

Formalising Informal Cities: Contested Space in Nairobi

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Programme Highlight

Nairobi, which has a population of 6.5 million, has doubled its size since 2009.¹ Nowhere is urban population expansion more keenly felt than on the streets – the circuits of circulation that make cities run. Or not.

A Modern City in Waiting

Naming the progress of the taxi I am sitting in and the long periods of not moving at all as a ‘traffic jam’, I am swiftly informed that this is ‘not a jam’. A traffic jam ‘is when you switch off the engine and go to sleep’. It is office closing time and armies of workers are marching along cracked and discontinuous footpaths out of the city towards their homes; indisputably the fastest way to get around at this time of day. Thousands of motor scooters – some of them taxis – weave in and out of the ‘not a jam’, jostling for space with brightly painted busses, taxis, 14 seat mini-busses, the occasional bicycle; all tangling with pedestrians, and people pulling carts laden with goods. The streets are where the city is navigated and viscerally experienced in tangles of bodies and metal.

The streets are also where the modern city is most keenly imagined. TV advertisements and giant billboards, funded by municipal authorities, announce the modern city – waiting to displace the informal settlements (or as some refer to them, slums²) and the tangled streets with gleaming tower blocks, green spaces and ordered routes, along which people and traffic flow unobstructed. The ‘Integrated Urban Development Master Plan’ (2014) devised between the Nairobi City Council and Japanese planning partners, which aims to deliver ‘spatial order of physical investments’,³ remains – for the time being - an aspiration.

¹<http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/nairobi-population/>

² Between 60% and 70% of Nairobi residents live in informal settlements, sometimes referred to as slums: <http://aphrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/NCSS2-FINAL-Report.pdf>

³ <http://citymasterplan.nairobi.go.ke/index.php/niuplan/background>

Progress

But steps towards a more formal city and transport infrastructure appear to be in process, and a project funded by the British Academy's *Cities and Infrastructure* Programme and led by Steve Cinderby at the University of York⁴ is supporting local advocates to negotiate the new city.⁵ The research team's focus in Nairobi⁶ is the interface between motorised traffic on the one hand – long a planning priority – and pedestrians and cyclists on the other who must take their chances, often with lethal consequences, in navigating the streets.

What do the people think?

The research is having a small but strategic impact on the city. Researchers have organised a consultation exercise with local people, unused to being invited to contribute to government planning initiatives. Finding their voices is a big step forward in the exercise of urban citizenship. Using inventive methods that include participatory mapping and digital space to aid re-imagining the streets, local people are providing useful suggestions that are being offered to city authorities. This kind of public buy-in is critical in the success of the formalisation of city space. The ways in which people use the streets is vital in re-design: people can easily disrupt, in their use of public space, designs that fail to acknowledge the lives they lead.

Formalising the Sharing of Space

At the moment urban space is shared informally as people push their way through the streets. The Killmani Ring Road is one of the team's intervention sites. Here the city's plans propose to formalise space-sharing between pedestrians, cyclists and motorised traffic as well as between shop owners, traders with informal stalls, the Ethiopian Church, manual car wash operators, piles of tyres – often with men sitting on them – and one of the city's most important shopping malls. Incorporating such a diversity of competing interests and uses of space is no small feat, and the authorities appear to be listening.

Street Party

The second intervention turns part of Lithuli Road in the city centre into a pedestrian zone so that local people can experience the street as a place to linger and congregate rather than push through on the way to somewhere else. The city authorities are collaborating in 'Placemaking Week',⁷ an initiative partly funded by the British Academy.

When I arrive to take a look at one of the events of 'Placemaking Week', the street is full of people and music instead of traffic. Lithuli Road looks more like a party than a major city route way. People are hanging out, listening to the music, painting the roads in bright colours, looking at the Nairobi 'then and now' photography exhibition that documents some of the ways in which the city has already changed; and scrawling comments on large sheets of paper, which are overwhelmingly supportive of the changes proposed.

⁴ *Instituting Creative Methodological Innovations for Inclusive, Sustainable Transport Planning*. Constant Cap, Daniel Onyango and Alicia Olago are key local delivery partners driving change on the ground.

⁵ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/cities-inclusive-sustainable-transport-planning>

⁶ A parallel research project in taking place in Kampala.

⁷ 30 October – 3 November 2018

Change the Streets

Even the re-routed bus drivers are largely on board. A ‘critical mass’ cycle ride is organised for the weekend along with various other activities that serve to inform, consult and entertain the people of Nairobi. Doubtless there are tough negotiations ahead, but key city authorities, some with the ear of the president, are enthusiastic about formalising Nairobi and making it a better city to live in. The new city, until now incrementally emerging in ad hoc ways, may in fact finally get under way.

Caroline Knowles is Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths University of London and Director of the British Academy's [Cities & Infrastructure](#) programme. Caroline writes about migration and circulation of material objects – some of the social forces constituting globalisation. She is particularly interested in cities, having done research in London, Hong Kong, Beijing, Fuzhou, Addis Ababa, Kuwait City and Seoul.



Preparing for the street party at Lithuli Road, Nairobi.

Image credit:
Caroline Knowles



Painting Lithuli Road in bright colours

Image credit:
Caroline Knowles