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Excavation | Elevation: Above and Below Ground in Nairobi

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Abstract A practice-led collaboration between James Muriuki and Constance Smith, "Excavation | Elevation" examines the excavations and extractions that make high-rise architecture possible. Focusing on the socio-geologies of Nairobi, it follows the city's urban transformation above and below ground. As fields become tower blocks, excavation and extraction, quarrying and land speculation underpin new high-rise skylines. But horizons can be fragile: buildings collapse and construction sites play host to new urban ecologies, as the underneath and the surface shape each other.

Keywords Nairobi. Construction. High-rise housing. Urban anthropology. Extraction.

Summary 1 Extraction. – 2 Collapse. – 3 Unruly Depths.

All images are part of the series *Excavation | Elevation* (2022-ongoing) by James Muriuki. Copyright James Muriuki.

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"To build up, you must dig down", said Patrick, a *fundi*, or skilled labourer, on one of Nairobi's innumerable construction sites. Showing us the deep foundations for the current building he was employed on, he gestured down into the cavity. "Down there, that's where it starts". All around Nairobi, *shambas* (fields) are becoming *ghorofas* (high-rises). The city is in the middle of a construction boom that is radically reconfiguring the urban skyline. Excavation and extraction, quarrying and land speculation underpin Nairobi's new passion for verticality. Patrick's simple words lingered in our minds long after the encounter, eventually inspiring the title for this project: *Excavation | Elevation*. With his words in mind, our engagements with diverse sites of urban transformation in Nairobi – with mushrooming high-rise buildings, with the quarries where building stone is sourced, with sites of building collapse and of prestige development – revealed themselves as interconnected not only materially but volumetrically. We began to see how the underneath of the city and its surface were shaping each other.

Patrick's comments drew our attention to the geological manipulations that underpin urban transformation, exposing how urban skylines rely on exchanges and flows between the above ground and the underneath. These exchanges, circulations and accumulations of earthly matter evoke what Latour (2020, 3) called the "critical zone": movements through the semi-permeable "thin skin of the living earth". Though porous and leaky, the critical zone is not totally free-flowing. Conditioned by geology and climate, interchanges across rock, soil, water and air are also intimately shaped by above ground politics, social life, technology and forms of knowledge production that render the underneath knowable in certain ways (Ballestero 2019). In such ways, the critical zone conditions and enables human and nonhuman worlds that emerge from it, and vice versa. This is what Clark and Yusoff (2017) point to with their conceptualisation of "geosocial formations". Highlighting the multivalency of *formation* as both geological and social, process and outcome, they posit that "thinking the becomings of earth and society together might help us probe the richly layered formations we have inherited for the overlooked, marginalized or as yet unactualized geosocial possibilities murmuring within them" (Clark, Yusoff 2017, 6).

Inspired by this approach, in this essay of word and image we follow Latour's invitation to become 'critical zonists'. Moving from sites of excavation into new vertical neighbourhoods and down into the city's underneath, we attempt to permeate Nairobi's shifting landscapes of buildings, planning and infrastructure, examining the materiality of anticipating the future in a rapidly transforming city. We found that in Nairobi, 'geosocial formations' are not simply of academic interest, but under scrutiny by all kinds of actors, from construction workers to residents. From this perspective, Patrick is also a 'critical zonist' in

the way that his very straightforward comment nevertheless revealed a mode of thinking that moved through the earth's surface, seeking to know its possibilities and limitations.

This collaborative project between artist and anthropologist has been in process since early 2022. In addition to publications, the project has to date encompassed two exhibitions, two short films, and a series of public talks, workshops and interventions.[1] Although we work in different media, with Smith taking the lead on the writing and Muriuki undertaking the photography and visual components, the fieldwork – including interviews, site visits, visual research methods and observations – has been undertaken together. This has taken us to diverse areas of Nairobi, from stone quarries to construction sites, from exclusive high-rises to dense tenement housing, from sites of building failure to salvage economies of scrap. The project aims to link together the extractions of construction material – the unmaking of the underground in order to build the above ground – with the extractive political economies that drive urban property regimes in both cities. This is part of a larger project led by Smith tracing how, within such conditions, urban residents live with and alongside precarious architecture and failed buildings, and how the material unreliability of their homes drive debates about (im) moral economies and public (mis)trust, generating calls for not only the politics, but the very fabric of cities, to be unmade and rebuilt along more equitable lines (Smith 2023b; 2023a). In this piece, we seek to bring word and image together on an equal footing, to develop an open-ended engagement with the terrain of Nairobi. Rather than images illustrating the text, or the text explaining the images, we intend for one to illuminate the other, evoking qualities of presence and feeling: a way of engaging with the city that is not simply about representation, but which attempts to foreground the material, tactile and affective.

1 See the project website `https://www.highriselandscapes.org/` for more information, including exhibition installations and to view the films.

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1 Extraction

"The city is coming this way, and it is us who are making it", said a quarry foreman by the name of Maina. His face crusted with grey dust, he gestured to the vast hole behind him, where tiny ants of men moved behind a toy-sized engine with a spinning blade fitted to its rear. The engine traced slow lines across the ground, slicing the land into a descending grid, the men threw the cut blocks of stone on to the back of a lorry. Like a cavity burrowing into a tooth, the quarry was gradually eating away at the green hillside. In this region of Kenya better known for the pineapple plantations of Del Monte than for its urban influence, Maina nevertheless saw himself as a city-maker, feeding Nairobi's hunger stone by stone.

Over the past decade, Nairobi City authorities have been re-imagining Nairobi as a 'world-class' city of spectacular infrastructure and gleaming high-rises, inspired by neoliberal models of urban development in cities like Dubai and Kuala Lumpur. Increasingly a destination for global capital, Nairobi's real estate sector has exploded in recent years, following a trajectory that has been described as a "real estate frontier" (Gillespie 2020). Land and housing are increasingly commodified with land values rising steeply. Although Nairobi continues to grow horizontally, one consequence of rapid urbanisation is that land values have been increasing exponentially. This has meant the real estate market has started to build upwards: in wealthier neighbourhoods family villas have been sold off to developers and high-end apartment blocks constructed in their place. Construction continues at such a pace it is dizzying: the city shapeshifts from one month to the next. Meanwhile, in Nairobi's majority neighbourhoods, corrugated iron shacks known as *mabatis* are being replaced by multi-story rental tenement blocks, resulting in the verticalization of housing and high levels of urban densification (Huchzermeyer 2011). This is part of an urban property boom that is generating new geographies of rentier capitalism in the city (Gillespie, Mwau 2024). Urban life is both literally and metaphorically unstable, as rapid urban financialization brings challenges of social and economic precarity. But the city has also been rocked by ongoing spate of shocking building collapses, revealing the extensive architectural precarity in which many Nairobians dwell, even as new towers soar overhead. The city tilts with the unsettling of ground (Elyachar 2022).

When he described himself as city-maker, we were struck by Maina's sense of agency in a city that is growing so fast along so many different trajectories, that it is often spoken of in public debate as 'out of control', and where popular majorities are often presumed to be victims rather than active participants of urban development. Indeed, scholarly approaches to African cities such as Nairobi have until recently emphasised the failures of urban systems, planning and politics, and the forms of abjection and marginality this has produced (see e.g. Guma 2022; Nuttall, Mbembe

2008 for a discussion of such perspectives). Against this narrative, social collaboration, improvisation and agency have emerged as important corrective themes for understanding the nuanced ways in which lives can flourish in African cities (Simone 2004; Simone, Pieterse 2017; De Boeck 2012). Yet cities make people as much as people make cities: processes of accretion and subtraction, construction and dispossession, wasting and renewal, influence city formations – both social and material (Smith 2019). In Nairobi, like cities elsewhere, substances and resources, technologies and things, human and non-human bodies are entangled in the becoming and (re)making of the city itself. The quarry where Maina works is one such site of entanglement; a geosocial formation from which the literal building blocks of the city are cut, but which simultaneously shapes the lives of those who live and work there.

Maina's words reminded us that much of the stone, as well as the sand and hardcore used in concrete, that builds Nairobi is not imported but quarried from the city's hinterlands. As Nairobi grows, the distance between the quarry and the city shrinks. As Maina put it, "the city is coming this way". This is an ambivalent observation: on the one hand, it alludes to the promise of urban development and a sense of agency over it, spoken with a sense of pride by Maina and his colleagues when they said, "it is us who are making it". But the approaching city is also understood as a potential threat, affecting their future livelihoods. Nairobi's expanding urban fringe has often heralded rising peri-urban land prices, conflicts over land use and tenser relations with adjoining communities. One landscape, one set of lives, are built through the unbuilding of others. This is what Neil Brenner (2013) pointed to with his conceptualisation of planetary urbanism: there is no place unmodified by urbanization. Where does an urban agglomeration begin and end? Should it not include the planetary infrastructure on which it depends? The planet is also "an agent in the process [of urbanization] as well as its expression and residuum" (Labban 2019, 41).

Where a quarry is located is decided not only by prospecting for desirable geologies, but by other porous, opaque interactions across the critical zone, in which topography and politics come together. The ambiguity of land ownership, of extraction rights and of claims that can be made to territory are fundamental to the geosocial formation of the quarry: it is the very lack of clarity that enables semi-licit quarries such as this to emerge. The politicisation of, and conflict over, land is an old story in Kenya, from the dispossession of vast tracts of the country by settler colonials, to a failure of redistribution following independence, the allocation of land as political reward and innumerable ongoing disputes over titles, boundaries and inheritance (Manji 2020; Boone 2012; Berman, Lonsdale 1992). The quarry where Maina works is on land with a complex and opaque history of allocation and re-leasing. There is an ongoing dispute over control of the land between public agencies and the Salvation Army, which has been a powerful landholder

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in Kenya since the colonial period. The church has accused the county government of intimidation, while county authorities have responded in kind (Ciuri 2024). At the same time, hundreds of acres of the area have been exploited for quarrying by parties the church claims the land was never leased to, a case that has been full of accusations and counter-accusations, and which was eventually dismissed by the Environment and Land Court (Cece 2020). It is this porosity and opacity that has enabled the quarrying to continue at pace and scale, machinations and extractions going underground in both senses of the word.

Ultimately, the very success of the quarry as a source of affordable urban materials for making the city renders its future uncertain: the site of Maina's quarry may be swallowed up by Nairobi's growth. There is a repetitive temporality here in the relation between quarry and city: across Nairobi's history, quarries have been absorbed into urban space. The local extraction of stone for urban construction dates back to Nairobi's earliest days as a colonial staging post on the East African Railway. What is now known as Quarry Road was in the 1920s an outlying track that led to the first peri-urban quarry. It was long ago engulfed by urban development, and today, one would describe it as just near the city centre. 'Kware', meanwhile, is a Sheng word that appears in neighbourhoods all over Nairobi, indexing sites where stone extraction does, or did, occur. Many of these excavations have been backfilled, and even have new buildings precariously constructed on top of them. In the fringe settlement of Gataka, for example, south of the city, a redundant quarry now has a large church situated within it and further buildings constructed on stilts around its edge. Such sites are frequently flooded during Nairobi's regular heavy rains, when rivers, streams, and drainage channels swell and overflow with increasing unpredictability. Such volumetric processes move within and across the critical zone, further troubling any sense of boundary between surface and underneath. Just as stones are raised from the rock upwards for construction, so other materials move below surface level. Flooding blurs the surface, as built form is displaced, leaks or sinks.

Though Maina and his colleagues describe themselves as city-makers, it is partly bluster. They are acutely aware that despite the quarry's vast physical presence, it is also precarious – politically, topographically, and temporally. Their sense of pride is also ambivalent, bound up in their awareness of Nairobi's murky politics and intensifying inequality. As Andrea Marston (2021) has shown in reference to mining in Bolivia, in extractivist economies it is not just rocks that are differentially valued but people too. The quarry, through its labouring practices, produces quarryworkers as stratified subjects, even as they might dream the city otherwise. This sensibility becomes more acute as we follow the trucks from the quarry and into a construction industry that simultaneously is producing a high-rise real estate boom and deep urban precarity.


CHEMIST
DUKA LA DAWA
CHEMIST
SUPER MARKET

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2 Collapse

Following the stone blocks cut from the quarry into the city, most truckloads go into the construction of low quality, but highly profitable, tenement rental units which now dominate low-income Nairobi. These tenement neighbourhoods are built at extremely high density with little regard for regulations and planning, generating vertical neighbourhoods of structurally precarious architecture, in areas that were already lacking in basic services, such as running water, sewerage, or adequate electricity (Mwau, Sverdlik 2020; Huchzermeyer 2011). It is these neighbourhoods that have borne the brunt of a series of building collapses occurring at a rate of four or five a year. In the rush to build, outrageous shortcuts are being taken. Sometimes the steel rebar is too small to cope with the size of the building, sometimes the concrete is diluted with too much sand, sometimes the excavated foundations are too shallow or are dug too close together, undermining the stability of the adjacent building. As the costs of construction materials continues to spiral globally, further shortcuts are being made by developers to recoup their investments. Collapsed buildings are part of wider dynamic of opportunist property speculation that we have elsewhere conceptualized as 'grey development': an opaque assemblage connecting the above and below ground: inadequate foundations, poor quality building materials, regulatory inadequacy and an illicit construction industry that drives a particularly aggressive form of residential capitalism (Smith 2020).

The precarity of Nairobi's housing reveals itself not just in the crisis of building collapse, but in forms of collapse at a wider, even planetary, scale (Arboleda 2020). The manipulation and extraction of geological materials – quarrying stone and sand, the excavation of vast quantities of earth for foundations, and a globally escalating concrete industry – underpin Nairobi's high-rise urbanism, linking the acute temporalities of collapse to the geosocial formations of the Anthropocene (Clark, Yusoff 2017). The carbon footprint of concrete makes it one of the worst contributors to anthropogenic climate change, which in turn is understood to be intensifying extreme weather events in Kenya and raising flood risks (Kiptum et al. 2023). Powerful seasonal flooding in Nairobi can literally undermine the foundations of tenement buildings and makes building failure more likely – indeed, most of the collapses happen in Nairobi's rainy season (Fontein et al. 2024, ch. 1).

Building collapses are moments of violent rupture, but they are deeply connected to long urban histories of extraction and dispossession as well as exclusionary futures. In 2022, an apartment block collapsed in Kinoo, a neighbourhood on Nairobi's western fringe. The building failed in the latter stages of its construction – apartments

had been pre-leased, but the building not yet completed. One Kinoo resident, Paul, tells us he would never live in a building more than three floors high in this area, it is too dangerous. Walking around, we start to see tilting tower blocks, their cuboid forms listing towards or away from each other. We are unsure if this is evidence to back up his words, or if our imaginations are going into overdrive: once you start looking for fragile buildings, you see them everywhere.

In this area of Nairobi's edge, apartment blocks are popping up via a dynamic land market in which local owners of small plots of land are selling to Nairobi property developers. Paul saw the collapse of apartment blocks as linked not only to the murky speculations of grey development but also to a fragile underground, revealing himself to be another critical zonist. What he described to us as 'seasonal rivers' flow through the area, some remaining entirely underground, some surfacing occasionally. The watery underneath is more akin to an aquifer and is much less defined than the word river implies (Ballestero 2019). The landscape is threaded with a porous network of rivulets, fissures, and channels through which rainfall soaks, groundwater swells and the seasonal surges of nearby rivers drain. When apartment blocks are constructed in this area, foundations are excavated and filled, but shortcuts are often taken, Paul told us. The foundations are not deep enough, large enough, or reinforced enough to cope with this friable underground. Instead of bedrock, they encounter the terrain of these seasonal rivers, whose underground waterways are sometimes fluid, sometimes dry: the streams and rivulets pulse with heavy rainfall or dehydrate in times of drought. Cumulatively, this destabilises a building's foundations, ultimately causing it to tilt and list, and even collapse.

For Paul, who was born in Kinoo, the crumbly, uncertain underneath is something that, although it cannot be seen, is somehow known at a visceral level. He knows not to trust it, a knowledge made clear in his commitment to remain living at ground level. But the uncertainty of the underneath is also changing character – its unpredictability taking on new aspects across the critical zone. Kenya's struggles with prolonged drought and with severe flooding have made international headlines in recent years as the effects of the climate crisis disrupt historical patterns of seasonal rainfall. There are other changes too. At the edge of Kinoo, Paul takes us to a waterpool where he used to play with friends when they were kids. Down in a steep valley, a stream gushes from the hillside, flattening out into a pool as the terrain levels out. "It used to be clean", he remarked, raising his arms and dropping them despondently. There is rubbish, mostly plastic waste, caught up in the fringes of the stream, the huge green elephant ears of arrowroot plants – *nduma* – erupting through a plastic bag. Building collapse is occurring amid a wider landscape of toxic flows across the area's surfaces. The flattish areas to the sides of the

stream are now cultivated, and fertiliser use is common. "The water now is contaminated" Paul tells us, not just from agrichemicals but from seepage and runoff from the many construction sites all around, "Children can't swim here anymore".

Back in Kinoo at the site of collapse, James and I stand with another local, Josephat, at the edge of the concrete debris and mutilated steel. Gazing at the rubble, Josephat explained that he had been going to rent an apartment for himself and his wife, but the building collapsed before construction was finished.

> This city – even you can't know where you are living. Any time, it can just collapse. […] And politicians they don't care, they only think of their stomachs. Now where do we go? For us *wananchi* (ordinary citizens), Nairobi is a death trap.

In addition to the faults of individual buildings and topographical uncertainty, Paul and Josephat's explanations pointed to the political economy of construction in Nairobi, and how precarious skylines are embedded in the wider landscape of a chronic housing crisis: since the colonial era, housing in Nairobi has failed to keep pace with the rate of urbanization, resulting in serious overcrowding. Today, roughly 60 percent of the city's population lives on just 6 percent of its land.[2] These inequities are entrenched and compounded by forms of spatial authority and infrastructural injustices that have their roots in colonial urban governance and through which arrangements of urban marginalization and dispossession persist (Kimari 2021). In Nairobi as in many African cities, planning policies and building regulations are anti-poor in the sense that they exclude low-income groups from security of tenure, quality housing, or access to services (Watson 2009).

The property sector is marked by a "revolving door" between politics and business, implicating politicians in land acquisitions, procurement and contracting, as well as in the extraction of profit (Pitcher 2017). For example, when the current President, William Ruto, was Vice-President in the previous administration, a property development company in which he was an investor was linked to a land-grabbing scandal when a primary school playground was seized for the construction of a hotel car park (Fontein et al. 2024, ch. 1). Though that case received more public critique than usual, it was far from unique. A former government flagship megaproject to build a 'world-class' high-rise techno-city on the fringes of Nairobi was rife with accusations of bid rigging, profiteering, procurement scandals,

2 "Urban Pathways – Kenya, Nairobi". *Urban Pathways*, 2019. https://kippra.or.ke/strengthening-the-upgrading-programmes-of-informal-settlements-in-nairobi-2/.

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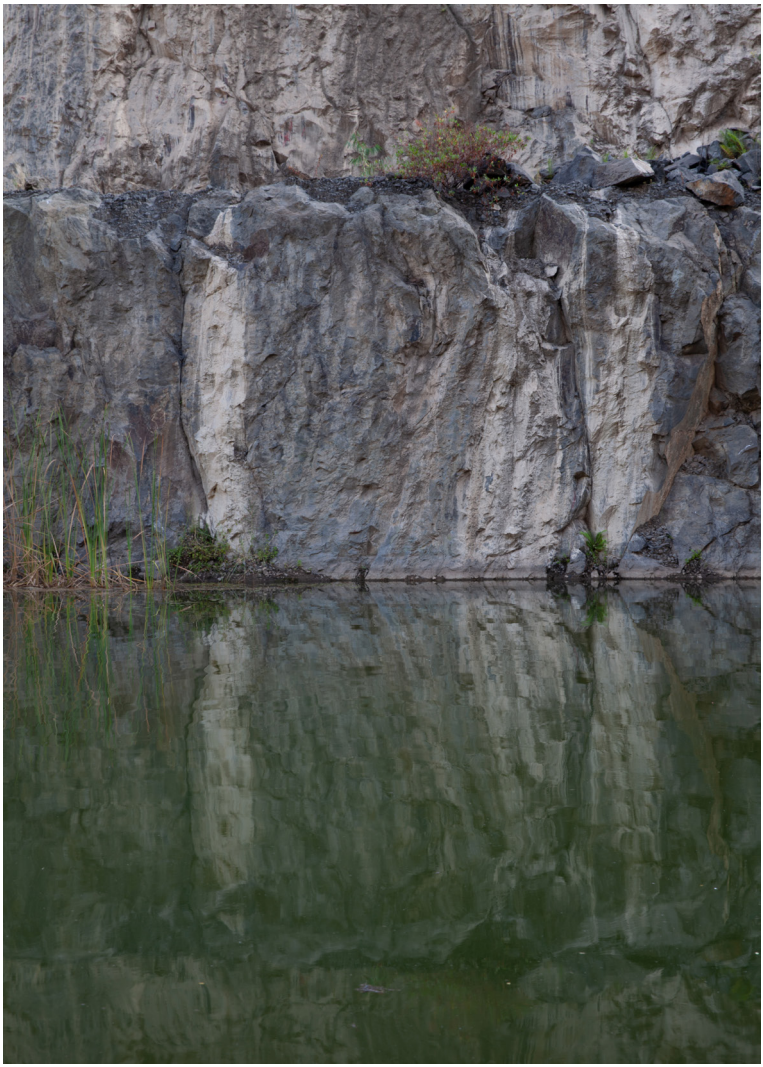
and other irregularities involving local senators and government ministers (Mulupi 2012). In such ways, the promise of Nairobi as a future global city is shown to be superficial: the surface of the vision may be of gleaming high-rises, but these promises are often illusory, riven with forms of deception and public mistrust, and sometimes hiding a dangerous precarity underneath (Smith 2023b).

In a city riven by immoral economies of housing, ecological breakdown, and derelictions of political care, we can see how for tenants of precarious buildings such as Josephat, flows and exchanges across the critical zone are understood not so much in terms of making urban life, but its 'unmaking'. The city tilts, grounds are unsettled, what should be below is surfaced in moments of violent and shocking rupture that have their roots in a slower, but nonetheless extractive, urban political economy, and an even slower breakdown of subsurface geologies. Down there, that's where it starts.

In such ways, the high-rise construction boom links the above ground to the underneath, as geosocial formation. The illusory promises of spectacular development and the hidden operations of the property sector require attending to the metaphorical possibilities of the critical zone as well as the material: attempts to think vertically through deception and opacity as we try to navigate an urban world that is not all it seems from the surface. In many ways, the infrastructures that appear on the ground *are* just the surface: their linkages to what is going on underneath remain opaque, though the network is understood to be powerful. In this subterranean politics, the earthworks of the diggers that excavate a building's foundations echo the workings of capital. As Xavier Garnier has astutely put it, "money is the great 'digger' in the neoliberal regime", while corruption "undermines social institutions… until it provokes local collapses" (Garnier 2021, 141).



3 Unruly Depths

In the financial and corporate hub of Nairobi's Upper Hill neighbourhood, is a site of neoliberal digging *par excellence*. In 2017, this was the setting for what was envisaged as the tallest building in Africa: a 300metre double skyscraper named The Pinnacle. Architectural renderings on billboards and promotional materials showed a birds-eye view of a gleaming edifice of glass and steel, soaring over the city with downtown Nairobi barely visible in the background. Led by a Dubai-based developer with partners from across three continents, the project was officially launched by then-President Uhuru Kenyatta and the foundations were excavated, generating a huge crater in the hillside. But by the end of 2017 the project was tied up in a complicated lawsuit with conflicting claims of land ownership and misuse of the site involving several project partners (Wasuna 2019). The case is still unresolved, and the project is dormant: the sound of machines has fallen silent, replaced with birdsong and rustling grasses. The planned tallest building in Africa remains the deepest hole in Nairobi.

Over the course of 2022, James and I made several visits to what we began to call the Upper Hill Hole, fascinated by its scale, but also by the incursion of plants, wildlife and unpermitted people. The hole is now filled with water, and creepers, grasses and wildflowers cover its banks. The suspension of construction did not mean the site was inactive – far from it. We sat and watched the flight of three kingfishers swooping across the water's surface, before they perched on the metal trusses on the foundation walls. Ducks swam beneath, house martins nested, and there are even fish in the watery depths. Nairobi is a city with a fraught history of destroying its green spaces, and the politics of environmental activism has been met with some brutal pushbacks, as attested by the 1980s Greenbelt Movement led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai. And yet here, under cover of what on the outside was meant to be one of the largest infrastructural projects ever in Nairobi, was now the city's only urban lake. It was playing host to new, unexpected ecologies, including the human.

On one visit we encountered Jeremiah, when he appeared to chop wood at the top of the crater. The wood was to feed the fire on which he was brewing tea to sell to workers employed on constructing a new highway adjacent to the site. The hole was a Godsend, he said. His tiny café had no permanent structures, instead he used wooden planks propped up on building stones for benches, while a shelter was rigged up from old plastic sacking salvaged from the same highway project. He had made a small entryway into the Pinnacle site by unfixing one of the corrugated iron panels, and, at the end of every day, disassembled his café and stored it inside the fence. He sometimes slept there too, under a tarpaulin.

The Upper Hill Hole is an example of what Bettina Stoetzer (2018) has called a ruderal ecology. She writes:

> The term 'ruderal' comes from 'rudus', the Latin term for rubble. A common term in ecology, it refers to communities that emerge spontaneously in disturbed environments usually considered hostile to life: the cracks of sidewalks, the spaces alongside train tracks and roads, industrial sites. (2018, 298)

or, in this case, the abandoned foundations of a skyscraper. Neither wild nor domesticated, ruderal ecologies are best described as unruly: they offer insight not only into nonhuman urban life but "the broader, unintended ecologies of human-built structures and the multispecies worlds of which they become part" (2018, 298).

This unruliness is an important aspect of Nairobi's geosocial formations. It draws attention to the city's urban churn, and the way in which materials, substances and more-than-human actors reconfigure infrastructural and developmental imaginations. This unruliness can reshuffle and realign urban formations in ways which draw attention to the unpredictable potentialities of the critical zone. Contemplating the hole's hidden depths, we began to wonder, what is the difference between this hole that was excavated for the Pinnacle, and the hole that is the quarry where Maina works? Both were sites of extraction – of labour and materials – indexing the inequities of Nairobi's growth in different ways. Both quarry and foundation held within them the potential to become something else – that is, a tower. One by being the site from which building stones were sourced and the other as the place where a skyscraper's concrete foundations would be poured. Both were entangled in the complex temporalities, socialities and materialities of Nairobi's constant flux. As geosocial formations, they prefigured the silhouettes of high-rise transformation whilst also manifesting its frailties, breakdowns and hollow promises.

This returns us to Patrick's words: "To build up, you must dig down". Rather than taking the city at face value, we have tried to dig under its surface, to think across its critical zone. We juxtapose the physical extractions of quarries and foundations with materialities of property-driven extractivism: the way that the political economy of housing is fundamentally entangled with the materialities and substances of Nairobi's urban landscapes, and how opaque property speculation is radically reshaping the city. When collapse occurs, we see below the urban surface to what is hidden underneath. Lives as well as buildings are unmade in an instant and promises of a 'world-class' future city are revealed to be hollow.

Sat on the banks of the hole in Upper Hill, we watched the birds diving beneath the water's surface. The hole's unruly ecology

seemed also to point to the hubris of humans' city-making projects. The subterranean excavations reinforced how frighteningly easy it is to interfere in the critical zone, in the "thin skin of the living earth" (Latour 2020, 3). But also, how surprisingly quickly the more-than-human world can reconfigure formations such as construction sites into alternative assemblages. Nairobi's persistent social and infrastructural injustices, materialised by grey development and its collapses, as well as its long histories of extraction, will of course take much more than unruly plant life to repair. But perhaps the interrupted excavations of the hole and its unplanned ecological incursions can offer a temporary refuge from the city's incessant construction work, a gap in which to reflect on the forms of power at stake in shaping which lives thrive in the disturbed landscapes of our cities.

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