

Liora Bigon · Eric Ross

Grid Planning in the Urban Design Practices of Senegal



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ISBN 978-3-030-29525-7 ISBN 978-3-030-29526-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29526-4>

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Cover illustration: Satellite image of the town of Tivaouane. Source: Google Earth; Khalifa Ababacar Sy Mosque in Tivaouane. Photo by Eric Ross

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

Research on the urban history of sub-Saharan Africa was for long hampered by a “rural bias,” the idea that Africa was quintessentially a continent of village-dwelling farmers bereft of cities. The emergence of the African city was intimately associated with the presence of Europeans on the continent, especially during the colonial era. The notion that pre-colonial Africa lacked an urban culture has now been put to rest. In the last three decades, the study of Africa’s urban past has become one of the most dynamic fields in African studies across disciplines. This scholarship reveals a long tradition of city building among communities across sub-Saharan Africa from the medieval era to the present. This tradition that is rooted in the deep historical past is the result of endogenous historical transformations and predates the arrival of Islam and Europeans in the African continent.

In this book, Liora Bigon and Eric Ross make an original and significant contribution to the historiography of Africa’s urban history. The originality of their work rests on the focus of their investigation on the history and role of the grid, an important but understudied dimension of the urbanization process in Africa. Bigon, who originally trained as an Africanist and architectural historian, has done extensive work on colonial metropolises in former French West Africa. Ross, a cultural geographer, is the foremost scholar of the history and contemporary development of Muslim clerical towns in Senegal. Together, these two prolific scholars have significantly enhanced our understanding of the impact of Islam and French colonial rule on the management of space in West Africa. They have done so by paying particular attention to the role of Africans, demonstrating that Africans are not merely passive receptacles of external cultural influences as Eurocentric scholarly wisdom would let us believe but dynamic historical actors engaged in the transformation of their living environment. They persuasively demonstrate that the planning of living space in Africa is the product of a negotiated process where Africans have been central in determining the terms of the negotiation. This same approach that seeks to emphasize African agency informs the book under consideration.

In their richly documented and copiously illustrated book, Bigon and Ross combine diachronic and synchronic analytical approaches to document the unfolding of an endogenous African tradition of grid planning in the *longue durée* and the

entanglement between this tradition and Islamic and European influences. Relying on a large body of archival documents, maps, and secondary sources, they are able to delineate the genesis of this tradition, including the underlying economic, political, and cultural forces that explain its emergence and transformation over time. The research convincingly demonstrates that a tradition of grid design was well-established in West Africa before the French began systematic use of grid planning in the eighteenth century. In Senegambia, the use of the orthogonal grid for the layout of royal capitals is determined as early as the sixteenth century. Sufi Muslim clerics drew inspiration from royal and Islamic spatial practices to build their holy cities. Royal and clerical grid designs were shaped by local cultural, political, and symbolic values.

The arrival of Europeans in the African continent introduced different spatial practices. These practices, inspired by metropolitan urban culture, were first confined to the islands and few outposts along the Atlantic coast occupied by European traders and administrators. Their impact on the hinterland where the majority of Africans resided was limited. The imposition of colonial rule from the nineteenth century was paralleled by the diffusion of colonial grid planning. The grid was integral to the colonial enterprise. It was a means to discipline the colonial subject's body, facilitate surveillance, and enforce control over space. However, colonial spatial practices were never hegemonic, even in cities founded by French colonizers. They had to contend with the resilience and continued potency of endogenous cultures of space management. Their capacity to expand was predicated on their ability to accommodate local spatial practices. The process of accommodation resulting from the entanglement of the two urban design traditions yielded spatial practices that were neither entirely European nor entirely African but a combination of both. Bigon and Ross rightly conceive of the colonial and postcolonial grid system in West Africa as the expression of hybridized spatial practices.

The merit of this book goes beyond its important contribution to the scholarship on the urban history of Africa. It offers a successful example of a methodology that bridges disciplinary boundaries. This methodology provides a grammar for reading the multiple manifestations change can take when different cultures meet.

Philadelphia, PA, USA
July 2019

Cheikh Anta Babou

Preface and Acknowledgments

This coauthored book on the history of the grid design in the urban planning practices of Senegal is the outcome of several years of happy collaboration. The authors, an urban historian and an urban geographer, have approached the issue from a variety of methodological and conceptual angles not normally conjoined in a single study. Indeed, the question of historic urban design practices in Senegal requires recourse to a number of disciplines: African studies, Islamic studies, colonial and postcolonial studies, human geography, urban planning, urban history, and art history. The writing of the book was undertaken in response to two main lacunae in the current historiography. The first is that the established scholarship in urban planning history – scholarship on grid planning in particular – is centered on the European experience, opening with that of Southern Europe (in antiquity) and then proceeding to that of Western Europe and North America (in the modern era). It is thus fundamentally Eurocentric. In this scholarly corpus, not only have the historic planning practices of Europe outside Europe been marginalized so too have the settlement design traditions of most of non-Europe. In the Western imagery, grid planning is perceived as an expression of the almost unique “rationality” of the West. Such rationality is rarely granted to the urban planning practices of other cultures. Secondly, of all the world regions, sub-Saharan Africa especially is generally denied an indigenous urban settlement design culture, one that is independent of medieval Arab-Islamic and modern European influences.

The authors are intimately acquainted with Senegalese cities, having spent 20 and 30 years, respectively, studying them. It is this familiarity that has led to the nuanced examination of the multiplicity of gridded design practices in this country. Over the course of the last 500 years, grid plans have been implemented by a variety of agents for a range of different reasons. How can one *disentangle* these practices while also appreciating the manner of their *entanglements*? This dialectical reasoning allows us to shed some light on a complex local development of an after-all, rather common spatial practice, grid planning.

The contributions of this book are threefold. Firstly, it focuses on the Global South and especially on a sub-Saharan urban tradition – a world region that is still underrepresented in urban planning studies. Secondly, it is an in-depth book-length

study that combines multidisciplinary expertise in order to examine the historic and present-day intertwining of several planning cultures on the *same* territory. Thirdly, on the methodological level, the book is based on a rich variety of sources, archives, maps and satellite images, as well as field work.

Appropriately, the research interests of the two coauthors became entangled long before this book was written. In April 2001, we fortuitously listened to each other's presentations at a conference on "Islam in Africa" organized by Prof. Ali Mazrui at Binghamton University. Ross' lecture entitled "Marabout republics then and now" presented some of his PhD research, which later took shape as a chapter in his *Sufi City: Urban Design and Archetypes in Touba* (Rochester University Press, 2006). Meanwhile, Bigon's presented "The reciprocal influence of Islamic vernacular architecture and French colonial architecture in West Africa," which later became a chapter in her *French Colonial Dakar: The Morphogenesis of an African Regional Capital* (Manchester University Press, 2016). Years later, in September 2013, we presented on the same panel at the International Planning History Society's (IPHS) conference on "Colonial and Postcolonial Urban Planning in Africa," organized by Prof. Carlos Nunez Silva at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon. There, the topics of our presentations, Ross' "The grid plan in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Senegalese urban design," and Bigon's "Planting the flag and the planning of imperial Dakar: asymmetries, uncertainties, illusions," practically begged for a collaborative study. And so, we have been collaborating ever since. In September 2017, at the second IPHS Conference on urban planning in Africa, organized by Carlos Nunez Silva in Lisbon, we co-organized a panel dedicated to grid plan designs in sub-Saharan Africa. The papers of most of the panelists were published in winter 2019, in a special issue of *Architext*, a professional journal of architectural history, entitled "The Urban Grid in Cultures of Planning and Architecture: Between the Global South, to the North, and Back Again." Other papers, together with those of some renowned scholars who have scrutinized the grid plan, were published as well in *Gridded Worlds: An Urban Anthology* (edited by Reuben Rose-Redwood and Liora Bigon, Springer, 2018). Furthermore, cooperation between the coauthors yielded two additional titles directly relevant to the current book which we want to acknowledge here: "The Crisscross of Gridded Traditions in Two Senegalese Cities" (*Architext* #7, 2019) and "The Urban Grid and Entangled Planning Cultures in Senegal" (*Planning Perspectives*, published online in May 2018). These scholarly activities have stimulated our discussion of the role of the grid plan in Senegal through the ages and changing regimes and on what it means for urban planning historiographies more generally.

Developing collaborative research on the history of grid planning in Senegal necessitated fresh fieldwork in order to collect data. In January 2018, we toured most of the cities analyzed in this book, including Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque, Thiès, Tienaba, Ndiassane, Tivaouane, Diourbel, Touba, Fatick, Foundiougne, and Kaolack, conducting interviews, making field observations, and compiling visual evidence. This fieldwork was partly financed by the Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. We are

tremendously grateful to the Truman Research Institute for their support for this project. We would also like to thank our respective academic institutions, Holon Institute of Technology (HIT) and Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, for their general support. In Senegal, fieldwork was enthusiastically enabled by IFAN-UCAD (Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, *Université Cheikh Anta Diop*). We would like to warmly thank Prof. Papa Demba Fall and Modou Ndiaye, where Prof. Fall was assigned to assist with data collection in the field (and thanks to Serigne Ndiaye, the IFAN-UCAD driver). Also deserving of thanks are *Fatoumata Cissé* Diarra, Director of Senegal's National Archives (ANS), and Thomas Hart for sharing with us some of his spatial enquiries into Dakar's Lebou community and for facilitating collaboration with Mr. Abdou Khadre Gaye, Director of the NGO EMAD (Entente des Mouvements et Associations de Développement) in Dakar. While in Touba, we were warmly hosted by Mr. Fallou Diakhaté and his family. In addition, we would like to thank Springer's professional staff who accompanied us throughout the publication process and especially Margaret Deignan, Springer's publishing editor in earth sciences, geography, and environment, for her advice and patience with us.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Historiographic Traditions, Grid-Plan Cultures and Africa



Abstract In Western (Eurocentric) research traditions of urban and planning histories, sub-Saharan Africa is generally denied an urban past, an urban settlement-design culture, and especially an indigenous practice of grid-planning. It is against this state of research that indigenous grid-pattern settlements in Senegal are analyzed in this book. The book demonstrates that urban grid-planning emerged independently in Senegal, before European colonization, while also shifting the discussion from morphological essentialism regarding the genealogy of the grid towards a more interactive, poly-centric and processual approach of “entangled histories.” This introductory chapter brings to the fore the sensitivities inherited in African Studies as developed against the background of the historiographic tendencies that characterize Islamic Studies, World History, (Global) Urban Studies and the current literature on grid planning. The chapter provides a critical overview of the assumptions about Africa in the various scholarly disciplines directly related to the book, giving special attention to global North-South perspectives. Through a focus on grid plan literature, the chapter calls for the enduring need to de-Eurocentralize global urban history. Proceeding towards a more inclusive, integrative and polycentric urban history would contribute to the “worldling” of grid plan legacies. The book’s rationale and structure are also presented here, including its methodological approach and a note on sources of data and cartographic analysis.

Keywords Grid plan · Historiography · African studies · Islamic studies · Urban studies · Global urban history · World history · Afrocentric perspective · Eurocentrism · de-colonization

1.1 Introduction

This book reveals the multilayered origins and the intertwined, formalistic developments of the grid plan design in the urban traditions of Senegal, both past and present. With remarkable continuity, the grid plan design can be traced from its