

Theorizing the "African City" ▾

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Viewing the Individual to Study Urban Africa

Deduced from a synthesis of scholarship and literature, a focus on individual lives seems to be the most legitimate way to study the African city.

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A valuable approach to studying African cities is to focus on individual citizens as agents who shape, and are shaped, by the given city's systems and dynamics



Photograph of a food market in Lagos, Nigeria

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Western study of urban Africa is a discipline constantly tainted from the side effects of imperialism and colonial-era convictions.

Tropes such as the denial of sophistication and agency of African cities and their respective history plagues the minds of scholars, both consciously and subconsciously. While debates ensue domestically on how to study American urbanism, the analysis on urban Africa seems significantly more theory-driven. Perhaps aimed at combating preconceived notions and ignorance about Africa, many historians seem driven to find the best way to study the African city. Despite not encountering a fool-proof map to study African cities, a synthesis of scholarship and literature continually highlights the importance of studying the individual agent as a microcosm to best understand the given city's systems and dynamics.

Leaning more towards a bottom-up approach for studying cities, a focus on the individual may be just as informative about a city's urban dynamics as attempting to see the given city as one. This individualized focus has the added benefit of humanizing the study, a key aspect often lost in the study of urban Africa. Viewing each person's livelihood and daily activities will help to uncover the broader conglomerate of systems (i.e. the city itself).

As studied by professor Garth Myers in his book, *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory*

and Practice, the practice of finding a best-fit strategy for seeing an African city as a centralized unit is problematic.¹ Focusing on the Zambian capital city, Lusaka, in his introduction, Myers argues that the textbook (i.e. Euro-centric) method of studying cities from a development perspective is impossible due to the colonial-linked history of almost all urban centers in Africa. Instead, scholars like Myers and his referenced historian Abdoumaliq Simone suggest utilizing the idea of the multiplex.² The multiplex is essentially the notion of viewing a city from multiple facets, each with its own relevance and agency. Under the multiplex umbrella, one can dig deeper to find each individual life at the city's base-unit to help unravel the enigma that is each African city.

Further works of scholarship, such as Tanya Zack's (and photographer Mark Lewis) new book, *Wake Up, This is Joburg*, reinforce the idea of decentralizing the focus of urban study.³ Using ethnographic methods to view Johannesburg as a case-study, Zack focuses her studies on individual lives in a successful manner. Coupled with photographs that blur the public-private divide, Zack contextualizes a city whose history has also been shaped by European colonialism. Namely, Zack's investigation of Senga Mutumbo's life served as a good example of the usefulness for this sort of study. Mutumbo is an expat from The Democratic Republic of the Congo (in central Africa and among other

nations of residence) who has lived in Johannesburg for over ten years. Zack points out an interesting idea, that despite Mutombo's livelihood and tenure in South Africa, he is still seen as an outsider in both social and bureaucratic contexts.⁴ This truth is a side effect of Johannesburg's early urban planning and exclusion of black citizens from residency and legality. Thus, the prejudice Mutombo faced as an outsider is indicative of a larger network of systems that define Johannesburg.

In a similar fashion, one can extrapolate the power of an individual lens as a tool for general study in African cities. Lagos, Nigeria for example (as seen in the photograph above) is one of the largest metropolises in the world. Instead of trying to grapple with the never-before-seen scale of urban sprawl and international city expansion, one could start with the individual story and work their way up.

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