

## **FACING EAST**

*Essay by Michiel Hulshof and Daan Roggeveen*

Even before he opens his mouth, the young man's glassy eyes reveal that he's had rather more than just the one drink. He walks straight towards us as we sip our beers on an outside balcony, enjoying the coolness of the Kenyan night. We're at Tribeka, a popular nightclub in Nairobi's central business district. The place rocks: a hip crowd is talking, laughing, drinking and dancing to African music. But the man now standing aggressively in front of us doesn't seem to share the euphoric mood. Staring at us with a blank expression on his face he states in no uncertain terms, "I hate Americans."

"Are you Americans?" he persists. Without giving us a moment to answer, he continues: "We Kenyans don't need you guys anymore. We are facing East to our new friends, the Chinese."

"We're from the Netherlands," we counter in an effort to calm him down. Bad move.

"That's even worse! Your country is hosting the International Criminal Court that is prosecuting our president! Fuck the ICC!"

It's an awkward meeting at an awkward moment. We, architect Daan Roggeveen and writer Michiel Hulshof, have been in Nairobi for a little less than three hours. It is July 2013, and we're on our first field trip to investigate China's influence on urban development in Africa. So far all we've seen is the arrivals hall of Jomo Kenyatta Airport, our hotel, and of course, Club Tribeka. Before we've had opportunity to ask a single question, the legitimacy of our research is confirmed.

After he's blown off some steam, the man tells us that he is the owner of a small fashion store in the centre of Nairobi. "Three weeks ago I was in Guangzhou to buy new clothes," he explains. "This type of business is the way forward for Kenya. Take a look out on the streets: you see many beautiful cars and many modern buildings. We can achieve all that by ourselves if we do business with the Chinese. We really don't need development aid from the West."

Over the course of the next week, we will discover that our young acquaintance is far from alone in this mindset. Indeed, 'Kenya is facing East' has become an almost-political slogan, bandied about in newspapers and discussed extensively on morning TV broadcasts. We hear people in bars, restaurants and in the streets deliberating the very same issue. From an outsider's perspective, it seems as though all of Kenya is debating whether the future of the country can be found in strengthening ties with China.

### **Africa's Economic Revival**

In the second half of the 20th century, Africa was attracting the world's attention for all the wrong reasons, be it wars, famines, floods, fast-spreading diseases or other calamities. No surprise, then, that influential magazine, *The Economist*, dubbed Africa 'The Hopeless Continent' in its May 2000 issue. By some small miracle, since then the stigma has largely disappeared. From 2000 to 2010, six of the world's ten fastest-growing economies belonged to Sub-Saharan African countries: Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Mozambique and Rwanda.

The Chinese are sharing in this success story. Trade between China and Africa has exploded, and since 2009, the Chinese have been the single largest trading partner of Africa (second largest if you count the European Union as a unity). The growth of economic relations seems unstoppable. In 2010, the total trade volume between China and Africa was US\$115 billion. Just one year later it was US\$160 billion. It is important to note that China's imports from Africa are a little higher than its exports.

Many African leaders have roundly praised China for its role. In an interview with German business paper, *Handelsblatt*, Rwandan President Paul Kagame said, "The Chinese bring what Africa needs: investment and money for governments and companies." In a fierce attack on the Western model of development aid, he added that the meddling of Europe and the US "have not helped Africa at all."

At the same time, there has also been criticism. In a speech in Beijing, South African

President Jacob Zuma referred to the colonial past of his continent. “Africa’s commitment to China’s development has been demonstrated by the supply of raw materials, other products, and technology transfer,” Zuma said. “As we all agree, this trade pattern is unsustainable in the long term. Africa’s past economic experience with Europe dictates a need to be cautious when entering into partnerships with other economies.”

There have been numerous studies comparing ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ approaches to Africa. But the question of what will yield better results in the long-run might be less relevant than the simple fact that there is a choice.

This in itself has led to a new and more confident generation of Africans who believe they can choose between two very different approaches: Western development aid that is heavily weighed towards poverty-reduction; and China’s investment diplomacy that brings new roads, railways, power plants and other forms of infrastructure.

Perfectly illustrating how the balance of power is shifting is Kenya. The country’s recent, blossoming love affair with China is accompanied by a messy and traumatic break-up with long-term ally, the United States. Oh, how Kenya cheered when Barack Obama, son of a Kenyan father, was elected US President in 2008! People all over the country wrapped themselves in star-spangled banners and took the streets, dancing in sheer euphoria. The Kenyan government even went so far as to declare a national holiday. But the relationship with the USA turned sour in spring 2013, when Kenyans chose Uhuru Kenyatta to be their President. At the time, both Kenyatta and running mate, William Ruto, were facing charges at the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in relation to post-electoral violence in 2007. The particularly bloody clashes resulted in the deaths of some 1,000 people, with a further 300,000 displaced.

So, when President Obama finally, after four years in office, made plans for a first official trip to Africa in July 2013, there was one notable omission from his travel itinerary.

Conspicuous in its absence was Kenya, the birthplace of his father and home to his grandmother, half-brother and best man at his wedding. Instead, Obama announced that he would visit Senegal, South Africa and – adding insult to injury – Tanzania, Kenya’s neighbour to the south.

The reasoning behind the itinerary was logical enough: these three countries fitted neatly into Obama’s message of democracy and good governance. Unsurprisingly, Kenyans weren’t just angry, they were furious. In typically dramatic fashion, President Uhuru Kenyatta responded by announcing a last-minute three week tour to Moscow and Beijing, planned conveniently to coincide with Obama’s Africa trip. His message was clear: when America does not like us, Kenya will be facing East.

### **Chinese Urbanism for Africa**

As is so often the case with fast economic growth, Africa’s revival comes with a massive movement of people from the countryside towards the city. Currently, roughly one-third of Africa’s billion-strong population live in urban areas. UNHabitat predicts that in the next 15 years, this figure will rise dramatically to account for half of all Africans, with some cities set to experience population growth of up to 85%. Within this timeframe, Africa’s most populous city, Cairo, will grow by 23% to 13.5 million people. By 2025, however, it will have been overtaken by Lagos (16 million) and Kinshasa (15 million). If there is one country in the world that has experienced this kind of urbanisation, and the social and structural transformation that accompany such shifts, it must be China. The Economist’s East Africa correspondent, Jonathan Ledgard, predicts that Africa’s urbanization process might be even ‘more extreme’ than China’s. “Urban development in Africa is very unpredictable. Nobody knows where people are coming from, or where they will end up,” he notes. Right now, most Africans moving to the city end up in slums and other informal settlements that currently house up to three-quarters of the urban population.

Can China’s own experience in fast, large-scale urbanization benefit Africa? Can the Chinese prototype developed over the past thirty years simply be exported? To answer, it is imperative that we describe this Chinese urban model. Here, our shared expertise, research and background offer a useful insight into China’s urban trends.

The two of us met in 2009 in Shanghai at the birthday party of a mutual friend. At the time we were working as China correspondent for Dutch magazine *Vrij Nederland* (Michiel), and as an architect at MADA s.p.a.m. (Daan). Within five minutes of shaking hands we were deep in conversation about our profound interest in the urban development of China's hinterland. We were surprised that virtually no-one, Chinese friends included, seemed to know exactly what was happening in all those fast-growing second- and third-tier cities.

To cut a long story short, we decided to start the Go West Project, aimed at letting the world know about the urban transformation in the heart of China. Over the course of the next three years, we travelled to Zhengzhou, Chongqing, Chengdu, Taiyuan, Hohhot, Shijiazhuang, Wuhan, Changsha, Kunming, Guiyang, Lanzhou, Xi'An, Hefei, Yinchuan and Kashgar. We interviewed hundreds of people: scholars, entrepreneurs, architects, migrant workers, government officials, taxi drivers, artists, millionaires, journalists and economists. We wrote reports for newspapers and magazines, made exhibitions and gave lectures all over the world.

In the fall of 2011, we published our book 'How The City Moved To Mr Sun – China's New Megacities.' There, we argued that the modern Chinese city is based on heavy infrastructure and centrally-planned districts and zones, with a clear division between insiders and outsiders, further compounded by a widening gap between rich and poor. In this model, we observed, residential development consists almost entirely of gated communities and privatisation of public space. Creativity and innovation can be found in the small, private initiatives of individuals with a passion for entrepreneurship. Such enterprises are often strongly discouraged, and only sometimes condoned. In rarer cases still, they might be carefully supported by local governments. Nonetheless, we're convinced that in the long term, it's such schemes as these that will determine the success of this particular urban model.

After the book's publication, the project came to a temporary halt. We both started our own offices: MORE Architecture in Shanghai (Daan) and Tertium, a strategic communications bureau in Amsterdam (Michiel). Almost weekly, we would call each other to discuss possible follow-up research.

"Why don't we take the new Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Kashgar as a case study?" one of us would suggest. "We could follow their development over the course of the next five years..."

"We could do the same in Shenzhen, to see if the SEZ there will eventually turn in to a Special Political Zone as well..." the other would put forward.

"Alternatively, we start the whole project again in India?" was one proposal. "Or what about Turkey?" came the typically ambitious response.

It was not until a year later that we settled on our best idea yet: to study the Chinese influence on the fastest-urbanising place on the planet.

We would go to Africa.

### **First Impressions**

China's visible impact on urban development in Africa is substantial. One need only take a virtual bird's-eye tour on Google Earth to catch a glimpse of some of the most impressive changes brought to Africa by Chinese constructors, developers and designers. Not far from the Angolan capital of Luanda lies arguably one of the most impressive examples: Kilamba New City. A massive housing development designed to accommodate 500,000 people it was built by the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (see pictures on page 74). The repetitive compound design is very similar to housing units being constructed all across China, from Xiamen to Kashgar.

Similarly, China is closely involved in the construction of Africa's architectural icons, ranging from the African Union's striking headquarters in Addis Ababa (see page 60), through to the highest office tower in Nairobi. On a larger scale still, the Chinese urban development model can be found in a number of newly-built special zones including Zambia's Multi-facility Economic Zones, or the brand new Lekki Free Trade Zone in Lagos, Nigeria (see page 86). But the Chinese influence on urban development and

urban culture goes yet deeper: CCTV Africa is broadcasting throughout the continent, and many African capitals have a Confucius Institute where African students are learning Mandarin Chinese.

Since the start of our research project in 2012, we have visited four fast-growing African cities to understand first-hand these Chinese influences: Nairobi (Kenya), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Accra (Ghana) and Lagos (Nigeria). Driving around these urban centres, the similarities with China are easily identifiable. From the expansion of roads and railways; construction works that go on for miles on end; to the eclectic mix of old shacks and shiny new high rises; and not least, the maddening traffic jams, these African cities are in the throes of change. Coming from China, it's a familiar atmosphere that comes with fast economic development, and that can be best described as collective hope for a better future.

At the same time, African cities also present many notable differences from their Chinese counterparts. By far the most striking is the presence of slums: indicators of informality and thus a lack of central power, it's a topic explored in detail by Huang Zhengli on page 46. As Peter Shitanda, the former-Kenyan Minister of Housing so succinctly explains, "According to the official master plan of Nairobi, Kibera should be a public park. In reality it is the biggest slum on the continent" (see page 54). Indeed, the presence of slums might be the clearest signal yet that the Chinese model of long-term urban planning could be at odds with the reality of on-the-ground Africa.

### **A Sketch**

Although our research in Africa is far from finished, we can already draw some lines in what will doubtless prove to be an intricate sketch of China's impact in Africa.

Key to understanding these complexities, it's important to remember that Africa is not one country. Indeed, the marked differences between African nations are arguably much more profound than, for example, the dissimilarities between countries in the European Union or the Americas. Where both examples share a common economy, history, and in some cases, language and culture, this is simply not the case in Africa.

Travelling between African cities, it is clear that most of the continent's myriad countries have their own political, economical, historical and cultural contexts. Already, this is strikingly different from China, where all cities are part of one undivided political, economical and cultural realm. As a consequence, Chinese impact on urban development will inevitably differ from country to country and from city to city, depending on – crucially – political contexts.

A second line to be drawn in our constantly-evolving sketch of this ongoing global exchange is that China is not the only country looking to Africa. Rather, its changes in fortune have attracted the world's attention. The Economist, the very magazine that branded Africa as 'hopeless' in 2000 shifted its view dramatically with its March 2013 issue, proclaiming 'Africa Rising: A Hopeful Continent'.

Other countries, too, are also active in urban development. Russia, India, Brazil and Turkey are all fighting for their fair share of the pie. Western construction companies may have been relegated to something of a back-seat position in the competition for contracts, but this picture changes when we look at more profitable parts of the urban economy.

Apple computers from Cupertino, California and Hugo Boss from Metzingen, Germany, are both targeting the new middle class urban consumer. And, in less visible parts of the economy, American and European banks are constantly scanning the continent for takeovers. This competition means that Chinese companies have to actively engage in winning Africa's 'hearts and minds.' Amongst their rivals are companies like Coca-Cola, who last year swept the entire continent with a catchy campaign aimed at the urban hip ('If the world thinks being kind is being crazy, then Africa, let's go crazy!')

In yet a third line of thinking, we can see Chinese activities in Africa are 'moving up the value chain.' Up until ten years ago, Chinese companies in Africa were primarily involved in construction, even going so far as sending over Chinese labourers to undertake work. When we look at the involvement today, however, we see an altogether different picture. Chinese companies have moved into earlier phases of the building process: project

management, real estate development and investment – all areas where return on capital is highest.

It might still be too early to answer our main research question of ‘Can the Chinese urban model be exported to Africa?’ Nonetheless, we can say with some confidence that at the very least, the outcome seems doubtful. Simply put, political and economical realities in Africa and China differ too much for a straightforward ‘copy and paste’ approach.

In cases where the urban model is being copied, for example in Kilamba Kiaxi or the Lekki Free Trade Zone, we see a clear disconnect between local conditions and the superimposed models. And whilst at first glance, the Great Wall Apartments in Nairobi may appear to be a typical Chinese compound on African soil, closer examination reveals a situation rather more complex. Local farmers, investors have discovered, cannot be as easily removed from their land as in China, something that has major consequences for the Chinese top-down development model.

All in all, there seems to be no one single answer to the question of the Chinese urban model ‘working’ in Africa. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn’t. And sometimes it doesn’t yet. The Chinese urban model must go through a process of ‘glocalisation’ in order to become relevant for both the international market and specific local application. Nonetheless, pertinent questions remain, and in this exhibition at Storefront, we seek to explore the how, where and why of bringing the Chinese urban model to Africa.

*The research Chinese Urbanism in Africa has been made possible with the generous support of Creative Industries Fund NL and the EFL Foundation.*