An urban revolution that doesn't make me a statistic

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By Geci Karuri-Sebina

An unfolding global polycrisis has accentuated the critique of contemporary urbanism, which has failed to be inclusive and developmental, especially in the Global South. A shift in trajectory will require a shift in our imaginaries, inclusionary processes and institutions.

"I want one day to return to being soil in my city, and I want to do that with some pride. Pride that this place is and was a reflection of something meaningful. That in my city's soul — reflected through its design, materiality and functionings — is held in my DNA. My realities, my hopes and my dreams. And yours too. I don't want to be a mere statistic of my city, and nor do I wish for you to be. I want to be in, of and for my city. I want my city to be me, and for it to also be you." — Geci Karuri-Sebina at 'URBAN REVOLUTION Aurrera!', The Bay Awards premiere, held in Bilbao, 25 October 2023.

I recently asked colleagues in an online meeting what they would stop doing immediately if they never had to worry about earning an income again. There were many answers — some funny, some profound. But the one that made everyone pause to think was, "I would stop living in the city immediately. I would go to my rural home."

Why would anyone feel that way, and why was it so understandable to everyone present? What is it about cities, these places that I advocate for and seek to understand better as an urbanist, that makes them merely a necessary evil for probably millions of urban dwellers around the world? What might they be to one person, but perhaps not to many others? What are they elevating, and what are they hiding?

The polycrisis appears in ephemeral and consistent moments of urban life. I have often questioned what cities hide, and perhaps part of the answer lies in this. I have watched Mazezuru worshippers gather around waters and ponds in southern African town and city velds — invisible to city planning in spite of their luminous white robes and consistent presence. Where is spirit and culture in our cities? I have seen a man slaughter and divvy up slabs of a young lamb in the white walled and tiled passageways of Baku, in a beautifully generous and bloody normal. Where is ritual in our cities? I have seen children play in cemeteries and sewage channels. Where are spaces for innocence and play in our cities? I have visited immigrant districts in many major European cities to see how 'they' live (and 'they' are always there somewhere; you just need to ask). Where are the 'others' — the aliens — in our cities? I have seen informality in the Global South go from being an apparently non-existent fact to an over-theorised fad — changing nothing either way. Where are the economically and socially disenfranchised in our cities? I have seen parks and other public spaces designed to keep undesirables and hang-abouts (also known as, 'the public') out of them; I have seen the most expensive & best endowed parts of the city failing to do the bare minimum to ensure inclusion of differently abled persons. Where are your 'lessers' — the money-less, homeless, jobless, genderless? Analytical rigidity can be a tool of power to erase the life and hide the souls of cities. Unnoticed moments still happen to someone.

Our cities hide a lot; primarily, they hide difference and deep contradictions.

As a start, I offer three factors to consider for this revolution: changing imagination, inclusion and institutions. I believe these may offer guidance for the different actions and roles of public interest that we may need from urban dwellers, built environment practitioners and city governments at the very least.

First, I shall make the case for imagination. What is it that makes cities 'good cities'? Is it their fossilized histories? Their monumentalised legacies of power and capital? Or their hyper-efficiency that is required for capital to tick along for those that feed off it, even if this means the city might turn its back on the majority of their actual human and non-human inhabitants — the rivers, mountains, deserts, animals, insects — until we come to the untenable moment when we declare: polycrisis!

What makes cities good? Being beautiful, resilient, sustainable and proud? I think first, it's imagination — an expression of place, time and constituencies. It is authenticity, aspiration and possibility. It's a kind of magic that has to happen in a situated and social way, each city with a creative vision of its own.

Whose imagination a city invites, permits and supports is the first area where we have to focus in this revolution. Because modernism has imposed a globalised idea of city-ness that would have us mono-crop cities everywhere — making them all the same kind of shiny, singular rendering of a 'smart city', which is exclusive, hostile and irrelevant. Decolonized imagination would offer more expansive possibilities[1–3].

Second, I'll make a case for inclusion, which is sometimes misunderstood. This is because we have a contemporary discourse that has appropriated the idea of 'inclusion' to suggest that it is merely an end. A so-called 'inclusive city' can still be produced within the same dominant paradigm — the unimaginative schemas and moulds that reproduce divided concrete jungles, but can then insert fixes (quotas, zones, murals) that offer a representation of inclusivity. Inclusionary housing. Inclusionary districts. But this is a lie. It is a lie because it is the very process of city-making that has long been left to the exclusive power, vision and expertise of the few, and that has repeatedly reproduced places that have neither the capacity nor the earnest intent to include all of what and who the urban holds. So that participation in city-making is a space for some — not for every — or even any-one.

'Inclusion' has to mean a lot more. It has to reclaim the rights for many urban actors — including indigenous and new communities — not just to be occupants and consumers in cities, but to understand and express themselves as part of city processes[4–8]. Otherwise, we will have very angry places where people, nature and spirits feel alienated — and they will respond with anger, because those places are not home.

Third, is the case for institutions — which have been described as "the rules of the game"[9], and indeed they are. Institutions go

beyond public or private entities; they are also ways of behaving, of interacting. They are literally 'the way things work around here'.

Cities are places of both explicit and hidden contradictions. Their logic and what keeps them on their trajectory can be very opaque and difficult to notice or question. Often, they surprise both their victims and their executioners. Cities can be an illusion — mirages of safe habitat, thirst quenching, pleasure, prosperity and community — while generally being structured to mete these privileges out only in unequal doses to particular actors in a hierarchical game where the dice is loaded and the rules are biased.

The way cities work — the institutions — that is, public-private laws, regulations and norms, which are codified in their architectures and guarded by their gatekeepers, all ensure that the 'city' idea sustains. As what? As a property market that grows, recycles and even hides capital. A model that sustains and reproduces the status quo. Hopes and dreams are kept alive to keep the game going, but the rules of the game are set to keep social hierarchy intact. And all can be complicit in the inertia. We have seen municipal governments in some parts of the world become increasingly behoven to act in the interest of increasing property values and utility sales (increasing rather than decreasing domestic consumption of water and energy) in order to balance their budgets. Across the world we gentrify cities because haves matter more than have nots. These are perverse hierarchies underpinning our institutional regimes[10–12]. We have to question them.

For cities to be more than a brutal real estate venture protected by the state, the rule book has to be questioned. Transversality — working beyond the hierarchies — is yet an illusion in our institutions.

Imagination, inclusion and institutional change

I am calling for a revolution against an order of hidden people, agendas and logics. Against cities as the expensive real estate of a few, rather than places of freedom. Against cities as sites of consumption and conformity rather than of creativity and diversity. Against cities as a formula, rather than a beautiful mosaic. I am asking us to reject cities as places of monochromatic misery, rather than places of hospitality, hope and mystery that could be 'home' for billions.

As for right now, I feel little hope for transforming the ways in which our cities work, given the trajectory we are on. In the places where I work and live, many of us critical role-players are still too colonized by what we are taught in school, by hegemonic urban images and management practices, and by systemic biases.

But I do see scope for an urban revolution as an ongoing practice — of questioning our own selves, our roles and our practices as urban dwellers; of worrying less about the debilitating theatrics of urban statistics and projections, and worrying more about what sits right in front of us now, visibly or hidden. And while this may not guarantee cities that look or function better, it could at least dignify cities with a sense of agency. It could signal an effort to do something real that people can take ownership of.

I believe there would be value in this because it would make for better soil. And better soil may be ground for new and, perhaps eventually, better seed. And that revolution may just enable an evolution of city-ness that might make us all proud ancestors and much more than mere statistics.

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