and pieces of the actions and interests of everyone. Part of every intersection is the prospect that things will not come together and take something from each other; rather that some fundamental divides and impossibilities of translation will remain. The idea of local intersection among heterogeneous actors, materials, and affect here means that accommodations – in the form of giving rise to new consensually determined ways of speaking, relating,

deciding, distributing, sharing, and so forth – do not necessarily take place. This absence doesn't mean that people are not paying attention to each other or taking each other seriously, but that the differences of others are not experienced as conditions necessitating some kind of challenge or motivation for any particular group to now enact their lives in a different manner.

Instead there is the simultaneous performance of ways of doing things that have no obvious concurrence or fit. In "neighborhoods" of actions and styles that appear to operate at cross-purposes, it is these very cross-purposes that provide a concrete manifestation of the different things that can be done and imagined in any given place. It is a materialization of different possibilities, different routes in and out toward the rest of the city; it is a reiteration of the possibility that specific prospects can be pursued by individuals and groups without them being perceived as threats and competition to others and that their effectiveness need not be predicated on having to somehow appeal to or subsume what others are doing.

Spaces of Intersection

Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) has stated that contemporary political existence shifts its focus from sovereignty to intersection. Sovereignty was a means of completion, of finishing the identity of territories and subjects – as something excessive to identities in that it frees them from the persistent mundane flows of continuous interaction that necessarily destabilizes and renders incomplete any version or articulation of identity, and converts them into an immutable reference. Intersection, on the other hand, refers to an incessant process of acting without a model, and is thus an environment also in the making. Instead of consolidating clearly discernible and bounded territories as platforms of action and interaction, there is a process of "spacing out," of generating, enfolding, and extending space in which mapping is always behind, struggling to "catch up."

At one level, both northern and southern cities appear to become more cosmopolitan – i.e. settings for the accelerated incorporation of cultural and economic diversity. But cosmopolitanism, to a large extent, implies the intersection or concordance of established identities, cultural values, and so forth. What is instead taking place, to use Agamben's (1995) language, is a progressive "exodusing" from such distinct positions – where residents who are both citizens and strangers, indigenes and migrants, are displaced from clearly elaborated identities.

The ramifications of such displacement are substantially different for African and northern cities even if in fundamental ways they are experiencing a "common moment." The space for the insertion of Africans into northern cities is opened up by the progressive abandonment of industrial and low-paid service jobs by a declining population base who can afford the risk to realign themselves to the uncertain terrain of an expanding "new economy." As Sassen (2003) has well documented, this new economy, in its need for the proximity of differentiated skills, knowledge bases, and experiences, engenders complex transactions requiring an expansion of low-skilled services. In most African cities, migration is triggered largely by the inability of cities to absorb a slow but discernible increase in a skilled urban population and the inability to expand economies due to a long-term shortage of investments in human capital and industry.

While remittances may constitute an increasingly important form of reinvestment, the more an African presence is spread across and instituted in northern cities, despite the efforts made to curtail immigration, the less those remittances will mean in terms of potential "development resources." Rather, remittances will increasingly serve as a kind of welfare allotment to households "left" behind. On the other hand, the more that urban Africa entrenches itself elsewhere and the more informal political rule and economic dynamics become at home, the more African cities may serve as contexts for the triggering and steering of transnational illicit economies.

Yet, if one looks at the old "African quarters" of the continent's major cities, such as New Bell in Douala, Ikeja in Lagos, Treichville in Abidjan – all mixtures of old money, ambiguous entrepreneurship, migration, and worn but still viable infrastructure – they continue to "work" in many ways. They embody a wide range of capacities to operate in many places at once and accommodate many different types of people and activities at the same time. This accommodation, despite all the polarization taking place in cities, remains a living capacity.

Intersecting agents seek to continuously maintain a capacity to mobilize whatever is available in order to access new opportunities and vantage points, as well as ways of manifesting themselves. As such, these worlds exist as fundamental spaces of argument – i.e. of political disputation where distances among groups who remain largely strangers to each other are activated and maintained for their productive capacities, rather than simply to reiterate differentiation.
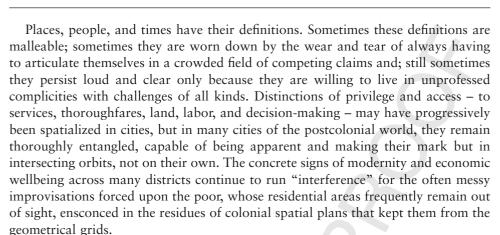
Living Architectures

Pheng Cheah (2003) has written about the "spectral nationality" that hangs over and haunts peoples of the postcolony. That no matter how the course of nationhood in much of the global south has found itself dissipated and fractured by war, indebtedness, exploitation, or nearly comprehensive incorporation in the circuitries of global capital, a dream-image of a way of life whereby a people exceeds the particularities of their local circumstances and relations is concretized in and through the locus of nationality. Indeed, the challenge of cities remains how to draw lines between different ways of doing things, different walks of life.

Too often architecture has deployed various built environments as registers of fear, of keeping people in a certain line and state of hesitancy. The emphasis has been on "strange attractors" such as monuments, shopping malls, skylines, and big projects that often turn into "dead zones" – making claims on space that rule out a wide range of uses.

What, then, does a daily living architecture point to? Cities are rambunctious in the contrarian inclinations of their inhabitants – their bravado and overwrought caution, their furtive impatience and hard-fought stabilities. These inclinations make their mark on the built environment and provide varied opportunities for the management of decay, repair, and regeneration. The concrete demonstrations of those who save for years, who spend profusely, who consolidate place and position, who circulate through prolific versions of renewal and opportunity, elaborate a field of adjustments and compensations, an intricate economy of calibration where households, plots, enterprises, associations, and networks carve out niches that are partially folded into each other – even if only barely.

Places, people, and times have their definitions. Sometimes these definitions are malleable; sometimes they are worn down by the wear and tear of always having to articulate themselves in a crowded field of competing claims and; still sometimes they persist loud and clear only because they are willing to live in unprofessed complicities with challenges of all kinds. Distinctions of privilege and access – to services, thoroughfares, land, labor, and decision-making – may have progressively been spatialized in cities, but in many cities of the postcolonial world, they remain thoroughly entangled, capable of being apparent and making their mark but in intersecting orbits, not on their own. The concrete signs of modernity and economic wellbeing across many districts continue to run "interference" for the often messy improvisations forced upon the poor, whose residential areas frequently remain out of sight, ensconced in the residues of colonial spatial plans that kept them from the geometrical grids.

Building lines, plot size, distribution points, service reticulations continue to be systematically violated – sometimes in the interest of greed – but more often as mechanisms to maintain the viability of diverse kinds of residencies in close proximity. Equations that link training to skill, skill to occupation, occupation to set modalities of entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship to specific forms of spatial encapsulation can themselves be thoroughly mixed up. Districts known for furniture production, auto repair and parts, printing, floral decoration, textiles, or ceramics usually contain a wide range of plant sizes, technologies, specializations, and degrees of formal and informal organization. There are many venues and instances of collaboration and clustering, as there are differentiated approaches and competition. Still, even under the rubric of a common sector, these activities are difficult to organize as associations, chambers, or unions – subsumed to a formalized set of business practices and representations.

This doesn't mean that rationalizations of various kinds aren't necessary. Legality, land use planning, and spatial regulation can be important instruments to sustain economic and social vitality – but usually only as a means of mediating among different ways of doing things, of drawing plausible lines of connection and mutual responsibility, rather than as the imposition of order and imagination. They can become a means for the diverse capacities and practices within districts to become more visible to each other – take each other into consideration and make productive use of their respective knowledge and potentials. These instruments then are an aid to the ways in which such urban districts have largely governed themselves in the past – i.e. through maintaining navigable thresholds and compelling economic motivations for different kinds of residents to be continuously involved in each others lives.

The seemingly wide divergences between contemporary economic spaces – between traditional markets and hypermarkets, shopping malls and streets full of small shops and stalls – poses many challenges to how such lines of articulation and mutual implication can be drawn. Big projects cast long and ominous shadows over vast numbers of small enterprises and labor markets even as they promise to accelerate new job creation. Different temporalities are involved, and so the cost savings and efficiencies anticipated by expanded scale also tend to flatten the intricate gradations once available to residents in terms of how they balanced their management of shelter, education, mobility, proximity to work and social support, opportunistic

chances, and household consumption; how they "paced" themselves over time and calculated what kind of time they had to work with.

These gradations didn't so much stand alone as class positions or characteristics of neighborhoods, but were more provisional markers that provided clues for how households, associations, and networks might collaborate, how they would use available resources of all kinds. So the challenge is how to redraw the lines of connection. Here the day-to-day struggles of municipal politics remain critical. This means finding fiscal formulas to give different economic scales and residential possibilities their own space; even if it centers on mandating cross-subsidies that tie the enhanced profitability of large-scale property development to the continuous renewal of local economies across the city which themselves fight for potentials of articulation in different versions of the "large scale."

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