

Territories in Motion

From Cotonou, an audiovisual approach for an African perspective on city centre futures

Monica Coralli¹ & Maria Anita Palumbo²

[1] Architect, geographer, LAA/GECKO PARIS

[2] Urban anthropologist, video maker, LAA/EHESS PARIS

Note: The audio-visual presentation accompanying the text is located at www.laa.archi.fr

Abstract: This text summarizes an ongoing research project focussing on how to understand African city evolution in a globalized context. We aim to redefine the approach of understanding a diversity of changes. This project intends to develop an alternative analytical approach to thinking differently about city identity and the city centre. Based on ongoing field research in Cotonou (Benin-West Africa), we argue that an audiovisual approach can be an instrument to rediscover the city. Moving from the particular case of Cotonou, our multimedia construct, 'Territories in Motion', seeks to suggest a framework through which to explore the city using our audiovisual approach, and propose the practical utilization of this construct.

Keywords: Urban anthropology; city centre; city identity; visual urban research; globalization; Benin.

INTRODUCTION

The city centre is generally related to its historical and geographic evolution. It plays a fundamental role because, from a traditional perspective, it is linked to the city's identity: in a way the centre is spatialising the identity of a city.

But in the context of globalization, can we still insist that different places prefigure specific cultural identities? Or that today distinct identities call for particular places? The aim of the Laboratory of Architecture and Anthropology is to investigate the correspondence between place and collective identity, a potent binomial that has become a problematic formula, which needs to be aggressively redressed. Our anthropological practice takes on the city as a whole, considering its real, imaginary, spatial, and temporal dimensions from an interdisciplinary perspective. We approach the city as a complex of realities that span time and space and are continuously re-imagined, projected, rejected, and dreamed about by the inhabitants. (Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie (LAA) 2009)

Following this perspective, the idea of the city centre has to be re-formulated – in Africa as in Europe – from a more anthropological approach, considering centrality as a result of everyday practices. Concerning Cotonou, in a context of 10 years of fast urban evolution, one must ask: who are the actors and the international partners of these changes? What is the future that this evolution is prefiguring? What is the identity of this city composed of? What is its centre made of? These were the questions we had in mind when starting our study on Cotonou (not far from Porto Novo, the official capital of the country), by far the biggest city in Benin, West Africa.

CONTEXT

Cotonou is the economic capital of Benin and, with its suburbs, contains 1/5th of the national population. It also houses many of the government and diplomatic services of Benin, as well as a major sea port and the airport. Important transformations on an architectural, urban as well as administrative level have changed Cotonou in the last years and keep changing its morphology. Big construction works are being completed (such as the new

Foreign Ministry; two main thoroughfares; the raising of the highway; and the re-paving of the main traffic arteries that connect the administrative, the commercial and the port centre). Other projects are still in progress, like the clover leaf intersection at one of the entrances to town, as well as the development of a new economic and commercial centre. Other changes are still under discussion (such as the moving of the military camp; the building of a second seaport, etc.).

All these works, carried out under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Works, don't individually indicate the speed at which urbanization is taking place. Rather than expanding the city, the current changes are a progressive densification of already urbanized areas. This densification mainly happens under the initiative of private enterprise. Taking advantage of the possibility for speculation, real estate developers replace one-floor houses with multi-level buildings, but without a definite allocation of function (apartments, offices...each buyer decides the end product), and what is being built often doesn't answer an actual demand that was based on market research. At the same time, the liberalization of Benin's financial market (that has been subject to a process of democratization and decentralization), allowed for the installation of and investments by new international powers in Benin. The segmentation of power and the multiplication of administrative levels have had a big impact on regional and urban plans.

After a period of *laissez-faire*, Benin State is nowadays taking the planning and construction of new infrastructure under its own control, with the total or partial economical support provided by international partners. Political alternation provokes discontinuity and ruptures. From one term of office to the next, some substantial projects find themselves contradicted by the next government. Still, projects abound among incongruous initiatives and contradictory logic and keep nourishing debates. So the city keeps being destroyed and re-built upon itself. Among demolishing and re-contracting processes, and other antinomial actions, the questioning of a unique (de-colonial/post-colonial) model in making and governing the city is a recent acknowledgment that opens up choices. Facing the presence of multiple partners articulating different models (architectural, urban planning, city administration), we observe a progressive awareness of this alternative of choices. Among them, two models seem to embody opposite perspectives on decision-making process: one (proposed by European partners) that associates decentralisation and population participation in decision-making. The other (proposed by Asiatic partners) that deals directly and exclusively with the highest spheres of State Administration. Therefore, Benin State found itself facing different possible partners articulating different architectural, urban and decisional models. At the same time, the South-Benin conurbation (Big-Cotonou 'under construction') is slowly taking shape, opening the perspective of a new administrative revolution in the coming years.

Because of this global context of recent transformations, understanding the identity of Cotonou – the economic capital and port city of a politically stable country – is actually problematic. At least it has to be re-examined, starting with its nature, resulting from being Benin's *de facto* capital, which already leads to a questioning of the concepts of 'centrality' and 'identity'. To rethink the complexity of the relationship between identity and territories in the context of local and global articulation, administration levels, past and future, is an interesting laboratory.

MAPPING AND CROSSING: A MULTIMEDIA SUPPORT THE SKILLS OF A VISUAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND CITIES

In this multitude of scales, actors, temporalities that compose a city, and because of our interest in experimentation with method, we decided to use an audiovisual approach focusing on recent changes of Cotonou city, in order to question its identity and its centrality. The challenge at the origin of this audiovisual research method is constructed on:

... the assessment of contemporary territories complexity and of the lack of theoretical and methodological disciplinary paradigms, in their classical acception, in the face of globalization and its multiplies, contradictories and changing facetes". [We believe that each city] needs a methodological renewal within each discipline (anthropology, architecture, urban planning, sociology...) and between them to be understood, analyzed and interpreted (LAA Scientific Project 2009).

The motion picture, with which the city entertains a privileged relation made of mirror-effects, emulation and distinction, is a tool that can work as a disciplinary crossroads for a better understanding of cities. To do a shoot of the urban space means to adopt a posture that considers the city not like the setting, but like the main 'character' of a story. This is the translation – in an audiovisual field – of an approach that advocates, not an anthropology *in* the city, but *of* the city (Hannerz 1980; Augè 1994; Agier 1999). In this audiovisual fieldwork we placed ourselves in the public space, to record the urban environment with the aim of measuring its changes and evolutions. We tried to articulate the visible and material levels of the architecture and the urban frame, with the 'invisible' part of a city: the politics, the social, the everyday life, the image, the past, the present, the future.

Playing with the city's different scales (macro-micro) we explored the city 'in the making' and 'under construction', following its day-time rhythm. Camera in hands, we approached Cotonou's centre as a mosaic, a heterogenic, complex unit. As in any 'exploring-audiovisual approach' (i.e. *film d'exploration* (De France 1982)), in which researching and recording proceed at the same time, the researcher's eye directs the camera that, in return, guides the human eye in its exploration of multiple ways of 'doing the city'. A complex object, made of spaces and times, continuously acted and transformed, imagined and practiced by inhabitants, the urban is the main character of our story.

In our approach, we insist that video is a specific instrument with which to explore and analyze contemporary cities because, rather than being another way to show the city, is a specific way to investigate it. In fact, the specific-exigencies of the audiovisual narratives are revealing some characteristics of urban space and its complexity (for instance, with questions such as: how can I film the future? Where is the future situated in the material and immaterial present of an urban environment?).

A city, as a research object, has to be examined from a broad range of perspectives and calls for crossing scales, in terms of time, space and actors involved in the practice and in the representation of the city. For instance, as much as looking at its map, the identity of a city can be found in a specific detail. That is why it should be analyzed looking at all the levels at the same time, through micro-space studies and through global analysis. Similarly, a city can be changed, starting from any of these different levels. Likewise, the relationship between city and time can't be limited to some historical considerations of the city's evolution. Any urban environment is a superposition of layers where past, present and future cohabit. That is why, to look at how time 'works' on space, is not only about considering transformations in a linear or diachronic perspective, but has to be read as an accumulation of layers, often reorganized, recomposed and selected by actors of the present, aiming at a particular future. A city is also composed of a multitude of actors that produce the city at different levels. From an everyday perspective, to a city planning scale, every inhabitant contributes to create the urban environment. Not only actors physically present in the city actually play a role in it. Rather, it is an agency between local and international, visible and invisible actors, that should be taken under consideration.



FIGURE 1: A moment of the 'thick' description.

This three-level, multi scale analysis is, in our opinion, necessary in order not to flatten the urban complexity – for this reason it constitutes the basis of our work. In the multimedia structure device called ‘Territories in Motion’, we propose a visual description of Cotonou, followed by four cases-studies, leading to a multimedia mapping of 8 thematic interviews of different administration figures from Cotonou and Benin. This structure simultaneously explains our investigation process and offers three different ways to explore the city. The graphical solution of each page follows the content and communicates the general intention, or ‘thesis’, behind each step of the work. As you proceed with the analysis, and the deeper you go into the analysis, it becomes increasingly necessary to multiply the observational and analytic perspectives: in the same way our screen multiplies itself, from a full screen, to a puzzle of 8 screens.

The first step is the result of a diffuse observation of the everyday, spontaneous but rhythmic, heterogenic but ‘systematic’, life of the city that we can never actually embrace in its globality. It is a sort of ‘thick’ description (Geertz 1973) of Cotonou, not intending to present the city in an objective way, but rather to suggest possible analyses and interpretations, through showing diverse aspects that flow from a direct and full immersion into the context. It is a way to study and communicate the lived complexity of a city.

This introduction, which we could call less of an historical and more of an impressionistic portrait, serves as a context presentation for the following step: four cases studies that have been singled out for a more detailed analysis of forces at work in changing Cotonou. They correspond to four constructions or project sites within the city, involving different configurations of actors, and an unequal participation of the State: a completely spontaneous neighbourhood development process, a political and economical intervention by the European Union, a real estate investment piloted by a foreigner investor and a Benin State-International Partner cooperating in urban development.

These specific and micro-territorial analyses do not intent to be representative of all the projects going on in Cotonou, but are indeed significant in their dissimilarity: in each area we can observe different levels of making the city, involving diverse actors, scales of intervention and temporalities. They are proposing, in the present, a



FIGURE 2: Four case-studies.

different vision of the future.

This 'announcement effect' also concerns how, and by whom, the city should be changed: from a top-down planning procedure example to a bottom-up one, we face a panel of possible ways to construct the future of the city. Our idea is not to counterpose them but to, through the video, recompose the extreme diversity within the city's changes and perspectives.

As a following step, in order to better understand the 'invisible' system that rules Cotonou, we questioned the personalities that are officially in charge of changes to the city, about specific subjects that were emerging during the field investigation. The result is an 8 subject organization of the 10 interviews we did with people elected to govern the city at different levels. First of all, we questioned them about their perception of Cotonou's identity, their ideas of where and what the centre is, their reconstruction of the city's history, the range of partners they encounter in their work practice. We also ask them about the recent big-projects that are intended to reshape Cotonou and we question them about the controversies these projects eventually create. Our final questions were about the images of the future they have in mind, as much as some details about the future administration project of a Big Cotonou.

The intention with the montage technique, where pictures of places enrich videos of interviews and both are connected to an active plan of the city, is to map the ambivalent nature of city production and perception. By overlapping these different narratives, drawn respectively from specific experiences of the city and positions in the city, we intend to move closer to a representation of the city as a 'text' composed from different voices. The multiplicity of political actors, and the overlap between their discourses, show the inter-crossing of controversial narratives on a city that arise from different spatial practices and produce diverse representations of space.

This three-level analytic structure allowed us to gain multiple points of view on Cotonou and provided the researchers, as much as any audience of this multimedia work, with the possibility to move among these three mediatic ways to explore Cotonou: to keep crossing data, perspectives and approaches to the subject is a very

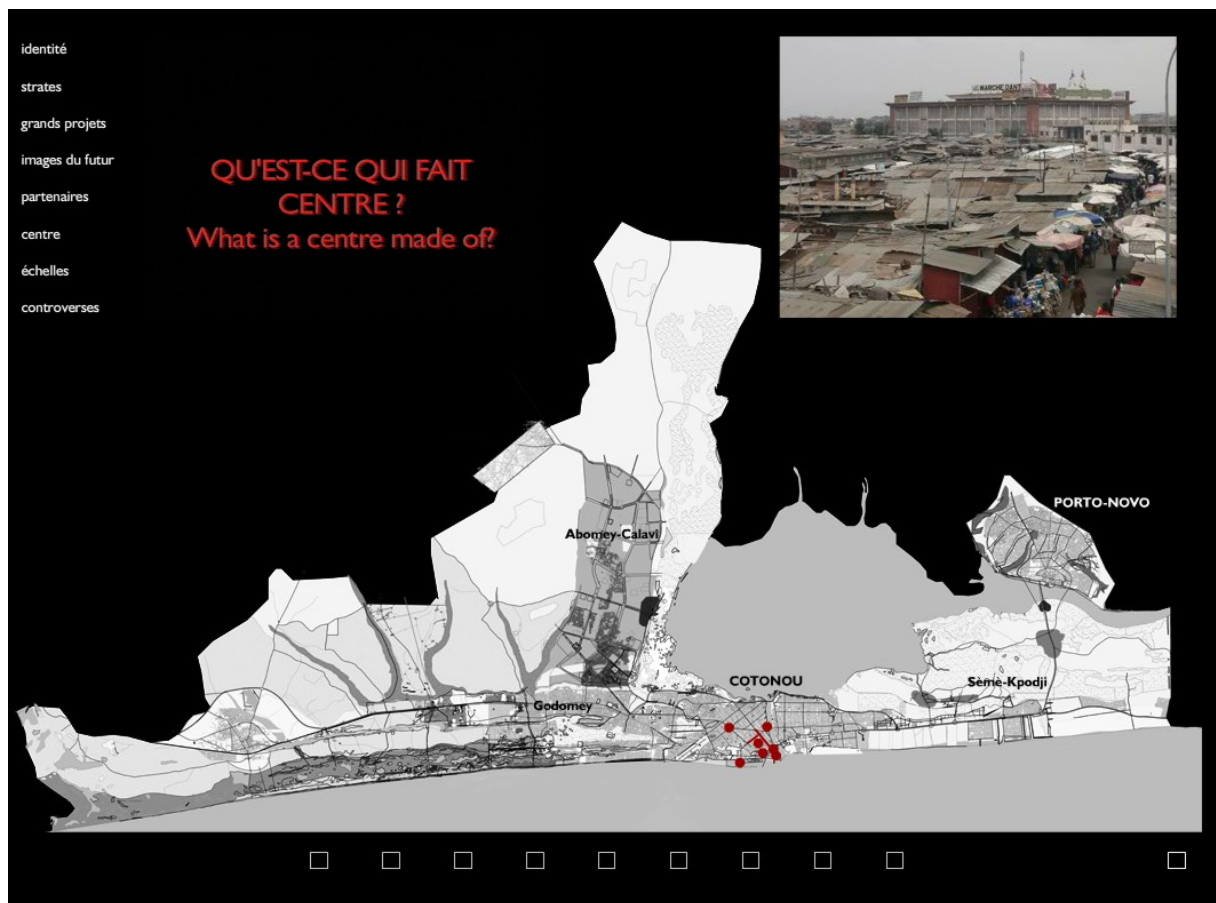


FIGURE 3: Mapping 8 questions.

important skill of any interactive-multimedia support structure, which is aptly suited for use in the process of a complex object like a city.

A STEP IN PROJECTING...

So far we have just analysed why a video exploration, associated with a mapping system of the city, is – for us – a very efficient way of questioning the city's dynamics. In a more general way, behind this work, a specific way to describe and to analyze urban life is emerging.

The montage of images, that makes manifest the different spaces, times and actors involved in city changes, suggests that institutional and spontaneous city-making factors should be crossed. The unstructured side of everyday urban environment 'production' and the informal un-institutional change process have to be integrated in the understanding a city. The official city would then be lighted by its own shadow 'elements', from which a Second-City (Michel Agier's *ville-bis*) emerges.¹ A further question would be how this can serve to actually work on a city. First of all this is a way to define new indicators that would measure the urban life.² In this case, a more classical and functional way to look at city transformation is disregarded in favour of privileging the inner and dynamic perception of spaces. Secondly, the aim of such a tool is to create a fictional arena that can put into perspective isolated points of view. As ignorance of others' forms of action is often, we believe, causing energy waste and contradictions, putting data on a similar support device can open new options for how to act and what to do in a city. Because of the rich variety of actors accumulating in city 'production', and the difficulties to unveil their agency, the audio-visual study we propose through a multi scale perspective, can be considered as a possible and more accurate tool to reconstruct these intricate processes of changing an urban space. This is why our findings are intended to play an important role in political decisions and evaluating city planning, as well as serving as a means of engaging fundamental questions of urban life: What forces are at work in changing a city? What forces create the identity of a place? What, in the end, is an urban centre made of?

CONCLUSION: FROM COTONOU TO AFRICAN CITIES... COTONOU, EXAMPLE FOR AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

This paper has been more of a search for a framework through which to explore the city – using an audiovisual approach – than to offer stable answers to our discussion. But certain conclusions can already be extended...especially concerning identity construction and the understanding of centre dynamics. Following our results, it looks like Cotonou's **identity** is caught in a double tension. The spatial identity of a town is generally formed around its singularity, or the absence of similarity. Identity here means that what makes a place special, different from others, specific, unique, a place you cannot find anywhere else. These specific aspects create a sense of belonging among the inhabitants of a city, whom in turn further contribute to the growth of that identity. But identity also means 'sameness', that is to say 'whatever makes an entity definable and recognizable, in terms of possessing a set of qualities or characteristics that distinguish it from entities of a different type'. This second aspect of identity is the collective one, the one that expresses the belonging and the sharing of specific qualities within a defined group. In fact, to be an international city, a capital, a metropolis, a world city, a cosmopolitan city, means to have certain characteristics, and in the case of Cotonou, this seems to be the way to construct its identity. For Cotonou the process of being part of an *imagined community* of international cities, is informing the process of constructing her own identity. By seeking to possess the quality of an abstract idea of a metropolis, Cotonou is cleaning itself of any details that could distinguish it from any other cities, in the name of becoming 'a normal city'. But, as you can see by exploring our work, the identity of a city is somewhere in the inter-crossing of the three dimensions that are collectively created and individually re-elaborated: inheritance of the past, problems of the present and images of the future.

1 Michel Agier used the expression 'city-bis' to signify the results of an anthropological observation of the citizen life. He prefers an understanding of the city, moving from the citizen's perspective, to a study of the institutional frame of the city: "is not starting from the city itself that an anthropological knowledge of the city emerges but indeed from a montage of sequences of urban life coming from a little part of the flow of real world. The globality of this information's represents a sort of bis-city resulting from a collection and regulated agency of urban data." (1996:35).

2 This is a methodology that LAA first implemented in 2005, while collaborating with APUR (Parisian Urbanism Atelier) on ways to define new indicators that would measure the quality of life in Paris for the 'A Slice of the City' (*Tranche de Ville*) project. In this case, classical and functional indicators, as well as the historical and administrative limits of neighbourhoods of the French capital, were disregarded in favour of privileging the residents' perception and use of the spaces in which they live. As a result, new criteria and cartographies that describe the quality of urban life began to emerge. Our team now uses this method to investigate other regional territories and has applied this approach to Mexico City, San Salvador de Bahia and London. The case of Benin is our first audiovisual experimentation of this method.

Concerning the **Centre**, one particular question arises: is a city centre made by specific buildings, confined in a specific area, determined by the historical quarter or by the geographical centre? In a word: is it a spatial and fixed element? If we observe a daily evolution of a city we can easily discover that the centre, in the sense of a part of the city with a high concentration of activities where people converge to, is displaced during the day. In the case of Cotonou, what makes a centre a practice: trade (as it is with more than one African city)? The trading activities are not only creating one centre, i.e. the big market of Cotonou, but are also determining different centres at successive moments of the day, animated by diverse actors. This commercial practice is actually making Cotonou play a 'central' role, also on a national scale.

All these considerations lead to a conclusion: we should have a more dynamic approach to the notion of **Centre**. That is why we believe that it would be interesting to displace the question concerning city centre to city *centrality*. In this way we would shift from a question concerning territory to a question concerning network (Lussault 2003).

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