

**Book Review to the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography***  
**Garth Myers (2011). *African Cities: Alternative visions of urban theory and practice*.**  
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In *African Cities: Alternative visions of urban theory and practice* (2011), Garth Myers offers a reading of urbanization and urban livelihoods in Africa that is refreshingly untied to pre-determined lines of inquiry of materialist or poststructuralist critique. Myers gracefully manages a critical conversation across a wide diversity of authors contributing to urban studies in Africa (and elsewhere). For this reason, Myers' *African Cities* is an essential volume for students and scholars of this rich field of inquiry. The book offers a thoughtful and critical experiment with the possibilities and constraints of theory and practice in the rethinking of what urbanization in Africa is, where it is going, and which alternative futures may be imagined for it. As such, Myers' volume is an inspiration to those who study cities elsewhere outside of Euro-America (Asia, Latin America or the Middle East) or even to those who study European cities that have remained on the borderlands of mainstream urban scholarship (e.g. Southern European cities).

Myers is seemingly aware that the job of re-imagining urban theory from an African point of view requires some level of intellectual liberty. He evokes Ed Soja and the (dead?) 'LA School' as a starting point for his theoretical and practical pursuits from Lusaka into the world. This is the first sign that Myers is unencumbered by theoretical fads or dogmas in scrutinizing the realities of urban livelihoods in Africa. Myers is also cautious about grand generalizations for a unified African urbanism, a task that is as much unproductive as inconclusive. Instead, he is methodologically committed to empirically grounded and comparative examinations of individual cities. He advocates this approach to bring out the site specific processes of urbanization that ultimately pose so many challenges to dominant theorizations of urbanism. Myers also sees this endeavor as a necessary step into developing what Edgar Pieterse terms the 'relational city', which requires scholars, practitioners and policymakers to come to grips with the realities of the urban poor majority in the continent. Myers illustrates his thinking with critical analyses of reports of international organizations as well as snippets of stories from his own fieldwork and stories imagined by others in literary works about Africans in Africa and elsewhere. In doing so, Myers signals his commitment to an ethnographically underpinned theorization of the urban condition in Africa and a willingness to embrace a diversity of sources and sites for such theorization. Using examples of postcolonial city-building, service provision, of music festivals, and fictional accounts of diasporas and transnational Africans, Myers experiments with alternative forms of urban critique which are as much attentive to injustice as to the possibilities of hope — even if ultimately unfulfilled or falling short of achieving desired ends.

Myers organizes his theoretical and practical explorations into five main themes that traverse and shape urbanization across African cities, albeit in different ways: postcolonialism, informality, governance, violence, and cosmopolitanism. He cautions the reader that these themes have been around for a while and treated extensively by African scholars, a testament to his longstanding knowledge of and contribution to the field. Yet, Myers' ability to discuss the main practical and theoretical conundrums of urbanization in African free of jargon and with conciseness deserves praise. Myers tackles each theme in a chapter, but it is not uncommon to find one theme (e.g. postcolonialism or informality) creeping into the treatment

of another (e.g. governance or the 'wounds' of violence, crime or war afflicting African urban dwellers). This crossover of themes highlights the richness and complexity of urbanization in Africa in contrast with the simplicity of the univocal dystopian view of the 'Africa talk'. The introductory stories Myers begins chapters with are effective in bringing the reader closer to the reality of urban life in Africa and in showing the multiplicity of meanings, practices, and activities going on there. The book does not shy away from portraying the difficult circumstances under which many ordinary urban dwellers live in Africa and to tying these to colonial and postcolonial histories and to more contemporary power struggles and inequalities.

What is at times unclear is the extent to which Myers seeks to remain squarely within the geographical boundaries of sub-Saharan Africa with his theorizing and practical insights. Does he want to use Lusaka to understand other African cities, or does he want to extend the scrutiny within the loose (and elusive) boundaries of the global South (use Lusaka to understand Mexico City or Manila)? Does he hope his undertaking will extend to the (also elusive) global North (use Lusaka to understand London and New York)? Irrespective of Myers' intellectual direction, *African Cities* remains an important contribution to urban theory. It will certainly entice the interest of scholars regardless of their geographical location and disciplinary allegiance (whether in anthropology, development studies, geography, history, or planning).

Ultimately, what I appreciate the most in Myers' volume is how this is a book of hope. In his attempt at reframing how cities in Africa are "discussed, studied, theorized and written about" (p. 1), Myers offers hope to urban scholars, practitioners, and activists alike in the form of a mode of theorization and analytical inquiry that is keen to search for alternative urban futures.