AFRICAN CITIES: COMPETING CLAIMS ON URBAN LAND

Paul Jenkins

Many African cities are considered to be in crisis, as measured by the ‘formal’ institutional order of late capitalist modernity: based on individualism as the basis of social relations, mediated by the idea of the nuclear family as the elementary unit of social reproduction; on citizenship in a representative democracy administered by a constitutional state as the basis of political relations; and on utilitarian rationality in a system of generalised commodity production and market exchange (mediated by state redistribution) as the basis of economic relations. As such, much of the actual functioning of these cities is considered ‘informal’, a nomenclature which inherently is based on negative concepts of the ‘illegal’, ‘un-authorised’ and ‘non-regulated’. However these ‘informal’ activities are often more socially and culturally legitimate, as well as economically essential, for the majority and hence politically powerful. African urban areas in many ways draw on norms and institutions derived from indigenous and often pre-capitalist socio-cultural orders, in which now dominant ‘Western’ rationalities are likely to have played a limited role. Here the basis for social relations may be more kinship and community-based than individualist or nuclear family-oriented; the basis for political relations may draw more on accepted authoritarianism or negotiated patronage than elected representation; and the basis for economic relations may draw more on principles of social redistribution or reciprocity than on market exchange.

This chapter examines these issues, with reference to other recent research on urban land in Sub-Saharan Africa, whilst drawing on a long engagement by the author with urban land issues in Mozambique in particular. It argues for an approach to urban land rights and management (including land use and environmental planning) that is based on understanding of both a) the realpolitik of urban land in the region as well as b) the mental models and organisational practices of so-called informal land access mechanisms. If we continue with the prevalent assumptions of late capitalist modernity as the norm, and with approaches based on limited actual socio-political analysis, the current approaches to urban land development in African cities run the
risk of creating wider social exclusion and economic marginalisation as the region urbanises rapidly. To be more effective in facing such issues requires transcending the current disciplinary boundaries of urban studies in a move to a collective understanding of ‘perceptions of the possible’.

The chapter suggests that urban land in Sub-Saharan Africa has been used primarily for elite group benefit from the pre-colonial period all through the colonial period, with different forms of control of access. Many of these, however, have been based on, or have included, forms of social redistribution to underpin elite hegemony. In the post-colonial period controls of access to urban land were relaxed in practice although many ruling elites established an anti-urban bias in development, which is arguably just a different form of the same approach. In recent years mechanisms to control urban land access are currently being re-instated, which the chapter argues primarily benefit elite groups. This is related to the interests of international capital as well as changing class structure. Will these new developments mean a radical change in approach to urban land access, or is it just a transition period to another manifestation of negotiated power balance?

The chapter argues that the normative analysis that underpins development approaches to urban physical and economic development (e.g. Devas 2004) need to recognise factors such as the above in dealing with the contextual specificities of urban areas and their predominant realpolitik. However it is also based on dissatisfaction with a separate largely descriptive literature that—while suggesting that what is taking place is not all bad but to be celebrated—does not acknowledge the inherent problems and suggest how these can be mitigated (e.g. Simone 2004). In this it suggests the need for an investigative approach that is firmly based on the parameters of contextual analysis as well as understanding ‘perceptions of the possible’. Thus, instead of investigating why African urban areas do not conform to essentially Northern norms, or indigenous rural ‘traditions’, we need to investigate with African urban dwellers how they continue to produce and adapt urban forms within their socio-cultural and political economic realities—and consider how this might be realistically enhanced within specific and general contexts. In the words of Coquery-Vidrovitch:

As long as we lack a theoretical and historical account of the forces that underpin global differentiations, we remain unable to account for processes that lie at the heart of African urban underdevelopment: the