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Reading Built Environments to See Urban African History

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How reading built environments in African cities helps to tell stories of their history

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Seeing African cities as built environments may be a distinctly useful way to reveal the history of the given city. Architecture and infrastructure are among the first things one would notice about a city upon arrival. Even before an investigation of the systems, individual livelihoods, climate, and politics- the built environment is what first catches the eye. The fact that architecture is impossible to ignore highlights the importance of understanding how one can study from it. Through the exploration of architecture in pre-colonial West Africa, current Swahili cities, and modernist architecture in Ghana, an important way of

reading buildings (or remnants thereof) is through a lens that recognizes the history it reveals.

The first way this strategy can manifest itself is through tracing the history of pre-colonial, urban West Africa via archeological findings. Dr. Andrew Gurstelle, the director of Wake Forest University's Lam Museum of Archaeology, revealed the ways in which this would manifest itself in looking at the cities of Djenne-Djenno and Ile Ife. Djenne-Djenno is an ancient city in the present-day nation of Mali in the Niger River Valley. The archaeological remnants here challenge the prevailing idea that this city must have been heavily influenced by European colonialism during the time of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade due to its logistical position between the Gold Coast and Mediterranean.¹ Perhaps due to the fact that Djenne-Djenno is far enough inland from these two locations or a disdain for adopting Euro-centric influences, the findings here found the opposite. Particularly, Djenne's "mudbrick" architecture was localized to the city and did not reflect any colonial influence. Additionally, the pottery with an equal importation from the north and south existing in the records reflects a lack of bias towards a particular other society or another. In the case of Ile Ife in present-day Nigeria, localized architecture is also apparent. Despite having a very different urban layout than Djenne-Djenno (and European cities for that

matter), Ile Ife similarly contained artifacts that reflect a synergy of nearby societies with no particular bias. Their hyper-realistic copper alloy artwork reaffirms this detachment from colonialist inflections. Synthesizing these two case studies, the concept of absolute European or Islamic dominance in architecture north of the Sahara can be debunked. Dr. Gustelle was able to display artifacts to reinforce this idea in a tactile fashion to Wake Forest's Urban Africa history class. While archaeological artifacts may help with other forms of study such as appreciation for their culture, the historical reading of such is particularly important for examining the past in terms of imperial context. Because the archaeological findings are tactile and were all built by people at some point in time, they fall under the umbrella of the built environment.

Another way to examine this historical lens is through the study of architecture in cities along the Swahili coast, on the other side of Africa. Particularly on the island of Zanzibar off the coast of present-day Tanzania, the House of Wonders (built in 1883) palace may be “read” in a way which reveals the history of the city. In Prita Meier’s 2016 book, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere*, she examines this building and its implications well in her third chapter.² Unlike what was revealed in the pre-colonial African cities mentioned above, the House of Wonders at Zanzibar points to an

adoption of colonial culture through architecture. Built by Seyyid Barghash (the third sultan of Zanzibar), this palace reflects his integration of the island city into a global trade network. As capitalism and colonialism are oftentimes quite intertwined, the public-facing palace which includes European-style, grandiose features is indicative of Barghash's desire for this shift.³ The visual culture of this new economic thinking proposed by Barghash may reinforce negative colonial prejudices such as that European ways of building and trade are superior or more sophisticated than the less codified Indian Ocean trade conducted by individual families before this.⁴ Using a historical lens, one is able to read this palace similarly to a book revealing this historic transition of Zanzibar into a more Euro-centric, trade-oriented world.

Lastly, taking a look at Ghana after its colonial independence with regards to its architecture stresses this historical utilization. Newly bolstered Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, was tasked with creating a national culture in a top-down manner after the exile of British colonialists. This is especially demonstrated in his enormous infrastructure overhaul and building in the capital city of Accra. As echoed in his independence speech, Nkrumah said, "We are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, that we are prepared to lay our own foundation. Our own African identity."⁵

Nrkumah thus laid out his vision for Ghana that can be directly derived from architecture in urban centers like the capital city of Accra. In Accra, Nrkuma's architecture revamp included a heavy use of modernist style, as opposed to European or native varieties. This alien style of building included rejections of these other styles by means of using essentially never-before-seen styles such as futuristic-appearing uses of concrete and arches.⁶ Additionally, modernity may make the existing colonial architecture across Africa seem dated. This introduces an interesting repeated dynamic, as British colonialism built their architecture with the intent of dating the existing African built structures in the same manner generations prior. Thus, looking at modern buildings in Accra built around the 1960's, one can trace the history Ghana underwent to find their own identity upon colonial independence.

Across the African continent and through the exposure of architecture revealing historic implications in three distinct time periods (ranging between 800 BCE -1960's CE), the methodology of using a historic lens to read the built environments is important to the study of urban Africa. These three case-studies serve as examples for how the physical world is often indicative of the history of the city. All architecture is rooted in history in its own right which makes this framework quite accessible as well.

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