

## CONCRETE AND URBAN HISTORY IN MOZAMBIQUE

*Age of Concrete: Housing and the Shape of Aspiration in the Capital of Mozambique.*

By David Morton.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019. Pp. 336. \$34.95, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2368-4); \$90.00, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2367-7).

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**KEY WORDS:** Mozambique, Southern Africa, urban, decolonization, politics, material culture, postcolonial.

*Age of Concrete* tells the story of the turbulent years preceding and following independence in Mozambique through the prism of the built environment. In the book's Introduction, Morton argues that, in doing so, the book 'offers a different kind of story of decolonization than the ones that are often told' (9). By looking at practices of home building in the Mozambican capital of Maputo over time, the book seeks to go beyond an analysis of 'politics of a more explicit sort' by shedding light on 'politics . . . that did not always call itself politics' but that, in its everyday workings and manifestations, 'helped give substance to what governance was and what governance should do' (11).

Drawing on the work of architectural historian Adrian Forty, Morton posits not only that 'concrete tells us what it means to be modern' and therefore represents a way to show how people's lives were transformed during this time, but also that the material 'shaped their expectations and conditioned their possibilities' (18). While this may be true, Morton may cut himself short as his book is in many ways about people. If, as he argues, 'the houses *are* the change' (21), people's 'stories are the evidence' (25) for understanding the city's history. Building on these many stories, collected through numerous interviews as well as solid archival research, the book consists of a stream of vignettes interlaced with images and photographs that together provide insight into the relationship between urban material and urban life.

The first three chapters focus on the years in which Maputo was still called Lourenço Marques. Chapter One starts by tracing the different urban spaces that were created in the city's peripheral *subúrbios* during late colonial years through (failed) attempts at colonial urban planning, law, and forced labour; the changing use of construction material from reed to wood, zinc, and blocks; and the resultant emergence of *cantinas*, compounds, *bairros indígenas*, and yards. Chapter Two describes the growing calls of suburban residents for recognition by the city's authorities and attempts to take down the 'reed curtain' that separated the *subúrbios* from the colonial City of Cement, notably through a debate that emerged in a series of newspaper exposés.

In the chapter that follows, which stands at the heart of the book, Morton describes the rise of clandestine masonry housing construction in the *subúrbios*. In doing so, he provides important insight into the workings of law and authority during late colonial times and the ways in which these had to be navigated in order to build (and maintain) a house of stone. Building in concrete also blurred the dualist distinctions between the City of Reed and the City of Cement and associated notions of precarity versus permanency, Black versus white, and the colonized versus the colonizer. It therefore represented an important political act, even if for many home builders the use of concrete merely symbolized people's aspirations to 'enter into "modern" life' (115).

By outlining these contrasts (and the spaces between them), Morton highlights the ambiguous relationship of the residents of the *subúrbios* with the City of Cement. He builds on this in the following two chapters which cover the period between the mid-1970s and early 1990s. Chapter Four details the nationalization of the city's housing stock after independence and how the — erstwhile slow — occupation by former residents of the *subúrbios* was accompanied by feelings of distance, isolation, and abandonment. In a context of war, an absent (or corrupt) state, and increased overcrowding, 'a house or an apartment in the City of Cement became a dubious privilege at best, a garbage dump and death trap at worst' (181). On the other hand, planning experiences in the *subúrbios*, described in Chapter Five, show the irresistible allure of modern 'urbanization' as represented by the City of Cement, with communities taking an active role in reshaping urban space according to grid-like lines and plans. These tensions reveal that what was in fact at stake for suburban citizens living in the margins of a 'would-be state' (216) was not the materiality of concrete itself, but associated desires and aspirations for comfort, security, and belonging.

The books' conclusions reflect on the multiple trajectories Mozambique has taken since the introduction of a market economy in the 1990s, which has seen a 'recolonization' of the City of Cement fuelled by the growing foreign presence of donors, capital, and investors. For those who stayed in the City of Cement, this means that their once decrepit apartments have turned into valuable assets and sources of rent, while concrete-block construction in the *subúrbios* has proliferated even if 'upgrading from reed construction has not marked the end of hardship' (223). By showing how concrete continues to represent an ambiguous marker and embodiment of urban life, Morton makes an important contribution to urban studies in Africa.

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## EXILE, NARRATIVE, AND MIGRATION IN AFRICAN HISTORY

*Africans in Exile: Mobility, Law and Identity.*

Edited by Benjamin N. Lawrance and Nathan Riley Carpenter.

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**KEY WORDS:** West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Southern Africa, migration, law, identity, memory, archives.

By distancing themselves from an approach favoring either the uprooting of exiles or the omnipotence of authoritarian states, the contributors to *Africans in Exile* renew the knowledge of African forced migration: they propose historicized case studies that highlight the political imaginations at work in situations of exile around two main ideas. First, if we consider exile as a practice of diversified mobility, both past and present, which in turn sheds light on state instability, we can reconstruct an archive of exile. Secondly, the archive that