The Intellectual Approach of the Book

A Brief Overview of Recent Writing on the African City

As noted previously, there has been an increase in publications concerning African urban areas in the past few years. Of importance among these publications is the United Nations’ (UN) “State of African Cities” reports (2008, 2010, with 2012 as yet not published at time of going to press). These reports synthesize current trends in urban analysis to some extent, but also provide data-sets that are generally in short supply elsewhere. These latter are, however, highly dependent on the data availability for each nation-state and this also depends on definitions—such as that of what is “urban”—which is usually a territorial/administrative definition. In addition, the analysis tends to be quite conservative and of limited criticality, given the nature of the relationship between the UN and nation-state governments. However these documents are important sources of quantitative and qualitative material on urban areas in the region. Doubtless there is substantial “grey literature” available in each country on urban issues, but not much of this is widely available, even in the countries themselves, except to the dedicated “collector.”

Widely published material on African cities in fact tends to be either academic or journalistic (sometimes a mixture) and in various cases does not focus on Africa per se but on cities of the South more generally but with an important emphasis on Africa (e.g., Davis, 2007; Robinson, 2006). A brief survey of titles in print on African urban areas recently produced some 26 books published in English since 2000, with another four in press or planned in the next year or
It is important to note here, that the nature of global “intellectual infrastructure” includes not only academic (and other) research capabilities, but also publishing mechanisms, and this latter is still highly North-centric despite some associations between North-based and South-based publishing houses. Book publishing is of course market-driven as publishers are in business for profit and this clearly affects the nature of the books accepted for publication. Some countries in the region (mainly South Africa and Nigeria) have considerable internal markets and thus some internal publishing capability, but this does not mean wide international distribution of the output. Academic journals are even more limited in their distribution and access, especially in the region, due to the hegemonic costs associated with these by many publishing houses. Moves to provide free repositories of academic research and free-to-access internet-based journals (with costs borne by authors) have to date been slow and uneven, with limited coverage of urban issues in Africa to date.

Of the 26 or so widely published books noted above, around half are the product of conferences and/or “expert group meetings,” and published as edited collections (some of these also include commissioned material), and the other half are based on sole authorship (in fact this is true for more of the recent texts surveyed). The coverage of these books is wide-ranging both geographically and thematically, with edited collections being the most wide-ranging in both aspects, and some of the sole authored material the most focused. The “intellectual approaches” adopted fall into anthropological, sociological, geographical, physical (planning-housing-architecture), post-structural and historical discourses, in other words: a wide range across the social sciences, arts, and humanities.

The literature reviewed in this chapter focuses mainly on the interface between how the architecture/planning discourse deals with “housing” (acknowledging the extensive literature that treats this as a verb/process and also as a noun/product) as well as anthropological/sociological examination of ideas of “home,” as well as “urbanism.” These two intellectual approaches have had a fairly long tradition in urban studies in the South. The former includes such classics as John Turner’s work in the 1970s–80s (e.g., “Housing by people,” 1976) and the latter such as Amos Rapoport’s classic “House form and culture” (1969). To this can be added perhaps the pioneering work of Paul Oliver on vernacular architecture (starting with “Shelter in Africa” 1971, and ending with “Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture,” 1997). The publications of these authors established quite active