
*Afropolis* is a collection of over 50 essays, vignettes, and images of artworks from an exhibition at a German museum, now translated into English. It seeks to show the multiplicity of urban practices, cultures, and lifestyles through pictures and text, and to challenge the dominant, normative, developmentalist approach to African cities. The editors locate the work within a growing discourse seeking to understand African cities on their own terms by developing approaches “focused on the creative dynamism enabling urban residents to create new forms of urban life - often beyond state control and planning” (p. 15). While there are the predictable photographs of corrugated iron shacks, the lasting impression created is of vibrant spaces; of movement, even, in static images; of people engaged in actions; of buildings and their owners asserting their position whilst trying not to stand too far out and up. The book does not seek to be representative of African cities, but instead to re-present as well as raise questions regarding how and by whom African cities are presented. The result is a compelling mosaic that both challenges and deepens typical impressions, narratives, and visual discourses of African cities. It includes an introductory section with broader pieces as well as five sections on particular cities (Cairo, Lagos, Nairobi, Kinshasa, and Johannesburg). There is variety in content, approach, and perspective within these sections, including republished journal article sections, comics and graphics, posed portraits, and photos of taxis, buildings, and street life.

*Afropolis* can be seen, then, to speak in ways that most of us cannot, to juxtapose angles, and to interpret the world differently. It points us to things we may not have registered through typical research methods, journal articles, and academic narratives of African cities. In so doing, the collection for me generated an impossibly long list of follow-up questions: What functions do the alternative building designs have? Does taxi culture encourage or discourage mass transit? How do ordinary residents engage with and respond to artists’ public representations? Certainly it is not the intention of the collection to answer such questions, but it has use for urban geographers in sparking alternative ways of seeing, thinking, and querying African cities.
The book might speak a different language, but academics can register, and carefully assess, the messages it conveys and its assertion of (re)presenting African cities differently. While many contributions are strong, innovative pieces from those with deep experiences in, and understandings of, African cities, there are also more limited works based on Europeans walking through African cities, reading secondary texts, and not engaging with the processes through which spaces are created and used. Schlegelmilch, for example, describes her own method as collecting photos without history, without trying to understand the unusual features of the building designs or interventions she photographs. Nieftagodien’s township history shows no engagement with the site itself, but provides a conventional secondhand description. These seem insufficient as part of a collection seeking to challenge the dominant, normative, developmentalist framings. Nor do such pieces challenge who can and ought to represent African cities or the methods used to develop such representations. Many other similarly problematic aspects could be pointed to: the ‘Words of Welcome’ that claim that spaces in African cities “are entirely different...[and] defy comparison with others” (p. 11); references to Lefebvre and de Certeau rather too casually slipped into the introduction to give (European) authority to the text; and claims that Joburg has the “best established art scene” as defined by galleries, fairs, magazines and publishers (instead of, say, by artists, innovation, networks and markets). Individually, such points are minor. Collectively, they serve to undermine the editors’ aspiration to reorient urban theory and the way we see African cities.

Better for the reader to overlook the disjunctures (or even the introduction entirely) and look to the individual works themselves. Important themes including life and death (Nglengethwa), movement (Kotter and Fischbeck; Farouk), imagination (Mowoso), home/belonging (Darwish), and the challenges of planning (UGhent; Gockede) are to be found throughout the book. Many of the pieces that analyse culture and its meaning are compelling and challenge our understanding of African cities (Odhiambo on Kenyan literature; de Boeck on cemeteries; Mungai on taxi culture; Malaquiais on the ‘Rumble in the Jungle’; Farber and Buys on hauntology). And Simone’s ‘People as Infrastructure’, reprinted here, remains a seminal text for rethinking African cities.

Despite the individual strength of many works, I struggled to pull the book together; to find connections between art, analysis, practice and politics; to weave Pieterse on radical incrementalism and recursive empowerment with, say, a photograph of an installation made of beer cans. A few pieces are explicit about the political ambivalence of the use of art (there is some discussion of state-sponsored art in Egypt and the use of music/ians by Mobutu). A photograph (p. 135) of “a jumble of cables” draws attention to the ambivalence of our reading
of images, as the author suggests some see this as “chaos or anarchy” but maybe it “testifies to this hidden self-help, the attempt to remain connected”. Ekpo (p. 150) argues that the broader push to recognize African art and culture must be seen as part of “that irresistible existential urge to prove to an Afro-phobic white world that Africans were not civilizational orphans”. He concludes, however, that art and culture cannot be the means through which to “settle an identity crisis or mitigate our psycho-dependency on others” (p. 156) in an era of capitalist modernity. While we see myriad examples of art as expression, as political commentary and intervention, we also sometimes see how it masks intentions, is open to diverse interpretations, is not inherently progressive, and - arguably - misdirects progressive energies.

And so this brings me towards two final thoughts regarding the implications of such a collection for an (African, urban) geographer. First, such works impact our approach as researchers through provocation which somehow shapes our engagement with cities - makes us see differently, more deeply, from new angles; feel differently what before may not have resonated; and ask questions we may not have wondered. In this, *Afropolis* is highly successful. Second, we need to be critical of what art does. We need to reflect on what kinds of art and creative processes are in line with the discourse of rethinking African urbanism. Certainly, this is not to seek to police what is or is not art, who can create it, and what its aim should be. *Afropolis* also demonstrates the need for careful reflection on the political intentions and implications of such work, including what works, artists and processes are enrolled to help us rethink the city and urban theory in progressive ways. In this, *Afropolis* is less successful.

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*July 2013*