

# BOOK REVIEW

**Danny Hoffman. *Monrovia Modern: Urban and Political Imagination in Liberia*.**

Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. xvi+205pp. Map. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. Cloth. \$94.95. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6357-6. Paper. \$26.95. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5884-8.

Danny Hoffman's *Monrovia Modern* uses the ruins of four iconic buildings in Liberia's capital city as a point of departure to describe the ways in which city dwellers constitute their lives. Hoffman explores how mainly ex-combatant youth who fought during the Liberian civil war (1989–2003) connect to the built environment and to an imagined future (38). Although his analysis focuses on the particularities of one West African city scarred by the violence of civil war, the book is relevant for analyzing the complexities of urban life that characterize many of the continent's rapidly developing postcolonial cities, which are often defined by their inadequacies and failures.

By bringing the past, the present, and the future together, Hoffman identifies a significant contradiction between the modern, often utopian, vision of the city that these buildings were intended to represent and their contemporary decay and destruction—hence the focus on ruins. Monrovia is a relatively young city and is considered by Hoffman as a “laborator[y] of modernism's and modernity's successes and failures” (17). Today, he claims, urban life is characterized by its “liquid” nature (9). The built infrastructures seem to be as unstable as the social lives of the people who inhabit them. This approach fits well within more recent scholarship on urban Africa, which highlights how cities exist beyond planning efforts and physical infrastructure, a viewpoint which considers people as part of the infrastructure. Much of urban life, Hoffman argues, is not to be found in those classic anthropological forms of associational life, but rather in the invisible, both literally and in the sense of being that which is unrecognizable (23–24).

In the second chapter, Hoffman provides a glimpse of how this conceptual frame is lived. Based on rich and observant ethnography, he describes the life worlds of young ex-combatants and the manifold creative ways in which they make a living in a volatile urban environment. By occupying the *gaps* (47) that have emerged in the layout of the city, they carve out their provisional trajectories. Throughout the book, we are presented with captivating ethnographic observations written in beautiful prose, through which

the reader is drawn into the threads making up the urban fabric. These observations not only provide a wonderful insight into the actual life worlds but also into the social/urban/political imagination that inspires and guides future actions.

The four chapters discussing the individual buildings make up the core of this book. Each of these buildings occupies a central place in the urban imagination of Monrovia's residents. The Ministry of Defence, the E.J. Roye tower, Hotel Africa, and the Liberia Broadcasting System are all part of public discourse and social commentary on politics, history, and conflict. As Hoffman describes, they are subject to speculation as to their new destinations and rumors as to what happened during the war, or regarding possible new investments. Of these four, the Hotel Africa is maybe the odd one out, as it is not part of the skyline of Monrovia, and also because it is not inhabited. Due to its links to (international networks of) organized crime during the war, this hotel is clouded in silence and mystery. This chapter describes the "social life of things" as it is a "ruin without authorship" (138). Still, considering Hoffman's approach to urban infrastructure as "liquid" and partly invisible, and the prominence of the formal hotel in the social imagination of the war, it is justified to include it with the others.

Each description of the buildings manages to draw connections between the past, the present, and future imaginations. These chapters provide a fascinating insight into aspects of Liberian history that do not often figure in discussions of the country's recent past. They shed light on (nationalist) ideological histories and modernist projects initiated by state authorities under the True Whig Party's (E. J. Roye), Samuel K. Doe's (Ministry), or Charles Taylor's (LBS) regimes.

Special mention needs to be made of the methodology that is used throughout the book. In addition to detailed ethnographic information, Hoffman makes use of photographs ("photowriting") as a way to represent and analyze the built form as a "provocation" (27). Each chapter ends with a brief postscript which elaborates on the images used throughout the text. This framing of the data does, as promised and intended, provide an extra layer of analysis and interpretation. It shows in a very convincing way the potential of using visual material in social analysis.

Hoffman's theoretical references are at times less convincing. The frequent references to European and American architectural projects and to Western philosophy are supposed to de-exoticize African urban life. Although these excursions are very insightful, they have the opposite effect of alienating or distancing the reader from the actual life-worlds of the dwellers that are central to his narrative.

Nevertheless, *Monrovia Modern* leaves the reader wanting to know more. Ex-combatants have received a lot of attention over the years, and I am curious about those dwellers who did not fight during the war, or about female voices that occupy and make the city. With this book, Hoffman provides us with new empirical insights on West Africa, and a

fascinating and original way of thinking the city that can inspire future scholarship.

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**For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

Gershoni, Yekutiel. 1997. "War Without End and An End to A War: The Prolonged Wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone." *African Studies Review* 40 (3): 55–76. doi:10.2307/524966.

Murphy, William P. 2003. "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientalism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars." *African Studies Review* 46 (2): 61–87. doi:10.2307/1514826.