

📖 Theorizing the "African City" ▾

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African urbanity is precious because it's the future of global cities, and it's unlike anything we've ever seen.

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“By 2100, the Lagos-Abidjan stretch is projected to be the largest zone of continuous, dense habitation on Earth, with something in the order of half a billion people.”

To “see” an African city is to make your focus local, consciously trying to have a zoomed-in perspective. This requires a big thing on academia’s part: you must disregard any preconceived notions of urbanity, affixing your attention upon the very people in a place. While the ability to compare global cities is valuable, thinking it is simple or mundane to do so is a fallacy of Western scholarship; to properly

analyze post-colonial cities you recognize there is zero framework for unprecedented growth.

Get Rid of Everything You Thought You Knew, Meet the Megalopolis

Megalopolis by Howard French conveys to the reader that the massive urban growth we are experiencing in the Global South is unlike anything we as human-kind have ever seen before. A megalopolis - such as the Lagos-Abidjan stretch, which spans Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, and Benin with roughly 70 million people - is one of the world's most rapidly growing and densely clustered metropolitan centers.

Megacities are the global leader of urbanisation and social mobility, though we tend to not come to that conclusion quickly. Infrastructure in megacities tend to be bemoaned by the West for their 'antiquated' infrastructure and transportation compared to other prominent cities such as New York City or Tokyo. The African cities extend outwards, not upwards as exemplified by London or Toronto's highrises. However, there is abundant value to African cities that is missed if we approach them with Western-centric expectations and comparisons. In this way we miss the complexities and beauty of navigating a different type of urbanity, one that will soon eclipse the rest of the world.

French argues that the colonial expectations have long been undermined by the day-to-day ingenuity and grit of the people who call them home, stating, “the lives of tens of millions of people along the coastal corridor are changing in ways that neither colonial designs nor six decades of independent government seem to have remotely anticipated.” African cities are so distinct from the pre-established standard that they defy any conventional understanding.

We’re all over the point I wish to make: the very precarity and essence of studying African urbanity rests in the idea that no city-planner, politician, or scholar on the planet has a foolproof idea of where growth like this goes next. Therefore, as scholars we must discard any expectation we have for urbanity as we know it. Data alone is insufficient in encapsulating what is happening, we must prioritize a closer look at the stories and unconventional modes of development. We can employ this bottom-up approach with Tanya Zack’s *Wake Up This is Joburg*, to develop an idea of what African urbanity looks like.

The Vibrance of Africa’s Urban Scenes

In *Wake Up This is Joburg*, Zack does a fabulous job of consciously conducting interviews of locals in Johannesburg, South Africa in a way that recognizes cities like Joburg as creative urban engines where the people in practice are the value (sometimes without state interference). The space she is entering has a heavy history and a modernity thick with remnants of colonialism and segregation. Johannesburg, she describes in the Introduction of the 2023 text, is an “arrival city...a place where migrants, many of them rural, with ambitions fixed on the symbolic city and its opportunity, engage in monumental struggles for survival or to establish a financial or spatial foothold for their dependents.”¹ She uses this to probe the question: Who is the city for, is our answer deriving from a colonial assumption of authority? As students, when given a case of social mobility and growth as fervent, we are led to believe the bottom-up, decentralized conclusion that the value behind the megacity (like Johannesburg or Lagos) rests in the individual’s desire to move there. This is exactly where an empathetic approach to the juxtaposition of academia and African urbanity should lead us.


Zack further decanters detached scholarship by giving us insight to a tangible culture that if we miss, we miss the allure and opportunity of

megacities altogether. This perspective is imperative to giving megacities a fair chance to live up to our ‘urban expectations.’ Zola, Chapter 5 of *Wake Up This Joburg*, describes an underpass that is occupied by hundreds of minibus taxi drivers and an informal market of food and other commodities. She details a thriving economic center that rallies off of hard work and a shared sense of ownership in success. She shows the controlled chaos and the organized busyness saying, “This density of food establishments continue around the rim of the binding point, supplemented by cooldrink stalls, biscuit sellers, and mobile ice cream and sweet vendors, who pass through all day. Each hopes to turn a taxi driver into a customer.” To see this vibrance and adaptability we must embrace a bottom-up understanding that values the ingenuity of those in these cities. Rather than succumbing to Western frameworks of infrastructure and social ‘order’ we must understand growth and development are organic, and the future of urbanization requires seeing them in their entirety.

1. Zack, Tanya, *Wake Up This is Joburg*, Duke University Press, 2022

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