



Ways of (De)constructing and Shaping a City: Urban Shifts and Materiality in Dialogue with Global China in Lusaka, Zambia

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Abstract

Lusaka's ongoing construction boom and shifting urban landscape are seen as closely linked to a significant level of Chinese involvement, especially with regard to the building process. Although Chinese features in the cityscape are pervasive and have increased in recent years, visual reflections of this can be misleading. They do not reveal the extent to which global China is playing a part in altering the built environment and trajectories in a city marked by rapid urban growth, spatial inequality and uneven development. With a focus on the main and simultaneous trends that characterise Lusaka's evolving urban morphology: densification, land-use change and sprawl, we explore if and to what degree Chinese capital (whether public or private) and participation contribute to producing a different kind of urbanity (in terms of direction and product). By unpacking the construction process, we argue that initiatives with some level of Chinese involvement largely plug into pre-existing patterns, replicate tendencies of urban development and, as such, constitute an integral part of the city-making process. From this perspective, Chinese influence on urban development processes needs to be understood through a "logic of supplementarity" – present and absent, identifiable and imperceptible – but as constantly operating within the core.

Keywords: urban transformation, construction industry, Africa–China relations, Chinese influence, materiality, Lusaka

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Résumé

L'expansion du secteur immobilier que connaît Lusaka et l'évolution du paysage urbain sont considérées comme étroitement liées à une implication massive de la Chine, notamment en ce qui concerne la construction. Bien que les caractéristiques chinoises dans le paysage urbain soient omniprésentes et en augmentation ces dernières années, les images visuelles de cette situation peuvent être trompeuses. Elles ne révèlent pas dans quelle mesure la Chine globalisée joue un rôle dans la transformation de l'environnement bâti et des trajectoires dans une ville marquée par une croissance urbaine rapide, une inégalité spatiale et un développement inégal. En nous concentrant sur les tendances fortes et synchrones qui caractérisent l'évolution de la morphologie urbaine de Lusaka, notamment la densification, les changements d'affectation des sols et l'extension urbaine, nous cherchons à vérifier l'effectivité et l'étendue des formes de participation et de capital chinois (public ou privé) dans la production d'un type d'urbanité différent (en termes d'orientation et de résultat). En examinant le processus de construction, nous soutenons que les initiatives bénéficiant d'un certain niveau de participation chinoise se calquent sur des modèles préexistants, reproduisent des tendances du développement urbain et, de ce fait, font partie intégrante du processus de création de la ville. De ce point de vue, l'influence chinoise sur les processus de développement urbain doit être comprise à travers une « logique du supplément » (présente et absente, identifiable et imperceptible) mais agissant toujours au sein même du noyau.

Mots-clés : transformation urbaine, industrie de la construction, relations Afrique-Chine, influence chinoise, matérialité, Lusaka

Introduction

Mr Liu receives us in his office, which is dominated by a massive wooden desk and an imposing leather chair, seemingly disproportionate to his rather short stature.¹ The barren white walls and neon lights contrast with an attempt to convey a more traditional Chinese look, marked by a set of carved wooden armchairs, a collection of Chinese vases, as well as a fully automated and equipped tea table around which we conduct our interview. Except for a framed depiction in copper of elephants in the savanna, and the mandatory presidential portrait of Edgar Lungu, nothing betrays its geographical location: Lusaka.

Xiao Liu is a relatively small-scale private building contractor with a parent company based in Nanchang, owned by his father-in-law. They first entered the Zambian market in 2011 after acquiring a tender to construct a library under the umbrella of an already established company

in the country, which on paper served as the legal contractor and managed all the official correspondence. This first project offered the necessary stepping stone to build capacity in learning and understanding the local environment, which helped them win further government projects for schools and other private undertakings.

A few years ago, he bought three residential units in the east of Lusaka. He demolished one to build his current three-storey building, which serves as his office space and residence, with the rest of the property dedicated to living quarters for his Chinese employees and the storage of building material. From the outside, the aesthetic of the main structure is reminiscent of residential buildings in urban villages in southern China. It sits rather strangely in the midst of a neighbourhood that is largely characterised by single-storey dwellings. The interior and exterior have been designed with a specific purpose in mind: to attract interest from potential clients.

Throughout Lusaka, the numerous construction sites and ubiquity of billboards advertising a variety of building materials signal a city in the process of considerable physical change. As part of this broader and sustained construction boom, Chinese economic actors have become a visible feature of the urban landscape - directly, as contractors, developers and suppliers of building material, or indirectly, as entrepreneurs setting up their own business(es). Overall, Chinese FDI stock in Zambia rose from USD 134.7 million in 2003 to USD 3.5 billion in 2018, when the country was among the top five destinations for Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa.² Next to China's primary interest in copper extraction, Zambia's tremendous need for infrastructural investment, the availability of Chinese state-backed concessional loans, and wide-ranging opportunities in real estate, have translated into a growing footprint of Chinese state-owned and private construction companies on Zambian soil.

Sitting at the intersection between a specific manifestation of global China, surely noticeable, and shifts within a particular urban context, this interplay speaks to a combination of different conceptual ideas. It calls for a 'reimagin[ation of] China beyond China' (Lee 2017: xiv), alongside the need to adopt flexible readings of space when 'anchor[ing] explanations in an understanding of capitalist transformation' (Mohan 2013: 1268). In reference to 'globalisation with Chinese characteristics', Henderson et al. refer to 'vectors of transformation' which, 'unlike "development" with its implicit assumptions about progress [...] can run in multiple directions' (2013: 1243). Yet, in their analytical framework, the diffusion of 'elements of Chinese culture and values and visions of modernity' (ibid.: 1239) is simply posed as a premise. From an urban perspective though, the existence, nature

and salience of Chinese characteristics need to be assessed independently and read against broader questions of urban development and material shifts in the built environment. This requires not only a combined analysis of varieties of capital and urban production, but also an enquiry into the different levels of involvement. As such, next to debates about a so-called Chinese urbanism (Hulshof and Roggeveen 2014; Harrison and Yang 2015), or the formation of hybridised landscapes (Lu 2000), it is crucial to consider the extent to which localised (or vernacular) realities determine the direction and shape of what and how urban space is produced.

In recent years, some of these aspects have been reflected in research by urban scholars in connection with select Chinese-led initiatives in different parts of the continent. For instance, the materiality of Kilamba Kiaxi, a new town development outside the Angolan capital, Luanda, has alternately become an object of dissent (Gastrow 2017) or has indirectly generated forms of lived appropriation (Buire 2017). In Johannesburg, resistance by the local municipal government to the implementation of the Modderfontein New City Development led to a complete overhaul of the original plan and vision (Ballard and Harrison 2019; Brill and Reboredo 2019). Drawing on a comparative analysis of two Chinese-financed and -built infrastructures in Ethiopia and in Uganda, Goodfellow and Huang illustrate how, ‘through financing and expertise, “Chineseness” enabled and mediated these political projects [before] political realities then diluted this Chineseness’ (2020: 16).

Regarding the role of Chinese companies within the Zambian construction industry, previous research has offered insights into the inner workings of Chinese businesses and their position within the sector and in relation to other players. This includes publications on entry mechanisms and market participation (Burke 2007; Bastholm and Kragelund 2009), level of uniqueness (Kragelund 2009), as well as imperatives of accumulation, regimes of production and managerial ethos (Lee 2017). However, except for a recent paper by Li and Siame (2020), focused on the nature and impact of Chinese (and South African) investments on Lusaka’s urban development, little has been said about the material production itself and the ways in which the different building projects involving Chinese contractors resonate with ongoing urban shifts. This is the focus of this article, and more specifically the question of whether Chinese participation (in its broadest interpretation) in construction contributes to the production of a different kind of urbanity. In other words, we aim to explore the level and nature of Chinese influence in altering the built environment and urban trajectories in a city that is largely characterised by rapid urban growth, spatial inequality and uneven development.

In essence, we seek to critically engage with the realities of city- building in Lusaka, through assessing the place and relevance of a Chinese influence. With Derrida's deconstructionist approach in mind, we examine the Chinese involvement in the built environment through a "logic of supplementarity", in which the supplement is regarded not as being exterior and added, but already at work in the origin (1967). Through a method of (un)writing the text(ure)s of the built environment, the physical manifestation of global China within this urban context then ceases to exist as a set of binaries and becomes a constituent and intertwined part of the city-making process (Dittgen and Chungu 2019). Contrary to Li and Siame, who portray Chinese investments as having substantially shaped Lusaka's current development trajectory (2020: 332), we argue that Chinese undertakings, while enabling forms of urban production, largely plug into the city's pre-existing patterns and tendencies of urban development.

Our study is based on empirical research, using data largely collected during four week-long fieldwork visits between the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2020. Apart from field observation at various construction sites, we conducted a total of thirty-six qualitative interviews with building contractors, developers, business-owners (Chinese and Zambian) and representatives from various regulatory bodies and the city council in Lusaka.³ This is combined with a longer-term perspective, as one of the authors, Chungu, practised architecture and urban design in Lusaka since 1994. Owing to his Chinese proficiency, tertiary experience in China and professional skills in the built environment, he regularly worked with Chinese contractors throughout the years.

The article unfolds as follows. We begin by situating the various Chinese-produced spaces and projects within a shifting urban landscape, looking at the ways in which Lusaka's built environment and urban configuration have evolved over time. The next section unpacks the different phases of the building process, from the early stages of design to the completed built form, differentiating between levels of influence and involvement. By taking a closer look at the drivers and effects of self-initiated projects by Chinese companies (and one in particular), the final segment explores how these entrepreneurial logics intersect with urban development trajectories.

Chinese Manifestations Amidst Dynamics of Urban Change

To date, Lusaka has known a total of five city plans, none of which has materialised as originally planned. Initially a small town, by 1931 Lusaka was envisioned as a garden city to fit its status as the new administrative capital of Northern Rhodesia (Collins 1986; Home 2013). Although never

implemented in its entirety due to the global economic depression at the time, that plan nonetheless segregated planned European and unplanned African zones, and proved inadequate from the outset in terms of residential, commercial and industrial provisions (Njoh 2007: 157–159).

Fast forward to present times, the most recent iteration is Lusaka's 2030 vision master plan. Approved in 2009, it was prepared by JICA (the Japan International Cooperation Agency) and largely focuses on addressing the fragmentation of land use, unmanageable levels of congestion and the overall degradation of infrastructure (Lane 2017: 38). However, given the lack of capacity within the Lusaka City Council, coupled with its institutional fragmentation and the absence of finance, this plan has carried little weight in guiding the direction or nature of urban change. Similarly, despite increasing numbers of plans and proposals for local development initiatives, there is a 'limited degree of implementation of the various [proposed] planning initiatives [...] for diversifying and reviving the flagging Lusaka economy' (Hampway 2008: 202). Without any coherent vision, the council's current roles mainly evolve around regulatory processes, such as approving building plans and, to some extent, development control.

Urban development, while politically supported, happens without any clear guidelines. Many aspects remain fluid and negotiable on a case-by-case basis. All of this unfolds in a city that has experienced rapid urban growth over the past twenty years, with its population more than doubling from 1.07 million in 2000 to an estimated 2.7 million people in 2020.⁴ This increase is paralleled by changing socioeconomic dynamics, spatial transformations and alterations in the built environment. Between 1990 and 2010, Lusaka experienced a 233 per cent change in urban land use, with 'over 70 per cent of the expansion resulting from the growth of high density residential land use (planned and unplanned), [as well as] commercial and industrial areas', alongside '40 per cent of the city classified as unplanned residential land use' (Simwanda and Murayama 2018: 273). A comparable transformation occurred from the 1970s to the late 1980s, but these shifts were driven by government and state-owned enterprises. This recent surge, however, is the result of a diverse collective of public and private actors, among whom the Chinese are perceived as key players.

Instead of simply mapping out the geography of Chinese-produced spaces in Lusaka (in its various forms and iterations), we outline this phenomenon in relation to broader urban characteristics and tendencies. In his book, *African Cities*, Garth Myers (2011) provocatively titles his first chapter 'What if the postmetropolis is Lusaka?', as a way to think about urban dynamics and change from a specific urban context in southern Africa. Myers reads Lusaka (and other cities in Africa more generally) in

relation to five vignettes: postcolonialism, informality, governance, violence and cosmopolitanism (2011: 27–28). While these themes aim to capture the ‘restructuring, deconstruction, and reconstruction of space’ amidst broader urban experiences in Africa (ibid: 24), our focus here is more specific and primarily centred on the material shifts within the built environment.

Overall, three main and simultaneous trends characterise Lusaka’s evolving urban morphology: densification, land-use change and sprawl. The last one seems increasingly uncontrollable as built-up areas expand in all directions beyond the official city boundaries and spill into smaller, more rural districts. Alongside a gradual outward expansion, there is also a tendency towards densification, especially in existing low-density areas with large-sized plots on which land-use value can be maximised.

The population growth rate of more than 4.9 per cent over the last decade has been driving the real estate market. Residential construction is therefore the most prominent and tangible use of land. This in turn has created opportunities for commercial developments, increasingly in the shape of shopping malls. If the changes in the residential sector are mainly driven by locals, often through self-built initiatives, commercial developments are largely dominated by South African entities, in addition to fewer foreign firms from other countries. Within this context, Chinese investors have also become increasingly active across different land-use typologies, although with limited connections to other stakeholders (UARE 2018), and have sought to take advantage of these opportunities in different ways.

A spatial reading of Chinese-associated undertakings in relation to the three above-mentioned trends reveals that their contribution as drivers of a particular form of urban change is not straightforward. Chinese state-funded projects often stand out, in terms of footprint and as illustrative examples of bilateral co-operation. Motivated by specific infrastructural needs and commissioned by the Zambian government, these projects are, from inception to close-out, packaged and implemented by Chinese entities on a turnkey model. Local input, beyond co-ordination efforts, is minimal and often limited to the determination of the location.

Projects of this nature in Lusaka include the Lusaka East Multi-Facility Economic Zone (MFEZ), the National Heroes Stadium, the Kenneth Kaunda International Airport upgrade, the Levy Mwanawasa Hospital, and institutional housing for the police, air force and other security wings of government. Developments on brownfield sites, such as the Chelstone police housing project, have sparked a general increase in building density within their immediate areas. Greenfield projects are predominantly located on the outskirts of the city and, as such, contribute to a more general urban sprawl.

At the same time, these developments usually include bulk infrastructure, such as roads, which increases accessibility and subsequently encourages further developments (Simwanda and Murayama 2018: 268). In the case of the Twin Palm Air Force housing project, for example, Twinpalm Road was upgraded and extended, linking the south-east part of the city to the airport in the north-east, which triggered heightened levels of development in the area.

Lusaka's housing deficit presents a potential market for residential development, and yet only a few large-scale projects have been realised, whether by Chinese, local or other foreign investors. Apart from the recent high-profile Kingsland City development (to which we will return at a later stage), few private Chinese investors have ventured into this market. Prior to Kingsland, the biggest Chinese-led residential project was Silverest Gardens Estate, located around 25 kilometres from the CBD in Chongwe district but marketed as part of Lusaka. The estate comprises 472 bungalow-style houses similar to those elsewhere around Lusaka. Units are sold off-plan and buyers are expected to pay through mortgages, a largely unviable housing finance option in Zambia, due to enormous interest rates and low levels of formal employment and income. Since its launch more than five years ago, the Silverest project has developed incrementally, to limit risk, mirroring other local projects.

Chinese involvement in Lusaka is also noticeable in the expansion of commercial activities. From clothing, housewares sold at markets, all sorts of products peddled on the streets, to television sets and mobile phone covers in Indian-owned shops, Chinese products are present all over Lusaka. Yet there is no corresponding footprint in the built environment. Low-end wholesale and retail in Lusaka is dominated by Indian-Zambians who occupy most of the space in the inner city and in the Kamwala area, also referred to as the 'second-class CBD'. After the liberalisation of the Zambian economy in the 1990s and the demise of state-owned supermarket chains, Zambia's retail landscape changed with the arrival of South African-owned shopping malls along with a myriad of chain stores (Miller et al. 2008). A welcome development for the local elites, these commercial spaces have largely remained out of reach for most of the population apart from offering work opportunities. Notwithstanding a geographical broadening of retail offering, the CBD and Kamwala continue to attract small shop-owners and people with low incomes from around the city and beyond. Apart from the recent emergence of a few 'China Malls' (Chinese-owned wholesale/retail shops) around the city, there are only a small number of Chinese shops in the inner city, and established Indian-Zambian-owned businesses remain dominant.

In parallel, Lusaka has been experiencing a slow resurgence of its manufacturing industry in the past few years, which had largely collapsed after the economic liberalisation in the 1990s. The Chinese-styled and -developed MFEZs were envisioned as a way to attract new Chinese investors to enter the local manufacturing industry through the special tax conditions applicable to the zone. In practice, though, the special economic zone near the airport is still mostly empty with only a handful of companies in operation. Instead, a different trend has emerged, with Chinese investors setting up factories all around the city, in the established industrial areas and new greenfield sites on agricultural smallholdings. This recent entry into manufacturing can be attributed to a number of factors, including the rising costs of production in China and untapped opportunities in Lusaka.

The Chinese footprint, while pervasive,⁵ cannot easily be linked to specific parts of the city. Overall, private Chinese investment and initiatives, largely spread throughout the agglomeration, tend to be located in more affluent and established residential areas. Outside a few exceptions, most of the Chinese private investors in Lusaka (from retail to manufacturing) own small to medium-size businesses which often mirror the activities of local establishments. With the majority of Chinese living on their business premises, as in the case of Mr Liu, there are no notable or specifically Chinese residential typologies that stand out as influential in terms of urban change.

Similarly, Chinese involvement in the hospitality sector is spatially scattered. The first two restaurants,⁶ today either forgotten or ignored by many, were established in commercial areas. More recent ones are found in affluent, old, residential areas of Lusaka (such as Longacres, Kabulonga and Roma, all predominantly low-rise and quiet suburbs east of the CBD). In almost all cases, old bungalow buildings have been converted for this purpose as well as for accommodation for the Chinese proprietors and workers. Across the city, north of Kabulonga, in Kalundu and Roma, a wide range of establishments (Chinese, Turkish and Zambian-owned) operate from within converted houses. While many of the new restaurants are increasingly located within shopping malls, these rarely include Chinese restaurants.

As for hotels, several have been developed by Chinese in various residential areas, from upmarket neighbourhoods like Roma to low-income areas such as Matero, in the west, and Kabangwe, in the north. In the evenings, large groups of Chinese people frequent casinos, especially the Marina Casino in Roma, adjacent to the Golden Peacock Hotel. The Chinese-built complex is part of an international chain, with branches in China, Mozambique, Malawi, Madagascar, Ivory Coast and Zambia. Housed in two rectangular

buildings painted yellow and gold, the hotel resembles medium-sized hotels in China and adds to the growing offer of up-market establishments in the city. The development of hotels and other accommodation facilities, such as guest houses and lodges, in residential areas is part of a broader phenomenon that emerged after 1996, following the sale of all residential houses to sitting tenants. It is the private ownership of these residential properties on large pieces of land that created these opportunities for change. Casinos, on the other hand, are a new addition to the city's landscape and can directly be tied to the Chinese influence. Some are situated in old existing buildings, such as the old Great Wall Restaurant, others in newly built structures, such as the Golden Peacock and several others around the city.

With the Chinese presence in Lusaka becoming more visible, one could ask why Lusaka has no Chinatown or major cluster of Chinese activities. For some scholars, the current spatial dispersion is a reflection of local adaptation or even integration (Yan, Sautman and Lu 2018), while others link the practice of locating work, residence and recreation in the same space to feelings of anxiety (Wu 2014). Another plausible explanation is that, in Zambia, lifestyles are to a large extent home-based, directed towards the plot of land and the house, which could either be interpreted as a form of isolation or adaptation.

A few spatial clusters have nonetheless started to emerge. The Great North Road, recently refurbished and expanded, is increasingly considered a prime location for commercial and warehouse developments, due to its connection with the Copperbelt and Northern provinces, and Congo and Tanzania, further along. With the residential expansion in this area and its critical role as a transit corridor, interest is growing from Chinese entrepreneurs to invest along this route. This has translated into the recent development of two additional shopping malls, warehouse space for rent, and the opening of a hotel, called 'Chinatown', by a Taiwanese businessman, combining hospitality and warehouse facilities.

Despite being scattered throughout different parts of the city, Chinese self-initiated projects are often motivated by a locational logic and a search for growth potential.⁷ Kalingalinga, for example, a high-density and upgraded informal area in the east of Lusaka but adjacent to wealthier neighbourhoods, has seen increased land-value speculation. Since 2012, many of the residential units along the main artery (Alick Nkhata Road), have been demolished and turned into shopfronts. While this phenomenon is largely led by Eritreans and to a lesser degree by locals, smaller numbers of Chinese entrepreneurs started to make their appearance in 2014.⁸

A few developments, such as the Kamwala Market and the JCS Food Market, indicate Chinese influence in the commercial landscape. Lusaka's

oldest market, Luburma Market (popularly known as Kamwala Market) was redeveloped in 2002 under a public-private partnership (PPP) deal between the Lusaka City Council and China Hainan Limited. Under a controversial sixty-five-year lease agreement, old, dilapidated structures were replaced with a ring of simple mono-pitch buildings around the old core, which to date remains the same (Mweemba 2015; Stien 2013). This outer core has small shop spaces leased to mainly Zambians who pay rent to China Hainan, which manages the market. Although this is a Chinese-operated facility, Chinese shopkeepers have gradually disappeared from it, and, apart from products on sale, the only visible Chinese marker is the barely noticeable name of China Hainan on the wall.

In contrast, the JCS food market, another recent spatial cluster adjacent to the Lusaka Central Sports ground, has distinctly Chinese aspects. At first, the facility, also referred to as JCS Food Town, was used as the wholesale depot and sales point for mushrooms produced by Jihai Agricultural Company, operating in the Lusaka East MFEZ. Over time, the open warehouse (part of a larger structure) has been transformed into a market space, one side dedicated to the sale of vegetables, fruit, seafood, meat and other staple foods, the other set up as a food court with a number of food stands around a shared eating area. While the market is operated by Zambian tenants, the food section is run by Chinese entrepreneurs, serving different Chinese cuisines (see Figure 1). Most patrons are Chinese, whether workers from construction sites or Huawei engineers, but this location is also gradually becoming popular among locals and other foreigners. The site has been expanding since 2017, with additional commercial structures, and there are plans to build a gym and a hotel. The managing director envisions this facility as a multicultural space and not one that is merely perceived as Chinese.⁹

Layers of Influence, Degrees of Involvement

Almost opposite the JCS Food Market is the construction site for the nearly completed Longacres Mall and Business Park. It is fenced off by a temporary perimeter wall adorned with images of projects by China State Construction Engineering Corporation in different geographical locations (either completed or planned). The rendering of the Longacres development itself can easily be missed among all the other depictions. While transient, set up only for the duration of the construction phase, these visualisations contribute to establishing a cognitive association with Chinese expertise. Nonetheless, the entire mall has been designed, supervised and managed by Zambian consultants and funded by the Public Service Pensions Fund, with the Chinese company hired as the building contractor.



Figure 1: One side of the JCS market is dedicated to food stands specialising in cuisines from different parts of China

Photo: Mark Lewis, January 2020

Projects such as the Longacres Mall (costing USD 72 million), the Society House Business Park in the CBD (USD 100 million), the NIPA Library (USD 10 million), the Engineers Institution of Zambia Offices (USD 3.5 million), Indo-Zambia Bank Head Office (USD 5 million) and the Urban Express Hotel (USD 2.5 million), among others, are all examples of projects funded by Zambian entities (public and private), designed by local firms and constructed by Chinese construction companies. Even though the Chinese are merely the building contractors, the majority of these projects end up being attributed (at least in public perception) to Chinese influence and its direct impact on urban change. What is usually not pointed out are the locally driven visions and forms of funding (Huang and Chen 2016) or the contribution of local professionals. In most cases, from these large projects to small residential developments, urban change in Lusaka is mainly driven by local dynamics with the involvement of local stakeholders.

Understanding the Chinese involvement in shaping the built environment requires engaging with the driving forces and temporalities as well as the role of local stakeholders. The production of the built environment at any scale can be gauged as an interactive and complex process, which is formative and constructed out of loosely orchestrated constellations of key individuals and organisations (Cuff 1989: 433). Different interests by

different players create a complex web of interactions whose intended goal is the physical creation of the material setting for urban life (Low 1996: 861). These actors interact in myriad ways, each making a contribution to the production process with varying degrees of influence. Understanding the essence of these actors, their motivations and the roles they play in this process is cardinal in revealing the nature and degree of Chinese impacts or influence on urban change more broadly.

Dana Cuff (1989) put forward three distinct approaches, which help characterise these processes and the social production of the built form. The first one is framed around vernacular building, a slow evolution of forms based on the social patterns, technologies and economy of the people who shape the physical environment. The second unfolds through organisational management, in which the production of the built environment does not involve the users, but rather a cast of bureaucrats, committees and entrepreneurs who place a product on the market. In this instance, the market drives the production of the built environment, set in a context of public bodies, private interests and regulations. The third typology evolves around the creative individual and refers to propositions made by planning and design individuals or professionals who articulate what they believe to be quality places (Cuff 1989). Cutting across these three approaches is not only the influence of promoters and/or financiers, but also a common aspiration in Lusaka to modernize (Wragg and Lim 2015).

To assess the Chinese role and influence in the material production of the built environment in Lusaka, several questions must be answered: Who are the promoters or clients and what do they intend to do? Who is financing the project? What is the method of procurement or process of building? The framework stipulated in the Zambia Institute of Architects (ZIA) Act [Cap 442 of the Laws of Zambia] provides a useful guide in understanding this process. The Act advances six interrelated stages: inception, concept, design development, technical documentation (which includes the tender phase), construction and close-out. This is the organisation management approach, which involves a collective of players who wield degrees of influence over the vision, process and outcome. Here, the design team led by architects add a layer of influence, which determines the outcome. The use of the earmarked space is subject to other influences beyond this technical procedure. The determination of any specific Chinese influence therefore depends on the type of project and nature of its funding as opposed to the presence of Chinese people or visibility of Chinese cultural markers. What we, thus far, have loosely called a Chinese project can refer to any one of the following: Chinese state-funded project with the Zambian government as recipient (bilateral cooperation); Chinese as contractors on any project;

and Chinese private firms as promoters. Each of these categories follows different guidelines in terms of vision and implementation process.

In Zambia, the architectural industry is dominated by local architectural firms who undertake most of these projects. To practise architecture in Zambia, one needs to be licensed under the provisions of the ZIA Act. Foreign architects executing a project in Zambia are required to enter into a joint venture with a local architect. In addition, a registered and licensed local architect is required to approve and sign off all drawings that are submitted to the council for building permission in accordance with the building regulation provisions. This scenario grants local architects considerable influence in directing the nature of buildings and, consequently, also in terms of urban change more broadly.

However, this is only true where architects are included. In projects commissioned by the public sector, SOEs and reputable private entities, the organisational management approach based on the ZIA framework is used, placing the direction and influence of change on a professional team of design consultants and technocrats who represent different client organisations. In this scenario, Chinese firms are involved as building contractors and provide a service for profit in much the same way as any other business. It is in this role that the Chinese presence in the production of the built environment is dominant, particularly with regards to high-value projects. In terms of general building, civil works and road construction,¹⁰ data shows that Chinese companies are largely dominant within the higher value projects, whereas the lower value projects become the operating ground for smaller Zambian firms with more limited financial means.¹¹ This being said, and as pointed out by Kragelund, the official figures are incomplete given that, among the small- and medium-scaled Chinese private companies, only a few are registered with the National Council for Construction and these are mostly working for private customers or as sub-contractors for the bigger Chinese companies (Kragelund 2009: 655). Mr Liu initially fell within this specific group but has since upgraded. Rivalries become visible during the tendering process, with competition among Chinese companies and frequent allegations of corruption. In a sector plagued by bribery, whether by Chinese, other foreign or local firms, this serves to secure the tender, but has no direct influence on the design or nature of the project, apart from attempts to bribe architects to reduce specifications and save on costs.¹²

A notable impact that can be tied directly to the Chinese presence in the construction industry is the increased use of certain materials perceived as 'modern'. This particularly refers to materials such as composite aluminium cladding and reflective glass for external use, and porcelain and ceramic tiles for interiors, as well as other contemporary fittings and fixtures. These materials are used in most projects, whether Chinese-funded or not. Access

by local architects and developers to these materials and a large variety of other products, which are manufactured in China, has had a visible impact on the aesthetics of the built environment. The fast pace of urban development and change in major cities in China and other Asian countries is predominantly associated with the emergence and multiplication of new high-rise buildings clad in these shiny materials. To many people in Lusaka, this notion of the ‘ultra-modern’ is what the future should look like.

In contrast, Chinese-financed projects arising out of bilateral cooperation are entirely designed in China, often without taking into consideration the local context and ignoring the ZIA Act. The primary focus is on technical design prowess and modernisation communicated through elaborate computer-rendered images and animations. Consequently, ‘modern’ materials are used on most new buildings and in the refurbishment of old ones. They fit into aspirations of modernity and many promoters/clients request design proposals for ultra-modern structures with the expectation that these materials will be used. A number of Chinese private investors who sell construction materials (see Figure 2), as well as building contractors, have taken advantage of this trend. For the builders, knowledge about and accessibility to Chinese factories have become important and play an influential role in lowering costs, by cutting out the middleman in retail, as well as gaining influence at the tender stage and during construction.



Figure 2: Zambian and Chinese employees at work in the Good Time Steel plant, a Chinese company that mainly produces steel from scrap material. While the use of steel in construction has increased, this input (in this case linked to a Chinese company) remains largely invisible once the project is completed.

Photo: Mark Lewis, January 2020

Whereas public projects tend to have an average to high design quality, for Chinese-owned private projects it is generally lower, suggesting a cost-saving approach. This is further reflected in the overall quality of the materials used and the workmanship of the buildings. With exceptions, most of the building developments by private Chinese investors are similar to other developments around the city that are self-built, without hiring a team of design professionals, as is required by law. Other than the presence of Chinese characters on buildings and billboards, the buildings themselves are nondescript, forming part of what has been called ‘a chaotic and ugly urban change’ (Simwanda and Murayama 2016). Similar to the predominant perception of the ‘Made in China’ items in the local markets, many of these buildings are referred to as Gong’a (*gong-er*), local slang for ‘fake’, often to point out the generally poor quality of construction. Chinese materials therefore fall within a wide spectrum of associations, from desired to rejected, depending on the nature of the project.

Towards a ‘Logic of Supplementarity’

Apart from the shifts within the built environment itself, the landscape of change is also partially communicated and transmitted through advertisements on billboards. While most of these simply display the services or products on offer, some of them are more creative in terms of messaging and branding. One company, SunShare, with its simultaneously unassuming yet highly ambitious catchphrase, ‘For your noble life’, stands out in particular. Present in Zambia since 2010, this Fujianese family business has gradually expanded its foothold and investment portfolio in the city.¹³

The company started as a retailer of imported building materials and soon turned to manufacturing them locally, as well as selling furniture, bathroom and kitchen designs, in addition to branching out into agriculture, fish farming and, most notably, property development. They first built a shiny, glass-clad, ten-storey office tower, which also hosts their headquarters, across from East Park Mall and Arcades Mall, in the emerging commercial precinct near Manda Hill. The tower, which dwarfs its surroundings in size and design, was conceptualised as a symbol of modernity and a tangible illustration of SunShare’s architectural capabilities and ambitions. To launch the opening of the tower in December 2017, SunShare held a widely advertised penthouse party on its top floor, attended by local celebrities and corporate personalities. Envisioned by the managing director as ‘a world-class central business social venue for global customers and business elites’ (*Lusaka Times*, 2017), the idea has since been put on hold and the space is currently used as a pompous and over-sized private office.

The completion of the tower set the stage for new directions and projects. In 2017, plans were announced for the construction of Kingsland City, a mixed-use development on 583 hectares of land, structured as a public-private partnership between the Zambian Air Force and SunShare Investments in connection with other Chinese construction companies. Located in Twin Palm (about 12 kilometres from central Lusaka), in the middle of what was once a nature reserve (also known as Forest No. 27), the development is imagined as the beginning of a new city, operating in parallel to the existing one. Our visit in January 2020 immediately preceded a site inspection by the Air Force commander and full delegation, checking on the progress of the USD 1.4 billion development.

We were received by a young Zambian property consultant, who first explained the different building phases on the maquette before showing us the unit options (from two- to three-bedroom flats to three- to six-bedroom free stands), constantly resorting to a vocabulary of ‘international standards’ and ‘Western’ lifestyle aspirations. Structured around principles of ‘live, work and play’, Kingsland is projected to be equipped with a shopping mall, sports complex, complete scholarly infrastructure from international kindergarten to ‘world class’ university, a hospital, police station, a central business district with office parks, banks and restaurants, a golf course and even a theme park to attract tourists (see Figure 3). The residential part, fully conceptualised in China, follows the architectural expression of modern minimalist design, of simple rectilinear buildings with big windows, placed within a natural setting. The first 250 units (out of a planned total of 2,500) were ready for handover, with the second phase intended to be more affordable, with houses priced at USD 30,000.¹⁴ On our way back to the city, we drove past a large billboard announcing the development of a luxury hotel, SunShare’s latest high-profile project, promoted as the ‘new landmark of Zambia’, the ‘highest building in Zambia’ (with twenty-seven floors), and similarly labelled as the ‘beginning of your noble life’. What is apparent is that none of these projects or activities, from building material all the way up to the glitzy tower, make any reference to China, but are always nested within a language of high quality and modernity.

By inscribing particular features into Lusaka’s urban landscape and introducing a previously largely absent built verticality into the new commercial centre, SunShare’s spatial footprint is distinctive and indicative of broader urban trends. Examples of novel spaces such as Kingsland City have emerged in many of the major cities across the continent (Watson 2014; Van Noorloos and Kloosterboer 2017), often combining aspirations of modernist urban planning in unspoiled (yet controlled) natural surroundings, while depicted as focal points of economic development and tourism (see,

for instance, De Boeck and Baloji on the Cité du Fleuve in Kinshasa, 2016: 249–255). Locally, Kingsland is similar to other conceptualisations (either completed or planned) of new urban-themed and self-contained satellite towns, as well as South African-influenced lifestyle estates.¹⁵



Figure 3: View of the maquette inside the Kingsland City showroom, which displays the project's different development phases

Photo: Mark Lewis, January 2020

Despite efforts ‘to keep the real city at bay’ (ibid: 250), through physical and metaphorical barriers, Kingsland actually connects to the real and living city by tampering with the delicate balance between natural setting and built-up land. While hailed by government-aligned voices as Lusaka’s new paradise and praised for avoiding the trappings of debt-financed development (Tembo 2018), the project has, since the beginning, been marred by controversy. In addition to being financially inaccessible to most of the population, there have been allegations of corruption, in particular relating to how the Chinese investors obtained control over state-protected land.

What is even more striking is that Kingsland sits on top of Lusaka’s few groundwater aquifers, and the partial bulldozing of the forest and subsequent urban development is putting additional pressure on underground water reserves, with the risk of causing severe water shortages and contaminations due to porous sewage systems (Mafa and Mukela 2019). In February 2020, after the Chalimbana Headwaters Conservation Trust and nine traditional leaders

sued Zambia Air Force Projects Limited and Kingsland City Investment, the court of appeal granted an injunction to stop works on the project. In response, the state denied not complying with the law regarding Environmental Impact Assessments prior to the onset of the development process (Mbewe 2020a, 2020b), leaving doubts about the continuation and status of the project. However, in May 2021, development at Kingsland was still ongoing.

Although SunShare pursues a more elaborate visual and architectural ambition than most other Chinese developers and construction companies, the bulk of self-initiated development projects are guided by the same principle: land-value gains and varying degrees of speculation. The high cost of property and largely inaccessible mortgage market have not only translated into a rental market estimated to be as high as 80 per cent, but also led to an increase in self-building and DIY. Furthermore, recent analyses by real estate groups indicate a gradual densification in existent residential areas, to maximise land-use value from property, and a glut of supply in the middle to upper market, triggering a decline in rental prices.

The highest demand and most attractive yields are located in the lower-middle market (UARE 2018; Elliott 2020), alongside continued interests in commercial developments. Chinese players have responded to these realities in different ways. When asking the SunShare managing director about the future direction of the company and nature of projects, he mentioned that, following research, they had started looking into low-cost housing (potentially in partnership with the Zambian government), after realising that the low-end of the housing market showed the highest demand and development gains.¹⁶

Another example is the development of a self-financed shopping mall by a Chinese developer from Zhejiang province along the Great North Road. The business model for the 18,000 square metre commercial facility, initially planned to be finalised by mid-2020, aims to attract shopkeepers and collect rentals. The promotional flyer, with project description and computer-modelled renderings, clearly states in large red font, in Chinese and in English, that ‘people who have no desire to make money, please avoid’ (*duì zhuànrqián méiyóu yùwàng de rén, qǐng huìbì*). Due to our base in Johannesburg, one of the collaborators enquired whether we might know of potential South African tenants interested in conducting business in Lusaka and who might be looking for commercial space (stating that in their mall, they would benefit from a three-month rental holiday during the first year). Given that South African businesses in Lusaka are associated with the high-end market, while Chinese-run commercial activities are closer to the lower end, this request was aimed at raising the profile of their mall.

As part of the increasing scholarly research in urban-related matters tied to the Chinese presence in Africa, there is an emerging interest in urban theory. Next to Li and Siame's (2020) use of urban assemblage and polarisation to explore Chinese (and South African) influence on shaping Lusaka's growth, Murphy et al. view 'Chinese impacts on Africa's urban development processes [as] operat[ing] through three overlapping consumption, production and infrastructure regimes' (2018: 123). Similarly borrowing from assemblage theory, more specifically the regime concept, the latter's analysis is premised on approaching 'cities as constituted by socio-spatial assemblages of heterogeneous materials, [...] agencies, rules, routines, norms, practices, and values that "impose a logic" upon a system and thus guide its evolution' (Murphy et al. 106, 113). While concluding that Chinese impacts on development processes in Africa are contingent on city-specific dynamics, and Sino-African relations are symptomatic rather than primary drivers of phenomena such as urban splintering (*ibid.*: 122, 123), their overall theoretical framing does not allow a dissociation between dynamics that influence the (urban) system and those that are inherently part of it.

In the absence of 'wider forces that might determine what assemblages are possible or not possible', assemblage theory provides 'no theoretical guideposts for telling us how to tease out significant relationships or distinguish between the trivial and the important' (Storper and Scott 2016: 1126–1127). In the context of Lusaka, this can be interpreted in the following manner. Most of the above-mentioned bilateral projects have to varying degrees become identifiable landmarks and associated with China, but they mainly respond to a logic of concessional loans and have arisen as part of bilateral agreements. Their relevance from a loans perspective and in terms of putting additional financial pressure on the state coffers, thereby influencing the extent and feasibility of public works going forward, certainly cannot be underestimated. However, when read against broader trends of urban production and processes in Lusaka, Chinese players, whether as service providers (for building materials or contractors for pre-conceived projects) or developers of self-initiated projects, have largely replicated and plugged into pre-existing dynamics and urban trajectories, irrespective of the direction this might take. Driven by short-term profit as opposed to a grand strategy or urban vision for Africa (Huang and Chen 2016), Chinese construction companies in Lusaka are thoroughly enmeshed with city-making processes. As a result, instead of placing too much emphasis on global China, a primary focus on local dynamics and contextualised specificities allows to adequately assess the level of Chinese influence in the shaping of the city's urban development.

Conclusion

In recent years, Chinese features have become a tangible part of Lusaka's shifting urban landscape, as spatial markers and with regard to the building process. However, mere visual impressions can be misleading and do not reveal the extent to which global China is shaping the city's built environment. Assessing the nature and degree of this influence is not a straightforward exercise and requires unpacking the essence of Chinese involvement. In her book, *The Specter of Global China*, Ching Kwan Lee explores whether Chinese state capital is a different kind of capital. Focused on Chinese investments in mining and construction in Zambia, she argues that it is 'under certain circumstances [...], bringing unique potential and perils to [domestic] development, and presenting government and workers with different kinds of bargains than global private capital' (Lee 2017: xii). In this article, we reformulated and adapted this question by asking to what extent Chinese capital (whether public or private) and participation (can) produce a different kind of urbanity (in comparison to pre-existent and concomitant urban trends).

In practice, it means weaving this specific manifestation of global China into a broader urban framework. This involves exploring the geography of 'Chinese' spaces in relation to the predominant mechanisms that are currently shaping Lusaka's urban morphology (such as densification, sprawl and land-use change), in addition to untangling the configuration of 'Chinese' construction projects. While adding complexity to the city's urban environment, throughout the article we argued that initiatives with some level of Chinese involvement, whether residential and economic spaces or construction projects, largely plug into pre-existing patterns, replicate tendencies of urban development, and, in this manner, constitute an integral part of the city-making process. Altogether, this phenomenon needs to be considered against the reality of a rising debt crisis at a national scale, the absence of a clearly defined masterplan at city level and a considerable South African influence in terms of urban aspirations and lifestyle. More broadly, it points to Derrida's 'double reading', in which 'the *second* reading [...] deconstructs the meanings that have been determined and identified during the *first* reading' (Kakoliris 2004: 283). As a result, forms of Chinese influence on urban development processes can (then) be understood through a 'logic of supplementarity,' as present and absent, identifiable and imperceptible, but operating within the core as opposed to existing in parallel. As such, while Goodfellow and Huang refer to the Chineseness of infrastructures from a temporal perspective, as gradually diluted and

‘subsumed into the local context’ (2020: 16), in our case the question of Chineseness is linked to the entire construction process and the city as a whole. At the same time, this (deconstructionist) approach is not reduced to studying the manner in which global China is impacting Lusaka’s urban landscape, but enables wider explorations into questions about the nature of urban change and trajectories, whether in this specific case or elsewhere.

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Notes

- † As this article went into press we received the devastating news of Gerald Chungu’s sudden passing on 1 July 2021. A creative architect and designer, critical scholar, and above all outstanding human being and dear friend, his laughter, passion and presence will be sorely missed.
1. Except for interviewees who are in the public domain, we have used pseudonyms throughout the article.
 2. Information drawn from the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University: <http://www.sais-cari.org/chinese-investment-in-africa>, accessed on 28 February 2020.
 3. This article forms part of a larger research project looking at forms of Chinese influence and urban shifts in Johannesburg and in Lusaka. It combines analytical research methods with visual photographic explorations through the collaboration with photographer Mark Lewis.
 4. Data from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019.
 5. In a 2017 paper, drawing on multiple primary datasets, Hannah Postel estimated the Chinese population in Zambia between 13,000 to 22,000 people, far below the much higher and frequently cited number of 80,000 to 100,000 (Postel 2017: 157).
 6. Sichuan Restaurant is hidden away in a large warehouse-type building in Lusaka’s Showgrounds; the Great Wall Restaurant, now renamed Casino and featuring traditional Chinese architecture, is located on the outskirts of the CBD.
 7. This was repeatedly mentioned during interviews with Chinese businessmen.
 8. Interview with a local real estate agent operating in the area. Lusaka, January 2020.
 9. Interview in Lusaka, 19 January 2020.
 10. We are not looking at construction works linked to mining activities as these fall outside the scope of our study.

11. Chinese firms make up 31 out of 49 companies (or 63 per cent) under the Grade 1 category (defined by a contract value of over USD 3 million). As the project contract value drops, so does the presence of Chinese companies, falling to 34 per cent in Grade 2 (contract value between USD 1.3 to 3 million) and completely absent in the lower grades (Source: National Council for Construction, Register of contractor profiles, January 2020).
12. Interview with a former director at the National Council for Construction (December, 2018), in addition to own experience as a practising architect in Zambia.
13. The parent company in China, Fujian Kaiyuan is a manufacturer and trader of building materials.
14. For phase one, prices range between USD 50,000 for the smallest unit (two-bedroom flat) to USD 450,000 for the largest free-standing unit (of 6 bedrooms). Even phase 2, which the developer refers to as 'affordable', is clearly out of reach for the average Zambian citizen.
15. The development of Nkwashi Town, 36 kilometres east of Lusaka, by Thebe Investment Management is one such example. It is wholly owned and largely managed by Zambian nationals, with the planning and design work conducted by local architects. According to the developers' website, 'Nkwashi will include more than 9,460 residential plots, as well as hundreds of acres of green areas and parks, nine schools including an International School and an American University with a Teaching Hospital' [<https://nkwashi.com>, accessed on 20 May 2020].
16. Interview in Lusaka, January 2020. Without stating this openly, it appears that research-based analysis and sales-dependent planning informed the decision towards more 'affordable' units for the second phase of Kingsland City.

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