

What spatial logic reveals about the essence of African urbanism

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Studying spatial arrangements, alongside material architecture, can more accurately evidence the changing nature of urban experiences, complementing traditional approaches. TEMPEA applied this approach to African urban phenomena, revealing unexpected insights.

Most analyses of African urban changes have been framed through the lens of individual periods and social forces. This approach often presents urban growth as organic during pre-colonial times and then unfolding according to a master plan during the colonial and post-colonial eras.

The EU-supported TEMPEA project sought a more dynamic interpretation to explore the social temporality and materiality of urban processes. The project focused on determining how precolonial African towns of the last millennium took specific forms. Key to the research was better understanding of urban social and ethnic coexistence, with their implications for future developments.

The spatial logic of African towns

Compared to other regions of the world, African built environments have been studied for a

comparatively short time. Typically, these urban environments, several centuries old, have been compared with ethnographic data collected within the last 100 years.

Archaeologically, work has focused on selected sites which have been intensively studied using cutting-edge excavation and analytical methods. But so far few studies have compared the developmental characteristics of built environments in different parts of Africa, limiting the scope of questions asked and steering research in divergent directions, for example setting trends in West and East Africa apart.

"With TEMPEA we were asking how active towns were created out of these agglomerations of buildings and other architectural features? What was their essence?" explains research supervisor Professor Paul Lane.

Marie Curie Fellow Dr. Monika Baumanova developed case studies based on published excavation reports; survey results (her own and those of colleagues); maps and plans of buildings and towns; and digital data, such as satellite photographs. Some of these methods have never been applied to African datasets or archaeological sites before. As she elaborates, "Data were analysed using geographical information system (GIS) and other computer software. However, equally important were novel ways of graphically representing the analyses. As it was often not known in advance where patterns would be discovered, data visualisation was key for actually discovering results."

TEMPEA focused primarily on architectural remains built of permanent material, such as stone or mud brick. Because these structures are durable and develop over many years, they are subject to alterations and additions by multiple generations, although they may also be demolished and newly built.

This selective process of curation and replacement offers unique insights. As Dr. Baumanova puts it, "TEMPEA has shown that even with limited evidence we can learn how people saw their own history rather than simply imposing our modern values on these spaces. We can access information about the past realities of urban life, including its relatively intangible aspects, such as movement, memory and privacy. This is crucial if we want to develop urban conservation strategies that align with local traditions and concepts of heritage."

Lessons for the contemporary era

Urban growth and the complexity of the social and material worlds that people produce are perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing us today. "TEMPEA helps us understand what spatial configurations have made cities socially sustainable and the central importance of urban space's 'heritage', in both its material and more intangible forms," concludes Professor Paul Lane.

To take the work forward, Dr. Baumanova plans to extend her research to other aspects of the urban sensory environment, such as aural experiences, alongside more in-depth kinesthetic and visual experiences. She plans to explore the ways in which the layout and characteristics of African urban traditions, are comparable with coeval settlements in Europe and Asia.

Provided by CORDIS

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