

## FOOTNOTES ON THE OFF SHORE CITY

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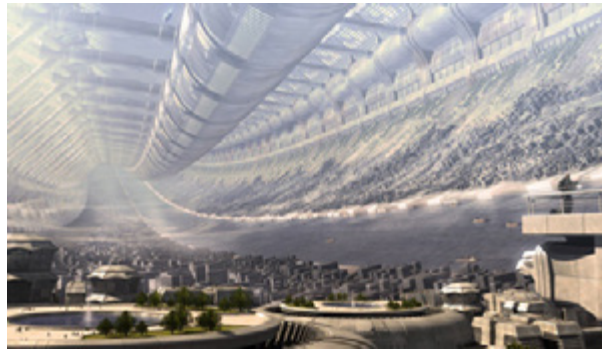
WISER

*Achille Mbembe conceptualises the “off-shore” as a means of reading the spatial disconnect between local communities and enclaves of global finance capitalism proliferating across African cityscapes.*

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we witness a renewed interest in the idea of the African future. Gradually, older senses of time and space based on linear notions of development and progress are being replaced by newer senses of time founded on liquidity and flows. Africa’s future is increasingly thought of as open, full of possibility and potentiality, even as pliant. This new cultural and political sense of time is constructed in a number of registers, from the economic to the fictional. It acknowledges that things are complex. And yet, in its emphasis on un-actualized possibilities and would-be worlds, it also relies on open narrative models. Critical in this regard is the study of emergent orders, forms of self-organization, small ruptures, “tipping points” that may lead to deep alterations of the direction the Continent takes.

One such direction points to the urban. Indeed, a major fact of the last decade has been the emergence of a new physical, spatial urban African landscape. This new urban landscape has three features:

**[1]** It is typical of a new global era of vast infrastructural projects. In almost every part of the globe, wires, pipes, devices and cranes, stadia, palaces, casinos, shopping malls, skyscrapers, highways, tunnels, vast housing and apartment complexes signal a new era of construction.



“Future City Landscape”. July 18, 2012. Flickr: lundrah.sawson

**[2]** Whether in Johannesburg, Abidjan, Kinshasa, Lagos, Luanda or Nairobi, gated residential enclaves are springing up. Most are serviced by their own infrastructures. The African urban can no longer simply be characterized as a mini-planet of slums.

**[3]** In all these metropolises, a profound remaking of private property regimes is under way.

Once again, these developments are not unique to Africa. From Beijing and Sao Paulo to Jakarta, Mumbai and Kuala Lumpur, mega-development is reinventing the contemporary Southern global city. In Asia especially, a similar process has been unfolding. Large, self-contained and multifunctional complexes have been growing along mass transit highways and railways lines. In Africa, urban infrastructure and densities are being stretched to the limit.

It is worth noting that contemporary Asian urbanism is a result of financialization. For purposes of accumulation and profit, finance capital is being fixed in highly stylized enclaves. Most of these enclaves feature glass architecture. Glass material is merged with technological innovations. The result is new mediated cityscapes.

“Africa, after all, is thought to be on the verge of a new macro-economic time.”

These new articulations of finance capital and glass architecture are hardly surprising. After all, in the global casino we live in, fictitious and hyper-real forms of capital are increasingly the norm. For their circulation, they largely depend on flows. These flows are enabled, in no small part, by the coupling of glass and light in fiber-optic technology.

The African case is slightly more complex. The imagined futures of the African continent are powerfully influenced by global discourses on emerging markets, and, in particular, the idea that the Continent is the last frontier of capitalism. If contemporary Asian urbanism is a function of financialization, African urbanism is the result of extraction. But the *logic of financialization* and the *logic of extraction* are not antithetical. How they seep into each other has unfortunately not yet been properly uncovered. Whatever the case, global finance (both in its raw, extractive and specular form) is keen to invest in an African land and property market that is believed to be on the verge of a boom. Africa, after all, is thought to be on the verge of a new macro-economic time.

Here, capital has always historically operated as a boundary-making project. Such was especially the case during the nineteenth-century. Its fantasy has always been that of disentanglement. Ironically, after having been experimented in the Continent over the last few centuries, this same *modus operandi* is longer restricted to it. It has become typical of the way capital works globally in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Typical of the global era of disentanglement is the fantasy of the offshore – the offshore economy, but also its double, the offshore city.

Evoking the offshore, we usually think of an oil rig, a ship-like, floating structure. The oil rig is a quintessential symbol of an extractive economy. And yet, what is taken from the subsea is usually inserted into a production chain that goes from the subsea to futures markets. We also think of the offshore in terms of financial setups – those spaces where profit can evade or be hidden without too much friction or contestation.

Contemporary global capital is haunted by the fantasy of the offshore in two ways: **[1]** in the sense that profit must be able to move easily from place to place; **[2]** in the sense that in moving constantly and easily from place to place, profit must be able to free itself from the entanglements required in each place. It must stay as far as possible from communities who might make claims on it.

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The “offshore” is therefore an evocative metaphor of place-lessness. It is a geographic location for sure. But more importantly, it is a set of socio-material practices that bring into being, or connect spaces where the production of profit can evade or minimize contestation.

The off-shore city is therefore a boundary-making city. It is not simply a city with its own infrastructures, its own labor regimes, its own forms of expertise, its own rules, its own technologies - a city that requires massive logistical and infrastructural investment. It is a city that aims at distancing itself from local conditions. More importantly, it is the architectural manifestation of an economy in which profit is disentangled from the place in which extraction happens. Off-shore cities are created in such a way as to not seep into the

crevices of their environment. They are meant to operate on the basis of internal self-containment.

They are typical of an age when capital and associated transnational companies aim to remove themselves from local social, legal, political and environmental entanglements. Their architecture is modular. Their prefabricated materials are not only disposable; they can also be reused elsewhere according to the principle of replicability, modularity and impermanence. A central project in capital’s work toward disentanglement, modularity in particular not only implies the use of mobile, compliant, and self-contained infrastructures. As a design, modularity enables one kind of work, setup or arrangement in one place to function just like another kind in another place.

Just like capital itself, the offshore city will always be haunted by the very entanglements it claims to sever. It will always operate in the shadows of the threat of overflow from the onshore. Under these conditions, what we need to keep tracking is the kind of work required to disentangle these new cities from the thick webs of politics, environments and socialities in which they are so intimately implicated.