

🖨 Theorizing the "African City" ▾

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Studying African Cities the Right Way

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Studying African cities can feel overwhelming as they are shaped by layered histories, a mix of formal and informal systems, and deep social inequalities. Rather than arbitrarily applying these cities into pre-existing criteria, it is necessary to prioritize local perspectives, historical contexts, and the everyday experiences of urban residents. For instance, George Packer's *The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos* and Kunlé Adeyemi's interview with Rem Koolhaas present contrasting perspectives on the city of Lagos that encourage deeper critical thinking. Instead of simply accepting their arguments, it is encouraged to actively engage with them, question their assumptions, and connect their insights to the everyday experiences of the city.

Seeing Beyond the Surface: Challenging Western Narratives



Al-amin Muhammad, *Under the bridge*

Packer's article tells various stories in his privileged visit in Lagos, where he describes the city as rapidly growing, yet deeply unequal, and seemingly on the brink of chaos. He elaborates the struggles of residents trying to survive in a city where government services are unreliable, infrastructure is crumbling, and informal economies dominate daily life. However, this perspective carries a Western-centric bias, overlooking the resilience and resourcefulness of local communities that often thrive within

informal systems. By focusing primarily on the city's challenges through a lens of perceived disorder, it fails to recognize the adaptive ways these communities navigate their environment.

When reading Packer, it's easy to get caught up in his dramatic portrayal of Lagos as an almost ungoverned space. His account raises important discussions about inequality and class, but it's crucial to ask: Who is telling this story? Whose voices are missing? It is necessary to look beyond the Western gaze and seek out local perspectives that reveal the true ways people experience Lagos. A key realization is that informality is not simply a sign of disorder, but instead a functional, adaptive system. Packer's framing of Lagos as a place of "statelessness" overlooks how informal networks sustain the city. When reading this article, it's important to identify moments where his perspective may overlook local ingenuity. By approaching the article with a critical eye, one can move beyond simplistic narratives of dysfunction and gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity of Lagos on its own terms.

Exploring the City Through Its Built Environment



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David Iloba, *A Man Selling Vegetables at the Street*

While Packer emphasizes the economic and social struggles of Lagos, Koolhaas examines the city through an architectural and urban planning lens. In his interview with Adeyemi, Koolhaas emphasizes Lagos's unique urban logic, where informality drives functionality. He sees it not as chaotic but as a space thriving on self-organization, from street markets to independent decision-making. This approach challenges the traditional Western view of cities and encourages the audience to reconsider how spaces adapt through necessity, sparking awareness of the interplay between design and grassroots improvisation in our own environments.

This perspective encourages a shift from simply reading about cities to actively observing them. How do formal and informal structures intertwine? What does the design of a street,


market, or transportation hub reveal about the city's underlying logic? One way to explore this is by reflecting on the spaces people interact with daily. How are urban areas repurposed beyond their original intent? By applying this lens to surrounding environments, it becomes easier to recognize how cities function outside traditional planning frameworks. This approach enhances awareness of how urban life is shaped by both intentional design and adaptive use.

Moving Beyond Simplified Narratives

In the case of Lagos, both Packer's and Koolhaas's opinions highlight distinct yet equally significant aspects of the city's complexity: Packer focusing on the struggles of the working class and Koolhaas exploring how informality and improvisation shape the urban environment. Despite offering valuable insights, these examples encourage the audience to recognize that understanding African cities goes beyond simply absorbing information, it requires active engagement with both the physical realities and the socio-political dynamics at play.

To truly understand African cities, simplified narratives must be set aside in favor of exploring the complexities that shape them. By prioritizing local perspectives and historical context, a more nuanced view of urban life can be developed. The formal and informal systems, along with the underlying power structures,


must be critically examined to gain a deeper understanding of the resilience and challenges faced by urban residents. The most effective way to understand these cities is not through books and articles alone, but also through firsthand exploration, questioning assumptions, and embracing diverse perspectives that challenge preconceived notions of urban life.

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