

Towards Sustainable African Urban Design Concepts

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Abstract : Sub-Saharan Africa is the world's fastest urbanizing region, but approximately 60 to 70 percent of urban African households are poor and living in slums. Although influential global institutions such as the World Bank propagate a new approach to housing and land policies, sustainable African urban concepts have yet to be applied significantly or even convincingly conceptualized. Most African city planners, urban designers, architects, policymakers, and developers have been trained in Western curriculums and continue to practice and plan according to such formal paradigms. Only a few activists promote Post-Colonial Afrocentric urbanism, recognizing the imperative of foregrounding the needs of low-income people. There is a vast body of authoritative literature on analyzing poverty and slums in sub-Saharan Africa and on promoting the need for land and city planning reform. However, of the latter, only a few venture beyond advising and sometimes outlining policy changes. The current study moves beyond a purely theoretical discourse into the realm of practice by designing replicable diagrammatic concepts at different urban scales. The guiding philosophy was that land-use concepts and urban requirements favoring low-income households must be fully integrated into the larger conurbation. Information was derived from intensive research over two decades, involving literature surveys and observations during regular travels into East and Southern Africa. Appropriate existing urban patterns, particularly vernacular and informal, were subsequently analyzed and reimagined as precedents to inform and underpin the represented design concepts. Five interrelated concepts are proposed, ranging in scale from (1) regional to (2) cities and (3) urban villages to (4) neighborhoods and (5) streets. Each concept is described, first in terms of its context and associated issues of concern, followed by a discussion of the patterns available to inform a possible solution, and finally, an explanation and graphic illustration of the proposal. Since each of the five concepts is unfolded from existing informal and vernacular practices studied in situ, the approach is entirely bottom-up. Contrary to an idealized vision of the African city, this study proposes actual concepts for critical assessment by peers in the tradition of architectural research in design.

Keywords : african urban concepts, post-colonial afrocentric urbanism, sub-saharan africa, sustainable african urban design

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