'We do not Want any more masters': ruins, planning and the " messy labours " of the urban poor

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'WE DO NOT WANT ANY MORE MASTERS': RUINS, PLANNING AND THE "MESSY LABOURS" OF THE URBAN POOR.

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Introduction

Amidst the animated conversations about recent national and county development plans for the city, one wonders when Nairobi's real residents will actually appear. In one of the most recent iterations of this master planning, the Integrated Urban Development Masterplan for the city of Nairobi (NIUPLAN), the now normalized images of futuristic highway networks and buildings (that appear to all derive from a singular neoliberal toolbox) persist unabated. Did the people fall from the many anticipated skyscrapers and super thoroughfares of this aspirational 'world-class city'? Or are they buried under the literal and literary rubble of these master plans? While there are gestures towards participatory consultation that one notes in the NIUPLAN, in the litany of pages devoted to this document we still do not seem to see or hear the 60-70% of this city who live in the poor zones that account for only 6% of Nairobi's geography. Instead we encounter the globally sanctioned trademarks of what a city should look like; the fervent ambition to be 'world-class'[1] that endures as a "regulating fiction" for much of our urban life (Robinson 2002). I argue here that despite their invisibility, it is the residents from these Nairobi ruins, its most marginalized spaces, who will determine the viability of the NIUPLAN in their neighbourhoods and in Nairobi broadly. For if we are to track the "long-running drama" (Manji 2015, 7) of master planning in Nairobi, we see that within and despite the imprints of colonial zoning, it is less the overdetermined templates of formal spatial management and more the "messy-labours" (Simone 2015) of urban ruin residents that shape our city geographies for present and future.

Not convinced by the topical promises of urban reform, and that are captured in neoliberal development plans such as Kenya Vision 2030 and its proliferating spatial progeny (of note are Nairobi Metro 2030 and the NIUPLAN 2014-2030) my PhD research dwells in the stories of residents from poor urban settlements in Nairobi, what I refer to here as ruins, to explore how both the material and discursive practices of these plans are experienced. I sit in these stories of urban entanglements—of innovation, violence, loss, resilience and redemption—in order to historicize urban spatial management in Nairobi from these marginalized spaces, and particularly those in the East of the city. Through tracking both the implementation and the absence of proposed urban interventions in Mathare, Nairobi (and it is usually the latter), I attend to how urban spatial management has shaped residents on both a public and intimate level. To these ends I call attention to three urban events:

1. The continuities between colonial and postcolonial urban spatial management, and in particular the persistence of "selective non-planning" (Yiftachel 2009) in certain parts of the city that creates intentional zones of non-inclusion without even the most basic of infrastructural services;

[1]. The Nairobi Metro 2030 strategy speaks about making Nairobi a "World Class African Metropolis." In fact the full title of this strategy is: *Nairobi Metro 2030: A World Class African Metropolis*. For critiques of the 'world-class' and 'global' city categorizations see, for example, Robinson (2002) McFarlane (2012) and also Roy (2009).

2. The increasing use of militaristic violence to constitute urban governance in the neoliberal present, and;

3. How the alternative urban histories and subjectivities that emerge from these ruins are what will direct us towards a *truly* more just city, and one that is altogether more inclusive than any master plan can ever conjure. This is principally the work of young people.

Before I contextualize and connect these three threads, I need to elaborate on the category of the *ruin* that is a key framing in my work. Informed by Stoler (2008), thinking with ruins allows us to:

> Trace the fragile and durable substance and signs, the visible and visceral senses in which the effects of empire are reactivated and remain. But ruination is more than a process. It is also a political project that lays waste to certain peoples and places, relations, and things. To think with ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artifacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present (Stoler 2008, 196).

My work focuses on these "durable substance(s) and signs" of colonial/postcolonial formal spatial management projects, how these are said to shape Mathare residents' subjectivities, and the manner in which these circulated positionings are engaged with by residents to develop different self and urban possibilities for present and future. In tracking the histories of Mathare through both the archive and collective memory of residents, consistent connections are made between urban governance in the present and past: the remnants and reactivations of empire that compel many residents to think of themselves as Matigari—"the ones who survived the bullets" and keep surviving them (Wa Thiong'o 1987). *Matigari* in this sense can be a metaphor for shared consciousness in this place where the weight of the coeval histories of the city feels heavier on the backs of the poor, as it is them who have suffered through all of its urban charades.

Thinking with ruins and Matigari connects the embattled reflections by 80 year old Monica Njeri about her 60+ years tenure in Village 1 where she has never "seen the government", with the plight of the youth group owned entrepreneurial car wash in Bondeni whose members are constantly besieged by the police, and often fatally, for "dragging water from the main pipes"; water that should have been in place decades ago. These stories spell out all the follies of Nairobi and belie the grand narrative that they are fixable through apolitical and technocratic sleights of hand contained in master plans, and whose genesis (and dependable saviour) is always more "business." Inevitably the expansion of ruins and precarious lives will make us question the costs of what it means to become a "world-class city" (urbans that really should be called world-waste cities); clones of EuroAmerican provenance and that have been normalized to mean hyper-modern and hyper-inaccessible. At the same time, and as I argue here, these margins must be the locations from where we chart out city futures since the ruin is also always a site for "vital refiguration" (Stoler 2008, 194). That despite constituting long histories of grave neglect are at once "always broken, but always resounding" (Simone 2015, 2).

To demonstrate these arguments in a clearer fashion, below I give a brief history of Mathare space, and connect this to broader historical urban spatial management practices in Nairobi. Subsequent to this I also highlight some of the ground work that, consciously and unconsciously, contests the violence of urban planning from within ruins and in ways that challenges both the history and futures of this city. This exercise is provoked by the question that haunts and
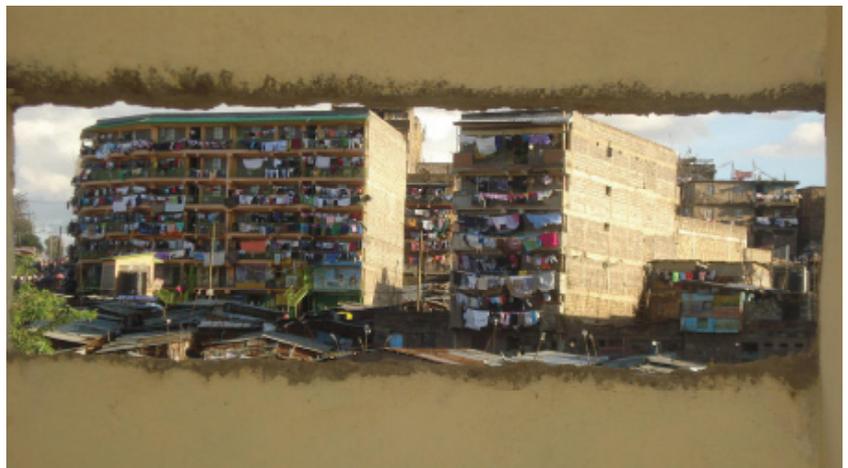
Picture from apartment building in Kosovo, Mathare, from the authors own files

undergirds this research endeavour: how is the value of life in Nairobi determined by spatial management grids that decide not just who lives and who dies, but also how should people who are left to die live?

"I live in Mathare not Nairobi"

While Mathare constituency is seen by some of its residents as the land of temporary 10 x 10 shack dwellings and a place that signals no spatial planning or "modern" architecture, it is important to recognize that it has emerged from a long history of being part of the exclusions of both colonial and postcolonial urban spatial management practices (Medard 2010; Torres-Rodrigues 2010; Myers 2015). Although it covers an area that is only 3 square kilometres in size and is likely the smallest constituency in Nairobi, it is seen as a relentless impediment to the "modern" city and a constant thorn in the side to county authorities, the police and its elected political representatives.

Both oral narratives and archival data document that Mathare has existed for longer than the myopic "rural-urban" migration narratives about "squatter settlements" and "slums" in Nairobi would allow us to believe. While villages were documented in Mathare Valley, what is now part of Mathare constituency,[2] from as early as 1921 (Chiuri 1978; White 1990), it appears that human settlement began to increase in the 1940s and 50s. As the contours of Mathare confer, this area was a quarry and became a central site to excavate rocks that would contribute to building many of the architectures that constitute the 'functioning core' of the city centre. Many of those who were working here later settled in its vicinity. During these pre-independence years, while a medley of employment laws controlled the presence of Africans in the city (White/Nairobi Master Plan 1948, 6; Chiuri 1978, 4), they were allowed to settle in this area as it is in the less favourable low lying eastern part of town where other African settlements such as Pumwani were and still are located (White 1990). Furthermore, the East was also an area that was deemed less desirable for European settlement as it had poor drainage, and would later host sewage treatment plants and other noxious industry (Otiso 2005; Hake 1977, 88). In sum, despite the many measures taken to keep Africans away from Nairobi, they were needed for the machinations of the city and so were confined to the 'inferior' geography of these eastern coordinates. This zoning, intended to quell white fears of the social and biological contagion of African bodies, allowed that this community could persist, albeit precariously, within city limits.

In the postcolonial period Mathare continues to be a space that is not included even in the most basic urban planning infrastructure of the city. Despite this, not too long after independence, it was still regularly raided for tax collection (Hake 1977, 161). In all of these periods it is always depicted as a site of overcrowding, and conjured as the bedrock of crime, prostitution, illegal alcohol brewing and "parasites"; violent imaginaries that are said to be embodied, above all, by its young population. The "slum" is therefore taken as the immoral part of the urban form while it's more middle and upper class constituencies are seen to be its moral body. Furthermore, due to the perpetual preoccupations to make Nairobi a 'global' city this space becomes the "anti-city"; in straddling a super highway and two main transport arteries into the downtown core is seen to cast a long shadow over the established and aspired prosperities of this African urban.

Therefore, while surrounded by legal and tenured city infrastructures Mathare was and is still included in planning by its very exclusion. It is important to note that this is an disregard firmly anchored within the complicities of the state; a situation that evidences informality not as the antithesis of *formality*, but a state of affairs that includes both as co-constitutive processes that 'fold' into each other (McFarlane 2012; Roy 2009, 826). In this regard, while it maintains the area of space delimited by the quarry and extends slightly in an eastern direction, like many poor urban settlements in the city its presence is accepted with ambivalence while it continues to be omitted from the "development impulse" that Manji (2015) discusses. Thus, over the years, it has taken on the contradiction of being at once within and without urban development; it is regarded as a necessary part of the city and yet planning continues *around it* without receiving any of the service benefits implied from being within the municipality's jurisdiction.

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[2]. Mathare constituency has six county assembly wards; these are Huruma, Ngei, Mabatini, Hospital, Mathare and Kia Maiko wards.

This historical neglect is evident in the dearth of basic water and sanitation services for residents, the absence of substantive educational and health facilities as well as a lack of tenure security (Muungano Support Trust et al 2012). What's more, this sinister exceptionalism further legitimized by the imagined positionings of its residents is also seen to provoke and justify a plethora of very violent acts committed, overwhelmingly, by the police and the city council. While these 'state-society imaginaries' are never as inflexible as often understood, (see, for example, Garmany (2013) for an examination of this in Fortaleza, Brazil), the combined impacts of both structural neglect and extra-legal state violence indicate a spatial particularity that has engendered a situation often considered one of "the most difficult urban environments in East Africa" (Muungano Support Trust et al 2012, 4).

Not Joining the Masterplan Party.

A cursory history of Mathare was needed to contextualize the ruination that it is entangled within: a political, social, economic and ecological disregard that both creates and criminalizes this space. Throughout the history of the three previous plans for Nairobi (1927, 1948 and 1973), very little is seen to have changed in this part of the city—a feeling that is reiterated frequently by its residents as well as scholars (Myers 2015; Medard 2010). Nonetheless, in recognizing this long history of indifference, residents, and particularly the young, work to fill the vacuums created by this abandonment. Mine is not a bid to romanticize often imperfect systems to deliver water, security and sanitation services etc., nonetheless, the persistent youth-work to equalize geography, in ways that have not been made possible by previous formal urban interventions, needs to be affirmed. And in embodying a reciprocated mistrust for these master plans, this work dampens the bourgeois fervour that accompanies the urban visions and proposals that do not make them visible. This is why many residents I spoke to conveyed multiple versions of the following statement: "I don't live in Nairobi, I live in Mathare".

In attending to this disregard in the areas of "blackness" that he conceptualizes, Simone (2015) speaks of these residents of ruins who:

Learned to live in the implosion of old orders grinding to a halt, of being the example that teaches a populace how to watch what happens when a portion of its citizenry is unmoored from the basic supports of life. It has learned to live with incessant transience, quickly deciding how to recoup opportunity from sudden detours and foreclosures (Simone 2015, 7).

In contrast to improvement, it is often master plans that provide exactly these "detours" and "foreclosures." Evidencing this are the statements in the NIUPLAN about the need to tackle the housing crisis, but that are followed in quick succession by remarks about removal and resettlement (NIUPLAN 2015, 6-28). Similarly, contained within this new blueprint is information about enhancing, for example, transport facilities, but nothing about the displacements that will likely be occasioned by these processes, nor whether there will be adequate compensation given to those who will inevitably be forced to relocate. Furthermore, an unspoken though normalized practice that haunts these projects is the use of police force to make sure the ostensibly "business unusual" of Vision 2030 will go on (see Medard 2010; Manji 2015 and Amnesty 2013 on the violence of both the administrative police and city council during forced evictions). While the sheer murkiness of the numerous headings and subheadings of the NIUPLAN make it difficult to discern whether there is indeed a comprehensive pro-poor project at hand, the snapshots conferred above inspire what Myers refers to as a "jaundiced optimism" (Myers 2015).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the spectacle of hyper futuristic assemblages of city, and beyond the celebration of these global blueprints, the residents of this city appear where they have always been—on the ground and working for home. Examples of this are the marches and petitions to stop land-grabbing that most recently saw the removal of a corrupt village elder from Kosovo (Hospital Ward), or the establishment of ward based El Nino committees in a variety of villages. This resistance is also attested to by the large number, and continuous proliferation, of community groups that tackle garbage collection, incessant

fires, bridge building, toilet maintenance, electricity and water provision. Unquestionably these actions manifest many situated contradictions and violences, but these are paradoxes that also reflect larger and more unequal local and global politico-economic practices.

Whether these imperfect actions confirm the "outlaw" beginnings and natures of a marginalized area is beside the point. What we should look at is how these 'barefoot activisms' are more about creating a city where people can live and not just "do business." Referring to the hegemony of these plans and their persistent ineffectiveness, one of my interlocutors stated the following: "Masterplan? We do not want any more masters'. They are going to build a sewage line but they don't even build toilets. We need houses."

This excoriation of technocratic planning is anchored within the painful realization that a 42 kilometre superhighway will be built faster than a house for a single mother; that the Nairobi Metro 2030 Vision Plan can make a decision as definitive as having a "Nairobi Philharmonic Orchestra" (Nairobi Metro 2030 2008, 79) but will not make any pronouncements about the exact number of toilets, clean water taps, clinics and access bridges that will be built in its margins. Therefore, a "strained relationship" with the ongoing proposals for urban planning will definitely persist in Mathare – if they are even noted. And in recognizing the "long-running drama", a telenovela actually, of master plan declarations that have never materialized in this part of the city, almost none of my interviewees speak with enthusiasm or even reference the spatial projects to come. These ruins will continue in their "own rules of operation" (Myers 2015, 332), uninspired by yet another proposal for Nairobi that does little to include them.

Speaking to the inherent disparities within formal planning documents in Nairobi Myers (2015) states that:

But until the yawning gap is narrowed between the elites' visions and the experiences of ordinary city residents, all the master plans in the world will not lead to the growth of inclusive, relational cities with an improving quality of life and declining rates of inequalities (343).

It appears that it is not just Mathare residents who are unenthusiastic about planning proposals. Experientially, city dwellers know that it is only from their determinations that poor neighbourhoods will change, and so we can continue to expect more grounded inattention to the proliferating urban blueprints from within the ever expanding city margins. The more the 'world-class city' is pursued on a national level , the clearer it will be that it is only through the 'messy labours' of ruins that this city will survive, regardless of what it says in this or the next masterplan.

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