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# The Secrets of African Cities Revealed Through Architecture

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## Introduction

Infrastructure and city layouts act as a guide for social, cultural and political ideals of a city and nation at large. The ancient and near colonial past laid the foundations for the present and future of African cities. The architecture and city composition of these eras serve as historical evidence for independent African cities' configuration and building style. Here, we will explore the ways in which the past, present and future are evidenced through the physical manifestations of urban African cities. We will also examine how such physical evidence can leave us only partially informed when considering the biases of historians on this

topic. To begin this inquiry into the interconnectedness of the historical understanding of African cities in relation to their composition and architecture, we will turn to the ancient beginnings of African urbanism.

## Ancient Africa as a Foundation for the Future

The built environments of African cities, with regard to both ancient archeological findings and modern day renderings, allow for a deeper understanding of African history. By framing the present day infrastructure with the scaffolding of the past, we can better understand why and how African cities have developed the way that they have today. Ancient archeological findings allow for a basis of understanding regarding the history of urban African cities.

According to Folers and van Buiten,<sup>1</sup> there is a prominent and well documented history of flourishing ancient urbanism which can be seen through such examples as the city plans of Nekhen in Egypt. Such evidence solidifies the idea that African cities have long existed and will continue to inform later cities' makeup. The architecture of ancient African cities and traditional architecture styles would become highly influential once African cities began to rebuild and reclaim their identities entering the modern era. This type of architecture will also come into play in the era of colonialism when areas, such as Zanzibar City in the later

twentieth century and the House of Wonders, will use it as a tool to display their political power and influence in the region against encroaching colonialist powers.<sup>2</sup>



The House of Wonders in Zanzibar, Tanzania

The archaeological evidence of ancient African architecture is quite scattered. Only in the past half century has this type of study been taken more seriously, which is where the issue with relying on remnants of built environments for historical context lies. We can only gain historical insight when the proper research is done and requisite evidence can be found. The biases of historians on Africa as an area of research have been blinded by Western and Eurocentric ideologies.<sup>3</sup> While built cities and infrastructure can be studied without such interference, the availability of ancient resources is indeed based on historic research and we must acknowledge this blindspot. Moving towards the topic of colonial-era Africa, we will begin to see more of the connection

between infrastructure and historical context and meaning.

## Colonialist Exhibitions of Power

The colonial period of African cities can be seen through colonial style architecture which acted as physical manifestations of power. British-Colonial architecture, characterized by verandas, columns and shutters, therefore presents us with remnants of an abhorrent past that has caused permanent fissures within African society. We can see the expressions of pushing back from this era within architecture and built spaces. The development of African cities was disrupted by colonial powers taking hold of various parts of Africa during the fifteenth through the nineteenth century and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>4</sup> The entire social, governmental and cultural makeups of cities and countries were disrupted, with African cities forced to halt their development to serve colonial interests. The ties between colonial power and politics and infrastructure is an important part of this topic.



The British-built 'palace' for Asante, now a museum. Kumase, Ghana. *Asantean noumena: The politics and imaginary reconstruction of the Asante Palace, Kumase*

According to Mulugeta et al, politics and architecture are powerfully intertwined and built spaces and styles of architecture often carry intrinsic political meaning.<sup>[5]</sup> The broad spectrum of architectural influence ranging from pre-colonialism, colonialism, post-colonialism and local culture are all reflected in the buildings of a city. Applying this concept to colonial-era Africa, it is plain to see that this argument is valid. During colonialism, monuments and buildings that were erected by the British in places such as Ghana, were done in the inherently British-Colonial style<sup>[6]</sup>. These built structures were a kind of physical marker of colonial power in the area, signaling both to the colonized population and the world at large that the land was under colonial control. The ideas of political and powerful meanings are intertwined with cities' infrastructure and aid in telling the history of a city. What is left of colonial architecture serves as a reminder of the past that can still be seen today. Applying this to independent African cities', we can further see how historic events, politics, power and national identity are intertwined.

## **Independent Africa Constructing Modernity and National Identity**

Periods of independence succeeding colonized periods, as shown through architecture and infrastructure, can illuminate the African

reaction to overcoming these forces. Through architecture and spaces created post-colonialism, one can see where there is an intermingling of returning to and exalting of an African past but so too of a rebuilding geared towards a new future. The identity of independent Africans in places such as Ghana are shown through their architecture and urban cityscapes. The kind of architecture, public spaces and use of space seen in Ghana are all connected to the creation of a national identity and nationalism and can be seen as physical manifestations of such. By applying the argument made by Mulugeta et al it can be argued that during the era of independence in Ghana, architecture and buildings were created in order to signal an independent Ghana and a reclamation of their nation. [5] The buildings erected in the international style were a way to signal newfound independence and nationalism in order to set Ghana on the international political stage. The democratization of the coastline of Accra was another way to rebuff the colonial separation of areas of a city. The work and vision of Nkrumah in Ghana was one that combined the ancient history of Ghana while simultaneously pushing the newly independent country forward. [8] He accomplished this through building a national identity – part of which was accomplished through architecture. The unapologetic modernism and internationalism acted as a direct contrast to colonialism by making the buildings built by the

British look antiquated in comparison.

Nkrumah's international style of infrastructure not only signaled towards the future but also admonished a colonial past. The architecture of independent Ghana shows the progress of a nation and people and the history they were creating.



Senior Staff Clubhouse, Knust Kumasi, Ghana. *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence: Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia.*

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear to see that the ways in which African cities are constructed and their building styles are able to help illustrate their history as well as their present and future. Although we can garner insight from built evidence, it would be remissive to ignore that this is but part of the larger puzzle of African history. Ancient evidence is a testament to the rich history of African urbanism as well as a

foundation for present day cities' configurations. Colonialism left a lasting legacy, as seen through architecture, that would one day be rebuffed by an independent African architectural style. The design of infrastructure fashioned by independent African cities blended ancient and international styles to illuminate their unique vision for their future.

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