URBAN MORPHOLOGY ON THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN PERIPHERY

ABSTRACT

Urban form in African cities is dynamic, unpredictable and in constant flux. Urban morphology remains mostly undocumented in Southern Africa as an emerging region. Current processes of informal land occupation, changing suburbia and incremental settlement transformation patterns present fragile, yet interesting morphological characteristics that are worthy of interpretation. How are we understanding, representing, and anticipating changing southern urban form and what is the value-add of understanding urban morphology in Southern Africa? In the absence of any formalised network of ISUF in Southern Africa, there is the potential to make a meaningful contribution to urban morphology and its associated processes and agents. Three case study perspectives from practice, research and teaching are explained to understand urban form in South Africa, as follows: 1). community-led data collection on urban form and social practice based on evidence from experiences in Cape Town townships; 2). area-based partnerships based on examples from informal settlement upgrading in Khayelitsha; and 3). deliberate and engaged teaching and learning currently taking place in the urban design programme at the University of Cape Town. Urban morphological approaches in the global south must be multi-scalar, relevant, valuable, and most importantly, affordable. This requires stripping out of irrelevant principles and techniques and focusing on low-cost, low maintenance and sustainable AI and labour-intensive of understanding the changing city. The future development of African cities needs to take a significant stand on the role of socio-economic realities, political action, local agency, and their relationships with urban form.

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KEY WORDS
URBAN MORPHOLOGY
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EMERGING NETWORK
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Urban form in African cities is dynamic, unpredictable and in constant flux. Urban morphology remains mostly undocumented in Southern Africa as an emerging ISUF region. Current processes of informal occupation of peripheral land, changing suburbia and incremental settlement transformation patterns present fragile, yet interesting morphological characteristics that are worthy of interpretation. In addition, large portions of urban centres, and infrastructure are yet to be built, bringing expectations of immense and rapid growth that will require ongoing evaluation of the changing shape of African cities. How are we understanding, representing, and anticipating changing southern urban form?

One may build on Vitor Oliveira’s question of what is the value-add of understanding urban morphology in Southern Africa. In the absence of any formalised network of ISUF in Southern Africa, there is the potential to make a meaningful contribution to urban morphology and its associated processes and agents. With this starting point, I would like to offer a view of urban morphology from Southern Africa.

Contextually, South African cities present examples of vast spatial inequality with fragmented and racially segregated urban neighbourhoods, and mono-functional land use as relics of modernist and apartheid spatial planning. The resultant character consists of an odd mix of dispersed growth patterns and inadequate urban performance with infill urban areas, developer-led office nodes and shopping malls, ‘fringe belt’ townships and expanding new informal growth.

Township settlements contain low-density sprawl of informal and individual state-subsidised housing, poorly designed urban spaces with minimal or collapsing infrastructure and inaccessible and low-quality public spaces and facilities. Reinforcing a legacy of poverty and inequality from the smallest to the largest scale through all the elements of the urban form including the region, settlement, block, plot, street, and building. So, how do we address the apparent indifferences between historical influences of urban form against the future of developing safe and resilient neighbourhoods in Southern African cities?

I feel there is much to learn from the urban transformation that is occurring on the periphery. The term ‘periphery’ builds on Caldeira’s argument to intentionally de-centre northern concepts, theoretically, practically, and visually by understanding peripheral urbanism. Peripheral refers not only to the structural and physical location in space but the position in policy (and power in government), practice (the role of urbanists), and academic platforms (research, teaching, and learning) as it upsets the power hierarchy of actors and stakeholders who, as Caldeira states, “engage transversally with official logics”. Within this theoretical context, my intention is to outline three perspectives that I have used in practice, research, and teaching to understand urban morphology in Southern Africa.

Firstly, community-led ‘off-grid’ data collection and an evidence-based approach demonstrates the reality of existing urban form and measures the
impact of wicked problems in local environments. This includes ongoing enumerations, household surveys and social mappings, particularly at the building and street scale. Resident-based information, social networks and local knowledge are used to understand spatial informants but also to identify vulnerabilities and risks, assets, and capabilities to guide the co-design of safe neighbourhoods. At the same time, digital mappings show the historical and changing building footprint at the neighbourhood and territory scale. The Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading research in Cape Town highlights multi-layered, open-source mapping software and simple low-cost, digital monitoring techniques can be used as design tools to define spaces for public intervention and monitor the activation of public spaces and buildings. This is often a field that is under-resourced and under-capacitated in peripheral settings (policy and practice) but holds immense value to urban morphology.

Secondly, an area-based partnership approach encourages people-centred design with environmental responsibility, social justice, and economic strength at the local neighbourhood scale. The approach looks at designing strategically located & impact-orientated public projects based on phased intervention possibilities. This is an unfolding and reinforcement of a ‘commons’ as opposed to a ‘plot burgage’, within which peripheral space holds the new ways of understanding emerging commons, networks, and hybridity on urban form. An area-based approach is used for upgrading informal settlements and implementation of spatial reconfiguration plans or action frameworks delineating an incremental public realm. The informal settlement is seen within the territory and connected neighbourhoods. Urban blocks (often unusual in urban shape) define an alternative infrastructure and collective tenure systems. Streets are mostly walkways, interspersed with a network of small public spaces and safe access routes. Buildings are expressed as dwellings.

The frameworks guide future legal land recognition, service delivery and housing scenarios. The approach supports inclusive participation including the capacity to deliver sustainable development goals (SDGs) aligned to Africa’s Agenda 2063. through partnerships between communities, interested stakeholders, intermediary organisations, and local municipalities. Monitoring and evaluation of urban transformation are viewed as priorities for continuous and open engagement between all parties.

Thirdly, a deliberate and engaged teaching and learning approach enables the co-production of knowledge between students, partners, and communities around the changing nature of urban form and production of space. There is something intriguing about the current emerging urban form situated within the southern periphery. Local agency and an everyday culture (as explained by a local agent from Gugulethu) in occupied space reveal a dynamic urban change taking shape in township areas in Cape Town. It is here that self-built infrastructure overlays the rigours of engineered service delivery patterns and brings into question the role of the urbanist. Not only does this add a sociological dimension to urban morphology but it encourages debating the
need for change in the study of urban form beyond the academy in the context of the southern periphery.

In summary, I argue that urban morphological approaches in the global south must be multi-scalar, relevant, valuable, and most importantly, affordable. This requires a critical reflection on not just change but flux, including stripping out of irrelevant principles and techniques and focusing on low-cost, low maintenance and sustainable AI and labour-intensive ways of understanding the changing city. The future development of African cities needs to take a significant stand on the interdependence of morphological systems including socio-economic realities and the role of political action, local agency, and their relationships with urban from.

NOTES

1. Meth, Goodfellow, Todes and Charlton’s “Conceptualizing African urban peripheries” note the rising interest in peri-urban spaces in the African context. They argue for a need to understand the lived experiences of urban change in urban peripheral space in South Africa and Ethiopia in Paula Meth, Tom Goodfellow, Alison Todes, and Sarah Charlton, “Conceptualizing African urban peripheries,” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 45, no. 6 (2021): 985-1007.

2. Buire comments on the lack of attention to the changing suburbia or even the very notion of suburbia and suburbanism or a lens through which such spaces are analysed, arguing, ‘Spatially, we want to understand not only where the cities are growing, but also which forms do they take…’, where, ‘the practices and discourses of those who inhabit these new urban spaces on a daily basis are essential to understand the socio-cultural dimension of the suburbs’ in Chloé Buire, “Suburbanisms in Africa? Spatial growth and social transformation in new urban peripheries: Introduction to the cluster,” African Studies 73(2) (2014): 243; Butcher Mabin, and Bloch in “Peripheries, suburbanisms and change in sub-Saharan African cities,” Social Dynamics 39, no. 2 (2013): 167-190, argue, ‘our African location…demands that we approach the city from inside and out, work with a more fluid notion of the relationship between formal and informal habitats – and at the same time refuse African cities any exceptional status’, on page 182.


4. Email conversation with Vitor Oliviera in early 2020 around developing a Southern African ISUF network.
5. David Dewar, “A Transformational Path for Cape Town, South Africa,” in Transforming Distressed Global Communities, 255-268 (Routledge, 2016), notes the translation of the political ideology within South Africa combined with the impact of a modernist approach resulted in the idea of separation that extended to a massive racial divide where controlled neighbourhood units were developed to contain people and remove any possibility for social unrest. Today, this has resulted in continued urban sprawl and the suburban model of mass housing; Mono-functional housing developments continue to be surrounded by buffer strips resulting in large portions of left-over spaces.


7. Caldeira uses the notion of peripheral urbanization to analyse the modes of production of space and self-constructed neighbourhoods in cities of the global South. Here Caldeira argues, ‘…peripheral urbanisation means simultaneously to de-centre urban theory and to offer a bold characterization of modes of the production of space that are different from those that generated the cities of the North Atlantic,’ in Teresa PR Caldeira, “Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south,” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 35, no. 1 (2017): 3-4.


10. Larkham argues, ‘Urban morphological approaches and analyses must be seen to be relevant, practicable, valuable, but also affordable. Past approaches have often been seen to be time-consuming, expensive and perhaps not well communicated in forms of words that related well to these problems,’ Larkham, Peter. “The need for change in the study of urban form.” Urban Morphology 26, no. 1 (2022), 3. See also concerning the interdependence of morphological systems in Chrisna du Plessis, Karina Landman, Darren Nel, and Edna Peres, “A ‘resilient’ urban morphology: TRUST C. Du Plessis, K. Landman, D. Nel and E. Peres,” Urban Morphology 19, no. 2 (2015): 183-184, to understand the future of understanding and researching urban form in Southern Africa.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


URBANA MORFOLOGIJA NA PERIFERIJI JUGA AFRIKE

Kathryn Ewing

Urbana forma gradova u Africi je dinamična, nepredvidiva i u stalnoj je promeni. Urbana morfologija ostaje uglavnom nedokumentovana u južnoafričkom regionu u nastajanju. Trenutni procesi neformalnog zauzimanja zemljišta, transformacija predgrađa i postepena transformacija obrazaca naselja predstavljaju krhke, ali zanimljive morfološke karakteristike koje su vredne tumačenja. Kako razumemo, predstavljamo i predvidamo promenu urbane forme u južnoj Africi i šta je dodatna vrednost razumevanja urbane morfologije u južnoj Africi? U nedostatku bilo kakve formalizovane mreže ISUF-a (International Seminar of Urban Form) u južnoj Africi, postoji potencijal da se da značajan doprinos urbanoj morfologiji i povezanim procesima i vinovnicima. Tri perspektive zasnove na studijama slučaja iz prakse, istraživanja i edukacije objašnjene su, kako da bi se razumela urbana forma u južnoj Africi, i to na kroz: 1) prikupljanje podataka kroz lokalnu zajednicu o urbanoj formi i društvenoj praksi na osnovu iskustava u opštinama Kejptauna; 2) lokalna partnerstva zasnovana na primerima unapređenja neformalnih naselja u Kaieliši (Khai- elitshi) i 3) smišljeno i angažovano podučavanje i učenje koje se trenutno odvija na studijskom programu urbanog dizajna na Univerzitetu u Kejptaunu. Urbani morfološki pristupi na globalnom jugu moraju biti multiskalarni, relevantni, vredni i što je najvažnije, pristupačni. Ovo zahteva uklanjanje irelevantnih principa i tehnika i fokusiranje na nisku cenu, nisko održavanje i održivu veštalu inteligenciju i radno intenzivno razumevanje grada koji se menja. Budući razvoj afričkih gradova treba da uključi važne stavove ujužnoj ekonomske realnosti, političke akcije, lokalnog delovanja i njihovih odnosa sa urbanom formom.

KLJUČNE REČI: URBANA MORFOLOGIJA, JUG AFRIKE, MREŽE U NASTAJANJU, KOKREACIJA

NEOCEKIVANE PUTANJE URBANE MORFOLOGIJE U FRANCUSKOJ

Giovanni Fusco


KLJUČNE REČI: FRANCUSKA; PIERRE MERLIN, URBANA MORFOLOGIJA I PARCELE, TEORIJSKA I KVANTITIVA GEOGRAFIJA, URBANA MORFOMETRIJA