

BOOK REVIEW

David Morton. *Age of Concrete: Housing and the Shape of Aspiration in the Capital of Mozambique*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019. 336 pp. List of Illustrations. Glossary. Notes. Sources. \$90.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0821423677.

In the introduction to his highly recommendable book *Age of Concrete: Housing and the Shape of Aspiration in the Capital of Mozambique*, David Morton informs the reader that his account addresses the question of nationalism in a different way. In place of the usual stories of decolonization that revolve around “strikes, nationalist appeals, boycotts and rebellion” (9), he provides an alternative view of nation building literally through the action of home builders. As he contends, “home dwellers of the subúrbios of Mozambique’s capital helped give substance to what governance was and what governance should be.” Since governance in this case is irrespective of colonial or postcolonial dispensation, Morton provides a dense social history of housing in Maputo that straddles these dichotomies.

Focusing on the three decades surrounding the country’s independence, namely the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s, *Age of Concrete* starts by successfully engaging with the specificity of Portuguese colonialism. Morton begins by criticizing Fanon’s description of the dual city and the currency such a concept has enjoyed in the field of urban studies, and then moves on to provide a rich and nuanced discussion of housing and city-making under Portuguese rule. Contrary to one of the main tenets of the theory on African colonial cities, the author argues that Maputo was for the most part devoid of anything that resembled buffer zones separating the city per se from the informal settlements. Even though Portuguese settlers lived for the most part in the so-called City of Cement, there were various zones of intimacy and co-habitation between colonizers and colonized.

Age of Concrete is about the aspiration for housing, and not simply for any random house, but for a house in concrete. It provides a description of how many of Maputo’s inhabitants yearn for houses, build and keep them, and then through these processes they relate, or fail to relate, to the state. For the most part, Morton is too sympathetic to the notion that by building their own houses people are shaping their neighborhoods, a concept he calls popular urbanism, borrowed from Emily Callaci. However, since the book only sparsely addresses the question of urbanism, or city-making, it is hard to understand the extent to which Maputo residents have historically been successful in such a quest.

Whereas I find such a description rich and timely, I also find that two areas of inquiry deserve better discussion. The first one revolves around the question of land. There is apt explanation of construction procedures, but the text is unclear regarding the processes of land acquisition and land tenure, which allowed for construction, particularly during colonial times. There is an indication, particularly in the discussion of housing building during colonial times, that even though people were allowed to build, the land they built on did not belong to them, but rather to the state. If this is the case, the question to be dealt with is how, by building their houses on land that did not belong to them, Maputo residents were or were not allowed to secure permanent tenure.

The second point to raise regards the relationship between house building and the fabric of the city. Morton explicitly avoids giving much detail regarding the inception of the City of Cement, for his focus is on the *subúrbio*. However, by avoiding such a relationality between the City of Cement and the *subúrbio*, one does not understand, for instance, the extent to which the expansion of the urban grid impacted on housing aspirations in the *subúrbio*. It is fairly well known that the expansion of the colonial city in various contexts was enabled by land grabbing, which frequently displaced thousands of people.

Finally, I am not convinced of the appropriateness of the title. It is too generic, for Morton offers much more than simply an analysis of how Maputo's residents have used the materiality of concrete to shape their housing aspirations. He provides a social history that discusses not only the aesthetics and practice of building housing, but also housing and urban typologies (the cantina, the compound, the Portuguese yard, and the *Bairro Indígena*), the specificities of colonial and postcolonial urban management, and the problematic nationalization of the housing stock by a socialist regime in the aftermath of independence in 1975, which stripped thousands of Mozambicans of property.

António Tomás 

University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, South Africa
antonioctomas@gmail.com

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Chétima, Melchisedek. 2019. "You Are Where You Build: Hierarchy, Inequality, and Equalitarianism in Mandara Highland Architecture." *African Studies Review* 62 (3): 40–64. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.45.
- Meinert, Lotte, Rane Willerslev, and Sophie Hooe Seebach. 2017. "Cement, Graves, and Pillars in Land Disputes in Northern Uganda." *African Studies Review* 60 (3): 37–57. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.119.
- Schafer, Jessica, and Richard Black. 2003. "Conflict, Peace, and the History of Natural Resource Management in Sussundenga District, Mozambique." *African Studies Review* 46 (3): 55–81. doi:10.2307/1515042.