

SPECIAL ISSUE: 'POLY-PERIPHERY' AND THE 'PERIPHERAL TURN' IN URBAN STUDIES

AFRICAN PERIPHERIES AND BRAZILIAN CIRCUMSTANCES

Alan Mabin*

*Universidade de Witwatersrand, Escola de Arquitetura e Planejamento, Joanesburgo, Republic of South Africa

Abstract

Substantial published work now examines diverse aspects of peripheries of Brazilian cities. Peripheries are certainly not only areas of poverty, neglect and deprivation, but can also be areas of wealth. Across the Atlantic ocean from Brazil, in Africa peripheries of great diversity are the sites of most urban growth. Terminology used to describe these peripheries varies and the word “suburb” is often used in various ways. Like Brazil, diversity and complexity form a theme of work on African urban peripheries, recognising the mix of autoconstruction, state directed projects, and highly capitalised for-profit “developments”. Peripheral governance requires intensive inter-sectoral and inter-scalar coherence. There is enormous scope for a two-way traffic of work on peripheries between Africa and Brazil.

Keywords

Urban development; Urbanities; Global South; Africa; Peripheries; Suburbs.

PERIFERIAS AFRICANAS E AS CIRCUNSTÂNCIAS BRASILEIRAS

Alan Mabin*

*Universidade de Witwatersrand, Escola de Arquitetura e Planejamento, Joanesburgo, África do Sul

Resumo

Um grande número de trabalhos publicados atualmente examina diversos aspectos das periferias das cidades brasileiras. As periferias certamente não são apenas áreas de pobreza, negligência e privação, mas também podem ser áreas de riqueza. Do outro lado do Oceano Atlântico, na África, periferias muito diversas são os locais de maior crescimento urbano. A terminologia usada para descrever essas áreas varia, e a palavra “subúrbio” é geralmente usada de diferentes maneiras. Como ocorre no Brasil, a diversidade e a complexidade formam um tema de trabalho no que concerne às periferias urbanas africanas, reconhecendo a mistura de autoconstrução, projetos conduzidos pelo Estado e “desenvolvimentos” com fins lucrativos altamente capitalizados. A governança periférica requer um alto grau de coerência intersetorial e interescalar. Há um enorme escopo para um tráfego bidirecional de trabalho sobre periferias entre a África e o Brasil.

Palavras-chave

Desenvolvimento Urbano; Urbanidades; Sul Global; África; Periferias; Subúrbios.

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During late 2024, the leading journal *Society and Space* awarded Teresa Caldeira's (2017) article 'Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south' the accolade of a 'most read in last 6 months' article, showing both that Prof. Caldeira was a little ahead of the curve towards peripheries, and also that her arguments remain cogent in thinking about 'peripheries' 8 years later. (A translation of the article appeared in this journal as Caldeira, 2024).

Although autoconstruction has been the dominant mode of urbanization and housing for the poor in Brazilian cities, in 2008 the federal government introduced a massive housing project [...] called *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* [...] most of the developments for the lowest income group are in the peripheries—not only of the city, but of the broader metropolitan region. Thus, although illegality and irregularity are not being reproduced, the separation is, as the developments are usually located in remote locations, reinforcing a pattern of spatial and social segregation (Caldeira, 2017, p. 15).

A substantial volume of published work now examines diverse aspects of peripheries of Brazilian cities. The literature raises all sorts of questions including around informality and urban geographies. One clear point emerging from this work is that peripheries are varied in multiple social, economic, physical, political and indeed geographical ways, delightfully captured in D'Andrea's (2021) title '*40 Ideias de Periferia*' – Forty notions of periphery. Looking at the city 'from the outside in' (Keil, 2017) reveals increasing importance of 'suburbs' and suburbanisms and that of many varied forms of periphery. The ideas of 'planetary urbanisation' (Brenner; Schmid, 2011) and the originally Brazilian notion of 'extended urbanisation' (Monte-Mor, 2005) take the possibilities of peripheries even further, to which point this short article returns below.

Peripheries are certainly not only areas of poverty, neglect and deprivation. In the São Paulo metropolitan region, the contrast between favelas in places such as São Francisco (in the east of the city itself) and the gated settlements of Aphaville (split between the *municípios* of Barueri and Santana de Parnaíba to the west of the region) provides just one instance, and as Caldeira noted, PMCMV (*Programa Minha Casa, Minha Vida*) added new complexities to concepts of periphery.

Across the Atlantic ocean from Brazil, peripheries of great diversity are the sites of most urban growth. Africa is heading towards having the second largest continental urban population after Asia – far outstripping Europe and the Americas. In that context I posed the question a decade ago, ‘In what ways does Africa have suburbs? What kinds of suburbanism can be identified in Africa? Or are these terms simply impositions from a developed or northern/western world?’ (Mabin 2013). Here we encounter differences in vocabulary between languages and contexts: in Africa, at least where English is a predominant language of research and publication as well as daily use, ‘suburb’ has something like American or British or Australian meaning: that is not at all identical to the Portuguese ‘subúrbio’. So in African contexts ‘suburb’ often means middle class or wealthy zones at some distance from older, ‘central’ city areas, as well as other parts of peripheries that may be populated by very poor people.

The indirect answer is that anywhere cities are growing quickly, most of their inhabitants and indeed passers-by, will be in places that are new relative to original sites and centers. Some of the new space occupied may be vertically defined (McNeill, 2020), and that is clearly the case in cities from São Paulo to Sydney, but most of the newly occupied space is likely to be peripheral: in the sense of being beyond the previous extent of ‘urban area’ as measured from older centres. From the ‘outside in’ that means the sense of being space through which travellers pass before reaching those older areas. Different languages reflect these diverse points of view: contrast ‘suburb’ in English – something subordinate to the city – with ‘Vorstadt’ in German – something that one sees *before* approaching the city. What comes *before* the older city rather than *after* is sometimes a way of describing peripheries in African languages too. Peripheries where much new expansion is taking place exist in every African city. Some of them may even look like or feel like peripheries on other continents, but the diversity not to mention recent appearance of so much African peripheral (and city) space and population means that can hardly be the general case.

The term suburban has frequently been negatively applied. It can mean ‘less than’ or ‘not fully’ urban. Statements like this would potentially denigrate most space in Africa’s cities as not-yet, not-fully or not-adequately urban. Scholarly

authors addressing suburbanisms in Africa avoid creating a morality of urbanisms and suburbanisms; there is a sense of searching for ‘the city yet to come’ (Simone, 2004). Moreover, the suburb has also come to mean something about the *new* in acts of claiming the periphery. It is possible that peripheral spaces and quarters are those of the most creative in music, art, and new forms of expression and of being. And the energy of the newer, even outer areas may be an important sign of changes in spatialities of creativity and the ‘now’ not only in African places but in Paris (Mabin, 2013, p. 157).

Diversity and complexity form a theme of work on African urban peripheries, recognising the mix of autoconstruction, state directed projects, and highly capitalised for-profit ‘developments’ (Bloch; Mabin; Todes, 2022). Most of the literature concerns ‘informal’ settlements; in a few cases there is exploration of public or state projects particularly in South Africa but elsewhere in Africa too (Freund; Mabin, 2023, p. 43-49). There is reference to the capitalised and often barricaded new formal and expensive developments, which have created some concern in the literature about such projects (Watson, 2013).

A major contribution to studies of African peripheries appeared in 2024 (Meth et al., 2024). The contributors to this book concentrated on urban peripheries in Ethiopia and South Africa, with further material from other countries, especially Ghana.

Where African urban peripheries are considered in their own right, the literature often focuses on specific challenges associated with urban sprawl and peri-urban development, such as transport, informal construction and infrastructure deficits, or traditional land systems and land use change’ and the volume ‘takes up the challenge of examining African urban peripheries holistically, not just as spaces on the city edge but as new socio-economic environments that give rise to distinct patterns and dilemmas of urban life (Meth et al., 2024, p. 1).

A challenge to received ideas of urbanisation and the extent of the urban arises from work by Brenner and Schmid (for select references see Brenner; Schmid, 2017, Schmid, 2018). The notion of ‘planetary urbanisation’ proposed by Brenner and Schmid came under wide debate (Ruddick et al., 2018), and it seems that the idea of ‘extended urbanisation’, originally argued in relation to changing Brazilian urbanism by Monte-Mor (2005), has been found more provocative than the larger ‘planetary’ notion. Whether or not the idea of the ‘city’ could be abandoned, the fundamental argument is that ‘the urban’ extends in all directions, for example into even remote parts of the Amazon basin or indeed the Congo basin in Africa.

And contemporary formations of life in places apparently far away from and geographically separated from dense urban environments reflect these patterns. In one sense these ideas follow that pioneer of urban analysis, Louis Wirth, in his almost 90 year old notion of ‘urbanism as a way of life’:

As long as we identify urbanism with the physical entity of the city, viewing it merely as rigidly delimited in space, and proceed as if urban attributes abruptly ceased to be manifested beyond an arbitrary boundary line, we are not likely to arrive at any adequate conception of urbanism as a mode of life ... Urbanization ... refers also to that cumulative accentuation of the characteristics distinctive of the mode of life which is associated with the growth of cities [...]. (Wirth, 1938, p. 4-5)

Varied forms of peripheral change combine to provide distinctively new terrain for urban life in Africa. And the people who are living in and using and building these peripheral spaces are making them into new forms of the urban. By and large, policy and planning has not yet engaged in depth with the form and changes of African peripheries. In that sense, it seems that engagement on the part of policy and planning with Brazilian peripheries is ahead of the circumstances in Africa. As Melo and Pereira (2024) argue, “In the past 10 years Brazilian democracy faced innumerable challenges [...] (yet) the democratic institutions have been resilient [...] Our institutions are alive and vigilant”. Setbacks for the urban reform movement were to an extent reversed as soon as Lula reappeared as president in 2023, one of his first actions being recreation of the ministry of cities – with an added section titled *Secretaria Nacional de Periferias*, intended to focus investment on favelas and other poorer peripheral parts of the cities (Simões; Medeiros, 2025).

The newer African literature argues that:

There is no ‘one shoe fits all’ policy recommendation or practice guideline for the urban periphery, but it is clear in all cases that peripheral governance requires intensive inter-sectoral and inter-scalar coherence. This will often be resisted by those who benefit from the liminal, contested and blurry existing governance in the peripheries and necessitates concerted efforts on the part of central and regional authorities as well as meaningful inclusion of peripheral residents as active citizens’ (Meth et al., 2024, p. 311).

Whilst pursuing the diversity, histories and potential futures of urban peripheries, one additional issue to be addressed is implied in another use of the term periphery. In Erminia Maricato’s (1996) book – well known in Brazil and probably much less so in other parts of the world – for closely related text in

English see Maricato 2018 -, the past, present and potential futures of cities ‘at the periphery of capitalism’ form the central questions. Thus in a way a concept of ‘periphery of the periphery’ emerges – in a slightly different sense to that of Cruz and Legroux (2023) –, and that constitutes a perspective which is often lacking in literature on African urban peripheries. There is enormous scope for a two way traffic of concepts between Africa and Brazil, and perhaps the next decade will see new advances in thinking about peripheries as such exchange (and collaboration) develop further.

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Alan Mabin

Alan Mabin graduated in South Africa and holds a PhD from Simon Fraser University in Canada. He has research experience in Brazil, France, Tanzania, and South Africa. He was one of the founders of Planact, a community service NGO that had a significant impact both during the struggle against apartheid and in the development of post-apartheid urban policy in South Africa. He has published prolifically and has been a visiting professor and researcher in several countries. He is currently Professor Emeritus at the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, where he served as Director from 2005 to 2010.

Email: alan.mabin@wits.ac.za

ORCID: 0000-0003-3191-2056

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