

A New Conversation About African Cities

Fragments from My Forthcoming Book

“The Cities of the Africa We Want”

By *Luc Gnacadja*

Africa is living through the fastest and most consequential urban transition of the 21st century. In seventy years, its urban population has grown twenty-sevenfold. By 2050, nearly one billion additional Africans will live in cities. Nothing about the continent’s future, its economic dynamism, social cohesion, political stability, or climate resilience, can be understood without this simple fact: **Africa’s destiny is being written in its cities.**

Yet we too often view urban Africa through lenses that distort more than they reveal.

The first is the familiar narrative of “urban explosion,” which reduces cities to spaces of chaos rather than ecosystems of opportunity.

The second is the notion that African cities are inherently “deficient”—defined by what they lack instead of the value they create.

The third is the illusion of a “placeless city”: an urbanism imagined in isolation from the territories that feed, sustain, and anchor it.

These misconceptions obscure the forces that actually drive Africa’s urban future: the vitality of its popular economies; the creativity and ingenuity of its people; the resilience of its self-built neighbourhoods; and the strategic importance of secondary cities and cross-border urban clusters. These are real engines of transformation—but they remain under-recognised and under-funded.

It is to challenge these narratives, and to help shift our collective gaze, that I have spent the past two years working on a book titled **The Cities of the Africa We Want**.

This project grew out of an essay I wrote in 2022 for ICLEI Africa’s *Africa Rise* series. What began as a reflection on an overlooked dimension of development has since evolved into a deeper inquiry into Africa’s urban, territorial, ecological, and political trajectories—and the transitions we must embrace to build cities that are liveable, dynamic, and regenerative.

Today, as Africa stands at a crossroads, the stakes could not be higher.

Our cities are expanding but not sufficiently transforming their territories.

They develop in places where climate risks are accelerating.

They move millions daily, but without viable mobility systems.

They carry immense responsibilities, yet lack the powers and resources to fulfil them.

Recognising this moment, my book identifies five major transitions Africa must navigate:

1. **a spatial transition** toward land stewardship and compact urban forms;
2. **a constructive transition** grounded in local materials and climate-responsive design;
3. **an ecological transition** that treats the city as a living ecosystem;
4. **a fiscal transition** that provides local governments with predictable and adequate means to act;
5. **a political transition** toward service-oriented, ethically grounded leadership.

None of these transitions will succeed if African societies continue to interpret their cities through imported narratives, obsolete planning models, or inherited fears. The first transformation we need is a transformation of perspective.

This is why, starting next week, I will publish a weekly piece drawn from the book—a short, curated fragment enriched with context and commentary—on my digital platforms and on the GPS-Development website (www.gps-development.org). Each instalment will be an open invitation to debate and a step toward building a more grounded, honest, and ambitious way of seeing African cities.

My aim is threefold:

- to open a broader public conversation on Africa's urban futures;
- to bring essential concepts and transitions into everyday discourse;
- to engage planners, scholars, decision-makers, community builders, and citizens in a shared dialogue.

Africa does not lack ideas, talent, or innovation. What it lacks is a compass, a shared sense of direction capable of aligning effort, guiding choices, and unlocking potential. If this series helps shift perceptions, if it helps us see our cities not as burdens but as strategic assets, then it will have done its job.

Africa's future will be urban.

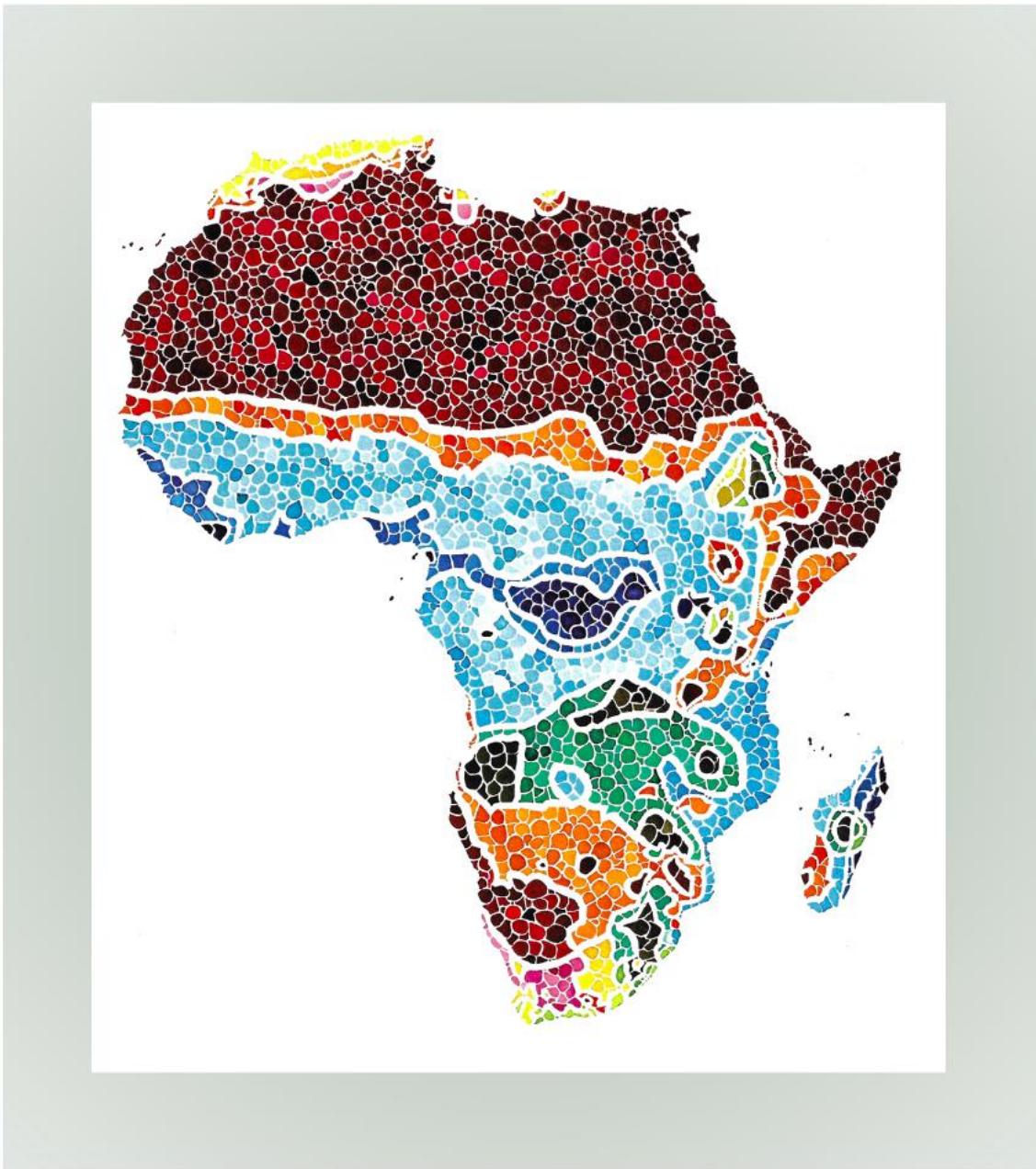
The only real question is whether we will shape it deliberately, or leave it to chance.

Luc GNACADJA is an architect and President of GPS-Development.

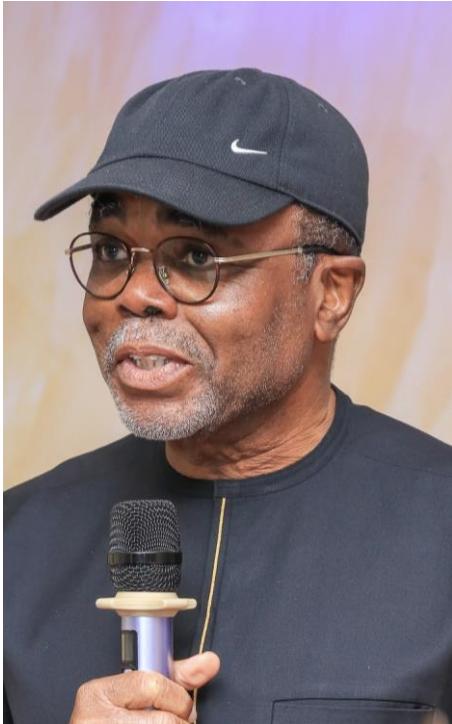
He is the former Minister of Environment, Housing and Urban Planning of Benin,
Former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

The Cities of THE AFRICA WE WANT

Between Disappointed Hopes, Real Promises, and Pathways to Reinvent



Fragments from Luc Gnacadja's Forthcoming Book
A Weekly Series of Short Essays



Luc Gnacadja has built his career around a core conviction: *Africa must reclaim ownership of its cities and territories to shape its future.*

An architect by training, he is a former Minister of Environment, Housing and Urban Planning of Benin and former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). He advocates for an urban and territorial governance that is grounded, lucid, and regenerative.

Through **GPS-Development**, the think-and-do tank he founded, he supports public authorities and local actors as they navigate territorial transitions and design pathways toward sustainable development.

His forthcoming book, **“The Cities of the Africa We Want,”** is the culmination of a two-year intellectual and empirical journey — and of a lifelong commitment to serving the continent’s sustainable future.