4.0 Africa; Post-Colonial vs. World Cities

This chapter examines the historical context of African post-colonial cities as relevant to world city discourse. This examination unpacks how the historical and social legacies of colonialism are still played out and contribute to the world city system itself. This chapter examines how the West typically perceives Africa and how some Africanist thinkers are attempting to open up spaces for alternative narratives. The relationships between culture, identity, and the spatial social reality that is created within African cities by this process are also examined.

The fact that the current hegemonic thinking on urban policy and discourse is based on neo-liberal and capitalist assumptions has very serious implications for African cities. The legacy of the capitalist colonial system has created very challenging realities for African cities to face, and yet many of these cities are now judged on standards that are impossible for them to meet due to these very same realities. Many African thinkers and leaders have accepted this dominant world city discourse and policy, and therefore much of Africa’s urban planning and thinking is understood within this capitalist and distinctly Western paradigm. There are serious questions as to whether a line of action that is intrinsically still linked to the historical legacies of colonialism and based on current neo-liberal economic policies, will enable African cities to ever “catch-up”. An even more telling question is that even if they do catch up in strictly economic terms, would they ever be able to break out of the symbolic stigmatization that is also a post-colonial legacy? It is also necessary to point out that underlying all these questions is also the assumption that catching up to Western standards is the inevitable and “right” outcome for African cities. When discussing how African cities live up to, or fail to live up to the world city criteria, it is also important to continually challenge these assumptions.

This chapter focuses on some of the social and economic challenges that may prevent African cities from ever achieving world city status, but also examines some of the underlying negative perceptions that on a symbolic level continue to prevent African cities from ever being considered as dominant players within the world city system.

The African post-colonial city is emerging from a radically different historical backdrop to most current world cities. It can be argued that for most African cities to meet the various criteria of
world cities a radical economic, political, and social overhaul of the entire world system would be required. As David Simon explains:

European imperialism and colonialism predicated on mercantile and then increasingly industrial capitalism, supplanted indigenous politics, societies, and economics with exploitative new colonial states and companies, usurping both natural and human resources and thereby creating Africa as a dependent and externally oriented 'possession' of foreign powers……although the world economy today has been structurally, technologically, and organisationally transformed ….. comparatively few of the new states have significantly altered their inherited position and role within it. (Simon, 1992: pp. 3-4)

He goes on to explain further,

The origins of contemporary globalisation lie firmly in the relationships established by nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial capitalism and its associated forms of colonialism.” (Simon, 1992: p. 33)

Simon goes onto argue that this unequal relationship ensured that the growth of colonial cities, was “not developed primarily through some local dynamic or for the benefit of local populations, instead their establishment, growth, and development were externally driven as an integral element of the colonial project.” (Simon, 1992: p. 22) He points out that this has left its physical imprint on these cities as even “architecture, urban layout and planning reflected European styles, fashions, and norms,” (Simon, 1992: p. 22) The basis for the formation of world cities was already in place then, as the colonizing power became the “centres of capital accumulation and political, military, and social control…[with] power, authority and investment capital …derived from …and owed to…the distant core.” (Simon, 1992: pp. 22-23) According to Simon, “this exploitative dominance-dependence relationship lies at the heart of what Castells (1977) called ‘dependent urbanisation in the Third World.’” (Simon, 1992: p. 23)
When analysing Friedmann’s world city criteria (see p. 16) in relation to African cities, it is clear that few, if any African cities currently meet these criteria. Friedmann’s initial description of a world city, whereby “the form and extent of a city’s integration with the world economy, and the functions assigned to the city in the new spatial division of labour, will be decisive for any structural changes occurring within it” (see p.16) do not bode well for most African cities. Most African cities extent of integration into the world economy is minimal as the functions assigned to African cities are still at the bottom end of the economic spectrum, mainly extraction of raw resources for export. In terms of the new economy of information, knowledge, and cultural production, African cities also sit at the bottom of this hierarchy. They produce next to no cultural products that are consumed by the West within this new economy, but are rather the passive consumers of the West’s cultural production. Within this situation, the West’s influence exceeds its economic influence, extending into the realm of the symbolic in terms of how African cities and their residents perceive their own spaces and their own identities within this global system.

Referring to Friedmann’s third descriptor of world cities, the low-skilled labour intensive structure of African cities highlights their lack of “global control functions.” (see p. 16) African cities also do not meet Friedmann’s second or fourth criteria for world city status as they certainly are not “used by global capital as ‘basing points’ in the spatial organization and articulation of production and markets.” (see p. 16) While within the continent there are cities that are regional basing points for capital, such as Lagos and Johannesburg, within the global capital system, these cities are still minor players. Also these centres are not centres of production of either industrial or cultural commodities for their markets, but rather act primarily as distributors and markets for Western products. Similarly the handful of African cities that may in fact have concentrations of capital on the continent, certainly do not count in terms of “the concentration and accumulation of international capital.” (see p. 16)

In fact, there is only one main criterion of world cities that African cities can lay claim to, and yet this phenomenon has created untold problems for these cities; that “as points of destination for large numbers if both domestic and /or international migrants.” (see p. 16) African cities are well known destinations for immigrants, (both legal and illegal), and refugees from less stable parts of the continent. However regulated immigration and naturalization are not realities for most of these cities and therefore they grow at an
uncontrolled pace that has led to massive growth without the relative growth in infrastructure and support mechanisms needed for such an influx. In turn this has led to the perceptions of African cities as chaotic, unregulated, overcrowded, and underdeveloped.

The spatiality of African cities is based on built environments that are the legacy of colonialism and the physical manifestation, exploitation, and inequality, inherent to the system. Yet it is within these physical spaces that millions of Africans now try and survive. Therefore it is necessary to look at the built environments of African cities and the way in which city planners continue to perpetuate these legacies to the possible detriment of African urban dwellers.

During the colonial era, “the structural inequalities of colonial relationships found expression in highly structured and rigid social stratifications that were reinforced by the visibility of ethnic and racial phenotypes.” (Simon, 1992: p. 26) Simply put the Europeans were the elite and the indigenous African populations subordinate. This relationship manifested at all levels of the colonial project, from the economic structure of employment, to the physical layout of the cities, whereby indigenous urban masses were forced into peripheral ghettos at the edges of the colonial city. Simon points out that this social stratification has had long lasting historical implications for African cities with the “institutionalised organisation and maintenance of (often extreme) social distance on the basis of race and ethnicity.” (Simon, 1992: p. 27)

The physicality of this social distance as expressed in the city is one of the most tangible legacies of colonialism. The physicality of the city is thus powerfully symbolic. The physicality of the African city is intrinsically foreign and symbolic of a form of social production. As Simon explains,

Central to the process of social production and reproduction of urban form and fabric is the nature of perception, especially by the bureaucrats, planners architects, and politicians whose world view represents the new dominant ethos. (Simon, 1992: p. 157)
In other words, African cities still retain the physical remnants of colonialism from the architecture, roads, and transport systems, to the housing and access to amenities. African cities at first glance look very similar to Western cities in terms of architecture and layout and are therefore expected to function as Western cities, despite the local and historical realities. As Simon describes it, “the social production of urban form in the built environment reflected imported European value systems without embodying any significant local elements.” (Simon, 1992: p. 74) The African city is a physical manifestation of European colonialism with its innate hierarchies and inequalities intact. In the decades since independence, little has structurally changed within this built environment and capitalist values are still expressed in African cities’ formal planning, as “ultramodern or post-modern office blocks rise incongruously behind slum dwellings of wood, mud, and galvanised metal sheets.” (Simon, 1992: p. 74) It is possible to argue that even within African cities one finds a distinction, based on Western sensibilities that still segregates African space from modern or Western space with the African space still perceived as disordered and chaotic.

Simon points out that while the infrastructure of many African cities is in decay, “the style of many commercial buildings in the CBD’s have changed markedly in recent decades…..[which] reflects the continued politico-economic dominance of international and national capital.” (Simon, 1992: p. 160) These new buildings “increasingly mirror what is sometimes called ‘international' modern styles derived from advanced capitalist countries, and boasting marble or other stone, reflective glass and stone exteriors.” (Simon, 1992: p. 161) African urban planners continue to plan on the Western model with a focus on making the city hospitable to capital and investment, this despite the realities of major rural to urban influxes and the importance of meeting the needs of the new class of urban poor. Simon points out that in these countries, “a high proportion of domestic capital is being channelled into commercial property, where profits are high and can be achieved comparatively quickly. “ (Simon, 1992: p. 161)

Historically the growth of African cities has been based, as Simon points out, on external rather than local drivers. The African colonial city became a magnet for hinterland rural populations, yet within the African context, the traditional distinction between urban and rural is not so precise. The post-colonial African city bears features of both urban and rural life, with the spatial segregation of these masses to the peripheries of the city still a very real
situation. These periphery housing sites, “regarded as problematic and unsightly by local authorities, the elites, middle classes and most foreign visitors…are essential to the urban poor.” (Simon 1992: pp. 10-11) The masses of urban poor in post-colonial African cities live in close proximity to a built environment designed not for them, but rather for capitalist functions and commerce.

As Simon also points out, even “thirty five years after decolonisation on the continent began relatively few substantive amendments to the corpus of inherited planning law and practice have been made.” (Simon, 1992: p. 145) He points out that many of these city planners or foreign or foreign trained and there is little if any public consultation. The ever growing urban-fringe in African cities is causing major challenges that are simply not addressed by these types of planners. Lack of access to transport and basic services are further perpetuating the physical isolation of these underclasses. The built environment of the African city both symbolically and physically perpetuates an inequality that is both derived from and helps to maintain the basic capitalist system.

As seen from the arguments made by Simon, African cities continue physically and symbolically to perpetuate Western ideals of growth and progress and this fact is crucial to understanding the way in which these cities are perceived by the West. It is clear that most African cities, while attempting to emulate capitalist centres, do not have the resources to do so, and in trying to do so, are perpetuating inequality and marginalisation of their own residents. These cities still segregate Western and African spaces in their attempts to integrate economically and structurally within the world system, as well as symbolically and culturally. By trying to emulate Western architectural and lifestyle trends, and relegating their problems to peripheral and unseen spaces, African cities are hoping to be perceived as world cities.

The perceptions of Africa and African cities within the dominant world system and world city discourse are also a legacy of colonialism and are based on Western and Eurocentric understandings of order, progress, and growth. What is revealed is that the “march towards civilisation”, a legacy of colonial thinking, actually underpins much of world city discourse. Cities understood to live up to these Western ideals are considered more successful than others. Since Western ideology has historically had the power to support its ideas, Western
paradigms of understanding the world have generally been accepted both in the West and in the regions it conquered. Not only was it physically manifested through the colonial system, but many post-colonial thinkers have accepted this ideology within their own minds. Many current African leaders are still operating within the colonial mindset and as Mbembe explains, post-colonial governments still use “colonial rationality” that make it impossible for them to comprehend the “possibility of the autonomous African subject.” (Mbembe, 2001: p. 14)

The way in which the West understands and defines Africa has become a hotly contested topic for many African thinkers who hope to deconstruct and undermine these dominant narratives. Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall look very clearly at this issue and come to the conclusion that within Western discourse, the continent has been relegated “to the twin provinces of anthropology and development studies.”(Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: p. 350) According to them, in this view, “there can be no authentic description of Africa that does not touch on witchcraft, kinship, poverty, or chieftaincy.”(Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: p. 350) For the authors, the implications of this are very real in that

this translates into an implicit view of Africa as a residual entity, the study of which does not contribute anything to the knowledge of the world or the human condition in general. (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: p. 351)

They go on to point out what this means for the understanding of the African city. According to them,

anthropology, history, and literature have long seen Africans as fundamentally rural creatures, while like elsewhere, the African city itself has been perceived as an emblem of irresolvable conflict. (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: p.353)

Mbembe has written extensively about the ways in which the West has historically viewed by Africa as a metaphor of “absolute otherness” (Mbembe, 2001: p. 2) Mbembe goes on to explain that according to Western views, this sense of “otherness” has specifically negative connotations:
Africa stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West’s obsession with and circular discourse about the fact of ‘absence’, ‘lack’, or ‘non-being’ of identity and difference of negativeness, in short, of nothingness. (Mbembe, 2001, p. 4)

Mbembe posits that Africa is still dealing with the implication of the way in which “African bodies were captured during slavery as…the West’s efforts to change itself, to construct new kinds of economies and identities.” (Mbembe, 2001: p. 17) These colonial economies and identities are still a reality for many Africans and this “colonial reality” still manifests through “Africa’s geographic boundaries, national languages, political structures, and its weak economic relationship to the international community.” (Mbembe, 2001: p. 18) According to Mbembe:

Western domination imbues the African with a ‘foreign’ powerfulness, which Western reason, efficiency, and propriety defines and defends itself against. Africa is designated with an oppositional power that infuses Western identification with fear/wonder love/hate of the noble/savages. (Mbembe, 2001: p. 18)

He goes on to point out that in order for Africa to start controlling its own destiny it is “not a process of overthrowing a static power, but undoing this relationship that renders the weak strong by virtue of being weak.” (Mbembe, 2001: p. 19) African cities’ attempts to enter into the world city system would be in direct opposition Mbembe’s world view. In fact, one could argue that by attempting to enter into the world system as it is defined by the West, African cities are set up to fail, or at least to deny their own identities in exchange for the colonial reality. Thinkers such as Mbembe would argue that to try and enter the world system willingly and compete on the West’s terms is to demonstrate a colonised or “captured mind” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 19) Mbembe points out, “Africans certainly dream of two cars in a garage, 100 cable channels and a cellular phone. But their inability to acquire these things is as much a sign of their oppression as it is their failure to be dominated.” (Mbembe, 2001: p. 19)
A similar point of view is expressed by Chabal and Daloz, who claim that

Africa has often seemed to represent either the initial stage of our notion of Progress or the dark opposite of what the west is taken to represent. (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: p. 141)

They go on to explain further that Africa is categorised in its failure to develop along this path as deviant, and that African cities are used as clear-cut examples of failure, chaos and disorder within the hierarchical world city system. However, Chabal and Daloz point out that African cities do not in fact represent a pathological failure to develop, rather they have simply developed differently to the West. They explain that “the political, social, and economic logics of contemporary Africa come together in a process of modernisation which does not fit the Western model of development.” (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: p. 143) However, these African cities are not lacking in order, but instead

the disorder is in fact a different order, the outcome of different rationalities and causalities. It appears as disorder only because most paradigms are based on a notion of a form of social, economic, and political development which reflects the experience of Western societies. (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: p. 155)

This view would posit that the very uniqueness of African cities, that which is perceived as negative by the West, is actually the strength that is feared by the West. Thinkers such as Mbembe, Chabal, and Daloz, while not necessarily vocalising an alternative voice, do argue that Africans should find space to act outside of the system, outside of theory, in opposition to the trend whereby “Western powers [have] sought to bring order to Africa…resistance, if it is to have a chance must be murky and chaotic; demonstrate a willingness to occupy the unoccupiable.” (Mbembe, 2001: p. 83) Mbembe is positing that the perceptions held by the West of Africa, as chaotic, disordered and murky is the very space in which Africa must find its strength and resistance.

There are other voices speaking in opposition to the dominant world city discourse with the African or third-world experience in mind. Jennifer Robinson describes the process whereby
third-world cities “that have large populations but do not qualify on the global theorists criteria as connected to the global economy are usually relegated to the category of ‘mega city.’” (Robinson, 2003: p. 264) She goes on to explain further,

Following the mega city / global city dualism, each perspective invokes a future that emphasizes either those areas or sectors with globalising potential or those that fail to conform to some or other norm of city living. (Robinson, 2003: p. 268)

She posits another possible view:

Anthony King proposes that we consider all cities to be world cities. To do this we need to be mindful of the range of processes that shape cities and to ensure that we do not privilege the ‘global’ as a site of operation, or only fixate on certain phenomena with an apparently ‘global’ reach. (Robinson, 2003: p. 263)

She also quotes thinkers like Richard Tomlinson, who claim that to think that solutions that have worked in the north would work here is simplistic. As she puts it,

Tomlinson, for example, asks whether the future of Johannesburg can any longer be imagined through a Euro-American urban development lens. One alternative is to imagine the future of Johannesburg as an African city. ‘American conceptions of inner city decline and appropriate policies may blind policy makers to local opportunities not found in American inner cities’ (Tomlinson, 1999, 9: 1 as quoted in Robinson, 2003: p. 275)

According to Tomlinson, there is “‘unlikely to be a renegotiation of the Johannesburg vision unless investment opportunities are found in what is African about the city.’” (Tomlinson quoted in Bernstein & McCarthy, 2002: p. 62)

In trying to improve the situation in African cities, a lot of attention has been paid recently to these kinds of indigenous approaches as posited by thinkers such as Mbembe. This type of
thinking is further described by AbdouMaliq Simone who sees the people of African cities as a powerful form of infrastructure:

> African cities are characterised incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is supposed to be inhabited and used. (Simone, 2004: p. 407)

This viewpoint proposes that new approaches to African cities "must be constructed from the bottom up, using a new formulation of citizenship that is culturally sympathetic to indigenous practices as a basis for the formation of new political and development institutions." (Simone, 2004: p. 246) This social based movement would be based on African understandings of social practices and community. This more informal understanding of social structure and policy development also has economic implications.

Based on the context laid out above, it is clear that when African city planners embark on a path of cultural planning to revitalise cities, the ultimate goal is to appeal to Western sensibilities. Therefore issues of cultural representation inevitably get bound up with the West's normative perceptions of development and also of what is African. Issues of identity and culture become issues of global perception and acceptance leading once again to a situation where Africans are in a position of being defined in relation to the West.

It is necessary to question if is it the inevitable and natural outcome that African cities will, and should, become part of the world system in the first place. The process also raises the question as to whether these cities that remain perceived as "African" by the West will ever be accepted into the system. But perhaps, the most important observation to note is that as far as the world city system has historically developed, most current world cities would not exist were it not for their historical dominance over other territories, such as Africa. Therefore in a sense, the system itself is based on Africa’s cities remaining in their historically inferior position within the system. This would render it impossible for African cities to ever truly become viable nodes within the system.
Therefore when one moves on to investigate how cities attempt to integrate into the world city system through the use of arts and culture, it becomes even clearer that the process for African cities is by no means simple. As has been shown, Africa is operating within a system that continues to perceive it in ways that negatively affect its ability to compete within the global system. Yet, many African countries and cities are still attempting to utilise the policies and directives of the world city system, one of these being the use of arts and culture for economic regeneration and symbolic renewal. The next chapter examines how this type of policy thinking has manifested within the South African context.