

**Elite Informality in Large-scale and Ambitious Real  
Estate Projects: The Cases of Dar es Salaam and  
London**

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## Abstract

This paper examines two case studies set in markedly different contexts—one in London and the other in Dar es Salaam. In each, it explores the development of large-scale, ambitious real estate projects and considers how these projects intersect with the articulation of bold political visions promoted by elite actors. These visions connect the construction of the developments examined with the cities’—and even the countries’—ability to acquire greater global significance. This is framed in narratives relating to the improvement of investment opportunities, innovative business schemes and cutting-edge real estate ventures that will cultivate positive economic and social transformation for both local and wider society. Consequently, it is argued that the examples presented of substantial urban transformation are intertwined with the projection of visions by the political and wealth elite. The visions promoted primarily align with this group’s interests, and are connected increasing economic gain, maintain the social positioning of this group, and amplifying political influence. Furthermore, the paper examines how informal practices concerning the utilisation of exclusive social networks, domestic and international flows of capital, and the strategic influence on political ideology by elite actors are central to the conceptualisation, promotion, and construction of these ventures. The analysis of these practices offers insight into ways in which specific elite actors can shape, direct, and engage in specific urban transformations. By “elite informality”, I refer to the often hidden interactions and manoeuvres that operate outside formal structures and procedures. The observations presented within this paper provide a basis for defining and interrogating the concept of elite informality, which I argue offers a valuable lens for understanding how elite actors negotiate and exercise power, particularly in contexts of significant urban change.

## CGD Key Theme(s) & Keywords

Theme: Political Economy of Global Development

Key Words: Informality, Power, Elite actors, Urban development.

# Elite Informality in Large-scale and Ambitious Real Estate Projects: The Cases of Dar es Salaam and London

## Introduction

Ambitious real estate projects are not just about buildings—they are arenas where elite actors exercise power, shape cities, and project bold visions of global significance. It is widely recognised that elite actors have a disproportionate influence on the conceptualisation and transformation of urban environments, the consequence of which is often the perpetuation of social inequalities (Mills, 2000 [1956]; Lefebvre, 1991; Piketty, 2014). This is a phenomenon that is not contained to specific geographical areas but is observable across global contexts (Harvey, 2007; Parker, 2015). A particularly salient and overt example of the central role elite actors have in the transformation of urban landscapes is the construction of large-scale real estate developments. These are primarily developed *to pursue the aspirations and objectives of elite actors but presented as necessary investments into urban landscapes that will benefit wider society*. Within the context investigated, the “elite” predominantly applies to two key groups: the extremely wealthy and the politically powerful. A central consideration in examining this group is the comparable, but contextually different, pursuit of these actors in conceptualising, promoting, and constructing ambitious development projects. This in turn provides insight into how the elite operate and interact with society in the distinct cities of London and Dar es Salaam. These dynamics are examined through the lens of how this group navigate power dynamics to achieve the re-shaping of urban environments, in ways that conform to specific visions and political ideologies that are perceived as desirable by the elite. Of particular interest is how informal practices by elite actors are a central aspect in understanding these dynamics, in the form of exclusive social networks, opaque flows of capital and the strategic influence on political ideology. Large-scale, ambitious developments provide a unique opportunity for examining informal activities, as it is widely recognised that the economically and politically powerful have a desire to pursue these types of endeavours, which have been described in a variety of ways and that have been strived towards in an array of urban contexts. Sklair (2017) describes “iconic architecture” in prominent global cities, del Cerro Santamaria (2019) describes an increase in the construction of “megaprojects” globally, which he connects with the spread of neo-liberal ideology, and Watson (2014) critiques the construction of “urban fantasies” within African contexts, to name a few examples. Developments of this nature are often underpinned by the promotion of a far-reaching, transformative vision, which incorporates narratives relating to the modernisation of a specific city, or even country, with the expectation that the development project will attract both national and international investment (del Cerro Santamaria, 2019; Watson, 2014; Fields, 2023). Behind every large-scale urban development lies a web of power, ambition, and often hidden influence, as the ability of elite actors to pursue large-scale ambitious developments is complex. These ventures involve the negotiation of both visible formal processes and dynamics that exist outside formal frameworks (Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014). The often opaque informal activities that elite actors engage with is therefore a crucial aspect of understanding how elite actors negotiate dynamics of power connected to such developments. Two case studies are drawn upon to gain greater insight into how the elite operate informally: the Royal Albert Docks in London and the Kigamboni district

in Dar es Salaam. These cases provide the opportunity to investigate extreme examples of large-scale developments situated in different cultural, political-economic and historical contexts, in the form of an ambitious business hub and the pursuit of a transformative satellite city. Moreover, these case studies illustrate both opportunities and challenges for elite actors in these ventures, with the real estate developments examined ultimately falling short of their ambitious goals.

Informal dynamics are a central aspect in understanding how specific elite actors interact with the ambitious pursuits investigated. These dynamics are therefore important in understanding how the elite shape and influence urban environments. This informal engagement—referred to here as “elite informality”—is shown to underpin both the conceptualisation and the realisation of such ventures. The term “elite informality” has been drawn upon previously to describe situations where elite actors have successfully re-negotiated or circumvented formal frameworks to achieve specific objectives, however, the utilisation of this term is limited. The examples include the construction of high-end housing that does not adhere to formal requirements, such as planning restrictions. Interestingly, interwoven in these discussions is the ability of the elite to then legitimise these activities and avoid legal implications (Moatasim, 2019; Azunre, 2024). In addition to discussions relating to the distinction between corruption and informality when assessing elite behaviours in a range of countries, including Tanzania, Russia and Mexico (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva, 2017). These examples are valuable as they contribute towards building an understanding of elite informality that has relevance across significantly different contexts, while simultaneously highlighting the lack of a robust and comprehensive understanding of the concept. A more in-depth conceptualisation of the concept of elite informality is therefore worked towards within this paper that focuses on several prominent forms of informal activity, including the operation of elite social networks, the promotion and manipulation of political ideology, and the strategic mobilisation of capital flows. These findings therefore provide an opportunity to develop a clearer and empirically grounded understanding of the concept of elite informality and offers valuable insight regarding the ability of elite actors to exercise power over processes of transformative urban development. This is explored through, first, describing the case study examples and considering the specific urban development visions which are promoted within each context that serve to reinforce the transformational and globally significant aspirations that elite actors are striving for through the construction of ambitious real estate developments. Second, exploring how the interdependent and intertwined nature of different aspects of ‘elite informality’ connects to the promotion and realisation of these real estate endeavours. Third, the fragile and temporal nature to elite actors operating informally and how this speaks to the ability of elite actors to exercise power is considered.

The case studies examined provide the opportunity to investigate these dynamics within significantly different global contexts that are situated in what are widely categorised as the ‘global north’ and ‘global south’. The rationale for drawing on these diverse examples is that they allow the concept of elite informality to be understood through a variety of perspectives, enabling greater nuance and global relevance. Comparative approaches that draw on markedly different global contexts are not widely adopted. However, bringing two

globally distinct cities into conversation with one another provides a valuable contribution to the conceptualisation of elite informality by encouraging dynamics and narratives to be observed through the lens of the other. As a result, insights are gleaned into how elite actors utilise and are impacted by the unique political, social and economic climates in which they are situated. Moreover, exploring this through the lens of distinct global contexts simultaneously provides the opportunity to challenge inequalities that exist in knowledge production, which previously have predominantly focuses on observations and experiences within the 'global north' (Robinson, 2016; Robinson, 2021). The concept of elite informality therefore contributes towards understanding the often opaque or hidden dynamics that underpin the transformation of urban environments. In doing so light is shed on the often invisible nuances of power that covertly, yet profoundly, shape the cities we inhabit.

### **Urban Transformation, Elite actors, Power and Informality**

The areas of literature that are built upon reflect the interdisciplinary approach adopted, spanning political science, urban geography, and sociology. The intention is to contribute towards a dynamic and multifaceted understanding of how elite actors informally engage with dynamics of power within the context of urban development taking place in varied global contexts. The argument presented speaks to the transformation of urban space, both cosmetically and demographically, a shift that is linked to political initiatives and substantial investments by individuals. Smith (1979) observed this pattern in a gradual form and coined the term “gentrification” to describe the urban development process of wealthier residents moving into urban areas and gradually transforming them. The consequences of this were cultural, social and economic, leading to original residents no longer having a sense of place in their shifting environment. However, extensive and rapid urban development that is supported by flows of global capital, as observed in the examples examined in this paper, go beyond this initial theoretical framework (Minton, 2017). Moreover, a key aspect of large-scale ambitious real estate projects of this nature is that the decision-making and underlying justifications are often dependent on and interwoven with dominant political ideologies and ideas (Minton, 2017).

The concept of “speculative urbanism” provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between ambitious development projects and political ideology (Fields, 2023; Gidwani and Upadhyaya, 2023; Gillespie, 2020). It describes the interplay between the promotion of neo-liberal ideas, capital accumulation, real estate development, and the projection of attractive “speculative” visions by elite actors. With these visions projecting narratives that an attractive more affluent future for an area is a direct consequence of constructing ambitious real estate projects (Fields, 2023). Moreover, it describes the key role of neo-liberalism in establishing justifications for these types of developments, for example, elite actors emphasising the necessity of attracting national and international investment and advancing politically within global rankings, which then increases the country’s political and economic leverage and opportunities (Gidwani and Upadhyaya, 2023). These developments are therefore viewed as necessary in realising the imagined futures that have been projected by the politically and economically powerful (Fields, 2023:511). This discussion, therefore, highlights how imagined futures, that

are projected by powerful actors, actively shape market expectations, economic priorities, and patterns of investment (Beckert, 2016), which are critical components in the realisation of large-scale ambitious real estate developments.

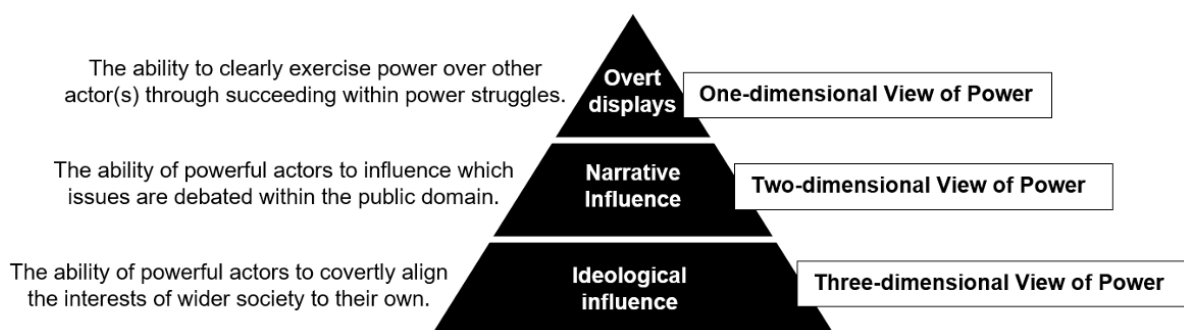
The significance of cities competing within the global economy is examined by Sassen (2002). Sassen describes how certain cities have achieved “World City” status, which implies they are highly influential on the global stage particularly within the financial sector and consequently attract higher levels of investment. The existence of these dynamics at a global level resonates with the findings presented. In both contexts examined, elite actors are aware of their positioning on the global stage. In London, classified by Sassen as one of five “world cities”, the emphasis was on maintaining this position. While in Dar es Salaam, the focus was on aspiring towards higher global positioning, with examples such as Dubai providing inspiration for the elite (Watson, 2014). These aspirations are underpinned by the logical argument and perceived values of neo-liberalism, including individual freedom, the necessity for continual economic growth and the celebration of risk-taking, as presented by Friedmann (2002). The utilisation of political ideology to further the objectives of specific elite actors is therefore a central aspect in understanding their engagement with, and justification of, ambitious real estate projects (Gillespie, 2020; Fields, 2023), which is a phenomenon that is observable across an array of cultural contexts (Gillespie, 2020; Watson, 2014; del Cerro Santamaria, 2019).

It is also important to recognise that the evolution of urban and political landscapes can differ significantly across global environments. A key consideration, within the Tanzanian context, is that despite a significant shift towards the economic liberalisation of the housing market, the country retains strong socialist roots which are evident in legislation relating to land governance. For example, the government has maintained significant control over the buying and selling of land (Andreasen et al., 2020), with only Tanzanian citizens able to purchase land for personal assets, on long-term leases from the government (Oates et al., 2020). However, laws have shifted with recent land reforms enabling a more robust and protected process for the privatisation of land, in addition to national and international companies having the right to purchase land for investment purposes (URT, 1999; URT, 2007). In contrast, economic liberalisation has had a significant impact on the UK, which has led to an increase in efforts to attract foreign investment within the real estate sector (Atkinson, 2020; McKenzie and Atkinson, 2020). This stems from a political shift while Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. During this time the government pioneered the adoption of neo-liberal policy that promoted the reduction of state involvement, through decreasing aspects of social provision in areas such as housing and increasing privatisation.

The categorisation of elite actors within this paper is connected to individuals who significantly influence and impact processes of urban development. Namely, individuals who fall into the categories of holding high-ranking social positions, being influential in wider decision-making, and having extensive access to resources (Scott, 2008; Savage, 2015). These individuals are routinely grouped in the distinct but often overlapping categories of the “wealth” and the “political” elite (Gray, 2015; Whyte, 2015; Simon, 2018). This is significant as the informal

interactions that emerge from the empirical findings explored often take place between and within these two distinct groups. A central aspect in understanding how elite actors operate is their relationship with power. For the purpose of this investigation, which has a significant focus on how power can be exercised through hidden dynamics, Lukes three-dimensional framework of power is utilised. This framework provides a useful lens to understand the power dynamics that have emerged within the research findings. Especially relevant is Lukes' observation that "power is at most effective when least observable" (Lukes, 2005:1). His framework consists of 1) overt displays of power that are easily observable, 2) narrative displays which focuses on the privileged position of powerful actors to influence, and render dominant, their own views as public narratives, and 3) ideological influence, which describes a deeper shaping of value systems by powerful actors. This framework therefore provides insight into how the elite utilise informal dynamics to exercise power within urban development processes. The dimensions of power described here are summarised in the following Figure:

**FIGURE 1: LUKE'S 3-DIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK OF POWER**



Source: Adapted from Lukes (Parker 2024)

Elite actors wield power not only through formal institutions, but through opaque, informal dynamics that shape society at every level. The elite engaging with opaque power dynamics resonates to an extent with the concept of "soft power" (Hayden, 2011; Sevin, 2025). However, as opposed to focusing on this group employing attractive rather than coercive tactics in global diplomacy efforts (Sevin, 2025) the concept of elite informality considers how elite actors engage with power dynamics that sit outside of formal frameworks. For example, established social networks that provide a platform for influential decision making. This not only impacts the political and economic interests of this group but also has implications for how wider societies are able to operate. These dynamics can have significant consequences not only at a local level but also nationally and at times internationally. Lindell provides a valuable starting point for defining the concept of Informality, she describes it as "activities that lie beyond or circumvent state regulation" (Lindell, 2010). Despite this explanation receiving criticism for being overly simplistic (Hilbrandt et al., 2017; Acuto et al., 2019), it does provide a framework for understanding how elite actors engage with informality. In the cases examined this is in regard to the elite

operating outside formal structures in order to pursue urban transformation, such as through utilising privileged social networks or shaping political ideas that justify their own urban development priorities. Historically the concept of informality has predominantly been applied to practices within the global south that impact disadvantaged groups, including the informal economy (Lindell, 2010; Chen, 2016), informal housing (Oates et al., 2020; Alananga Sanga and Mwasumbi, 2019), and relational informality such as support networks (Ekeh, 1974; Hilbrandt et al., 2017). These debates largely focus on individuals who are unable to access formal frameworks, for reasons such as limited resources or their citizenship status (Oates et al., 2020; Marx and Kelling, 2018). However, the relevance of this theoretical framework to the behaviours of elite actors has not been widely explored. The concept of elite informality is therefore an emerging area of study that focuses on how the wealthy and powerful engage with informal activities from a position of privilege, as opposed to a position of disadvantage and limitations (Armytage, 2015; Goodfellow, 2020; McFarlane, 2012; Azunre, 2024).

In considering how the elite deploy informal practices three key areas are considered: the utilisation of social networks, flows of capital, and political ideology (Goodfellow, 2020). Social networks have been observed as central to the decision making of elite actors. In her study of the Pakistani elite, Armytage makes several poignant observations about the behaviours of this group (Armytage, 2015; Armytage, 2020). She describes how elite actors come together in informal social spaces to actively shape the formal societal rules, regulations and institutions in which they operate. Armytage goes on to highlight how these informal interactions are instrumental to furthering the position of this group. Consequently, elite actors are able to continually out-perform wider society due to relational and economic advantages (Armytage, 2020). In addition, regarding flows of capital, Baker (2010) describes an example of how individuals operate outside established formal frameworks in order to achieve what they describe as “financial innovation”. He observes how this creates the opportunity for elite actors in the private and public space to profit from high-risk novel practices (Baker, 2010:649). The formation and utilisation of political ideology also impact the ability of elite actors to informally influence wider society. An observation is made by Lentz (2015): She describes how the political ideologies of elite actors are often formed in shared educational institutions, these shared views then infiltrate wider society as a result of the high-ranking positions these individuals then acquire. Despite the term “elite informality” having been employed in some cases to describe these types of behaviours (Moatasim, 2019; Azunre, 2024) a robust and systematic framework that enables the significance and wide-reaching relevance of the concept to be understood, has not yet been developed. Contributing towards a framework for understanding elite informality enables light to be shed on how opaque networks, hidden flows of capital, and ideologies nurtured in elite social spaces, enables powerful actors to shape society beyond formal institutions – crafting the rules, utilising opportunities, and embedding their influence within the expectations, discourses and imaginaries of societies, which in turn significantly impacts how urban landscapes evolve.

## **The Pursuit of Globally Significant Real Estate Developments in Diverse Global Contexts**

To address considerable challenges in investigating how elite actors operate informally, within the markedly different global contexts of London and Dar es Salaam, a multidimensional research approach is adopted. In relation to each case study the data sets of official documents, media coverage, and interviews are examined. The combination of these data sets capture varied and rich insights into how elite actors' informality engage with the ambitious real estate developments investigated. Moreover, the distinctive case study contexts provide nuanced insights into the fragility of these informal dynamics, with elite actors encountering significant and contextually specific challenges in their pursuit of globally significant visions, which are ultimately not realised. This was valuable as it provided an increase in media coverage and formal investigations which allowed greater visibility of informal dynamics and in turn shed light on why specific elite actors were positioned in such a way that enabled them to influence or participate in these particular development projects. These actors range from those investing in the real estate projects examined to those who stood to gain political. Moreover, the utilisation of case studies situated in the "global north" and "global south" contribute to the construction of a cross-cultural theoretical understanding of how elite actors interact with urban environments (Robinson, 2016; Garrido et al., 2020), that seeks to challenge existing binary narratives relating to how cities are shaped (Gillespie and Mitlin, 2023).

Moreover, the cases examined provide the opportunity to investigate how elite actors interacted with the comparable phenomenon of pursuing ambitious large-scale real estate developments, with aspirations that incorporate the pursuit of global significance. This largely revolves around expectations that the projects would lead to both national and international recognition and attract significant investment. The case studies include the construction of an international business hub situated in the London borough of Newham, within the Royal Docks district. This was a multi-billion pound development that was intended to take place in several phases and transform the Royal Docks district. The commercial importance of the Royal Docks District was advocated by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2011 who initiated a 2-year tendering process. The contract for the development was won in 2013 by the Chinese company ABP, that was owned by Xu Weiping, and the construction of the first phase began in 2016. Decision-making and opportunities relating to this development were underpinned by a political push during this period to develop closer relationships with China. The following image portrays the developers plans for this urban transformation:

**FIGURE 2: THE VISION FOR THE ROYAL ALBERT DOCKS (RAD) BUSINESS HUB**



Source: UK Official Documents (RAD Business Hub Promotional Material)

A central aspect of this development was the expectation promoted by politicians, investors and government officials, such as Boris Johnson, that it would attract international investment primarily from China. Consequently, this was anticipated to cement economic ties between China and the UK and contribute towards maintaining the high-ranking positioning of London on the global stage. An additional consideration within this case study included the overwhelming need for affordable and social housing within Newham, which at the time of data collection was classified as one of the most deprived boroughs in London. However, these globally significant aspirations were not realised due to a combination of reasons, including the COVID 19 pandemic, a breakdown in relationship between the UK and China, and a shift in China’s approach to international investment. This shift related to the introduction of the “three red lines” policy in January 2021 which imposed economic limitations. This incorporated tackling debt-driven models of real estate growth which contributed towards high-risk approaches to property investment (Zheng et al., 2025). The high visibility, ambitious nature, and considerable challenges of the RAD Business hub endeavour therefore provide the opportunity to understand how and why specific elite actors were able to informally engage with its conceptualisation and construction.

The second case study, situated in the Kigamboni district within Dar es Salaam, Tanzania’s most populated city. Several ambitious developments were examined within this case study that were connected to a broader transformative vision being promoted by the Tanzanian government: the construction of Kigamboni Satellite City. The vision for this development was initiated in 2008 during the political leadership of President Jakaya Kikwete. Prof. Anna Tibaijuka, Minister of Land, Housing and Human Settlement was also a central figure in promoting the endeavour. The aspiration for Kigamboni Satellite City is portrayed in the following image:

**FIGURE 3 THE VISION FOR KIGAMBONI SATELLITE CITY**



Source: TZ Official Documents (Government Promotional Material)

This globally significant vision promoted by the Tanzanian government was two-fold: this high-end development was expected to attract national and international investment into the city and it was intended to contribute towards addressing housing demand within the country. It was also projected by the Tanzanian government that these transformative expectations would lead to improving Dar es Salaam's positioning on the global stage and lead to increased investment into the country. Within the context of Dar es Salaam, however, there were problems associated with the visions projected by elite actors. For example, the cost of housing in a development of this nature was far beyond the means of citizens requiring affordable housing. Moreover, the pursuit of this development experienced difficulties when a significant political shift took place within the country, which involved John Magufuli becoming president in 2015. A key aspect of the President's leadership was to push back against the liberalisation of the economy. This included halting high-end development projects that were perceived to primarily benefit the established political and economic elite. John Magufuli framed this within his political campaign as a crackdown on the corrupt practices of the Tanzanian elite. The shift in political ideology within the country had direct consequences on the pursuit of the Kigamboni Satellite City development and resulted in an increased scrutiny of elite actors within media coverage. Thus, this provides a unique opportunity to gain insight into informal dynamics surrounding this endeavour.

### **Elite Informality and the Transformation of Urban Spaces**

The envisioned transformation of the Royal Albert Docks district, through the construction of the Royal Albert Docks (RAD) business hub, involved establishing a positive environment for international investment and working with developers that had access to the capital and resource required for a construction of this scale and

nature. Informal dynamics played an important role in pursuing these objectives. The following two examples offer insight into both the engagement of elite actors with informality and how these practices are interconnected. First, a prior relationship existed between the development company, ABP and the public-private company London and Partners that was owned by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson. Details of this relationship emerged in minutes from council committee meetings, media coverage, and were highlighted in an enquiry by the London Assembly. The outcome of the enquiry concluded that an informal relationship had existed between ABP and London and Partners and that contributed towards ABP securing the development project. These dynamics also had significant political implications, as at this time the UK was focused on strengthening ties with China. The relationship that London and Partners had with ABP therefore provided further opportunities for Boris Johnson in achieving this political objective through informal interactions. For example, he accompanied Xu Weiping, the owner of ABP, on a visit to Beijing which involved meeting with high-ranking Chinese government officials. Informal interactions between London and Partners and ABP, in particular, between the companies' owners Boris Johnson and Xu Weiping, was therefore an important aspect in the decision-making and the vision projected for the RAD Business hub development. Moreover, in his role as Mayor of London, this relationship with ABP also presented Boris Johnson with further informal networking opportunities to develop international relations with high-ranking Chinese officials.

Second, coinciding with the time that plans for the RAD Business hub development were being finalised the government launched Enterprise Zones, these enabled businesses to pay reduced tax and to streamline planning applications, alongside other benefits. Enterprise Zones were primarily established in the North of England with the only Enterprise Zone in London being introduced in the Royal Docks district, as it was identified by the government as an area where increased investment was being strived for. The suspension of certain formal requirements positively impacted the RAD Business Hub development, including long-term financial benefits for the development firm. The exceptions enabled by the introduction of this Zone also had negative implications for the surrounding community, as they led to a significant reduction in potential tax revenue. Interestingly, negative consequence for residents within the Newham borough, resulting from a reduction in tax, were not highlighted by the government or within media coverage. This observation was particularly interesting as within the context of the Kigamboni case study the idea was posed to reduce taxes for the real estate developments examined, however, this was criticised by the Tanzanian media due to the impact this would have on wider society. Consequently, this demonstrates the value of drawing on these two distinct case studies simultaneously. Seen together, they illustrate how the scope of elite informal practices is impacted by the current political climate and dominant public narratives within a country. This can be observed within the two examples in relation to the reduction of taxes having distinct political framing, in particular the perceived ownership of tax revenue for wider society which appears to be a stronger public narrative within Tanzania, in comparison to the UK. This correlates with the political climates within the countries, and the Tanzanian president, John Magufuli, visibly pushing back against the liberalisation of the Tanzanian economy. These examples of informality illustrate the utilisation and interconnected nature of social networks, flows of capital and political ideology,

therefore providing insight into how specific elite actors negotiate and operate outside of formal frameworks within their distinct contexts.

The Kigamboni case is focused on how the Tanzanian government pursued a vision for urban transformation that drew inspiration from extensive and ambitious real estate developments, such as Dubai, that propelled countries onto the global stage. Examples of how interconnected informal dynamics played a central role in the pursuit of ambitious real estate developments by elite actors are demonstrated in the following examples. First, the shifting of elite social networks profoundly impacted the realisation of the imagined Kigamboni Satellite City development. Of significant consequence was a breakdown in relationship between an influential real estate investor Yusuf Manji and the newly elected president John Magufuli, this was intertwined with the president implementing a shift in the country's political regime. As a result, the political momentum behind the development broke down, despite significant investment and planning by the previous political elite, as the flows of capital necessary to attract the required investment were no longer available. Second, Within the Kigamboni context informal practices, that were later classified as fraudulent by the Tanzanian authority, emerged in relation to the sizable inflation of land to 32 times its ordinary value. A justification for this was that the projected value of the land, once the Kigamboni Satellite City development had been complete, would hugely exceed the current value of the land. This manipulation of land value therefore presented an example of the renegotiating of formal boundaries by elite actors in order to increase flows of capital. Interestingly, although it was to a significantly reduced amount, comparable practices of the projection of land values being incorporated into the selling of surrounding apartments could also be observed within the Royal Albert Docks district. This led to the increase of land values by 3 times over a short 10 year period and took place prior to the imagined urban transformation for the area being realised. These types of economic practices are tied up with neo-liberal political ideology regarding free market principles, and the rationale that land is worth what people are prepared to pay for it. Thus, this represents another example of drawing on diverse global contexts, simultaneously, to gain greater insight into the engagement of elite actors with informality, in addition to highlighting how the political context impacts how these activities are perceived. Across continents, the same pattern can be observed, in that the imagined futures projected by elite actors are interwoven with the ability of this group to benefit from and exercise power over the urban environments in which they operate.

These dynamics significantly impacted which elite actors influenced and participated in the real estate projects examined and the urban development priorities perused within the case study contexts. Lukes (2005) 3-dimensional framework of power can also be observed within these informal dynamics, including overt displays of power, such as the ability of powerful actors to suspend established formal process within a specific area of London or the halting of a large-scale development within Dar es Salaam. Narrative influence, such as the adoption of the Enterprise Zone in the Royal Docks District not being challenged on the grounds of it resulting in a significant reduction in tax revenue, which had consequences for wider society. In Kigamboni the elite engaging in narrative influence could be observed in a shift of what was perceived as acceptable to discuss in

the media. Under the political leadership of John Magufuli journalists had increased freedom to report on what the president described as corrupt practices by the established political and wealth elite. Finally, ideological influence could be observed in the Royal Docks case in relation to an emphasis being placed on the value of pursuing a development that has anticipated to cement ties between China and the UK. Thus, attracting foreign investment into the capital was portrayed by elite actors as inherently beneficial for the whole population. An irony exists here, as the pursuit of such a development directly pulled government resources and valuable urban land away from initiatives such as building affordable housing. In Tanzania the gradual liberalisation of the housing market allowed the pursuit of Kigamboni Satellite City to be perceived as achievable by government officials and led to significant resources being invested into its conceptualisation and planning.

These varied examples, across the case study contexts examined, illustrate the central role of elite informality on the ability of elite actors to exercise power over the transformation of urban space. In both cities, the utilisation of informality to exercise power did not just shape urban development objectives—it reshaped the very boundaries of what was possible. For example, the introduction of an economic initiative within the UK, in the form of an Enterprise Zone, enabled the circumventing or relaxing of established formal frameworks and a speculative approach within Tanzania enabled land values to be significantly re-negotiated.

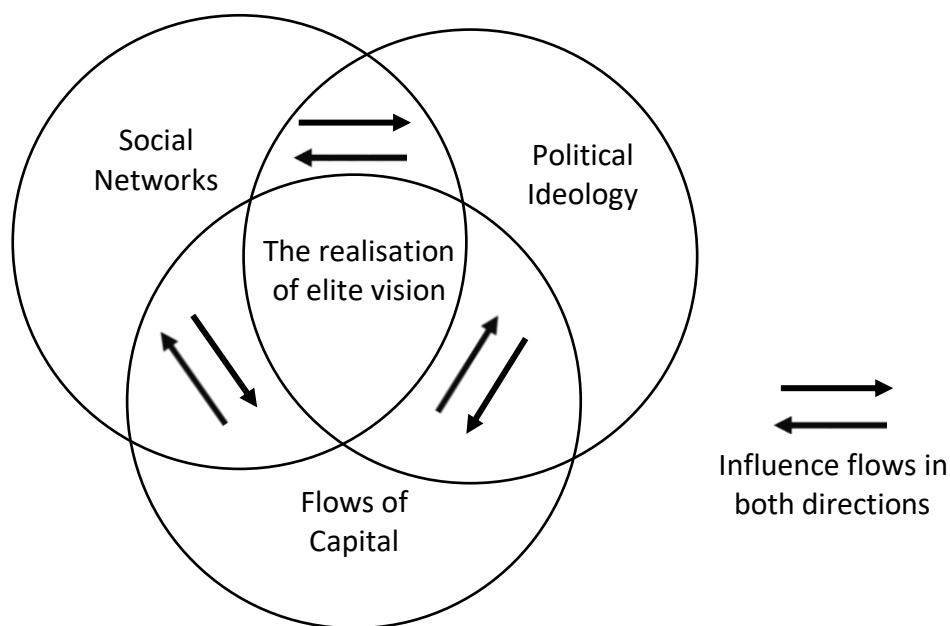
### **Elite Informality and Temporal Fragility**

When considering the examples discussed the ability of elite actors to exercise power over large scale, multi-year urban development initiatives is clear, both in regard to promoting a new development venture or halting one. The temporality of these dynamics is also key. The flourishing of elite relationships is often impacted by the availability of flows of capital and the current political climate. In each case financial incentives and innovative financial practices emerged that allowed developers to operate outside of formal boundaries. Despite this, flows of capital became a significant obstacle for both development ventures, this was a result of broader political shifts and the breakdown of social networks, thus, highlighting the fragility of these dynamics. The emphasis on dominant political ideologies in the justifications of these developments were also inherently fragile due to the inevitable shifts in these ideas that takes place within the national and international political landscapes. In the Kigamboni context a shift in the national political landscape was particularly impactful, while for the Royal Albert Docks the realisation of the development was negatively impacted by a shift in international political relations. This paper has therefore presented the argument that the interconnected and dynamic nature of elite informality gives insight into the ability of specific elite actors to benefit from specific ambitious real estate developments while also contributing to the significant fragility in realising these types of urban transformations.

### **Conclusion**

The findings presented offer insight into how the elite circumvent and re-negotiate formal constraints. The concept of elite informality has been employed and developed within this paper to contribute towards a more robust empirical and theoretical understanding of these dynamics. The interdependent nature of elite informal practices, which have been examined within the context of elite actors pursuing visions for ambitious, globally significant, real estate developments is visualised in the following figure:

**FIGURE 4 INTERCONNECTED AND TEMPORAL NATURE OF PRACTICES OF ELITE INFORMALITY SURROUNDING THE REALISATION OF ELITE VISION**



Source: Author's original diagram

The findings highlight the deeply interconnected nature of informal dynamics—spanning social networks, flows of capital, and political ideologies. At the same time, it was recognised that these very dynamics remain temporally sensitive and inherently fragile, shifting as political conditions, social relationships, and financial landscapes evolve.

These insights matter because they illuminate a significant aspect of how critical urban development decisions are made, decisions that profoundly influence the utilisation of urban space, the allocation of government resources, and ultimately the opportunities and lived experiences of wider society. In both case studies, pressing needs for affordable housing and meaningful employment were evident. Yet, the priorities of elite actors were not aligned with meeting these needs; instead, their ambitions centred on attracting an imagined group to the contexts examined, with the expectation they would bring greater wealth and investment. The justifications underpinning these narratives are predominantly linked to the promotion of neo-liberal ideologies by elite actors. These include the necessity of a continually expanding economy, which over time is argued to trickle down and

positively impact the whole of society. It is reasoned that this type of economic growth is achieved through attracting increased investment. Elite actors therefore focus on attracting international investment through either the city acquiring greater global visibility or significance as in the case of Dar es Salaam, or through striving to maintain the city's current prestigious global positioning such as in the context of London.

Elite informality has therefore been presented as a valuable analytical framework for understanding the engagement and influence of elite actors on the shaping of urban environments—one that exposes the decision-making processes, practices, and justifications through which power is exercised. It provides insight into why specific elite actors are strategically placed to promote, influence and engage with ambitious urban developments, such as the ones considered. In addition, it allows greater clarity not only on who benefits from these real estate projects, but also the inherent vulnerabilities and risks that are associated with these endeavours. The analytical focus and conceptual understanding presented offers a framework through which elite behaviours and their engagement with power dynamics can be more fully comprehended. The interconnect and interdependent nature of informal practices utilised by elite actors, when operating within privileged social networks, utilising and benefiting from opportunities relating to flows of capital, and the promotion of specific political ideologies and ideas that align with their own aspirations, is also highlighted. These informal dynamics are considered within the context of large-scale ambitious real estate projects situated in London and Dar es Salaam. This presents the opportunity to observe and analyse how the informal activities of elite actors significantly impact this group's ability to exercise power over urban change and the implications this has for the lived experience of local residents across markedly different global contexts.

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