

African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice by Gareth Myers, London: Zed Books; 2011, 224 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1848135093, £70.00 (Hardback), £18.99 (Paperback).

African Cities consists of 6 chapters (plus introduction and conclusion), which collectively conceive of an urban space in Africa using imaginative, literary and artistic references. Individually, Myers draws on Soja's influential work on the 'post-metropolis' and specifically the "six discourses" of Los Angeles (Soja, 2001:38) as the principal organising mechanism for the book. As such, the book offers individual accounts of the emerging post-metropolis in Africa, the state of postcolonial cities, informal cities, governance, and crime/warfare. This method is highly enlightening. First, as the author argues in his introduction, most western students will have a notion of African cities as 'wounded spaces' – whether by war, famine, disease, poverty, political turmoil – and this book dispels this. Second, while on the one hand there is a growing disconnect between the western-centric urban literature and the realities of the African continent, there are also several parallels. In Myers's examination of the post-metropolis in Lusaka in Chapter 1, what he presents is evidence of 'profound material changes' in African cityscapes, which amount to a restructuring, deconstruction and reconstitution of urban space on a grand scale. This book goes some way then to reasserting the relevance of African cities within a wider urban discourse, as well as reasserting the urban in critical African studies. Third, Myers provides a critical theoretical perspective on the state of the African continent, which is intended to assert alternative imagery of Africa, which necessitates new and distinct theoretical frameworks. However, the fact that African cities are so

multiplex; 'quite different from one another in patterns, processes, forms, and functions' (p7) does raise a question about the book's attempt to bring these together coherently in one volume, which is never really addressed in the work.

Myers offers a refreshing take on African studies which provides a welcome departure from the prevailing literature on Africa, which has tended to be dominated and distorted by accounts of urbicides, poverty, bribery, warfare, and slums. There are 6 main chapters, each addressing a separate theme or perspective on the city. In chapter 1, Myers draws on the changes occurring in Lusaka to examine the prospect of an emerging post-metropolis in Africa more widely. Using a series of constructs inspired by Soja's (2000) work – post-colonialism, informality, governance, violence, and cosmopolitan – Myers examines the changing spaces of African cities. He concludes that whilst Lusaka is a 'worlding city' (p37), exceptional in being connected to the rest of the world, in other respects it is also quite ordinary. The fact that Lusaka is living with the temporal consequences of colonialism as well as spatial legacies creates unique spatialities, which produce trends and patterns replicated in other African cities. Thus for Myers, Lusaka speaks of other African cities!

In chapter 2, Myers explores the vast topic of post-colonialism in Africa, a well-established discourse with recognised links to different areas of human geography. The chapter provides a summary of the main debates and key areas of reading, and will be welcomed by students looking for a short introduction to the field. In chapter 3, informal settlements are explored as a way of examining informal cities. Elsewhere in urban studies, informality through e.g. the informal economy has been associated with unregulated, often illegal areas of activity. The fact that there is a strong trend towards informalisation in African cities has

led to many western assumptions about the use of informal arenas as a stop-gap to more formal economic and political development whereas what is argued here is that it requires a more nuanced understanding about the role of informal institutions in state and society. For example, in West Africa, informal settlements have not been considered to be squatter settlements or slums because informal rules governing their development were so well understood. Compare this with the perception of 'bidonvilles' in North Africa by colonial regimes as dangerous and disorderly zones of resistance (p74).

In Chapter 4, urban governance is treated perfunctorily in terms of 'neoliberal good governance' and 'post-structuralist' approaches, which in many respects underplays the hugely influential role of governance and dominant elites in Africa over time. In the second half of chapter 4, the analysis of 'justice' in the African context is treated more substantially and is both theoretically and empirically informed. In Chapter 5, the *Wounded City* draws exclusively on Mogadishu and Somalia, by drawing on a wide range of political and military literature. Similarly in chapter 6, cosmopolitanism is viewed through the lens of Somali and Zanzibari diasporas and the views of artists, writers and exiles as a type of 'alternative vision'. One might ask however, to what extent cosmopolitan cityscapes have connection to Somali and Zanzibari diasporas or "transnationalisms", rather than being a 'haunting sense of abandonment', and which jars with the brief discussion of the 'festivalisation of Africa' later in the chapter (p183). Both chapters draw heavily on the work of Gurnah and Nuruddin Farah, and on the empirical experiences of the author. To my mind, this is a recurring issues and a major criticism of the entire book. While there are substantial, well informed debates in this book and the use of alternative sources, which offer a fresh perspective on

the theoretical work on African cities, the selective use of case study areas - Zanzibar, Somalia, Zambia – cannot tell us about Africa as a whole - in which there are 46 countries - nor of the thousands of cities growing there. At best, this is a collection of case studies, rich in literary and empirical sources, which argue for an alternative theoretical framework for dealing with African cities. It is not a coherent piece on all African cities and the types of development and demographic changes being experienced there currently. Furthermore, the introduction and conclusion fail to make wider links with the broader changes taking place in Africa, the broad similarities and differences between African countries and indeed cities, and therefore the scope and limitations of the case studies as representations of cities in Africa or of the 'African city'. One is left feeling that the case studies reflect the author's own connections with travel in Zambia, Zanzibar, and Somalia, rather than as sites of representation. By the author's own admission, the social spaces of Cape Town (racism) are substantially different to that of Accra in which indigenous land rights have primacy. In this sense, the extent to which Myers is able to enlighten us about the mythical 'African city' is debatable, but with this caveat in mind, this should not deter the reader from what is an engaging account of select African cities.

Rachel Granger, Coventry University