The Aims and Objectives of the Book

The overall aim in producing this book is to extend recent writing on African cities, with a focus on physical urban development issues, and in so doing, to critique key concepts used in contemporary analysis (and subsequent policy and practice). As noted in the acknowledgments, the book draws from four decades of a wide range of urban experience as well as specific recent empirical research in Mozambique. It is the author’s intention that the book is intellectually situated between human geography or cultural studies of African urban areas (which often critique contemporary concepts) and typically more normative work in these urban areas (often short-term, highly local, and instrumental in nature) undertaken under the rubric of “development.” As such the book seeks to contribute to a new critical empirical approach to African urban studies, as advocated by a number of researchers, such as Harrison et al. (forthcoming), Myers (2011), Murray and Myers (2006), and Robinson (2006).

The key theme embedded throughout the book is that African cities are much misunderstood in current writing, especially concerning physical urban development, as many texts start from a normative perspective, which is based on premises that are derived from idealized perceptions of the city and the role of the state. The book turns this approach around to focus on African city dwellers’ actions and perceptions concerning the built environment, contrasting these with the “received wisdom” concerning what the city and its physical manifestation should be. In so doing the book aims to contribute to filling a knowledge gap between historic North-centered attempts to empirically understand the African city (such as that of the so-called Manchester School of the 1940s and 1950s, based at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Lusaka); the fragmented aid-funded...
normative research from the 1970s onwards (which tends to be self-reinforcing and not query concepts); and more recent work (mostly after 2000) within a postcolonial tradition of urban studies (which queries concepts but often with a limited empirical basis).

Over two decades ago, Catharine Coquery-Vidrovitch wrote the following. Arguably, over two decades later, we still have limited empirical understanding of Sub-Saharan African cities and how they function, let alone adequate analytical concepts and frameworks.

As long as we lack a theoretical and historical account of the forces that underpin global differentiations, we remain unable to account for processes that lie at the heart of African urban underdevelopment: the integration of the household into new networks of capitalist production; the invention of a new web of concepts and practice on land and land laws, on housing and rental; new patterns of foodstuff consumption; new regulations governing social and political life; all of these processes involving new relationships to the broader political economy which is definitely neither Western nor native behavior.

(Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991).

This is partly due to the “peripherality” of Africa in urban theory, as argued by a number of researchers (e.g., Ferguson, 2006; Myers, 2011; Robinson, 2006), but probably as much, if not more, due to the practical difficulties of undertaking empirical urban research in the region. The nascent postindependence “intellectual infrastructure” in Sub-Saharan Africa (in terms of research capacity through—e.g., universities) was definitively undermined by structural adjustment and the withdrawal of the state across the region in the 1980s and 1990s (as it is governments that fund most such research worldwide, directly or indirectly). This has been particularly the case for urban issues, as the funding for research from international development agency sources, which continued after this period, has generally focused on the “rural” and ignored the “urban.” The research that has been possible in the above circumstances has thus tended to be either highly instrumental and normative, or very local and focused (for instance through academic research such as doctoral studies, more often than not by international students and academics). This, at least, has been the author’s experience over the past three decades.

The outcome of the above situation is a dearth of empirical material of reasonable depth (in methodological coherence) and sufficient width (for more general analysis). More so, the