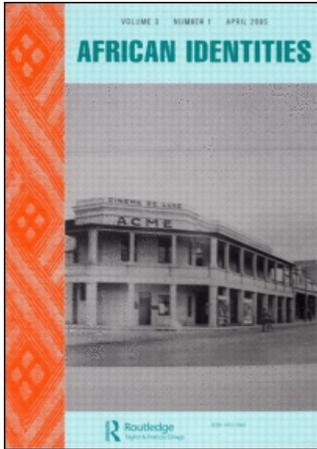


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# Imperial legacies and postcolonial predicaments: an introduction

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*Fassil Demissie*

The idea for a special issue of *African Identities* focusing on contemporary African cities caught in the contradictory logics of an imperial past and postcolonial predicaments emerged while convening a colloquium on 'Colonial Architecture and Urbanism in Africa: Intertwined and Contest History' which was organized by the Centre for Black Diaspora at DePaul University in 2005–2006.<sup>1</sup> The colloquium was aimed at exploring the cultural role of colonial architecture and urbanism in the production of meanings, in the inscription of power and discipline, as well as in the dynamic construction of identities. Like other colonial institutions, such as the courts, police, prisons and schools that were crucial in establishing and maintaining political domination, colonial architecture and urbanism played pivotal roles in shaping the spatial and social structures of African cities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although a number of the colloquium participants addressed the connection between colonial past and postcolonial present, the venue was not designed to explore in depth the postcolonial predicament of African cities. A separate undertaking was carried out to invite other scholars to participate in the discussion about postcolonial African cities where intense social and spatial claims to postcolonial citizenship and modernity are constantly negotiated in the context of the deepening crisis of African states to provide adequate quality of life and security to an impoverished citizenry. Increasingly, African cities and the material and social condition of their existence are further undermined by the globalization process which limits their capacity to provide even the minimal conditions of habitable living for their inhabitants.

This special issue of *African Identities* is an attempt to forge a productive encounter between postcolonial African cities and recent scholarly intervention to problematize African cities as spaces where the urban inhabitants are reconfiguring and remaking urban worlds, deploying their own forms of urbanity born out of their historical and material circumstances. It is in these new dense urban spaces with all their contradictions that urban Africans are reworking their

local identities, building families, and weaving autonomous communities of solidarity made fragile by neo-liberal states.

Urban Africans throughout the continent are creating and recreating dense social networks, flows, exchanges, and knowledge with their own architectural and urban development imprints. Indeed, the pace of the new forms of African urbanity has been accelerated in recent years by the deepening political and social crisis that has engulfed African cities. This has necessitated wider discussion and debate about postcolonial urbanity. Recent studies bear testimony to the fact that such debates about postcolonial African cities have indeed begun within the continent; urban Africans, despite limits of resources, are remaking and imprinting postcolonial cities with their own forms of urbanity (Simone and Abouhani 2005; Enwezor *et al.* 2002).

In recent decades postcolonial theory and postmodern urban geography have turned their probing lenses on various forms of cultural production associated with the postcolonial city. What has not been examined in depth, however, is the connection between African cities and the postcolonial setting. Despite the decidedly spatial imagery of many of the models of postcolonial narratives, most of the debates surrounding these texts have focused on such factors as race, gender, language and nationality in the construction of colonial and postcolonial subjectivities, rather than geographical issues of spatiality.

In much of the postcolonial literature following the departure of colonial rule, a moment of euphoria erupted among postcolonial elites who had hoped that colonial cities in Africa would be transformed into engines of national development, not just for the individual countries but for the continent as a whole. Modernization projects such as airports, universities, hospitals, expansion of highways, hydroelectric projects, the construction of new civic buildings, new apartment buildings, banks, insurance companies as well as national theaters were undertaken by the postcolonial states and private individuals as markers of modernity and modernization. The location, style and materials used to produce these projects were influenced by broader trends in international urban design, politics and economics.

The immediate decade of postcolonial Africa saw the advent of increased state intervention not only in the planning of the economy, but also in the rise of a closely related impetus related to physical planning to accelerate the modernization process. Great hopes were placed in rural and later urban development by state bureaucracies, international aid specialists, urban planners and architects. These hopes which underpinned the decolonization process began to unravel as the postcolonial state sank further into deeper crisis brought about by globalization and the neo-liberal policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. At the same time, the idea of the African city as a unified and dynamic space associated with the 'national project' of the postcolonial state – as a space of social and cultural integration as well as with the production of national consciousness – began to dissolve. Since then, African cities have witnessed the multiplication of social actors and transnational affiliations, as well as the increasing prevalence of forms of subjectivity that are more fluid,

mobile and flexible than during the earlier decades. At the same time, African urban dwellers are creating a dynamic social and material world born out of their historical circumstance despite the harsh and often brutal conditions imposed by the policies of the IMF, the World Bank and the postcolonial state.

### Imperial legacies

Throughout Africa, the physical imprints of colonialism are evident in the form of military garrisons, churches, hospitals, trading centres, prisons, schools, agricultural and mining barracks as well as urban centres. These colonial built forms scattered throughout the continent were constructed at different times characterized by different architectural and urban planning traditions of various European colonizing powers (Portugal, Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and England) which are stark reminders that colonialism was not just an economic, political or military project. It was also spatial whose imprints are still visible throughout the continent long after colonialism's official demise.

Colonial cities in Africa were designed and built by various European powers along the coast or in the interior to extract rents, crops, and minerals from rural areas and for exporting goods internationally. The strategic location of these cities was determined by their relative closeness to the sea or navigable river, and proximity to mineral, agricultural and local labour resources. Given the differing motives of European colonial powers in establishing colonial cities in Africa, the function of these cities was tied to the metropolis. For example, in West Africa, colonial governments began to implement large-scale production of goods such as timber, rubber, cocoa, and palm oil by organizing a trade monopoly. These projects heavily taxed peasants, provided support to local rulers, and required the implementation of policies that relied on forced labour. On the other hand in Central and Southern Africa, colonial capital began to exploit the vast reservoir of minerals and agriculture by relying on migrant labour. To obtain a cheap labour force for mining, settler agriculture and later manufacturing, land was expropriated, taxes were imposed and African agriculture was left to stagnate and deteriorate.

As trade and commerce began to expand throughout Africa, cities began to attract migrants from rural areas to work in the commercial sectors of the colonial economy. In addition, European settlers of various countries and nationalities, as well as those from other countries, began to migrate to many parts of colonial Africa, particularly to the settler colonial societies of Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Algeria, in large numbers, often at the encouragement of the colonial governments to work and administer the embryonic colonial economy.

The expansion of the labour intensive incipient manufacturing economy enlarged the need for more labour to process raw materials and commercial products of an increasingly integrated colonial economy. As more displaced

African workers moved to the cities in search of work and to raise money to pay for rising colonial taxes and debts, the subsistence basis of African peasantry in the rural areas began to change fundamentally, hastening the steady stream of impoverished African peasants migrating to the cities. The process was also accelerated by chronic rural poverty and the inability of the rural areas to sustain African subsistence production. In addition to the meagre and desperate living conditions of Africans in the rural areas, recurring drought, soil erosion, livestock overstocking and competition from settler farms contributed to the decline of African agricultural production. Colonial agricultural and labour policies also significantly put additional pressure on African agricultural production in terms of restricting farmers' access to land, capital and labour, which, together with the declining capacity of the rural areas to support farmers and their families, drove thousands of Africans in search of employment in the cities. For those who migrated to better their lives and those of their families, colonial cities offered new hope with uncertain futures. However, despite precarious employment and a relatively higher wage than earned in the rural areas, African wages did not keep up with inflation. Fluctuating economic cycles and periodic swings in colonial economic activity often produced destitution and urban poverty. Those without any visible formal employment resorted to all sorts of informal employment, often leading a precarious existence working as washers, street vendors, barbers, shoe shiners, etc. However, the majority of the Africans migrating to the cities were temporary migrants, circulating throughout their working lives between colonial cities and rural areas.

African peasants who have chosen to migrate to colonial cities rather than face starvation, found themselves in wretched slums, sprawling shanty towns and other temporary places of residence without any visible means of support. The overcrowding and unhealthy conditions created an environment for the transmission of many communicable diseases, particularly tuberculosis.

Initially, little attempt was made to enforce racial divisions by the local colonial authorities even though different areas in the city were set aside for different races. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial medical practice and racist discourse provided the pretence for imposing residential segregation in many colonial cities. Colonial medical discourse and Christian missionary healers identified the African body as the source of communicable diseases – a body that was considered to be a threat to the settler white population (Vaughan 1991). Colonial municipal health officials therefore began advocating the creation of segregated African townships away from European residential centres. As Swanson (1977) has argued, the 'Sanitation Syndrome' and the general European fear of large number of Africans living in close proximity began to shape colonial urban policies and practices. Thus colonial medical discourse provided the context for the radical spatial reorganization of cities on the basis of race which resulted in the creation of 'native townships' to accommodate the growing urban African population. On the eve of the First World War, numerous 'native locations' began to be established in many parts of colonial Africa. However, the size of these 'native location' differed widely and

these residential areas emerged to be the foundation of African residential areas in colonial cities.

Colonial administrators and planners responded to the growth of Africans in colonial cities by attempting to shape the built environment in ways they thought might lessen the threat of plagues, overcrowding and violence to Europeans. For example, colonial municipal officials in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Harare, Nairobi, and Kinshasa as well as in other colonial cities used public health concerns informed by the prevailing colonial medical discourse and practice to remove and relocate Africans to less desirable parts of the city.

With the accelerated industrial expansion and African urbanization, housing conditions in African townships worsened. Overcrowding and the substandard housing conditions together with the spread of communicable diseases began to threaten the health of the African workforce employed in the mines and in the emerging industrial and commercial sectors. With these concerns embedded in paternalism, 'civilization' and progress, municipal authorities and local business leaders began to call for improvements in the living conditions of the African townships.

In the aftermath of the First World War colonial administrators, doctors and other municipal functionaries turned to the new discipline of town planning both to further residential segregation and also to persuade the African urban population that their interest (jobs, housing, and health) would be best served in the newly segregated areas built at some distance from European residential areas. Situated on the distant horizon and out of sight, these segregated African residential areas were built on the least desirable land characterized by a landscape of monotony and abject poverty. It was from these shanties and urban slums that thousands of African workers – gardeners, 'nannies', street cleaners, office and factory workers in overalls, suits and work dresses, travelling by bus and on foot, converged on the colonial cities to relieve Europeans of the mundane tasks of daily life. Ironically, these segregated spaces also served as an incubator for the development of African trade unions and national liberation movements.

The development of colonial cities in Africa coincided with the use of architectural and urban planning technologies designed to domesticate the urban geography and ecology of the city where the 'sword, cross, money ... colonial administrators and its military men, the church and its proselytizing activities' (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, p. 28) became essential utilitarian tools of the alleged colonial 'civilizing mission' – a vision informed by the nineteenth-century Western notion of development aimed at transforming the 'backward and primitive' societies of Africa into an Enlightenment project through education, sanitation, and trade and wage labour. These colonial endeavours were understood within the narrative construct of civilization forces and modernity radiating out from the newly industrial European epicentre to suburbs, the rural hinterland and the 'Dark Continent'. Racial segregation through zoning, legislations limiting the movement of African to cities, and other colonial laws were introduced to ensure tighter control over African populations. The aim was

to create a permanent clerical, artisan and unskilled class of urban workers with temporary residence permits, but without any rights.

While residential segregation is a feature of colonial cities in Africa, housing, urban and industrial legislations have specifically evolved out of colonial state policy to control and regulate spatially the existence of Africans in urban areas. It was through the differential allocation and control of urban space that the colonial state has been able to maintain the rigid system of control which has been one of the pillars of colonial rule in Africa. Thus, state control over the allocation of urban land has had direct implications for the character of African housing and the amenities provided to Africans living and working in the urban areas. Yet, the degree of control over the movement of Africans to the cities depended to a large degree upon the effectiveness with which local municipalities enforced influx control legislation already in place. Local authorities were reluctant to enforce the laws in part because the legislation represented a barrier to local industries' access to cheap African labour. Therefore, to a great extent, local municipalities resisted the state's attempt to tighten influx control regulations. Because of the attractive wages in the industrial sector, especially the early 1930s, Africans were moving in large numbers to the cities. Hence, the implementation of various urban policies had little impact on the pace of African migration and urbanization. The phenomenal growth of the African urban population and its precarious existence in the segregated townships was viewed as a dangerous threat requiring systematic regulation and control.

From the beginning, African workers and their families reluctantly accepted mine, commercial and industrial employment in colonial cities. As colonial subjects and workers, they endured multiple forms of exploitation, both in the workplace and where they were forced to live. Others endured personal and family sacrifices and made painful adjustments which often required that they leave behind loved ones in the rural areas to find employment in the urban centres. The adjustments were painful as they travelled back and forth between the rural areas and the colonial urban centres. Those who were forced to reside in the urban slum yards and shanties permanently actively contested one of the central contradictions of a colonial and racially segregated society: the politics of a place to live.

### Postcolonial predicaments

Haunted by legacies of empire, out of the field of vision for much of western academia, African cities are moving away from the 'nation building' project assigned to them by imperial powers and postcolonial states. As sites of postcolonial citizenship and modernity, African cities have become spaces for 'negotiations and agreement where new organizations and services, freedoms and autonomous spaces are emerging and developing – many of which are improvisatory – new types of exchanges, development and subsistence, forms of

solidarity and resistance are produced' (Enwezor *et al.* 2003, p. 19). However, for those who occasionally visit the continent, African cities are often perceived as spaces of disorder, chaos, ungovernability, poverty, physical and symbolic violence as represented in the writings of journalist Robert Kaplan (1994). The urban apocalypse suggested by Kaplan and other journalists emphasize the phenomenal growth of urban poverty, rampant communicable diseases, unmanageable urban growth and the breakdown of infrastructure and provisions as proof that African cities have entered a condition beyond the reach of human intervention and without any viable options for urban development. Such images of perpetual urban crisis is reproduced and mediated by a host of national and global institutions as cautionary tales of a dystopian future of African cities, signalling the impending collapse of the continent itself. These responses, however, one-dimensional and simplified, bespeak the complexity of African cities and the limitations of trying to impose a master narrative. As Raymond Williams reminds us, the persistent force of an over simplified contrast between 'the city' and 'the countryside' in the contemporary period underlines the fact that this contrast 'is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and the crisis of our society' (Williams 1973, p. 347). By 'experience and crisis' Williams was referring to those continuing changes in the social and economic relations which have been so intimately tied to the process of contemporary capitalism and its particular urban forms.

Over the past three decades, the discourse of development theory as it related to Africa has focused on urban policies and shelter strategies as part of a broader intervention by the state and international organizations, particularly the IMF and the World Bank to 'alleviate poverty, unemployment and inequality in Africa'. As Burgess, Carmona and Kolstee (1997, p. 17) have argued, these interventions have focused on 'balanced growth with redistribution measures; the stimulation of small-scale enterprises, and labour intensive technologies; the deregulation of the urban informal sector; and the introduction of transfer technologies in public services and expenditures'. Given the structural and institutional framework within which these microeconomic policy interventions were developed, the urban problems facing African cities, particularly high unemployment, escalating poverty and widening inequality, have actually worsened. As many African countries faced declining growth rates, balance of payment deficits, ever-increasing debt, and declining flow of foreign investment, national and municipal governments throughout Africa were unable to provide minimal services to urban dwellers. Much of the infrastructures of African cities have also been slowly decaying with little or no investment to upgrade existing urban facilities.

One of the most persistent arguments advanced by the IMF and the World Bank has been the need of African states to adopt a set of political, economic and institutional reforms to reverse the crisis facing the continent. In this regard, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) became the dominant development discourse based on neoliberal supply-side theories of development that stressed

market determination of wages and prices to allocate production input and finance much to the detriment of social welfare and related policies.

The IMF and the World Bank have insisted on the need for African states to slash government spending, particularly expenditures on services that are crucial to the urban poor, the vulnerable and the aged (education, health, housing, water, etc.). This has meant privatizing public assets, removal of import controls, devaluation of currencies, and opening up African economics to exploitative foreign investment as a necessary condition to bring wealth and prosperity to the continent itself. At the level of cities and municipalities, a World Bank consultant argued in the 1990s, that

important change in policy thinking in the developing world is closely linked to the acceptance of market-oriented economies: the growing acceptance of rapid urbanizations .... An emphasis on national economic growth and export-led development will usually mean that new investment resources must be directed to already successful regions and cities .... Government has considerable control over the entire cost structure of urban areas. Public policy should be directed to lowering these costs.

(Bond 2005, p. 339)

Lowering these costs means privatization of municipal services (water, electricity, sanitation and sewerage, schooling and even health care services), cost recovery schemes, restructuring local government conducive for private sector investment, cutbacks in civil service, elimination of urban subsidies and increasing the role of private sector investment in urban infrastructure and housing development.

In the aftermath of the imposition of a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) by the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s in a number of African countries as a condition to getting new loans from both institutions, African cities entered a new crisis characterized by the collapse of urban services, growing poverty, high rate of unemployment, disease and urban decay coupled with physical and symbolic violence.

Two divergent accounts emerged to account for this new phenomenon. The first descriptive account is represented in the writings of Robert Kaplan (1994) on Lagos. The urban apocalypse suggested by Kaplan is also reflected in the works of other journalists who point to the growing poverty, disease and uncontrollable growth as proof that African cities have entered a state beyond recovery and rehabilitation. The second approach is presented by a group of African and European researchers conducting critical studies of African cities. While sharing some of the descriptive accounts offered by journalists, these scholars offer a different interpretation of issues facing African cities, focusing on the current economic roots of the crisis, the legacy of colonialism and the negative impacts of globalization. At the same time, they also draw our attention to the ingenuity with which African urban residents have developed novel strategies to the structural and social crisis confronting them. In the last five years, the convergence of architectural and cultural theory as well as critical urban studies, often focused on major art exhibitions held in Europe and Africa have produced critical works on African cities.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of the journal begins with Alfred Ndi's piece about the need to theorize about the postcolonial West African city where urban Africans with their complex 'informal economics' (craft, street vending, shoe polishing, 'smuggling' etc.) are 're-villagizing' the cities by superimposing their indigenous cultures, institutions, traditions, norms and practices and in the process decolonizing the city itself. Ndi stresses that any approach to the study of the postcolonial city must carefully consider the complexity and fluidity which characterize the nature of contemporary African cities.

William Cunningham Bissell explores the continuing hold of colonial categories in the contemporary constructions of African urbanism even in the context where the city is rapidly being transformed by globalizing processes. Bissell examines the urban plans and programmes for conserving the Mji Kongwe in Zanzibar as a cultural property to promote the flow of capital and tourism. Bissell argues that politics of conservation and the contemporary process of urban development have recentred outmoded anthropological categories and practices complicating the discourse of development in the most unexpected and problematic ways.

Ann S. Lewinson writes about the utility of 'civic space' in the context of contemporary African cities. While social theorists generally agree on the role that civic spaces play as sites for the unfolding of African modernity, Lewinson's case study of Dar es Salaam reveals that such spaces are inscribed with social class identity, particularly those of the middle-class professionals who occupy important places within the state and private sector.

Meg Samuelson explores the works of Sello Duiker, Phaswane Mpe and Yvonne Vera. Focusing on literature by these three recently deceased novelists and tracing their urban worlds back to *Drum Magazine*, Samuelson analyses both the emergence of urban imagination which characterizes the work of these writers and also discourses of the city in southern Africa where gender issues have been written out of the city space. For Samuelson, the work of Duiker, Mpe and Vera to create a space for women affirms the centrality of gender in shaping and representing the city.

Susan Baller considers the notion of vacant spaces in the urban landscape in the Pikine/Guediawaye – a suburb of Dakar (Senegal). Rather than considering such spaces as 'empty' awaiting urban development projects, she examines how these sites provide an arena for social and cultural practices, which transform them into spaces with multiple functions and meanings. She examines how the inscriptions of such spaces often associated with youth serve as sites for the construction of urban identities, where dreams and desires of the urban youth are performed.

Albert Fu and Martin J. Murray examine the cinematic representation of Oliver Schmitz's *Hijack Stories* (2000) of post-apartheid South Africa where the director utilized different genres to represent Johannesburg. Both authors seek to illustrate how post-apartheid Johannesburg is a place of hybrid identities, not only in the different spaces of the city, but also through the influence of global hip-hop cultures, as well as the real and imagined perceptions of the city's 'citizens'.

In the concluding section Fassil Demissie examines the changing urban landscape of Kinshasa through the recent work of Belgian photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart whose images capture the transformation of the urban geography of city

and the lives of those whose existence has been irrevocably altered by forces outside their immediate control. The images captured by Marie-Francoise Plissart in Kinshasa resonate with those that one sees in Lagos, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Addis Abeba, and Luanda as well as in many other postcolonial cities of Africa.

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### Note

1. An edited volume with the same title is now in preparation.
2. The mega art show such as *Century City* (2001) in London, *Africans: The Artist in the City* (2001) in Barcelona, *Depth of Field* (2005) in London, *Lagos: STADTanSICHTen* (2004/05) in Berlin and Stuttgart, *Documenta11\_Platform4* in Lagos, and the work of Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas' project on Lagos.

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