



Africa Research Institute

understanding Africa today



[Home](#)
[Publications](#)
[Blog](#)
[Events](#)
[About](#)

Who will plan Africa's cities?

12 Sep 2013



COUNTERPOINTS

Africa's cities are growing – and changing – rapidly. Without appropriate planning, they will become increasingly chaotic, inefficient and unsustainable. In many countries, urban planning legislation dates back to the colonial era. It is ill-equipped to deal with contemporary urban problems. A shortage of urban planning and management professionals trained to respond to urban complexity with progressive pro-poor approaches exacerbates urban dysfunction.

As planning educators seek to train students for employment within the existing system, the urban and rural planning curricula of many planning schools are outdated as planning legislation. Some African countries have no planning school. The reform and revitalisation of planning education – and legislation – could contribute significantly to sustainable and more equitable urban development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Vanessa Watson is Professor of City and Regional Planning at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and co-chair of the **Association of African Planning Schools** (AAPS) steering committee.

Babatunde Agbola is Professor of Urban and Regional Development at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and chair of the AAPS steering committee.

Old master plans

...new fantasies

Greater sprawl, rising inequality

A network for reform

New curricula

Getting the shoes dirty

Work experience

Speaking truth to power

Countering inertia

Notes

In 2012, planning students at Makerere University and members of the **National Slum Dwell Federation of Uganda** concluded a four-month “urban studio”. The purpose of this unusual collaboration was to survey living conditions in six Ugandan informal settlements. For many of the students, this was their first experience of daily life in an informal settlement. With residents and Federation staff acting as “community professors”, and planning students contributing technical knowledge, a vibrant two-way learning partnership was initiated.

Enumeration and mapping exercises provide invaluable evidence about informal settlements. Many such settlements, throughout Africa, do not even appear on official maps. At the conclusion of the urban studio in Uganda, the students and Federation members presented reports to the municipal authorities and communities. These included detailed information on education, income and saving, land tenure and access to basic services in the informal settlements. An indispensable resource guiding the planning of inclusive, pragmatic urban development in the study areas had been created.

Urban planners in Africa are confronted by a daunting task. An urban crisis is being fuelled by growing numbers of inhabitants without access to shelter, basic services or formal employment opportunities. Vigorous, often unrestrained, development of any available and well-located urban land is widespread. Environmental hazards are escalating, compounded by waste, air pollution and the effects of climate change.

change. Conventional urban planning practices and systems that remain trapped in the past are fail to counter these threats.

Planning is the single most important tool that governments have at their disposal for managing rapid urban population growth and expansion.

The prevailing image of urban and regional planning in Africa depicts a disengaged, technical and apolitical profession. A more critical view holds that planning is deeply political, its overriding purpose being to further the interests of political and economic elites. There is little enthusiasm for reform from within. Yet planning is the single most important tool that governments have at their disposal for managing rapid urban population growth and expansion. If inclusive and sustainable planning replaced outdated, controlling and punitive approaches it would underpin more equitable and economically productive urban development in Africa.

Crucially, change depends on planners who are innovative problem-solvers and willing to collaborate with all parties involved in the development process, including local communities. Their actions need to be informed by explicit and progressive values. The education of these future planners requires thorough reappraisal of existing teaching methods, the introduction of new ones, and remodelled curricula.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Old master plans...

In 2005, some 700,000 people were evicted from their homes in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city. Operation Murambatsvina, or "Drive Out the Rubbish" – also referred to as "Restore Order" and "Clean Up" – was legitimised by the 1976 Town and Country Planning Act. This was in turn based on the UK 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and model town and country planning law widely implemented by the British Colonial Office in Africa and the Caribbean.¹ State-authorised evictions carried out under the auspices of colonial-era legislation have become a common feature of life in African cities.

Planners are often involved as the "handmaiden of state repression".²

The master plans for many African cities were drawn up at a time when current urban population growth rates and poverty levels were not anticipated. The plan for Harare assumed an orderly and law-abiding population that was willing to comply with zoning and building laws designed for middle-income, mostly European, car-owning and formally employed families. Long before 2005, the realities of land occupation in the city bore no resemblance to official imaginings. In sub-Saharan Africa, almost two-thirds of the urban population live in slums, lacking acceptable shelter and basic services.³ For

most inhabitants of Harare and other African cities, outdated planning laws are an irrelevance – until deployed against them by the vindictive or opportunistic.

The private property development sector is booming in Africa. The number of housing estates and shopping malls is multiplying rapidly. Most urban development in sub-Saharan Africa is occurring in completely non-planned and non-transparent manner – despite the existence of master plans. Many cities along the West African coast do not even have a master plan. Although some larger projects and satellite developments, like the multibillion dollar **Konza** “Techno City”, 60km south-west of Nairobi, developers are usually competing with shack-dwellers for well-located land within city boundaries. Outdated and rigid urban planning laws never anticipated this scenario.

In the absence of a well-resourced and functioning planning system, development fosters dealmaking among the influential and financially better-off – rather than compliance with accepted and transparent planning processes. Private tenement block construction in and around Kibera, Nairobi’s large informal settlement, is a prime example of this phenomenon. As most of the development does not conform to planning or building regulations, it is as unauthorised as the neighbouring shacks. Tall seven- or eight-storey tenements are largely ignored by city authorities because they appear “formal” or because of financial inducements. The fire, collapse and health risks of such tenements are seldom subjected to rigorous official scrutiny.

Most urban development in sub-Saharan Africa is occurring in a completely non-planned and non-transparent manner.

The vision of the future for Africa’s cities was often shaped by reference to cities in developed economies – like London, Paris or New York. The master plan for Lusaka, Zambia’s capital city, was based on the concept of the “garden city”, a quintessentially British creation. The unanticipated scale of informal settlement in contemporary Africa is typically ignored, or wished away, by national governments and city authorities.

BACK TO CONTENTS

...new fantasies

A new genre of urban plan has recently emerged in Africa, usually created by international architectural and engineering companies. Nowadays, an urban future akin to that of Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai is fancifully and inappropriately envisaged. The master plan for Kigali, Rwanda’s capital, where 80% of inhabitants live in informal settlements, is one of the most far-fetched examples – complete with glass-box towers, landscaped lawns and freeways. It even features a replica of “The Gherkin”, a skyscraper in the financial district of London.

The fantasy designs for African cities win awards. Typically, they nod in the direction of the needs of shack-dwellers and purport to embrace other laudable aims. But the implementation of plans that are unsustainable in the extreme and inappropriate in terms of climate, available infrastructure – particularly power – and affordability, exposes their shortcomings. Few of the completed towers of Angola's Nova Cidade de Kilamba are occupied. This Chinese- and Brazilian-built development 20km south of Luanda, designed to house half a million people, is simply too far away from the capital city and too expensive for most.

Master plans in sub-Saharan Africa – old and new – are almost always drawn up by central governments. They are usually “top-down” impositions informed by an anti-urban, anti-poor stance among political leaders. Political and economic elites typically consider removal to rural areas as the best way of dealing with the urban poor and unemployed – a point of view that overlooks the fact that a majority of the poor inhabitants of African cities today were born there. There are adherents to the Operation Murambatsvina approach throughout the continent. This is symptomatic of a widespread denial of the realities of contemporary urbanisation in Africa, not evidence of the constructive management of urban transformation.

Old and new master plans are equally exclusionary, albeit in different ways. Older plans, strongly influenced by colonial town planning, put in place zoning schemes with mono-functional land use, plot sizes and building regulations. The urban fantasies – more recent urban master plans – assume either that the existing informal city can be scraped away or that new “smart” or “eco” cities on greenfield sites provide a better alternative to upgrading what is in situ.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Greater sprawl, rising inequality

The poor, the vast majority, have little choice in either circumstance. They are being edged off better-located land with increasing frequency and ferocity. As the “formal” city becomes ever more inaccessible, informal settlement expands rapidly around, outside and beyond it. As one land expert has put it, the poor have to step outside the law to survive.⁴

Current planning systems and practices ensure that social, economic and spatial inequality will continue to rise in African cities. Instead of allocating more of the state expenditure on urban infrastructure to the provision of basic services to the poor, funds are diverted to new developments that aim to attract investment and provide new homes for the affluent minority. While those with adequate regular income may be able to find rental housing in new “middle-class” suburbs, on unplanned urban peripheries people are even more distant from urban infrastructure and dislocated from basic services.

Sprawling development intensifies the effects of the scourges of African cities – inadequate infrastructure and economic opportunity, and greater concentrations of people living in areas at high risk from flooding, disease, fire or landslide. Conventional patterns of industrialisation and formal

creation, which accompanied urbanisation in the global North, are absent from most countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

A network for reform

Planning educators tend to train their students to operate within existing planning systems. In 1999, academics attending a workshop of three African planning schools* in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, decided that this approach was no longer wholly appropriate. Across the continent, planners and planning systems were failing to meet the many and varied challenges of urbanisation. It was time to try and revitalise the education of urban and regional planners.

The history of planning education in Africa is firmly ensconced in the traditions and models of Europe – especially the UK – and the USA. The curricula of African planning schools draw largely on the colonial past and promote ideas and policies transferred from the global North. Most planning textbooks used in Africa are produced for students in the USA, the UK or other developed economies. The [Association of African Planning Schools](#) (AAPS) was formed to mitigate the dominance of unsuitable and irrelevant archetypes in planning education.

The principal objective of the fledgling AAPS network was to ensure that future urban practitioners were equipped to respond effectively and meaningfully to urbanisation in Africa. The gap between what planning students were taught and the urban realities they confronted after graduation needed to be reduced.

There was a shared belief within the network that even though planning systems were broken, they were operated by individuals who could interpret and implement them in different ways. If staff and students could promote a different vision of urban planning, systems could be challenged and change brought about from within.

From the outset, it was recognised that if planning schools were to influence governments and planning departments, a pan-African network would need to include as many institutions as possible. The distribution of the 70 or more planning schools in Africa varies widely, as do their educational approaches. Most countries have only one or two planning schools. Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have no planning schools, whereas Nigeria has 36 schools and South Africa 11. The *École Africaine des Métiers de l'Architecture et de l'Urbanisme* (EAMAU), in Togo, admits students from 14 francophone countries. In some countries, planning schools do not communicate with one another.

The gap between what planning students were taught and the urban realities they confronted after graduation needed to be reduced.

The establishment of a link with the **Global Planning Education Association Network** (GPEA) following the first World Planning Schools Congress in 2001, was an essential spur to the AAPS. By end of 2007, membership had increased to 26 planning schools. Close ties with the **African Centre Cities** in Cape Town, and the first of three tranches of funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, enabled the network to launch its “Revitalising Planning Education in Africa” project.

BACK TO CONTENTS

New curricula

In 2008, the first major AAPS conference took place in Cape Town. It was attended by academics from 22 member schools and focused on planning curricula. Delegates were each asked to prepare a paper on the most significant planning issues in their city or country, setting out how local planning curricula did – or did not – respond to these. Five main themes emerged from the papers:

- informality
- access to land
- climate change
- collaboration between planners, communities, civil society and other interested parties
- mismatch between spatial planning and infrastructure planning

Groups of delegates with common thematic interests were organised into “communities of practice” tasked with producing papers on each of the five themes. These were presented at the second major AAPS conference in Dar es Salaam, in 2010, by which time the network had expanded to 43 schools. There was general agreement at the conference that the themes were largely unaddressed in African planning curricula.

The University of Zambia’s master’s programme is the first in Africa fully to incorporate the issue of informality.

Educational reform is no easy task in most African universities – or anywhere. Curriculum change is a highly centralised and usually protracted process. Severe financial constraints are commonplace. Underpaid staff undertake consultancy work to make ends meet, library resources are poor, and there is a shortage of computers and other essential equipment. Internet bandwidth is usually very limited, technical support inadequate, and power outages frequent.

Despite these practical constraints, AAPS members drafted a new two-year master’s degree curriculum that incorporated work on all five themes. The pilot will be launched by the University of Zambia in 2013. It is consciously adapted to local issues and staff capacity and embraces the use of community-based studios. Many of the first intake of students are employed by Lusaka Municipality. At the third AAPS all-schools conference in October 2012, in Nairobi, a draft undergraduate planning

curriculum incorporating the five themes was refined and is ready for piloting. The University of Zambia's master's programme is the first in Africa fully to incorporate the issue of informality. The emphasis on a more positive and inclusive approach to urban informality in research and teaching is the most contentious of the AAPS's objectives. Informality is widely regarded as synonymous with illegality, inefficiency or unproductive chaos. Planning – modern, orderly, emulating “clean” Western urban models – is equally widely regarded as the antidote. Anti-informality still informs the approach of many planning schools and educators, and appears to be particularly strong in Nigeria. There, the educational accrediting body, which has a high degree of control over planning curricula, does not even specifically require informality to be addressed.

It could be argued that the emphasis on the five themes in the new master's and undergraduate curricula does not leave African planning graduates well prepared for local job markets. On graduation they might be expected to implement outdated planning legislation, or design golf courses or gated communities for the wealthy. But unless planning students are exposed to the prevailing conditions and trends in African cities, and encouraged to consult and interact with local communities to assess how planning might best address these, they will merely advance the marginalisation of the planning profession – and of the poor – in sub-Saharan Africa.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Getting the shoes dirty

Planning educators and their students need “to get their shoes dirty”. This imperative has been overlooked in traditional planning education models – and by many practising planners. Local case studies on the use of bicycle-taxis in Malawi, or resistance to market removal in Ghana, or the informal recycling business in Johannesburg, throw into stark relief the completely inappropriate nature of current approaches to planning in African cities.

Case study research generates invaluable, nuanced teaching material – as well as important contributions to our knowledge of African cities. The lamentable deficiency of good data to assist planning practice and policy development in Africa needs to be overcome. Many erroneous assumptions about African urbanisation have gone unchallenged for decades. Case study work is a pre-eminent means of addressing the need to produce new knowledge relevant to practice, enhance skills and competencies, and establishing values that planners should embrace in the course of their professional careers.

The AAPS organised three case study workshops in different regions of sub-Saharan Africa between 2009 and 2011. For many participants, the work entailed a different approach to gathering and presenting data. They were more accustomed to producing empirical – usually quantitative survey-based – urban research reports. Others presented on the adoption of a case study approach in their teaching and the benefits they had observed of placing students in urban learning studios, working closely with a community or individual in the field.⁵

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Work experience

Urban planners have historically been regarded by civil society and community organisations as one of the main obstacles to achieving more inclusive cities and greater utilisation of “bottom-up” processes for upgrading informal settlements. Increasingly, it is recognised that they are also potentially part of the solution. A memorandum of understanding signed in November 2010 by the AAPS and [Shack/Slum Dwellers International \(SDI\)](#), a global network of community organisations, articulates a shared determination to “promote initiatives, plans and policies which encourage pro-poor and inclusive cities in Africa” and “change the mindsets of student planners”.

The link between the AAPS and SDI paved the way for joint urban learning studios, such as the one described at the beginning of this Counterpoint. The idea for these partnerships emerged from a project in which [Pamoja Trust](#), an SDI affiliate, provided internships for students from the [University of Nairobi's Department of Urban and Regional Planning](#). By mid-2013, AAPS member schools and SDI affiliates had completed five studios in four countries – Uganda, South Africa, Malawi and Tanzania. The studios have underscored the potential of a two-way learning process. Participating in community enumerations, data collection and mapping, students and staff begin to understand more about dynamics of informal settlements – and the importance of producing plans that take into account everyday needs and capacities of their inhabitants. The local knowledge of inhabitants and technical knowledge of students are complementary. Both are needed to shape new approaches to planning the future. Innovative partnerships have also been agreed between the AAPS and [Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising \(WIEGO\)](#) and [Streetnet](#), an informal trader advocacy network.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Speaking truth to power

Planning systems and practices will not be reformed without changing the mindsets of politicians, international donors and urban policymakers, as well as those of planning educators and students. In 2013, the AAPS included 50 planning schools from across Africa. But if it is to be more than an academic network, it needs to take on a more active advocacy role.

Planning ethics are at stake in the pursuit of more inclusive, collaborative planning processes. In 2016 participants in a workshop organised by the AAPS informality and infrastructure groups visited informal “floating” settlement of Makoko, on Lagos Lagoon. A fishing village whose origins dated back to the 18th century, Makoko was threatened with imminent demolition and the eviction of its 100,000 or more inhabitants. The workshop participants drafted a communiqué in which the AAPS secretariat called on the Lagos city authorities and all African governments to cease demolishing informal settlements and engage in constructive in situ upgrading instead.

Africa's future planners are faced with a prodigious task.

In the case of Makoko, the AAPS action was to no avail. But it is vital that in future African planning schools are not, through their silence, complicit in unethical planning interventions. There may be a balance to achieve between the various AAPS members on many issues, but the network should remain neutral on the issue of promoting inclusivity in planning. The AAPS aspires to produce planners equipped with a critical openness to how things are, but also imbued with creative anticipation, speculation and imagination about how things could be. Reflexive and progressive values are essential in planning. So too is a determination to ensure that equitable outcomes are as important as processes.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Countering inertia

In her address to the 2006 World Planners Congress, Anna Tibaijuka, who was then Executive Director of UN-Habitat, pointed out that planning is often “anti-poor”, and can increase social exclusion in cities. She criticised the widespread belief that “in the planned city... the poor should at best be hidden or at worst swept away”. Tibaijuka called on planning practitioners to develop a different approach to planning that was sustainable, pro-poor and inclusive – placing the creation of livelihoods at the centre of planning.

In Africa, little has changed in the intervening seven years. According to Edgar Pieterse, Director of the African Centre for Cities, “the dominant policy response to the deepening crisis associated with urban growth and expansion [in Africa] is inertia”.⁶ While there are many inspirational and progressive planners across the continent, others have few qualms about fulfilling the role of compliant “handmaidens of repression” – governmental or economic. The planning profession in Africa has been choked by acute political, institutional and financial constraints.

The reform of planning education will be a very long-term and resource-intensive process. It will require practitioners and educators alike to engage with different styles of research and teaching in order to enhance the effectiveness with which the planning profession responds to Africa's rapid urban transformation. Africa's future planners are faced with a prodigious task. Educational reform alone will be insufficient to drive a reorientation of planning values and skills. It must be accompanied by reform of legislation⁷ and practice. If this does not occur, the future in many African towns and cities will be bleak indeed.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Notes

¹ See McAuslan, P., *Bringing the Law Back in: Essays in Law and Development*, Ashgate, 2003.

² Kamete, A.Y., "In the service of tyranny: Debating the role of planning in Zimbabwe's urban 'clean-up' operation", *Urban Stud* Vol. 46, No. 4 (2009), pp.897–922.

³ *Planning Sustainable Cities* – Global Report on Human Settlements, UN-Habitat, 2009.

⁴ Fernandes, E., "Illegal housing: Law, property rights and urban space", in Harrison, P., Huchzermeyer, M. and Mayekiso, M. (eds.), *Confronting Fragmentation: Housing and Urban Development in a Democratising Society*, University of Cape Town Press, 2003.

⁵ A selection of the workshop presentations on case study research are to be published in J. Duminy, J. Andreassen, F. Lerise Odendaal and V. Watson, "Planning and the case study method in Africa; the planner in dirty shoes", Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming – 2014.

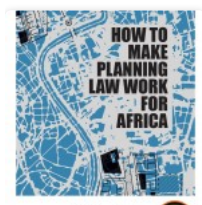
⁶ Duminy, J., Odendaal, N., and Watson, V., "The Education and Research Imperatives of Urban Planning Professionals in Africa", in Parnell, S., and Pieterse, E. (eds.), *Africa's Urban Revolution: Policy Pressures*, Zed Books, forthcoming – 2014.

⁷ See Berrisford, S., *Africa Research Institute Counterpoint* – forthcoming. In July 2012, the AAPS and the African Centre for Cities launched a campaign for the reform of urban and planning law in Africa.



COUNTERPOINTS

More from my site



How to make planning law work for Africa



Views of suburban Luanda: the move from an informal settlement to social housing



Whose Land Is It Anyway? The failure of land law reform in Kenya



Rising through cities? A look at Ghana



Interview with Jules Dumas Nguebou



Qui va prendre en charge l'aménagement des villes africaines?

Home
Publications
Blog
Events

About

info@africaresearchinstitute.org | Tel: +44 (0)207 222 4006 | Fax: +44 (0)207 222 8959 | 55 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL | Charity
Number: 1118470

© Africa Research Institute

