Increasing the Relevance of Urban Planning Education in African Cities

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ABSTRACT

The Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS) is a peer-to-peer network of 50 Universities in Africa that teach urban planning degrees. In 2008, the AAPS received funding from the Rockefeller Foundation to enable a project on revitalizing planning education. This comprised two parts: a program on curricular reform and network building and a second on case study research. This piece reflects on the rationale for these two initiatives and the outcomes thus far. The important underlying theme is that a renaissance in African planning education is closely associated with shifting value constructs and conceptualizations of what urban planning is, and what its function is in the contemporary African city.

Keywords: African City, Curricula, Informality, Planning Education, Urban Planning

INTRODUCTION

The image of urban poverty in African countries is a familiar sight in the popular and academic media. Unlike the conditions that underpinned early industrialization in Western Europe, urbanization in Africa is hard to predict and overwhelming for many under capacitated city governments. Contrasting with Latin American countries, the end of colonialisation occurred relatively recently (in the mid 20th Century) and its influence is still discernable in the shape of cities and the laws that govern them. This extends to urban planning. The instruments that are intended to create livable urban environments are in many cases still based on northern paradigms. Urban planning legislation and frameworks derive from previous colonial regimes and have, in many cases, not been replaced with contextually relevant instruments.

The UN-Habitat’s Global Report on Human Settlements: Planning Sustainable Cities (2009) provides an exceptionally clear exposition of this dysfunctional internal management of cities, especially in Africa. It is a view widely reflected in the academic literature. The report emphasizes the role of urban planning in addressing this as one of the many challenges facing cities. It also stresses the unpreparedness of many urban planning systems and the graduates that work within them in rising to these challenges.

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African planning schools operate in a context in which urban planning practices, national planning legislation and planning curricula remain largely inherited from their older colonial past, and continue to promote ideas and policies transferred from the global north. As such, many of these ideas and practices are inappropriate in contexts characterized by rapid growth, poverty and informality. In order to confront the urbanization pressures on the continent in all its unique dimensions, fundamental shifts are needed in the materials covered in urban training programs and in the methods used to prepare practitioners.

To this end, the Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS) a network of 50 universities across African that teach urban planning degrees, have embarked on several projects aimed at revitalizing planning education. This process has been recorded in two publications (See Odendaal, 2012; Watson & Odendaal, 2013) with an emphasis on the process of network building and the resource constraints faced by planning schools in Africa. This article provides an overview of this initiative and what it could mean for the future of African cities.

AN URBAN FUTURE

Most urban regions around the globe have experienced tremendous spatial change over the last 50 years as technological innovation has accelerated in tandem with economic, social and cultural globalization. Cities have grown in size and population, some dramatically so, especially in the global south. Many urban conglomerations have changed in terms of their dominant economies, their demographic distributions and in terms of urban form. The majority has experienced high degrees of fragmentation, social polarization and reduced infrastructure performance.

It is now a well-established fact that practitioners need to prepare for a future in Africa that is urban. UN Habitat predicts that the increase in urban population in developing nations between 2007 and 2025 is to be 53 million, 70% of the world’s population will live in cities by 2050, most of them in the global south (UN Habitat, 2009). Growth rates in the developing world have slowed down however, from just less than three per cent in 2000 to 2.4 percent in 2010, but this is still three and a half times higher than the annual average population growth rate in the north (UN Habitat 2012). There is some debate on the extent of urbanization in Africa. Potts (2012), for example, questions the data that informs such claims, and highlights some examples of slowing urbanization. Important to recognize, is the fact that there are varying patterns of urbanization across the continent and more reliable data is needed in understanding such patterns.

Intervention in African urban spaces not only needs to contend with inadequate service infrastructure and housing backlogs, but also territorial growth within a context of climate change and increased risks from natural disasters. This is not the urbanity and industrial development that informed the evolution of the urban and regional planning profession in the early 1900s, but a less predictable and more volatile unfolding that many policy makers on this continent find overwhelming and threatening (Pieterse, 2010).

Economic life in African cities is not predictable. Livelihoods for the many unable to access work in the formal economy or secure permanent homes rely on a range of strategies to survive. Informality as manifested in informal work and trade and settlements is a visible feature of urban life for those at the margins. Inadequate access to shelter, work and land causes many to rely on marginal livelihoods. In many Sub-Saharan African cities, this constitutes the majority: 62% of the urban population live in slums and 60% work in the informal sector whilst in Francophone Africa alone, 78% of urban employment is informal (UN Habitat, 2009). The policy context is often uncertain, planning systems are ill equipped to deal with the informal economy in particular and official intervention is unpredictable, causing many to work in insecure conditions (Skinner
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