NOUAKCHOTT IS THE CAPITAL CITY OF MAURITANIA, created ex nihilo in 1960 in the middle of sand dunes. No physical obstacle to urban sprawl – Nouakchott is home to more than two million inhabitants – nor to speculation. Until recently one of those “ordinary cities” considered “off the map” (Robinson, 2002), Nouakchott did not attract significant global capital because it was located in the Sahara desert, at the margins of the world. But, recently the situation has changed.

As David Harvey (2001) observes, capitalism is always looking for new “spatial fix” in order to resolve the tendencies of its inner crisis. Capitalist expansion is now affecting urban areas in peripheral regions of the world, and especially in Africa. Peripheries are now the new frontiers of urban expansion. In this unlimited conquest, even the Sahara becomes an interesting space wherein to invest and Nouakchott is no exception.
In order to grasp the rapid evolution of Nouakchott’s landscapes, we choose to use kite aerial photography. This method is very simple, economic and ecologically sound. A swivel camera is attached to a kite. The camera is radio controlled from the ground. Oblique and vertical shots can be taken. The shots are quite precise, thanks to the video control. It is a catchy and participative tool, and the photos are easy to share with other stakeholders and citizens – fostering new collaborations and partnerships for urban and landscape governance. The kite aerial method is particularly useful to study cities dealing with issues of urban sprawl. It compensates for the lack of mapping up-to-date data (Bosselut et al, 2009) and allows a birds-eye view of speculation processes in real-time, and emergent town-planning forms on the fringes of the cities. In the case of Nouakchott, it highlights the strong urban contrasts in the capital city of one of the poorest countries in the world.

A wind of change has been blowing through Nouakchott since its integration into the club of petro-countries in 2006 (Choplin, 2009; Choplin, Franck, 2010). In the race to competitiveness with modern cities, Mauritanian stakeholders attract foreigner capital by offering access to cheap urban land coupled with limited and lax regulatory policies that promote private investment. In 2005, legislation was passed officially recognising the property developer profession in Mauritania. Since then, local companies offer investment opportunities and engage in land and real estate speculation. This strategy explains why the historical colonial buildings in downtown Nouakchott have been destroyed to make way for a new central business district. Following “the Phoenix effect”, skyscrapers must be erected. On the fringes, new buildings are also rising from the ground.

A successful Mauritanian company promoting investment in real estate is FCI. It attempts to follow Islamic financial principles, extremely popular within the Arabian Peninsula, and promotes an Islamic quarter in the suburbs of Nouakchott. The future quarter, called Sukuk (the Arabic equivalent of the term for a bond, title or financial certificate), forecasts 50 villas, 60 allotments, and a central plot of 4,650 m2 to become a central business district. The naming of this suburb connotes the diffusion of Islamic financial principles largely guided by those of the Middle East. The sukuk investment funds are structured in compliance with Islamic law (Ould Bah, 2011). The sale of sukuk is primarily directed at Islamic investors as Shari’a law prohibits them from investing in conventional debt securities. The sukuk example demonstrates that international dynamics can converge with national interests. Though Sukuk is obviously a speculative project, it is not identified as such because it is congruent with Islamic values. It can be seen as a halal speculation.

The capital city has become the showcase of internationalisation, a tool for attracting flows of capital. Following this speculative land tenure dynamic, a new town called Ribat al Bahr is under construction. Covering an area of 650 hectares, Ribat al-Bahr is a prestige project that when completed will boast residential villas, hotels and a financial centre, schools, shopping malls and a landscaped sea front. The developers, Mauritania Investment Group, are backed by Emerati funders (http://www.ribatalbahr.mr/index.php). Another company, the Qatari Diar Real Estate Company is also promoting a luxury resort 20km north of the capital.

On the margins of the Arab and Muslim world, Mauritania offers a strategic geopolitical location for Gulf actors to exert their influence. Moreover, the Gulf cities have become symbols of capitalist success and economic richness, especially in the Arab world, but also in Africa (Barthel, 2010). Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha increasingly epitomise global urban transformations and new modern development patterns, beyond the urban model of the West. Websites show videos and futuristic images endorsing international standards and marketing tools. But, for the great majority of Mauritians, the urban modernisation and development are more symbolic than real. The main prestige projects are precisely that, “projects”. This infers that until now they remain only in announcement form. The Ribat al-Bahr project resembles an empty showroom. Five years after the Sukuk project’s inception, only seven houses have been built. The Qatari project seems also to be on hold (it has disappeared from the Diar website). Gazing upon these
kite aerial photos, one might venture to ask to whom exactly is this city destined? For whom are these extravagant spaces provided? Why do the government and private investors want to beautify the cityscape when for the majority of Mauritania’s inhabitants everyday life is hampered by chronic poverty and social and political unrest?

Currently, the World Bank is promoting a huge slum-upgrading programme, linked to the Millennium Development Goal of “Cities Without Slums”. One of the priorities was to upgrade the oldest and biggest slum located in the centre of Nouakchott. In principle, the 50,000 inhabitants are given titles of to the land they live on. The rationale of the programme is to legalise urban informal areas, or to convert squatter lands, considered as “dead capital” into a real estate asset. Obviously, this programme fits neatly into the neoliberal ideology of land tenure inspired by Hernando de Soto (2000): poor people are poor because they live in informal areas; so, if they receive property title, they will have a start-up capital and enter the modern market economy. But the privatisation of land exposes people to the risk of being dispossessed by richer investors and evicted. In part, dispossession is already occurring. Only the richest slum dwellers, or those with patronage networks, can get the property title to the land they were living on. The poorest and most marginalised people of the slum have been resettled 15kms south of the capital, in a dusty location with no facilities. There, they have been given title, but they now ironically call their new quarter, “Sans fiche, sans photo” (“Without documents, without photos”), a metaphor for their continuing dispossession.

References