 The Creative Genius of Urban Africa

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How to Prepare for a Successful African Urban Future

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An analysis of the most important historical lesson those thinking about the urban future in Africa must know.

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Introduction

While Africa's staggering size of roughly 30.4 million square miles¹ secures the spot as the second-largest continent in the world, its true size is most likely unknown to most. Did you know that by 2100, Africa will be home to 40% of the world's population?² I was completely oblivious to this fact prior to studying different aspects of the urban landscape in different areas of Africa. In response to this rapid expansion, there are several important lessons we can take away from Africa's urban history in order to adequately prepare for the expansion-filled

future. The most important lesson those thinking about African urban futures need to know is that it will be crucial to prioritize urban development that is both sustainable and inclusive, which will inherently redefine the definition and boundaries of African cities. Historians can look to examples such as Lagos, Accra, and Johannesburg for insight into how these cities were impacted by colonialism and how their current situations reflect necessary changes for the future.

Expansion: A Balancing Act

In order to adequately determine the requirements for the successful expansion of African urbanism in the future, those involved with the future of African urbanity must find a balance between rapidly expanding while taking into consideration the lifestyles of the individual. One example of a city that has experienced rapid urbanization and expansion only within the last several decades is Lagos, Nigeria. Lagos is located in the southwest corner of Nigeria in Western Africa and went from not being universally mapped in 1997 to having a projected population of 24.5 million people by 2035.³ With such rapid expansion, there are differing opinions on the success of it.

One historian that examined Lagos's expansion is George Packer in his 2006 article "The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos." He had a relatively negative perspective on the

expansion, analyzing some of the nasty experiences Lagosians he interviewed experienced. Packer writes, “‘Nobody will care for you, and you have to struggle to survive.’ It is the singular truth awaiting six hundred thousand people who pour into Lagos from West Africa each year. Their lungs will burn with smoke and exhaust; their eyes will sting; their skin will turn charcoal gray; And hardly any of them will ever leave.”⁴ In this case, Packer is seeing expansion on a micro level. He continues with the example of a girl who went to Lagos and “upon arrival, she discovered that she owed the woman [who brought her there] two hundred dollars for transport and the restaurant job didn’t exist...She is now a prostitute in a small hotel called Happiness.”⁵ Packer here brings up an important aspect of urban spaces in Africa expanding: people are bound to suffer. If 600,000 people per day entered any modern city looking for work, there will naturally not be enough work for all. People then have to look to other avenues of work, some of which, like in the above example, may be illegal and degrading. Outsiders can see expansion as guaranteed prosperity when in reality there will inevitably be some hardship. Packer’s example highlights the importance of the first part of the major lesson for thinkers of the African urban future: sustainability. How will the future be sustainable? Packer argues that if historians/urban planners “don’t address this question of economic growth [in Lagos]...there

is no doubt as to what's going to happen [there] eventually. It's just going to boil over.”⁶ In order for the future success of African urbanity, urban planners and government officials must have an idea about how long-term growth will be sustained on a larger scale, and down to the individual as well, ensuring people that come to grow the city have enough opportunities to properly sustain themselves.

Packer's article was written in 2006, and although relatively negative, brings up the important aspect of sustainability. A 2016 interview, “Lagos shows how a city can recover from a deep, deep pit,” between architects Rem Koolhaas and Kunlé Adeyemi provided an update on the situation in Lagos. Adeyemi states, “In the last five years the economy improved, the government became more stable, the security improved. When there's more security in an environment, people are able to invest more... there is now a semblance of a healthier and livable society.”⁷ Nineteen years and roughly fifteen million people later⁸ Lagos was seemingly able to avoid the doomed fate Packer predicted for it. Adeyemi also brought up how “The politics, the development, they couldn't catch up. It was really moving very fast. It's only now that Lagos is getting to a point where the state has been able to implement a degree of order.”⁹ Adeyemi claims that the expansion of Lagos, although not perfect, needed time. The economic improvement improved expansion on

the larger, city and political level, as well as on the personal level. Both work in tandem with one another to improve both aspects of expansion. Lagos went through difficult times, but a sustainable plan for the future that included economic growth serves as a fitting example of how going forward, the expansion of African urbanity must be sustainable, as the negative consequences predicted by Packer could come true in any city if the planners do not plan for a rapidly growing society.

Who Wants to Come to Cities and Why?

Sustainability is a critical part of the historical lesson those thinking about African urban futures must know. However, it is not the only aspect that needs attention. A pivotal part of urbanity in the future is that cities must be inclusive, and therefore expansive.

In Rebecca Ginsburg's book *At Home with Apartheid*, she outlines the lives of black African women as domestic servants during Apartheid in Johannesburg, South Africa. Ginsburg states, "Family and friends who had already made the move assured [these women] that they would be able to support themselves in Johannesburg."¹⁰ Furthermore, in response to the question of why a former domestic servant chose to move to Johannesburg, Ginsburg received the reply, "You always think of gold and money when you see Johannesburg...Maybe if I go to

Johannesburg, I can have the same.”¹¹

Johannesburg is a concrete example of why the definition of a city must be re-evaluated when thinking about the future. In this case, people from the poorer suburbs of Johannesburg moved there to seize any opportunities for themselves and their families. This is not a new idea. Most cities tend to have more opportunities than their suburbs do. If we extend this idea to thinking about urbanity in the future, considering what is and is not a city is essential. Historically, as seen in the above example, cities have attracted people from the suburbs which inherently puts more focus on the city itself and does not encourage growth in the surrounding areas. However, in the future, if there is thought about expanding and growing the surrounding areas of a city alongside the city itself more overall prosperity could occur. If a city's growth and success are more spread out instead of highly concentrated, cities may also be able to avoid creating successful vs non-successful areas. This could allow for opportunities to reside in every corner of the cities, rather than only in certain areas, which may produce prosperity for more residents of the city and its surroundings.

Inclusivity

One last aspect of the urban future in Africa that works tangentially with the expansion of cities is ensuring that urban development is inclusive for all city inhabitants. An example of a city that

was non-inclusive under colonial rule and suffered as a result is Accra, Ghana.

During the height of the colonial era in Accra, which lasted from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century,¹² it was not an inclusive city. Historian Jennifer Hart “argues that the British colonial government's policies of modernization and urban planning in the early 20th century led to the creation of a formal sector in Accra, which excluded many local residents and pushed them into the informal economy. [She] suggests that this process of informalization has continued in post-colonial Accra, as the government has failed to address the needs of the informal sector and provide adequate infrastructure and services.”¹³ This idea of an informal economy is pertinent to the urban future because when a city is not inclusive to all its residents, similar to how the colonialists in Accra were not, those not included may be forced to turn elsewhere to survive. Not only does the individual have to participate in a non-regulated economy that may not have access to all the goods and services a regulated one might, but on the flip side, the state-regulated government loses engagement. Both sides suffer because laws and policies are not inclusive to every resident of the city.


Another example of the colonial government in Accra not being inclusive was regarding corn mills. Hart writes “At a meeting of the Accra

Town Council on January 8, 1940, councilors engaged in a long discussion about an unauthorized corn mill that had been erected at the house of Mr. K. Armah Kwantreng. The Medical Officer of Health – a British colonial officer – ‘expressed the opinion that the corn mill in question was situated in the corner of a very dirty compound which was full of shacks and old lorry parts and other filth and was therefore injurious to health’...The debate over Mr. Kwantreng’s corn mill exemplifies in many ways the influence of prevailing public health rhetoric on the processes of town management and planning in colonial cities like Accra.”¹⁴ In this case, the colonial government enforced itself on the people of Accra simply because they thought the area the corn mill was situated in was dirty. There were no grounds for this claim and action, which inherently acts as a divider of people. It would make sense that the African people of Accra would not want to be associated with the colonialists because of the non-inclusivity that occurred. Going forward it is essential that urban Africa is more inclusive to prevent divides from happening so the city and all of its residents can thrive.


Conclusion


In conclusion, the most important historical lesson those thinking about the African urban future must know is that it is essential to prioritize sustainability and inclusivity in urban

planning. The city relies on its residents and vice versa. African cities and its people have experienced hardship in the past, but going forward into a time of guaranteed growth and expansion, it will be essential to keep these ideas in mind to prevent the same mistakes from happening again.

FOOTNOTES • 14 

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