



## **Bypassing the city: divisions and divergences in Antananarivo**

**Catherine Fournet-Guérin**

*In a context of global competition, major projects are the order of the day, including in the global South. The new bypass road recently built in the Malagasy capital Antananarivo fits into this vision of modernity and aspiration to international standards. But this bypass has become more than just a road; it has been transformed into a recreational space – and consequently a source of conflict.*

In the major cities of less-developed countries, highway projects aimed at easing traffic congestion and improving urban road-based infrastructures are legion, but they are often unsuccessful. They are also often prestige projects, as fast roads are a byword for modernity and accession to international standards (Berry-Chikhaoui *et al.* 2007; Cerro Santamaria 2013; Deboulet 2010).

Early 2007 saw the official inauguration of the “By-Pass”, a new road to allow traffic to skirt around Antananarivo, the Malagasy capital. However, in addition to its primary transport function, this road has also attracted new uses that have become particularly popular with the city’s residents. Indeed, within a very short space of time, the By-Pass has become established as one of the city’s (rare) leisure spaces, which has created significant tensions.

### **The By-Pass: both a necessary and a prestigious road project**

The plan to build a road to bypass Antananarivo was a long-standing project, implemented in the 2000s, as part of a national road-building policy supported by international funding (Japanese cooperation). For this urban area of 2 million people, it was a pressing need, given the high level of congestion in the city and the severely undersized road network, most of which dated back to the colonial era. The aim was to reduce the volume of traffic in the city centre in order to improve traffic flows, and also to facilitate flows of goods at different levels – urban, regional and national.

The By-Pass is 17.7 km (11 miles) long and connects a number of municipalities on the outskirts of the capital. It was built on land located in rural municipalities rather than in the municipality of Antananarivo itself, which made the project considerably easier to complete: there were no residents to be compensated and no houses to be knocked down. Indeed, the landscape is so rural (paddy fields, peasant houses without electricity, brick kilns) that it is difficult to believe it is only a few kilometres from a large city. So far, the road has attracted hardly any new facilities nearby, except for a modest hotel complex. By contrast, classified advertisements for building plots abound, reflecting the level of speculation in these sought-after peripheral spaces.

Aside from its functional aim, this new road also embodies a desire for prestige on the part of the central government, which was the contracting authority. Indeed, the southern end of the road is located close to the presidential palace, so it is likely to be taken by foreign visitors. In terms of image, for Madagascar, the By-Pass is without doubt an asset. Even its name – borrowed from English – bears the promise of modernity.

And yet the results have fallen well short of the original ambitions: the traffic levels observed on the road are still very much on the modest side.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the By-Pass is the only one of the city's new main roads to have only two lanes instead of four, with no central reservation (median strip), and one of the rare roads not to benefit from street lighting. If traffic levels were to develop, it would be seriously undersized. At present, it is impossible to overtake another vehicle on this road, which slows down traffic – which, in any case, is limited to a maximum speed of 50 km/h (30 mph). It is therefore far removed from any notion of an expressway or motorway. Moreover, it is perhaps this fact that has encouraged the road's appropriation by the city's residents for secondary, leisure-related uses.

### From road to recreational space

Soon after the By-Pass was opened, it became clear that it had been adopted by the local population in a somewhat unusual way: at weekends and on bank holidays, it would become a recreational space for the city's inhabitants.

The reason for this is simple, however: Antananarivo is a city cruelly lacking in recreation spaces. Residents regularly complain about its urban density, its air pollution, the lack of vegetation in the city, and how hard it is to find a space in which to relax (Fournet-Guérin 2007). They have also developed a very strong attachment to rural spaces, accompanied by an idealisation of the countryside, which is seen as a fantastical, peaceful, harmonious space and a real place for relaxation, with its unchanging and reassuring landscape (hills topped with villages, with paddy fields below). And this is precisely what the By-Pass offers. Furthermore, the immediate vicinity of the road is composed of vast, flat, airy spaces that are open easily accessible.

The combination of these two characteristics has led to the road's rapid adoption by local inhabitants: since the first weekends following the opening of the road, hundreds of informal market traders have been coming to sell their wares on the roadside. They set up their stalls on Saturday afternoons, do a roaring trade in the day on Sunday, and then take everything down at the end of Sunday afternoon. A new form of sociability has become established, and has proved spectacularly successful: thousands of people from Antananarivo descend upon the By-Pass on Sundays, arriving by share taxi (minibus), by bicycle, by moped, or even on foot for those who live just a few kilometres away in the eastern suburbs.



Stallholders setting up their pitches close to a roundabout on a Saturday morning. The modest nature of the road is clearly visible, along with the quality of the stalls  
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<sup>1</sup> At most, a few dozen vehicles per hour during the day in 2009.

Many low-cost activities are on offer to punters and passers-by: pony rides, fairground attractions such as Ferris wheels and carousels, table football, pool tables, etc., as well as numerous food and drink stands. Many people bring picnics, or alternatively buy rice dishes or sandwiches from roadside vendors. The food on offer is traditional family fare, with no fuss or frills. People eat standing up or seated on wobbly wooden stools. In this way, the urban model of the popular, working-class *gargote*<sup>2</sup> has been transported to the side of the By-Pass. What is more, these events take place not just every Sunday, but also – and, indeed, to an even greater extent – on every public holiday.

Although these removable facilities are temporary and their spatial extent limited (leisure activities do not line the road along all of its 17 km, but are instead concentrated on areas a few hundred metres in length close to roundabouts), the result of their presence at the weekend is a reduction of the available carriageway, as no parking areas were provided for: people park on the verge, straddling the edge of the road. This necessarily leads to a dramatic slowdown for vehicular traffic.

### **The negative reactions of the elites: showcase city versus day-to-day city**

These recreational practices have provoked strong negative reactions from one section of the urban population, namely the motorised elite classes, whose displeasure is also relayed by the press. Those who have access to a private vehicle vociferously decry these unexpected uses of the capital's new bypass road.

These well-off residents of Antananarivo welcomed the gradual opening of these new roads in the 2000s, breathing a collective sigh of relief, as driving anywhere in the city is a daily ordeal because of the severe traffic jams. What the local elites expected from the By-Pass was a level of driving comfort that is rare in Antananarivo (bearing in mind that there are no motorways or truly fast roads anywhere in Madagascar) and smooth traffic flows. However, the appropriation of this road space by other residents at the weekend is in direct contradiction to these aspirations: this single infrastructure therefore suffers from two conflicting uses.

Those residents who are sufficiently well-off to own a car do not hold anything back in their virulent condemnation of these practices, citing unacceptable levels of disorder, accusing the public authorities of not respecting the primary function of the By-Pass, decrying the crowds that present a danger and an obstacle to traffic, and deploring the state of public hygiene along the road. Like all public spaces in Antananarivo, the roadside of the By-Pass is not equipped with public toilets, litter bins or water supply points. These rich city-dwellers cannot for an instant imagine the recreational and beneficial aspects of these new practices – which they always describe in pejorative terms – for their less well-off neighbours. In particular, they make claims concerning the road's legitimate purpose: a road is made to be travelled along, not turned into an open-air canteen and fairground.

However, the municipalities concerned seem to be well aware of the situation and have not sought to prohibit these installations, as long as they remain temporary and disappear on Sunday evening. In 2011, a conflict between the public authorities (municipalities and central government) and traders did arise, but the ongoing threat of expulsion has ultimately come to nothing. Accordingly, this informal occupation of the roadside is tolerated by the various responsible authorities, which in some cases even compete to control the roadside space.

### **The By-Pass as a mirror of urban social divisions**

Ultimately, this conflict of uses can be interpreted from a social standpoint: the well-off, motorised classes of the Malagasy capital are unaware of the day-to-day difficulties of city life and

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<sup>2</sup> A *gargote* is a cheap restaurant.

are disdainful of working-class pursuits. In addition, this conflict may also reflect the fundamental divide that structures society in Antananarivo, separating the “upper castes” (which adopt aristocratic values such as discretion and “appropriate” behaviour) from the “lower castes” (of servile origin) who make up the majority of the city’s population. The leisure activities and spaces adopted by the stigmatised categories of the population are constantly devalued and denigrated by the elites. It is in this way that eminently urban practices such as picnics and Sunday funfairs are discredited. The “high” society of Antananarivo distances itself from anything produced by socially stigmatised subaltern categories in order to distance themselves from them and deny them any characteristic that might identify them as urbanites.

At local level, as a modern circumferential road, the By-Pass has become a fully fledged place of sociability. But this unexpected function has also created divisions that reveal social conflicts within Antananarivo society. At international level, this example clearly shows the limits of poorly designed prestige projects – or, at the very least, of projects that have not been designed to meet the needs of the majority. Overly technical visions of the city can conflict with the desires of ordinary city-dwellers, as can be seen in many large cities, especially in the global South.

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