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# Behind the Buildings: The Influence of the Built Environment on African City Scholarship

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## Evidence of Power Structure in Urban African Architecture

Architecture has always been closely intertwined with power. Monumental buildings like the Taj Mahal, Buckingham Palace, and the Forbidden City have housed the most powerful and elite members of society throughout history. This may seem self-evident—of course the wealthiest people have large and ostentatious living spaces—but in studying the built environment one must ask why a city is

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designed in a certain way, and what those buildings and structures represent to everyday residents. In African cities, the connection between grand architecture and social hierarchies is evident. By studying the built environment, historians can see what groups possessed influence at certain times, and how societies determined what made a person, family, or cultural group powerful. However, the built environment hides certain things from the diligent observer. Those without education or wealth are often left out of the historical record, even in regard to the built environment.

Therefore, understanding how they interacted with certain structures, or felt about changes in their local landscapes and living areas is a more difficult task for the historian, but one they must undertake to truly appreciate African cities.

Stone buildings in the Swahili port cities such as Mombasa and Zanzibar closely reflect and shape the power hierarchies of those societies. As Meier remarks, stone architecture was owned by the “patrician elite”, called the “waungwana”.<sup>1</sup> Those who did not have the means to trade and sail between polities resided mainly in “thatch roofed” houses, representing their lower economic status.<sup>2</sup> Stone houses also play a role in shaping their own importance in society. As traders from the Arab world would sail into the Indian Ocean, the “gleaming white” stone houses attracted them to stop and exchange

goods, increasing the wealth of Swahili traders and heightening the prestige of those living in the houses.<sup>3</sup> This connection to the mercantile class was reflected in decorations adorning these houses. Objects from around the world, like “Middle Eastern glazed wares” and Chinese porcelain were commonly displayed in homes, and demonstrated to visitors the influence the home’s owner had around the world.<sup>4</sup> This high valuation of distinct clothing and ornamentations is noted by Hermann von Hesse, as he claims that the wives of important and wealthy merchants often dressed in Arabian and “Victorian” styles to show off their status.<sup>5</sup> Even without looking at any historical records, one can determine who was powerful in these societies based on their home construction and decoration.

However, historians struggle to see how these stone houses, and other buildings, affected the lives of everyday residents of African cities. While some of the less affluent decorated their homes in imitation of the glamorous stone houses, not all appreciated their existence in society and what they represented. As colonists arrived and began participating in the slave trade, many of the elites living in stone houses profited off the trade of their countrymen. Without anything changing about the architecture itself, historians can see how perceptions about the houses and individuals inside them changed following certain trends.

Suddenly, many thought the stone houses a representation of “racialized violence and objectification” and denounced their owners as exhibiting “inhumane cruelty”.<sup>6</sup> The legacies of such violence echo in oral traditions, but the architecture itself often hides such evidence. In Zanzibar, stone houses were used to hold “countless enslaved Africans”, but one could not know that just by looking at the buildings.<sup>7</sup> Elites tended to show off the benevolent aspects of their homes—the faraway objects and expensive decorations—but hide what actually may have been happening inside and around them, obscuring historians’ abilities to see.

The introduction of colonialism, especially by the British, highlights how architecture was valued and influenced power structures in African cities. As James Bannerman accommodated British colonists, he transformed his own home into the “residence of the governor”, and other houses became hospitals and schools.<sup>8</sup> Bannerman believed in the “civilizing mission” of colonialism, and was therefore willing to give the British priority over the actual residents of Accra. This drew a clear divide between White residents and the Africans living in the cities which would continue for countries as colonies developed. The Cape Coast Castles, and other large forts built along the gold coast by European powers, are examples of this stark difference between settlers and existing residents. They were large and imposing, but

often far removed from the rest of the city and population. Built mainly to deter hostile attackers from the sea, they could only operate with the consent of those ruling the territory, and the land was “rented” and not owned by Europeans.<sup>9</sup> By observing these castles, historians may see different things upon close inspection that they had not realized initially. While the structures look like a dominant presence in the African city, historians can see that their weak construction and vulnerability show how flimsy colonial rule could be in African cities. As Von Hesse points out, infrastructure was often woefully underdeveloped, and colonists faced massive problems with African residents of cities.

The motivations of building construction by rulers and elites also tell historians about what is valued in a society, and how those change over time. The sultan of Zanzibar, Bargesh, built the House of Wonders, a large home meant to demonstrate the power of his administration, and as it had “European and American” influences, his complicity with the West.<sup>10</sup> Initially, the House of Wonders was hated by many of Zanzibar’s residents and observers. Out of place among the already gorgeous stone architecture, it was seen as inauthentic and not “African”. Over time, perceptions have changed and many now appreciate the amalgamation of cultures and materials that Bargesh used. Although great focus is given to Zanzibar’s stone

town, the outskirt of the city is often overlooked, forcing historians to look for other sources to see their viewpoints. Even in the materials themselves, stone lasts for a long time whereas wood and hatch decay, showing the importance of each individual as they are in the historical record.

With limited historical records, historians must look to other sources of information to understand African cities. Architecture is a great medium for this study, as the intentionality and purpose behind built objects are often very meaningful to society. Large stone buildings and huge castles demonstrate the power structures of a city as they reflect the desires of powerful residents, but to truly understand African cities one must look beyond those monuments and attempt to see how every day residents interact with their environment.

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