Peri-urbanism, just cities and neoliberal modernity - Comparative ethnography of ideals driving neighbourhood transformation in African urban conurbations

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1   Introduction

The call for comparison in critical urban studies is now firmly established and drives many initiatives to look beyond single cases and let cities from the South speak to urban theory in general (McFarlane 2010, Robinson 2006a, 2011). Urban anthropology has a long tradition of making use of the power of comparative methods to unsettle established knowledge by focusing on cities of the south (Robinson 2006b). In the 1980s, though, with the postmodern turn, comparative methods in anthropology became defamed, because they became seen as bound to grand theories and seen as colonial, distorting acts (Abu-Lughod 1991, Hol̓ 1987, Hutnyk 1990). Now one can observe a re-emergence of comparative methodologies; I situate myself in this field which I coin as interpretive, post-crisis comparison (post-crisis referring to after the crisis of representation in anthropology) (Brettell 2009, Handler 2009, Heer 2015, Lazar 2012, Scheffer/Niewöhner 2010, Yengoyan 2006). My method is inductive and interpretive; it comprises highly flexible theoretical framing,   as well as comparison across what may seem to other disciplines as "incommensurable" cases. This method of comparison has two aims: it should first improve our understanding of individual cases, and this is what I did in my PhD. Second, it should also contribute to reconsider concepts and theory; this is that I am still busy with now. So I am very much looking forward to your comments.

In this paper, I focus on neighbourhood transformation in two African conurbations, Maputo and Johannesburg. Johannesburg, if one includes the neighbouring municipalities Pretoria and Ekurhuleni, is one of the largest metropolitan areas in Africa with over 10 million inhabitants, and Maputo, including the neighbouring city Matola, has about 2 million inhabitants.

These two cities in Southern Africa went through differing historical trajectories: Johannesburg is still shaped by the legacy of apartheid, Maputo's history was characterised by Portuguese colonialism, socialism and civil war. The two cities show many contextual differences, the most striking being that Johannesburg has a much stronger state, stronger civil society and a stronger economy. Johannesburg has from the 1970s on transformed into a polycentric conurbation with many subcentres consisting of what Teresa Caldeira calls enclaves, namely shopping malls and office complexes, strongly differentiated along racial and class lines. Maputo, on the other hand, is still characterised by the Portuguese centre-periphery model, with a city centre urbanised according to European standards, and a diversified suburban and peri-urban area with informal, semi-formal, formalised urbanisation patterns. Newest trends in building and urban policy in Maputo, though, point towards the emergence of subcentres as well.

The method of ethnography takes us to the micro-scale of neighbourhoods and urban practices. I argue, though, that the drivers of neighbourhood transformation on the micro-scale reflect dynamics of the conurbations at large.

In Johannesburg, I focus on Linbro Park, a peri-urban neighbourhood, home to about 1000 affluent, white urban dwellers. The residents themselves perceive their neighbourhood as being in transition, awaiting a change in heartbeat, as a local politician expressed it in an interview. The new Spatial Development and Urban Design Frameworks declare that the agriculturally zoned land with large stands (many of the residents keep horses) should become transformed into a mixed neighbourhood with industry, commerce and residential spaces in the next years and decades (ARP 2012, City of Johannesburg 2008/2009, City of Johannesburg et al. 2008).

In Maputo, I focus on a part of Polana Caniço, a poor area which was illegally occupied during the civil war in the 1980s. It has high population density, high levels of poverty and few services, but because of its proximity to the city centre and the nice view onto the beach and the ocean, it is regarded as a prime location by municipal officials and real estate investors, and is undergoing gentrification. The poor residents are currently selling their land to urban elites who then construct huge villas.

I will show that similar urban ideals drive the agency of the actors involved in the transformation of these neighbourhoods in both cities. I look at images of the urban uphold by the different stakeholders involved, namely the urban dwellers, private real estate investors/developers, and the local government. I have coined them the ideal of peri-urbanism, which many urban dwellers aspire to; the ideal of the just city, to which local governments claim to be committed; and the ideal of neoliberal modernity, to which many profit-seeking real estate investors and individuals are oriented.

I base the paper on the premise that urban agency is oriented and guided by images of the ideal urban, of how the actors want to live in the city or profit from the city. I define images, with Förster, as mental representations or mental objects (Förster 2012, 2013: 7). What "the urban" is and how is it supposed to become is subject to contestation between these actors endowed with different resources acting in differing structural conditions. I argue that the analytical focus on such emic (local or localised) notions of the ideal urban is an adequate route to reassess the urban from new perspectives.

2   Urban ideals driving actors in Linbro Park

In Johannesburg, well located, affordable urban land is a scarce resource. Linbro Park, the neighbourhood which the case study one focuses on, has long belonged to the peri-urban fringe of the city. The white property owners remember nostalgically the time before the end of apartheid when the neighbourhood was zoned as white, when there was no crime, no traffic and no street lights. While the youth of nearby townships were throwing stones and Molotov cocktails against the apartheid regime's military tanks, the youth of Linbro Park rode, according to this nostalgic narrative, to the local library on a horse back. The residents have coined this peri-urban lifestyle "country living in the city", by which they mean that they engage in space-intensive leisure practices like horse riding, own a large estate, but at the same time have access to urban amenities and jobs in the urban economy. With the end of apartheid, thought, this peri-urban lifestyle with low intensity use of space has become increasingly contested. Many of the urban dwellers are opposed to these anticipated chang-

es, because they threaten their peri-urban idyll; they are especially opposed to the plans by the local government.

Henri Lefebvre has argued that a revolution, I quote, "means nothing without the production of an appropriate space." (Lefebvre 1996: 59). In post-apartheid South Africa, public housing is one of the key domains of social welfare by which the government reallocates urban space to those who were excluded from the white apartheid city. The local government, more precisely an urban renewal Project, therefore wants to use the land of the neighbourhood Linbro Park for the construction of low cost housing, so called RDP housing. The Alexandra Renewal Project wants to alleviate the lack of housing in the nearby township, and it aims to develop Linbro Park according to the new national housing policy into an integrated, mixed-use and mixed-income settlement. Influenced by the UN Habitat discourse on urban sustainability, the ideal urban future for Linbro Park would be a safe and compact environment with accessibility of jobs and services.

The majority of the white property owners are opposed to these plans by the government, fearing an urban future in which the black poor and white rich would interact as neighbours. The property owner association lobbied strongly against the construction of public housing for the poor, arguing that it would deteriorate property prices and increase crime. Many of them have therefore started to support the third urban ideal, namely turning Linbro Park's land into an economically profitable commodity.

Property owners with business interests as well as actors of the real estate market, namely private developers, regard the land in Linbro Park as a commodity which should be transformed in profit-maximising ways. They envisage Linbro Park as a mixed-use development with industrial, commercial and residential functions.

Although today in 2015, Linbro Park has not yet changed much, on the level of urban planning documents, the ideal of profitable space has been able to dominate the others. Most of the residents have nowadays accepted that their rural idyll is subject to change, and many have sold their land lucratively to private developers. Many moved to other peri-urban areas or rural areas. Because of the resistance by urban dweller, the lack of public funds and institutional capacity, as well as the pressures by private developers, the local government has in Spatial Development Framework (2008/2009) reduced the size of the public housing component considerably; only about 8 out of the 200 stands are still planned as public housing for poor township dwellers. When I was there in July, many expressed doubt that it will ever be constructed.

3   Urban ideals driving actors in Polana Caniço

Now in this second part I will present a case study on gentrification in Polana Caniço, a poor neighbourhood in Maputo.

Since the 1990s – with the liberalisation of the economy, the end of civil war and turn to multiparty democracy – Maputo has experienced an influx of expatriates; this has increased in the last years related to a natural resource boom. Some people say that Maputo is going to be a second Luanda with high rents. As part of this process, Polana Caniço has increasingly come under gentrification pressures exerted by private real estate investors who aim to construct luxury housing to satisfy housing demands by expatriates and other urban elites. I use here the term gentrification in its broad, non-normative sense, namely as a process of urban change in which the residents of a neigh-

bourhood become replaced by a class of residents who are relatively more affluent then them (Slater et al. 2004).

In officially illegal, but socially accepted land transactions, residents of Polana Caniço are currently selling their land to private real estate investors. These real estate investors as well as municipal officials would like to transform Polana Caniço into a modern neighbourhood of international standards. The urban dwellers in Polana Caniço express this urban ideal as New City ('cidade nova'), similar to the urbanisation pattern of the European colonial city, but at the same time representing the new, neoliberal era.

The municipality gets often approached by investors who are seeking for land to construct shopping malls gated communities, but the municipality has to turn them down because all the land of the municipality is informally occupied. Many municipal exponents are therefore "committed to create conditions in order to accelerate the process of investment in the city" (interview with João Munguambe, alderman for economic activities, 02.08.2012). This enthusiastic support by city officials for private investment driven urban development is partly related to the lack of financial capacities by the municipality which is therefore dependant on public-private partnerships. But it is also because such land transactions are highly lucrative for city officials who can demand large 'commissions' from the new users.[1]

Besides the urban ideal of the modern city, municipal officials also have appropriated international discourses of the just city uphold by international agencies like UN-Habitat, City Alliance and the World Bank. Not least funded by the World Bank, the municipality is currently drawing up a requalification plan for the area. The plan does not exist yet, but municipal officials have proclaimed in the local TV that the plan will, besides shopping malls and elite residential areas, also entail multi-story apartment buildings where the current Polana Caniço population should be relocated to. Housing the poor in Polana Caniço instead of removing them to the city's outskirts should alleviate poverty and ensure access for the poor to urban amenities.

Even before the plan has been drawn up, residents of Polana Caniço and municipal officials, showed little trust that the local government will have sufficient capacity to actually construct these houses for the poor. This discourse of housing the poor, though, I argue, is largely a façade and a strategy to acquire funds from international agencies. In addition, these plans and ideas by the state provide a context in which real estate investors seeking for profitable investments feel safe enough to invest in Polana Caniço in the present.[2]

In addition, the discourse of housing the poor should also protect the state from becoming seen as supporting the expulsion of Polana Caniço's residents by the property developers. Indeed, there is a section of the urban dwellers which criticises the ongoing gentrification, reflecting an ideal which one can coin as the "right to the city". Many informants lament that having to leave means loss of proximity to urban amenities and loss of access to urban services; this is especially true for younger generations who depend on schools and urban work places in the inner city; also many academics share

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[1] Officially, all land belongs to the Mozambican state and users need to get usufructure rights (DUAT) from the municipality. Socially, the sale and purchase of land, though, is well accepted. The land transactions in Polana Caniço are, from a strictly legal point of view, illegal (see also Jenkins 2013, Silva 2011).
[2] Although the state is weak, is slow to draw plans and lacks capacities to implement them, it is nevertheless a primary engine behind the gentrification process. This underlines what Wacquant (2008) claims, namely that role of the state in the neoliberal city should not be underestimated.

this urban ideal and criticise the gentrification for disrupting the social fabric and leading to long term negative effects.

This sounds like debates around gentrification in many places of the world. But this is not the whole story. A considerable part of the population in Polana Caniço perceive the gentrification as an opportunity to realise their dream of peri-urban living, an urban ideal which they share with the white elite living in Linbro Park. For them, Polana Caniço is a deficiently urbanised place; they suffer from its stigma as poor and dangerous. The high density, the irregular plots and small paths do not conform to their ideals of urban aesthetics. Their aspiration is to build a home at the peri-urban periphery, where they can keep chickens and grow food on large stands. Many urban dwellers aspire to move to such areas, as there is "more space and more comfort" and it is "quieter and more relaxed" (interview with Polana Caniço resident, 03.12.2010). For this peri-ruban dream, many residents are willing to give up the proximity to urban amenities, and live with the lack of transport.[3]

4   Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative ethnography shows how local governments appropriate international housing discourses and ideals of the just city. But because of the relatively low capacities of the state the implementation is difficult and in the competition for land the private real estate developers succeed. The case study also shows, though, that despite low capacities, local governments shape production of space in these two African cities considerably, if also in indirect ways which yet need to be understood.

The case study also points towards the importance of urban dwellers in shaping transformation in African urban conurbations; the peri-urban dream towards which the agency of many urban dwellers in these two neighbourhoods is oriented is a powerful driver of low density urbanisation in African cities. It points to the need to develop more nuanced understandings of local notions of the urban which vary considerably across lifestyle groups and which influence urban futures.

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[3] Usually these areas have no electricity and water when the first urban residents decide to move here; they anticipate, though, that the state or private entities will soon provide services

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