

URBAN revolution

As urbanisation accelerates across the Global South, cities across Africa are challenging traditional urban models by embracing the unique cultural, climatic and social realities of the continent

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Rush hour:
Tom Mboya Avenue, Nairobi
THOMAS COCKREM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By 2050, nearly 70% of humanity will live in urban areas, with much of this growth concentrated in the Global South. These cities are not just expanding, they're transforming, innovating and reimagining urban life for the 21st century. At the forefront of this transformation is Nzinga Biegueng Mboup, a Senegalese-Cameroonian architect and curator based in Dakar.

"The city is one of the fundamental categories for understanding contemporaneity," Mboup says. "It's not only in the cities where most of the world's population lives but also the spaces that generate the forms of coexistence and collective action that define a large part of our present."

EMBRACING THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The term "Global South" has gained prominence in recent years, uniting cities across continents under a shared identity. While some might critique it as a generic term that overlooks differences, Mboup sees value in exploring the similarities among these cities.

"I'm very much interested in the ways in which they are similar," she explains. "We share a lot of similar climatic zones; if we look at tropical countries, they tend to be in what is considered the Global South. There have been many examples of architectural currents that try to be very specific to the climate, such as tropical modernism in Brazil, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and West Africa."

Beyond climate, cultural elements like religion also create common threads. "Most of the Muslim world tends to be in the Global South," Mboup notes. "The way in which religion dictates daily lives of cities can have echoes between different places."

Mboup advocates for establishing a discourse that looks at architecture and urbanity through the lens of the Global South, rather than using the Global North as the standard. "I welcome the common heritage that these cities face," she says. "There are ways in which we can establish another form of discourse, ways of looking at architecture and urbanity through that lens."

CHALLENGING THE SUBURBIA MODEL

Despite the unique realities of cities in the Global South, the American model of suburbia continues to be a powerful influence. Indeed, a recent exhibition



Nzinga Biegueng Mboup

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at the Centre for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona reminded Mboup just how powerful this model of suburbia is because it still manages to be the standard in so many other parts of the world.

In Dakar, a city that is a peninsula and the westernmost point of the African continent, the suburbia model was imported during the 1950s and 1960s. "We had examples of social housing that echoed the American model of the single-unit, single-family household spread out in neighbourhoods," she recalls. "But those no longer exist because inhabitants have modified all of these housing units."

The reason for this transformation lies in the social fabric of Dakar. "They were a projection of a political ideal at a time when our first president wanted to create this kind of new urban class," Mboup explains. "But they were modelled on the idea of a single-family unit, which just isn't the reality. We live in what people call the extended family, and as the family extends, so does the housing."

Today, what were once single-family homes have been modified into four or five-storey buildings to accommodate extended families. Yet there remains a desire for the suburbia model among the new aspiring middle class, leading to the development of gated communities replicating the same model that has shown its failures.

"We exist within this state of tension of still looking towards northern models but seeing that when we have adapted those models they have failed," she observes. "It's time we pay attention to other requirements that housing and urbanity need to respond to."

INNOVATIONS FROM WITHIN

Mboup expresses frustration when asked what cities of the Global South can bring to the world. "I see every day the many possibilities, lessons and future forms of urbanity that are being created in my city and many sub-Saharan African cities," she says. "But these lessons aren't being taken into account by leaders or decision-makers."

She highlights the incredible inventiveness, resilience and adaptability of citizens. "In Dakar, we have ambulant traders (who sell items in traffic), and it's fascinating to see what they sell," she shares. "You could almost understand the timing of the year and everything that is going on by just looking at what they sell because it changes depending on the circumstances." ➔



Stall economy:
A fruit seller in Nairobi



Below:
Catching up with the talk
of the town in Marrakech
Right:
A stall in one of the city's souks



During the COVID-19 Pandemic, for instance, traders began selling masks on the streets. “They always have something that you need,” Mboup says. “It’s incredible. I don’t know how they figure it out but they adapt rapidly to change.”

Neighbourhoods in Dakar also provide a mix of uses, with commerce self-generating based on the density and needs of the inhabitants. “There isn’t a kind of planning to say that every so-and-so corner will have a specific shop,” she explains. “But I can’t walk more than five minutes without finding a corner shop that has sprung up to provide services.”

These models show an adaptability to rapid change that Mboup believes is instructive. “On a practical level, cities of the Global North are now looking at the Global South because the climate is becoming a little bit more like ours with increasing heat waves,” she notes. “They’re interested in looking at how to deal with this condition.”

EMERGING FORMS OF LIVING

As an architect operating in Dakar, Mboup observes new forms of living emerging in response to social and economic realities. “I’m fascinated by the way housing reflects the social and cultural realities of the country,” she says. “A lot of construction isn’t really done by architects – about 97% is built without any architects.”

Traditional forms of living in compounds with multi-generational families are now happening vertically due to the city’s constraints. “Because Dakar is a peninsula, what used to happen on a horizontal level is now happening vertically,” she explains. “People add levels to existing houses to accommodate extended family.”

This process is happening across class levels and serves to consolidate social solidarity. “It makes sense to regroup the family, especially in contexts where we deal with inflation and economic crises,” Mboup notes. “People plan for the future by building houses with foundations that can welcome more levels.”

This incremental building adapts to the economic model where people don’t have access to loans and rely on their own means. “They do it little by little, and people find sometimes ingenious ways to do it,” she says. “As architects trained in the Western paradigm, we need to look at housing very differently.”

RECONNECTING WITH HERITAGE

Mboup and other younger architects are also concerned with reconnecting

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with their heritage, particularly vernacular forms of building. “There’s a growing interest in building with earth, building with bio-based materials,” she says. “That’s quite a central part of my work.”

This movement goes beyond architecture, extending to other aspects of life. “People are also looking at food and how we can reconnect with our traditional grains and other modes of living that we’ve left aside,” she says.

By embracing these approaches, Mboup believes that buildings can better reflect the people who use them and be adapted to the climate. “It’s about finding ways to make buildings that are more sustainable and culturally relevant,” she explains.

LOOKING AHEAD

Mboup emphasises the importance of embracing the unique conditions of African cities without any inferiority complex. “In many ways, we’re already further ahead,” she says. “We should really embrace those possibilities.”

She urges decision-makers to recognise and learn from the innovations within the Global South. “We need to look at ourselves without feeling the need to emulate the North,” she says. “It’s time we pay attention to what our housing and urbanity need to respond to.”

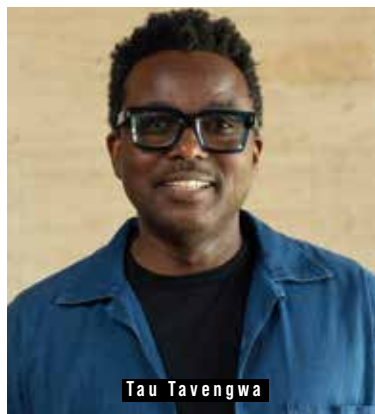
THE HUSTLE ECONOMY: RETHINKING URBAN INFORMALITY

Architect and curator Tau Tavengwa believes that to understand the cities of the Global South, we need to reframe our vocabulary. “I’ve just fallen in love with the word ‘hustle,’” he says. “I hate the word ‘informality.’”

For Tavengwa, ‘hustle’ captures the spirit of improvisation and ingenuity that characterises these cities. “If you talk about hustle, it’s about improvisation,” he explains. “Everything we’re talking about is hustle.”

In Cairo’s bustling markets, such as Khan el-Khalili, thousands of vendors sell everything from handcrafted jewellery to spices, often setting up shop in improvised spaces. These markets are not just centres of commerce but also hubs of social interaction and cultural exchange, showcasing the adaptability of those who navigate these complex environments to make a living.

Similarly, in the medinas of Morocco, the narrow streets are lined with small workshops where craftsmen produce traditional goods like textiles, ceramics and leatherwork. ➔



Tau Tavengwa



Above: Colourful commute – a local bus in Dakar



Below: Retail heaven in a Marrakech souk

OPPOSITE, TOP: FREDRICH STARK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

These artisans often operate outside formal economic structures, relying on skills passed down through generations. Their ability to sustain livelihoods through creativity and resourcefulness exemplifies the essence of the hustle economy.

Tavengwa argues that using the term “informality” often carries negative connotations, whereas “hustle” acknowledges the creativity and adaptability of people navigating complex urban environments. “We need to describe the spirit and sense of improvisation,” he emphasises.

NAIROBI’S URBAN TRANSFORMATION: A TALE OF MULTIPLE NARRATIVES

Tavengwa emphasises the importance of embracing multiple models in urban development. “We have to make space for more than one model of what a city can be,” he asserts.

The Kenyan capital exemplifies this philosophy as it undergoes significant urban developments that reflect both its challenges and aspirations. As one of Africa’s fastest-growing cities, Nairobi is experiencing a construction boom with projects like the Pinnacle Towers, set to be Africa’s tallest building, and the recently completed Nairobi Expressway, which aims to ease traffic congestion and improve connectivity.

Tavengwa notes that while these developments symbolise progress, they also highlight underlying inequalities. “The people living in the peripheries often do not have access to the advantages of city life,” he observes. In Nairobi, affluent neighbourhoods with modern skyscrapers exist alongside informal settlements like Kibera, one of Africa’s largest slums.

He cautions against adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to urban planning. “Housing is not just about housing; it’s a narrative,” Tavengwa explains.

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“Housing is a narrative. We are battling a machine that is defining how we should live, and housing is the battleground for that.”

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Nairobi’s dynamic shifts also involve rethinking transportation and public spaces. The city’s investment in new commuter rail lines and the development of green spaces like the Nairobi Green Park Terminal demonstrate efforts to create a more inclusive urban environment. In this way, the city reflects the broader narrative of African cities – complex, vibrant and full of potential for innovative urban solutions.

Indeed, by acknowledging its unique challenges and embracing diverse models of development, Nairobi is redefining what an African metropolis can be. Tavengwa believes that cities like Nairobi are not exceptions but are grappling with global urban issues.

RETHINKING INFRASTRUCTURE: LESSONS FROM HARARE

In Harare, Zimbabwe, innovative approaches to infrastructure are emerging in response to pressing social needs. Tavengwa recounts a story from 2008, when massive evictions left 1.2 million people homeless.

“A state psychiatrist wanted to provide mental health support to these traumatised communities,” he explains. “He found that middle-aged women, the ‘aunties’, hold the psyche of entire communities together.”

Instead of building costly facilities, they set up park benches where these women could offer support. “If you saw this old lady at a bench, you could sit and have conversations,” he says. “They provided an essential service without needing to build hospitals.”

This approach illustrates how infrastructure doesn’t always have to be about physical structures. “It’s a proposition of how you can think of infrastructure in a very different way,” Tavengwa notes. “There are similar interventions in other places.”

By reimagining what infrastructure can be, cities can address urgent needs in resourceful and community-driven ways. 🌍



Above:
A window on urban life in Dakar, Senegal

Below:
The Mosque of the Divinity, also known as the Fisherman's Mosque, Dakar

Left:
Cairo bazaar

OPPOSITE: TOP: DAVID SOUTH / ALAMY STOCKPHOTO