

O- 0799

The Cultural Approach to Urbanism in African Cities. Mapping the Past, Present and Future of Cities in the African Context.

Frances Bassey, Arch.^{*1} and Kay Obwona Aber, PhD²

¹ Architect, Ktisis Designs, Nigeria.

² Urban Planning Consultant, Uganda.

Abstract

The background of the paper is on the global increase in urbanization, a significant part of which is taking place in the developing world especially in the African continent. The transition from rural to urban life is a significant cultural transition for many of the new settlers and in order to achieve sustainable settlements, there is a need for cultural awareness within the urban planning process. An approach with a cultural perspective that addresses issues of diversity; ethnic, religious, social as well as economic in order to create a sense of spatial justice within our fast-growing cities.

The objective of the paper is to pose questions on the role of Culture in shaping our cities, sustainable urban growth and the idea of cultural planning as an approach in urbanism. In this there is a discussion on the narratives of how people adapt to urban life and create a synthesis of how they maintain or transform their cultural identity within the new urban context.

The authors address the narratives from our past, our present and our future; the starting points of our African cities from a cultural perspective and where it has directed them and moving on from there to the future. This takes on a form of cultural mapping of the timeline of African cities. How do these cities maintain their genius loci in the context of urban hybridity and the possibility of homogeneity in the city today; reflecting on the fact that most cities undergo similar processes of transformation?

This paper attempts to give some insight on possibilities that will drive provocative questions on the current urban condition found in Africa and find new lines for new narratives.

Keywords: Cultural Sustainability, Spirit of Place, Urbanization, African Urbanism.

* **Contact Author:** Frances Bassey, Architect.

+2348181539533

No 2 Agatu Street, Off Gimbiya Street, Abuja, Nigeria

email: francesbassey@gmail.com

(The publisher will insert here: received, accepted)

1. Introduction

Urbanization bereft of a viable cultural construct could be a leading factor in societal chaos because the culture of a people is their way of life. This encompasses their approach to the social, economic, infrastructural aspects of their lives. We can therefore go on to say that the level of cultural awareness of a people to some extent defines their collective quest to ascertain their origin, understand their current predicament and plan or project a future. Furthermore, an adequate amount of cultural awareness would guarantee some form of progressive, developmental and organizational patterns in any given scenario and most especially in the urban context. This brings us to the chaos that was earlier mentioned; like many African settlements, the society in which we find ourselves is enduring the bittersweet process of urbanization. The challenge being – the trends, the innovations, the advancements in civic technology and the fact that first world modules are adopted in an attempt to solve Third World problems. The advent of social media has also perpetrated the importation of a wide variety of cultural heritage most of which are not applicable to who we are as a people and the challenges familiar to us.

Architecture in Africa has always looked to western cultures for inspiration, importing ideas and ideals, some of which bring significant economic development while still failing to capitalize on any kind of African characteristics. What is the African characteristic; the narrative being told? This approach has left African cities with an identity crisis, and wandering playfully with a variety of ideals, till maybe someday when they finally find the fix and fit; like one in search of their one true love. The question thus; is there any such research answering those questions? The continent is therefore riddled with an urban form without a defined character and purpose.

There is also an increase in informal settlements and the emergence of slums that are a contrast to the western images of an ideal African metropolis. Among the elite circles and policy makers, these slums are considered to be a nuisance that should be cut off like a cancer while ignoring its existence. In order to deal with this innate urban decay, the African city has to be dealt with critically and with an awareness of the uniqueness to the context. Adopting the idea from the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her Ted Talk, the Nigerian author expresses the risk of cultural misunderstanding and misinterpretation when we forget that every place, people and their identities are composed of many overlapping stories.

2. Introducing the City

Cities are defined as the physical manifestation of different aspects at play on the landscape; political forces, social forces, economic forces and environmental forces. Going by this definition, what do our cities say about our social groupings and interactions, economic state and environmental effects?

Cities have a common identity as living organisms; they are unique in identity and spirit and the soul of the city is defined by its people. People and culture form and determine the rhythm of life and character of the city. It is befitting to characterize the soul of the city as being made up of the elements of culture, history, people, belief systems and social interaction.

Do our cities truly reflect the essence of who we are, what we stand for and an even glaring global question, are they livable? Can they accommodate climate change and environmental forces specific to our geographical location? Do our cities holistically encapsulate the global requirements or would it suffice to say the state of African cities are falling short of global expectations.

However, a closer look at the African city, gives a limited indication to where they have been, where they are, and where they are going. Considerations for overhauling governance, policies and apply interventions to

make these cities more congruent with the rate of change happening within them, is the road less travelled.

In the face of a story, we are usually impressionable and vulnerable and when we have other stories, we go through a mental shift in our perception of a thing and in this case a place (Africa). The unintended consequence of a single story could be a thwarted idea of what a city in Africa should be. The problem with stereotypes is not they are not true, but they are incomplete.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche (2009).

The narrative and the singular conventional representation of African cities are usually chaotic, decaying or 'off the global map' and though there are elements of truth in these representations, there is the imminent danger of being unable to reimagine a new paradigm for these cities because the single story takes away the idea of possibilities. It is therefore appropriate to ask, what is the burgeoning literature on African cities? In asking this question, we may be able to apply new layers to the Africa's cities urban dynamics and develop interventions, accordingly.

In order to contemplate new paradigms, we must be aware of two variables, which are: The ways Africans understand their cities, and the ways they occupy them. This defines the soul and spirit of African cities and in essence can inform the African module for finding appropriate solutions. This in turn could be the missing variable in reimagining the hybrid African metropolis.

3. Urbanism in the Context of African Cities

There is a global increase in urbanization, a significant part of which is taking place in the developing world especially in the African continent. The transition from rural to urban life is a significant cultural transition for many of the new settlers and in order to achieve sustainable settlements, there is a need for cultural awareness within the urban planning process. An approach with a cultural perspective that addresses issues of diversity; ethnic, religious, social as well as economic in order to create a sense of spatial justice within our fast-growing cities.

African cities are considered the least urbanized in the world though they are rapidly urbanizing. In 1950 only two African cities had their population above two million unlike today where the continent now has a considerable number of have mega-cities like Cairo, Lagos and Kinshasa. There are however numerous speculations, ideas and discussions about the future of these cities and the trajectories of their growth. One speculation being that growth may be shifting from major cities to intermediary, secondary or medium sized cities. This may not be a far-fetched idea, as with innovation and technological growth it would only be a matter of time before rural areas began to adapt to urbanization changes.

Following the notion of the danger of a single story, it may be safe to consider various other stories as to the state and direction of Africa as a continent. The continent is being faced with a myriad of issues, both real and imagined. These are wide-ranging and include access to housing, clean water, healthcare, electricity, employment, education, and sanitation with probably the most pressing being the prevalence of slums. The narratives that define Africa rarely articulate the nuance and positive intricacies of its people. The commonly held notions are abject poverty, corruption, criminally inclined people and diseased. This blurs out a view of the extraordinary diversity and creativity of their everyday existence.

Pieterse (2009) In understanding Africa, it may be time to contemplate relatively small settlements of less than half a million inhabitants will dominate the urban landscape. Though everything about the urban tends

to use the mega city as its dominant imaginary, it is necessary to ask: what does urban life and urban development mean in these smaller settlements and less mega cities? On a wider view, Informal urbanism in terms of social reproduction has become the dominant theme. He further notes the existence of numerous narratives of the state of African cities amongst many others like;

- Africa may not be meeting carbon reductions requirements,
- Africa's GDP is anorexic
- The depths of deprivation is unimaginable.

It is however clear that the continent has evolved based on inherited ways to perceive urban transitions and social life. He further states that the prevalence of slum life in the African context is much more dramatic and complicated than any other place. In creating a new genre for this story, the near future will definitely bring changes, as new ways of living in cities, are being constructed on a daily basis. We must however know to differentiate across the continent its urban transitions noting that various cities in different regions in and around Africa, are evolving at different rates.

“The current explosion of growth across Africa’s cities presents a transformational moment for African architecture. A vision for the future of urbanism on the continent requires a clear understanding of the historical references – from the empires and kingdoms through to the enforced European encounter and latterly the enthusiastic embrace of modernity that established the image of independence for so many nations. In parallel, a manifesto for urban development demands a contextual language that is distinct from the language of politics. The culture of the African city is hybridized and the African citizen sees himself – reads himself – through his local condition, his ethnic group, which is his history, and through his colonial experience, which is his modernity. People do not operate within a single or a double consciousness, but within a quadruple consciousness. The key is to align this metaphysical fact with the physical fabric of the city. To this end, it is useful to look beyond national borders and instead to seek a more elemental reading of the continent.”

David Adjaye. (2013)

This statement demonstrates the need to invent a revolution in the way of thinking that will create a stirring within African urban planners, built environment professionals and other stakeholders. This also raises questions like; how do we research and think about African cities in order to understand the phenomenon of their growth?

Pieterse (2009) The academic literature dealing with urban Africa, tend to fall into on of three categories:

- technically oriented policy discourses that seek to gather as much data on numerous problems and develop policy answers premised on the assertion that these solutions are likely to work if there is ‘political will’ and finance to implement the policy proposals.
- critical political economy perspectives on urban conditions and processes seen through the prism of spatial functioning of capitalism and its attendant state regulation/facilitation.
- ethnographically oriented approaches that either simply opt for in-depth case studies to decenter the grand sweeps of the first two approaches and/or also embeds such cases in broader philosophical project to illuminate the nature of social life or being in the African city, marked at as it is by a variety of complex social-cultural phenomenon and processes.

Pieterse (2009) goes on to assert for a methodical stance for theoretical approach that is contextual, specific and layered to adopt to the complexities of the process. This deep ethnological work would inform and renovate the theoretical direction which can help prioritize what the quantitative question to understand,



trends to engage with and that is important to make some kind of input. Therefore, careful ethnographic work is important to destabilize technocratic assumptions on what is expected to be on ground as opposed to what is actually there. Culture is therefore the idea behind putting the key stakeholders who are the people, the endusers into the question while creating a new narrative that relates more to their experience. This can be a way to theorize what we do not have a grasp of neither do we have so much control over as they are the organic processes of urban living.

This gives us a new variable with which we can rewrite the African Cities' stories by rethinking the cultural and social dynamics in everyday urban life. Ultimately, people are the anchor upon which connections and the identification of cities should be made. Perhaps an approach was overlooked; an approach that eliminates the say of the people, for it is pertinent while thinking of urban interventions, not to omit the environment and the people within it.

4. Culture and Urbanism

Monclus et al (2006) The relationship between culture and urbanism has been the focus of much discussion and debate in recent years. While globalization tends towards homogeneity, successful 'global cities' have a strong individual - and particularly cultural - identity. The economic value of the culture of cities lies not only in the arts taking place there but also in the city's fabric, its architecture, and in its cultural heritage.

Monclus et al (2006) 'Culture' is arguably one of the richest and most complex in any language. There are hundreds of definitions and a myriad of expressions in many locations. Culture is material and symbolic, belonging and being, pattern and process, macro and micro, corporate and public, product and public good. Culture has become a business of cities, the significance of this cultural economy now measured in terms of employment, expenditure, wages and multipliers. Place themselves – their architecture, their townscapes, and their street life – have become sources of inspiration in the creative process.

Culture is also about controlling cities – their images, meanings, comparative advantage, destinies and corporate appeal. Place themselves – their architecture, their townscapes, their street life – have become sources of inspiration in the creative process.

What is the essence of Culture in the development of cities? "Essentially the city is a culture itself. The fact that culture today is becoming once again a center and a driver of development is a distant echo of the theocentric age under the aegis of which European institutions of education, science, fine arts, music, architecture and many other things appeared and developed. Historically, the religious cult was the heart of the city and all styles and genres of art known today derived from the creative practices related to temple decoration and religious observances.

Sergey Sitar (2015)

This was in response to the questions on the ability of culture to become a catalyst in city development – from an economic and social points of view, and its competitive recovery.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion it is right to say that culture is a key aspect in defining the urbanization and settlement patterns in African cities. This along with social, economic and political factors that also determine the way of life in the cities. Looking at the narratives from different parts of the continent the redline remains the fact that there

is the common idea that yes urbanization is taking place and this in cities that are not equipped to deal with the spatial complexities that it poses on urban spaces that were designed in colonial times that are adapting to the high volumes of people.

The narratives from our African cities show a cultural perspective and approach to settlement both in the informal and formal sectors of the city that form complex hybrid landscapes. This cultural mapping maintains their genius loci and should be respected in addressing the future of these cities in the planning process as they undergo the continuous process of urban transformation. A search for these cultural linkages, will give rise to new layers for urban planning strategies that can address the complex stratification of layers that define the African Urban landscape.

There are questions that the urban policy makers, professionals and different stakeholders should continue to ask themselves on the current conditions of the urban landscape of the continent and how our narratives define and outline a path for the future of our cities. In this manner it becomes possible to move from the modules of urbanism of western cities and adopt a hybrid approach for African cities that is more specific to the context given the diversities that define our culture and our cities as well.

References

- 1) Adjaye D. (2013). Interview. Available at <http://www.zeitgestafrica.com>. [Accessed 12 Nov. 2015].
- 2) Chimamanda N. (2009) *The Danger of a Single Story*. (Lecture) Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript
- 3) Kochalumchuvattil, T. (2010) The Crisis of Identity in Africa. *Kritike*, Volume Four Number One. 108-122.
- 4) Maathai, W. (2009) *The Challenge for Africa: A New Vision*. London: Heinemann.
- 5) Monclus, J. and Guardia M. (2006) *Culture, Urbanism and Planning*. New York: Routledge.
- 6) Pieterse, E. (2009) *Explanatory Notes on African Urbanism*. Cape Town: Jacana Media.
- 7) Pieterse, E. (2013) *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities*. Cape Town: Jacana Media.
- 8) Sitar, S. (2015) *Culture a Goal or a Tool of Urban Policy*. Strelka Institute for Media Architecture and Design. Available at: <http://futureurbanism.com/interview/culture-a-goal-or-a-tool-of-urban-policy/>

