

French Urbanism in Foreign Lands

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*To my dear sister, Akwi Salome Njoh, for
being a great role model in the Njoh family
through her hard work, selflessness, and
unreserved generosity.*

Preface

Factors at the root of French urbanism abroad can be better understood in the broader context of France's overseas ventures. There is a tendency in the scholarly world to underestimate France's global reach and influence abroad. For instance, popular accounts of the contribution of Europeans in 'opening up' the 'New World' make only passing mention of France's role in the process. Yet, there is a preponderance of evidence portraying France as a dominant player in that process. It was one of the first European countries to traffic enslaved people from Africa to the Americas (NPS.gov).

Yet, France's ventures abroad went far beyond its involvement in the slave trade. As other European powers of the seventeenth century, it was involved in efforts to amass large territories in foreign lands. In this regard, it founded its first colony in North America: Port Royal in present-day Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1605. Three years later, in 1608, it claimed Quebec. This soon became the capital of what it christened New France (roughly, present-day Canada). In what is the present-day United States, France controlled Louisiana. However, it did not limit its territorial acquisition efforts to North America. Rather, it broadened the scope of these efforts to include the Caribbean. Here, it founded Guiana (1624), Saint Kitts (1625), and Guadeloupe and Martinique (1635).

France's early overseas imperial ventures also included the establishment of trading posts and colonies in Africa and Asia. In the former, it established a trading post on the coast of present-day Senegal in 1624. In the latter, it established the colonies of Chandernagore, India, in 1673 and Pondicherry, Southeast Asia, in 1674. Other early French colonies in the Asian region included Yanam, which was established in 1723, and Mahe, founded in 1725. The French also established a number of colonies in the Indian Ocean, including La Reunion (1664), Mauritius (1718) and Seychelles (1756).

The second wave of French territorial acquisition efforts was initiated in the nineteenth century and focused mainly on Africa. Here, France amassed vast territories in North, West and Central Africa. At its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, the French colonial empire covered a total land area of about 12,347 km² (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, 1976). In effect, France controlled this vast area, almost a tenth of

the Earth's surface, from the seventeenth century to the 1960s. One legacy of France's extensive empire-building efforts is the human settlements it built or inspired through its unique spatial design philosophy. Very little of the history of these settlements is known especially in the English-speaking world. The only exception is in the case of erstwhile French possessions such as Quebec, Montreal and Louisiana that are located in developed countries. Thus, there is a lacuna in knowledge of the history of towns and cities that were directly or indirectly planted, if I may borrow Robert Home's (2013) terminology, by the French in many territories outside of France.

This book is intended to bridge this gulf and to examine the spatial and physical development schemes that the French government or its agents employed in these countries. The aim is to highlight aspects of these schemes that embodied French values, culture and socio-economic objectives. Also of interest is how French physical and spatial planning thought has influenced urban planning in territories without a history of French conquest. The case of Latin America is particularly noteworthy. With the exception of French Guiana (or Guyana) and a few Caribbean islands, France never effectively colonized any territory in this region. Yet, the region's architecture and urban design boast features of vintage French urbanism. The following questions constitute the book's guiding posts:

- Which major towns/cities outside of France, and especially in the developing world, owe their origin to France's overseas ventures?
- What specific social, cultural, economic and physical features distinguish these towns/cities from their peers?
- How are they affected by their history as the brainchild of French town planners or builders?

These questions are not only of historical importance but also of contemporary interest for at least two reasons. First, a significant number of human settlements planted by France or its agents rose to serve as the core around which many major contemporary cities developed. Second, France currently maintains territories abroad despite the fact that colonialism is no longer fashionable.

The broad questions outlined above are easy to address once we have some appreciation of the expansionist and territorial conquest motives of European powers—of which France is a prime example. Key amongst these is the desire on the part of Europeans as a dominant group to export their culture in order to acculturate 'cultural or racial others'. This ideological rationale was founded on a belief of the superiority of Europeans over 'others'. But this was only one of several overt and covert purposes of imperialism and colonialism. Others frequently mentioned include the need for European powers to aggrandize their social, economic and political power as well as protect and preserve themselves.

There is no shortage of scholarly works on the military, economic and political tools that were used to realize these goals. What remains unclear is the role that architects, urban planners and others skilled in manipulating the built environment played in this connection. Colonial governments required, at a minimum, roads,

streets, colonial military barracks and government stations. Paradoxically, little attention has been paid to the politics and personalities that were involved in developing these facilities. Far less attention has been paid to how these facilities facilitated the attainment of the overt and covert goals of the colonial project. This is especially true in the case of French colonialism, which has not received adequate attention in the relevant English language literature. Consequently, the English-speaking world lacks knowledge of the many physical and spatial development projects that French colonial authorities undertook throughout the world. It is tempting to argue that to understand the colonial activities of one European power is to understand the colonial activities of all. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. This is not to say that there were no points of convergence in colonial activities and the avowed rationale of these activities. However, one must be careful not to exaggerate the similarities while conversely minimizing the many disparities that characterized such activities. Consider the case of British and French colonial urbanism. Professional civilian planners were responsible for town planning and related activities in British colonies. In contrast these activities fell under the aegis of the military in territories controlled by the French.

Another important issue that is accorded only passing attention in the discourse on colonial urbanism is the race question. There is a glaring distinction between the manner in which British and French colonial/imperial authorities handled this question. This was evident in the first wave of European colonialism in the Americas (c. 1500s–1700s) and resurfaced in the second wave in Africa and Asia (1800s–1900s). In the Americas, the British took many actions, including the enactment of laws to separate the races. One of the most notable of these laws forbade interracial marriages and criminalized interracial sexual intercourse. The latter was labelled ‘miscegenation’. No similar laws existed in the territories under French control at that time. In fact, interracial marriages were encouraged, especially in the French West Indies. Also, although racial spatial segregation was the norm in both British and French colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this spatial structure was not rooted in the same philosophy. In British colonies, racially segregated spatial structures stemmed from a belief in the superiority of Europeans over ‘racial others’. In French colonies, this spatial structure was a product of the view that European culture was superior to that of ‘cultural others’.

French colonialism was certainly not the only conduit for exporting French urbanism. It is therefore not surprising that the spatial structures of some cities in countries without a history of French colonization boast features of French urbanism. The *raison d’être* and implications of these features in foreign lands remain largely unknown. This is especially true in the English-speaking world. This book seeks to contribute to efforts aimed at addressing this deficiency in the literature.

The book is unique not only because of its thematic orientation but more importantly because of its substantive focus. Recently—the end of the twentieth century, to be more precise—urbanism has risen to greater prominence. This period marked the first time in human history that the proportion of people living in urban areas surpassed those living in rural settlements. Most of the growth that produced this

phenomenon occurred in developing countries. Here, it is important to note that the nucleus of a significant number of the cities in these countries was created by European colonial authorities. Moreover, Europeans, and especially the French, as this book shows, were or have been influential in shaping these cities spatially, physically and culturally.

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Contents

1 Rationale for French Colonial Urbanism	1
Introduction.....	1
Acculturation, Assimilation and French Urbanism Abroad.....	2
Power-Related Motives of French Overseas Urbanism	3
Channels for Diffusing Urbanism: The French Experience.....	7
Colonial Governments	8
Educational and Research Institutions	9
Professional and Scholarly Associations	10
International Development Agencies and Consultants	10
Plan and Overview of The Book.....	11
References.....	15
2 French Urbanism in North America	17
Introduction.....	17
Background.....	19
French Urbanism in the US.....	21
New Orleans.....	21
French Urban Culture in New Orleans	24
Early French Urbanism in the US Hinterland.....	27
Washington, DC.....	28
The French and Built Space in Colonial Canada.....	29
Quebec City	30
The Spatial Structure of Colonial Quebec	33
The City of Montreal	37
Discussion and Concluding Remarks	43
References.....	45
3 Latin America	47
Introduction.....	47
Economic Prosperity and the Allure of Eurocentric Urbanism	48

The Dominance of French Urbanism.....	50
Argentina.....	53
Brazil.....	57
Venezuela.....	61
Discussion and Concluding Remarks.....	64
References.....	66
4 French Caribbean Territories.....	69
Introduction.....	69
France and Modern Human Settlements in French West Indies.....	70
Modernist Urban Planning in French West Indies.....	75
French Housing Policy in the Caribbean.....	78
Social Housing.....	80
Aid to Individuals.....	81
Private Housing.....	81
Employer-Assisted Housing Strategies.....	82
French Urbanism in West Indies: Regional Perspectives.....	83
Concluding Remarks.....	86
References.....	86
5 French Urbanism in Indochina.....	89
Introduction.....	89
Historical Background.....	90
Economic Development and Civil Infrastructure.....	93
Architecture and Urban Planning.....	97
Power Dimensions of Urban Planning in French Indochina.....	104
Spatial Order and Built Space.....	105
Concluding Remarks.....	111
References.....	112
6 French Urbanism in the Middle East.....	115
Introduction.....	115
Barriers and Opportunities for French Colonial Urbanism.....	116
French Urbanism in Ancient Cities.....	118
Diffusion of French Urbanism to the Middle-East.....	119
Aleppo and Damascus.....	125
Beirut.....	127
Concluding Remarks.....	130
References.....	131
7 French Urbanism in North Africa.....	133
Introduction.....	133
French Urbanism in pre-European-Colonial North Africa.....	134
Logic of North African Indigenous Built Space.....	136
French Colonial Ideology of Assimilation in North African Built Space.....	137

From Assimilation to Association in North African Built Space..... 149

Conclusion 152

References..... 153

8 French Urbanism in Sub-Saharan Africa..... 155

Introduction..... 155

French Pre-Colonial Urbanism in Sub-Saharan Africa..... 156

Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa 157

Urbanism in French Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa 158

Spatial and Physical Expressions of French Urbanism..... 162

French Urbanism Expressed Through Construction and Housing..... 171

French Urbanism in the Land Domain..... 174

French Urbanism and Public Health 176

Concluding Remarks..... 178

References 178

9 Continuity and Change in French International Urbanism 181

Introduction..... 181

French Urbanism in Contemporary North America..... 182

French Planning Agencies and the Exportation of French Urbanism..... 186

 Geographical Areas of Main Focus..... 188

Cultural Diversification and Social Control of Urban France..... 188

The ‘Boomerang effect’ of French Colonial Urban

 Social Control Measures 191

Conclusion 193

References..... 194

Index..... 195