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Controlled Housing Development vs Reality: Formal and Informal Peri-Urban Growth in Nairobi City, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Two parallel urban land development processes shape urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa: formal and informal. Urban areas in Kenya exhibit these two land development processes, with their divide, in most cases, becoming increasingly blurred. The informal land development process occurs within a "regulated" environment. Not only that, but developments are often characterized by a disconnected growth pattern in which housing development precedes the provision of necessary infrastructure, resulting in fragmented developments and urban environments. This article evaluates housing development and urbanization trends to understand the dynamics that drive informality in new residential neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Nairobi, particularly the Nasra Garden Estate. Utilizing qualitative and spatial analysis, the research explores the dissonance between urban planning regulations and actual development practices in the Nasra neighbourhood. The findings show that private developers operating with limited oversight from authorities buy land promoted by land-buying and selling companies for "controlled neighbourhood development" schemes. However, subsequent development on these lands occurs incrementally without proper adherence to planning procedures and regulations, and often lacks crucial infrastructure such as sewer systems, water supply networks, and paved roads. As a result, the initial "controlled" development in these neighbourhoods is gradually lost. Therefore, the study underscores the necessity to reconcile formal planning frameworks with on-the-ground realities in African cities to bridge the fantasy–reality gap in urban growth.

Introduction

Sub-Saharan African cities are urbanizing and expanding in ways that challenge conventional planning. Urban populations and city footprints have grown exponentially in recent decades (Cohen, 2004) such that between 1960 and 2020, the urban population in Sub-Saharan Africa increased over tenfold, from roughly 32 million to 458 million (UN-Habitat, 2023). This rapid growth has largely expanded outside formal planning frameworks, with 30–60% of housing being constructed outside official regulations (Payne, 2001; Wafula, 2016). Informal processes play significant roles in urban development and residential housing construction, with 70 to 95 per cent of all new housing estimated to be provided informally (Musyoka, 2010). As a result, informal or quasi-formal processes account for the majority of new urban housing, outpacing what government-regulated development delivers (Payne and Durand-lasserve, 2012; Alterman and Calor, 2020).

A defining feature of African cities' urbanization is the proliferation of unplanned peripheral settlements that expand beyond initial city boundaries (Lemanski and Lama-Rewal, 2012; Bathla, 2022). The expansion often takes the form of sprawling informal suburbs where basic services lag behind the burgeoning housing developments. It is common for extensive new neighborhoods to emerge on city peripheries with little to no initial infrastructure, including paved roads, water and electricity connections, and with only insignificant public facilities (Jimmy, 2023). These peripheral zones become the loci of middle-class and elite informal housing development, where developers, driven by high housing demand and high-priced serviced inner city, purchase land in peri-urban areas and build

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incrementally (Visagie and Turok, 2020; Jimmy and Lombard, 2024). The result is urbanization without infrastructure, a pattern where the built environment materializes first, and services are extended (if at all) later as retrofits (Jimmy, 2023).

Contemporary planning in Nairobi and, indeed, across the African continent has often been characterized by fantasy plans with ambitious visions of orderly, high-tech cities or strictly zoned suburbs that assume a level of state control but are rarely realized on the ground (Watson, 2013; Satge and Watson, 2018; K'Akumu, 2023). Watson (2013) describes these as "African urban fantasies" in which master plans for satellite cities and new towns promise controlled developments and world-class infrastructure yet remain disconnected from prevailing socioeconomic and development realities on the ground. Such plans reflect a vision of control and the idea that through zoning, building codes, and comprehensive schemes, urban growth can be guided into a neat, compliant order (Watson, 2013; Abubakar, 2021). Under this paradigm, estates designated as "controlled development" areas are expected to strictly adhere to approved layouts, standard house designs, and infrastructure provision before occupancy, regardless of ongoing regulatory oversight (Jimmy, 2023).

Nairobi's planning history is replete with instances of this optimistic rationality: from colonial-era layouts to post-independence zoning ordinances, in which authorities have long aspired to mold urban expansion into ideal forms (Jimmy, Martinez, and Verplanke, 2019; Jimmy and Lombard, 2024). However, the disconnect between plans and reality is the prevalent phenomenon in which meticulously drafted plans frequently remain on paper, while actual development on the ground proceeds along very different lines (Watson, 2013; Satge and Watson, 2018; Jimmy, 2023). This phenomenon in Nairobi mirrors urban development in most African cities, exposing a tension between the fantasy of planned, controlled housing development and the reality characterized by formal-informal growth.

Therefore, this study examines how urbanization trends in Nairobi foster conditions in which anticipated "controlled development" housing schemes devolve into largely unregulated development. The study traces Nasra Garden Estate's initial development strategy, guided by a prototype plan provided to land buyers; the development phase; the expiration of the approved plan; and the build-occupy-service process that followed the neighbourhood. The findings underscore the challenges of planning without infrastructure, the myth of controlled self-sufficient neighbourhood developments, especially in weak, fragmented, potentially corrupt states, where the state functionaries and developers exploit planning systems for personal gain, and the planning processes and development actors are driven by conflicting and entangled rationalities (Watson, 2009b, 2012; Jimmy and Lombard, 2024). The case of Nasra Garden Estate illustrates the gap between "fantasy" plans for urban development vs. the reality on the ground by evaluating the estate's housing development process from subdivision to occupation.

One of the main reasons that underpin the quasi-formal development in peri-urban areas in Kenya is that the majority of land is under freehold tenure, with ownership absolute. This land tenure presents a perfect opportunity for informal land transactions and development for three reasons (Musyoka, 2004b, 2010; Musyoka and Musoga, 2015): One, the misconception that absolute ownership means that such land is not subject to planning, and the owners can, therefore, use it the way they want. Two, the ease with which freehold land can be subdivided and its use changed, as it is convenient for the title holder to quietly subdivide the land without attracting the attention of regulatory authorities, unlike leasehold tenure, where the government has to consent. And three, a limited or total lack of enforcement of development control on this land category. Informal land subdivision and incremental construction have become the default solutions for accommodating urban growth in Kenya. As UN-Habitat (2018) and other scholars observe, the formal systems in Kenyan cities seem unable to keep pace with the pace of urban demand (Mwaura, 2006; Manasseh, 2012). The subsequent section 2 gives the background and basis of the study. Section 3 explains the methodology and the case study. Section 4 provides a detailed analysis of controlled development vs reality, and the last section provides lessons and conclusions.

Formal vs. Informal Urbanism: Rethinking the divide

The traditional urban theory associating formal, planned cities with legality and informal urbanism with the unplanned city of illegality and chaos (Hart, 1973) has been widely challenged by contemporary studies. Contemporary scholarship (Hansen and Vaa, 2004; Roy, 2005; Watson, 2009a) demonstrates that formal and informal processes are intertwined and often co-produced, especially in rapidly urbanizing cities of the Global South. What appears to be informal development is often entangled in formal structures of power and negotiation (Hansen and Vaa, 2004; Banks, Lombard and Mitlin, 2019). Hence, Baross (1990) shows that while the conventional development process is expected to follow a plan–service–build–occupy sequence (Figure 1), many cities instead experience a reversed process in which construction precedes infrastructure and updated zoning regulations (Jimmy, 2023). These build-occupy-service patterns are common in peri-urban areas where land was previously used for agriculture (Mercer, 2018; Meth et al., 2021). The reversed sequencing becomes an integral stage of urban growth, not an aberration, and what starts informally has the potential to become formalized (e.g., through regularization laws), or formal buildings may transition to informality over time, blurring the boundary between the two states (Musyoka, 2006).

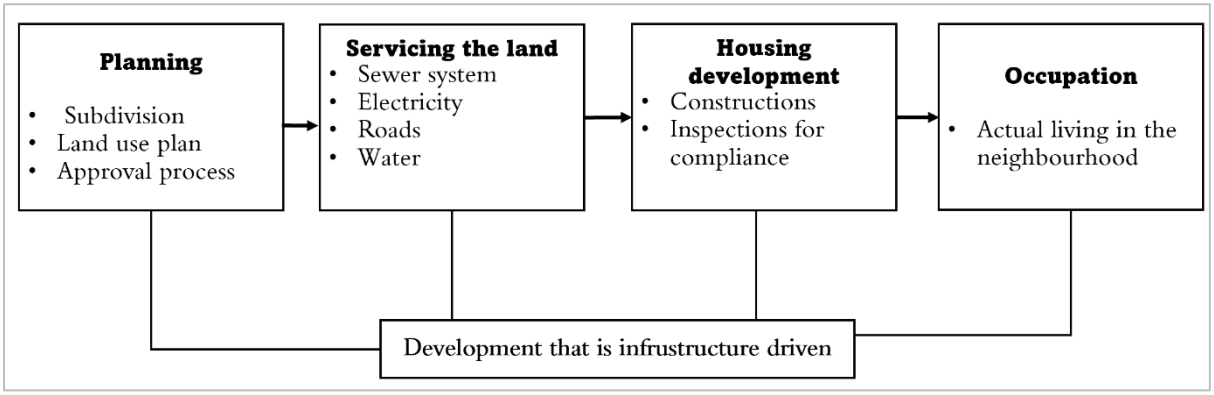

Figure 1. An illustration of conventional formal land development process

2.1 Incremental Housing Development

Incremental housing is the process of building a dwelling step by step over time as resources allow, and has long been recognized as a prevalent mode of housing production in the Global South cities (Wakely and Riley, 2010; Van Noorloos et al., 2020). While incremental approaches have been associated with low-income populations through self-help constructions, recent scholarship highlights that the ethos of incremental development permeates all income groups in many countries. It involves phased construction, extensions, and adaptations that precede formal approval, in which middle-income households embrace incremental strategies, albeit using different resources and methods: a family buys land on the urban fringe and constructs a modest house, which is later expanded vertically or horizontally as finances improve (Jimmy, 2023). Dunning, Hickman, and While (2020) refer to this as "soft densification," a small-scale, organic increase in housing units within existing plots through incremental changes. Soft densification occurs without formal planning, for example, turning a single-family house into a multi-family dwelling by adding partitions or extra floors informally (Ibid). In many cases, incrementalism is not only a construction practice but also a financial strategy, as it allows investment in housing in small installments, accessible to the wider society than formal mortgage-financed construction (Van Noorloos et al., 2020).

In Nasra, incremental development emerged gradually after formal subdivision approval, where landowners constructed unevenly in stages and, as the plan expired, individual plots progressively modified building designs with vertical additions. Not only that, the constructions occurred without the infrastructure and services to match the developments, as explained in section 4. Hence, incremental housing can be a double-edged sword, which, on one hand, as a pragmatic response to resource constraints and housing demand that yields flexibility and grassroots investment in housing, while on the other hand, it can lead to mixed urban forms and infrastructure deficits if not coordinated (Van Noorloos et al., 2020).

While this study is based on dynamics observed in the development of Nasra in Nairobi, the setting resonates with a broader international discourse on incremental housing and peri-urbanization. For instance, incremental housing development has been posited to operate as a dominant mode of city development rather than a marginal condition across Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and some parts of the Global North involving incremental constructions, retrofitted infrastructure, and negotiated state angenegement (Wakely and Riley, 2010; Van Noorloos et al., 2020; Friendly, Noorloos and Steel, 2025). Similar patterns of negotiated, tolerated informalities and incremental densification have been revealed in studies of peri-urban developments in the Global South (Roy, 2005; Fernandes, 2011; Suhartini and Jones, 2023). Moreover, Nasra aligns with debates on soft densification in the Global North, where vertical and horizontal extensions quietly restructure suburban neighbourhoods beyond formal planning control (Pow, 2017; Dunning, Hickman and While, 2020).

2.2 Regulatory Failure and Negotiated Planning

Formal planning regulations, including zoning laws, building codes, and building standards systems, are intended to guide urban development, but in much of the developing world, they often fail to achieve compliance and sometimes even incentivize the very informal outcomes they seek to prevent (Musyoka, 2004a; Lombard, 2014). Overly rigid or unrealistic rules push a significant portion of development outside the legal realm (Watson, 2009b; Bhan, 2013). Watson (2013) notes that many African cities operate under dual systems of regulation: the official one on paper and the pragmatic practice on the ground. Roy (2005) speaks of the social production of illegality, where the state actively manages informality by deciding which illegal acts to tolerate or regularize. Regulatory failure in Nairobi is evident in outcomes like frequent building collapses (Smith, 2020). Overly stringent regulations in many developing cities price the poor (and even middle class) out of formality, forcing them into informality (Payne and Durand-lasserve, 2012).

One effect of regulatory failure is the emergence of negotiated planning in the form of informally brokered arrangements that substitute for formal rule enforcement, in which developers often negotiate exemptions by engaging city officials through lobbying or bribing, or by paying fines for regularization (Schramm and Bize, 2022; Jimmy, 2023). Negotiated planning also occurs at the neighbourhood level, where Residents' associations in estates often mediate between members who undertake informal construction and the authorities. The literature suggests that in environments of weak enforcement,

negotiation becomes the default planning mode (Goodfellow, 2019). For example, lobbying for water, roads, or electricity connections after incremental construction.

The study setting

This research adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the Nasra Garden Estate development in its real-life context, which was part of a PhD[1] research project titled "Reconsidering informality: Informal housing practices, illegal actors, and planning response strategies within middle-income neighbourhoods in Nairobi city, Kenya." Fieldwork and data collection occurred in 2021 through a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders in Nairobi. A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample that included Nasra estate residents (both original plot owners and newer developers), officers from the Nairobi City County planning department, former City Council officials, and representatives of the Nasra Garden Estate Residents' Association. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded for thematic analysis, following standard qualitative methods (Bryman, 2012). The semi-structured interview format allowed interviewees to recount experiences and perceptions in detail, while the interviewer probed key issues (e.g., compliance with the estate's original plan, infrastructure challenges, interactions with authorities). Walking interviews were also employed, in which respondents first described issues in a sedentary setting and then guided the researcher on a walking tour of the estate, pointing out specific sites of interest (locations of rule violations, examples of informal extensions, and infrastructure problem areas). This method provided rich context by situating narratives in physical space. One focus group discussion was held with five members of the Nasra Residents' Association leadership. The focus groups offered a forum to elicit collective views on why informality took hold in the estate and to cross-verify individual accounts.

The study reviewed both official planning documents and grey literature relevant to Nairobi's housing and planning governance to supplement field evidence. Key documents analyzed included: Physical Land Use and Planning Act, 2019, Nairobi City County Zoning Ordinance (2004) and its amendments, the Nairobi City County Regularization of Developments Act, 2015, local area plans and policy reports, as well as Nasra-specific records such as subdivision plans and Residents' Association meeting minutes. These sources provided normative benchmarks (e.g., what was legally supposed to happen in Nasra) and documented instances of policy implementation or failure. The Residents' Association meeting minutes (2016 and 2021) provided insight into the community's attempts to self-regulate and engage the City-County Government. A 2016 memorandum records the residents' agreement on certain building standards and their plea to the county to enforce them.

Lastly, spatial mapping was used to both contextualize Nasra Estate and analyze its growth over time. Historical satellite imagery from Google Earth (2003, 2013, 2022) revealed the neighbourhood's development trend over the years (see Figure 2). In 2003, the area was largely undeveloped; by 2013, a sparse pattern of houses dotted the landscape; by 2022, the estate appeared almost fully built out, with dense buildings. These images illustrate the estate's transition from planned emptiness to unplanned occupancy over a decade.

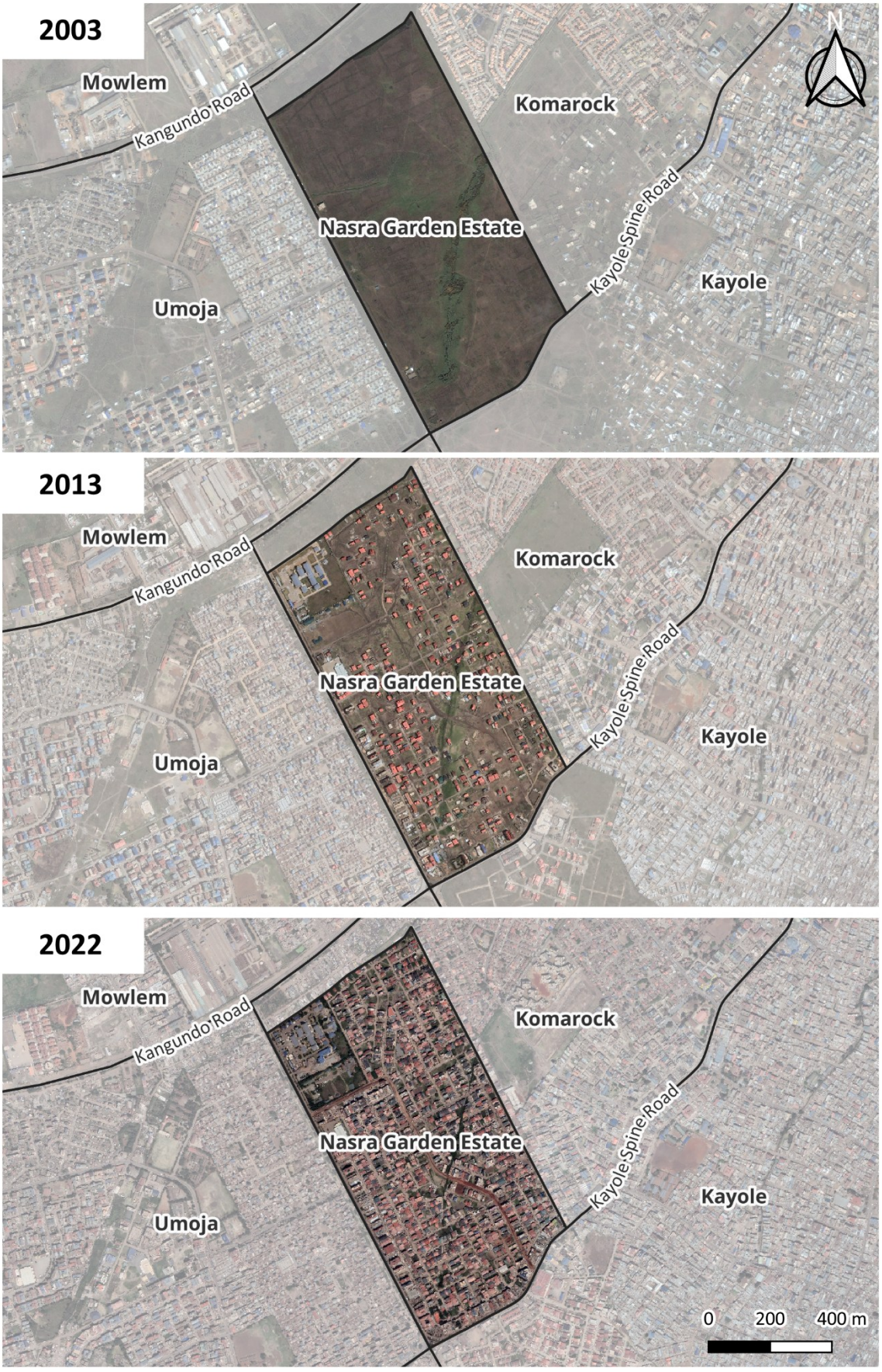

Figure 2. Nasra neighbourhood over the years. Source: Adopted from Jimmy, 2023

Nasra "Controlled Housing Development" versus Reality

4.1 The "Prototype Building Design Plan" Expiration and Onset of Informality

Nasra Garden Estate is located in the eastern periphery of Nairobi, approximately 14 km from the central business district. The land was originally part of the Embakasi Ranching Company's lands, which remained undeveloped until the early 2000s. In 2007, Kiambu Dandora Farmers Company Ltd (a private land-buying and selling consortium) acquired a section of this land, registered as Nairobi Block 157, and initiated a subdivision plan for middle-income housing. A comprehensive subdivision scheme was prepared and submitted to the city authorities in 2008. The scheme laid out 2,200 residential plots, each measuring 65 ft by 26 ft, with provisions for a few slightly larger commercial plots along the main road frontages (Manyanja Road, Kangundo Road, and the internal Spine Road). Notably, the planned plot size of 65×26 feet (roughly 1625 square feet, or ~151 m²) was below the minimum residential plot size of 50×100 ft (~465 m²) mandated by Nairobi's 2004 zoning ordinance (City Council of Nairobi, 2004). Despite this, the City Council approved the Nasra subdivision plan in 2008 as a "controlled development scheme".

The Kiambu Dandora Company marketed Nasra land plots to prospective middle-class buyers as a controlled development neighbourhood with all services to be provided. One of the first plot buyers highlighted that due diligence was a critical step during the land purchasing phase by stating: "Before purchasing my plot, I did a lot of checks... I found out it was a clean deal, the company had the mother title, and the comprehensive scheme was registered as controlled development" (Interview, Participant 23, 2021). Upon purchase, each plot buyer was provided with a specific housing design prototype, with conditions to adhere to during the implementation phase. The Kiambu Dandora provided each buyer with a plot certificate and an attachment of a building design plan describing the "type building design" to be implemented on each plot. There were four types of structures prescribed to be permissible in Nasra, as confirmed both by interviewees and Residents' Association records: (1) single-family bungalow units with front and rear yards (for parking/gardens), (2) duplex residential units (semi-detached houses) with an attic, (3) two-storey commercial buildings on the estate's periphery (Manyanja and Kangundo Roads), and (4) four-storey commercial buildings along the Spine Road (the main internal road). The estate was supposed to have mostly low-rise homes (1–2 storey) and a few medium-rise commercial blocks in designated zones. There was also a showhouse built on-site as a sample to guide owners on the expected style and quality.

Between 2008 and 2010, the initial developments in Nasra adhered to the designs, with a few plot owners commencing construction immediately; many plots remained empty (see Figure 2). Those who built in this early phase largely complied with the type plan and regulations. A long-term resident recalled that in 2009, "you could count the houses on one hand; everyone was trying to build the 'approved' design, but the whole area was still marshland, no roads" (Interview, Participant 8, 2021). At this time, no infrastructure services were connected, such as no paved roads, no electricity, no water mains, and no sewer line.

The official development plan that was approved in 2008 expired in 2010 (approvals in Kenya have a maximum 2-year validity period for implementation, unless extended; otherwise, a new application and approval are required for construction). The expiration meant that, legally, any plot owner who had not yet built in accordance with the type plan would now need to reapply for individual building permits under normal procedures (including compliance with prevailing building codes) and would incur re-application costs. Some early developers proceeded with building houses in anticipation that services like roads would catch up in due course, while some privately paid for electricity and water connections from neighbouring estates. For the sewer connection, the landowners jointly contributed (each 40,000 KSH, equivalent to USD 340) to provide sewarage system in the area. The sewer connection, completed by 2011, encouraged those who had hesitated to start building to begin. As one county official noted, "once the sewer went in and people had some basic services, there was a rush to build" (Interview, Participant 4, 2021). With the expiry of the development plan, subdivision approval, and sewer connection, the neighbourhood entered a new phase characterized by increasing non-compliances. An official in the Nasra residents' Association described it succinctly: "When the planning approval expired in 2010, the non-compliances began. Some thought the plot was too big for one house… some became business-minded and had the idea of constructing two houses on the same plot to earn extra income." (Interview, Participant 17, 2021). The absence of frequent inspections for enforcement reinforced this: no inspectors came to mark illegal structures, and no stop orders were issued.

Figure 3. Developments in Nasra in 2021, showing different housing typologies of different heights. Authors, 2021.

By 2013, the majority of plots were still undeveloped, five years after the parcels were sold to middle-income developers (see Figure 2). Consequently, in defiance of the 2018-approved plan's guidelines, many plot owners saw an opportunity and applied entrepreneurial logic. Instead of building a single dwelling for owner-occupation as envisaged, they added more floors than initially approved to double their investment or convert the plot into a multi-unit rental apartment (Figure 3). In addition, the interviews suggested a social shift: early buyers were often owner-occupiers building family homes, but by 2012-2014, more plots changed hands to small-scale developers or speculative investors aiming to maximize rental yields. These new actors were less interested in conforming to an outdated plan and were more interested in making profits with no active oversight from the original developer or the City-County. Some owners still put up a single dwelling, but of a design different from the original samples (often larger or multi-storey homes). Others built semi-detached maisonettes, squeezing multiple units in one plot. A few early deviators constructed low-rise apartment blocks (2–4 floors with several flats) (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Mixed developments capturing the diverse developments implemented on the ground. Authors, 2021

The visual homogeneity envisioned for Nasra was not achieved, and an assortment of different house typologies was noticeable in the neighbourhood, many clearly violating the intended typologies (Figures 3 and 4). Also,

aerial images from 2003, 2013, and 2022 (see Figure 2) show gradual development from an initial open plot (bare land) to sparsely settled (built-up) to a fully developed neighbourhood, albeit the majority did not adhere to planning standards and procedures. Realizing that Nasra was fast losing any semblance of the planned estate or "controlled development" neighbourhood, the Residents' Association representatives met with City County officials in 2013 and 2014, presenting their concerns that Nasra was becoming "uncontrolled" and requesting assistance with enforcement. During the first meeting, the residents' association representatives discovered that only about 20% of the houses in Nasra were listed in the city records; the rest were not, and therefore were not approved for construction, as they had been illegally built. A Residents' Association representative recounted: "We went to the city-county for help, but realized they did not have many houses on record… less than 20% were on record, yet on the ground, we had thousands of houses. According to the authorities, the area was just bare land" (Interview, Participant 17, 2021). This not only confirms how informality began in Nasra but also shows that the city's authorities were either unaware of it or tacitly tolerated its informal development.

Figure 5 summarizes the process of Nasra Development by mapping the sequence from subdivision approval, expiry of the development scheme, incremental construction, and successive regularization attempts, to the current condition of widespread non-compliance. The roadmap illustrates how informality in Nasra emerged cumulatively through regulatory lapse rather than abrupt planning failure.

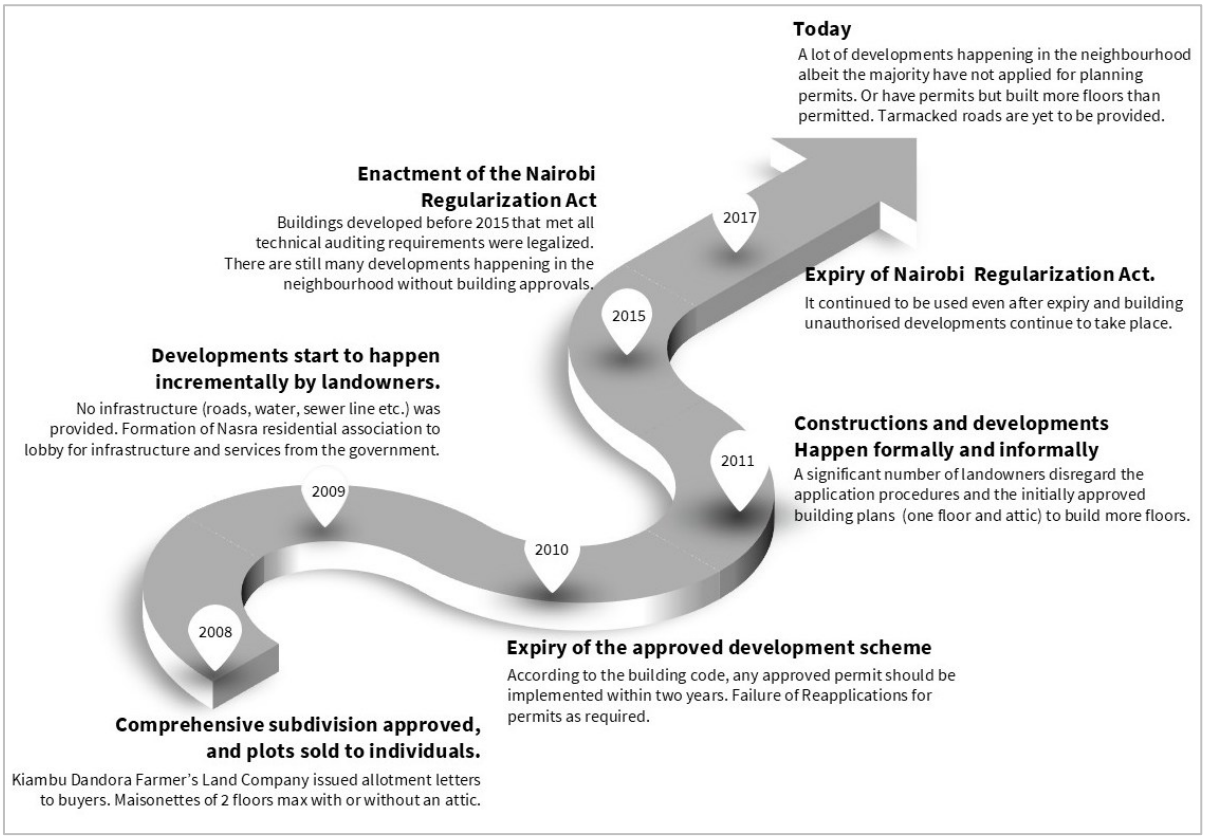

Figure 5. Roadmap of Planned Approval, Regulatory Expiry, and Incremental Informalization in Nasra Garden Estate (2008–Today)

4.2 Build-First, Service-Later and "Controlled Development" Dynamics

Nasra Garden Estate's growth exemplifies the build-first, service-later model of urbanization, a common phenomenon in Nairobi and many other Global South cities, especially in the city fringes. The growth was not in par with infrastructure development; hence, basic services lagged in the neighbourhood. Roads remained mostly unpaved (Figures 3, 4, and 6); many homes relied on water delivery by private tankers; electricity was extended piecemeal, relying on a few electricity transformers funded through constituency development initiatives; and drainage was virtually nonexistent. The first tarmac road in Nasra (a section of Spine Road) was planned to be constructed in 2022, nearly 13 years after the neighbourhood's inception. The road was initiated by the Kenya Urban Roads Authority (KURA) following years of lobbying by Nasra residents through their representatives from the Nasra Residents' Association. The development sequence in Nasra, hence, can be described as a reversed sequence (Figure 7) as opposed to Baross's conventional sequence, as discussed earlier in section 2, in which services are provided before houses; in Nasra, the sequence was planning, building, occupying, and then lobbying for services.

Figure 6. No tarmacked roads were present in the Nasra neighbourhood in 2021 during data collection. Authors, 2021

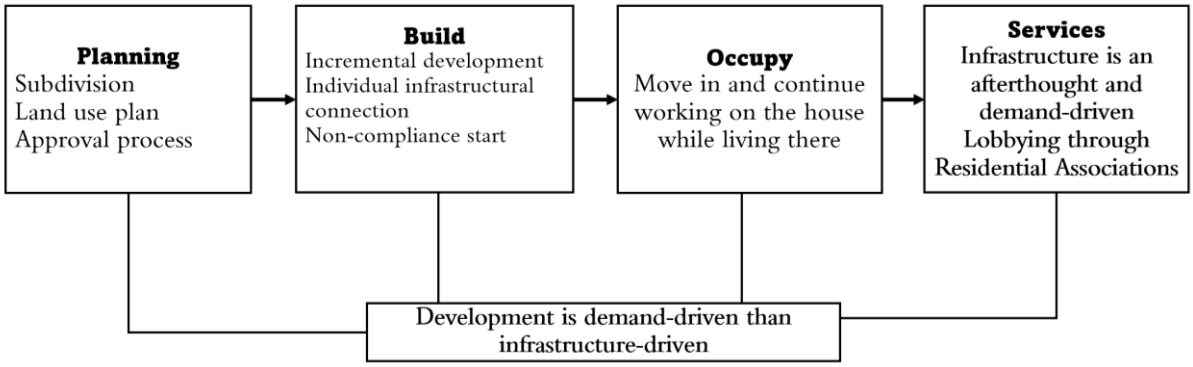

Figure 7. Incremental Housing development process in Nasra, the reverse of the conventional sequence as illustrated in Baross, 1990. Author, 2025

Nasra's situation of developments without corresponding infrastructure depicts a microcosm of Nairobi's wider peri-urban problem. Manasseh (2012) and Mwaura (2006) observed that such demand-driven development leads to urban expansion without a commensurate increase in essential amenities and social services. The vision for Nasra's "controlled development" for upper-middle-income urbanites failed due to a confluence of governance failures (a lack of sustained regulatory enforcement) and entrepreneurial incentives to earn extra and maximise their land. The approved scheme required continuous oversight (monitoring of construction, sanctioning deviations, and updating plans when needed) during implementation, but that did not take place. For instance, when the approved scheme expired in 2010, the city authorities did not enforce the requirement for fresh permit applications, and landowners were not sensitized on the importance of the re-application process, which exacerbated informal developments in the neighbourhood. Hence, the regulatory lapse created a vacuum in which informality flourished and a loophole for non-compliance to be exploited by developers. This loss of control was not sudden; it happened incrementally. Initially, just a few non-compliances occurred, but when unchallenged, they set a precedent for more similar non-compliances. Over a decade, these small infractions snowballed into a wholesale departure from the original plan (See Figures 3,4, and 6). This mirrors Larson's (2002) observation that urban illegality often begins at the margins (a minor violation here, an exception there) and, when tolerated, eventually becomes mainstream practice. In Nairobi, as in many African cities, planning authorities operate within political and economic constraints that often undercut enforcement of regulations (Jimmy, 2023; Jimmy and Lombard, 2024). Thus, even though the fantasy plans exist and are intended to be implemented on the ground, the reality is that informal practices take precedence (especially in well-off neighbourhoods) and are tolerated by the authorities or are highly negotiable, as Schramm and Bize (2022) argued.

Implications for Urban Planning Theory

5.1 Lessons from Nasra development

Nasra's case highlights a mismatch between how planning theory assumes city development and how urbanization unfolds on the ground in rapidly growing cities in the Global South. The planning frameworks presume that residential land is serviced before development, and that regulations are adhered to and consistently enforced. However, in Nasra, as in many other cities in peri-urban neighbourhoods, housing construction precedes infrastructure provision, a phenomenon that shapes urban growth. Planning theory therefore, needs to account for a reversed sequence of development that is build–occupy–

service as a mode of urban development in addition to the conventional sequence.

The study also highlights the limits of the perception of "controlled development," where, after the expiration of approvals and as time passed, more non-compliances and illegalities dissolved it. Hence, planning theory should acknowledge that development control is not static or linear and requires sustained oversight, adaptation, and continuous updates as developments move through different shades of (il)legality (e.g., some formally planned areas can become partly informal, or informal developments can become formal/legal). Since incremental discourses focus on self-help developments confined to low-income groups, planning theory studies need to expand this discourse to include other actors (middle-income and elite groups), whose practices significantly shape the urban areas but are often overlooked in incremental and policy research.

In Nasra, imposing the "controlled development" (prototype building plans, single-dwelling rule) concept failed because it assumed strong institutional capacity and reliable enforcement. These findings relate to Watson's (2009b) argument that urban planning operates within a control-oriented paradigm but is often ill-suited to the actual socio-political environment; hence, planning should emphasize context-sensitive and adaptive approaches rather than rigid blueprints. Based on that, planning in Global South contexts should shift from a regulatory mode to a facilitative and accommodative mode, with continuous oversight without tacit toleration. This does not mean negating regulation, but rather engaging with realities and needs on the ground where plans should define not just what is desired, but also what is feasible given known enforcement and resource constraints.

Against this backdrop, the key lessons from Nasra for other Global South cities include localizing and adapting planning models to actual governance capacity; viewing formal and informal systems as intertwined; engaging and empowering community self-organization; and adopting adaptive, learning-oriented planning methodologies. These lessons push towards a more realistic, inclusive, and flexible urban planning paradigm that could better serve cities like Nairobi, where perceptions of controlled development give way to the reality of negotiated, incremental urbanization.

Conclusion

This study examined how formally approved "controlled housing development" in Nairobi evolved into a densely built and mainly quasi-formal neighbourhood. By tracing Nasra's development trajectory from subdivision approval and incremental development to approval expiry and negotiated service provision, the findings highlighted that loss of control occurred gradually as entangled issues of weak enforcement, expired approvals, and market-driven incentives shaped the cumulative process. The case of Nasra empirically confirms that urban informality is a dominant mode of city development in contexts like Nairobi; thus, urban policymakers must acknowledge that informality exists in its various shades. Failure to do that, the phenomenon is likely to persist as long as there is misalignment between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities.

In addition, the Nasra case reinforces calls for a contextualized and pragmatic approach. It demonstrates that theories predicated on strong institutional control need recalibration in environments characterized by what Roy (2009b) calls the "idiom of urbanization" through informality. Planning education and practice in the Global South must therefore equip practitioners with tools for negotiation, community engagement, and incremental planning, rather than relying solely on master plans and statutory enforcement that are borrowed from Global North settings. This case adds empirical weight to the argument that planning systems should evolve from control-oriented to communication-oriented paradigms, where dialogue with stakeholders shapes realistic development frameworks.

The paper calls for bridging the fantasy of controlled development to the reality gap in housing development by reimagining planning approaches to accommodate informality and incremental urban growth. Nairobi's Nasra Garden Estate exemplifies the fate of many planned developments in rapidly growing cities. A well-intentioned plan that turned into an unplanned reality. Nevertheless, within that outcome lie important insights: residents did not set out to subvert the law arbitrarily; they responded to genuine pressures from housing demand, a lack of services, and economic opportunity in the absence of effective, up-to-date regulations and enforcement. Hence, cities can better bridge the gap between the fantasy of how urban growth is imagined (envisioned) and the reality of how it actually unfolds in neighbourhoods.

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