

Book Review

City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development

*Sian Butcher**City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development (2008)*

Author: Edgar Pieterse

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In Mbembe and Nuttall's seminal piece, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis"¹, South African urbanists are taken to task for either their prescriptive or partial accounts of city life, too narrowly drawn along the lines of spatial segregation, economic inequality or rampant criminality. They argue that:

Ways of seeing and reading contemporary African cities are still dominated by the metanarrative of urbanization, modernization, and crisis...²

...Forgetting that the city always also operates as a site of fantasy, desire, and imagination, recent South African historiography tends to privilege a reading of the urban as a theater of capitalist accumulation and exploitation. This scholarship constitutes an impressive body of work—albeit one that is sutured to a political agenda (the critique of the apartheid state), theoretically narrow (though empirically very strong), and almost entirely undeveloped in terms of comparative foci.³

What is missing for Mbembe and Nuttall is closer attention to the aesthetics of urban life that move us beyond overly deterministic structural narratives and include the liminal spaces of agency, creativity and complexity within the city form.

Edgar Pieterse's work, and specifically his recent book *City Futures* inhabits a fraught borderland between the work of Mbembe *et al*, and that of the lambasted policy-oriented urbanists. This positioning, somewhere between the technical preoccupations of urban development strategists and the everyday musings of urban cultural studies, has been incredibly productive in shaping and nuancing Pieterse's understandings of, and approaches to intervening in, the city. This is an important theme in *City Futures*: that by "Blurring Boundaries"⁴ (to quote from another work of Pieterse's) between these ideologically distant camps, our urban epistemology and relevance of practice can only deepen. The book's wider project seems to be one of bridging – beginning conversations between the more concrete as well as conceptual approaches to the city; between Northern theory and Southern empirical work - to plot out ways forward for more engaged, transformative urban policy and praxis in cities of the global South. At a pragmatic level, this project also makes room for Pieterse's own multiple identities - as planner, policy maker and philosopher.

City Futures begins in the early chapters by mapping out the broader trends of the “second wave” of urbanisation. This is quickly followed by an interrogation and problematising of mainstream approaches to urban development, through the examples of UN-HABITAT’s Global Campaigns for Secure Tenure and Urban Governance. While Pieterse sees these campaigns as more sophisticated and less ‘one-size-fits-all’ than previous attempts to respond to the urban question, he highlights some important contradictions, generalisations and concerns. For one, he finds their homogenous approach to cities of the global South, especially in their readings of ‘slums’ and the urban poor, unhelpful in building more careful ways of intervening in these areas of material deprivation. He is also particularly uneasy about how these campaigns effectively depoliticise urban development processes and practices by not exposing the workings of power in creating massive urban inequalities, and by limiting democratic participation to an overly consensus-based model.

Later, in Chapter 5, Pieterse suggests ways for better theorising power, and putting the political back into our approach to cities. More broadly, he sees incremental radical democracy as “the most useful and productive approach to urban politics” – illustrated more tangibly through his conceptual model of urban politics. Here, he speaks to five spheres of political engagement, located at various scales and including a multiplicity of groups. This is a model Pieterse has drawn on in other work, but in *City Futures* he takes it further by drawing out the important spaces of overlap and “interface” between them – it is from these places of interface that the most productive outcomes emerge. Essentially, this model and chapter form the “heart” of the book – these specific mappings of the existing political geography of our cities, and the marking of potential spaces of engagement are key to any relevant urban interventions.

Chapter 6 takes a “detour via the insurgent”, reminding us that any talk of the political is inherently bound up in the everyday experiences and negotiations of ordinary citizens making their lives in these spaces. Here, Pieterse advocates an everyday, cultural approach to building richer, denser accounts of southern urbanism, looking to popular culture and literature to fill in the gaps on this in current urban studies. His key argument in this section, which I find particularly compelling, is that without this cultural, micro-perspective on everyday experiences of the city, our policy responses are limited and less appropriate to lived realities.

The final two chapters return to the alternative policy responses Pieterse envisions – he does not want to end off in the realm of high theory, nor in the micro-politics and negotiations of the everyday. Rather, he asks where these conversations have taken us in terms of alternative policy creation. He sees this task – of finding alternatives - as incumbent on all progressives (a very different perspective to urbanists Mbembe and Nuttall). He leaves us with a number of grounded, “strategic entry points” into reimagined urban planning systems at a variety of scales.

The fraught borderland between philosophy and policy that this book inhabits is prey to a number of tensions and pitfalls – dangers that Pieterse himself is all too aware of (he lists some of these in detail on p.38). In the first instance, the full scope and depth of the monumental task Pieterse takes on can only be hinted at and signposted. However, for the purposes of this project, these signposts are adequate, and an extensive set of endnotes and bibliographic details point readers to further discussions. Given the extensive nature of this book's topography, it is also difficult to pin down its most appropriate audience. On the one hand, the introduction is very clear that it is aimed at "progressive urban development practitioners" within government, institutions, NGOs and social movements, as a non-academic text. On the other hand, the book is largely concerned with conceptualising urban development processes and praxis at a metatheoretical level. At times, one questions whether Pieterse's conversations around re-theorising spaces and relations of power in the city match his intended audience. Overall though, this may be more of a productive tension than a fatal flaw – in my reading, *City Futures* serves as a useful 'big picture' text for practitioners, as well as providing some user-friendly entry points into academic urban debates and jargon like 'discourse' and 'citiness'. The typologies and frameworks included in the latter half of the book describing alternative urban interventions may also be of particular use to development practitioners.

One final query lingering at the back of my mind is around Pieterse's choice of subtitle – *Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development*. The use of the term 'crisis' was an immediate red flag (especially in relation to Mbembe and Nuttall's (2004) concerns), but its meaning is rather ambiguous. Is 'crisis' used as a tongue-in-cheek response to the negative alarmism raised by some popular recent work (such as Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums*) that Pieterse himself critiques in the introduction? Alternatively, is it employed in its true sense – reflecting some of the staggering, sobering statistics included in the second chapter? Perhaps importantly though, one must note that the term 'crisis' is not connected to the city, but to the state of 'urban development'. The informal, unplanned and stereotypically chaotic city of the global South is not the crisis that needs to be confronted – but rather it is our stale, irrelevant development responses to these urban forms that require some shaking up.

Overall then, Pieterse's latest work rises to the broader challenges he sets for himself and other critical urbanist scholars. His book makes an important contribution to a small, burgeoning countercanon of urban theory being honed in the South – theory that has traditionally been the preserve of the North¹¹. His theorising is grounded in empirical examples drawn from Southern urban experiences, from Accra to Rio de Janeiro, and is presented in an accessible way such that it can be of use to a range of readers. This leads to his second accomplishment: responding to the challenge raised by Nuttall and Mbembe (2005) – that of building more nuanced and adventurous accounts of the urban¹². Through his problematising of mainstream approaches, and his call for inclusion of the informal and everyday in rendering more complicated readings of the city, Pieterse productively interfaces with Nuttall and Mbembe's critique. However,

Pieterse's particularly feat is to make space for these readings without sacrificing the political and the transformative on the altar of aestheticism.

Notes

¹ A. Mbembe & S. Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," in *Public Culture*, 16(3), 2004, pp. 347-372

² *Ibid*, p.353

³ *Ibid*, p.355-6

⁴ E. Pieterse, "Blurring Boundaries: Fragments of an Urban Research Agenda". In *Urban Forum*, 17(4) 2006, pp. 398-412

¹¹ J. Robinson, "Global and World Cities: A View from off the Map". In *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26(3), 2002, p. 531-54

¹² S. Nuttall & A. Mbembe "A Blasé Attitude: A Response to Michael Watts". In *Public Culture*, 17(1), 2005, p. 193-201