

PART D

**URBAN
PLANNING**

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As the western design paradigms make room for a more Asian-style modernity, the continent's great urban schemes still lack an African angle, with the exception of a few pioneers, who embed unique thinking within the design of the city of tomorrow.

As soon as you set foot on African ground, you notice Africa's boom. New airports, luxury hotels, stadiums, motorways, ministries and sumptuous residences are popping up across the continent. And this is just the beginning, as great schemes are currently being thought up for brand new cities. These schemes reflect Africa's grand ambitions, and can easily stand in comparison to the grandiose developments that have taken place in Dubai, Chongqing or Kuala Lumpur during the past decade.

Yet, in observing these developments, an uneasy feeling does emerge. Is this the African city? If this isn't, what then is the African city? And there we are groping in the dark, as we know so little about the conceptual grounding of the African cities of the past, and how they might inform our conception of the African city of the future.

We have been focused so long on developmental problems—the so-called slums, the failing infrastructure, the lack of control—that we forgot to understand the African city's unique historical character and spatial qualities.

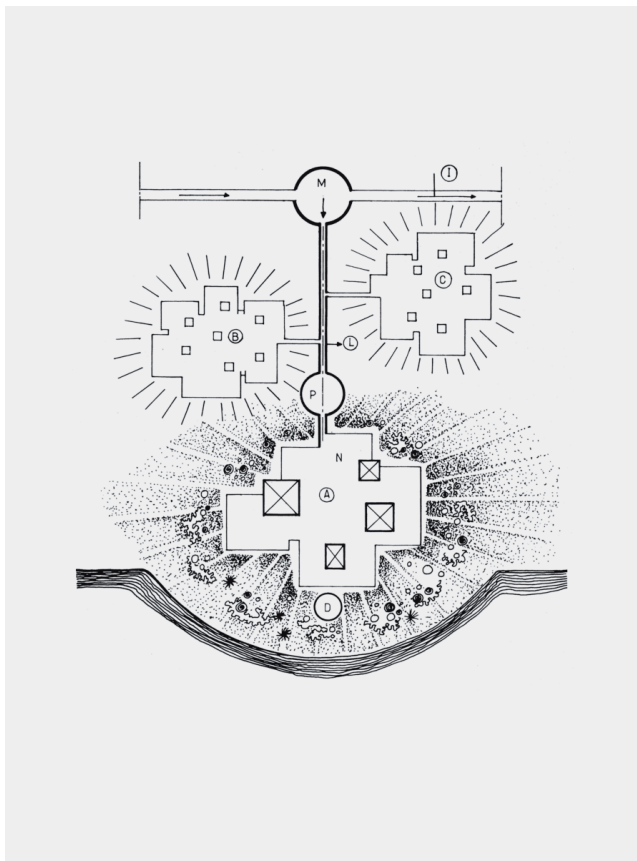
The restricted scope of this article cannot pretend to make good this omission, but by providing a brief historical overview of some pertinent cases, we can develop a better understanding of today's situation in order to invite policy makers, developers, designers and researchers to broaden the horizon in shaping the African city of tomorrow.

To begin: Many pre-colonial African towns and cities were developed in accordance with a mixture of both functional and symbolic layers. The functional layers did not diverge much from those we can observe elsewhere in the world: climate conditions, security needs, commercial infrastructure and hygiene directed certain urban patterns that are logical to the modern mind. The symbolic concerns, however, require a deeper understanding of African cultures and of their philosophical and religious thought in particular, and have led to patterns that are not so easily recognized. Research by twentieth-century cultural anthropologists on African traditional cultures did recognize these layers, but urban planners did not take this research into account.

The modern, colonial administrators dismissed these symbolic concerns as belonging to a primitive culture in need of drastic change. As a result, the city planners and architects employed to engineer this drastic cultural change on an infrastructural level similarly ignored the symbolic facets of the traditional African city in their designs for the new colonial capitals. At best, they would leave the existing city intact, preserving it as a monument to the past, and build the new city next to or around it, like Le Corbusier's Plan Obus for Algiers, which preserved the exotic architecture of the Casbah, but squeezed it between flyovers and rows of skyscrapers. Other examples of modern city designs developed next to the existing African towns include the plans for Casablanca by Prost and Ecochard and the master plan for Fort Lamy by Candilis.

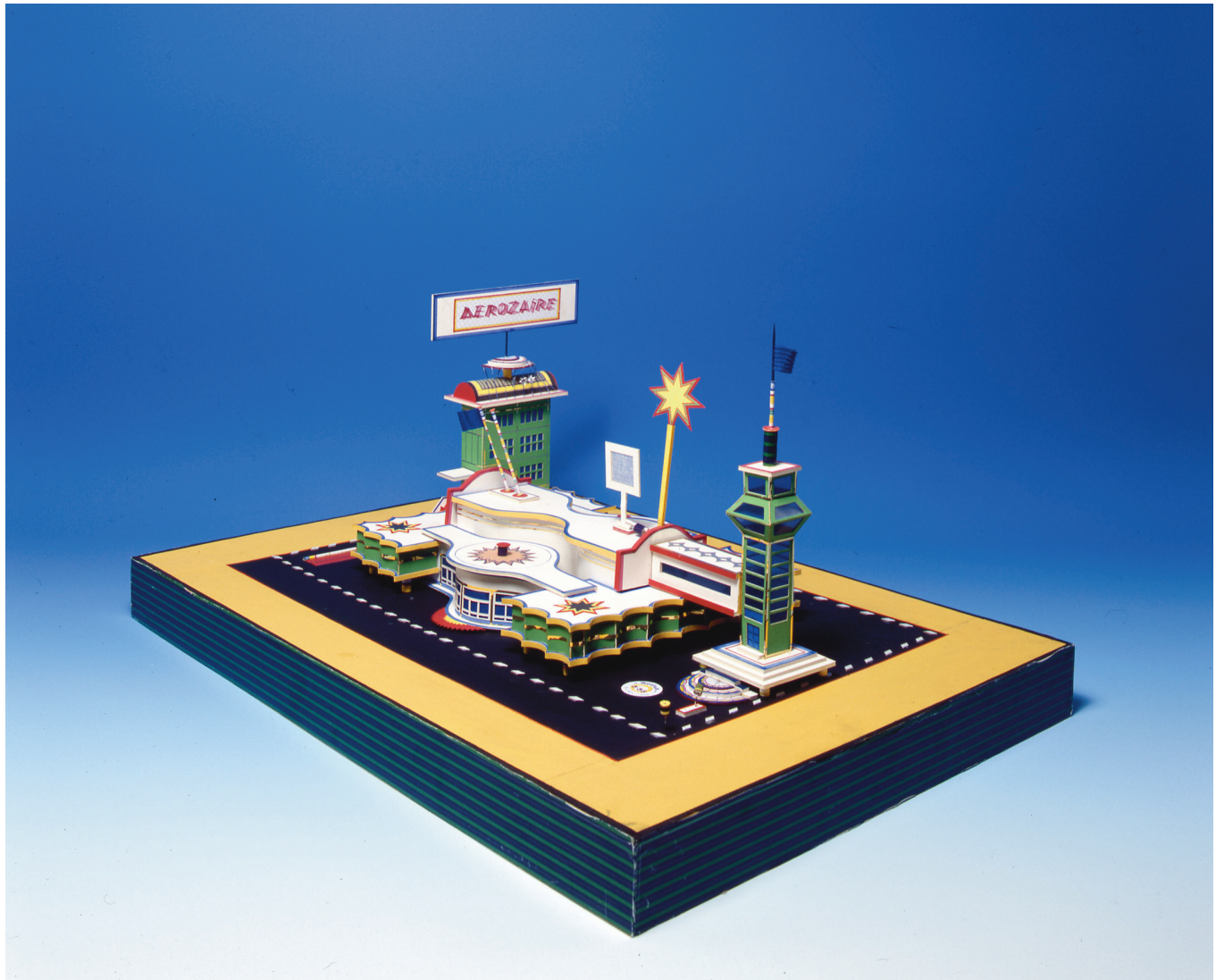
Cities of lesser imperial importance, such as Ouagadougou, underwent more modest interventions. The traditional tissue of the city, with the courts of the princes surrounded by their retainers, was largely preserved and complemented by new colonial administrative quarters in a zoned layout following a modernist functional and sober city grid. But when the colonial administrators left, they took with them the machinery required to manage and develop the city according to their modern principles. And yet, it was only after independence that the city of Ouagadougou started to grow in earnest. At the time of independence, the city counted 60,000 inhabitants, and in the following 25 years the population grew eightfold. During this period, there was hardly any control on this expansion, let alone any idea of a "design" for the city. It was only in 1984 that the first "structure plan" for the city was developed.

Expansion of other African cities, such as Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, which grew at similarly rapid rates, took place in a slightly more structured manner. These expansions were traced and managed by surveyors, engineers and urban managers. However, these professionals had little clue as to what the true characteristics of these



Urban development scheme of a Bamileké city in Cameroon, after M.A. Fassassi





cities were, and, as a result, failed to find fitting ways to manifest these characteristics on the level of urban design.

After this intermediate period of fast growth and reduced control, a new period commenced that can be broadly characterized as a time of dual development. On one side, this concerned the containment of the city expansion through continuation of cadastral planning and a greater or lesser degree of infrastructural interventions of the residential areas, depending on their levels of affluence. On the other side, this concerned the beautification of strategic areas within the city, such as administration quarters, airports, city centers, religious buildings, upper class recreational areas and a few brand new capitals such as Abuja, Dodoma and Yamoussoukro. The design of these interventions was put in the hands of professional designers, who, almost without exception, came from Europe and North America. In essence, we are still in this time of dual development, and design input by African professionals remains modest, if not absent. The only difference, perhaps, is that the foreign designers are now also coming from South Korea, China, Japan and elsewhere in the East.

In the post-independent years, new towns were planned to mark a fresh new start of the young nation. These schemes were based on the post-war modernist principles in service of the African welfare state, and aimed at including all strata of the population. In practice, these schemes proved to greater benefit the affluent classes than the poor, but they nonetheless provided frameworks for low-income residential areas in cities like Zanzibar or Dodoma. Recently, in the wake of the African boom, the interest for the establishment of complete new cities has been revived. However, nowadays, these new cities-to-be, such as the Cité du Fleuve near Kinshasa or Al-Sunut city near Khartoum, are exclusive. These shining complexes turn their backs to the existing cities, as if these are to be given up or left as a remnant of a not-too-bright past. Access to these cities is reserved for the rich, with an exception made—in a manner not too different from the colonially segregated city—only for the poor who serve the rich by day but disappear at nightfall.

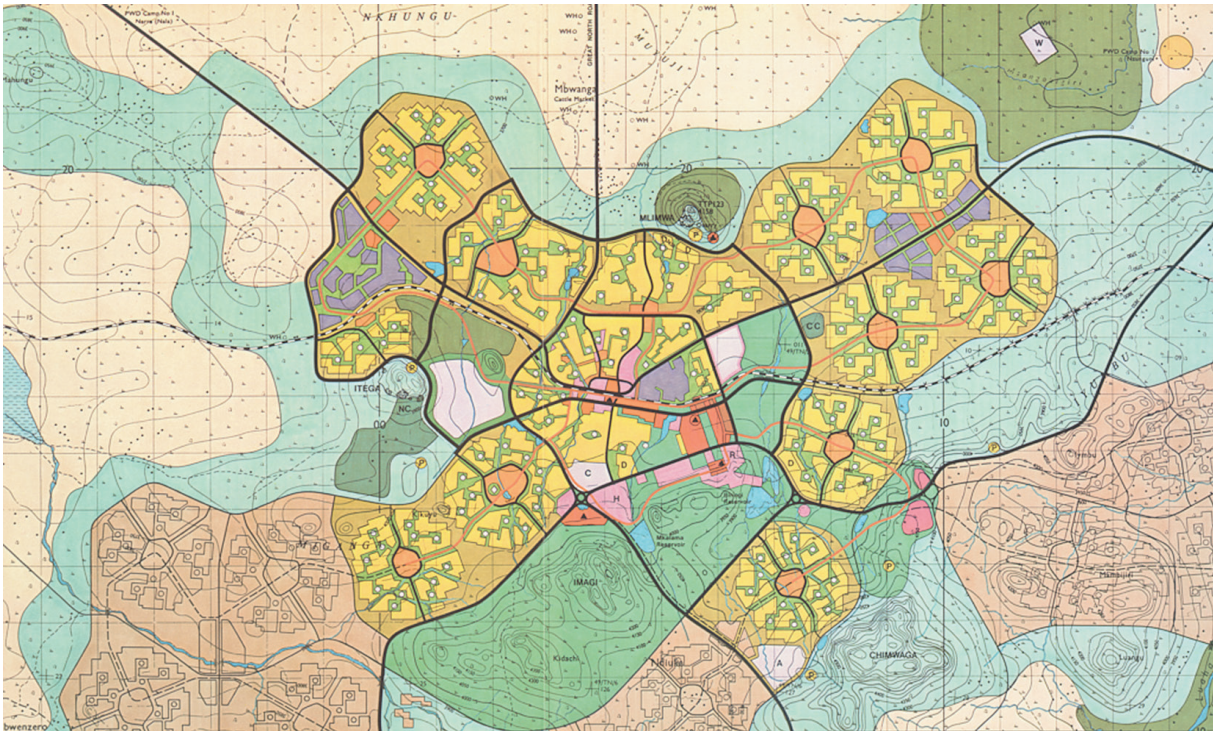
These cities, which are being planned all over the continent, have the appearance of Dubai, that early 21st-century quintessential site of successful capitalism and growth, with just a small dash of African flavor. African cities have even started in on the competition to build the tallest and greenest skyscraper, acquiring the age-old human habit of displaying new wealth via the erection of a taller tower than one's neighbors. The example to follow, of course, is Dubai's Burj Khalifa, now the world's highest skyscraper. The design of these buildings is predominantly in the hands of foreign architects, but African

architects, many of whom are following in the footsteps of Pierre Goudiaby Atépa (he architect responsible for the design of a number of striking buildings in West Africa in 1990s), are emerging on the stage as well. This may be a burgeoning trend: the recent international awards given to Francis Kéré, who received both the Khan Award for Architecture and the Holcim Global Award 2012 for his work in Burkina Faso, and Peter Rich, who received the 2009 World Building Award for the Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre in South Africa, will certainly boost the self-confidence of African architects.

In terms of urban design, the situation is different. As was mentioned above, modernist western design paradigms are making room for a more Asian-style modernity, in which the African angle is largely lacking. This is probably due to the scarcity of African urban designers. In African academic training, urban design is lagging behind, and city development still the sole realm of surveyors, urban managers and engineers. And yet, African creativity in urban design is waiting to be channeled and unleashed. However, the process of documenting, discussing and promoting African city design has recently been taken up by organizations such as ArchiAfrika in Accra, the African Centre for Cities in Cape Town and African Architecture Matters in the Netherlands.



Le Corbusier, Plan Obus, 1931



Dodoma 1976 Masterplan by PPAL

Despite this general dearth of African urban planners, three pioneers who have begun to embed African thinking in modern city design are worth highlighting here. The first is the Benin-born architect Masudi Alabi Fassassi, who has been active since the 1970s and has undertaken an extensive analysis of multiple traditional African towns in his book *L'architecture en Afrique noire: Cosmoarchitecture* (1997). Fassassi sees the city plan as a symbol of society and culture, and, not as a utilitarian tool as the modernists did. In relation to African urbanism, he has written of the notion of a “teratological city,” a term derived from the science of teratology, or the study of developmental aberrations, which describes a city that, at its foundation, is subject to a deviation that we cannot fully know or quantify through rational means.

The second urban-design pioneer to note is the Nigerian-born scholar Nnamdi Elleh, who took up the challenge of making a kaleidoscopic inventory of the African architectural world, which resulted in his book *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation* (1997). In it, Elleh comes to the conclusion that Africa has always been receptive to foreign architectural thought and, at the same time, has been highly influential in the development of modern architectural thought itself. The West’s exclusive claim to modernity is mistaken, he asserts, and it is time for

the African thinkers and designers to claim and state their modernity, which, though it has remained somewhat hidden, has been quietly developing over the past 150 years.

The last pioneer I’ll mention is the Congolese artist Boudy Isek Kingelez, who sensed and translated African modern thought into a world of maquettes in the 1990s. With these models, which are made of cardboard and scrap material, Kingelez conjures partially imagined cities like the *Ville Fantôme* (1996), a blueprint of a future African city that still is in a limbo, a spirit that may guide us into a new world. That Kingelez touched a sensitive string in the African mind has meanwhile become apparent in the design work of fellow artists, and more recently in the exercises of architectural students all over the continent.

It goes without saying that the future of design of the African city is in the hands of these students. In this light, the current change of focus by ArchiAfrika to education in architecture and urban design in Africa has been an important decision. The ArchiAfrika conference that will take place in June this year in Accra will be the first time in history that African architectural schools will come together to discuss and make plans for the education of architecture and urban design—and without the tutelage of western institutions. With any luck, these students will become the African city designers of the decades to come.