



URBANISM |  
SOUTH SUDAN  
BY JOSHUA CRAZE

rubbish  
recycling  
land appropriation  
dislocation  
industrial waste

## BURNING THE FUTURE

the disposing of waste  
that cannot be disposed

1  
The fires start at dusk. From the edges of dirt roads a hazy smoke rises up and hangs over the town, suspended in the dusty air. Leaves, batteries and plastics bags combine in the smouldering fires that cover Juba – Africa's newest capital – with smoke every evening. By morning the fires have subsided, and, walking through the streets, you can find hardened fragments of cauterised plastic beneath the ashes; ruins of the future.

In *The Road to San Giovanni*, the Italian writer Italo Calvino imagines a series of cities – mirror images of Italy's own proud industrial centres – that generate rubbish cities, doppelgangers of their own excess. The more productive the cities become, the more they threaten to drown under the growing piles of rubbish that surround them. 'This', he writes of Leonia, his fantasy city, 'is the result: the more Leonia expels goods, the more it accumulates them; the scales of its past are soldered into a cuirass that cannot be removed. As the city is renewed each day, it preserves all of itself in its only definitive form: yesterday's sweepings piled up on the sweepings of the day before yesterday and all of its days and years and decades'. Calvino paints a picture of a society that welcomes each day as if it were the first, and yet is choked by its own unacknowledged history.

In Juba, it is not the past that is suffocating us, but the future. The endless burning plastic that fills Juba's streets, unknown six years ago, is an anticipation of Juba tomorrow.



Giulio Petrocco

2

Finding Juba's Public Health Office is a challenge. After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005, ending twenty years of civil war, Juba was made the administrative capital of South Sudan, and the new government needed a home. It displaced the state government and moved into its buildings, creating a domino effect as homeless bureaucrats occupied the offices of others lower down the scale. The Public Health Office for Juba ended up in a small room at the back of the local police force compound.

The police station is packed with indolent figures, slumped against walls. Hundreds of soldiers live outside in impromptu tents and makeshift shelters – they are here to ensure the referendum for independence passes without incident. A glorious ficus, its tangled trunk a mess of separate coils, has been transformed into a Christmas tree; hanging from its branches are gifts: the clothes, smoked fish and mosquito nets of the army that won independence from the north.

At the back of the compound, Kallsto Tombe Jubek, the beleaguered head of Public Health for Juba, is sitting in a spare office. There are no files in the room, but along the front of his desk, arranged like a small Hadrian's Wall, is a set of cans and bottles: instant coffee and beans, guarded by a miniature Sudanese flag.

During the civil war, Juba was a small merchant trading town. Encircled by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the town was held by the northern government. It was difficult to get supplies, and residents still talk darkly of those difficult days spent searching for food. There was no problem with rubbish during the war, Jubek explains. People burnt their rubbish. In villages up and down Sudan, I have seen the same practice. Old food, clay and animals hides are taken out to the edge of a village and burned; the ashes can later be used to fertilise fields. Fire in the village can be productive; in central Sudan, back in March, the evening sky was aglow, as villagers set the land aflame to revitalise the soil.

After 2005, everything changed. Juba was rapidly filled with NGOs, hotels and the UN. With them came thousands of expatriate workers, plastic bags, promises of development and a quantity of rubbish Juba had never had to deal with before. Whereas the rubbish in the village is generally organic, in Juba today it is plastic and chemical: burning it does not renew the soil, it destroys the land.

In 2006, with USAID money, the local administration finally established a rubbish dump. The going has not been smooth. It initially offered contracts to rubbish collection companies, but, Jubek told me, many of the companies just went around Juba, promising waste disposal services and collecting money from hotels and businesses, before promptly vanishing.

Now there are three companies working in Juba, but they cannot cope with the demand. A company called South Sudan express services central Juba. Just taking the rubbish from one of the larger hotels, Jubek tells me, can occupy one of their vehicles for the entire day. South Sudan Express only has eight vehicles.

3

We are heading out of Juba on a bumpy road, and David, the Kenyan driver I have hired for the day, is complaining. 'The rubbish here is terrible. In Kenya, we recycle. You should go to Kenya, Joshua, and see how we deal with this problem.' Scopas Lukudu, the Public Health Inspector for Juba Payam, is offended and I find myself temporarily the unwilling adjudicator in a competition between Kenya and Sudan. Thankfully, the argument soon stops, as Lukudu, heavy and saturnine in the back seat, concedes, 'one day we will have recycling. We have heard how you can make money from this thing'.

We drive past a market, with piles of okra on display next to plastic bottles full of oil. In reality, recycling is already happening in Juba. Young boys, thin and playful, wander the streets collecting empty water bottles; twenty-four such bottles can be sold at the market for one Sudanese Pound (30 cents), and will be used to store cooking oil.

This is clearly not the sort of recycling Lukudu was referring to, as he continues telling me about his ambitious plans for the future: three more rubbish dumps, a sewage treatment plant... it is just a question of getting the money.

Scopas Lukudu was Juba's health inspector in the 1970s. When the war broke out, he joined the World Health Organisation, then after 2005, slotted seamlessly back into his old job. Thirty years of working for NGOs had marked Lukudu, and, like many in South Sudan's nascent government, he spoke in the strange language of bureaucratism endemic among aid workers. I thought as we left Juba town that this language of technocratic intervention, the *lingua franca* of government in so many parts of Africa, will be the NGOs' most enduring contribution to the continent.

As we drive further along the road to Yei, we pass under the shadow of Jebel, the mountain that marks the boundary of Juba. Buildings are less and less frequent, and soon the squatter settlements begin. In 2009, 30,000 people were evicted from Juba town. Two years later, much of the land the squatters were forced from remains fenced off and empty, sold to investors uncertain about South Sudan's long term political stability but greedy enough to buy up the land in case there is a future profit to be made.

Many squatters simply moved slightly further out of Juba, to the sides of the Yei road. We pass their *ad hoc* assemblages of UNHCR canvas and cardboard boxes which, in their austerity, have the look of Potemkin villages: recently built for the visitors' benefit.

According to the 2008 Land Act, it is the communities of South Sudan who own the land. What this means in practice is obscure. The ministry that gives out land permits in Juba has refused new applications for a year now. Still, amid rumours of speculation and corrupt community elders taking payments from large companies, houses continue to be built in Juba. Many of the squatter settlements outside of Juba are populated by members of the very community that should own the Juba area.

Squatters' huts are arranged on one side of the road. On the other side, a long line of garbage fires greets us like a crowd before a procession. 'Companies are always cutting corners', Lukudu complains, gesturing at the rubbish; rather than taking it all the way to the dump, they drop it off at the side of the road, just before the checkpoint at which licensed companies have to pay 5 Sudanese pounds to use the dump; unlicensed companies pay 15.



Just past the squatter settlements are the first signs of the new United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) complex – indications of a new, more permanent status for the mission. For the first six years of peace, UNMIS rented a large site near the airport, but now the owners want their land back. Here in the shadow of Jebel Mountain, a lone Rwandan soldier stands guard over an empty valley. 'That', Lukudu tells me, 'was the old rubbish dump'.

We slow as we approach the military checkpoint just before the dump. I see trucks being checked, and anticipate a long wait. Thankfully, Lukudu is waved through and we drive on past the huts and the squatter settlements, into the bush.

It is the height of the dry season, and the ground is cracked, dotted with sparse bushes struggling under a strong sun that crushes colour into the valley floor. In the rainy season when the dust and the rubbish turn into a toxic slick that renders the roads impassable, the grass here, says Lukudu, is taller than a man is high.

The only adornment on the arid landscape are large signs, every fifty metres or so, demarcating plots. This place, I realise, is going to be the site of frenetic development. In 2005, the South Sudanese government took over the offices of the state government. Now they are moving on. All the signs indicate land acquired for the future buildings of different ministries. One sign is for the Land Commission: the printed words loom large, standing over an empty landscape.

Just as the signs finish, the rubbish begins. Rather than the small piles of burning garbage I saw earlier, now there are huge mounds of smoking rubbish, burning slowly in the noonday heat. All this momentarily confuses me: I understand the need to burn rubbish in the town, but why burn it here, in the arid emptiness of this landscape? I find my answer amid the smouldering trash – neatly arranged piles of scrap metal, delicate constructions as intricate as Jenga towers. They burn the rubbish, Lukudu tells me, interrupting my thoughts, to retrieve the metal, which they sell to Ugandan merchants who take it to Kampala to be recycled.



Giulio Petrocco

After another twenty kilometres, we arrive at the turn for the rubbish dump. Stretched out across the road, barring our path, is a thin strip of paper, knotted together with plastic. It is, like the thousands of roadblocks that adorn the dirt tracks of Sudan, less an actual physical barrier (scissors, freedom), than it is an indication of the real barrier: the people who put the barrier in place.

Lukudu looks visibly surprised. Suddenly showing more energy that I previously thought him capable of, he announces that he is going to investigate, and hops out of the car, ducks nimbly under the barrier and saunters off down the road, gesturing at me to remain in the car.

I wait for five minutes before becoming suspicious. In Juba, I heard stories of hundreds of people living at the dump; villagers displaced by land speculation, living off the scraps and detritus of the city. Perhaps the barrier is a sham, I think, paranoid by now, and Lukudu is using this time to ensure the dump is empty.

Just behind the car, there is a group of people arrayed around the tree that marks the turn off to the dump. I walk over to talk to them. They come here everyday, they tell me, to sift through the refuse, and pick out food, bits of machinery and scrap metal. Yesterday, however, soldiers came and put up the barrier. Apparently a brigadier has claimed that he owns the site, and has forbidden rubbish dumping. The villagers I spoke to sat almost totally still: first the dump took their fields away, and then the dump itself, their livelihood, was declared off-limits.

It begins to seem strange that the proposed ministry buildings were so close to the rubbish dump; occupying the rubbish dump, I thought, would be a good piece of realty speculation by a canny brigadier.

After talking to the group I set off for the dump. I want to find Lukudu and ask him about what I had just been told. It is hard to see through the dust and smoke, and the flies descend, congregating for an important conference on my mouth, coating my eyes; my skin feels alive.

After walking for ten minutes, I give up trying to brush the flies off my face, and light a cigarette, the dull blue wisps of smoke standing out in the noonday heat against the diffuse grey of the smouldering plastic. After a few more minutes, Lukudu appears around a bend, walking towards me. The barrier, he tells me, was built by the local community, who are angry about all the rubbish being dumped on their land. And it is the government, Lukudu sighed, who is going to have to pay for all of this. In the heat and stench of the dump, I think about how different Lukudu's explanation was to that given by the rubbish-pickers by the tree. It is only on the morrow that I come to wonder how Lukudu could have found this out, when he also told me he had not met anyone on his walk. *Brigadier* is a strange synonym for community.

Together, we walk on to the dump. There are burning slag heaps lining the road, and the burnished metal edges of tin cans protrude from the carbonised remnants of a hotel's daily effluence. The trees are twisted, flecked with ash.

You can read the modern history of Juba in the rubbish; a future spied, not in tea leaves, but in whiskey bottles, in piles of horns and hides that did not find their way to the factory, and in USAID rice sacks that we trample underfoot, ripped and discarded.

There are shacks lining the side of the road. Not quite dwellings; bare skeletons of sticks, wreathed in simple skins of tattered blue plastic. In this barren landscape, we finally meet someone. A man walks towards us, wearing a tattered blue shirt. He carries a machete, and accompanies us to the dump. His village, he tells us, is but three kilometres from here. During the war he was displaced to a camp and then worked in Khartoum. After 2005, he returned home only to find that it had become a rubbish dump. Rather than return to farming sorghum, he farms the rubbish, planting seeds of fire and harvesting the scrap metal.

When we finally arrive at the dump, it is little more than a continuation of the road – a shallow pit, barely two metres deep and largely indistinguishable from the area surrounding it. It doesn't smell like the rubbish dumps I have visited elsewhere in Africa. There is nothing rotting, nothing foetid: here, everything burns. It smells like an industrial plant and is the uniform grey of Soviet architecture in Warsaw. I find a scrap of colour: some Japanese toothpaste, crushed into the earth, staining the ash red.

'These companies', Lukudu complains, referring to the waste disposal trucks, 'have no training, no instruction, they don't know what a rubbish dump is'. We walk back to the car; he tells me that if there wasn't a barrier up on the road and the dump was functioning, there would be 500 people here, going through the new rubbish. Back at the car, I see a rubbish truck roar past us. Now the dump is closed where will they dump their rubbish?

'Oh', Lukudu replies, 'just further up the Yei road'.

'And what', I ask, 'will happen when the rubbish reaches Yei?'

Lukudu looks concerned, as if he suspects I might be slightly soft in the head. 'Don't worry', he tells me, 'Yei is very far away'.

4

After I got back to Juba, I phoned the Kenyan man who had rented me one of his cars. We chatted amiably about the difficulty of doing business in Sudan, and the great opportunities to be found here. Finally, he asked me where I had been.

'Oh', I replied, 'I went to the rubbish dump'.

'Which one?' he asked me.

'Which one? The dump on the Yei road.'

'Yes', he said, 'of course, but which one?'

I hesitated. 'The dump next to the UN compound', I said, in a tone that sat somewhere between statement and question. This made him confused. 'Why', he asked, 'didn't you visit the big dump? You are writer; you should see these things. If you talk to the Ministry of Public Health in Juba, I am sure you can arrange a visit.'

5

The office of South Sudan Express is a hive of activity. Two of their eight vehicles are being repaired, and workers in orange jump suits are preparing for their morning rounds. Reception is a narrow cubicle on the side of the road, and I talk to Cheng, a Dinka from Bor, who is running the front desk. 'We have a lot of problems', he tells me. 'So many complaints: people tell us that we don't pick up their rubbish in time, or we don't pick up enough of it.' He smiles as he is passed two pieces of grubby handwritten paper – 'You see? More complaints'.

Giulio Petrocco, the Italian photographer whose images you see around these words, and I ride with the South Sudan Express workers in their truck. We sit in the back, on top of the rubbish, as we wind our way slowly through the streets. Some markets have collectively organised their rubbish collection and pile it on the side of the road for the workers to collect, without gloves or removal equipment save a plastic tarpaulin and a rake. Shop owners, angry that their rubbish sits and festers by the side of the road, berate the company as we go through Juba. The workers, who are all Sudanese, direct complaints to their overseer, a snappily dressed Dinka man who wrote a Masters thesis on hospital waste management.

He listens studiously, noting everything down. Others, unable to pay the high prices of South Sudan Express, are unconcerned and pile up their rubbish in old oil drums to be burned come sunset.

Finally, after what seems like hours, we head up the Yei road. The truck is rented from an Eritrean company, and our driver is also Eritrean; part of a vast force of East Africans who provide most of the labour in Africa's newest state.

We pass the government dump, which two weeks after I visited it is still closed, and head another forty kilometres up the road.

This dump we finally arrive at is not new – a broken South Sudan Express truck testifies to its long use. Like the other government dump, there were the same smouldering fires, the same smell of an industrial plant. The only difference was the people: hundreds of them, waiting for the arrival of the truck, and then, as it gradually tipped up, scattering the waste on the ground, they poured over it, finding aubergines, needles, pineapples; searching bottles for water and alcohol; taking note of the position of scrap metal.

As I walk through the dump the people mill around me. One man, a high school graduate, asks me: 'Give me something, anything, it is not right that I have to live here'. He had returned from an internally displaced people's camp to find his village transformed; a harbinger of the city that Juba is becoming.

'Please', he said, 'give me something'.

And I gave him a cigarette. ■

