



OPTICS OF IMPACT: Urban Development and the Politics of Urban Expertise

MARCO DI NUNZIO
University of Birmingham

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5148-7571>

MEET THE INTERNATIONAL URBANISTS

A construction boom has transformed Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, beyond recognition. At the close of the 2000s, the city counted only a few high-rises. Today, it is filled with towering shopping malls, office buildings, luxury apartments, and landmark government and corporate headquarters. Across the city, and especially in its outskirts, new settlements have emerged. Hundreds of thousands of families inhabit 380,000 housing units built by the government since 2005, with the ostensible aim of providing home ownership to poorer urban dwellers.

This development emerged from an ambitious political vision—combining a commitment to Marxism-Leninism, state centrality, and pragmatic embrace of the market economy—which was formulated and implemented by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) during its tenure from 1991 to 2018. Under the EPRDF, Addis Ababa witnessed the construction of condominium housing and large-scale infrastructure projects such as the light rail and the expansion of the ring road. Construction activities then continued after the fall of the EPRDF in 2019 and under the auspices of Prime Minister Abiy

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Ahmed's Prosperity Party, albeit with a greater focus on private investment, luxury developments, and beautification projects.

International actors have contributed to this transformation. International contractors, particularly Chinese construction companies, as well as funding from the European Union, World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and China, have proved crucial in realizing major interventions in the built environment, especially large-scale infrastructure (Bayissa Badada et al. 2023). At the same time, and unlike other cities in the Global South and across Africa, Addis Ababa has seen international actors coexist alongside a rapidly growing domestic building industry. More than 3,000 contractors operate in Ethiopia, the vast majority of whom are domestic.¹ This local industry—comprising urban planners, architects, contractors, and developers—has played a key role in reshaping the city's built environment (Zegeye Cherenet and Helawi Sewnet 2012).

City builders and professionals, both domestic and international, have left their mark on the capital's spatial fabric, making its built environment a living archive of the experiments, solutions, and struggles of building professionals, as well as of the impacts of government, corporate, and international actors on its social and spatial fabric. Yet the built environment does not tell the whole story of Addis Ababa's construction boom. If one were to carry out a contemporary archaeology of the city's urban change, starting from its material and spatial fabric to trace courses of actions, one would miss the work of a small but influential constituency of building professionals who have left no material mark on the built environment. These were international urban experts, or "urbanists," as some called themselves—and as I will hereafter—often to distinguish themselves from "academics" or other "experts," including technical professionals such as architects, planners, and engineers.

Part of a growing global industry of knowledge and expertise (Robin and Acuto 2023), mostly based in universities and think tanks in the Global North, urbanists' work primarily involved writing reports and organizing high-level meetings and public events. Their claim to expertise rested on their commitment to narrate and evaluate the local experiences of cities across the world against the "lessons learned" and "best practices" drawn from the "international experience" of global cities such as Dubai, Shanghai, Mumbai, Singapore, London, Paris, and New York.

Urbanists I encountered over a decade of ethnographic research preferred offering a bird's-eye view rather than a sustained documentation of local specificities and histories. This approach was reflected in a mode of engagement, which often centered on short-term fieldtrips, the analysis of secondary sources, and interactions mainly with policymakers. In their reports and meetings with local

and international stakeholders, international urban experts spoke the normative language of productivity, underpinned by a firm belief in the ultimate necessity of building as an emblem of progress. Urbanists combined a teleological assumption that greater economic efficiency would produce benefits for wider society, with a pragmatic appreciation of development as inevitably incremental and cumulative. Teleology and pragmatism became synthesized in a conviction that urban development could be achieved anywhere if two necessary adjustments were made to the political, social, economic, and spatial fabric of a city: spatial densification and the diversification of urban space. To achieve this densification and diversification, they argued, cities, including those on the African continent, had to pursue organic connections to global circuits of production, investment, and technology by developing private-public partnerships to build housing and expand the city's infrastructure.

At first sight, the narratives of international urban experts appear not to radically differ from those of corporate and government city builders. Domestic contractors, developers, and planners embraced similar narratives to justify their actions in the built environment and make sense of their role in Addis Ababa's construction boom (Goodfellow 2017; Choplin 2023; Croese 2018; Di Nunzio 2026). Yet while shaped by particular institutional or political interests, these domestic narratives were directly grounded in the specific challenges and possibilities of the city's development context. By contrast, although urbanists' teleological pragmatism echoed corporate and government orders of urgency and necessity, it sought to transcend or even purposefully ignore those specificities.

Addis Ababa featured in urbanists' lists of case-study cities only by the late 2010s, quickly emerging as laboratory of urban development on the African continent. When visiting the city for the first time, large-scale housing construction, the expansion of the road network, and the city's light rail system were often read as examples of how strong political will, a governmental developmental ethos, and technocratic knowledge could shape cities in Africa. Beyond these broad strokes concerning the city's development, urbanists knew little about Ethiopia's historical and social realities, visiting Addis Ababa only on quick and infrequent trips, and over short periods. Yet this limited empirical knowledge of local realities did not undermine their careers and status. Even though, as we will see, their presence in Addis Ababa provoked irritation or skepticism among domestic city builders and professionals, international urban experts enjoyed funding and recognition. This contradiction proves central to the politics of expertise and constitutes the focus of this article.

In examining the long history of experts' engagements with the African continent and the Global South, critical scholarship has explored how experts made realities commensurable with rationalities of government (Foucault 1980; Scott 1998; Mitchell 2002) and contributed to design programs and policy that willingly or unwillingly reinforced regimes of authoritarian politics using the neutral language of technocracy (Ferguson 1990; Easterly 2014; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). This scholarship has provided a powerful critique of the politics of expertise. Yet as the anthropologist Tania Li (2007) has suggested, it has also tended to reproduce an image of experts as competent, knowledgeable, and effective actors, which has limited scholarly appreciation of how, why, and when expertise falls short of its promises. As Li argued, we should attend also to those moments when reality escapes the grip of expert discourse. What follows expands on Li's invitation to bring nuance to anthropological understandings of expertise and explore how its inability to capture the complexity of the real is constitutive of expert knowledge itself. By going beyond a portrayal of experts as scient or even demiurgic figures, I show how international urbanists could claim status and recognition in a city they knew very little about and despite leaving no mark on the built environment. The work of urbanists reveals how the impact of expertise is not upheld through an appreciation of and engagement with the complexity of lived realities and local specificities. Instead, it is itself validated through an entanglement of rhetoric, coloniality, and optics. Urban experts claimed authority through a language of simplicity and linearity, reproducing established tropes and reinforcing a singular, normative vision of economic growth. They were given status by virtue of the enduring legacy of the coloniality of knowledge. They exerted influence and impact as their encounters with local interlocutors became less about engagement and more about the staging and performances of those encounters themselves.

DISCOURSE, TRUTH, AND COLONIALITY

Expertise is a form of knowledge, the planning theorist Robert Beauregard (2015, 122) remarked, that is not necessarily concerned with making sense of lived experiences. Planning knowledge, for instance, operates within a potential disjuncture between reality and possibility. While planners might learn from reality, in terms of challenges, deficiencies, and issues to be addressed, "they operate more comfortably . . . when dealing with possibilities." In this regard, "knowledge about real people and their daily lives is interesting but not directly useful" (Beauregard 2015, 131). Instead, plans, as well as the measures needed to implement them, are often defined against what is believed to be desirable and necessary.

The codification of the desirable and necessary in cities has been the focus of the global industry of consultants and experts, including international urbanists, whose work centers on advising policymakers and city governments on so-called best practices for achieving “urban success” and “urban growth.” These recipes promise to make cities more manageable, productive, and globally competitive by prioritizing property titling, taxation systems conducive to business, and policies that expand mortgage and financial sectors.

Yet the implementation of these solutions has had adverse impact on cities (Bhan 2016; Fainstein 2010; Harms 2016; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009). They have not only contributed to the eviction and dispossession of poor communities to make way for densified neighborhoods, infrastructural projects, and private investments in the built environment but have also proven financially burdensome for city governments and taxpayers. Crucially, they have consistently failed to deliver affordable services, housing, and connectivity for urban residents.

Despite their failures, these prescriptions continue to be upheld as best practices. I contend in this article that urban experts’ willful ignorance of lived experiences proves central to explaining their success. As international urbanists, for instance, wrote off the complexity of lived realities, they were able to craft narratives of urban development that consisted of a series of logically consistent statements on what any given city should do to achieve positive urban change. The linearity and simplicity of their arguments made international urbanists excellent and convincing speakers, and their reports easily accessible.

However, linearity and simplicity alone were not the only the reasons international urban experts could claim to have impact, even though their work left no trace on the built environment, and independent of whether the formulas for urban development proposed in their reports—safely stored away in city government archives—and in high-profile government meetings became actualized and implemented. International urbanists could still claim impact because the simplicity and linearity of their discourses justified the inevitability of urban inequality and validated a strong belief in building as a categorical imperative, an idea that had traction domestically as well as globally.

The influence of urban experts thus extended beyond policy implementation. A discourse has an effect not only when it shapes policy but also when it constructs a vision of necessity and inevitability. This is not an illusion or mystification (Burawoy 2012; Gramsci 1988). Rather, it offers an impression of reality, one granted the status of truth because it aligns with existing dominant normative frameworks against which realities are accounted for and evaluated, and imaginations of the future elaborated (Foucault 2013). From this perspective, international urban experts had an effect because they spoke and validated

as truth the “common sense” (Gramsci 1988; Geertz 1975)—the doxa, as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) would have called it—of contemporary corporate and government involvement in the urban.

But this is not the whole story. As Michel Foucault (1977) observed, there is something about impressions of reality beyond what they do and achieve. Normative narratives become “true” also because they are embedded in configurations of power relations that sanction the status “of those who are charged with saying what counts as ‘true’” (Foucault 1977, 13). The question is not just how and why normative discourses are validated, but by whom.

Importantly, the presence of international urbanists in Addis Ababa did not go uncontested. Even those domestic building professionals, government officials, and academics who shared a vision of growth and development similar to that of international urbanists expressed irritation, and in some cases anger, at their pretensions. Many resented the assumption that urbanists based in Euro-America, and who had limited knowledge of local specificities and contexts and spent very little time in Addis Ababa, could dictate how development should unfold in the city and the Global South more generally.

The irritation of domestic actors did not necessarily prevent these experts from engaging or exerting influence. As I observed while shadowing urban experts, they were rarely invited by city or national authorities and universities. Instead, they often invited themselves. International urban experts managed to assert their presence by bringing their own funding, mostly from private foundations and financial endowments, which enabled them to organize high-level public events, conduct research, and author reports. Domestic city builders and professionals tolerated their presence less out of support than convenience: denying them access would have required more time and effort than simply allowing them a brief stay in Addis Ababa.

This ability to assert presence through external funding and self-initiated invitations raises the question of why Euro-American urbanists, despite limited empirical knowledge, could claim to hold the “truth” about the urban in Addis Ababa and elsewhere. As the sociologist Anibal Quijano (2008) and, later, the philosopher Walter D. Mignolo (2018) pointed out, the legacy of colonialism persists not only in the current regime of international relations (Bhattacharyya 2018) and the unequal distribution of the right to mobility (Khosravi 2007) but also in the way narratives produced in Euro-America—in the language of generalization and categorization—are granted the status of truth, while knowledge based on, produced by, and narrating the lived experiences of communities in the Global South is relegated to the periphery of what is considered relevant or significant.

Wittingly or unwittingly, international urbanists operated in an economy of knowledge that was globally shaped by the enduring legacy of colonialism. Euro-American urban experts could elevate common-sense narratives about economic growth to the status of truth because they benefited from a racialized and unequal system of expertise, credentials and, importantly, financial resources, which enabled them to speak from positions of intellectual authority (Hecht 2012; Tsing 2005; Li 2007; Mitchell 2002). With their technical advice and normative narratives, experts' knowledge sat at the very center of the coloniality of knowledge. As the historian Gabrielle Hecht (2012, 16) argued, colonialism justified itself through a portrayal of Africa as a place devoid of technology and through a belief that colonialism "would transform the continent through European science, technology and medicine." In this context, urban planning, for example, did not just constitute an instrument to enforce geographies of racial segregation in colonial towns, or an embodiment of an idea of order and progress that colonial institutions sought to project through their urban forms (Mabogunje 1990; Mitchell 2002; Swanson 1977). It also served as a terrain where colonial urban planners and scholars based in the metropolises were granted the status of experts, supposedly holding greater knowledge of the urban (Vainer 2014).

Ethiopia did not experience colonialism in the ways that other African countries did. Yet, its six-year colonial interlude (1935–1941) had significant impacts on the country's economy of urban expertise. Colonialism not only brought the violence of Italian fascism; it also brought Italian architects, planners, and contractors who shaped the geography of the city well into the 1960s and 1970s (Fueller 1996; Dandena Tufa 2008; Levin 2016). Other European and American experts followed, perpetuating the trope that Ethiopia needed lessons from what was now framed as the "international" and "global" experience to implement a vision of development that would help the country rise and connect to the world (Lall, Henderson, and Venables 2017; Collier et al. 2019). International urbanists, I argue, are an iteration in this long history. They reveal how the nexus of truth and coloniality continues to frame the rhetoric of expert international involvement with the urban and beyond, expressing itself, as we will see, through a firm conviction in the necessity of building, claims of neutrality, an illiberal understanding of politics, and an evolutionary and othering understanding of development that promotes the normativity of sameness.

THE NECESSITY OF BUILDING

A prominent representative of a private foundation—which aimed to support positive global change by funding initiatives that addressed pressing challenges—posed a provocative question at a meeting about urban development in the Global South. When the floor was opened to questions for the audience, she said: “You are talking about inequality as if it were a negative. Someone could argue that inequality is positive.” The room, filled with urban experts and academics, shifted uncomfortably. Her comment carried weight because her foundation was funding the work of several people in the room. When I met her again in Addis Ababa, I could see that her question on inequality was not necessarily about denying the reality of inequality, but about finding ways for a foundation like hers, funding the work of experts, to engage with the social and economic realities of the Global South. She was aware that urban development in Addis Ababa, for instance, had been pursued at the cost of evictions and low-wage labor on construction sites. She accepted and understood the reasons for a critical assessment of urban development, but she did not believe that such a critique could make a difference in finding a way forward.

This ambivalence toward critique was not limited to corporate funders. A broader “critique of critique” was one of the premises of the work of urban experts I encountered over the years. One long-standing urbanist, also in the room that day and who directed a major think tank and advised governments and international organizations, articulated this view clearly: “If you look at everything as being run by evil capitalists, you just end your work there.” For him, critique was a dead end unless it pointed toward viable alternatives. Another expert in the same meeting agreed. For him, two ways of thinking about research existed. “Academic books, papers, teaching, and conferences have long-term impact, perhaps the most meaningful kind,” he told me. Yet, he continued, research is transformative when it helps find technical solutions, formulas, and arrangements that can affect and adjust spatial and policy interventions. Sustained engagement in policy, connecting with political leaders and major organizations, implementing initiatives with clear effects that funders can appreciate, that, to him, made a difference: “There is a problem with Marxist theory. I have not heard any alternative or proposition. Just critiques.”

However, concerns with ideology or applicability were peripheral to urbanists’ rejection of critique. The fundamental problem with critique, urban experts believed, was that nuance and complexity called into question the urgency of building itself. The concern of critical knowledge with a complex and nuanced appreciation of lived experiences and contextual specificities hampered experts’, policymakers’, and political leaders’ ability and willingness to build. To be clear,

the urban experts I spent time with were rarely involved in designing a given building or in drafting a master plan or local development plan. International urbanists pursued *impact* by seeking to influence *how* government agencies, international organizations, and corporate actors conceptualized *how* they built in the city. Yet the *how* of building was subordinated to the act of building. Urbanists felt that they could act on the *hows* because building was the categorical imperative of urban change that ought not to be questioned.

Urbanists' critique of critique was not only aimed at anthropologists and Marxist geographers concerned with describing and documenting urban realities. They targeted anyone who questioned the necessity of building, including architects and urban planners who sought to rethink the boundaries, extent, and use of their practice. "You can criticize as much as you want, but if you provide no concrete alternative, what will be done with all your thinking?" a European urbanist who regularly advised international and government agencies on urban issues told an Ethiopian architect who had just given a presentation to a mixed audience of international academics, urban experts, university students, and domestic building professionals on how architecture has lost meaning in the city. "Yes, sure," the architect replied, "but we need to inform our planning with such a way of thinking." The urbanist was blunt: "You know what I think? If you think too much, things happen by themselves; it is better to do something." "This approach has created disasters!" the architect retorted. "Look, I prefer to do something with some mistakes than doing nothing," came the response. "But haven't we made enough mistakes?" the architect asked back.

THE BALANCED VIEW

Ordinary residents paid a dear price for the redevelopment of their city. Under both the EPRDF and the Prosperity Party, the ability of the Ethiopian state to influence and lead processes of city building was grounded in political authoritarianism. A pervasive apparatus of mobilization, repression, and surveillance limited the emergence of political competitors and constrained the ability of ordinary citizens to shape policy. Moreover, the benefits of Addis Ababa's construction boom are unevenly distributed. High-rise buildings, office complexes, and real estate developments have primarily catered to the upper middle class, the super rich, expats, and Ethiopian returnees from Europe and North America (Biruk Terrefe 2020; Goodfellow 2017). The government's "affordable" housing projects have trapped poorer homeowners in cycles of debt and precarity (Planel and Bridonneau 2017). Though the boom has created 1.8 million jobs nationally and attracted workers from the city's hinterlands, most construction workers face low wages, unsafe working conditions, minimal labor protections, and the

constant threat of dismissal (Di Nunzio 2022; Shaefer and Oya 2019). Strikingly, Addis Ababa's rapid development has led to the widespread destruction and erasure of the city's historical and social fabric (Elleni Centime Zeleke 2010; Alazar Gedamu Ejigu 2014). Large-scale evictions and demolitions, particularly in poor communities in the inner city and the outskirts, have cleared the way for construction activities (Ezana Haddis Weldeghebrael 2020; Amanuel Tadesse Weldegebriel et al. 2025).

Amid deepening inequalities and injustice, urban experts saw the task of expertise as providing a balanced view of the effects of urban development. Evictions certainly represented the negative, while the construction of housing units and growing employment in the construction sector were positives, worth celebrating. As I spent time with international urban experts, attending their meetings, workshops, and conferences, I observed how this pursuit of a balanced view of Addis Ababa's development not only implied seeing both sides of the coin but also, wittingly or unwittingly, downplaying ambivalence around what was considered a positive. For instance, while condominium housing certainly improved the quality of the housing stock, the spatial injustice and economic precariousness experienced by residents (Planel and Bridonneau 2017) was glossed over. Similarly, while more than a million people were employed in the construction sector, what remained unacknowledged was that low wages and a lack of safety made it a primary site of adverse incorporation (Di Nunzio 2022). When prompted, several urban experts acknowledged that inequalities existed, but added that low wages in construction and high mortgage rates were global trends. A degree of disruption was inevitable, they argued: what really mattered was the change happening in cities like Addis Ababa.

Visible, tangible transformations in the built environment tipped the scale of what was considered balanced and fair. Yet a balanced view of urban development was not just about celebrating change for its own sake. While critique supposedly failed in terms of action, balanced views were seen as a mode of knowledge that urban experts could fruitfully use to engage with the constituencies of urban development they believed capable of achieving meaningful change: city leaders and decision-makers, corporate and government city builders.

The fact that the city's powerful actors were the primary interlocutors of urban experts does not mean that the latter were inevitably pro-capital or anti-poor. The urbanists I encountered saw themselves as opposed to unrestrained neoliberalism—what one called “releasing the hounds to build as much as one can”—and as agents of a progressive agenda to make urban development inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

We can read this progressive stance in multiple ways. For critical geographer [Henri Lefebvre \(2003\)](#) this coexistence of progressive politics and elite politics in expert discourses forms the core of how authoritarian projects become realized in cities. In *The Urban Revolution*, he warned about urbanists—architects, building professionals, and researchers—who pursue projects of urban change framed as progressive or radical while helping obscure the regimes of authoritarian politics and exploitation that underpin transformations of the built environment (see also [Kanna 2011](#)). For the late anthropologist [James Ferguson \(1990\)](#), the political scientist [Timothy Mitchell \(2002\)](#), and the economist [William Easterly \(2014\)](#), the coexistence of progressive narratives of development and authoritarian elite politics is engrained in experts' pretense that their work exclusively concerns the provision of technical solutions to extant problems. In their claims to be neutral or balanced, experts commit to progress and development, depoliticizing domination and reinforcing the status quo.

At first glance, urban experts in Addis Ababa followed this script. They believed that, by virtue of their independence as knowledge actors, they could transcend the political environment. "I think universities are independent and it is our job to provide knowledge!" I was told by a professor of urban design at a North American university who, in an irritated tone, sought to explain why his design unit was preparing proposals for a government-supported green space on land to be made available through the large-scale eviction of local communities.

Yet, there is more to urban experts' appreciation of politics than the depoliticizing effects of technical discourses. In fact, urban experts' balanced views did not just disguise politics ([Li 2007](#)). Those I encountered were well aware of the inequalities and political authoritarianism pervading the city's development, and were careful to protect their reputations and not be seen as serving the vested interests of international organizations, corporate actors, and the political leadership. The balanced view of these experts was cognizant of politics, yet it was an understanding of politics devoid of power.

Since Michel Foucault, anthropologists and critical scholars have understood politics as an expression of how relations of power shape the conditions, terrains, and circumstances of "existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future" ([Foucault 1982](#), 789). From this perspective, politics is examined as a repertoire of institutional arrangements and actions that not only govern contemporary realities but also entrench forms of oppression and domination.

In Ethiopia, a critical assessment of politics, the state, and, more recently, the impacts of economic growth on the city's social and economic fabric have often intertwined with an anti-authoritarian critique of power. As the late historian [Elleni Centime Zeleke \(2019, 24\)](#) argued, critique has been embedded in a

terrain of political struggle where “academic practice, government, civil society activism and the social needs of local communities are brought together and recombined in very fraught ways.”

Urbanists tended to avoid the word *power* and often regarded anyone engaging in its critique with suspicion. Instead, they embraced an understanding of the political as a site of decisive, purposeful, and informed government action rather than domination. Urban experts saw themselves as progressives because they believed that their balanced views on the urban provided city leaders with an informed synthesis of the priorities of corporate and government city builders, the recognition that disruptions are inevitable in a moment of urban development, and an acknowledgment that the negative sides of urban change must be dealt with.

This vision of politics pervaded the talk of urbanists. In one meeting with city officials in Addis Ababa, an urban expert remarked: “City leaders need to be courageous,” before citing the example of a Latin American mayor whose promotion of a bus rapid transit (BRT) system cost him an election, only for him to later return to office as a celebrated urban innovator.

Examining the history of the BRT systems and its replication across the Global South goes beyond the aims of this article. Suffice it to say that BRT systems have been celebrated as public transport interventions that combine efficiency with reduced traffic and pollution. Yet the protests that generally accompany their construction, and the tensions around running such systems in various cities across the Global South, tell a more ambivalent story (Rizzo 2015). These BRT implementations have sometimes resulted in higher bus fares, fewer drivers employed, and a concentration of resources and funding in the hands of a few private transport operators.

That the implementation of a BRT system was presented as an example of courageous leadership reflects how urban experts understood and appreciated politics as the ability of city leaders to decisively intervene and transform the built environment. In urbanists’ discourses, the currency of politics was not power, but political will. Just as action trumped critique, and visible change in the built environment defined what was fair, the effectiveness of political will rested in city leaders’ and decision-makers’ ability to “make tough political decisions” (Lall, Henderson, and Venables 2017, 28) and achieve meaningful change by transcending social and economic tensions. From this perspective, political will was not just a celebration of government action as a vehicle for meaningful change in a city but also a *de facto* understanding of politics that was as minimalist as it was illiberal. As Hannah Arendt (1958) might put it, urban experts did not speak the language of the political: an endeavor that is open-ended because it rests on a search for a synthesis between multiple views and subjectivities.

Instead, as urbanists praised the courage and force of political will, they urged every city leader to act as *homo faber*: as an agent of a politics of finality, the concern of which is to reshape society in the name of a higher sense of necessity—an idea that, Arendt warned us, is the antechamber of authoritarianism.

EXCEPTIONS, REPETITIONS, AND BENCHMARKS

One of the urbanists I met over the years was the urbanization lead for a private foundation that funded experts in cities across the world. She was not an urban expert herself. She had a past career in finance, far removed from the academic institutions, research centers, and think tanks from which many urban experts emerged. Yet she had taken to her position with dedication and commitment. As part of her job, she had to speak about urban issues in panel discussions, sitting next to experts and scholars with decades of research experience. As I bumped into her from time to time in workshops and meetings, I could see her growing into the role. Over a short time, her speeches became more polished as she skillfully packaged her presentations, drawing on the conversations and presentations of speakers who had participated in her foundation's past events.

This was not a matter of mimicry or straightforward plagiarism. Rather, she was learning to inhabit the discursive style of urban expertise. The speeches I heard over the years by established experts often followed familiar patterns—polished, compelling, and refined through repetition. One senior urban expert in particular exemplified this skill. He could craft a compelling talk about urban transformation or a policy experiment with just a few minutes of preparation, distilling and reassembling insights picked up from colleagues, researchers, and city builders.

Because urbanists' discourses were crafted through repetition, they tended to be rather repetitive. Repetition, however, was not only matter of rhetoric. Their speeches were repetitive because urbanists' expertise revolved around reproducing established tropes. Through repetition, international urbanists validated both their own status of experts and dominant normative frameworks about cities and development.

One such trope, often repeated at the beginning of urbanists' presentations, was that "Africa" constituted the new frontier of urbanization. Asia, particularly China and India, urban experts argued, repeating themselves and their peers, had urbanized quickly and pervasively from the 1970s to the 2000s. Now it was Africa's turn. Yet the unprecedented degree and pace of this urbanization was cause for concern, urbanists agreed: this third urban revolution was as full of risks as opportunities.

"What I see here is that there is a race for development," noted the head of a private foundation during a dinner with a group of urban experts in Addis

Ababa. “Here, the government has very clear and lucid ideas, and they are ruthless in their implementation. The government is trying to catch up with housing and infrastructure. But what is going to become of this is open-ended, and this gives room for our work.” Experts could help Africa rise to the challenge, said a European professor of architecture at a leading technical university, on another occasion. “We want to engage with Africa. Also because Asia will no longer listen,” he said in a sarcastic tone, adding, “Africa is in a stage of urbanization and will need Europe’s advice.”

The open and unapologetic embrace of the tropes of Rudyard Kipling’s “white man’s burden” by urbanists was unsettling. Yet the coloniality of their involvement with urban Africa was not only about how they conceptualized their role and boasted about the value of their knowledge. It also concerned the epistemologies of generalization and categorization that pervaded how urban experts crafted their narratives about Africa, economic growth, and the urban.

As the philosophers [Achille Mbembe \(2001\)](#) and [V. Y. Mudimbe \(1988\)](#) have argued, speaking of Africa as a place that could be captured and described in its entirety is the legacy of a colonial regime of knowledge. “Africa” has been crafted into an idea of otherness, dysfunction, crisis, and violence against which the West has asserted “its difference from the rest of the world” ([Mbembe 2001](#), 2). Still, as the anthropologist [James Ferguson \(2006\)](#) pointed out, Africa has persisted as a category in journalistic accounts, public narratives, and expert and policy discourses. However, Africa’s portrayal has changed over the years. Experts’ narrative of Africa as the new frontier of urban development was itself the result of a paradigm shift. In the early 1990s, business reports and media accounts portrayed Africa’s poverty as a threat to rich countries ([Jerven 2015](#)). Twenty years later, throughout the 2000s and 2010s, Africa’s economic growth was described as bringing new opportunities for investment and wealth creation ([McKinsey Global Institute 2012](#); [Knight Frank 2017](#)). While the rest of the world was in recession, Africa was rising. Annual GDP growth provided the grounds for a paradigm shift in representations of the continent, and some countries in particular—Ethiopia included—that were seen as rising from the ashes of famine, civil war, and stagnation toward economic growth and political stability.

Narratives of success and economic growth shifted representations about Africa from the continent of crisis, civil war, and famine to the continent of promise. African cities and countries have gradually moved up global indexes on quality of life and wealth ([Knight Frank 2017](#)). By the mid-2010s, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and international consultancy firms such as the [McKinsey Global Institute \(2012\)](#), and [Knight Frank \(2017\)](#) portrayed Africa as a potential destination for investment in manufacturing, infrastructure,

real estate, and retail. Yet replacing the stereotypical image of Africa as a continent of crisis with one of a continent of economic growth also proved problematic. While the former fixed Africa as a homogenous reality doomed by abnormal disorder and disaster (Mbembe 2001), narratives of growth evoked imageries of success, omitting exclusion and subjugation from their representations of African development. In so doing, they not only fixed Africa into an image of promise but also exaggerated traits of success and growth, perpetuating the image of Africa as thriving through exceptions.

While talking about Ethiopia, urban experts relied on and repeated a repertoire of narratives about the country's development and economic success that concealed how authoritarianism and social exclusion shape the experiences of ordinary citizens. A dominant narrative about Ethiopia's development has emphasized the central role of the state in economic growth as key to the country's remarkable success and Addis Ababa's construction boom. Political ownership of the development process has been portrayed by development practitioners and major scholars in development as beneficial to sectors that might not be of primary interest to private investors but prove crucial for national development, such as the construction of infrastructure (Kelsall 2013) and the implementation of poverty-reduction strategies (Nino-Zarazúa et al. 2011). For this reason, informed commentators and development experts such as Alex de Waal (2013) invited scholars critical of the EPRDF's record on inequality and democracy to give a "fair hearing" to the party's developmental vision and to wait for it to be realized. Yet such invitations were and are deeply problematic. While the urban poor are told to "wait" for development to manifest, political stability, economic growth, social equity, and political and civil rights are prioritized in a sequence that is claimed to lead to a democratic, developed, and affluent society. As a result, authoritarianism in the present is endorsed as a step toward democracy in the future, just as growing social inequality is deemed necessary to achieve economic growth.

These teleologies of development made for the foundation of urban experts' discourse. They pervaded reports that justified resettlement as a tool for triggering investment in strategic city locations (Lall, Henderson, and Venables 2017; Collier et al. 2019) and described low wages as an opportunity for investors and the national government to boost growth (McKinsey Global Institute 2012).

Urbanists' narratives on urban Africa, and urban Ethiopia, were not only concerned with justifying evictions and low-wage labor, however. After all, as urban experts insisted, these were globally shared experiences. The task of

urban expertise also consisted of making sense of and addressing something urbanists considered fundamentally “African” and that they believed created a major obstacle to the success of African cities: “informality.”

As a concept, *informality* has a long and ambivalent history. In his seminal article about urban economies, the late anthropologist [Keith Hart \(1973\)](#) used the word to describe the income opportunities (many falling outside the normative and regulatory framework of the state) used by urban dwellers in late colonial and early postcolonial Accra to make do in a city that offered limited employment. Since then, *informal* has been used to describe a wide range of economic, social, political, and cultural realities located outside what scholars consider the desirable norm. While *formal* describes segments of society that are mainstream, modern, legal, bureaucratically regulated, and capital-driven, *informal* represents anything that does not fit these descriptions ([Ferman, Henry, and Hoyman 1987](#); [Meagher 2013](#)). The adjective *informal*, applied to a range of income opportunities, often availed in combination with “formal” employment, became *informality*, a noun: a “thing” on its own. From *informal* to *informality*, the latter has become a trope in urbanists’ discourse, or rather, a “racial vernacular of development,” to put it with [Jemima Pierre \(2020\)](#), epitomizing Africa’s alleged unique otherness and exceptionality of the arrangements dominating its political economy: failed states, twilight institutions, endemic corruption and nepotism, non-state, illegal, and shadow dual economies.

For the urban experts I talked with, the cure for these ills was to formalize the informal by making visible what was hidden. This entailed, for instance, mapping and digitizing informal economies and transport systems and replacing informal settlements and their economies with planned, serviced housing facilities. Addis Ababa, according to one urban expert, was at the forefront of this effort. For him, the construction boom had created employment, providing alternatives to the informal economy, while condominium housing had entailed a positive, radical reorganization of the spatial, social, and economic fabric of the capital. “What you have achieved is incredible,” another urbanist said in a meeting with senior government officials in Addis Ababa. “Building 30,000 housing units a year is something that London would not ever dream of achieving these days!”

In principle, urbanists celebrated local experiments and policy solutions. At the same time, the premise of their work, and the very reason for their presence in Addis Ababa, they believed, was that local experiments alone could not tackle the combined challenges of rapid urbanization and informality. Local experiments were seen as too engrained in the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of a given context, potentially curtailing the long-term view that politicians, city leaders, and policymakers should have to imagine the future of their cities. This

is where urban experts positioned themselves as essential. Their comparative and bird's-eye view on processes of urban development globally, international urbanists claimed, could provide city leaders and decision-makers with the parameters to evaluate the performance of their cities and chart a way forward.

A common method for doing so came in the form of benchmarking. Think tanks and research institutes led by international urbanists frequently published global indices ranking cities across indicators such as GDP per capita, murder rates, urban density distribution, and transport network coverage. "Comparative data," one urban expert explained to government officials, "can give you a sense of where your city is going and could go in relation to other cities across the world." Indicators, urban experts insisted, were not just metrics; they were instruments for policymaking, offering a way for governments to monitor, evaluate, and improve the quality and effectiveness of their policies and interventions.

While benchmarks measured the performance of African cities in relation to cities like London, New York, São Paulo, Seoul, and Singapore, they also pointed to appropriate models of development, consisting of learned lessons and recipes for urban development concerning governance structures, modes of financing, and the spatial distribution of policy interventions, drawing on the experience and achievements of cities across the globe.

"What do you think is the model here?" I often heard urban experts asking their interlocutors. "Is Singapore the model?" one urbanist asked on one occasion, mentioning the Southeast Asian city-state's lessee-occupied public housing model. "The difference between London and New York is that in London the transport system is governed and managed by the city government, while in New York it is run by the State of New York," the same urban expert observed on another occasion to senior city government officials, discussing the implications of governance structure on the effectiveness of public transport infrastructure. As New York, Singapore, London, and other cities populated urban experts' talk, international urbanists argued that any city could achieve meaningful and sustainable urban change if its leaders applied the right policies and pursued them with political will and determination. Benchmarks and models of urban development were useful because they showed political leaders and city builders where they should be heading next.

Urbanists' conviction in the value of their benchmarks and models of development points to why and how their advice was problematic. It operationalized an appreciation of action as building, conviction in the power of political will, and the positive impacts of interventions in the built form on the social and economic fabric of city. Their ideas also rested on a linear and evolutionary understanding of urban change and a belief that successful urban development

in a city like Addis Ababa depended on domestic city builders' commitment to emancipating it from its own otherness and exceptionality to reach a degree of sameness with cities that experts assessed as further ahead on the evolutionary road to development.

UNPACKING URBAN EXPERTS' IMPACT

As I shadowed urban experts through their daily schedules, with appointments over breakfast, lunch, and dinner to present their work to local interlocutors, I observed how their presence was often seen with suspicion and irritation. With all their talk of benchmarks and models of development, urbanists wittingly or unwittingly questioned the value of the knowledge and capabilities of domestic actors. Academics were often the first to voice skepticism. "Planning in Addis Ababa has all been concerned with models and solutions that are not suitable to the social, political, and economic realities of the city," remarked a senior geographer at Addis Ababa University after a presentation by an international urban expert.

Academics were not the only ones to question the premises of international urbanists' involvement with Addis Ababa. "You represent what I am most against," a real estate developer who often participated in such debates told an urban expert. "There are a lot of discussions here on how we can rethink urban development," he continued. "My frustration with what you are saying is that we are still trapped in the usual ways of thinking about these things." A senior government official at the City Plan Commission questioned the usefulness of urbanists' benchmarking altogether. "Well, we can do research. We have that capacity. We know the problems and we can plan in relation to these problems."

Another senior official at the same commission went further. "Why do we need urban planning? To be like others? To solve problems? But whose problems? Are we here to solve the problems of the Romans?" he asked at a conference in Addis Ababa attended by international urban experts and academics in planning and architecture from Euro-American universities. While he was an admirer of Roman architecture and planning, reproducing the technologies and solutions that Romans, and Europeans after them, had pursued and implemented over centuries would not help Addis Ababa meet the challenges of its fast urbanization, he concluded,

Despite their opposition, city government officials, but also critical architects, academics, and developers often participated in meetings and workshops organized by international urban experts. Some city government officials joined these events, and many invited urban experts to their offices, often with the hope that the latter's Euro-American universities might train city officials (a

hope quickly dashed when they learned about the tuition fees for executive and masters programs). But what really opened doors for urban experts was the aura of authority and prestige they brought with them as they landed in Addis Ababa. “This is a great opportunity, and we are looking forward to working together. You come from a prestigious university and we are happy to have exposure to this kind of institution,” a high-ranking city government official told a visiting urban expert. Officials in other government agencies shared this sentiment. “Your presence here is a recognition of what we have done,” said a senior official at the Ministry of Urban Development.

Both irritation and praise pervaded encounters between urban experts and building professionals. This ambivalence reflected the impact of international urbanists in a city such as Addis Ababa. Contrary to the demiurgic and scient depictions of experts in critical scholarship (Mitchell 2002; Ferguson 1990; Easterly 2014), international urban experts and the private foundations that funded them had little use to domestic city builders, failing to influence policies and planning practices. While international funding played a significant role in the construction of large-scale infrastructure, the significant part played by the domestic building industry in Addis Ababa’s construction boom—including its building professionals, planners, architects, policymakers, and engineers—made urban experts’ narratives on benchmarks and models of development redundant. Domestic city builders’ reactions to urbanists were meant to remind them that locally produced research had fed decades of policy, planning, design, and engineering in the city’s built environment.

Nevertheless, in one sense, urban experts proved transformative. Their impact was less about what encounters between international urbanists and domestic city builders produced, and more about how both parties narrated such encounters to their peers, funders, and interlocutors. The influence of international urbanists lay more in the *optics* of their interactions than in the specific content of their advice.

Domestic corporate and government city builders and experts shared a belief in the moral primacy of building and saw evictions, low wages, and heightened inequalities as inevitable during a construction boom. Local actors thus strategically welcomed the presence of international urban experts. Despite underlying irritation at their presence, urbanists’ funding, affiliations with prestigious universities, and well-framed, balanced views lent additional credibility to dominant local visions of development and economic growth. International urban experts gave interviews to local and global media. They celebrated Addis Ababa’s achievements in speeches at local and global forums, including at universities and public events. They organized high-level workshops and conferences

with global audiences that also featured local and domestic building professionals, bringing international prestige to Addis Ababa as a laboratory for new ways of thinking about urban development.

For their part, urban experts narrated the willingness to engage of domestic city builders and professionals as proof of the value of their own expertise, suggesting that their knowledge was not only relevant but also impactful. This bolstered their reputations among peers and helped attract further funding, as private foundations and financial endowments interpreted such engagement as effective knowledge transfer. As urban experts celebrated their impact with their peers and funders in Euro-America, Addis Ababa became a case study that reinforced the urgency of a balanced view, the courage of political will, and the value of benchmarks. Urbanists not only advertised the merits of their knowledge to their funders and peers; they also anchored the legitimization of “local” visions of development into the reproduction of stereotypes about Africa as a land of exceptions (Ferguson 2006; Mudimbe 1988; Hecht 2012).

CONCLUSION

The presence of international urban experts in Addis Ababa reveals the paradoxes of expertise in the global urban development industry. While these experts claimed to provide valuable insights and solutions, their engagement often reinforced a singular vision of economic growth rooted in teleological assumptions and the enduring coloniality of knowledge. Their narratives prioritized building as an unquestionable imperative, celebrated urban transformations while downplaying structural inequalities, and framed political will as an instrument of decisive action rather than a site of contested power.

However, the impact of these experts was not as straightforward as scholarship on expertise sometimes suggests. Their advice, based as it was on benchmarks and models of urban development, was often disregarded by city government officials. International urbanists failed to produce the outcomes they desired or shape how the city was built. This does not mean urban experts were not impactful. Rather than substantively influencing policy or practice, their impact was discursive, reinforcing global stereotypes about African urbanization while simultaneously legitimizing the priorities of domestic city builders and policymakers. Their role in reproducing and legitimizing authoritarian politics, and the inevitability of inequality and injustice, had more insidious impacts that extended beyond the transformation of the built environment. With their claims of truth, balanced views, and consistent narratives, they constrained the space

for knowledge that captured the complexity of lived experiences in cities, as well as that for alternative urban agendas to emerge and thrive, both locally and globally.

Ultimately, the work of international urbanists highlights broader tensions between domestic knowledge and “global” expertise, between technocratic narratives and political realities, and between the aspiration for inclusive development and the entrenched structures of inequality that persist despite—or perhaps because of—expert interventions. Grappling with these tensions proves essential if we are to rethink the role of expertise in shaping urban futures beyond the logics of extraction and exclusion. This task has never been more urgent than in the present, as the very production of critical knowledge itself has come under sustained attack.

ABSTRACT

Examining the long history of expert engagement with Africa and the Global South, critical scholarship has explored how “international experts” made realities commensurable with rationalities of government and contributed to design programs and policy that willingly or unwillingly reinforced regimes of authoritarian politics through the neutral language of technocracy. While providing a powerful critique of the politics of expertise, this scholarship tends to reproduce the image of international experts as competent, knowledgeable, and effective. This article goes beyond such portrayals to examine the contradictions in the work of international urban experts, or urbanists. I discuss how and why their limited empirical knowledge of local urban realities did not undermine their status as experts, as they engaged with and narrated the development of Ethiopia’s capital Addis Ababa. By exploring how urban experts could still claim their work to be “impactful,” no matter whether their formulas for urban development proposed in reports and meetings with government stakeholders were ever actualized and implemented, I examine why expertise validates itself through an entanglement of rhetoric, optics, and coloniality. [expertise; urban; cities; Addis Ababa; knowledge]

NOTES

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1. Construction Proxy, website, updated May 7, 2015, <https://constructionproxy.com/catalog/contractors-in-ethiopia>

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