What is the good city?

The development of industrial capitalism in Europe gave rise to conditions that motivated the rise of modern urban planning. In Africa, urban models for ordering society emerged in the late 1930s. Andrew Byerley looks at the laboratory of urban Africa.

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Perhaps a starting point for a city to qualify as good would be the city that does not kill. Modern urban planning emerged during the 19th century partly as a response to the fact that cities were, in fact, killing en masse. Squalid and overcrowded housing, rudimentary healthcare at best, wretched working conditions in the “Satanic mills,” compounded by the ravages of alcoholism, fire and major epidemics such as the 1832 cholera outbreaks resulted in a life expectancy at birth of just two years in some British cities. However, the obvious disharmonies of the early industrial city – made all the more evident as the “iron horse” began to carve open areas of slum tenements to the gaze of one and all – also caused the city and city dwellers to begin to be constituted as targets for “improvement.” Indeed, the spectacle of the dystopian city, coupled with developments in the social and natural sciences, prompted an outpouring of utopian designs for the “good city.” Robert Owen’s *New Harmony* settlement in North America and Charles Fourier’s *Phalanstery* being but two notable examples. Foucault tellingly frames this era as the advent of “urban social medicine.”

This will to improve was no simple humanitarian knee-jerk response: cities had long been deadly without provoking much intervention. Nor did developments in the fields of science and technology make intervention inevitable. Indeed, many powerful forces opposed state intervention in areas such as housing, despite harrowing living conditions. Of more decisive importance for the actual implementation of interventions to improve urban “life” was the existence of powerful strategic incentives to actually do so. Bruno Latour concisely, albeit sardonically, identified such a need as follows:

> The consumption of human life as a combustible for the production of wealth led first in the English cities, then in the continental ones, to a veritable “energy crisis”. The cities could not go on being death chambers and cesspools, the poor being wretched, ignorant, bug-ridden, contagious vagabonds. The revival and extension of exploitation – or prosperity, if you prefer – required a better-educated population and clean, airy, rebuilt cities. (Latour 1988: 18)

Indeed, with the development of industrial capitalism the notion that a healthy nation (especially healthy cities) would beget a wealthy nation would make itself manifest firstly in a range of model industrial worker settlements and, somewhat later, in designs for entire model industrial cities.

From the late-1930s, such urban models for engineering society found new opportunities for application, the laboratory of urban Africa. In British colonial Africa, the 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act signalled the start of the colonial project of developing modern urban subjects out of “tribal” Africans. Comprehensive urban planning and housing design were again prioritised tools and many Western architects and planners travelled to British and French colonial Africa. The paradigmatic model of the “good colonial city” – paradigmatic not least for its provision of formally planned African housing areas – was Thornton White’s *Nairobi Master Plan* of 1948, which adopted and adapted the key tenets of Western planning, including functional zoning at the scale of the city, the neighbourhood unit, housing estates and infrastructure to instil a sense of “community” among urban residents.
Capturing the social engineering intent of this planned, model colonial city is best done by quoting from the plan itself: “From early childhood the ways of modern, regular, time bound life can be instilled, and need not be acquired arduously in later life… It is the translation of the values of tribal life into modern terms which is most clearly realized in Neighbourhood Planning.”

Did this herald the model “good” African city? In Uganda, for example, the construction of the large African housing estates in Kampala and Jinja – designed by the German architect and planner Ernst May – entailed the forced removal of thousands of African households located on the urban periphery, their living conditions framed by the colonial powers as deplorable and the areas given monikers such as “the black ring” and the “sceptic fringe.” In their place were built Naguru and Nakawa African housing estates in Kampala, and in Jinja the Walukuba African Housing Estate, spaces reserved for those with formal sector jobs in the state-planned industries that would set Uganda on the road to “development,” Western style. In my own research, I have followed the social and material developments in these estates up to the present time. The initial intention of these housing areas as spaces for engineering “the new Africa” were soon subverted in the economic and political turmoil following independence. Indeed, already in 1965 the Jinja Municipal Housing Committee decreed how the estates were “rapidly becoming an unhealthy and increasingly lawless slum, especially in terms of overcrowding, crime and poor sanitation.” By the late-1990s, almost none of the thousands of residents living in the estate had a “formal” sector job. Instead, most constructed their livelihoods from informal sector activities such as trading, urban agriculture, brewing and a range of other activities.

Despite the physical decay of the built infrastructure, there was a sense that residents had constructed, if not the “good city,” then at least a place that worked for them. While some contemporary writing on the African city does verge on “slum” romanticism, the case of the Ugandan housing estates does bear witness to the dynamism and creativity of urban residents to fashion workable urban spaces through lived and practised knowledge. However, in July 2011 the Naguru and Nakawa Housing Estates were demolished, despite vehement protests from the displaced residents, making way for an “eco-city” suburb, today’s internationally circulating “model” of the “good” city. Among displaced residents this was interpreted instead as yet another case of land-grabbing and displacement of supposedly “problematic” groups from central city areas. Indeed, coupled with other cases, it is possible to discern a government discourse that legitimates the “development” of any state-owned land in the name of societal progress and national “development.” By extension, those who protest are liable to be labelled as against development.

This was powerfully emphasised to me in 2011 in the sentiments of the former residents displaced from the above mentioned Naguru and Nakawa housing estates: “Our stand is not anti-Government or anti-development… We are against development on property that is actually ours by law. The development must be for us and by us.”

The notion of “For us and by us” – while not unproblematic – would seem to be a productive criterion to be able to at least move in the direction of “the good city.” However, despite research proving the benefits of integrating local knowledge into the planning process, state and city governors still show a notable weakness for abstract universal solutions. One currently influential example is Paul Romer’s solution to global urban poverty, the Charter City. Romer argues that Southern cities simply don’t work and can’t work: poor planning, a lack of “correct” rules and institutions, endemic corruption and massive informal growth make any meaningful “correction” impossible. His “solution” is to build entirely new cities wired with the “correct” technology, governance and urban planning regimes and to allow developed countries with a “successful” track record to provide the necessary expertise. While it is, perhaps, too strong to restate Aimé Césaire’s consideration from 1955 that the West must construct the Other as “barbarian” in order to justify its mission as the world’s civilising force, urban imaginaries such as Romer’s do strongly intimate the continued existence of avatars of colonialism. Whether the “charter city” simply represents a macro-scale gated community, the latest utopian model of the “good city,” or is simply a case of a vehicle for creating investment opportunities for Western capital, time will tell.