

# POLICY BRIEF

## issue 1

# Middle Class Urbanism is a Policy Issue

Anna Mazzolini

### Summary

*Many different voices have arisen over the last years regarding the need for further evidence on urbanization directions in the Global South.*

*New, diverse and multi-agency urbanization patterns and their transformative impacts on countries' policies, planning apparatus and land management have been at the core of the recent debate on southern urbanism. Among factors such as the role of foreign investments on urban planning, the increasing contribution of the "informal" economies in the city development and economies, and the threat of new "unsustainable" urban trends such as sprawl, congestion and collapse of conventional planning systems, the urban middle class appears to be an intersecting and recurrent actor silently penetrating and influencing all the factors mentioned above.*

Current rising investments in Africa's cities which are often described as entirely new cities or planned, self-contained enclaves, are related to this new urban actor. On the other hand, paradoxically it is the urban middle class that is seen as the sole actor able to create a more equitable urban environment.

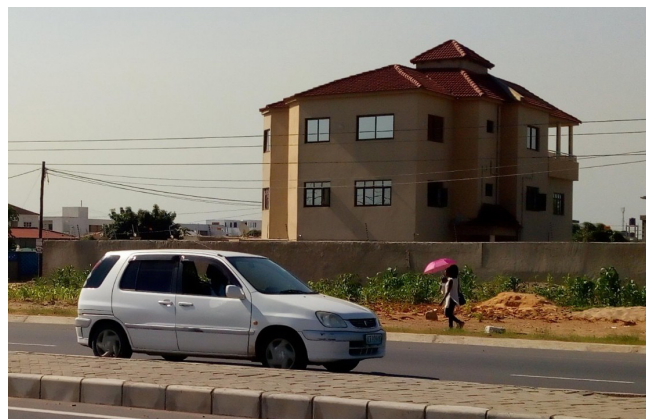
Beyond pure spatial and policy analysis, what is at stake is to capture more conceptual clarity on these issues, and this is a complex and long-lasting issue. After almost two years of Intense research, the Middle Class Urbanism Project is pleased to share the first brief on this topic and to introduce its interdisciplinary and positively deconstructive research approach.

### Middle Class Urbanism is a Policy Issue

Middle class urbanism in the Global South has attracted a huge number of Individual or joint research programs aiming at tracing new city-making trajectories and charts of the actors involved, as well as the analysis of the consequences these trajectories are likely to pose in the long-term.

European universities, universities in the Global South, development organisations and institutions have undertaken a large array of joint research projects or knowledge-exchange programmes to analyse such issues.

Practice and knowledge production are increasingly linked to each other when it comes to analysing current changes and trends in Global South urbanism. Yet, in the Habitat III conference in Quito (2016), the need for a stronger link between knowledge generation and global policy making was one of the main themes approached, as well as the need for much more empirical evidence.



New construction on the Circular Road, Maputo, September 2019

Cities in the Global South - especially those facing massive so-

cio-economic restructuring - are fast-changing realities upon which we often observe the limits of research design due to sectoral approaches unable to create a framework of analysis which could follow the transformative patterns of such urban developments.

The way a research project is conceived is clearly also a policy choice: writing about Southern urbanism tends to be normative and often one-way: optimistic and pessimistic visions oppose each other, describing opportunities vs limitations of the new urban trends and/or urban actors' behaviours.

It is fundamental to review what we know, or what we think we know, about the cities we aim to talk about; this requires a sensitivity that is difficult to encompass and that is often missing in the overall debate and literature.

Beyond maps of actors and actors' agencies, city plans' histories and urban policies, what is shaping the urban form is a complex intersection of unreadable efforts to materialize certain ideologies and aspirations:

burgeoning aspirations and intersection of ideologies that is possible to capture solely through an accurate analysis which can verify them through an unfolding process among different disciplines, timelines and scales.

The MCU project works in Maputo, which is one of the many cities of the Global South that are often described as urban "grey zones that only take shape and become colorful through the actors' agency and practice" (Forster and Amman, 2018).



Mapulene Neighbourhood in expansion, January 2019

Places of floating opportunities, limitations and struggles and messy city planning, these cities are often described as spaces of surviving, even when talking about the new urban middle class, which is often defined as coping with the urban life as a "hustle playbook".

Without denying the struggles that underpins the efforts of these people to make a life, the research also aims at refining the lexis of the overall discourse, talking about aspirations rather than weaknesses, and about movements rather than limits.

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It is common to read about the new urban middle class as the actor that could negatively contribute to an uneven city development. Privately-led urban planning often related to the growth of this new social stratus is often read as "an urban revolution from above (...) entailing the worldwide implementation of mainstream neoliberal urban growth strategies» (Sheppard et al., 2015). Projects ideally conceived for middle and upper classes have a supply-driven character and often insert themselves into systems defined as different stages of neoliberalism, from clearly neoliberal, more-than-neoliberal, to not



New housing aesthetics in Mapulene neighborhood, January 2019

necessarily neoliberal at all (van Noorlos 2018).

According to the hybridity of the political economic systems, the project tries to go further and to read them not as a continuum or a development through a temporal line, but rather as a pendulum of forces, possibilities, agencies and ideologies influencing and alternating with each other in time and in physical space.

The research project looks at Middle Class Urbanism as a phenomenon observable at various scales that share common patterns of (i) aspiration for entitlement and (ii) the materialisation of this entitlement in the urban scenario through the modification of the physical environment.

This modification can happen directly, through particular construction processes, or the appearance of settlements that are differentiated from the surrounding area, but also indirectly through a new way of seeing and planning the city by authorities and decision-makers.

Local planning authorities often materialise these aspirations by trying to restructure the image of the city within a context of increasing competitiveness among urbanities in the Global South, thus promoting images of habitability and prosperity often put in place solely through slicing up the city for post-democratic private-sector-driven governance.

In addition, middle class households try to materialise their social entitlement through a particular architecture and/or new locations in the city.

In order to study these various aspects of the problem, the research project approaches the theme through four different disciplines - urban studies, architecture, anthropology and history, while constantly verifying the Individual discipline's findings.

The methodology that the Middle Class Urbanism project seeks to

create is a conceptual framework on the go, thus approaching the theme in an unexplored and constantly changeable way, which after a long and difficult program, will achieve a certain degree of conceptual clarity. Theoretical and conceptual clarity are not points of departure, but rather moments of enlightenment into which the researchers bump after having intersected and unfolded findings of the four disciplines, at different research scales and through a variety of field research methodologies.

It also envisages going back in time -still in an interdisciplinary way- and enhancing traces of the origin of a phenomenon in the political economy scenario.

This way of acting ensures a fairer reading of such realities, beyond pre-conceived interpretations.

In Maputo, what the research has highlighted so far is that it doesn't

WHAT WE ARE OBSERVING AT VARIOUS SCALES IS A CHARACTER OF ASPIRATION FOR ENTITLEMENT AND ITS MATERIALISATION ON THE URBAN SCENARIO

matter if the status that one wants to concretise is not completely achieved or is unstable: the middle-class urbanism as "architecture or planning of celebration" is more a statement than an investment. It is more an aspirational and mental model than the certainty of a fully implementable project.

It is exactly at the intersection of materialised, not-materialised and unmaterialisable aspirations that the project is reading the city development trends.

At the same time, it analyses this intersection through the use (or not) by authorities, communities or individuals of a proto-socialist planning background merging nowadays with a neoliberal approach to urban planning.

Within this process of the merging and redefinition of causes, effects and drivers of urban restructuring, many other concepts are coming into view, such as the relation between global urban trends and local trajectories, the culturally rooted imitation factor when it comes to urban models, the use of the informal urban sector, and the redefinition of the authority itself.

It is the broader redefinition of the city that is at stake in Maputo and similar cities, and it is a policy choice to decide how to read the phenomenon, since it is a policy choice, beyond an academic one, to decide how to read and write about the redefinition of roles, authorities and actors as agencies of a new urbanism.

It is first of all an exercise of the imaginary that the research is trying to penetrate into and better understand, because beyond all the empirical observations, it is the imagined city that has the lead of the space. Even if we still don't see it.



MCU research intervention: exploring new aesthetic reference through projects in Polana Caniço neighborhood, October 2018

## Endnotes

- 1 Förster, T. and Ammann, C. (2018) African Cities and the Development Conundrum: Actors and Agency in the Urban Grey Zone
- 2 Van Noorloos F., Kloosterboer M. (2018) Africa's new cities: The contested future of urbanization. Urban studies 55(6)
- 3 Sheppard E, Gidwani V, Goldman M, et al. (2015) Introduction: Urban revolutions in the age of global urbanism. Urban Studies 52(11)
- 4 University of Cape Town, UCT Marketing Institute, African Lions Research Programme

## Bio

Anna Mazzolini (\*1980), mother of Adele and Ines, is an architect and urban planner. She holds a PhD from the University of Venice (IUAV) (2016). Anna has been working as a policy expert, merging a multidisciplinary research profile with more than ten years of experience in Mozambique, including fieldwork, project management, planning consultancies, policy elaboration, and diplomatic charges.

She collaborated with the UN, Cities Alliance, international research centers and NGOs on topics such as informality, governance, urban planning and housing issues. Supporting both the central government and municipalities, Anna wrote the strategy of implementation of the national housing policy and worked in local projects, focussing on slum upgrading, water and sanitation, participatory planning, and land management in different cities of Mozambique, especially Beira. In 2019, after cyclone Idai, she co-authored the country's post-disaster assessment report.

In 2017, she joined the Middle Class Urbanism research project at the National Museum of Denmark. She is currently a research fellow on urban mobility policies at the Politecnico in Milan and a UN consultant for post-disaster reconstruction with IOM. She publishes poetry in Italian and Portuguese.

## Middle Class Urbanism

Middle Class Urbanism. An interdisciplinary study of the physical reordering of urban sub-Saharan Africa is an interdisciplinary research project funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research (FKK). The aim with the project is to investigate rapid urbanization processes in sub-Saharan Africa with a special focus on the radical transformations of the built environment caused by middle class urbanism.

### Funded by:

