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Re-thinking the Urban Glossary in Tanzania

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Within a complex scenario, African housing architecture is testing and integrating concepts and approaches. Albert Nyiti, a Tanzanian researcher, writes about challenges and contradictions

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The meaning of urban concepts in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been increasingly diverging from global narratives. This shift in discourse is perhaps a product of the appreciation of differences in culture and context, which in recent times has claimed space in global urban literature. The urban scholarship in SSA has predominantly been handed down from Eurocentric and/or Americentric urban concepts that have proven not to reflect the region's contemporary urban realities on the ground. Concepts such as urban, informal, unplanned, and housing, to name a few, are changing to reflect these realities. The nuance is even more pronounced when two or more of these urban concepts are combined. Put another way, one needs to fully understand the layers of meaning buried deep under these combined urban concepts, or some of it will be lost in translation. In this short essay, I attempt to question the meaning of a few

concepts that shape the urban discourse in SSA, looking at Tanzania as an example. The urban concepts selected here are those perceived to be fundamental in explaining the city-making process through the lens of urban housing development in the country. Among many others, this article is limited to the combination of the concept of urban housing development with the concepts of planned or unplanned, formal or informal, and regularized or formalized housing. Delving into these concepts is one step forward in the attempt to re-think the urban housing glossary in the country.

Planned versus unplanned housing

When we imagine planned housing, it entails master-plan-guided residential development. This is housing that is developed according to the urban planning standards that are provided by the state. Conversely, residential development in a given locality that is not guided by the master plan is referred to as unplanned housing. These two directly opposing concepts seem to fairly exhibit overlaps in the Tanzanian context and are not quite opposite (binary) to each other. Good examples of the overlaps can be found in Dar es Salaam's planned settlements like Sinza and Mwenge. Notwithstanding the planned status of these settlements, the housing development in the area has been largely characterized by unplanned housing transformations, often contradicting planning guidelines. Nevertheless, these unplanned housing transformations are existing realities and make the planned settlements more functional and meaningful to their residents and the community at large. With over 70% of Tanzanians living in unplanned housing, one is left to wonder: What is compliant urban planning good for if unplanned housing transformations are what's making these areas more usable?

Informal versus formal and / or regularized (formalized) housing

Informal housing is any residential development that falls outside the government's legal system in a given locality. If a dwelling unit is deemed informal, it is as good as tagging it as illegal housing. The residents of such housing usually do not hold any title deeds for their dwelling units. Formal housing, on the contrary, includes housing that is recognized by government laws and regulations, with its residents qualifying for title deeds. The case of regularized or formalized housing, however, is a bit different; it entails transforming housing that was initially informal into formal, i.e., making illegal housing into one that is legal (and in

principle) by improving environments with basic services as well as secure tenure. This appears to have a very clear and direct meaning until it is thought through the lines of the governance of these housing units. One thing to note is that these housing units were initially unplanned and informal; however, their new formal status does not make them planned housing. It is correct to therefore categorize regularized housing units as unplanned and formal housing following their newly acquired status. In addition, in practice, the regularization project has achieved very little in the provision of basic services other than roads, but with greater success in improving residents' security of tenure.

For almost twenty years now, Tanzania has been implementing a regularization project that was intended to end by December 2023. According to the Minister of Lands Housing and Human Settlements Development's (MLHHSD) 2023–2024 budgetary speech, 2.145.100 residential properties were identified, with 1.002.391 of them officially surveyed and 142.833 title deeds prepared under the project by May 2022. MLHHSD intends to evaluate the opportunities and challenges of the project post-2023 so as to determine the best way forward for handling unplanned and informal housing in the country. Again, one thing is clear in the Tanzanian case: planned housing is not necessarily formal housing, nor is unplanned housing always informal.

Conclusion

According to urban theory as we know it and as captured in popular (Eurocentric and Americentric) books, these aforementioned urban concepts should exhibit clear-cut differences. However, through the lens of urban housing development, the Tanzanian case suggests that there exist very thin lines of distinction between what is planned and unplanned housing as well as what is informal and formal or regularized housing. In this case, a planned settlement can have both planned and unplanned housing characteristics of developments, while a formal settlement can be one that was initially characterized as unplanned and/or informal but eventually became regularized. Using these key urban concepts loosely in explaining various key urban issues in Tanzania, whether in research or in industrial practice, could be misleading to both the presenter and the targeted audience. Regardless, one thing is clear: between the lines, there are lessons to be learned here. The essay calls for a need to re-think the urban housing glossary in Tanzania so as to fit the criteria of what is actually happening on the ground. Doing so will result in generating theories from our own perspectives and practices.

Theories that could indeed inform the Tanzanian city-making process in a manner that is more functional and meaningful to our context.

Front image: Unplanned housing in Kinondoni Municipal, Dar es Salaam, photo by Albert Nyiti, 07.2019

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