CITIES AND THEIR GOVERNANCE
AUCKLAND VERSUS AFRICA

The city is a territory which was originally alien to Africa, but which Africa has learned to conquer. First, cities were taken over by their inhabitants, now it's up to the administrators – the good ones, that is.

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When you wander through the streets, watching the smoke-filled junctions where the collective taxi vans stop, amid shouting throngs, or the queue of impassive women carrying their shopping bags on their heads, this conquest appears to be a difficult and precarious one. The inhabitants are perennially attempting to recapture their true vocations – they are like an elusive magma, a futuristic dream of flurries of activity, sounds, smells and faces – so many faces – a dream plunged into an ocean of dust. You take another step and realise that there is something wrong with the city, that the lives built there are, at times, artificial, that you are witnessing something extraordinarily unnatural; this is often because there are two things missing here: a social and environmental balance with the surrounding rural areas, which do not prepare people for city life, but rather, are culturally and materially destroyed by the city; and the regulatory role of the state, the difficulty of the institutions – particularly at local level – in contributing to order.
From what we can see in this vast continent, cities are likely to become a symbol of that rift that is due to the impossibility of the local culture of communicating with that of their former colonisers, who brought their urban model to Africa, almost as a form of nostalgia. So much so, that in this fragile fiscal system, or failure to collect waste, it is not so much Africa that is in decline, but rather a certain exotic projection of the idea of Europe – an overseas Europe.

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But we also find this, to a certain extent, elsewhere – at the opposite pole, in fact, in New Zealand. Auckland is an almost perfect city, a new exclusive tourist destination, topping the

quality-of-life charts – a model of urban planning. By the sea, the waterfront is every bit as impressive as that of the architectural giants of Sydney or the Gulf, and it is reached along a wide, luxurious road. Public transport, costly but efficient, links the centre to the suburbs, in which the urban fabric appears to permeate the surrounding greenery, dotted with houses and villas, with reasonable-sized apartment blocks and having a widespread sense of aesthetic harmony.
Auckland, with its integrated suburbs and its Britomart Centre, has developed a culture of immigration – European but now largely Asian, and even Maori (which in 1997 became an official language in New Zealand); it has adopted typically liberal-democratic solutions and could almost be a model city – a southern hemisphere model, which is indeed the hemisphere of many African cities.
And yet New Zealand's main city is not really a model. Cities, perhaps by definition, are not perfect, except in Italian Renaissance minds – for example in the paintings of the 'ideal city'– a cold and lonely utopia, a forerunner of the metaphysical urban areas painted by De Chirico. Because Auckland too has its flaws: it is an expensive metropolis which is entirely dependent on cars; it has few green areas, almost as if it has grown too fast for the planners. And even in the streets full of luxury shops and European designer brands, homeless people spend the night sleeping in doorways. Yet this is an extraordinarily extreme city, in the geographical sense, since it lies on the Pacific – on a void – but also in the historical sense.
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I have made a comparison which is only seemingly incongruous, because it's always good to see things from different viewpoints and because, ultimately, this is the point in Africa, too: cities are not perfect, especially in places which are equally extreme – on the edge of the desert, or of a faraway ocean. Politics is an exact science and it has to accept the fact that it has to govern constant change. Because the African city is a magma that is in constant metamorphosis, ripping out pieces of desert and savannah, expanding into immense

suburbs, and it is paying the price of being lived, at times, as a sham, an intruder on this continent of wide open spaces. Scaffolding on eternally unfinished skyscrapers, tumbledown shops with holes in their metal roofs, open sewers and maybe an overheated cinema – all of these deceive the traveller as to the real age of the city, what it was like yesterday and how it has developed since. Through the ruins of the present day one can barely perceive the past; the age of the city is indefinable; a certain nostalgic timelessness fills the air, an absence of development, strange architecture, which is impossible to create deliberately but which is simply the result of unpredictable alchemy, in which the new is immediately old, the old is rooted in the present and the future is an indifferent variable. A place full of nostalgia for what might have been, for the obsessive attempt to model itself on something, but never quite achieving it. In the skyscrapers of the various capitals we can see only weak imitations.

At some road junctions, poles are weighed down by improbable tangles of cables, twisted wires, poor connections – like defiant ‘power stations’ that ignore the laws of gravity, a sign that everyone, every single house or shop, has added his or her wire to that unfortunate pole planted there; these poles are unsafe, yet faithful, because those criss-crossing wires ensure, as best they can, that homes have at least some weak lighting – true fossils of modernity. Years ago, in Dar Es Salaam, I took a photo of three telephone booths that stood side-by-side in emblematic succession. In the first one, the handset had been ripped out, in the second, the dangling wire was missing, too, and in the third, there was no telephone at all, but only its metal support. It looked like the sequence of a work of contemporary art.

The city, therefore, does not always mean order and does not regulate the community, or rather, it does it back to front, by organising itself into ghettos, as in certain parts of Europe. But those intertwining streets, going in all directions, are haunted by a great absence – that of an urban development plan and,

downstream, much of what should be an urban administration. Each of the brief descriptions above are not merely an attempt to be ‘picturesque’ but are a call for a political presence.
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This is why, in Lilongwe, it was so important to talk to the administrators of large African cities, to experts, to Habitat, to politicians and citizens – and in so doing to discover some splendid examples of good governance, which the difficult context makes even more valuable.
First and foremost, citizens take their revenge by using the only weapon they have at their disposal – life – and African cities are teeming with life. Even today, 40 years after independence, many westerners find it hard to understand the secret of African cities. All the more so when, as sometimes happens, they set examples of good administration.
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‘*It's a question of rhythm: we have it, and so we know how to take any path, even the most anarchic, the most desolate, in other words, the hardest one. And where there’s rhythm, people themselves fill up the spaces and the air, give meaning to the forms around them, and know how to give substance to the environment they live in, however absurd it may be.*’
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Africa has slowly developed unpredictable antibodies and has reinvented the city. There is no space for the individual breath, but simply a collective one, full of dust and noise. This injection of life encompasses the art of transforming streets into stories. The numerous crafts, epic markets, traffic jams, journeys and life in the chaotic neighbourhoods all become songs, caricatures, urban legends, little daily rituals which nobody would do without; the city thus takes possession of the otherwise alienating rhythm of the urban jungle. Every little handcart in the market provides an opportunity to chat for hours about the origin of the aubergines, the aphrodisiac properties of alfalfa, the saleswoman’s village, or how fashionable a beard cut with a Chinese razor might be. The wait at the taxi van stops, where vehicles, crammed with passengers, take people

wherever they want to go, becomes a unique theatrical experience, as does listening to the jingles that the ticket sellers sing during the short stops before the driver sets off again. These are not just any old singsongs, but provide valuable information as to where the van is going:

'Off we go to Colobane, Colobane,
If you want whores go to Wakhinane,
but only after Colobane.
You can get palm wine in Nimzatt,
no problem, I know where it's at;
but first we go to Colobane.
We're going here, to Colobane and then on to Wakhinane, and even to Nimzatt,
but for now let's all go to Colobane, Colobane,
ah, my dear Colobane.'

Anywhere else in the world, stating which three places the van would be stopping at would be cold and insignificant from an expressive point of view; but making it into a little show, in keeping with the ancient oral tradition of the people, is pure art.
The miracle lives by its wits, through a continuous metamorphosis in which the flow of faces and stories gives continuity to the city, weaving a human fabric made of intertwining paths, where the misery and misfortune of each individual are softened by closeness (also emotional) to other people, be it family, neighbours, members of the same ethnic group, co-workers or fellow street people. The challenge has been met – even though it is structurally on the brink of collapse, the African city manages to get by.
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The shepherd says that his sheep are able to recognise the old smells of the out-of-town pastures, which have been covered by the dust of the new bus station, forced as they are to nudge aside the ever-present refuse that stretches across the surface of the never-ending city like a huge veil. These emaciated urban flocks are common in Africa and symbolise the point where rural meets

urban, and the division between the two. These animals willingly perform the task of refuse collectors and deserve our even greater gratitude: piglets roam happily among stinking sewers, kid goats and lambs have a great time licking the wounds of a consumerism that has yet to be born – to the point that no waste removal or disposal system has ever been developed, and nobody even knows it is rubbish, least of all kid goats and piglets.
Engulfing the environment, the urban area grows and grows, and no authority, no urban planner can explain any plan to you. You just have to listen to the voice of the old farmer who has come to town because of the drought. He whispers that the new maze of slums is nothing more than the dream of creating a new desert, where the blocks alternate as randomly as the dunes in the Sahara desert, disintegrating and rising again at the first wind storm.
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A policy of the land, for the land, be it urban or non-urban, will be a wise and realistic one if it adopts the jingles of the taxi van, or pays attention to the shepherd and his flock. In other words, if it is able to avoid rifts and to take over and adopt the voice of African culture, which, in its own way, struggles each and every day to conquer the city. If it manages to do this, urban policy in Africa will not create the ideal city – which does not exist on this earth – but will invent its own tropical, or southern-hemisphere city. And it will set an example to the rest of the world - from Europe to Auckland.

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