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SPECIAL SECTION

Massive Urbanisation

The atmospheres of massiveness: The politics and times of the maybe in Southern megaregions

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue on massive urbanisation, the collective that has prepared this issue reviews the thinking and experiences that have been important to them. The reflections centre on the use of 'massive' in Jamaican patois, where it has two countervailing meanings. On the one hand, it means an inordinate lack of sensitivity to the real conditions taking place, a sense of extreme self-inflation beyond reason. On the other, it means a collectivity coming into being without a set form, but reflective of a desire for collaboration and mutuality. Massive urbanisation thus means here both the voluminous expansion of speculative accumulation, extraction of land value, replication of vast inequities and disfunction, and the continuous emergence of new forms of urban inhabitation, a constant remaking of the social field by what has been called the urban majority. All of the contributions attempt to work with this sense of doubleness, amplifying the creation of particular atmospheres of the urban as a materiality of its heterogeneity.

KEYWORDS

atmospheres, blackness, massive, temporality, urban majority, urbanisation

1 | INTRODUCTION

For those of us who live and work as researchers in the largest urban regions of the so-called Global South, we are always grappling with salient conceptualisations, practices of engagement, and strategic positionalities capable of addressing and enduring the oscillating, volatile compositions of space and time. While genealogies of constitutive forces at work in producing specific conditions are certainly useful in tracking the logics and forms of socio-spatial transformation over time, the profusion of seemingly contradictory trajectories of change, of the multiple 'real' that characterises the simultaneous coherence and chaos of these regions as territorial entities, compels researchers to continuously reformulate critical questions, let alone recalibrate analytical lenses. The shape and speed of volumetric expansions, the heterogeneities of life situations and livelihoods, and the fractal replication of built environments that require singular adjustments to ensure even limited viability combine to make navigation through a plethora of institutions, scales, registers and narratives always a bricolage of fragments. The availability of specific territories to discordant dispositions, to an obdurate endurance of built environments and ways of life, to sudden, arbitrary evictions, to continuous upgrading, to a constant deferral of hegemonic development agendas, to being the playground of geopolitical games, to institutional gridlocks or rapid interventions, all intersect in ways in which it is difficult to figure out the proportionality or efficacy of the factors at work in any disposition.

A collective of urban researchers working in nine major regions of the Global South came together over the past 18 months to think through the notion of the *massive* beyond its conventional connotations of mushrooming populations and a voluminous and explosive mass beyond apprehension or control.[1] The collective also sought to think of urban extensiveness as something involving the temporality of dreams, ambivalent desires, improvised manoeuvres, and unruly inclinations in addition to the generalisation of commodity forms and capital accumulation.[2] For in Jamaican patois, 'massive' has two countervailing meanings. On the one hand it means an inordinate lack of sensitivity to the real conditions taking place, a sense of extreme self-inflation beyond reason. On the other, it means a collectivity coming into being without a set form, but reflective of a desire for collaboration and mutuality. *Massive urbanisation* thus means here both the voluminous expansion of speculative accumulation, extraction of land value, replication of vast inequities and disfunction, *and* the continuous emergence of new forms of urban inhabitation, a constant remaking of the social field by what has been called the *urban majority*.

As such, massiveness may be the very thing that provides a kind of 'safety net'. All kinds of discrepant environments become momentary bastions of largely improvised collectivity, where people try to make some functional use of each other without any pretence of long-term commitments. Momentary, sporadic and makeshift become the defining metaphors of many collective formations. Our collective seeks to work through what a progressive urban politics looks like in conditions of anticipated intensifications of displacement, enforced mobilities, temporary residence, heightened reliance on extended family networks, and the reworking of solidarities. When does the visualisation of particular urban realities enable the visualisation of strategic approaches for dealing with them?

For example, if the collaborations among widespread and seemingly disconnected capillary networks across an urban region are able to produce visualisations of urban realities that have remained elusive or subject to distorted narratives, to what extent do these visualisations also demonstrate a substrate of 'popular power' potentially capable of transforming the realities they map? If the profound and enduring inequalities operative across urban regions are more comprehensively and precisely visualised, how do we assess the impact of that process on producing more effective and just urban politics? If this entails the 'power of naming', what is a politics of naming, and how effectively does a repertoire of familiar terms, such as secure tenure, community management, institutionalised social movements, name?

2 | A MATTER OF ATMOSPHERES

So, instead of invoking *massive* urbanisation as a descriptor for some inchoate, fundamentally messy process, we engage the massive here as an atmospheric condition, pointing to an expansive density of operations and sensibilities at work in the continuous re-composition, repair and renderings of the constituent spaces of Karachi, Johannesburg, Rio de Janeiro, Cairo, Jakarta, Istanbul, Lagos, Delhi, Manila and Nairobi. Atmosphere is the product of traceable and deliberative structuring forces, which represent that entanglement of violence, capital and extraction, and the multiplicity of inclinations, tactics and experiments undertaken by diverse individual and collective actors to create livelihood and mutable territories of everyday operation (Allewaert, 2013; Chakrabarty, 2002; Ghertner, 2021;

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016; Zeiderman, 2019). Atmosphere is also, at the same time, something more intangible, amorphous, which nevertheless affects the metabolic and processing functions of bodies and machines. Here atmosphere can simultaneously be seen as a modulation, a biome, a political chemistry, or a domain of shifting thresholds of sensibility—of what can be sensed, what is considered sensible, and a milieu of affect, of affecting and being affected that ramifies and disrupts the stabilisation of categories and ontological positions (Adey, 2013; Anderson, 2009; Gandy, 2017; McCormack, 2008, 2018; Stewart, 2011). Here, notions, for example, of *sub*urbs, *sub*alterns, peripheries, *sub*sistence might lose their prefix and rather reflect more transversal compositions of spatial materials.

With cognisance on the extensive geographical literature on affect, atmospheric conditions, urban density, some of which is cited above, we also borrow in our conceptualisation of atmosphere that which has been applied to 'atmospheres of anti-blackness' or atmospheres of fugitivity, which have for some time been critical tropes in thinking through the black urban political (Bledsoe & Wright, 2018; James, 2013; Moten, 2018a, 2018b; Sharpe, 2016). Such atmospheres instigate the necessity for specific re-conceptualisations of agency, relationality and collective life. The repurposing of atmosphere here is important for us because of our concern with the extent to which the massiveness of urban regions is, at least tacitly in terms of the implications of prevailing governmentalities, viewed as being capable of absorbing crisis and, in particular, large volumes of death. Whereas the complexity of administering vast and complicated urban territories might normatively be seen as the basis of decisions, policies and interventions that are always only partially effective, or skewed to the valuation of particular kinds of lives over others, or even intentionally directed to allowing death, the inverse of such assumptions seems to be increasingly relied upon as a sign of the capacity of 'massive' urban regions to absorb death and yet continue to function for those who remain. Whatever takes place then, in terms of gestures toward sustainability, investments in logistical proficiencies, governmental reform, and democratic participation, occurs in the midst of a banking or hedge on the absorptive capacities of the massive.

Here, there is a concession to volumetric complexity that exceeds the repertoire of available managerial tools, even as investments in urban technologies consume larger proportions of metropolitan budgets. An intensified desire to control, according to expanding interoperable logics and procedures, is complemented by faith in a monstrous inexplicability, which is more than a necropolitics. This massive atmosphere, capable of absorbing that which would seem to undermine any prospect of territorial and socio-political coherence, instead comes to stand for a capacity, that even though it cannot be reasonably acknowledged, underlines the prospect for regional endurance.

It is not simply a necropolitics because, in contrast to a politics of inhabitation focused exclusively on the prolongation of life—which shrinks the very horizon of the political and the capacity to make political demands—the atmosphere of the massive also 'registers' all of the impulsive, risk-laden acts of inhabiting that are indifferent to life's sustainability. Not only does the massive urban absorb death, but it stages all of those seemingly purposeless and irrational actions that are not undertaken in 'life's interest' but remain manifestations of liveliness (Foucault, 2011).

In light of such atmospheric conditions, we have found it particularly useful to think through the non-performative dimensions of contemporary black thought as a way of approaching everyday operations in the cities in which we work. Here, such operations, always fleeting and provisional, occur outside the frameworks of recognition, efficacy and subjectivity. They are materialised in acts of refusal, ignoring, disobedience and ignoring among lives in a continuous process of rehearsal (Ferreira da Silva, 2018, Moten, 2018b, Lewis, 2020).

Detachment from the need and tropes of 'mattering' become the platform for blueprinting new modalities of collective affect. If the massive, in its conventional renderings, represents a sense of excess—excess populations, excess chaos, uncertainty, violence, informality, precarity, and so forth—a black diagnostics becomes useful in terms of pointing to the ways in which it is this very excess that becomes a resource to be extracted from, the embodiment of inordinate capacity, and the locus of intervention, where it is not so much a matter of bodies to be controlled or disembodied, but rather their potential for excessive enunciations.

An emancipatory politics then requires ways that exceed the excessive. While on the surface paradoxical, this formulation does get at fundamental conundrums of processes of becoming within our urban contexts. For example, all of the half-finished built environments at expanding 'peripheries' might upend the usual notions of workability or profitability, and are subject to processes of bargaining that ambiguate clear-cut interests and aspirations, or the ways in which urban identities operate as fungible currencies whose valuations are constantly shifting but at the same time cannot be assumed by just anyone. Here the issue is how to be something specific, non-convertible or translatable—not to be an excess of anything—yet at the same time, articulable, capable of participating in collective mobilisations of sentiment and effort even if such mobilisations do not take the form of alliances, coalitions or social movements.

3 | THREE MOVEMENTS

3.1 | As such three key notions organise this special issue

3.1.1 | The politics and time of the *maybe*

This reflects the conjunction between inhabitant and environment where things could go many different ways. It is a notion that resonates with Deleuze's figuration of a 'center of determinacy', but which does not line up completely, as it maybe reflects the ellipsis in all performance. All of the traumas of the past, everything that has been tried so far, whether it works or not, all of the times where one has fallen down to pick oneself up again does not prepare a person for what will take place now. All of that suffering that won't be redeemed, but which has thickened your skin, turned the surface of the body into a confusing map of contradictory itineraries. All of this comes to matter and won't matter whether the person passes through the roadblock, manages to mobilise a life's savings into something tangible, manages to turn that corner just before the police or debt collectors arrive. This time of the maybe, more than simply a wager or speculation, is a continuous refusal against what is on offer, against how one is regarded. It is a situation where what a person has doesn't count, and where all that the person lacks is also refused count. Given all of the ways larger numbers of inhabitants in our cities are on the move, often relinquishing things of value in order to better position themselves in relation to often opaque opportunities, as well as the stories they tell both about themselves and others about how they assess and decide, this politics of the *maybe* becomes increasingly salient to intensified circulations of bodies and things.

3.1.2 | Bandwidths of operation

Too often questions of what gets done and how become a matter of individuated agency. At that scale, agency often finds itself inflated beyond the real structural conditions that would seem to limit it, or depreciated in terms of a generalised carceral relationship to those very structures. Either a matter of too much, or not enough. Additionally, amplification of the capacities of the most precarious to give fortuitous shape to their everyday life conditions can be seen as being complicit with the apparatus of capitalist power that subject them. Conversely, our cities have been the locus of infrastructural and logistical investments, often seemingly incongruent to existent urban complexions, on the part of the apparatuses and financial vehicles that often appear opaque and impervious to domesticating instruments of regulation. In the middle, then, are heterogeneous concretisations of a 'majority' that often clear class divisions and whose interests, aspirations, practices, identifications fluctuate according to the frame applied—as frame shifts from household, to civic association, to district, to multiple membership in varying networks, and so forth. Instead of either solely relying upon or discarding extant social categories or ways of thinking about issues of efficacy, agency and power, how can these be complemented by conceptualisations of *operability and affecting* that take place across various configurations of collectivity, affect and social action? How can these operations be mapped, and in ways that encompass different thresholds of sensibility?

3.1.3 | Confusion's generativity

Countervailing the repeated emphasis on accountability and transparency that dominate discourses on urban governance—and which indeed are something often valued by inhabitants across the board in our cities—confusions about how things work, what the rules are, and especially around designations of property and tenure, often provide a platform for manoeuvring and rearranging. It is an incitement for accommodations, bargaining and the stitching together of provisional formations of collective labour that are applied to both the physical making of things and operations on and with a socius. Confusion is also an atmospheric condition that not only precipitates bewilderment or passivity, but also the possibility that inhabitants can write themselves into scenarios and prospects, where the proportionality of factors or variables at work is uncertain, and thus upends clear designations of eligibility, of whether particular kinds of inhabitants are sufficiently worthy to operate in specific instances or spaces. Confusion reflects a dense compression of causes and effects that act both as an overdetermination of events but also as a prevailing sense of looseness, where things are not tied down for sure, and that most importantly accommodates the simultaneity of multiple contradictory or discordant events, actors, practices and dispositions. It is not a locus of getting rid of anything, or of opposition. Again reflecting a

sense of absorption, confusion may be an impediment to action as inhabitants are uncertain as to what is likely to occur as a result of acting in a particular way. But at other times, we are convinced that more 'experimental' actions are made possible since they *maybe* take on so many different connotations that either reduce the number of people paying attention or interdict their rush to judgement.

While these preoccupations have taken on a particular framing—in terms of black critical thought, notions of atmosphere and multiple agential 'realisms', the individual contributions will engage specific and concrete empirical situations. As such, the intent of this series of 'cases', loosely drawn, is not to engage in comparative gestures or necessarily engage an overarching conceptual rubric, but to complicate the usual readings of each urban region in such a way as to posit unanticipated political openings and unforeseen trajectories of environmental and social development that is an outgrowth of ongoing collective discussion over a period of one year. Here we turn to a final sense of the 'massive' in one of its uses in Jamaica patois as a collective in the making. Just as a collective of urban researchers have worked to develop a sense of mutual intellectual caring, edging each other on to think about our fields of study in different ways, we seek to think through the processes of incipience of forms of collective liveliness in our respective cities, beginning with the vernaculars, strictures and categories that have made sense to the inhabitants and colleagues we work with. Then we try to move outwards, transversely, from there to reach some sense of imminent possibilities that our cities offer to each other.

4 | INDIVIDUAL TRAJECTORIES

K. Murat Güney (2022) reminds us that Istanbul, spreading across two continents, is located on one of the world's most dangerous earthquake fault lines. The lives of 15.5 million citizens, 1.5 million additional documented and undocumented migrants and numerous visitors may be ruined in just a minute long sudden shock. According to estimates, a major earthquake at a magnitude of up to 7.5 is expected at any time. Estimates suggest that such an earthquake may cause the death of hundreds of thousands of residents and the total collapse or severe damage of up to 200,000 buildings in Istanbul, 17% of all housing stock in the metropolitan city.

The current Turkish government justifies the ongoing massive urban transformation projects and new mass housing projects underway as an improvement of the housing stock to make residential buildings stronger and more resilient to earthquakes. However, indeed, areas actually under earthquake risk do not match the areas that are officially declared under disaster risk by the government. The Disaster Law #6306 that granted the government the absolute right to expropriate land based on the justification of 'protecting residents against earthquakes and other natural disasters' was arbitrarily used to seize valuable land in Istanbul by the government and its allied construction companies. The disaster was quickly converted to an opportunity for economic growth. Earthquake risk has worked as an instrument of disaster capitalism and an effective excuse for expropriation and more construction.

In his contribution, Güney introduces stories of three different neighbourhoods, namely Moda, Tozkoparan and Fikirtepe, which each experience the ongoing massive urban transformation differently based on the land value of the neighbourhoods, class position of the residents, and residents' capacity to organise in order to protect their rights. He critically discusses how biopolitics presents disaster capitalism's massive urban transformation projects, which are indifferent to life's sustainability, as actually a manifestation of liveliness by justifying those projects as interventions in terms of public health and safety through making housing resilient to earthquakes. Moreover, he explores how massive urban risks such as earthquakes disclose the possibility of the politics of the maybe that might work for life's interest, yet not implemented.

Nitin Bathla (2022) addresses the ways in which contemporary ex-centric urbanisation in the Global South is often explored through descriptors such as half-finished, decaying and sub-urban (e.g., Keil, 2017; Sawyer et al., 2021). Although well meaning and critical in their reading, such descriptions tend to project and reproduce normative ideas of developmentalism and linear pathways of urban growth. In their emphasis on generating a global comparison, such views often ignore the complex pathways and rationalities through which urbanisation unfolds below the veneer of what seems as half-finished or sub-urban at first. While not denying established critical approaches, Bathla takes inspiration from Lancione's (2020) call for attention to radical politics shaping at the margins. It explores radical politics of dwelling shaping at either ends of a contested urban expressway, the Dwarka Expressway, located just outside Delhi, which has been in the making for over a decade.

On one end of the contestation are the residents from working class neighbourhoods, which must be cleared owing to their 'illegality' to make way for the highway. On the other end are the middle-class residents who have bought into and who improvise everyday life along the unfinished highway while attempting to avoid the captivity

of commodified everyday life. The highway thus emerges as a double contestation, contested both by people who are being evicted and in whose name evictions are being carried out. Both sides formulate collective political strategies and unique spatial strategies to make the highway and its urbanism work for them. The resultant is a hybrid reality in which lifeworlds, legalities and dependencies intermingle that defy separation, and detectability. Understood through this perspective, radical struggles and possibilities hiding behind the half-finished, decaying and sub-urban come alive and become accessible.

Kristian Karlo Saguin (2022) explores how spaces are being rearranged and even inverted in Metro Manila. Urban gardens have emerged at the cracks and edges of the densely built environment, taking on a variety of forms that cultivate a sense of habitability amid harsh urban conditions. The empirical diversity in the spaces, practices and trajectories of urban gardens in the city, however, often exceeds their usual framings either as state-sponsored projects from above that seek to transform individual habits and dispositions or as grassroots initiatives from below that result from conscious collective resistance or encroachment.

Saguin provides a different account of urban gardens in Manila by considering them as sites that articulate an atmosphere of edginess, characterised by a coming together of various actions, aspirations and relations, and by a mode of practice marked by a distinctive temporality and peripheral logic located beyond individual intentions. Making a garden work and maintaining its place in the city entails consolidating relationships between various urban elements that carve spaces of manoeuvre, produce diverse eventualities, and map onto the indeterminate politics of the maybe.

Mariana Cavalcanti (2023) tells the story of militia urbanism by narrating their encroachment upon institutional politics as the production of a particular atmosphere in which surcharges extracted from the poor in exchange for 'security' and infrastructure guarantee the continuity of the everyday as urban residents know it.

In Rio de Janeiro, the war on drugs has produced not only thousands of deaths of poor black youth (and, to a lesser extent, of equally poor black police officers), but also a sense of 'tranquillity' in areas 'dominated' by so-called 'militia' groups. What the media and social scientists call the 'militias'—for the lack of a better term—are somewhat dispersed groups of off-duty police officers, members of the armed forces, firemen and private security workers (as well as all the possible combinations in the everyday between these different categories), whose organisation as 'militias' owes much to the structuring of death squads in the city's peripheries since the 1960s and 1970s. They gained legitimacy and consolidated their power in the early 2000s, particularly in the rapidly urbanising west zone of the city, by kicking out drug dealers and enforcing their idea of 'order' in the communities they came to 'control'.

Their idea of order includes the death penalty and bodily punishments imposed on drug users, surveillance over voting, and the everyday governance of infrastructure such as gas cylinders, local means of transportation, cable tv and internet service provision. In many areas of the city's west zone, they have also taken over the role of urban developers by expanding the initial hijacking of city infrastructures into city-making itself: buildings, streets and entire blocks get erected somewhere between the informal and illegal, producing new forms of territorial sovereignties and land tenure.

Finally, Sobia Ahmad Kaker and Nausheen Anwar (2023) work through the perennial crisis of flooding becoming the norm. Every few years, Karachi floods during the summer monsoon. Paradoxically, whenever monsoon floods occur, residents and governors are taken by surprise. In the aftermath of the floods, there is public outrage. Politicians, planners and citizens blame each other. They cite illegal constructions that block natural storm water drains, historical planning failures, ineffective and corrupt municipal governance, and politically motivated institutional conflict as primary causes of urban floods. Under heavy political pressure, city governors move quickly to find 'fixes'. A cacophony of action commences. Eviction drives against 'illegal settlements' mushrooming along the city's storm water drains, heavy taxes and fines on non-conforming constructions, and additional budget allocations for infrastructural improvements at critical points of the storm water drainage system all happen at once and in full force. A couple of years later, it all happens again.

Kaker and Anwar look at the space–time of Karachi's certain and yet uncertain flooding crisis as a moment to study the politics of the maybe. They place special emphasis on how the space–time of 'the maybe' is experienced in a blatantly unequal, unjust and exploitative society. They study the conditions of inhabitation, citizenship claims, and governmental relations of the affluent and the poor: otherwise disparate groups of people whose futures (I argue) are bound to each other through the city itself. The affluent and poor are examined in relation to their own urban socio-political context, but also in relation to each other. With the help of concrete examples of ways in which differently positioned Karachiites negotiate their futures in response to the certain and yet uncertain flooding crisis (past, present and anticipated future of eviction drives in Gujjar Nullah, and past, present and anticipated future of citizen protests at DHA), they elaborate that while 'the maybe' is a traumatic space–time to inhabit, it is a politically laden space–time. In conclusion, refraining from passing concrete conclusions as to the outcome or directive of the politics of the maybe, they outline its form as one that is continuously unfolding and mutating.

While not appearing as papers in this special thematic issue, we would also like to draw attention to some of the work of other members of our collective that has been critical to our deliberations. Dian Tri Irawaty (Irawaty et al., 2023) emphasises that throughout Jakarta's urban transformation, kampungs have assumed centre stage in poor people's struggles for the housing justice issue. The battle of housing justice means fighting for the future of kampungs and the contestation over what precisely a kampung is—how it is composed; how it operates; and what its boundaries consist of. Government and private developers have constantly attempted to modernise and formalise kampungs. Academics try to understand and define kampungs, and primarily identify them in fatalistic terms: kampung is the opposite of any other spatial arrangement. At the same time, some academics also romanticise kampungs, seeing them as an organic space that mediates a wide range of social values and mixed functions.

On the other hand, activists have been mobilising the narratives of kampungs to defend housing justice. Through their lens, a kampung is defined less as a site than as an urban way of living to be protected. Evicting kampungs means the dispossession of a way of life. At the same time, the fight for endurance does usually entail complying with specific norms and requirements issued by the state, in terms of the particular design and ownership of the built environment. To fight against eviction, linked with the stigma of 'slums', activists in Jakarta have won the political space to actualise in situ redevelopments that usually compress lateral, dispersed urban functions into the format of social housing. Even though collaboratively developed and owned, activists can be seen as acting as an extended hand of the state. As such, where are the terms and limits of housing 'justice'?

Taibat Lawanson (2021) engages the constant tension between formal and informal systems in Lagos, with institutional authorities swinging in support of either or both under various circumstances. This often results in the outsourcing of governance to vested interests and a tacit endorsement of chaos as had been experienced especially in the public transport and land administration sectors. Everyday citizens, in a bid to survive, respond to these uncertainties by negotiating space and identities, and engaging in a series of fluid practices from the appropriation of public infrastructure, to engaging in street vending and even civil protests.

Through a series of case studies from around the city, Lawanson highlights the intersection of governance contradictions with the agency manifested in how everyday people respond to the challenges of such a complex urbanism. This entails a repertoire of subversive practices that exude a politics of the maybe in mediating the tensions between interrelated yet distinct legal–illegal and formal–informal dichotomies.

Steve Ouma Akoth (Asher & Akoth, 2020) has been examining the contestations around the Kangemi open air market in Nairobi, which is situated on the shoulders of the Waiyaki Highway at the west of Nairobi Central Business District (CBD). This highway is part of a trunk road passing through the Nairobi CBD to connect to the Port of Mombasa and the larger land-locked Eastern African countries. Its current upgrading and expansion is widely viewed by those working in the market as an obstruction and freezing of the intense circulations of persons and social networks. The market, like all 'shopping malls', displays intensity not only of exchange in commodities but more so of ideas, networks, political manoeuvres and speculations. As such, what would it mean to relocate the market elsewhere, or more importantly, what and who can actually be displaced when the diversity of these activities, residents and market operators has a long history of turning the highway into a living interlocutor that was within their immediate control? They respond to this situation by 'critiquing the road', which they see as undermining the viability of the market when it fails to follow the market 'route' and is subsumed into the mega-road infrastructure as an enclosed entity.

The design for the upgraded Waiyaki Highway is not just the use of cement and concrete, rather it is also about a road that is alienated from the residents, cut off from the heterogeneity of ways in which they once interacted with it. The eventualities of the 'modern and competitive Nairobi' is in this instance much more about abstracted, technologically sophisticated road infrastructure that dismantles social networks, appropriates value for motorised citizens and re-orients what it means to be Nairobian. Still, the residents and traders of Kangemi have negotiated how to capture and benefit financially during road constructions, either through negotiating various forms of compensation or by positioning themselves as some sort of residue that can be available to reorient the modern Waiyaki Highway, whose value they hope to *maybe* appropriate as well.

Caroline Wajinku Kihato (2017) has written widely on how the politics of maybe evokes both an incredible sense of possibility and freedom, and distrust. Indeed, for many urban communities, 'maybe' offers an opening, however small, to see things differently, to pivot, to not go down the rabbit hole of despair and fortune. It signals a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of everyday life. The knowledge that there are any number of outcomes possible from a single action, the sense that life is fleeting and the one thing that we control is how we choose to perceive what is going on around us. Specifically, Kihato explores the lives of African migrant vendors living and working on the streets in Johannesburg, situated in hostile and xenophobic environments. Frequent police raids on

their street stalls undermine their ability to earn a sustainable income. Difficulties obtaining or renewing residency visas and permits mean they are often considered illegal in their host country. Yet every day, they are propelled by the possibility of what may be; by the politics of maybe. While the idea of the politics of maybe may seem empowering, even heroic, it places a burden on individuals, particularly the urban poor 'to rise above their circumstances' to 'see things differently', 'reframe', 'change their mindset'. Does the politics of 'maybe' empower marginalised communities to overcome structural obstacles, or does it allow us to be complicit in the structural forces that blame poor populations for being poor?

Momen El-Husseiny (2022) explores how during turbulent times, governments sometimes promote new cities at a massive scale through constructing an atmosphere of the unknown, where all sorts of multifarious operations take place to ensure state domination. Here, speculative architecture becomes a means to pave the way for operative control. A sense of unlimited growth is evident in the process of drafting, conceiving and realising the New Administrative Capital (NAC) in Cairo. At the urban and financial levels, constant cycles of interruptions and restructuring take place. The incalculable imagination of the new desert city becomes a dashboard for variegated makeshifts, where the state imbricates new mechanisms of governance using the atmosphere of scale, obscurity and obfuscation. Maybe things will work, but this is less important than securing a locus of constant mobilisation as a way for the state to preserve itself, especially when it has increasingly no idea of how to provide for the demands of the urban populous.

His work draws on participating in national committees pertaining to Cairo's massive expansion during 2018 and 2019, including field observations of the construction of NAC from 2018 to 2021 and media outlets. He argues that at the heart of such expandable spatial politics—thriving on self-adjustment under massive operations—there is a drive to anti-blackness in the sense of arbitrarily vilifying the ways in which many of those inhabiting the city make their lives barely viable. Swinging *here* and *there*, uprooting the urban-other or simply disturbing livelihoods, these operations, as dispossessions, attempt to steer the unanchored bodies and ways of life to the creation of a new incalculable urbanity. Everything is subject to a new calculus of value—what little to keep in the former city, and all that needs to be gotten rid of. This is where a politics of incompleteness appears in the restructuring of urban and financial governance. State manoeuvring is unknown, unclear, untransparent, impulsive and circumstantial. It is a mode of governance to reproduce new state possibilities by expanding all over the place under the register of incompleteness.

5 | CONCLUSION

While evidence is plentiful of residents falling through the gaps, of early and unnecessary death, of fundamentally precarious relations with the city, it is important to creatively attend to 'massiveness' in its multifarious dimensions as a way to envision the scope of collective life beyond its familiar renditions. This is not to say that aspirations to cultivate a life worth living in place, replete with the reciprocities and mutual assistance that has long characterised our conceptions of 'popular districts', is no longer possible or of worth. Rather, it is the profusion of the urban, no longer embodied by a particular spatial or social arrangement, no longer epitomised by city-form, that engenders a wide range of sociality and livelihood, even though often now piecemeal and tentative. Here, massiveness is not simply the size of the region, nor its population densities or a purported malignant spread of the poor, the generic and the speculative. Rather, it is an extensionality driven by the insufficiency of any specific spatial product or social or political arrangement. Not only do 'variations on a theme' spread out fractally, but each instance and project deviates from itself, proposes its own 'better solution', its own concrete reworking, or attempts to shore up its long-term prospects by replicating itself, and then often resulting in too much of the same thing, which undermines rather than sustains.

Our understandings of urban growth are thus often too limited, too ill equipped to detect the various forces of transformation at work, and thus also unable to grasp how collective processes are shaped, reformed or dissolved. The COVID-19 pandemic may be construed as an overarching, unitary force that compels greater levels of coordination and lends rationale and political will to ensuring sustainable urbanisation. But any significant redesign of urban machinery will require a remaking of the tacit social compacts that have regulated, made use of, and enabled the autonomy of intersecting aspirations and ways of doing things. Urban life will be remade in the interstices, in those moments and places where things could go in different directions, where the relations among discrete urban actors, locations, built environments and economic functions rub up against each other in ways that resist total control, which indeed spur the continuous elaboration of various 'settlements'—both in the sense of political negotiations, spatial and social forms, and modes of belonging. In the massiveness of these urban regions, nothing is settled for sure.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data openly available in a public repository that issues datasets with DOIs.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The collective came together in the context of an initiative by the Urban Institute at the University of Sheffield. The school was entitled 'Re-tooling Mobilisation and Advocacy in Contexts of Massive Urbanisation' (September 2020) and co-convened with the University of Cairo. http://urbaninstitute.group.shef.ac.uk/urban-institute-september-school/

[2] Some of the discussions that emerged generatively among the collective were published as a two-episode podcast with Urban Political in December 2020. https://urbanpolitical.podigee.io/

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