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Introduction: urban presence and uncertain futures in African cities

Michael Keith with Andreza Aruska de Souza Santos

> Distance is not a safety zone but a field of tension.
>
> Theodor Adorno (*Minima Moralia*)

In their collection *Africa's urban revolution* Sue Parnell and Edgar Pieterse argue that, 'as the continent that will be disproportionately shaped by the way in which society thinks about cities, Africa must assume an increasingly central position in the urban imaginary of theorists and practitioners'. They suggest that African cities demonstrate rapidly growing agglomerations of building and dwelling but that 'most African countries are not able to capitalise on this demographic shift because urban residents are structurally trapped in profoundly unhealthy conditions that impact negatively on productivity, economic efficiencies and market expansion' (Parnell and Pieterse, 2014: 15).

At the heart of this assertion is the sense that as cities grow they mobilise vast resources of investment and major structural changes to the built environment in terms of systems of transport, drainage, sewage and electrification systems, places to work and places to live. Urban transformations disrupt and reconstruct the relationship between humanity and nature, disturbing existing ecosystems and generating new levels of carbon emission, domestic and industrial sources of (rarely low-carbon) energy. But these changes are not material alone. They reconfigure the ways in which cities choose (for better and for worse) to govern their citizens, denizens and occasional dwellers. Their built forms also assume an agency

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of their own. Before they are constructed, land is often cleared, people displaced, real estate traded. Sacrifices and interventions in the present day are frequently justified in terms of long- or medium-term futures. Attempts to rationalise the city are also commonly attempts to tame it, to control its morphology and to optimise its demography. And the people who live in cities appropriate these interventions. Both material infrastructures and the logistics that link them are mediated by the histories that weigh on the present, the deep cultures of the everyday and the experimental and inventive ways in which those who live in cities do not always choose to behave in the ways they are meant to.

Positioning questions of critical distance

These combinations of cultural practice of vernacular skills and crafts, international forms of professional and scientific knowledge and emergent landscapes of built environment foreground the city as a space of never-ending mutation. Nowhere is this combination of the material and the cultural more urgently demonstrated than in contemporary Africa, the part of the globe witnessing the most rapid urbanisation as the third decade of the twenty-first century begins. In this collection we have brought together a series of interventions in the study of African cities that address both academic debates and a more general audience in city halls, civil society and engaged communities. It explores practically how African cities might consider their futures more effectively. Each of the chapters in turn examines the sense in which the rapid growth of African cities reconfigures the relationship between urban social life and the built environment of housing, energy, transport, waste and transport infrastructures.

The authors share a rooting in the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s Urban Transformations programme.[1] One element of the programme involved a partnership between scholars in Africa and the UK with support from both the ESRC and the South African National Research Foundation in association with the (South African) Human Sciences Research Council. The volume is the result of that collective endeavour to link researchers across international borders to think about the challenges confronting African cities. All members of the endeavour were obliged to commit to work that was:

- *Interdisciplinary*, in particular recognising the combinations of culture, craft and science in the shaping of the city, an imperative to bring

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together the strengths of the social sciences in working with both the natural sciences and the humanities.

- *Working across urban professional interests* to address policy communities and city stakeholders.
- *Multi-scalar*, recognising the challenges of geographical scale that structure the contemporary city globally, from the renewed interest in neighbourhood studies to the complex formations of the megacity.
- *Internationally comparative*, acknowledging that urban studies have moved beyond both a celebration of the iconic urban experiences of the global north and a straightforward valorisation of scholarship of the global south.
- *Future oriented*, working not only from the projection of past trends but also through an analytical focus on the challenges of the emergent city.

All of the authors of the volume have shaped their work to address these criteria. But the practices of working across borders is rarely straightforward: borders of training, borders of profession, borders of knowing – all generate communities of interest and boundaries of separation that sometimes reinforce and sometimes undermine borders of geography and history. And so the collection starts by asking two fundamental questions. To what extent does the interdisciplinary field of urban studies imply a 'synthesis' of forms of knowledge that can help us understand how the city works, how to 'see like a city' in twenty-first-century Africa? Or are different approaches creating exchanges and comparisons of ways of making the world visible through very different lenses that are fundamentally incommensurable?

As we collected and curated this collection, these questions in turn raised a series of three secondary issues that are provoked by the architecture of our endeavour, addressing in turn the nature of the interdisciplinary in urban studies, the practices and ethics of research and the dominant paradigms of social science research on cities.

In terms of the *nature of interdisciplinarity in urban studies*, the collection intervenes to suggest that it is imperative to move beyond pious appeals for scholars of different backgrounds to work together. Instead it considers a more contentious domain. The collection addresses how different forms of knowledge and science 'land' in African cities, whether it is conventional understandings of housing markets, received wisdoms on city resilience or transport planning or the 'modernisation' of waste, water and energy

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systems. It explores what it might mean for citizens and city halls to consider what happens if different forms of knowledge production – for example urban economics, risk and resilience, ecosystems analysis and engineering logics – are deemed fundamentally incommensurable.

In this sense it makes an old case for cities to understand the importance of local context in shaping the possibilities of their own futures. It also calls for a study of how different knowledge systems open up different options for urban futures in Africa and suggests that the trade-offs and incommensurabilities between these forms of knowledge are central to any consideration of city futures. *Commensuration* is in this sense a regime of urban knowledge mediation and an everyday feature of city governance practices. Most people working in city halls recognise this as self-evident as they balance the demands of conflicting interests and diverse forms of professional expertise in planning, welfare, regulation and economic development. They confront daily realities of 'least worst' interventions, the rationing of scarce resources and the clumsy solutions that do not always work when confronting 'wicked' problems. Yet all too often, this is something that scholars in the business of providing 'golden bullet' solutions to single systems in transport dilemmas, building homes or city electrification overlook.

In terms of the *ethics of research*, the logic of the shared endeavours of the authors of this volume has a significant implication for the organisation of the academy. Academic power commonly reflects deeper economic and historical relations, privileging particular sites of knowledge production. This edited collection argues that twenty-first-century urban research, particularly in an African context, demands new forms of collaboration that recognise these institutional configurations. These include collaborations between cities and scholars – scholars working across disciplinary boundaries in the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences, and scholars working across geographical boundaries in the global south and the global north. Putting these principles into practice, the volume consequently comprises six substantive chapters, an introduction and conclusion, in total involving over forty authors, mostly from Africa and the UK but also of nationalities from across the world. This in turn implies a different way of thinking about research practice, never erasing the power relations of the academy but at least acknowledging them and seeking to address their implications.

In terms of the *dominant paradigms in urban research*, the collection contributes to a lively argument that some of the most exciting work on

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cities internationally is emerging from the challenging experiences of the African continent. They speak back to the realities of the global north and inflect the ways we might rethink Chicago or Paris as much as Lagos or Nairobi. The edited collection evidences some of the engaged and practical dimensions of what these claims might mean in terms of cutting-edge research contributions from leading scholars in the field.

The chapters all reflect original research, the overwhelming majority of which emerges from collaborations between institutions of the global north and the global south. Most of the contributions are from South Africa, although three chapters draw cases from a much wider set of locations across sub-Saharan Africa. This in turn is partly a reflection of the relative institutional power of the South African university system. Chapters consider a number of locations across the continent, but South African cities appear more often than others. When this volume is making a case for the importance of consideration of the legacies of history and geography in shaping urban futures, it also raises the question of whether South African urbanisms should be seen as particular to or shared in common with the rest of the continent.

However, as the well-regarded political economist and postcolonial historian Mahmood Mamdani has argued in his award-winning book *Citizen and subject*, 'there is a historical specificity to the mode of rule on the African continent' (Mamdani, 1996: 294). The city plays a generic role in most of postcolonial Africa which makes the urban in South Africa exemplary rather than exceptional to a continental trend. Mamdani's framing is both provocative and contested as reception of his work at the time and subsequently demonstrates (Aseka et al., 1997; Chen, 2017; De Goede, 2017; Kamola, 2011). His work is also powerful because in these and other texts he emphasises the trajectories of *histories in place* that undermine flat readings of the present day in favour of deeper readings of specific historical and geographical conjuncture. More significantly, his arguments undermine what was seen as South African exceptionalism and are founded on a reading of colonial legacies that starts with what is continentally shared (whether in post-apartheid South Africa or contemporary Darfur) but rests on what is historically particular.

Mamdani argued that the bifurcation of power in colonial Africa structured the organisation of the rule of populations and the architecture of the state. It was generated from the deep logics of legal, formal and informal classification of the governed in colonial settings resulting from the continent's distinctive colonial experience. The city was a mode of

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rule, historically rooted in colonial legacies structurally distinguishing between the rural and the urban but also defining the relational link between the two. In the bifurcation of the postcolonial, states were left with urban systems that relied on civil power and rights (with the colonised excluded on the basis of race) juxtaposed with systems of rural governance that appealed to tradition and culture to enforce rule by 'custom'. So for Mamdani in this sense apartheid and the South African experience were less 'exceptional' to the rest of Africa than was commonly argued. South African cities were in some ways the ultimate exemplification of the colonial lock-ins of African urbanism; their study cannot be simply 'exported' to explain other national trajectories, but their underlying logic frames the historical legacies of the continent as a whole. In this spirit we are careful about the use of the couplet 'African city' in the collection. More specifically the volume is weighted more to anglophone than lusophone or francophone settings, a recognised limitation notwithstanding some significant continental similarities of colonial history. But instead the authors make clear their setting in specific urban contexts in Cape Town, in Dar es Salaam, in Karonga or Ibadan. In this sense the volume as a whole is locally sourced but globally oriented, addressing international perspectives framed by particularly pressing local contexts.

What makes the African city particular? To what extent is the city in Africa part of a subset of concentrations of humanity that we call cities that will over time display the characteristics of what was once evoked as the 'urban age', the rules, laws, and evolutionary forms of urban science?

In one sense these two questions nuance our starting position and open a discussion of this volume that is central to the future of urban studies in Africa in particular but also globally. Across urban studies the call for 'interdisciplinary' or 'cross-disciplinary' modes of scholarship and research have become something of a cliché. All the contributors in this volume share a commitment to bring together different forms of empirical evidence and diverse approaches to urban Africa. But what are the terms of trade in such pluralities? To what extent does the interdisciplinary field of urban studies imply a 'synthesis' of forms of knowledge that can help understand how the city works? If we take commensuration itself as a focus of our work, to what extent is it possible to fuse engineering, neoclassical economics, normative aid interventions addressed at those most in need and medical science into a singular way of seeing and thinking about how cities make sense in the present day and might structure their own futures more effectively? These are slightly more problematic questions.

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They invoke the extent to which combinations of humanities, social science and natural science perspectives may throw together diverse approaches, dispositions and epistemologies of the city that are in structure, form and logic incommensurable. They also make problematic the geometry of critical distance on which research is commonly premised.

Diverse approaches to urban research in Africa

In one of the more cogently argued overviews of African urbanism, Somik Lall et al. (2017) in a 2017 World Bank analysis suggest that African cities are dysfunctional (cf. Macamo, 2018: 6). They lay out the structure of their argument in terms of the fundamental basic premises of economic theory. The failings of cities in Africa relate both to challenges in the urban form and to related weaknesses in the urban economic structure. In terms of urban form, the authors argue that evidence demonstrates that African cities are crowded, disconnected and costly (Lall et al., 2017: 13). 'Crowded' is a term juxtaposed with density, the former pejorative, the latter not. Crowded cities have weakly developed infrastructure and poorly managed access to formalised residential housing; the negative externalities of disorganisation outweigh benefits of concentration. They lack connectivity across urban space, fragmenting travel to work areas and diminishing the propensity to scale up growth. And Lall and colleagues argue further that wage costs and transaction costs are disproportionately high and so labour costs reduce return to investment.

These challenges in turn translate into significant – if not insuperable – weaknesses in the economic structure of urban transformation. Standard urban economics highlights the city as a driver of economic growth through agglomeration economies, economic diversity and associated developments of rich reservoirs of human capital (Glaeser, 2011; Glaeser and Gottlieb, 2009). But for Lall and colleagues high costs for food, transport and housing diminish the potential advantages of African urban agglomeration. Weak property rights and institutional flaws also generate extra costs. Consequently the cities of Africa are 'locked in' to non-tradable goods and services, rendering the megacities and other urban concentrations of the continent in some ways fundamentally parochial and starved of global investment. This lock-in is prompted particularly by the 'Dutch disease' of concentrations of economic activity in natural resource exports and by the inefficient urban morphologies attributed to sub-optimal working of land markets, property rights and zoning regimes.

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The response to contemporary weaknesses in urban form and economic structure are straightforward:

> To grow economically as they are growing in size, Africa's cities must open their doors to the world. They need to specialize in manufacturing, along with other regionally and globally tradable goods and services. And to attract global investment in tradables production, cities must develop scale economies, which are associated with successful urban economic development in other regions. (Lall et al., 2017: 13)

As with other less plausible and more boosterist studies such as McKinsey's championing of cities of the continent as the 'African lions' (McKinsey, 2016), the architecture of the scholarly argument is clear. Identify the lessons of urban form and economic structure from other parts of the world and develop this logic so that it lands in Africa. Economics, what Thomas Carlyle once called the 'dismal science', is transformed into analytically coherent, policy-friendly recipes for interventions in cities across the continent. A dismal science that draws on the medium- and long-term imperatives of a utilitarian calculus to make a case for the rationalisation of the future African metropolis. If cities in Africa can be made to look more like the successful engines of growth in other parts of the world, then majoritarian prosperity and economic development (however benefits are distributed) will follow.

In the post-Cold War decades, such science may have escaped the juxtaposition of development models that owed their legitimacy either to postcolonial appropriations of Soviet socialism or proxy interests of Western governmental geopolitical models of continental change. But fundamentally, a neoclassical economics toolkit that appeals to clarified property rights, minimised transaction costs, optimised resource allocation of factors of production and efficient independent judiciaries to regulate and minimise rent seeking and state-legitimated corruption speaks clearly to a plausible everyday policy prospectus. Thus realised, the structure and form of economic reason speaks powerfully to the futures of cities. But perhaps only so far.

When science is defined as a search for the universal, the particularities of time and space, the distinctive powers of history and geography, are barriers to be overcome in the analytical frame. In the context of urban studies more generally, cities of the urban age are teleologically defined. So one of the critiques of economic reason as much as of economics scholarship per se is that urban economies are divorced from locational

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specificity, both in the name of universal reason and in the knowledge claims of norm-free science.

While such framings may be at times both analytically powerful and politically persuasive, they can also generate a less unalloyed response from scholars in disciplines other than economics. The erasure of the normative in the name of critical distance is also at times explicit in other claims of scientific expertise but may lead in different directions. So a focus on the metabolism and ecosystems that reveal the disequilibrium of the systemic combinations of nature, culture and material form embodied in the built environment and infrastructures can also direct the analytical gaze elsewhere, maybe towards the temporalities of change and the power of ecosystem lock-ins and path dependencies that shape the city that is yet to come. If for John Maynard Keynes the long term is famously inhabited by the dead, those more ecologically inclined see it as the inheritance of our grandchildren. Timescales are measured differently through different scientific lenses. And where the normative domain is more explicit, appeals to the policy demands of poverty reduction might prioritise interventions of the here and now over the scientific promise of a future city realised at an uncertain date. Where a history of the present brings to the surface the enduring legacies of regimes of power and authority, the contested grounds on which reforms are mooted become analytically as well as descriptively relevant to making sense of what is possible in tomorrow's urbanism.

Most obviously this tends to appear in clashes between more activist-, NGO- or charity-focused foregrounding of the commonly grim realities of contemporary urban life on the one hand and the sort of diagnosis, prognosis and prescription of the urban condition found in the reports of the World Bank or McKinsey. But equally, in the appeal less to the vernacular than to the power of what anthropologists might describe as 'local knowledges', there is at times a fundamental challenge to the structuring of arguments that follow neoclassical economic reason. In this sense, while economic reason may simultaneously produce 'truths', those truths might be subjected to contrary evidence and different conclusions from different analytical starting points and contested normative futures. As Nobel economist Paul Krugman has argued, economics cannot tell you what values to have and where to start such analytical foundations. He has suggested that the tendency to ignore, neglect or mask interests is characteristic of certain structures of economic reason and that economics can rarely provide an exhaustive 'truthful' account of all dimensions of most social contexts (Krugman, 2020).

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In terms of scholarship, this in part opens up a domain of intercultural dialogue which recognises the possibly incommensurable truths revealed by economic reason alongside other forms of 'science'. For Krugman it also opens up a different sort of exchange in city halls and policy domains where he finds himself too often 'arguing with zombies', 'ideas that should have been killed by contrary evidence, but instead keep shambling along, eating people's brains' (Krugman, 2020: 4). Such an alternative form of dialogue could involve a recognition that it is possible to acknowledge that you may 'have your own opinions but not your own facts' yet also recognises that these facts may reflect disciplinary weaknesses as well as strengths.

If we are to unpick the DNA of the city and to recognise a diversity of approaches to the urbanisms of the twenty-first century, such an element of humility might be essential. So in this volume we are trying not to privilege any particular take on such long-running institutional dilemmas of academic politics and metropolitan realities. However, in a collection that brings together contributions that cross a range of social scientific backgrounds, we hope at least to curate some terms of engagement which might structure the sort of cross-disciplinary exchanges that are in this fashion more productive than polemical.

Diverse dispositions to urban research in Africa

Within the social sciences an instructive exchange on the disposition of work on African cities characterised the pages of American academic prose in the early 2000s. It involved a published essay by Michael Watts responding to the work of Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall.

Michael Watts is a distinguished geographer of development who locates his own work in the Marxian and post-Marxian traditions and whose powerful research has described over many years a committed theoretical and empirical engagement with the grim systemic underdevelopment of contemporary Africa in general and the extractive capitalisms that structured the Nigeria of the city of Port Harcourt and the Ogoni people in particular. In 2005 he published a high-profile critique of what might be seen in hindsight as a new disposition for thinking about the contemporary African city. In responding to the work of Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, Watts railed against what he appeared to see as the performatively spectacular but analytically and politically foreclosed celebrations of African expressive urbanisms. His essay criticised both the modes of knowledge

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production and also almost a lack of a 'moral seriousness' of the project of Mbembe and Nuttall and their various networks of collaborators and colleagues, working at the time mostly within the South African academy. Even reading the Watts critique in hindsight, some years on, it comes across as morally serious, rooted in a deeply normative reading of emergent African urbanisms but also in a tone that castigates scholarship that might for Watts speak more to the ivory tower than the city streets.

For Watts, Mbembe (and co-author Nuttall) through a focus on cultural exploration retreated away from empirical reality towards paradoxically European theory, privileging 'Simmel over Sandton', using evocative textual strategies to extend a 'panoptic account of Africa as a space of radical uncertainty, of "nonlinearity, of chains of fragmented events, that has been misrepresented" by "the faked philosophies of Marxism and nationalism"' better grasped through the exploration of other archives capable of yielding both 'the power of falsification' and the processes through which Africans 'stylize their conduct'. Watts saw Mbembe in particular as creating texts that did not want to 'be encumbered by what he has elsewhere called the worn-out pretext of miserabilism'. The result may have been poetic but for Watts it was 'too conceptually undeveloped to be of much utility, and often the contours and pathologies of metropolitan psychic life [in Mbembe's writing] are weakly anchored in empirical data' (Watts, 2005: 188).

In contrast, Mbembe, a powerfully erudite social theorist, looked at Johannesburg through a lens that built on his own embedded critical engagement with multinational philosophical traditions and African modernities. Through turning his attention to the African metropolis in his work on the city, he adopts a particular disposition that responded to some of the motivations for his seminal monograph 'On the postcolony' (Mbembe, 2001). In this landmark work Mbembe famously and fundamentally challenged the *ways of seeing* late twentieth-century African social life. He subsequently explained how his strategy had been consciously provocative, invoking the economic anthropologist Jane Guyer's work to criticise three powerful analytical traditions that block key African realities from view: the (monetary) reductionism of economics and its associated tyranny of quantitative methodologies, the positivistic framing of the parameters of economic reason in turning African landscapes into economic science, but also the cultural particularism of anthropology that can make Africa 'look like a pathological departure from a standard model based

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on Western experience and institutions' (Mbembe, 2006, quoting Guyer, 2004: 172).

Mbembe was writing against a series of 'isms' of late twentieth-century academic scholarship. He rejected the *scientism* of certain forms of neoclassical economics, the *presentism* of scholars that forgot or erased the legacies – we might even say the 'path dependencies' – of African history in descriptions of contemporary urban life, and the cultural *empiricism* particularly found in some genres of anthropology. It is possible to see this project as reconfiguring both the geographical imaginaries and historical sensibilities that might structure how stories are narrated of African cities. This project is founded on a novel relational intellectual architecture of theory and praxis that confounds conventional disciplinary boundaries but also consequently in some ways lacks the institutional supports of disciplinary epistemological self-assurance (or self-satisfaction).

The reason for referencing this debate of some time ago is not to privilege one or other of these takes on African urban life. All three scholars (Mbembe, Nuttall, Watts) have remarkable careers, committed engagements and impressive bibliographies. The intention is instead to suggest that in microcosm the debate encapsulates some distinctive choreographies of divergence in literatures on the African city in particular. It also foregrounds an urban studies more generally that privileges the theoretical insights of the urbanisms of the global south in general. The texts of Michael Watts were no more, no less normative than Achille Mbembe's. Neither made claims in the name of critical distance or scientific truths. Theirs was a difference of disposition.

The urban scholarship of the global south has provided in the last decade some of the most exciting forms of new thinking about cities. Within the social sciences a standard trope of criticism has long been that paradigms, theories and approaches to the city that have been nurtured in a limited number of privileged metropolitan sites of the global north do not always serve particularly well when they land in those parts of the globe with the most significant increases in urban populations in the twenty-first century; in China, in India and in Africa in particular. Well-argued critiques of urban theory of the global north abound, drawing on postcolonial, feminist and other framings of urban life to contrast deliberately with the insights of the mainstream traditions of urban studies (Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Pieterse, 2010). Jennifer Robinson and Ananya Roy have gone so far as to argue that that the appeal to the universal speaks to a limited audience when the global urban majority

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live in cities that are characterised by informality, multiplicity, marginality and dispersion unrecognised in the cities most commonly theorised by leading economic geographers, in the process (citing a phrase from Linda Peake) 'seeing everything from nowhere' (Robinson and Roy, 2017: 185).

But perhaps more productively still, some traffic might run in different directions. Strands of African urban theory speaks to the African city in particular but also transcend geographical specificity from a southern disposition. The various collaborations of Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone perhaps exemplify this trend. Pieterse was one of many that long called for an urban studies that could 'think and theorise the specificity of African cities' based on both an obligation for research to address the pressing dilemmas of the urban condition and the recognition that 'there is no direct correlation between better theory and effective policy' (Pieterse, 2011: 2).

In an early collaboration Pieterse and Simone (2013) try to outline the configurations of a specifically southern urbanism that draws in particular (though not exclusively) on the patterns and processes of contemporary African urban life. For Sharad Chari (2014) their work highlights five themes of specific '"urbanisms" (what *are* our diverse African cities), "palimpsests" (how are multiple temporalities used, handled, sorted or denied), "deals" (Pieterse has it that "the term 'economy' … is virtually meaningless in African cities" and that "deal-making" relates more to everyday pragmatics), "governmentalities" (how does state and non-state power work) and finally "interstices"' (Chari, 2014: n.p.). This taxonomy of plural urbanisms, palimpsests, deals, governmentalities and interstices makes visible particular forms of urban life. But it also travels and is as recognisable on the streets of contemporary east London or New York as in the particularities of Johannesburg or Cape Town. Similarly, Simone and Pieterse have more recently argued that a paradox of contemporary urban life is that the global majority who 'presently don't have much access to rights, resources and opportunities actually prefigure, in their making something out of difficult conditions, what many urban futures may need to look like' (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: 110). In their *New urban worlds* three vectors of redescription, secretion and resonance generate different ways of seeing the city anew.

But again these powerful descriptors can also inflect the ways in which we might understand a contemporary European condition characterised by post-austerity uncertainty, the ongoing and recurrent legacies of a 'migration crisis' and fears that it is pandemics as well as people that

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travel. Importantly, the organising principles of the creativities, pragmatics and alternative worlding practices at the heart of their work draw less from the vocabulary of 'rights' discourse that structures much writing in the field and more from the performative, theatrical, extemporised strategies and tactics of everyday life. There is a sense, then, that the scope of such work cannot be confined in straightforwardly geographic terms. It is a standard trope of postcolonial studies approaches to make the familiar strange, the strange familiar and to 'provincialise' the dominant ways of telling stories and constructing narratives in the social sciences. But it would be a paradox if precisely this tactical move inhibited the propensity of such theory to speak back to a global urbanism that is locally inflected but internationally germane. The valorisation of 'southern urbanisms' should not inhibit flows both south/north and north/south. We might rethink how Cape Town speaks to London but equally how Shanghai might speak to New York, London to São Paulo. Such conversations imply a slightly different disposition of theoretical labour that is not straightforwardly 'comparative'.

However, several different arguments, occasionally conflated, become central to such positioning. All are legitimate, although each has slightly different implications. The specificity of African (most often South African) urbanisms, the push back against the scholarship of the global north and the rejection of an academic gaze that is instrumentally linked to technocratic policy formation are all shared by critical theoretical dispositions internationally. But what is perhaps most significant analytically and germane politically about their work is the positioning of the researcher *in situ*. The researcher is engaged. The outcomes of research are translational, they build on site and offer back to whence they came. Not necessarily co-productions as such, but Pieterse and Simone's collaborative and individual work is characterised by a sense of proximity. The view from up close. It involves an epistemology that undermines a valorisation of critical distance.

Informing Pieterse and Simone's work is clearly a project that is highly normative in both the forms of engaged scholarship on which it is based and the practically translational research which it advocates. So there are two dimensions which we are suggesting in this volume might be constructively brought together through an alternative framing of urban life. One relates to how we locate the alternative ways of inhabiting the city that Simone and Pieterse describe. The other involves how we seek to capture not a universal vocabulary of city life but think instead creatively

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about how the experiences and tendencies of cities in Africa speak back to a global urban condition.

The sense of critical distance is not a safety zone but a field of tension, as Adorno once argued. But however productive making the city visible from up close might be, it is also essential at other times to retreat and make the lenses through which scholarship is generated explicit. Such movement questions how such mobile engagement might work; what are its spaces of translation, how does it envisage the time over which it operates, the relationship between the snapshot presentation of today and the propensity of tomorrow? Proximity begets a certain sense of plurality. Data observed and data analysed are data interpreted through specific frames of reference and knowledge productions that measure value differently. The calculus of economic value, optimal mobilities of transport systems, elongations of life expectancy, the calibration of happiness, the territorial extension of food, water and energy management and the generation of ecological sustainability – all are premised on measures of value and worth that are distinctive and particular to specific scholarly disciplines. They speak to a diversity of epistemologies that we also showcase in this volume.

Diverse epistemologies of urban research in Africa

The engagement up close and from a distance invokes different ways of producing knowledges of cities. What appears to be 'merely' perspectival can on closer inspection reveal some fundamental challenges to different epistemologies, regardless of how institutionally powerful their disciplines are in shaping the behaviours of city actors. In part this is no more than a restatement of some of the foundational truths of social science and its relationship to the urban world. W.I. Thomas, founder of what became the Chicago School of Sociology and the man who gave Robert Park a job, made the point a century ago that in the social sciences there was no straightforward correspondent theory of truth. You cannot choose your own facts. But people may choose their own ways of seeing the world and in this sense whether or not their interpretations of the world are factually correct is at some times and places irrelevant precisely because when situations are defined 'as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas, 1928: 572).

And what goes for cartographies of position applies equally for registers of the temporal and the way this structures reasoning across different

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ways of making the city visible in research. Some people have jobs. Others have careers. Others again struggle to get by day to day. The difference between these objective demographics describes how rational actions are qualified by temporal horizons. Equally, the logics of profit maximising, utility optimising, mobility preference or sustainable building may subsume socially constructed measures of speed, rhythm and expectations.

In the context of late twentieth-century global forms of economic governance and structural readjustment programmes led by international regimes of lending and investment, Jane Guyer, a former member of the World Bank International Advisory Group and distinguished anthropologist of sub-Saharan Africa – whose work so influenced Mbembe – has highlighted the power of cultural constructions of the temporal for an understanding of African life. Foregrounding the counterintuitive similarities between late twentieth-century forms of monetarism and evangelical Christianity, she argued that both define knowledge systems that 'privatize the near future while socializing the present and the distant horizon' (Guyer, 2007: 411). Their similarities contrast with alternative readings of the temporal in (respectively) alternative traditions of twentieth-century neoclassical economics and many centuries of biblical thought historically. She goes on to suggest that 'the new indexing of diagnosis of the present to an "infinite horizon" in the future places people in emotional and sociological *terra nova*. The nesting of temporalities and the relative emphasis and mutual entailment for different populations, or for the same population in different affective states, becomes the ethnographic question' (2007: 413), an issue that the work of Irmelin Joelsson in this volume situates in contemporary Dar es Salaam (see also the work on Togo by Pinot, 2010).

The shift towards the temporal rhythms of neoliberal economic knowledge systems was itself a reconfigured relationship between legal and utility logics in the law and economics tradition emerging from economists such as Ronald Coase in the 1960s (Keith, 2019). For Guyer, an unintended consequence of the forms of neoclassical economics reason deployed in late twentieth-century Africa shifted mainstream economics thinking from a conventional taxonomic distinction between the short term and the long term to a privileging of the importance of the long term and diminution of short-term considerations. She then highlighted how this shift complements and mirrors a framing of fundamentalist Christianity which privileges the millennial and rewards in the hereafter over the contemporary moment. Both monetarism/neoliberalism and fundamentalist Christianity for Guyer rationalise and justify present-day

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suffering in the name of longer-term reward. Simplifying her argument slightly, the overlaps as well as the divergences between neoliberal regimes of government and fundamentalist Christianity translate into regimes and rhythms of development time in sub-Saharan contexts structured by market state reforms. The paradigmatic differences of each with other forms of neoclassical economic thinking and biblical reason respectively are diminished by the structural similarities of implicit, not explicit, measures of the calculus of time.

For Guyer the plural registers of economic reason imply but do not always make explicit normalisation and valorisation of rhythms, speeds and horizons of the temporal. A cultural translation of internationally nuanced registers of temporality is consequently essential for any understanding of developmental interventions, infrastructural investments or forms of market liberalisation. Such an argument is not a form of 'relativism'. The argument follows instead the landmark choreography of Clifford Geertz's (1984) case for 'anti anti-relativism', asserting that to make our knowledge systems subject to forms of cultural translation pluralises our systems of knowledge production but does not equate to making equivalent all forms of truth or scholarship. It sits easily with a sense that we must understand that how multiple knowledge systems of universal economic reason, hydrology, engineering, climate science 'land' in context matters. Not in altering the internal logics of these disciplines as such but in making sense of how particular logics are inserted into the systems of systems of city change that are structured by individual legacies, path dependencies and lock-ins to particular organisations of social and economic life. It complements the renewed interest in anthropologies of time that interrogate the epistemological implications of temporal registers of different forms of scholarship and science (Born, 2015; Connolly, 2011; Goldstone and Obarrio, 2016; Nielsen, 2011; Pinot, 2010).

Guyer's rhetorical structure of argument reflects an obligation to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar that is also central to an anthropological sensibility. Curiously, the productive urban studies theoretical domain has at times reflected less on what it has derived from such argumentative structure and the anthropological discipline than it perhaps sometimes warrants. Yet the ability to link the view from up close with a perspective from a distance, to link the micro and the macro, has long been a mainstream dimension of such work.

Such a sensibility becomes particularly important when considering the scale of infrastructural change implicit in rapidly growing African

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cities. Within mainstream urban studies research on infrastructure-led transformation has at times been characterised as an 'infrastructural turn', normally reflecting the influence of the work of Bruno Latour's use of the Foucauldian notion of the assemblage in combinations of material structures and cultural forms (Amin and Thrift, 2017; Howe et al., 2015). Yet the traditions of thinking about such combinations has deep roots in anthropological inquiry and the infrastructural turn owes much to the early anthropological investigations of scholars such as Penny Harvey (Harvey, 2005 and 2012; Harvey and Knox, 2015) and Brian Larkin (Larkin, 2013).

Larkin's influential work argues that infrastructures must be seen in terms of what they justify and invoke as much as what they deliver in purely technocratic terms. A road, a bridge, a pipeline makes claims on the land which imply specific notions of 'development'. And development brings with it cultural baggage that is aesthetic, ethical and political. It is the claim of 'progress' that has long been contested in cultural theory but more straightforwardly links in cities the *micro* changes of the sidewalk, the drains or the domestic boiler to the legitimacy, trust and politics of *macro* systems of mobility, waste or energy or development economics (Larkin, 2013).

So, analytically the focus on infrastructure works productively to shift the analytical gaze from proximity to critical distance and back again. Social life on the ground works through these multi-scalar realities in every dimension of urban life, but academic research can at times separate them. Engineering challenges technocratically defined in terms of what is possible demand a time horizon different from returns on capital or from social or ecological impact assessments of particular interventions. Hence in part what the anthropological engagement with infrastructure facilitates is an ability to set up an analytical frame that can accommodate the scale of infrastructure investments, the upheavals, opportunities and transformations envisaged, engaged or delivered with the ways in which such changes land in urban contexts in terms of both geographical scale and rhythms of time and speed (Anand et al., 2018). Critical distance and proximate engagement are held alongside one another. Not a form of relativism but a facet of perspectival realities.

Similarly, Andrew Barry has argued that the wide exponential growth of an interest in infrastructural forms often neglects the four-dimensional locus of systems that are built, modified and eventually rendered obsolete. Barry distinguishes the notion of infrastructure as an 'installed base' from its physical location in material space. 'We need to see the earth, its rocks,

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soil and water, as integral to the ongoing existence of infrastructure. Infrastructures such as pipes, roads and cables should not be considered a solid and static base in part because they rest on, or are built into, a further base' (Barry, 2017: 187). But if the three-dimensional context is vital in determining what the infrastructural forms might become, then the fourth dimension of the temporal creates its own speeds of implementation, rhythms of operation and horizons of disruption, breakdown and eventual decay or obsolescence. And within the temporal itself the register of human and non-human time run together in strange ways. And so Barry likewise cites the powerful return to an interest in the anthropologies of the temporal in this context.

This analytical choreography replicates that of the multi-scalar. Temporal scale is also not a safety zone but a field of tension. The logics of the here and now may be quite properly different, based on different values, different knowledge systems and different epistemologies when we compare immediate needs of the impoverished with rates of return on investment and temporalities of urban ecosystems. It is fine to say that the gas boiler is not ecologically sustainable but such a rhetoric alone will not prevent utilities and industry companies servicing the demand for such commodities, people in need of heating demanding them or government legislating the exchange, planning and building regulations through which they are installed. The same is the case for almost any piece of infrastructural fabric. Timescale is not a safety zone but is a field of tension akin to that of scalar distance.

Of course the multi-scalar and the multi-temporal are realised simultaneously in city life characterised always by an excess of sensory information, cultural perception and historical legacies. And so for the purposes of this volume, the argument of the book as a whole and across the individual chapters identifies the importance of the imperative to 'only connect'. We cannot understand the urban without thinking about the rural, make sense of the periphery of the city without thinking about where its periphery flexes socially, is defined by regulations and is mapped by scholars and city governments (Chapter 2). Urban morphology is one medium through which we make visible the multi-scalar.

In many ways, every urban plan sketches a future. The promises contained in master plans, whether of new pipes, roads, houses or sanitation, already organise the present, inverting the logic that the present dictates the future (de Souza Santos, 2019; Larkin, 2013; Nielsen, 2011). But creating new presents with promises of a better future is not an equal resource. The limits of both governments and residents to wait for promises to

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become (quite literally) concrete vary. While residents wait for roads to be tarred with asphalt, their rents may already become more expensive. Local governments may prefer to invest more on road tarring than sanitation. The latter, which should come first, is invisible and thus politically less appealing. In this intersection of people, place and time, tensions brought by frustrations and delays undermine the promise, and urban plans all too often go awry before they are even complete.

'Cures that harm' is how McCord (2003) described unintended consequences of crime prevention programmes and when turning the logic from individuals to cities; risk mitigation in African cities is what often inflicts risk (Chapter 3). Goodfellow (2017) reminds us that road construction can inflate land value and evict residents who are already vulnerable. 'Cures' can be a dangerous guessing game when adrift and not well connected to people, place and time. But who speaks for the people? How do communities engage with infrastructural futures? How do they incorporate heterogeneous practices in informal settlements? Participatory projects, when trying to connect residents, technicians and politicians, may give the right to voice to different groups, and yet, without safe employment and housing, frustration at the inability to confront those in power may result in a backlash. More commonly certain modes of community voice can legitimise top-down approaches when socio-economic disparities are not alleviated (Chapter 4).

The 'new urban sciences' in this world is a term that is increasingly used to characterise the interface of multiple forms of scientific practice to make sense of the complex systems of the urban. For Michael Batty (2013), the *science of cities* relates particularly to the theorisation of advanced spatial analysis. However, it is also the case that not only infrastructural investment but also the metabolism of urban forms, built environment interests, urban ecosystems and medicine have developed similar research sub-disciplines in the city. Specialisms of city engineering, biosystems, life sciences and public health have linked new sources and methodologies for garnering data at city scale such as satellite technologies, mobile phone records, mobility data, using data analytics to consider the interfaces between systems in settings of urban complexity. Such approaches have developed an extraordinary capacity to generate exponential increases of data in real time when paradoxically the speed of innovation and adoption of disruptive technologies in cities makes the longer term harder to predict. This highlights the need to consider how the new urban sciences land in the city. The relatively new discipline of science and technology studies

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(STS) approaches work to understand how genres of scientific knowledges make sense of the city. The city simultaneously adopts (or does not adopt) scientific reason and the social processes of technological innovation become a rich research focus in their own right (UN-Habitat, 2020). STS repeatedly demonstrates how diverse epistemologies generate analytical frames that land and impact on how cities behave as complex systems (Howe et al., 2015; Krause and Guggenheim, 2012). A century on from W.I. Thomas's invocation of a *social* 'science', modes of seeing change patterns of behaviour.

Complex systems logic demonstrates why *seeing like a city* demands recognition of geographical specificity and path-dependent social settlement, opening contextual opportunities of place that render bespoke local city 'clumsy' solutions to 'wicked' urban problems more plausible. Cities of the global south have the potential to leapfrog the twentieth-century lock-ins of car-based urbanism and wasteful city metabolisms of water and waste. But equally, different histories of colonialism and systemic underdevelopment weigh heavily in specific parts of the world; alternative visions of the good life balance the imperatives of the city commons, the architecture of markets and the freedoms of regimes of rights differently. We have argued elsewhere that such a perspective demands a different framing of cross-disciplinary engagement between social science, humanities and natural science epistemologies of knowledge production (Keith and de Souza Santos, 2020). The tensions between time-space contextual framing and diverse epistemological approaches to the urban share a recognition of the powers of the new urban sciences and the capacity to *predict* in real time (P), the contingencies of *emergence* in complex systems (E), technological disruptions that are *adopted* differently (A) according to distinct local systems of commensuration that demand an experimental disposition to urban futures that promote innovative *knowledge exchange* across urban systems (K). This disposition of 'PEAK Urban' creates a frame through which technological change might be harnessed by cities that are reflexive and flexible in their response to technological disruption, optimistic yet also pragmatically realistic about the propensity for technological change to shape their futures (Keith, 2020).

Such a focus on emergence in complex systems does not equate to a sense of developmental immaturity. It instead highlights and problematises an acknowledgement that Africa is the part of the globe where by some measures urbanisation is moving fastest and a recognition that this in turn implies both shared logics and divergent dynamics of metropolitan

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life. When divergent dynamics shape individual cities, they create particular articulations of these shared logics, combinations of local culture and global trends that create relational similarities between cities and also particular patterns of combination and hybridisation within each. How these processes of urban transformation can be theorised depends in part on how we make sense of such a process of combination and hybridisation. In this context Marilyn Strathern in the 1990s forensically examined Latour's analytical device of the assemblage that is central to his actor network theory that has become so influential in the urban studies of the last two decades. Her critique argues that in Latour (and in long-standing anthropological traditions) the combinations of material objects and cultural life create new forms of the hybrid. Latour analyses the links between the hybrid forms of the material, social and cultural, his networks that constitute actor networks are famously neither simply human nor non-human; not modern, just unfinished. Or put more simply, they are always in the process of becoming. She points out that Latour's logic of networks and hybrids is potentially endless through its fractal form and so she suggests that what might be of interest is as much how networks are cut as how they are held in place and stabilised in the short, medium or longer term. Interpretation 'must hold objects of reflection stable long enough to be of use' (Strathern, 1996: 522; see also Strathern, 2015), but it is in the cutting as much as the assemblage of the hybrid forms that novelty *becomes*, new parts of the systems emerge, ontology asserts itself.

Significantly, she illustrates this principle by citing the creation of intellectual property through patents that rely partly on individual or corporate innovation but also partly on knowledge made by others as scientific advance stands on the shoulders of its predecessors. Intellectual labour becomes property when law cuts the network itself. For Strathern, law 'cuts' the normative domain – 'the limitless expansion of justice' – when it creates a 'manipulable object of use' to which can be attributed a property value. In this sense 'there is a good case for seeing property as a hybridizing artefact in itself' (Strathern, 1996: 525). Similarly, when science 'lands' in the city, it structures how we might think about the urban but also creates new permutations, new ontologies of social, cultural and economic systems through which cities themselves evolve.

It is in this sense that in the contemporary city, where proprietary data is the clichéd new oil of tech giants such as Google, Uber or Amazon, future propensity cuts the network and becomes a property in its own right. When Uber in 2019 manages to make the largest quarterly loss

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ever recorded of a public company and yet still pursue a major initial public offering of share value which bets on future data powers to enclose the virtual commons of the metropolis, urban futures are as tradable as futures in any other commodity. The city becomes a crucible of forms of expertise and knowledge practice. And in liberalised urban markets such as South Africa's Johannesburg, Uber captures market share far more rapidly than in other more regulated cities. For better and for worse.

In this spirit this volume shares a concern with how epistemological logics and regimes of particular expertise land in the cities of Africa, whether in generating novel forms of risk and institutional interdependency (Chapter 3), how regimes of law and economics frame interventions in upgrading and ownership in informal settlements (Chapter 4), the socio-technical systems and intersectionality of energy systems (Chapter 6) or the nexus of waste systems and contemporary science (Chapter 5). They share a recognition that, in order to make sense of the contemporary moment through a geographically sensitive lens, a global urbanism lands in the cities of Africa through diverse approaches, diverse dispositions and diverse epistemologies.

Outline of the book

This book brings together different disciplines and scholars from across the globe to discuss the nature of African cities – the interactions of residents with infrastructure, energy, housing, safety and sustainability, seen through local narratives and theories.

African peripheries usually face disqualification when represented by what they are not (Mbembe, 2001). Paula Meth et al. (Chapter 2) outline what an urban periphery is. The focus of this chapter is to conceptualise these heterogeneous spaces, often marked by constant change, in terms of governance and experience. Looking at case studies in five South African and two Ethiopian cities, the authors frame urban peripheries across distinct categories that epitomise economic, housing and governance arrangements. Despite efforts to create taxonomies and typologies, the authors conclude that such categories are not mutually exclusive; they are complex, contradictory and variable. The category of the periphery is problematic but is still a valuable descriptor of urban form. When discussing fast-paced urbanisation across the globe, it is important to account for the fact that 'suburbanisation' is 'now the dominant form of urban development globally'. Secondly, however overlapping and temporary

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categories may be, because peripheries are spaces of urban transformations, the sociology of definitions and categories responds to the call to define African cities by what they are and not what they lack. The creation of new categories in the study of urban peripheries should aid the allocation of policy resources as well as the use of analytical tools avoiding a one-fits-all solution.

In a similar vein, Mark Pelling et al. (Chapter 3) consider the paradox of development in African cities. The authors point out that often development itself can be the root of risk as much as it aims to mitigate risks. The authors look at Karonga (Malawi), Ibadan (Nigeria), Niamey (Niger) and Nairobi (Kenya) and discuss natural risks (floods, droughts, earthquakes) as well as everyday risks (inadequate sanitation or poor water quality) and explore the governance of disaster. When analysing these distinct urban forms (from small cities to megacities), the authors call for a better understanding of the interaction between multiple nodal actors: government, universities, civil society, among others. Without such understanding, development projects, despite their aims, may harm rather than service cities.

Nodal actors and reflections on development projects are also part of Maria Christina Georgiadou and Claudia Loggia's chapter (Chapter 4). The authors analyse upgrading projects in informal settlements in Durban, South Africa. Georgiadou and Loggia consider that participation is more than providing feedback to projects previously agreed before community appraisal. The construction and management of integrated systems to think and intervene in urban peripheries are both necessary and challenging. Empirical data shared in this chapter shows that participatory processes will demand new tools and methodologies to deliver empowerment, local ownership and resilience. A successful participatory upgrading project will not be one that delivers infrastructure and services, but one that offers full ownership of the upgrading and tenure security. The measurement of successful policies from state and community perspectives deserves greater attention.

The question informing Henrik Ernstson et al.'s piece (Chapter 5) is 'who benefits from reframing waste as a resource, and in what ways?' The authors examine how green technology and livelihoods working in and with waste can antagonise in the process of being transformed. What is ecologically and technologically sensible is not always socially inclusive, and the politics of waste needs to encompass different voices to understand what makes waste 'valuable' economically, socially and ecologically. Listening to different actors also means thinking about the different power

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plays and capacity of individuals to determine what waste can become. Collaborative governance is consequently considered conceptually and theoretically in the chapter.

While Chapter 5 sheds light on sustainable development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) when tackling waste, this discussion is continued in the chapter by Federico Caprotti et al. (Chapter 6), where urban energy is the key concern. The authors work with an understanding of the socio-technical nature of energy systems, where socio-spatial, environmental and economic inequality co-exist and for that reason cannot be studied separately. To make energy transformations inclusive demands an understanding of South Africa's development. From the country's industrialisation to its cheap workforce, it is possible to map how energy is distributed in the country. Socio-spatially, the chapter describes how informally built shacks and locally run solar power are challenged by both the physical material of the fabric and the path-dependent legacies of energy provision in South Africa, where municipal revenues relate to a single provider and an existing grid. Most shacks considered in their study could not bear the weight of a solar panel, while municipalities are perversely tied to extending centrally controlled twentieth-century energy systems to raise their own revenues and realise the fiscal stability needed to achieve just transitions. Echoing previous discussions, the chapter turns to multi-level governance for inclusive energy transition and better quality of life.

In the final substantive chapter, the infrastructural turn in urban studies is addressed head-on by Irmelin Joelsson's (Chapter 7) consideration of how the construction of a major piece of transport infrastructure in Dar es Salaam – a landmark river crossing – reconfigures the DNA of the city through its interface with global finance, the introduction of a pension scheme linked to the revenues generated by tolls on the road bridge and the social policies and practices of insurance. The emergence of welfare nets in contemporary Africa brings together international finance and new ways of governing urban populations. Welfare systems are meant to create providential systems for protecting individual futures. But in this chapter the author considers how such forms of urban governance have to be understood ethnographically alongside other traditions of getting by, hedging and networking to mitigate risk in the everyday lives of the citizens of Dar es Salaam.

These chapters, we believe, share a sense of the possibilities and also the dilemmas confronting African cities of the near future. In the conclusion

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of this volume we go on to suggest that they also share a disposition that in some ways advances urban studies more generally from a focus on the powers of infrastructures of the city to a complementary but alternative focus on the architecture of the platform economies they configure and the logistics through which cities themselves manage to function in even the most challenging circumstances.

Note

1 The ESRC Urban Transformations (UT) programme was a portfolio of research funded by the ESRC from 2015 to 2020. It involved over seventy projects and international partnerships with equivalent research bodies in Brazil, China, India and South Africa. The UT programme was directed by Michael Keith. This book was completed with support from UT and also from the PEAK Urban programme, funded by UKRI's Global Challenge Research Fund (Grant Ref: ES/P011055/1).

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