

Ubiquity as a tool of urban development: leveraging common knowledge for more humane cities

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Introduction – Our inevitable Urban future

Kenya and most other states of Africa are fast moving to becoming urban societies.

The overall population of Kenya is expected to reach 71.5 million in the next twenty years. In the planning inspiration that Kenya is following it is expected that by the year 2030 the urban population in Kenya will be 60% of the total population – that is about 43 million people. The Nairobi metropolitan region is expected to have a population of about 11.74 million.

This figure is a huge jump from current levels of population. It is reasonable to assume a commensurate growth in the physical developments in the cities. The City of Nairobi has seen a ten fold increase in its population between 1963 and 2007. Major corridors have been growing at a high rate in the last few years and this can only be expected to intensify with the growth in population.

These developments are going to create tremendous pressure to deliver quality. According to the United Nations “...urban governance deficiencies continue to affect most African cities”. There will be need for improved outcomes in the systems of governance for example and how populations are involved in the process of decision making and how talents and expertise in the population are harnessed for the common good. Similarly, the need to have improved quality in the physical environment is going to grow in order to assure public order and safety and to mitigate negative effects in the welfare of the population. In the overall, cities have to deliver a higher quality of life to forestall civil collapse.

Society today is bombarded with information through a range of media. Whereas the impact of the internet has been widely discussed and appreciated, there is similar upsurge of information through radio – Nairobi has more that 30 radio stations broadcasting to the city – mobile telephony and public forums like shopping malls and city streets.

There is thus an urgent need to review the mechanisms that we rely on to deliver this transformation.

It is debatable whether this huge amount of information indeed leads to better decisions or a correct evaluation of societal values. There is no doubt however that it influences actions that people take and the choices they make. This new range of media cannot be ignored in seeking to influence action within communities.

Moving toward Common Knowledge

It is suggested in this paper that a systematic development of common knowledge will contribute significantly to achieving the goals of quality in the development of the cities. This will occur through the development of common values and a common understanding of what constitutes positive action within the process of city development.

The ultimate goal we are aiming at is of a soundly and rationally executed city, where space has been utilized in a way that optimizes on the needs of the community. This

process involves the actions of a huge spectrum of people. Critical among these will be the professionals who take up most of the responsibility of actual utilization of the space and the development of an aesthetic.

Just as important however are the players in the economy who make decisions on what is to be built, and the investments available to build it. This category of players are often the risk takers and thus have a major say in how professionals respond.

The actions of other people outside these categories may seem at first glance to be minimal or inconsequential. The city however is a shared physical space and all users of this space have a contribution to its quality and the expressed values, values of good and bad. They create the *genius loci*, the spirit of place and give the city its character and sense of life. These are the people who inhabit the streets; to search for services or to provide them. The phenomenology of architecture and cities is a far more complex subject and is well discussed in texts.

The challenge that arises in these understandings is one of coordinating the action of all the players involved so that the desired result can be found. Majority of people in a city will want to live in quality environments. Certainly those who own property – houses or commercial premises – will want to live in an environment that assures that the value of the property remains high and does not depreciate. Service providers and traders would want an environment that helps maximize their dealings.

All city dwellers also wish to live in an environment that is safe and gives peace of mind in the daily interaction of life, and is also clean and does not threaten health. Safety, health, convenience of use, the fundamental issue that inform city planning regulations, also capture the spirit of what is good for all.

Defining and Developing Common Knowledge.

How do you define the common knowledge? “Common knowledge is a phenomenon which underwrites much of social life. In order to communicate or otherwise coordinate their behavior successfully, individuals typically require mutual or common understandings or background knowledge. Indeed, if a particular interaction results in “failure”, the usual explanation for this is that the agents involved did not have the common knowledge that would have resulted in success.”

This simple definition of common values has been amplified further by examining the underlying structure of these values. In the book *Rational Ritual, Culture, coordination and Common Knowledge*, Michael Chwe has categorized the issues that confront us into “Free Rider Problems” and “Coordination Problems”.

In a free rider problem – sometimes known as the prisoners dilemma, no person wants to participate under any circumstances: each person always prefers to free ride on the participation of others.

In Coordination problems, each person cares about what other people do, and hence each person cares about what other people know. Hence successful communication does not simply distribute messages but also lets each person know that other people know, and so on.

The dynamics of city development that should be of concern, relating to the values they carry, are mainly those that involve actions by the citizens. Crucially these must include the formation of public opinion - the general understanding of what constitutes good or bad within the environment- and which will guide the population of the city in the action they take that impact on the overall quality of the city. As has

been demonstrated in many spheres of life today, civic action can alter or even direct the course of many public actions.

Our concern then should be for a well informed body of public opinion, to inform such actions. The clear benefits of this will include the ease of making policy. For a lot of our policy makers – especially politicians – issues are only real if there is resonance of the issues within the body politic. Political dynamics dictate that if a politician knows they may be asked about an issue or have it quoted against them, they will seek to absorb and understand the matter more seriously.

There are certain areas of interest within the planning and building process that would stand out in the hierarchy of concerns. Among these are the following:

- (a) The Content of the Planning and Building regulations. Even more important than the actual letter of the regulations is the logic behind them. It would be necessary for example to have a broad understanding of how the formulation of the regulations is related to the assurances of safety. Safety against fire is a critical informer of the town planning regulations. The logic behind these regulations is fairly simple to articulate and can be explained in simple language. Broad acceptance of this knowledge would make it easy for the population to understand and therefore accept the regulations.
- (b) Planning and Control parameters. The broad understanding of the logic behind density control and its impact on human health – in relation to sanitation – is again critical. Such ubiquity of knowledge would make it easier to achieve broad adherence to the rules. It would cause citizens to become themselves agents of good practices.
- (c) There are broader issue informing the location of certain facilities in the city whose logic is not in the public domain. It is not always obvious to an observer how issue of civil defense are dealt with; the importance of certain traffic corridors, the location of military facilities, etc.

Examples from Nairobi

Within the city of Nairobi, it is clear from observing physical developments that new strategies may have to be evolved to control development. The city authorities have admitted that they are overwhelmed by the scope of developments and are thus not in a position to oversee everything. This has created a dangerous situation where many structures within the city have not been approved or supervised by the city authorities. The resultant situation has seen a public uproar due to the number of collapsed buildings – usually under construction- which have led to loss of life.

The other glaring example has been the ongoing battles within the city for the preservation of environmentally sensitive area – forests and riparian reserves, mainly. Once again the city witnesses numerous developments that encroach on such environments. Also related has been the frequency of building on road reserves with the result that most of the buildings have to be brought down later.

The response by the authorities has been to promise a new set of building regulations. It is important to note that this process has been ongoing for a very long time indeed. New building regulations were drafted way back in 1998 but have never seen the light of day.

What is of concern in this argument is that even as these regulations are being crafted, very little of the thinking is being shared with the public. Thus the average city citizen has no idea of what is being discussed or what indeed is being crafted.

This makes it difficult for the public to fully embrace these regulations when they are finally issued.

The ideal situation would see the public embrace these regulations to an extent where adherence is about 100%. This can only be achieved however if in the first instance there is broad awareness about the existence of these regulations. This would hopefully allow for greater understanding of their purpose and which would then lead to broad acceptance and adherence to the provisions of the regulations.

The role of the Institutions

The various institutions that serve as custodians of the professional values of the town and city planning have unique and critical roles to play. Among these are:

- Professional organizations, e.g. The Architectural Association of Kenya, Kenya Institute of Planners.
- Universities and Research Institutions
- Regulatory Authorities – Local Authorities and Government Departments.

In different ways each of these institutions exists to perpetuate and develop the best values of the professions. The most important understanding – which may well deliver a paradigm shift – is the recognition that the average citizen is the ultimate beneficiary of their various activities. Arising out of this, the most critical part of their strategies, must seek to develop common understanding of the values that best deliver on the common goal. This would require that each of these organisations has a programme – or a line of action – that raises common understanding and nudges the public to a slate of values to be pursued.

This question is at its most focused within the Universities.

The Research Question within Universities

The major issue confronting the Universities even as they seek to build relevance in their localities, is who indeed is the legitimate consumer of research? Universities have tended to confine their answer to this matter by focusing on only other scholars as the legitimate targets of research. This has constrained the contribution the institutions are thus able to make within their localities and are unable to feed into the process of policy formulation.

Universities must consider four critical constituencies as they formulate their research agendas:

- (a) Scholars and Researchers in a Global network of academics: There is no doubt that scholars and other researchers are critical consumers of research. It is in this way that ideas and insights are refined and tested, so that the result is a true contribution to knowledge.
- (b) Practitioners of Urban planning: These broadly will represent all those people who in their daily work rely on available knowledge of urban planning. They may be planners, architects, urban designers, etc. running professional practices or who may be policy makers. This category of people decides on a daily basis what is going where.
- (c) Students: This should go without saying that students ought to be great beneficiaries of research findings by having the new information filtering to their lecture room material in class. The translation of research findings from around the world into course material is currently slow, as evidenced by the lack of a regular flow of new texts or course readers, to the detriment of the students.

- (d) The General Public: Research findings must eventually become common knowledge and Universities must have clear strategies to have up-to-date understandings filter to the non-academics and non-practitioners.

When one of these areas remains un-addressed in the research agenda of the institution, an imbalance results and reflects negatively on the contribution of the institution to human development.

Benefits of targeting the general population.

The need to have information filter to the common man on the street would be a smart move by institutions of higher learning. It would also require a fundamental shift in the way the Universities look at Research- not as a necessary activity for promotion, but as a critical contribution to the mission of the institution. This would cause Universities to confront the question of how they define their own relevance.

There are benefits to be gained broadly when the various organizational structures embark on a deliberate program of raising public understandings. Among these are:

- (a) Influence on policy. When issues are the subjects of broad public discourses, policy formulators will be duty bound to respond to the sentiments of the public through reasonable and satisfying policy interventions.
- (b) Raise funding for research. A similar logic will see issue being identified for resolution and this will influence how research support – especially from the public treasury – is appropriated.
- (c) Raise the public profile of the discipline. This will allow for easier acceptance of the various policy directions and ultimately adherence to best practices.
- (d) Make it easier to gather data for further research. Users can contribute ideas, contacts different perspectives and even data resources.
- (e) Focuses thinking in helping explain matters in simple terms. There are benefits from thinking in fundamentals – a necessary part of communicating with the non-professional public.

Conclusion

This paper argues for a system of public engagement in the issues that inform city planning with a purpose to raise the broad understanding of the logic and underlying rationale of policy. The changed environment we find ourselves operating in, where knowledge is available broadly through the media and public forums, suggest a need for the professions involved in city planning to raise their profiles by adopting a more aggressive attitude to the task.

Special mention is made of the Universities whose primary purpose is to generate knowledge and understandings. Universities must see the general public as legitimate consumers of research and work toward creating avenues to communicate with the public the knowledge that arises from research activities in their networks. Such work must be regarded as critical part of the missions of the Universities and rewarded accordingly.

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