

The pursuit of political independence... and a city shaped like a rhinoceros

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Rhino City. The new capital of the work-in-progress that is Southern Sudan. A city in the shape of a rhinoceros. An otherworldly, fantastical piece of town planning in one of the world's newest states, although it's hard to determine (zoology aside) to whom the scheme properly 'belongs'. Rumours abound.

Plans for the expansion of what is currently the city of Juba are said to have been drawn up by a Sudanese contracting outfit and a Canadian firm, UAS. A quick internet search reveals UAS 'has been providing innovative solutions to clients in the Aquaculture, Animal Feed, Forestry, Fertilizer, Food and Grain industries since 1974.' Well, I suppose Rhino City is innovative. Up to a point. It's the

sort of scheme that produces a knowing, humorous sigh. Here we go again.

In the scramble for Africa, town planning is only the latest tool in a 1,000-year tragic history of skills-for-resources transfer. Southern Sudan, the would-be breakaway state, has yet to gain full independence and **here come the experts, ready to put into motion what they would never dare do at home – three cities in the shape of a rhino, a giraffe and a pineapple. All native, of course, to the state-in-waiting.**

Sudan, the largest country in Africa, has a complex history of colonisation and domination, not only by the usual European suspects, but also by Egypt. British rule, lasting just under a

century, exacerbated the tensions between the Muslim, Arabic-influenced north and the largely Christian, black African south. Southern Sudan's attempts to break free are, as ever, linked inextricably to the divide-and-rule policies of both.

In January, a referendum will determine whether the 8 million Southern Sudanese will, in fact, go it alone. Rich in natural resources, with impressive annual economic growth figures (roughly 10 per cent, in stark contrast to Europe's 2-3 per cent current figures), Sudan is an investor's dream, pesky politics and local idiosyncrasies aside. No wonder everyone's pouring in. The conditions that make it possible to even contemplate building a city in the shape of

a pineapple owe as much to the half-crazed search for another El Dorado as they do to the hopeless naivety of the government officials who either commissioned the plans, or worse, sanctioned them.

But the tale of these three cities is part of a wider discussion, that of contemporary African urbanism, both academic and 'real', that has somehow lost its way. Mercer's Quality of Living Survey ranks cities according to a range of criteria, which multi-national companies draw upon when determining pay-scales and remuneration. For countries in the developing world, whose economies rely rather more heavily on the goodwill of foreign 'experts' and investors, Mercer's findings actually carry some weight. Of the 221 cities that were ranked in 2010, the only African city *not* occupying the bottom slots was Cape Town. This isn't to say that life in Lagos or Lusaka is intolerable – far from it. Rather, the attempts to draw out a credible set of alternatives (to pineapples and rhinos) that the town planners of what could arguably be the most interesting, challenging and, yes, *exciting* urban project in recent times might look to – the new capital city of a soon-to-be-established independent state – have failed. The raw material is fascinating, the solid, awe-inspiring stuff of history. Freedom, independence, equality, the future... not a million miles away from the thinking that gave rise to the modern movement. There's been an explosion in interest in African cities recently, with high-profile architects and thinkers devoting time, energy and resources into discovering what makes them tick. The city planners of Southern Sudan should take note. We all should.

