

In the *concrete* jungle. A dialogue about city-making, cement and the Global South

Armelle Choplin, Giacomo Pozzi

This conversation is the result of a meeting that took place in January 2026 between Armelle Choplin, geographer and urban planner, and Giacomo Pozzi, urban anthropologist. The dialogue is structured around Choplin's research on the construction sector in West Africa. Drawing on neo-materialist and Lefebvrian frameworks, the conversation explores the role of concrete and cement as ethnographic entry points for understanding urbanization processes in West Africa and the Global South. Based on Choplin's multi-year fieldwork along the Abidjan-Lagos urban corridor, the dialogue examines how building materials embody flows of capital, colonial legacies, class aspirations, and gender dynamics. Choplin identifies three urban typologies – the Premium City, the Affordable City, and the Low-Cost City – shaped by the everyday agency of ordinary builders, transnational migrants, and female professionals. The dialogue also addresses the tension between the global push for ecological transition and Africa's legitimate demand for concrete modernity, questioning neo-colonial assumptions embedded in alternative architecture. Methodologically, the authors advocate for empirical, multi-sited ethnography combined with interdisciplinary collaboration to trace both material flows and invisible capital circuits that shape contemporary African cities.

Giacomo Pozzi: In the call for papers for this dossier, we proposed to overcome the culture/material dichotomy. Through your work, you demonstrated that following the flows of building materials is a useful ethnographic entry point through which to understand urbanization processes and urban life in general: still, shouldn't we go beyond a 'material' approach? Your use of Actor-Network Theory is an attempt to overcome a kind of static materialism?

Armelle Choplin: In my research, I mobilised a wide range of theories and approaches. One trend is neo-materialism, inspired by the Marxist approach; another is related to Science and Technology Studies (STS), with Latour (2005) as a key reference.

I find it interesting to view materials as ‘vibrant matter’ (reusing Jane Bennett’s expression – 2010). Concrete is not static; it is not an inert material. It can have different social lives, as described by Appadurai (1986). I decided to follow cement bags and bricks to understand the urban production that was taking place before my eyes in West Africa. When I first arrived in Cotonou, Benin, in 2016, I was immediately struck by the colour of the city. Grey was everywhere. Concrete dominated the urban landscape. Cement was not just visible; it was omnipresent and pervasive. I had the idea to work on cement after hearing David Harvey present his book, *Abstract from the Concrete* (2016). He shed light on the links between concrete and capitalism, and I decided to see if we could draw parallels with what was happening in Africa (he was talking about China). Between Abidjan and Lagos, along the West African Urban corridor, concrete was everywhere. For me, materiality was a key entry point, a kind of pretext to understand urban production, not only in its material aspects, but also in terms of politics, economic trends and social relations. I wanted to unpack the different meanings (political, cultural, social...) behind this mundane material. I discovered that concrete was an affectively charged material. This is how it began, and then I spent almost three years in the field tracing bags of cement and trying to understand urban production.



Fig. 1. Cement depot, Cotonou. ©Choplin, 2023

GP: In your research you propose an analysis of urbanization processes by tracing the journeys of cement and people making urban life in West Africa: what is the relation between everyday life and urbanization processes? In the attempt to answer the main question of the dossier – *How is a city built?* – should we look at the ordinary people, processes and lives to formulate an answer?

AC: Over the past decade, numerous papers have been published on urbanisation in Africa and the Global South. One part was dedicated to the study of large urban projects, such as mega-urban projects, mega-cities and new satellite cities (Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018), like Eko Atlantic City in Lagos¹, for example. On the other hand, many papers focused on infrastructure because it was the era of the infrastructural turn². A third trend in the study of cities in the Global South was related to slums. I was part of this trend because I had previously conducted research on slum upgrading in West Africa. At one point, however, I felt that something was missing from the picture. Large urban projects, infrastructure and slums were well known, but not the ordinary city built by ordinary people who are not rich or part of the elite, but not very poor either. This group is huge in this part of Africa, where the middle class represents a significant proportion of the population (Mercer, 2024). This is why, in my book, I decided to examine three types of cities shaped by concrete. First, there is the city of the elite, which I call the 'Premium City': mega projects, luxurious high-rises and wealthy enclaves. But there is also the city built by the state, which I call the 'Affordable City': in some countries, the government and even presidents have recently launched social housing programmes (mostly private-public partnerships). The third type of city, the 'Low Cost City', is that of the everyday inhabitants: people who are shaping the city by building their own houses. I was interested in filling the gap and trying to understand this multifaceted 'Concrete City', which is built day by day, brick by brick, by these people.

GP: Well, it is quite clear to me, and you explained very well in some of your articles and in your book, that this attention to the everyday life is related to your choice to adopt a Lefebvrian

¹ See the promotional website <https://www.ekoatlantic.com>.

² See, for example, Guma, 2020; Kanai and Schindler 2019; Kasper and Schramm, 2023.

approach: you consider urban space as both a product and a producer, which in turn acts on the societies that produced it. What does it mean today, in the Global South, though not only there, to adopt a Lefebvrian approach? Urban space is increasingly linked to concrete, you suggest. And I agree. For example, look at this picture (Figure 2). I took it in the city of Mindelo, where I do ethnographic research, in Cape Verde. It's concrete, most of it. Mindelo, even though it is not a huge city, is characterized by an important urbanization process. It has a couple of interesting features: it is an archipelagic urban space, located at the intersection between West Africa and the Atlantic, with a transnational and highly mobile population. Here, concrete embodies the ideas of modernity, progress, and well-being, making them, at least in part, at least symbolically, accessible. In this sense, as you wrote, concrete is heuristic because it is both substance and matter when it is in the state of cement powder, it is a material when the cement turns into concrete, and it becomes a thing when it is found in the form of cement bags and concrete blocks. What kind of space is produced by concrete, who experiences it, for whom it is conceived, and how this material shapes urban forms and the lives of city dwellers?



Fig. 2. Partial view of Mindelo taken from the road to Ponta João d'Évora. ©Pozzi 2025.

AC: I checked the Lefebvre publications on concrete and cement, but there's just one quote. Nevertheless, we fully understand the connections he establishes between capitalism, urbanisation and concrete. As Harvey suggested, concrete is the materialisation of capital flows³. Capital can be anchored thanks to this powder – cement – which later becomes concrete blocks. This is obvious in West Africa: when you transform the powder into concrete blocks, you create value. If you have the land, you can increase its value simply by turning the powder into concrete and building four walls. Lefebvre argues that the city supports capitalism; in this part of the world, this is an immediate reality. Of course, it's the same in Europe. People know that if they buy a plot, they can transform it later, perhaps by building on it. So, plots and blocks are important resources. In my view, this is how we can bring a Lefebvrian perspective to this part of Africa. It's also a good way to show that Africa is the new frontier for capitalism. Through this building material, you can visualize this concretely. Historically, concrete is a colonial material that was brought during colonisation. The colonisers arrived on their ships with alcohol, water and... cement bags. But now, concrete is one of the few commodities produced in Africa rather than imported. This shift is very interesting: concrete is a former colonial product that is now considered an African product. Its supply chain demonstrates that it is possible to do business and make money in Africa. It is fascinating to examine figures such as Aliko Dangote⁴, Africa's richest man and cement magnate, who represents the embodiment of capitalism in Africa.

GP: In the previous answer, you suggested that concrete is related to colonialism. So, I suppose, we could say that it is an agent of racialization. Consequently, I wonder, from an intersectional point of view, if there is also a gender-related question regarding concrete. Probably these three dimensions – gender, class and race – were also important for you as a researcher studying concrete in West Africa. How are these three dimensions (and their impacts) related to urbanization processes and concrete in West Africa?

³ See also Jappe, 2022.

⁴ Aliko Dangote has become a billionaire by setting up cement plants in West Africa, and recently he opened the first oil refinery on the continent: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/27/world/africa/nigeria-dangote-refinery.html>

AC: I was very surprised by the 'Africanisation' of cement. It is considered an African product, and people are proud of this industry. There is a kind of consensus surrounding cement, even if concrete tells a lot about social classes. Depending on your class, how you use it differs: if you are poor, you build your own walls; if you are rich, of course, you call an architect or a bricklayer. But all these people want cement because, if you are rich, it's a way to express your success, but if you are poor, it's also a way to try to legitimise your position and place in the city – trying to avoid eviction, which is one of the most important problems for vulnerable people in West Africa. Rich or poor, young or old, men or women – everyone wants cement. Even though this colonial material has now been reappropriated locally, it conveys a kind of neo-colonial vision of the city, with a continuity of the idea of modernity. Cement and concrete also have other meanings that do not exist in Western societies: young people offer bags of cement to prove their commitment and love to their partners, and people can receive bags of cement when they retire. These dimensions are culturally significant. The meaning of cement varies around the world. It is important that women, including illiterate women, know how to work with concrete and know the price of a bag of cement in the Global South. I conducted research on women who are trying to build a house with their own hands to escape family or to invest their own money in their projects. In these cases, it is a way to emancipate. They acquired competencies to build: they know a lot about construction.

GP: We know very little about the daily work of urban planners, architects, engineers, bricklayers, builders, planners, landscape architects, estate agents, speculators, designers, consultants, brokers, civil servants, plasterers. Following cement, you also followed cement tycoons, entrepreneurs, political stakeholders, architects, sellers of cement and the ordinary men and women. How do these professions materially and culturally shape the urban dimension?

AC: Following bags of cement from the quarry to construction sites allows you to understand how cities are made. In Europe and Africa, we don't know who built the cities. Because there are so many stakeholders and everything is blurred, no one is held accountable for anything. I started from this observation: "We don't know who made the city, but we know what made it: the

materials". By tracing these materials, I was able to interact with a wide range of people. Nowadays, bricklayers can independently undertake huge real estate projects, just using AutoCAD. They are building the city. Other major city-builders are transnational migrants. With Senegalese colleagues, we are currently studying how the Senegalese diaspora living in France, Italy and Switzerland are building houses in Dakar from 'here' – from Bologna, Paris and Geneva. It is not just one house. They are creating the city. On the outskirts of Dakar, some neighbourhoods are directly linked with places like Brescia, Rimini and Bologna. Another issue is that we know very little about architects, electricians, civil engineers, bricklayers and construction entrepreneurs in Africa. Together with my colleague Ludovic Bakebek from Cameroon, I decided to explore the role of women in shaping and building the city, focusing on female architects, civil engineers and construction site supervisors. They usually come from the upper classes and have degrees and a cultural background, not just money. Cultural networks are more important than economic ones. There hasn't been much research into the material role of women in the city, so I'd like to encourage other colleagues to explore this issue with us. It would also be great to establish a network of people working in the construction sector, as it is an understudied area and, I believe, one of the most important in contemporary urban Africa.



Fig. 3. Scaffoldings, Cotonou. ©Choplin, 2026

GP: What emerges from your research is a Marxist understanding of the impacts of the extension of capitalism and neoliberalism in Africa through the lens of cement. In doing so, from the 12-year-old boy who dreams of becoming rich and famous by playing football in the Champions League or making cement, to the choice of covering houses in tiles to become the “boss of the neighbourhood”, what emerges is how these practices reinforce and legitimize the hegemonic class, while also serving as models for improving one’s social status. What are the imaginaries and the aspirations of the hegemonic class in West Africa that could be the next trends reproduced in the built environment? Do you think that ‘new’ practices, such as Kéré’s architectural projects⁵, could be successfully and largely adopted or whether the widespread uses and abuses of concrete will remain with us for a long period?

AC: You are pointing out a very interesting question and also highlighting the gap between the two trends that we can observe in Africa. First, we need to consider that Europe and other Western countries are currently engaged in an important debate about ecological transition and decarbonisation. We know that the cement industry is responsible for around 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. In Europe, the consensus on cement, concrete and large-scale construction is over. The opposite is happening in Africa: people dream of having huge concrete houses with air conditioning and all the comforts. There is a niche market represented by architects like Francis Kéré, who won the Pritzker Prize in 2022 (the Nobel Prize of architecture) and builds with local materials. His model is the earth house. This is exactly the opposite of what people in West Africa want to live in. So how do we bridge this gap? On the one hand, we are pessimistic because people just want huge concrete houses. On the other, we can be optimistic because of people like Francis Kéré and the interesting experiments taking place in West Africa. I have tried to map all these initiatives involving architects who use bio- and geosourced materials to demonstrate that more sustainable construction is possible. In Europe, there is sometimes a fascination with the vernacular, which can be dangerous. And sometimes I’m afraid that the work of Francis Kéré could be appropriated by Europeans in

⁵ <https://www.kerearchitecture.com>

search of beautiful, picturesque architecture. Definitely, African people cannot be expected to live in mud huts just to reduce the global carbon footprint. This way of thinking is completely neo-colonial. People in Africa don't want to live in wood or earthen houses. They deserve modern, comfortable homes. That's why they are demanding concrete houses, and this is a legitimate demand. One of the main issues for the next few decades is how to reconcile the aspirations of Africans, who want to live in concrete city with air conditioning as Europeans and North Americans have done for decades, with the need for more sustainable buildings. They have the right to concrete houses, too. That's why my book is not just a manifesto against concrete. We cannot simply say that concrete is either good or bad. It's more complicated than that.



Fig. 4. The Goethe Institute in Dakar, designed by Francis Kéré and inaugurated in April 2026. ©Choplin, November 2025

GP: We have been talking a lot about Africa, but we didn't explore so much why you looked specifically at this urban corridor. You used this urban corridor emerging between Abidjan and Lagos as a case study, this 1,000-kilometre strip, where cement highways link the cities of Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou, Porto-Novo and

Lagos, shaping a mega-urban region of 40 million inhabitants who live, move and build in concrete. This region is set to have one of the largest urban concentrations of the twenty-first century. How much does looking at the Global South change our understanding of global processes such as urbanization? This is a kind of critique that I always exercise to the Urban Studies Italian community. There are very few urban studies scholars in Italy studying Africa. There are Italians working abroad who do that, but among Italians working in Italy in this field, few are interested in Africa. Why should we look there?

AC: It's not just in Italy; it's the same in France. It's a more general problem with Eurocentric research. But things are changing. Twenty years ago, it would have been impossible to argue that you could say anything interesting about these places in the world, considered as 'margins'. In this case, however, it's not a marginal place anymore. We need to pay closer attention to what is happening elsewhere in the world, and in particular in that urban corridor in West Africa where nearly 40 million people live – a mega city region currently under construction that stretches along a highly vulnerable coastal strip from Accra to Lagos. At the same time, there is urban sprawl and verticalization. We know that 80% of the housing and infrastructure for cities in 2050 has already been built in Europe. In this part of Africa, projections suggest the opposite. Only 20% of the city has been built. The same applies to India and Southeast Asia. The future of the world is concentrated there! If researchers have not yet arrived, the private sector certainly has. Italian industries and investors are already present. They know that's where the money is. All the international consultancy firms, such as McKinsey and Knight Frank, are already there, ready to do business and make profits. They tell you "how to win in Africa"⁶. However, it is very difficult to conduct research on these issues. The risk is to produce only an overview. We need to conduct very empirical research because the future of Africa is important not only for the continent, but for the whole world. As Achille Mbembe and Felwin Sarr argue (Mbembe et al., 2016; Sarr, 2020), the future is currently being written here. During my academic visit to the University of Bologna in 2025–26, I have been conducting research in Italy, exploring the export of 'Made in Italy' products to Africa, with a particular focus on the

⁶ See McKinsey website.

marble and tile industry. I attended the ceramics fair (Cersaie) in Bologna, where I met some African clients. The same was true at the marble fair (Marmomac) in Verona. Africans are coming to buy the 'savoir faire' of Made in Italy: not only marble and ceramic tiles, but also machinery. I am convinced that global capitalism can be understood through the marble slabs and ceramic tiles that circulate around the world and arrive in African ports.

GP: In Cape Verde, there is a passion for Made in Portugal. Portugal has this specific type of famous ceramic, *azulejos*, all painted. It can happen that those who have some success with their migratory project, when they build a house in Cape Verde, they want these ceramics, the original ones, to be shown in their houses. And they want the artisanal ones, not the industrial ones. They spend a lot of money just to show through their houses and through construction materials that their migration project was successful and that they can afford to buy something like that.

AC: It's the same in Dakar. When you have money, you add tiles everywhere. If you're rich, you dream of having Italian flush toilets and an Italian bidet. That's perfection! In my current research, I'm focusing on finishing materials, specifically tiles from Sassuolo and marble from Carrara, but also from China. You need to imagine that if you want to buy a toilet in Dakar, there are only a few production industries in Africa: in Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa. This means that the great majority of flush toilets in Africa are imported from Foshan in China, near Guangdong. If you want a toilet, it must travel ten thousand kilometres.

GP: The study of cities requires a distinctly interdisciplinary approach, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also from a methodological one. From this perspective, you favour a qualitative approach, particularly ethnography. Why is that? What led you to identify and choose ethnography as a valid methodological approach? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach? Because you were not trained as an anthropologist, but still you chose ethnography.

AC: I think the empirical approach, and fieldwork in particular, is very important for the analysis. Although I was not trained as an anthropologist, I spent a lot of time with anthropologists. I was trained in human geography in France, where it has strong links with sociology and anthropology.

GP: In Italy, the relationship between anthropology and geography is not so marked. There are not so many common paths or opportunities that involve dialogue between these approaches. A person can construct them, but in most cases, they are not offered, especially at the higher education level.

AC: In France, it depends where you study. I had the chance to be trained in ethnography. Together with my colleague Olivier Pliez, who is also a geographer, I started studying what we call 'inconspicuous globalisation' (*mondialisation discrète* in French – Choplin and Pliez, 2014). This concept was developed to look beyond globalisation as observed through large firms and global product flows, taking a quantified approach. We studied everyday commodities such as bags of cement, jeans, second-hand clothes, lighters, and women's bread, for example. We traced these items from China to West African markets, via Dubai. This follow-the-thing and multi-situated approach is very useful for highlighting the flows of commodities and supply chains from producers to consumers, since there are no figures available to quantify this kind of business. My idea was to re-apply this approach to investigate material flows and the immaterial flows (capital flows) behind urban production. However, this is very challenging. I would like to work more on these economic aspects, as the circuits are complex. We don't really know where the money comes from or how it arrives (also because the money laundering business is important).

GP: And do you think that it is possible to study all this ethnographically?

AC: That's what we are trying to do, but we also need to work with economists who can explain to us how capital circuit works. For me, that's the limit of our ethnographic approach. We see things, but it's difficult to have an idea of what is, for example, the true amount of money circulating and all the actors involved in the sector.

GP: Technique and materiality seem to move together. In your studies, this dialectic is central. If the city is the result of daily actions – to build or rather shape the urban environment – the relationship between technicality and materiality must necessarily be investigated. What are the technicalities of materials and the

materials of technicalities that you met during your research?

AC: Unfortunately, I'm not a technician and I know little about technical aspects. However, before going into the field, I took the time to familiarise myself with how the cement industry works. This helped me appear credible to the people I met. Technique and materiality are the focus of my new book. Everything has been done to disconnect people from their built environment. Look at this concrete wall or this window. You are aware that it is not very well insulated – it's cold in winter and hot in summer. You realise that the materials matter, but you don't know anything about them. My new book (Choplin and Simay, 2026), written with architect Philippe Simay, explores how these materials shape and influence our lives. We argue that, just as we are reclaiming control over what we eat, we need to reclaim control over our built environment. Nowadays, people want to know what they are eating. For me, it's the same with the construction sector. We need to develop a better understanding of these materials by acquiring more technical skills. These materials affect our everyday lives, particularly in the context of climate change and recurring extreme weather events. We must understand the connections between techniques, materials, extractivism, industrialisation and their impact on our lives and our planet.



Fig. 5. Toilets in Sala Borsa, Bologna. ©Choplin, 2026

GP: We could say, on the one hand, that concrete permits different designs. On the other, it has become a symbol of modernity and protection against the disruption of the human sensorium experienced in the metropolis. Do you think that materials shape cultures and vice versa?

AC: I truly agree and would add that materiality and the built environment are highly political. Reconnecting with materiality is a way of re-politicising the way we inhabit the planet. Some materials, such as concrete, steel, glass and plastic, are hegemonic and shape our lives. When Walter Benjamin talks about Paris and modernity, he is describing concrete, steel and glass. These materials are still hegemonic 150 years later, deeply embedded in capitalism, extractivism and standardisation. They shape our lives and our cities (vertical cities). In contrast, there are other materials that are subaltern and whose role is to support these four hegemonic materials, such as glue and additives. These materials are completely invisible yet omnipresent. Because we use them, we cannot reuse the hegemonic materials. We must demolish them. Concrete cannot be the only solution for the next few decades. We need to reinvent training in architecture schools, as well as the way we produce materials. After all, 150 years of concrete production is a very short period in the context of human history. We can imagine shifting direction now, *bifurquer*, as we say in French. But that's very political. This is why I believe people need to know more about the buildings they live in, so they can put pressure on politicians to introduce new regulations. There is growing opposition to concrete and cement in Europe. I've even seen graffiti saying 'basta cemento!' in Bologna. Many people are deciding not to use concrete anymore. Another way of building is possible, and I think we need to find this new path globally, looking at what is happening in the World, especially in Africa where the urban futures are taking shape...

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