Urbanization, Urbanism and Urbanity in an African City: Home Spaces and House Cultures,

Paul Jenkins, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 274 pages, ISBN: 978-1-137-38016-6, £62.00

(Hardcover).

Urbanization, Urbanism and Urbanity in an African City draws on the international and

interdisciplinary research program entitled "Home Space in the African City" which ran from

2009 to 2012 funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research. This publication is

timely and useful for scholars and practitioners interested in fresh and in-depth

understanding of contemporary African cities particularly against the backdrop of the recent

unprecedented urbanization process in the African continent.

The book presents an interdisciplinary research approach that is methodologically committed

to empirically grounded studies of Maputo, although this may not be clear to a casual reader.

The work is embedded in architecture/urbanism and anthropological/sociological enquiry

having the impetus from the author's living and professional experiences. The author

advocates for this approach to bring out the site-specific processes of urbanization that

ultimately pose so many challenges to dominant theorizations of urbanism. The book aims to

contribute to a contemporary critical empirical approach to African urban studies as

advocated by Myers (2011), Murray and Myers (2006) and Robinson (2006). The author does

so by filling a knowledge gap between historic North-centered attempts to empirically

understand the African city.

The author organizes his theoretical and practical explorations into four main separate

sections with each putting forth his argument in an orderly manner, but it is not uncommon

to find one theme creeping into the discussion of another (e.g. nature of urbanism, the

concept urban and the challenges that African urban dwellers are grappling with). This synthesis of themes highlights the uniqueness, richness and complexity of urbanization in Africa which is distinct from the simplicity of the univocal dystopian view of the 'Africa urbanization debate'. While the first section (Chapters 1-2) summarizes the author's main argument, reviews recent literature on African cities and provides an intellectual introduction to the key concepts discussed in the book respectively, the next two chapters introduce the macro and meso level in-depth case studies through brief review of trends of urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa and Mozambique's location within the discussion. Chapter 5 concentrates on an overview of the metropolitan area of Greater Maputo (thus, Maputo and Matola) and then examines the physical expansion in recent decades as well as providing background to the recent Home Space research program study area. In the third section (Chapters 6-8) a case is made for a focus on home spaces and house culture. Chapter 6 presents the selection of life stories which highlights glimpses of urban residents' life, work and home which underpins the form of urbanism for households and their wider families across the peri-urban area of Maputo. Chapter 7 relates the integrated findings of the study while the subsequent chapter (Chapter 8) discusses key topics from the research program including the critical role of endogenous knowledge in understanding African cities. The final section (Chapter 9) revisits the opening arguments concerning "ways of seeing" the emerging African city and further discusses the implications of an approach which is not state-centric, yet does not absolve the state from its responsibilities. In view of this, the author calls for a more critical empirical research based on trans-disciplinary approaches as the basis for better understanding of the city. Each chapter of the book begins with a brief introductory overview which brings the reader closer to the real understanding of urban life in Africa with emphasis on the nature of urbanism in the African region in the current context of rapid urbanization,

and in so doing, challenges some of the 'received wisdom' of how cities "should be" through focusing on empirical understanding of what the city is, how it changes and the aspirations of the majority of urban residents for what it "can be", hence the form of urbanity they express.

The book focuses on the level of the household and the unit of analysis used is the "home space" – a concept developed by the author to both denote the physical space within which peri-urban households dwell as well as the way people live in this space. The unit of analysis allows the author to study the socio-cultural acts of dwellings as well as the physical space of dwelling and extrapolated from this to the wider form of urban development. The book highlights the physical urban development of Maputo tracing it from the pre-colonial (early period of 1885), colonial (between 1885-1975), post-independence (1975-2010) histories and to the contemporary period of 2010 onwards (p. 79-104).

The book exposes the inability of the state to adequately provide the needed urban infrastructure. Hence, it argues that the informal sector has comparative advantage over the state in playing this critical role. In view of this, a point is made that, in most cities of sub-Saharan Africa, home making is predominantly the domain of urban residents with limited engagement by the state and regulated private sector. The argument is made against the backdrop that, state-led urban development has not been effective in Africa, hence the author calls for the need to understand the dynamics of these processes. To this end, the author identified two gaps with respect to urban development in Africa; the gap between defined need and actual provision in the formal systems, and the gap between actual demand and supply (whether formal or informal). The author focuses on the nature of the latter gap which is seen as key to more successful alignment between officially defined needs provision and such systems.

The concluding Chapter 9 queries key issues (such as the nature of rapid urbanization in Africa and the difficulties in defining the concepts 'urban' and 'slums') regarding how they are conceived and defined, pointing to the fact that standards used in defining the aforementioned concepts are inevitably general and non-contextualized. The author calls for understanding African cities for what they are and not for what they should be. The author highlights the usefulness of "mental models" used in understanding as well as "organizational forms" applied in action.

Ultimately, what I appreciate most in Jenkins' writing is how his book is contributing to current empirical writing of African urban studies, thereby attempting to reframe the African urbanization debate by querying how cities in Africa are 'studied, discussed, theorized and written about' (Chapter 9). Jenkins offers hope to urban scholars, practitioners, and activists alike in the form of a mode of theorization and analytical inquiry that creates new forms of urbanity and urbanism in Africa.

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References

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