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SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Building the City from Below: Toward a Citizen-Centered City-Making

Jennifer Hart. 2024. ***Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra***. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 316 pp. $45.00 Paper. ISBN: 9780253069337.

Stephen Marr and Patience Mususa, eds. 2023. ***DIY Urbanism in Africa: Politics and Practice***. London: Bloomsbury. 256 pp. $20.96. Paper. ISBN: 9781786999023.

Shakirah E. Hudani. 2024. ***Master Plans and Minor Acts: Repairing the City in Post-Genocide Rwanda***. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 258 pp. $32.50. Paper. ISBN: 9780226832722.

In his book *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott writes, "We have repeatedly observed the natural and social failures of thin, formulaic simplifications imposed through the agency of state power" (1998, 309). State and top-down planning lacks *mētis*, or the common sense and practical experience that people on the ground possess of their everyday environments. Instead, Scott proposes a focus on practical knowledge, which "depends on an exceptionally close and astute observation of the environment" (1998, 324).

Africa's rapid urbanization provides a useful test of Scott's argument, as governments employ various strategies to accommodate the growing population in its cities (Hoelscher et al. 2023). But the gap between government plans and residents' everyday experience is vast, as Martin Murray accurately describes: "At the present moment, the everyday realities of urban life are largely shaped by a very different set of unregulated quotidian practices that operate outside the sanctioned authority of official policymaking and planning initiatives" (2017, 25). The failure to bridge this gap undermines the development of inclusive cities that consider the needs of all residents (Paller 2021).

Drawing from these insights, this review essay of three books outlines a model of citizen-centered city-making that can inform processes of urban development across Africa and the globe. By placing urban citizens at the center of the city-making process, these studies offer a blueprint for an inclusive and just future. But they also offer a stern warning: when state power and government authority fail to consider indigenous knowledge and bypass citizen participation, processes

of urbanization can exacerbate inequalities and exclude residents from a better life that city living should provide.

But that doesn't mean that residents don't resist, bargain, and negotiate for a better life. It is through this process of contention that cities are actually made and remade. Citizen-centered city-making is the process through which residents respond to state power and make space their own.[1] I argue that citizen-centered city-making involves a process of claim-making, contention, and creating the commons.

First, city-making involves modes of claim-making, or the everyday strategies that people use to pursue rights fulfillment (Gallagher, Kruks-Wisner, and Taylor 2024), which can be individual or collective endeavors. Second, city-making is inherently contentious, where residents make claims to the same goods, services, and space as others, leading to winners and losers. Third, city-making requires reconceptualizing cities as commons, where insiders and outsiders make decisions over the rules and procedures of daily life and can extract social value from urban life (Kohn 2016). Citizen-centered city-making, therefore, integrates *mētis* into the built environment, institutional development, and governance practices.

During the rest of this essay, I apply these insights through the empirical cases discussed in the books. These case studies draw from different points in history —from colonial rule in Accra, Ghana, through postindependence crises across many African cities, to rebuilding for the future in urban Rwanda—to show that *mētis* deserves a central place in city-making.

Creatively claiming the city

Jennifer Hart's *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra* tells the story of the making of modern Accra, where British colonialists used regulation, capital accumulation, and modernist conceptions of order to rebuild the city according to new logics. This process sought to displace the livelihoods of the indigenous Ga people, who relied on farming, fishing, and salt making. The colonial administration used planning procedures and regulations to try to contain African autonomy and agency, defining a wide range of indigenous practices as "nuisances." Yet Hart argues that it was not these formal institutions of planning that remade Accra, but rather the *mētis* of indigenes who creatively reimagined their urban futures "within, against, and outside" of state power (11). This contributed to an indigenous urbanism across the infrastructural domains of sanitation, health, economy, mobility, and housing that integrated local histories, values, and practices of residents into a process of city-making.

Hart's method relies on reconstructing the different ways that indigenous Africans claimed the city as their own under colonial rule. She pays special attention to the petitions that residents, business owners, organized groups of tax payers, and Ga political leaders wrote to the governor's office and elected officials "to demand access to infrastructure, protest a lack of representation and investment, appeal taxation and fines, and push back against the emerging

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culture of urban governance in Accra" (27).[2] For example, in the chapter on sanitation, traditional authorities and residents sent petitions to the government protesting the Towns Council Ordinance of 1894 which sought to raise revenue for sanitation measures. But the Council also gave local leaders new opportunities for personal advancement and empowerment, through which organizations and associations reached out to them to seek connections to state power. These regulatory environments created new spaces for debate and dissent, leading to contestation over the right to the city.

The deliberations over public health were most intense. Hart observes, "Chiefs, sanitary inspectors, traders, medical officers—not to mention African political representatives, lawyers, doctors, and newspaper editors—and other colonial officials all struggled over power, land, and resources through debates about the meaning of 'public health' in the town" (84). While indigenous practices relied on a combination of healing practices, the colonial administration introduced a far more coercive form of public health measures, including demolition and home inspections (as well as large-scale vaccination campaigns) which largely sidelined the chiefs and centralized authority. They outlawed indigenous burial practices in family homes by enforcing cemetery burial, creating new land markets in the process (Balakrishnan 2022). These policies left profound legacies on the built environment, as the colonial regime invested in sanitary measures in European areas, leading to slum conditions in native areas. These areas would then be demolished. Europeans sought to manage and regulate Africans by criminalizing African practices with the goal of protecting European health—not the public.

Africans made their greatest claims to the city via their economic strength in what became known as the "informal economy." While the colonial regime sought to marginalize Africans in favor of expatriate enterprise, indigenous Ga constantly pushed back: they objected to relocating fishmonger activities, boycotted rent controls, and took over the motor transport industry. Most of these activities took place outside the formal purview of the state, contributing to what Hart calls a process of informalization. But this informalization was not merely economic, it was political. Hart writes, "The union of market women, merchants, ex-servicemen, chiefs, and educated elites in the economic discontent represented the emergence of a new national consciousness that was firmly rooted in a desire for economic opportunity." A popular Ga saying was born: "*Agbene wo hie etserewo*" ("Now we are awake") (145).

It is through this process of informalization that Africans claimed ownership and control over their city. As Hart observes, "Urban residents shaped the emergence of a distinctly *Accra* culture" (150174174). She goes on to conclude that the quotidian practices of lorry drivers and other entrepreneurs "often had political consequences, even if African agents did not frame them as political acts" (ibid). Accra was a quintessentially African city "not only because of its precolonial roots but also the persistence of Africans in shaping the plan for the city long after it became the colonial capital" (ibid).

Hart's intervention neatly applies Scott's concept of *mētis* to the making of an African city. But it does even more. She maintains that practical skills and indigenous knowledge are not only used as forms of resistance, but part of a

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broader claim-making practice that is itself inherently political. It is a form of taking ownership of the city and establishing local control. Perhaps more provocatively, it is a form of citizen-centered city-making where African logics create the physical and social infrastructure of the city.

Contention through crisis

Consensus, cooperation, and collaboration headline the talking points in citizen-centered urban planning initiatives. Participatory budgeting relies on building stronger communities through civic engagement, while *in situ* slum upgrading integrates informal settlement residents into the planning process. All of these sideline politics, either through outsourcing government activities to apolitical NGOs—what Ferguson (1990) famously called the anti-politics machine—or to the rule by experts through techno-politics (Mitchell 2002). Yet these initiatives risk keeping the status quo in place by reproducing socioeconomic inequalities that already exist in the city and the built environment.

In their impressive volume *DIY Urbanism in Africa: Politics and Practice*, editors Stephen Marr and Patience Mususa push back on these conventional modes of urbanism and urban planning initiatives to argue that times of crisis can offer a radical break from the past to initiate new experiments in governance—what they say is "an attempt to initiate something new and disrupt the status quo" (194). They bring together a series of case studies to highlight the different forms of associational arrangements and social practices that are active in daily life to provision services and manage infrastructure in cities, especially those that lack state capacity. These cases range from residence associations (Agbo Jr., Chapter Four) and community policing (Adetula, Chapter Five) in Lagos and indigenous practices (Hart, Chapter Seven) and placemaking activities (Okoye, Chapter Eight) in Accra to utopian environmentalism in Durban (Daniel, Chapter Ten) and backyard gardening and poultry farming in the Zambian Copperbelt (Mususa, Chapter Twelve). These case studies represent the agency of Africans, emphasizing the quotidian practices and *mētis* apparent in Scott's work.

Integrating quotidian practices and ordinary individuals into the city-making process has emancipatory potential because it recognizes the agency of marginalized people. Drawing from Hannah Arendt, Marr and Mususa suggest that "In the current moment of multiple crises—socioeconomic, environmental, an ongoing pandemic, widespread democratic erosion—and uncertainties, DIY becomes a key form of politics utilized by those on the margins, sometimes by choice, oftentimes by necessity" (192). As Marr outlines in Chapter One, the "performance" of governance that emerges out of crisis is a process of city-making because it involves "new ways of becoming [that] are made possible and new ways of getting by—or even better, getting out—are invented" (19). This is akin to the story that Paller (2019a) tells in Accra when informal settlement residents were forced to rebuild their structures and neighborhood after a fire—creating a new urban future through the process of "building permanence."

Inhabiting and occupying urban space is a key way that residents of Ga Mashie create a civic public, explains Victoria Okoye in Chapter Eight. Residents of this central Accra neighborhood claim these spaces for social and cultural practices,

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appropriating streets and back alleyways for celebrations of births and funerals, as well as sports such as football and boxing. "The sheer weight of activity transforms this street" (118), Okoye writes, thereby connecting past generations to future generations. These spatial practices embody the "lived experiences of an urban majority who are already in the process of remaking the city" (125).

Similarly, Mohammed-Bello Yunusa uses the terms space hacking and space stealing to describe how indigenous communities occupy unauthorized space in northern Nigeria. In Chapter Three, Mathias Agbo Jr. draws from the example of the Makoko Floating School in Lagos to show how citizen-led placemaking can harmonize urban visions. Antje Daniel provides a more revolutionary example with her discussion of Green Camp in Durban, South Africa, a utopian environmental community that is "reshaping the urban place, through which urban citizens are maintaining their agency" (145). She explains how citizens are initiating change through everyday practices, helping communities heal from spatial and social segregation.

But the book warns that the state must recognize the presence of its residents for this potential to be reached, as Marr and Mususa explain: "The progressive potential of DIY will surely be limited if the states in which these tactics and politics are practiced turn ever more hostile to citizen innovation and participation" (199). At the center of these placemaking processes is contention. Nowhere is this clearer than in Henrik Angerbrandt's Chapter Six on Lagos. He writes, "Someone is always attempting to protect their carved-out space within the city, often on behalf of someone else" (75). He emphasizes the hierarchies and discrimination that take place in the hidden transcript, which can often reshape the state in exclusionary ways. Higher-ups in government instrumentalize area boys and political parties, capturing grassroots structures for their own empowerment. He concludes, "The state government in Lagos, by linking these structures to the ruling party, reinforces its control at the grassroots" (83). As Marr and Mususa make clear, "DIY politics forces us to consider how politics unfolds, the actors involved, and the ends to which it is directed" (187). With any process of politics, there will be winners and losers.

Creating a commons

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 is the most extreme example of crisis, and Rwanda's government was subsequently tasked with rebuilding the country, which includes its capital city, Kigali. Shakirah E. Hudani's *Master Plans and Minor Acts: Repairing the City in Post-Genocide Rwanda* asks a fundamental question: What does national repair look like at the level or scale of the city?

Hudani points to the quotidian practices and "shared ties that enable neighbors to forge conciliation and cooperation in relation to the built environment, the neighborhood, and the home" (3). She calls these minor acts. These practices are as simple as helping a neighbor place a roof tile on a home or gathering a pile of firewood together. But they play a major role in a politics of repair by inscribing place-based social memories into the built environment of the city.

In effect, these minor acts are part of a broader process of city-making that connects the past to the present to the future. She writes:

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> I characterize the city as an enduring archive of remembrance and loss. In their built forms, such 'wounds' in urban Rwanda call for a deeper reading of forms of identity and injury that endure in social memory and built space, and also for what they offer to a pedagogy of postconflict rupture and rebuilding, for which the city serves as a living repository. (98)

Though Hudani doesn't theorize these minor acts as commoning (Linebaugh 2009), her practices of repair depend on collaborative participatory processes of accessing, negotiating, and governing common resources (Ostrom 2015). She envisions a city in which all residents make decisions over the rules and procedures of daily life and can extract social value from urban life (Kohn 2016). What she is effectively advocating is an urban rebuilding process through the creation of a commons.

This is clear in her discussion of informal settlements in the second part of her book. She explains how residents of the Bannyahe informal settlement used collective agency in resisting relocation to other parts of the city which were in line with Kigali's Master Plan. Instead, they "galvanized collective agency in seeking to remain" (125), what Liza Weinstein (2014) has effectively called the "right to stay put." Facing dispossession, abandonment, and alienation, Bannyahe residents fought for the commons that they had created. As one resident explains, "I can't live outside the city; I am from the city and belong here" (140).

Hudani's analysis of the Rwandan government's Kigali Master Plan demonstrates how state simplifications *à la* Scott end up undermining social progress. This occurs materially by accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) through a technocratic governance scheme that seeks to modernize the nation-state. In Chapter Three, similar to Hart's discussion of colonial rule in Accra, the state seeks to cleanse the population by drawing on the word "isuku," meaning cleanliness, and instrumentalizing it as a social metaphor of the body politic. The Master Plan attempts to green the city through communal hygiene practices, effectively transforming subjects into modern citizens. Drawing from a long literature on biopolitics, she suggests, "Landscaped roads are merely one visible facet of a deep governmental interior that supports a green apparatus of governmentalized order at the local level" (81). The Master Plan "cleanses" the city of the past by envisioning a future that dispossesses a huge portion of the existing population. Just as Scott warned, "top-down state planning erases, defamiliarizes, and depoliticizes these local claims to place by the use of displacement, relocation, and movement; and by simultaneously thwarting possibilities for voluntary mobility in the country, including those that involve the right to the city" (186).

In the context of post-Genocide Rwanda, these state simplifications are far more dangerous: they involve what Hudani calls "disorientive dispossession," "not only because they dislocate and render unstable the homes and livelihoods of low-income urban residents, but because they create a literal disorientation in ways of life, modes of social reproduction, and links between personhood, place, and directions for the future" (166). The Master Plan erases the creation of a commons, undermining the *mētis* needed to construct a more just urban future.

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But the process of city-making does not stop there: how residents respond to state power and make space their own articulates an alternative vision of city life based on citizen-centered minor acts at the center of Hudani's analysis.

Toward a citizen-centered city-making

Reading these three books together confirms that a model of citizen-centered city-making is an interdisciplinary pursuit. It involves the structural and institutional histories of urban space, where Hart's position as a historian is so effective. Marr and Mususa apply their insights as a political scientist and anthropologist, respectively, to dissect the politics of everyday life in times of crisis. Their contribution is huge: while many scholars effectively point out the importance of everyday strategies in coping with precarity in African urban life (e.g. Simone 2004; Tostensen, Tvedten, and Vaa 2001), they emphasize the larger struggles for power in which they are a part, which contribute to winners and losers. Hudani's perspective as a critical geographer sheds light on the role of place and space in the making of a city. However, place and space are not only material, but involve struggles for recognition, dignity, and belonging in the city. City-making involves the dynamic and political process of claiming urban citizenship (Harvey 2008). All three books confirm Scott's insight that the future is uncertain and contingent, and no amount of top-down planning can account for the human inventiveness in everyday life.

Yet this holistic approach also helps poke holes in the arguments outlined in the respective books. For example, while Hart's book does an excellent job of demonstrating how politics underlies the history of making Accra, she could do more to engage with political scientists who have uncovered the role that party politics play in the development of Accra (Paller 2019b). It would be useful to apply insights from Angerbrandt's chapter in Lagos to shed light on how the indigenous actors that Hart references are linked to formal government representatives, and especially the political parties that emerge toward the end of colonial rule. Alternatively, *DIY Urbanism in Africa: Politics and Practice* might be strengthened by providing more of the historical, political, and institutional conditions that explain whether do-it-yourself urbanism is revolutionary, or simply reproduces the unequal status quo. Finally, there could be more examples of the minor acts that are so important to Hudani's story. By incorporating some of Marr and Mususa's insights about the politics of DIY practices into her analysis, Hudani could strengthen her argument about what types of cities and neighborhoods these minor acts actually produce, beyond the solid critique of top-down planning and the Kigali Master Plan that the book so effectively offers.

The pursuit of citizen-centered city-making suggests that theory and practice cannot be separated from each other in the pursuit of socially just and inclusive cities. The *mētis* of local communities must be incorporated into urban planning, and the theories of city-making that emerge must pay close attention to context. Politics underlie the entire process of citizen-centered city-making, precisely because "urban residents are not only doing things individually but with others"

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(Jimenez 2017, 453). These three excellent books show how claiming citizenship in the city, engaging in contention during crises, and creatively creating a commons provides a template for city-making across the globe.

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Notes

1. I use the term "citizen" to refer to all residents of the city who are members of the urban political community. This includes host populations and migrant communities. They do not have to be citizens of the country.
2. This approach draws from the historiographical tradition outlined in Korieh (2010).

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