Playing in the gap: Re-futuring African cities

By Geci Karuri-Sebina and Thiresh Govender

This essay explores the role of expanding imagination in shaping future African cities. To move beyond the sterile, static and decontextualised visions for future cities rendered in typical smart city images, the opportunity to explore alternative framings is proposed. The role of myth and metaphor in seeding transformative imaginaries is introduced, and the authors pursue a visual conceptual journey on ways in which we might fill the “myth gap” created by sweeping away the “smart African city” rendering. Three active reframes for our urban futures are presented for contemplation: Room for Contest, Terrain Manipulations, and Desire(d) Streets. The speculative drawings offer different cartographies for the future and experiment with different protagonists, forms of engagement, purpose, and scales. They draw upon various inspirations for imagining futures, first and foremost what might be ignored in the everyday. They offer the possibility of narrative shifting. Importantly, they challenge the myth that the future of the African city is packaged in a new, specified, shiny, technologically intelligent, imported experience. The authors suggest through this exploration that there are different informing myths possible, and that in fact a large part of that future resides within our current realities.
Myth | In 2021, mid pandemic – a time in which there was an explosion of questioning about the futures of cities all around the world, paralleled with a global awakening to Black Lives Matter and decolonising Africa’s narratives – the two of us undertook to further experiment into ideas of imagination and narrative-shifting. We were inspired by a memo by fellow architect and intellectual from Wits University, Professor Daniel Irurah, who shared the following metaphor:

"Among my Kikuyu people, we have a saying which goes as follows: Ona įgĩtũnyuo mwana nĩ įikagĩrio mũngũ. A literal English translation: to get your baby back from the monkey, you have to throw a squash to him. If the monkey has snatched your baby and is swinging recklessly branch-to-branch with the baby in the trees, your strategy should be to trick the monkey by throwing something “dear” to him (such as a squash or pumpkin) so that, in the process of reaching for the “new-gift”, it might just release your baby back to your hands safely.” Excerpt from Daniel Irurah’s memo VUNJA: A Call Back To Our Future (2021)

Irurah’s memo (2021) invokes the challenge of the “myth gap” (Sachs, 2012). The moral of his beautifully metaphorical story is that we (agents in modernity, the monkey) adopted a mode of “progress” which led to the snatching of our urban future (earth, the baby), and we have been dangerously swinging with her in the trees of our development jungle. The question in seeking to arrest this perilous practice is this: what is the new gift or offering that would enable us to let go of the hijacked earth? What’s the pumpkin? What are the new myths? And why does this matter?
Well, Evans (2017) warns that in the gap between the old stories that used to bind us together and the emergence of new societally held stories, there exists real risk for the gap to be filled by sinister stories born of mal-intent, greed, fear, hate, and so forth. The macho Marlboro Man or the white picket fence American Dream are typical US examples.

In the urban African space, this is the challenge we take on as we rebuff the official urban future that Africa seems to have been sold, and thereby create a gap. As urban practitioners, we (the authors) have been reacting to the prevailing and singular “smart city” imaginary which seems pervasive across urban representations and media; the shiny, pristine, one-size-fits-all, alien city of steel and glass, greenways and waterways that easily parachutes in from the North with great clarity – simultaneously decontextualised and desirable as an exacting symbol of modern progress. The “smart city” as a flashy, paradoxical package of universal prosperity applied in extremely unequal contexts where the majority live alternate, hidden realities. The “smart city” as a toxic potion of public gullibility and modernist bravado through which global capitalism offers a magical, short-sighted promise in pixels that would magically solve all problems of today and occlude the possibility of any other solution, any other tomorrow.

Unseating the “African smart city” imaginary requires some gap-filling, failing which our current urban fault lines may become amplified rendering any hope for better alternatives (for example, the sustainable and inclusive city) deferred. If we are not to be that (the “smart city”), then what are we to be that might be appropriate or desirable; the pumpkin(s)?
Plate 1: Expanding the myth. The exchange warrants an exchange, be it cunning, violent or consensual, in order for a more holistic, integrated and inclusive urban future to be conjured.
The question was put to us: What will be shaping sustainable African cities over the next 20 years? And our answer was one about possibility rather than projection: Imagination. Since 2019, we had begun an experimental enquiry into Unvisioning Cities in which we explored alternative spatial imaginaries by queering more globalised ideas of a “smart city” in specific places in the city of Johannesburg, exploring their layers of social complexity, culture and low-tech realities.

Our first experiment resulted in a series of vignettes and collages that re-framed the questions and possibilities for technology-fuelled future imaginaries. This was an exercise in playing with the power of spatial representation as a way to open up space for a different kind of imagination and narrative; to un-vision the stubborn “hor-renderings” of “smart” or “future African cities” that Africa has been foredoomed to pursue (Watson, 2014). The process we experienced was one of revealing or unearthing a sophistication and intelligence embedded deep within the tensions that we hold in city spaces. The exercise challenged how we draw, where we draw from, what is erased, what is retained, who participates in the imagined future, and - importantly - how it is produced. (It further challenged notions of a singular uncontested developmental saviour towards ones that are more incremental, negotiated and irregular).
Process | The question of an alternative vision for the future African city, if we are not to be London/New York/Shanghai/Elysium, is a common and enticing one. However, we suggest that the gap-filling is not about simply picking and imposing new metaphors or visions that seem more desirable. It is not literally an exercise of swapping out “smart city” for a “plan B”. Offering a “re-vision” would only serve to limit the deeper, wider creative and open enquiry which is essential to transformative imaginaries (Fritz, 2018). The metaphor is an idea, a questioning. And myth is expansion, not closure; it invites play and exploration. And these – questioning and play – are key constituents of imagination.
“[Metaphors] do not just describe reality but they constitute reality. They are foundational in disrupting the present, unlocking alternatives, and creating new futures.” Sohail Inayatullah, Futurist (2016)

Thus, responding to Irurah’s invitation, we began playing with monkeys and pumpkins – purposively delving into the myth gap and possibilities for the next 20 years. Emphasis is placed on representation (drawing) and the metaphors it conjures. We developed three scenarios driven by combining essential human conditions (habitat, livelihood and leisure) which set the scene in which various terms of engagement could facilitate the exchange or transaction (baby for pumpkin). We offered three trajectories, just plausible examples, for how different futures might be realised; through force, through manipulation, or through consensus. We engaged deeply in narrative-building within these imagined scenarios, questioning and rendering the characters, contexts and possibilities.

We played with different ideas about rights to the city and politics of care juxtaposed against forced removals and exclusionary “development rights”. We played with the city as tectonic shifts and movements; as interdependencies between socio-economic actors in dynamic ecosystems. We played with the city as patterns of layered, ephemeral uses that can enable individual and communal play as well as tranquillity and shared memory for all.

**Methodological note** | In addition to the initial provocation that established the terms of enquiry and captured the provocation by Irurah, three drawings were produced, each commenting on
a particular set of concerns identified by the authors. Each has prescribed protagonists in the transactional states of Force, Manipulation or Consensus which we explored as three modes (or in varying combinations thereof) of how we see futures being produced. Each drawing is located within a specific spatial order being a Room, a Street or a Landscape, establishing the trans-scalar territories through which these transactions would be conducted. The drawings employ collage as a technique to allow one to juxtapose various (existing and new) elements and decontextualise them to create some recombinant speculation, always hinting that the future imaginary is carefully leveraged from some social or infrastructural asset of our present time - whether desirable or not. The drawings codify protagonists to emphasise their specific alchemic role in relation to other elements. Relationships, the harmony, consensus, tensions bring to life new negotiated outcomes. These new futures are mapped onto a novel cartography that could set the course of new aspirations... but the actual outcome may of course differ vastly from its cartographic promise. The scenario drawings are centred around cartographic maps, as they are simultaneously a device to project a course towards new terrains as well as to record an existing terrain become ambiguous in its role.
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The Results | The outcome of these experiments is three sets of ideas; three active reframes. These reframes are not alternatives to the smart city vision, but what they do is to evoke questions and different opportunities in alternatives that are not evident in or permitted by the dominant smart city hor-renderings. Presented as drawings, the reframes serve as a complementary visual register of a set of ideas that the authors and audiences can explore. We lean on drawings (visual representation) as a way to expand beyond the limits of words in contemplating the complexities of what and how future cities are. They are produced in a deliberate response and critique to the dangerous promise of the smart city discourse and in particular its ritzy visual representations that deny the social, political and cultural complexity of our futures inheritance - today. This work aims to make more critical what we determine to be smart, sophisticated and intelligent. It suggests that these attributes exist in some clumsy and aesthetically jarring manner in our current every-day. We have a responsibility in our representation not to erase these contributions, but to acknowledge and work into them in building our future cities. The drawings further suggest that the agency of articulating and delivering on a future city will be a collective effort. Undertaken by many. Whether the many can find some consensus is yet to be determined. But the future city will meet and serve all in different ways. It is important that increased interdependence (socially, economically, spatially, ecologically, spiritually) be established to minimise fragmentation and extreme disparities in opportunity.

The specific reframes - as with any good metaphor or story - are left to the interpretation of the audience. They are conversation-starters,
evoking speculation about present and future, perhaps raising suspicion and emotion, but - always - they elicit new questions. It is thus important to remember that these reframes are not meant to be good or bad, likely or unlikely, desirable or undesirable. They are playful, not real. And therefore we can indulge them, and be open to contemplating and even playing further into the exploratory imaginaries that they open up. Such as the alluring notion that cities could actually work for everybody. That we can all “fit” in them if we layer in time, impermanence and virtualisation. That we could connect the formal to the informal. That the city can be a shared commons where belonging and sanctuary are rights equally held by all of their human and non-human inhabitants.

We are reframing as we play into the myth gap. Reframes such as these are an integral part of the futures literacy approach (Miller, 2018), and they are not merely the incremental reconfigurations invited as “thinking outside the box” (Lianaki-Dedouli, 2020). Reframing devises radically changed frameworks which simulate emergence, allowing for “the conceptualization, the meaning-making and sense-making of possible structures, processes and dynamics that characterise a world or a society in a future unknown to us” (ibid). This allows us to focus on an entirely transformed, previously unimaginable future - one that is not necessarily likely or desirable, but one that willingly plays into complexity and uncertainty, and begins to force (or entice) us to rethink or un-think our previously viewed range of options and choices. This is because reframing makes us more aware and open to revising or even dismissing our previously held “anticipatory assumptions” (Miller, 2018).
02. ROOM FOR CONTEST

A combative condition of win-lose plays out with a blinded perspective to the possibilities that lay beyond the stand-off. Room for human agreement is required to plot more hopeful urban trajectories.
03. TERRAIN MANIPULATIONS
The lived social and spatial layers, precariously placed, and carefully manipulated, allow for complex co-existence and proximities of different futures.
04. DESIRE (D) STREETS
The street as the armature for temporal, layered, complex and diverse leisure pursuits; accommodating the grand and everyday, the profane and sacred.
Towards the Futures | So what now for resolving the myth gap and debunking the sterile “smart city” imaginary? This play, this simulation, has begun to suggest that there are “pumpkins” available; that we can meaningfully play into the myth gap and more importantly—that we can invent and mould new worlds of possibility. In our experience and relations, we believe Africans to generally be strongly oral, visual and creative. How can we beneficially leverage these strengths, using simple futures and visualisation techniques to explore alternative myths and metaphors for our future cities? Then we needn’t just capitulate and aspire to images and consumption of stale futures. What rich new vistas could sit ahead of us, spaces of authenticity and possibility? And what gets in the way of such imaginings, or of pursuing alternatives? These are questions that suggest a practical way forward for scholars and practitioners who are interested in transformative futures for African cities. In challenging the myth that the future is some new, shiny, technologically intelligent experience, we suggest that there are different informing myths possible, and that in fact a large part of that future resides within our current realities. These realities bear invaluable intelligence in creating opportunity from intense forces—even those deemed regressive. These fragments of intel are born out of a primarily social intelligence and could be harnessed towards more amplified, integrated and authentic futures. It takes an imaginative, courageous and critical set of visionaries to identify and imagine the pumpkins that lie in our midst and present these to our monkey(s).

In this way, working into the myth gap and shifting the informing assumptions and metaphors begins opening, catalysing and informing a shift in development narrative and trajectory (Inayatullah, 2016). A different narrative base triggers not only
new changes, but also new conditions of change that begin to emerge from the new story. These in turn evoke new values, cultures, systems, policy directions, processes and indicators of progress (Scharmer, 2018; Inayatullah, 2004). This transformative sequence is one worth exploring more deeply based on reframes such as the ones explored in this exercise.

“We have to be ready to imagine futures that are not about the future but about helping us to discover, tease, provoke aspects of the present that wouldn’t otherwise be noticeable and also suspend this kind of urgency that we must plan for it or otherwise its game over.” Riel Miller, Head of Foresight, UNESCO (2020)
References


Feukeu, Kwamou Eva; Ajilore, Bunmi; Bourgeois, Robin (2021). The Capacity to Decolonise: Building futures literacy in Africa. IDRC, Canada.


Ravetz, Joe (2020). Deeper City: Collective Intelligence and the


**Additional suggested readings:**

AbdouMaliq Simone – Various works
Bertrand Russell – *In Praise of Idleness*, 1935
John Berger - *Ways of Seeing*, 1972
Louis Kahn – *The Room, the Street, and Human Agreement*, 1971
Peter Cook – *Plug-in City*, Archigram
Robert Neuwirth – *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters*, 2004
Post Scriptum | It has been said that the journey is the destination (Ralph Waldo Emerson). This was certainly the case for this exercise in at least three respects. Firstly, the scenarios we built could not have come from either of us alone. It was a creative, dialogic process of mutual appreciation and robust interrogation through which we generated new ideas and new worlds. There were neither holy grails nor holy cows; we were playing. Each could give and take. Our process demonstrated “co-creation” and “collective intelligence” which have become popular aspirations in futures and urbanism. The mode is one that we celebrate the space to do more of in our respective practices as it enriches creativity and novelty - and therefore imagination, and possibly relevance.

Secondly, the combination of conversing while rendering legibility to the emerging ideas – thoughts and questions translated into metaphor while drawing was powerful. It magically translated back to something more than the initial words. The imaginaries became somehow palpable. We believe that such processes and devices for engagement present important means for drawing (sic) people away from or beyond dominant images of microwaved possibility, using representation as process (not just as visualisations of predetermined outputs) to develop novel, potentially transformational ideas. The works of futurists like Joe Ravetz (2020) echo this idea that participatory visual thinking and narrative building can be a very meaningful approach to futuring and transformation.

And thirdly, the personal circumstances under which we were exploring these scenarios became so dramatic and impactful that they forced us to reflect upon whether these ought to be seen as just interruptions and inconveniences, or if they were actually
part of stories that we were telling. Both of us came down with COVID-19 around the same time, making us third-wave victims of a raging global pandemic. This slowed us down. Then mere days after our recoveries, Johannesburg, our city was burning as politically-triggered civil unrest raged through KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng provinces in South Africa. We concluded that these were not just unrelated, parallel events; they were in our course. Disease and anarchy so easily played into our city’s physical and highly unequal social structure, into our own disjointed experience of our city, and also into our reflexive practice. We were starkly reminded that the future is unknown, but not necessarily remote or removed; it has seeds in the here and now. Confronting stubborn characteristics in how we engage in both the present and the future - building a deeper consciousness about our anticipatory assumptions and their influence on what is deemed possible - are important ways to avoid reproducing the very same crises and issues that we seek to escape (Miller 2018).
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