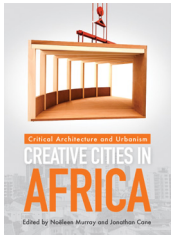




Pan-African indicators for creative cities

BOOK TITLE:

Creative Cities in Africa: Critical Architecture and Urbanism



Cities in Africa are increasingly in the spotlight as the realisation dawns that contemporary urbanisation in the Global South is rocketing ahead, at an accelerated rate and scale that Euro-America has not known. But it is not all about “the economy, stupid” – as the expression goes. This well-known catchphrase is attributed to James Carville, who coined it in 1992 while campaigning for Bill Clinton, advising that the political race was largely an economic one.

Cities are growth drivers but also incubators of social imagination, without which societies struggle to reinvent themselves for a future in which urbanisation is a global mega-trend. Africa and Asia are at the sharp end; it follows that southern cities are indicators of entangled polycrises that others have yet to see, and their creative responses are all the more beguiling.

Cue a newly published book from HSRC Press on the ‘creative cities’ concept, from the vantage point of Africa. It makes a valuable contribution, from a multicity perspective. Its editorial approach draws upon Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* and his methodology of the convolute – assemblages of research, sketches, collections, notes and cuttings, as the Introduction sets out. *Creative Cities in Africa*, as an assemblage in itself, invites a less instrumentalist notion of the subject matter, as productive responses to the nested complexities that accelerated urbanisation brings.

The first chapter sets the tone. It is about a fantasy city – Ville Fantôme created by Bodys Isek Kingelez. This large-scale art installation of plastics, paper and recycled materials is a bold and playful imagined megacity, “making a noisy claim for its own cityness, for cityness in Congo, and African cities in general”, writes Jonathan Cane – also the book’s co-editor with Noëleen Murray. Cane follows the cue of Filip de Boeck and Sammy Baloji, that Ville Fantôme is a “prolegomenon” – that is, a preliminary to a work of complexity. His chapter operates this way too. The book grapples with less tangible aspects of what a creative city might be while forging a plausible set of indicators through a pan-African prism.

Each chapter cuts into the topic in a distinctive way, the authors using varied methodologies that range from ambulatory thinking to everyday urbanism, a single building as lens, an unreal city, ‘ruins’, short stories, artworks, and a public park. The case studies move the reader from city to city, with the African continent as shared referent and conceptual anchor. The volume as a whole, in its urban juxtapositions, manages the tricky balancing act of respecting contextual difference while seeking commonalities.

After Villa Fantôme, a hopscotch through the continent begins in Johannesburg. Chapter 2 is about an iconic bridge that has arguably come to represent the interests of the elite and narratives around nation-building rather than the collective democratic values of the person whose name it bears – Nelson Mandela. Chapter 3 moves to Lubumbashi in a considered reflection of urban design, using walking as a research tool. It’s about learning to read the city’s signs and back routes or pathways invisible to an outsider – *katricher*, as it is known. Chapter 4 makes parallels between Dakar and Cape Town by referencing both the rise and fall of respective monuments and memorials, paying particular attention to literal and figurative scaffolding – or “not-yet” space. Chapter 5, on Nairobi, is about the hold planning still has on imaginaries about the African city.

Next up is Douala, with Chapter 6 apprehending creativity as embedded in the quotidian. Chapter 7 looks at singer Miriam Makeba’s home in Dalaba, and Ângela Ferreira’s artistic rendering thereof. It uses sounding as a methodology – as related to the sonic, but referencing critical architecture and urbanism to posit a hybrid, messy modernity. Chapter 8 also takes a single building as a lens – this time the former Durban home of a Hindu association, to offer a spatial biography of socio-cultural connections and how it expanded incrementally to become a significant urban actant. Chapter 9 on Maputo is a lyrical contribution that begins with buildings, critiques the discourse of ruin via short stories, and ends with an artist turning buildings into stories. Chapter 10 returns to Johannesburg, offering a notion of the “empathic” city in Paterson Park on the Louis Botha “corridor of freedom” – a placemaking initiative by the City of Joburg to infrastructurally restitch what spatial apartheid has fragmented.

Creative Cities in Africa demonstrates a rich variety of approaches to rethinking the topic, from the empirical to the more poetic, and what it might mean from a pan-African perspective. Its multidimensionality celebrates a complexity that is often elided for more singular narratives, countering in the process rising exceptionalism. It should have crossover appeal, not only to scholars and researchers in urban studies and creative fields, but also to practitioners, policymakers and anyone invested in re-imagining city futures.

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ISBN:

9780796926487 (softcover, 214 pp)

PUBLISHER:

HSRC Press, Cape Town; ZAR395

PUBLISHED:

2023

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HOW TO CITE:

Gurney K. Pan-African indicators for creative cities. *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(3/4), Art. #19190. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/19190>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:

7 March 2025