Collapse

Fake buildings and gray development in Nairobi

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Abstract: In Nairobi, the speed of urban growth is producing a parallel threat of architectural failure: in a recent spate of tower block collapses, many have died. Nairobians describe collapsed tower blocks as “fake,” referring to ideas of the counterfeit, as well as anxieties about morally suspect economies. Simultaneously, state-led development is re-envisioning Nairobi as a “world-class” city of spectacular infrastructure and gleaming high-rises. Though seemingly disconnected processes, the two are deeply entangled. Building on Africanist debates about the power of the double and the relationship between the surface and the underneath, I explore this superficially sleek but materially fragile landscape through a lens of “gray development,” complicating standard distinctions between the informal and the formal to uncover the underneath of Nairobi’s world-class fantasies.

Keywords: architecture, counterfeit, fake, informality, Nairobi, real estate, urban development

On 13 June 2017, the day before the Grenfell Tower fire, a tower block collapsed in Nairobi. As with Grenfell, this tragedy exposed startling urban inequalities, shady allocation of contracts, disregard for regulations and planning, and the use of substandard or inappropriate construction materials. News coverage reported that not only had the building been constructed from inferior materials but also planning laws had been bypassed; the area bordered a river and was officially classed as riparian land. In a press interview, Nairobi County’s representative for urban planning, Christopher Khaemba, highlighted that though such buildings were being built in many low-income areas of the city, they impli-

cated officials up to the highest level. “This area was unplanned,” he said. “No developments are allowed there. But you find that most of these developers were brought by politicians” (Agutu 2017).

In Nairobi, far from being an isolated incident, such collapses have become shockingly frequent. The city has experienced a spate of devastating apartment block collapses in which scores of people have been killed. Between 2010 and 2016, at least 12 apartment blocks collapsed (Mutambo 2016), while in March 2018 alone, a further four buildings fell. Meanwhile, city authorities are re-envisioning Nairobi as a “world-class” city of spectacular infrastructure

and gleaming high-rises. These plans are part of “Vision 2030,” the Kenyan government’s development blueprint, which promises infrastructure-led urban transformation will drive Kenya’s economic growth and arrival on the global stage (Smith 2017). Increasingly a destination for global capital, Nairobi’s high-end real estate sector is booming. When tower blocks collapse, the disparity between these global city dreams and the everyday lives of ordinary Nairobians is materialized. This article reflects on this drastic landscape of architectural failure, tracing how collapse is situated within larger processes of urban transformation.

Buildings inside out

On 12 March 2018, I visited the site of a block that had collapsed the previous night. Fortunately, everyone had been able to get out of the building before the collapse, but many were left with nothing. Where the tower block had been was a huge pile of concrete rubble and twisted metal wedged between two still-standing buildings. Dusty clothes were tangled in the debris; they had been left out to dry on a balcony when the building fell. I spoke with Maria, a young woman who had been renting a bedsit on the first floor. She had come back to the site to see if she could remove her belongings from the rubble, but everything was buried too deeply. We sat together on a step opposite the wreckage, and she described what had happened:

There was a mama who was a greengrocer on the ground floor. It was her who noticed the *ghorofa* [tenement block] was falling. She was hearing the cracking as she cut vegetables. She heard, “Kakaa! Kakaa!” . . . She went into the vacant shop next door, and she saw the tiles cracking off the walls . . . and sand was falling from the ceiling. Two other neighbors came, they told her, “Our homes have cracks, and those cracks this morning weren’t there.” All these signs, they started at nine at night.

At 1 a.m., the door to the shop . . . exploded like a bomb, and it flew out. Then we were really believing that this block will fall . . . We kept watch here, waiting until it collapsed . . . listening to the sound of things falling inside . . . by 3 a.m. Saturday morning, now that was when the block fell. Every person was running. Now we have nothing.

Though this had clearly been a traumatic experience, Maria was remarkably composed as she recounted the events of the previous night. Significantly, she did not see the collapse of her home as unexplainable or as an aberration. She was quick to link the collapse of the building to wider Nairobi politics, as well as to a shadowy world of property speculation and an opportunistic construction industry that cuts corners to increase profits:

This building, even it hasn’t lasted the year. You see it is still new, but now it has brought these failures. People are greedy; you can see they are cutting corners. That building, before people [moved in], of course it was approved. There’s an engineer, he said it was OK.

Also, the material [building materials] that I saw, it was fake. You see that *chuma* [rebar]—it’s not the one for building columns. This is the problem: the *chuma* is very small. That metal is fake-fake. The stones [bricks] are also cheap; they cannot build a tall building like this. The strong one is *ghali sana* [expensive], so they won’t pay. Now you can see.

Maria’s words raise several important themes: about material properties, about risk, culpability, and failure. Her use of the word fake, which she used in English, to describe the poor-quality materials is particularly significant, to which I will return below. What is also apparent in Maria’s account is her repeated reference to sight. “Now you can see,” she said, as though the building itself had laid bare something of the

political economy that produced it. Developing a long-standing discourse in Africanist anthropology about the power of the double and the relationship between the surface and the underneath (Ferme 2001; Mbembe 2001), this article explores how Nairobi's building failures evoke anxieties about the difference between true and false, the seen and the unseen. Just as the internal structure of Maria's home had been turned inside out, the twisted rebar and leaking pipes revealed, so too was the fragility of Nairobi's housing sector exposed. The material failure of the building reveals the larger, shadowy assemblage of Nairobi's real estate sector, and the emergence of a particularly voracious form of property speculation I term gray development.

Gray development

Examining the wider landscape of building collapses complicates the conventional categories of "formal" and "informal" so often used to depict cities in Africa. Academic attention to Nairobi's urbanization has long had a tendency to split the city in two: the history of the formal, planned city and that of the informal "self-help" city (Hake 1977). In international development circles, Nairobi's unauthorized housing, as well as its wider popular economy, have become classic case studies of informality (Amis 1984; ILO 1972). More recently, the formal/informal distinction has been problematized, and in Kenya, scholarship has emphasized cross-cutting linkages between the formal and informal sectors through studies of political clientelism, land markets, or entrepreneurship (Boone 2012; Branch and Cheeseman 2009).

In general, however, this has not overridden a common tendency to describe the informal as beyond or apart from the rest of the city, distinct from some "mainstream" formal urban development happening elsewhere. Critiquing this, Ananya Roy has argued that in many cities of the Global South, informality should be understood as a mode of urbanization rather than a spatial descriptor; as a logic that underlies gov-

ernance, planning, property markets and so on, driving a differential production of spatial value (2011: 233). Elite spaces such as malls may also contravene planning laws, and thus be no more officially legal than slums, but they can command infrastructure, services, and legitimacy in a way slumdweller cannot (see also Ghertner 2015). This logic connects seemingly disparate geographies—slum and suburb; shopping mall and street market—so that informality characterizes the lives and habits of elite urban residents as much as slumdweller (Roy 2011: 233).

This is undoubtedly a vital and influential argument, undoing assumed distinctions between formal and informal, as though there were any clear boundary between them. But it does raise the question that, if *everything* is marked by informality, as Roy seems to propose, then how useful any longer is informality as a lens for understanding the character of urban change? As Keith Hart, who originally coined the term informal economy back in the 1970s, has remarked, if the formal and informal have "leaked into each other to the point of being indistinguishable," then we have reached a point where "informality tells us too little about what is actually going on" (2010: 151–152). To see informality everywhere masks the extent to which a surface compliance with official procedures is necessary and enabling. To focus on the Nairobi neighborhoods I explore here through "informality" alone is to underestimate their deep entanglement with official politics, land markets, and real estate economics. Instead, I suggest "gray development" may be a more useful lens to make sense of Nairobi's shifting housing landscape.

The buildings that have collapsed in Nairobi are spread across various neighborhoods. They are usually, but not always, in lower-income areas and constructed within the past decade; some have even collapsed before construction was finished. What is producing this landscape? Nairobi is one of the fastest growing cities in Africa: its population has more than doubled since the 1980s and is growing at a rate of more than 4 percent annually (WPR 2019). According to

JLL's latest City Momentum Index, which ranks real estate markets across the globe, Nairobi's real estate sector is the most rapidly growing in Africa (JLL 2019). For ordinary Nairobians, this has put enormous pressure on housing. Since the colonial period, Nairobi's lower-income housing stock has failed to keep pace with population growth, resulting in serious overcrowding and dubious notoriety for its slums. Life is increasingly squeezed: roughly 60 percent of Nairobi's population occupies just 6 percent of the land (Urban Pathways 2019). Unlike in other African cities, the corrugated iron (*mabati*) dwellings that typify Nairobi's slum housing are not auto-constructions but represent a commercial—if unauthorized—rental property market of their own, constructed in large numbers by absentee landlords (Amis 1984). But as the city swells, so the value of land has increased, and constructing single-story dwellings has begun to make less economic sense. In many neighborhoods, *mabati* structures are being replaced with multistory tenement blocks, known in Kiswahili as *ghorofa*. Daniel, a long-term resident in a neighborhood called Tassia, described the process like this:

Tassia is very expensive! This is now Nairobi! You know, there is no time that land prices have gone down. All the days it is going higher and higher. But when you are building—like, if you build a *ghorofa* [residential block], you know *ghorofa* will pay. These *mabatis* you will not earn now. *Ghorofa* you can have 8, 10, even 12 rooms every floor, maybe 6 floors. So you see property is a good business.

This process is producing high-density neighborhoods across a range of income brackets. As Nairobi's housing crisis pushes rents up, what we see is in some sense the gentrification of unauthorized housing. Some neighborhoods, such as Pipeline estate, are now considered relatively desirable and aspirational places to live, but rarely comply with planning or zoning laws. Each tower block is built by private investors

with little regard for what is happening on the plot next door. Buildings are closely packed; many plots have construction coverage of 100 percent, and buildings are built back to back going as high as eight floors, creating neighborhoods of extreme vertical density (Huchzermeyer 2011; Mwau 2013). Neighborhood roads are not surfaced, units do not have piped water, and there is minimal drainage or sewerage. For residents, life in such estates can be challenging. Though some of these buildings seem superficially to be of higher quality, with nicer paintwork and balconies, residents complain lower floors are permanently in darkness, while those at the top describe the difficulty of carrying water up so many flights of stairs. Services such as water are rationed and subject to abuses of power and authority. This is made clear in an account of life in Pipeline estate compiled by Nairobi housing researcher Baraka Mwau (2013):

The queue at the tap is long . . . You are never too early for it, unless you have a “good relationship” with the building caretaker, who sends signals to his “friendly tenants” when he is about to open the tap. That's how powerful this position can be in these kinds of tenement buildings . . . Often, the caretaker (mostly men) doesn't send the signals for free; there are “payments” involved. The “payments” range from cash money to a beer in the bar at the ground floor and/or more “personalized” forms from certain female tenants.

Despite these challenges, for many Nairobians, life in a *ghorofa* is regarded as a considerable step up from a *mabati* dwelling. This was indicated to me by Rashid, who lives with his wife and children in a *mabati* in Shauri Moyo estate. In 2016, he and his wife went to look at rooms in a new *ghorofa* in Kariobangi, a neighborhood some distance from the city center. They liked what they saw and paid a deposit to secure their new rental. However, the week before they were due to move, the building collapsed. Rashid described his wish to move to a new house like

this: “We wanted to move because that building was fresh. You know, Shauri Moyo is dirty, there is rubbish, the air is not good. So we said, let’s go high-rise, it can be better.” While the rise in rents may have pushed out the very poorest, even Nairobians without any regular income, such as Rashid, are aspiring to a new high-rise lifestyle.

Ownership of specific buildings is obscure, masked by a hierarchy of caretakers, brokers, rent collectors, and managers. But it is well known that many public figures, including the current vice president and other major politicians, have major real estate interests in the city, and they invest not only in elite property but also in low-income tenements, as well as having interests in construction, brokering land deals and building permits (Pitcher 2017: 385–386; Rajab 2018). Kenya’s real estate sector is marked by a “revolving door” between politics and business, which gives significant advantage in terms of facilitating land acquisitions, mitigating risk, or quickening the process of securing contracts (Huchzermeyer 2011: 171; Pitcher 2017: 387). This sets the terms of engagement for firms lower down the pyramid, where the lines between private and public, official and unofficial procedures becomes increasingly blurred.

Following Roy, we could use “informality” to describe this murky context, where owners may have title deeds, have commissioned architectural plans, and even have had their projects signed off by Nairobi County planning officers, but where what appears on the ground bears little resemblance to the plan (see Huchzermeyer 2011). But informality here seems too broad a category, with little purchase on how these processes materialize as precarious tower blocks. By focusing only on informality as the shadowy logic that drives urbanization, we lose sight of the surface, the veneer of formal correctness that is also crucial to making such projects work. As such, I have started to think of this property nexus through the notion of “gray development”—a semi-licit assemblage of circumvented planning laws, pliable oversight, off-the-books negotiations, opaque documen-

tation, an opportunistic construction industry using poor-quality materials. Gray development is now the dominant silhouette of Nairobi’s skyline, forming the core of the housing industry. It is its very “grayness” that makes regimes of audit, regulation, and planning not simply ineffective but facilitative: the networks of influence on which gray development relies is tightly woven. Only when this assemblage is drastically ruptured, such as when building materials fail, do we start to see how some of these processes operate.

Fake buildings

Remembering Maria’s comment from earlier, what does it mean then to describe such buildings and construction materials as “fake”? Maria was not alone in using “fake” to describe poor quality goods; in fact, the word has become common parlance in Kenya to describe not only anything substandard but the intention or purpose of which is dubious. To give just a few examples from Kenyan news articles during fieldwork in 2018: a supposedly charitable family foundation was outed as fake (Kitundu 2018); contaminated, fake sugar was repackaged and sold as well-known Kenyan brands (Amadala 2018); even fake beggars were arrested in Nairobi’s streets (Amisi 2018). It is increasingly difficult these days to talk about anything as “fake” without mentioning fake news. Kenyan political activists, as elsewhere in the world, have been using social media platforms and blogs to spread false rumors and fake news that they then reinforce through comments and shares from multiple different accounts (Lynch 2017).

Public concern with the proliferation of fakes, counterfeits, imitations, and simulations has been widely noted in many African contexts, from fake foods and fake medicines to fake money and fake pastors (Blunt 2004; Peterson 2014; Wiegratz 2010). As this literature acknowledges, “counterfeits” or “fakes” do not necessarily exist in opposition to the “real”: “fake” goods may be known to be less durable or of poorer

quality, but consumers may choose such items for cost or convenience (Battersby and Haysom 2018). But there is not always a clear choice in such purchases. A syndicate within the Kenya Bureau of Standards, which is meant to uphold official quality standards, approve imported goods before sale, and root out counterfeits, has recently been revealed to be running a counterfeiting scam of its own, faking the certification mark that authorizes an imported item for sale. Goods from cement and roofing materials to sugar and cooking fat have all been certified with faked versions of the bureau's official sticker. "The market is awash with these fake stickers and we cannot tell which product is genuine and which one is not," said Mugambi Imanyara, the chair of the bureau (Kamau and Mathiu 2018).

In this context, Maria's comment that the building materials were "fake" was not to dismiss them as unreal but to locate them within concerns over quality, corruption, and contamination. But the word also evokes discernment: the capacity to tell the difference between the seen and the unseen, between quality and counterfeit. "These buildings are just fake" was a remark I heard frequently when asking people their opinions on the spate of tower block collapses—the implication being that these structures cannot be trusted, that their promise of a better quality of life than that at ground level is an empty one. It refers to an awareness that life in Nairobi is awash with illusory promises and that beneath the city's surface, other dynamics are in motion.

The moment of collapse reveals the building to be fake by exposing what is hidden within: that is, infrastructural inadequacy. In their work on state-funded indigenous housing in Australia, Tess Lea and Paul Pholeros have described a housing situation in which structures are produced that look like, but are in fact not, houses (2010: 188). First impressions may give the appearance of housing, but these edifices lack the infrastructural functionality to fulfill the basic classification of "house." "The sign of the material house is an illusion," where the phys-

ical structure is disconnected from "the range of functions it is assumed to be able to provide to the resident: [such as] safety, security, and health benefit" (191). Pipes are not connected, sewerage is delivered straight into the ground, walls are not insulated, and electrical circuitry goes nowhere. As in Nairobi, the facade of the house conceals a much dirtier, more dangerous materiality. Nairobi's collapses make visible not only the structural failure of buildings—that gray development is actually non-housing—but the illusory nature of the promise such buildings seemed to offer. A non-house, like an image, imitates that which it represents, while this act of representation masks its capacity for distortion, simulacrum, and opacity (Mbembe 2001: 142). Maria told me her building "looked so smart; I thought it could be a good place," before the collapse revealed the building's interior and thus its fakeness. Indicating the heap of rubble, Maria's comment "Now you can see" suggested her realization that the tenements cannot be taken at face value, that their promise is a facade hiding what is really at work underneath.

Maria's concern with "the underneath of things" evokes a widely noted anxiety in many African contexts about doubling, or the slippery relationship between a sign and its referent (Ferre 2001). Achille Mbembe (2001) has examined the power of the double in Africa, using it as a motif for understanding the politics of structural adjustment and neoliberal reform in the 1990s, when the IMF, the World Bank, and other institutions demanded new regimes of privatization, audit, and accountability. As a large literature on the political and moral economy of neoliberalism in Africa has shown, the implementation of supposedly democratic and transparent systems was perceived by many to increase opportunities for opacity, profiteering, and the extraction of resources (Blunt 2004; Mbembe 2001; Murunga 2007; Wiegatz 2010). Systems and practices began to operate in ways that diverged from their stated or purported purpose. In Kenya, trust in official symbols of authority, power, and authenticity—such as election results, land title deeds,

or procurement contracts—was increasingly hollowed out; signs became detached from their referents, while reliance on their imagined capacities increased (Blunt 2004: 300). As Hannah Elliott has adroitly shown in her work on land and the making of property in northern Kenya, as formal land markets have escalated so too has a market in associated documentation. For a fee, officials in the Lands Office or County Government could provide amended or altered documents, such as minutes of meetings on plot allocations or backdated official letters of allotment, while for a higher price, entirely falsified documents such as land title deeds might be obtained (2017: 138). In such contexts, anxieties about fakes suggest concerns not just about quality but about self-interest, desire for quick profits, abuses of power, and more broadly the degenerative effect such practices have on moral economies (Wiegratz 2010). The desire to turn land into property by whatever means is understood to be rife with moral and ethical dilemmas, where Kenyans draw distinctions between socially productive wealth and morally suspect modes of accumulation (Shipton 1989).

Nairobi's gray development is an example of such economies: it is precisely through such channels that land is procured, plans signed off, construction materials approved, and buildings constructed. In an article titled "Kenya, Land of Fake Goods, Fake Leaders, Fake Smiles," Dennis Otieno (2013) noted that while buying land in Nairobi, "you must be very cautious, lest you pay a fake owner." In this sense, the whole supply chain that drives gray development is entangled in processes of doubling, where everything is opaque and potentially counterfeit, but nevertheless relies on symbols of formality. What is important to note is that fakeness here does not imply the items are inoperative or broken, in fact, in the absence of alternatives they are often vital to making things move or to getting projects off the ground. Fakes, then, have very real effects, animating speculative and accumulative practices, but which are not necessarily the same—or intended to be the same—as those of the original.

Wreckage and rejuvenation

That gray development may reveal itself as fake, and thus subject to moral critique, speaks to a larger set of anxieties about trust, and about the precarity of life, investment, and aspiration amid Nairobi's rapid transformation. The capacity to discern what is fake can therefore be an important skill: it is the ability to penetrate Nairobi's opacity and see what is really going on. To declare something fake is to know how to read the double, to make sense of the underneath of things. But for Maria and many others, fake housing is known only when a building fails, its underneath revealing its counterfeit nature. Collapse might seem, then, to imply the breakdown of the generativity of the fake, of the way it can set new processes in motion. Here, the building's curtailed lifespan—as with counterfeit goods such as handbags or mobile phones—seems in keeping with a common characteristic of fakes: they are not built to last. They enable temporary mimicry of a certain lifestyle, but their insubstantiality makes this an ephemeral performance. But from a broader perspective, even if one building breaks down, the larger effect of the fake is not fully undermined. Even in the face of multiple collapses, gray development continues to proliferate across Nairobi's urban landscape. In the context of the city's housing crisis, even though the legitimacy and stability of gray development may be in question, thanks to what Mbembe (2001: 143) has called the "opaque violence" of the double, for many in Nairobi reliance on the imagined capacities of non-housing is nevertheless increased.

Of the tenants I met who had been displaced by collapses, most were back living in tenements similar to those that had collapsed. One woman, Diana, said, "Now I will only live on the bottom two floors. I am scared to live up." Many others, however, were living on the fourth or fifth floors, explaining they preferred to have more light, or felt safer from street dangers if they lived away from ground level. Only one had moved to a *mabati* structure, and that was because it neighbored a relative's accommodation

and she lived there for convenience. It was only, then, at the very moment of collapse that these tenants' reliance on gray development—on the imagined capacities of non-housing—actually broke down. The twisted, failed materiality of the underneath revealed the building's promise of a better quality of life to be an empty one, but they continued to be residents in other tenement blocks, their hope for a better future re-assembled elsewhere, though many remained anxious about what lay beneath the surface of the block. Though they may be structurally frail, then, gray development's constructions are far from ephemeral: they continue to flourish, their fakeness materially substantial.

It was not just tenants who seemed to be in a repeating cycle of reliance on gray development. The materials—the steel and bricks that Maria described as fake—were also entangled in cycles of reconstitution and reassembly. In the aftermath of Nairobi's building collapses, valuable economies of salvage and recycling have emerged. Following another collapse in March 2018, I spent a day observing the activity on the rubble. Early in the morning, groups of young men with hammers and hacksaws set to work to extract the steel rebar and the metal from doors and window frames, and to salvage as many whole bricks as possible. The bricks were removed and sold almost immediately, on the streets or to building merchants for reuse in new projects. By the end of the day, most of the valuable materials had been extracted, and now a new set of actors arrived, in the form of scrap metal dealers. They came in old pickups and carried scales to weigh the scrap, each man lining up with his pile of salvaged material. The scrap is taken to scrapyards around Nairobi and then in bulk to Athi River, about 30 kilometers outside Nairobi, where one of East Africa's largest steel plants is based. As well as other types of steel processing, the plant uses scrap metal to produce products such as rebar, structural steel, bolts, and nuts. The materiality, as well as the sociality, of gray development recirculates, its shifting assemblages reconstituted anew.

Much of the recent work in anthropology on architectural remains and urban "debris" has emphasized a move away from "ruins" as fixed, static objects and toward "ruination" as an active, unforeclosed process (Gordillo 2014; Stoler 2008). The phases of collapse, salvage, recycling, and reconstruction in which gray development's materials are swept up certainly evoke this vibrancy, alerting us to their "vital refiguration" (Stoler 2008: 194). But Nairobi's collapsed buildings are not historical debris in Stoler's sense, acting across time and presencing forgotten or problematic pasts in temporally unsettling ways. Nor do they fit with the common association of ruination with abandonment or absence, where ruined sites are understood to be melancholy or ghostly (Edensor 2005; Navaro-Yashin 2009). The contemporary ruination of Nairobi's gray development is not so much marked by absence or desolation as it is caught up in highly social ways of imagining and materializing urban futures. On one hand, the reconstitution of new tenements with the "fake" materials that caused others to collapse is an index of the voracious residential capitalism reshaping Nairobi. But, as the continued high-rise residence of many tenants also implies, in a city of great disparity and infrastructural breakdown, it is also linked to the imagined potentiality that high-rise buildings seem to offer.

Mirages of the future

The perpetuation of gray development's murky assemblages is not entirely down to Nairobi-ans' lack of options, to poverty, or to suspect moral economies of property and speculation. It is embedded in Nairobi's larger landscape of urban transformation under the government's "Vision 2030" development rubric. As with gray development, Vision 2030 raises important questions about promise and delivery, surface and depth, and the nature of doubling and what failure makes manifest. Launched in 2007, Vision 2030 mobilizes now-familiar vocabularies of neoliberal development in seeking to create "a

democratic political system that is issue-based, people-centered, result-oriented and accountable” (Government of Kenya 2007: 22). Nested within this vision is a strategy to reinvent Nairobi as a “world class African metropolis,” one of the flagship projects for which is a new satellite city: Konza Techno City, or “Silicon Savanna.” The digital renderings for this new urban center depict a spectacular array of glass and steel skyscrapers, promising exclusive, enclaved living remote from the precarious, densely populated neighborhoods where so many collapses have occurred. In imagining Nairobi as a “world-class” city, Vision 2030 references the skylines of new global cities in Asia, as it seeks to replicate the transformation of cities like Shanghai, Singapore, and Dubai. Observing the proliferation of such schemes across Africa, Martin Murray (2015) has described them as “city doubles”: aesthetically, they may look like cities, promising a particular kind of future, but they are schemes driven by dubious private accumulation rather than fostering civic life.

Increasingly, the gap between the image of Vision 2030 and its referent is being hollowed out. Despite promising Nairobi’s world-class future, very little has yet to appear on the ground. Many Kenyans now jokingly refer to it as “Vision 3020” to reflect the pace of implementation. As with other cases of doubling, it is widely understood in Kenya that the glossy surface of Vision 2030 enables all kinds of other practices to occur. The Konza project has been rife with accusations of bid rigging, profiteering, procurement scandals, and other irregularities involving local senators and government ministers (Mulupi 2012; Onyango 2018). Dubious, probably counterfeit, documentation in the form of share certificates and letters authorizing land claims have also been in circulation (Nzioka 2018). The implication of politicians and officials in Konza’s scandals speaks once again to the opacity of real estate in Kenya, of the impossibility of disentangling formal from informal, legal from illegal—even amid a discourse of global investment, accountability, and transparency.

Nevertheless, the surface promises of Vision 2030 remain seductive. With minimal implementation, Vision 2030 primarily exists as digital renderings, as billboards showing desirable homes, and elaborate websites promising “exclusive urban living” and “middle income status by 2030” (Konza Techno City, no date). Despite the exclusionary design, this imagery is enticing—not just for urban elites but also for ordinary Nairobians (see Smith 2017). Even though such visions may well be financially out of reach, they hint at potential alternative futures, of luxurious living conditions and orderly neighborhoods. Calvin, a young Nairobiian and self-described “hustler,” was quite clear that his dreams of the perfect house are in part shaped by the sleek images of urban panoramas he sees all around him. “You see all this real estate up there on the billboards. You know it’s expensive, but of course you want,” he told me simply. His fantasies of a particular material future are intimately entangled with the digital scenes of Vision 2030 that circulate throughout Nairobi.

Buildings from Dubai

In his work on urban megaprojects in Vietnam, Erik Harms has argued for the importance of examining “luxury and rubble” within the same lens, since spectacular masterplanning and urban real estate can “symbolize the exciting potential of remaking the city” even when such projects entail displacements and demolitions (2016: 4). The fantasies of Vision 2030 intersect in important ways with gray development’s speculative investments, as well as Nairobians’ ways of managing and understanding this precarious environment. The allure of a world-class city is echoed in the aesthetics of gray development, where even cheaper constructions are smartly decorated, painted in bright colors and feature balconies with tiling and windows with reflective glass panes. The aspirational names given to tenement blocks helps reinforce this effect: Royal Villa; Modern Heights; Lifestyle Plaza. When I enquired of tenants what attracted

them to estates like Pipeline, I was told, “Those *ghorofa* are clean, new. You know, we are going to Vision 2030. We cannot live in *mabati* anymore.” In this way, and despite its exclusive design, Vision 2030 enables fantasies of future inclusion. The surface of Vision 2030 has become part of the stuff out of which aspirations are made and futures are reoriented. In some sense, gray development is an image of an image, its referent being Vision 2030, which itself refers to a model of global citymaking from elsewhere. This nested set of imagery is seductive, but its doubling is also full of opportunities for slippage, exacerbating anxieties about opacity, simulation, and the relationship between the surface and the underneath.

At one site of collapse, I met Josephine, a tenant in a neighboring block. We discussed the building’s failure, and I mentioned I had heard the block that fell was very beautiful, or in Kenyan parlance, “smart.” Josephine nodded vigorously in agreement. “Yes!” she said. “It was like Dubai! Everything looked like Dubai. It was smart.” But then she said that when it fell, “We saw that Dubai was only on the outside.” Echoing Maria’s words, Josephine said, “The materials were weak, fake.” The building had been painted in bright colors, with pretty balconies. In comparison to a corrugated iron structure, these flats were enticing, seeming to offer a new kind of life, one that hinted at the glossy towers of Konza City and Vision 2030—or even, as Josephine imagined it, the skyline of Dubai. When the collapse revealed “Dubai was only on the outside,” this promise was shown to be empty, fake, a facade covering a precarious reality.

In architectural theory and practice, “facadism” has emerged as critical name for a style of architectural design that preserves the street frontage of a—usually historic or listed—site, while the building behind is remodeled, or even demolished and rebuilt to a completely different plan (Grant 2014). Facadism became popular with city planners in Europe in the 1980s, becoming a tokenistic form of historic streetscape preservation. It has been widely criticized and even ridiculed for its superficiality, often de-

scribed as a literally two-dimensional approach to urban heritage. The kind of facadism at work in Nairobi’s gray development is a veneer of seductive futures rather than of preserved history; it suggests an aura of possibility rather than a nostalgia for a lost past. But the idea that the surface is disassociated from the interior reminds us to look more closely at what is really going on within.

The point here is not just to reveal the building as counterfeit but to see how both the surface and the interior animate new kinds of practices. The mirage of Vision 2030 conceals anticipatory actions that remake the city in ways that are at variance to, but nevertheless reliant on, its surface claims. Nairobi may be “rising,” as investor reports about booming real estate markets suggest (JLL 2019). But, as the building collapses make all too clear, it is also falling. Residents must negotiate a perilous landscape of unregulated construction sites, poor-quality housing, and a lack of services hidden under a surface of seductive aesthetics. Gray development is thus in some ways a materialization of Vision 2030’s hollow promises, driving a dynamic property market and animating new high-rise ways of living and hoping that are built on fragile foundations. When it collapses, we start to see the underneath of things: deeper concerns about the precarity of life, as well as the socially destructive mode of extractive accumulation in which gray development—like Vision 2030—is rooted.

In his book *Rubble*, Gastón Gordillo argues capitalism “rules through the production of spectacular places” while simultaneously leaving a path of destruction and rubble in its wake (2014: 81). Examining a city from the site of rubble, while mirages of a very different kind of future hover on the horizon, suggests architectural failure and its aftermath can help unravel shadowy urban political economies. Failure events become folded into larger critiques of corruption and forgery, as discursive tools for understanding the city’s underneath. That is not to say the surfaces of Vision 2030 and gray development can be dismissed as entirely artificial.

Reliance on non-housing and other counterfeits become material aspects of life in Nairobi, with constitutive effects—even as their frailty is made visible for all to see. Attending to the doubling effect of gray development thus helps us move beyond conventional distinctions between formal and informal urbanism, not simply to suggest the lines between such categories are blurred but to show how surface and underneath, interior and exterior, are mutually constitutive. In a city where it is hard to tell what is genuine and what is not, building collapses are both a comment on, and a product of, the uncertain promises of anticipating life in a “world-class” city.

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