

Paul Jenkins - Understanding Urbanisation, Urbanism And Urbanity in African Cities

Human settlement in cities of the South need different approaches to those initially developed in rapid urbanisation in the North from the mid 19th to mid 20th centuries, however our concepts of the good 'urban' are deeply influenced by this historically and geographically distinct experience. In addition our professional approaches embed these concepts (generally with a high degree of disciplinary exclusivity in understanding), albeit with at least half a century of more recent 'development discourse' overlay and adjustment. Whether such concepts, disciplinary approaches and/or professional praxis are relevant would appear to be significantly challenged by the widespread and increasing 'non-conforming reality' of cities of the South.

This is perhaps no more clear than in emerging urban areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, the last global macro-region to enter the rapid urbanisation process. In this context, weak states and high levels of urban poverty (and therefore limited private sector engagement) lead to the vast majority of such fast expanding urban areas being developed, not according to pre-defined developmentalist approaches which are overwhelmed by the reality, but by (mostly poor) urban residents, according to their socio-cultural agency, albeit constrained by political economic structures. This has led to a prevalent negative view of such emerging urbanism, labelling this as ruralisation, or defective/pathological forms of urbanity.