Nicholas Coetzer

Building Apartheid: On Architecture and Order in Imperial Cape Town

Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2013, 260 pp., 73 b/w illus. $119.95, ISBN 9781409446040

This volume, the fourth title in the Ashgate Studies in Architecture series, is a substantial achievement due to Nicholas Coetzer’s thorough scholarship drawing on archives and other primary sources to support a historical study of architecture, housing, and urban planning in Cape Town, South Africa, from the late nineteenth century to 1948, when apartheid officially began. Coetzer argues that the project of legal exclusion known as apartheid began fifty years before it was enforced through legislation. The book is admirable for its highly articulate portrayal of the social, political, and cultural contexts that, through architecture and the ordering of urban and suburban spaces, “were actively constructing Cape Town and South Africa into a territory of apartheid” (215). The book is strong in its historical treatment of pre-apartheid Cape Town through a postcolonial lens, though not an overly determined one. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this study is the revelation that the seemingly innocuous humanist and scientifically based decisions around the aesthetics and ordering of space in pre-apartheid Cape Town gave rise to a dehumanized landscape and “unfold[ed] without contradiction from Empire to apartheid” (216), laying “the solid foundations onto which the ugly edifice of apartheid was built” (13).

The organizational scheme of the book is grounded in the literature of “whiteness” and the premise that the construction of identity is a relational process involving the binary of “Self” and “Other.” Conceptualized in such a fashion, the formation of “Self” is a result not only of what the self is but also what it is in opposition to. Therefore, the unstable nature of identity sows the seeds for its own unraveling. Part I, “Self/Countryside,” brings this theoretical premise into the spatial realm as Coetzer discusses the built heritage of Cape Dutch rural homesteads and their architectural elements (e.g., gables, thatched roofs, whitewashed walls). The British and Afrikaner residents of Cape Town saw these as their common heritage. Given these buildings’ status as examples of a significant vernacular, which subsequently became the prototype for the so-called Cape Dutch revival in Cape Town and beyond, they were also understood as requiring preservation. At a social and political level, Cape Dutch architecture came to be construed by Europeans living in the Cape—as they positioned themselves as the stewards of the history and vast territory of southern Africa—as a mark of Western “advanced” civilization. Conveniently framed in this manner, “civilized” was seen in opposition to “native” or “Other,” although, as Coetzer points out, that relationship was often muddled.

Part II, “Other/City,” extends this oppositional relationship to the urban scale as the city’s public health officials, engineers, planners, and architects attempted to make the cityscape pretty and inoffensive. Unsightly visual aspects of Cape Town, such as dense slums and dilapidated structures, were positioned in contrast to making the city beautiful through regulation of the aesthetics of built form and concomitant social space rooted in European heritage as well as romantic ideals of the garden city and Arts and Crafts movements. Regulatory mechanisms couched in “scientific” terms, but in reality rooted in racial and social assumptions about the “Other,” legitimated where and how certain inhabitants of the city should live and

President Obama’s 2009 realignment of the United States as a Pacific Nation, Moses establishes a case for observing the contentious architecture of Honolulu as embedded in discourses of opposition and subjugation.

The third section of the book provides a riposte to the dilemmas posed in the previous two sections by setting the stage for defining precarious boundaries within charged urban contexts. Anyone who has visited Singapore recently will note that, with renovation, colonial-era shophouses have taken on new meaning as sites for market-driven gentrification. Anoma Pieris’s characterization of a pluralized “graduated sovereignty” in the city-state extends to Singapore’s planning and zoning. Expanding a polemical trajectory for contemporary cities, the conflicts between a colonial past and a rigorous yet hyperbolic present are centered on the demands of control, statehood, and modernity via an architectural optics once contained by geography and now enforced by foreign construed markers.

Such tensions augment Imran bin Tajudeen’s analysis of the design of kampung houses found in Malacca and Singapore. In addition to featuring visual components that speak to an aesthetic mobility found across the tropics, these buildings connote a hybridity within competing notions of local and regional vernaculars. What Tajudeen determines to be the longue durée of a racialized imperial present is also captured in other cities, including Hong Kong and Shanghai, discussed in the last two essays of the book. Housing typologies described by Cecilia Chu, such as the tong lou of Hong Kong, parallel those built forms seen in previous sections in which the inscription of boundaries governed by identity haunts divided cityscapes. In Shanghai, by contrast, the presence of the past registers a cultural nadir for an outward-looking Chinese middle class and elite while also harboring the remains of a staunch historicity strategized within colonial dictates. For Andrew Law, and significantly for this volume, “the colonial . . . has become an important symbol within a new political rhetoric of individual aspiration” (302).

In each of the chapters, how the past is conveyed is not so much another litmus for appraising the imperial mission but rather the upshot of a new territory in which the forces of global markets and political motives result in spatial disjunctions. One might describe Rajagopalan and Desai’s volume as an exegesis of a landscape of spatial events—even when occasionally foregrounded by elephants or nameless servants—inculated by visual and spatial tactics of representation. For the contributors and those concerned by the ambiguous states of Being prior to and following a pivot toward a global modern architecture and urbanism, the inscription of affronts amid most urban spaces ultimately discloses colonial desire.
led to “the exclusion of social and racial Others from the city,” thereby transform-
ing the city into a “White space” (107).
By addressing the racialized underpinnings
of planning regulations, Coetzter under-
mines an enduring myth of science and its
applications as “disinterested” or “object-
tive” and points to the shifting definitions
of what constitutes progress and norms
around how and where people live. The
construction of difference involved the
conflation of the “Other” with physical
materials, such as corrugated iron, that
were associated with low status. Buildings
constructed from such materials were
deemed disorderly hybrid eyesores and
were consequently removed and relocated
to the periphery of the city in an effort to
“sanitize” the inner city and make it “safe”
for middle-class and white inhabitants.
Coetzter highlights this significant point
through his discussion of the association of
diseases, such as tuberculosis, with low
social and economic class, blackness, and a
lack of visible order, as well as with low-
status construction materials. The preva-
ience of infectious diseases in the city’s
“unsightly” quarters, such as the well-
known District Six, was yet another justifi-
cation for the forced removal of people
from the core of the city based on their
race and social status. Coetzter’s discussion
is a useful springboard for further research
focused on the relationships among dis-
case, public health, and the built environ-
ment in African cities.

Part III, “Same/Suburb,” details a his-
tory of housing in Cape Town that grew
out of Darwinian theories about the impact
of the environment on living organisms as
well as influential ideals of the garden city
and Arts and Crafts movements. Through
the spectacle of imperial exhibitions and
design competitions, “the identity of Englishness (as signified through the
cottage) was paraded and ‘naturalized’ as
essential, whilst other ways of being in the
city were excluded or downplayed” (175).
The creation of social-spatial zones that
dictated where and how people should live
combined with antiurban low-density
housing formed the backbone for munici-
pal housing schemes in early twentieth-
century Cape Town and set the stage for
later apartheid planning. Decisions about
housing the “native” population, including
permanent residents, migratory laborers,
and well-educated nonwhites, were based
on ridding the city of its ugly, dense, and
insalubrious environment and thereby
bringing order and beauty to Cape Town.
The “natives” were pushed out to the mar-
gins of the city and into the suburbs, where
they were rehoused in stripped-down free-
standing cottages, block houses, or hostels
in the hope that these new settings would
be conducive to “civilizing” the nonwhite
population. Coetzter argues that this reor-
dering of urban space ironically created
conditions in the city’s suburbs that
brought whites into close proximity with
“Others,” but this time in the city’s periphery.
This uneasiness and uncertainty eventually
led to new plans for achieving order.

Overall, Building Apartheid: On Archi-
tecture and Order in Imperial Cape Town
is an outstanding contribution to scholarship
about the historical development of pre-
apartheid Cape Town. While the book can
be criticized for being repetitive at times,
that is in part because the story of spatial
planning in South Africa is one of repeated
selective exclusion of people according to
race and class based on social constructions
of “Self,” “difference,” and “Other.” Care-
fully articulating the historical develop-
ment of architectural space in Cape Town
from many perspectives, Coetzter’s highly
readable benchmark study has significant
relevance for scholars of architectural and
planning practices in contemporary South
Africa.

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Lucy M. Maulsby
Fascism, Architecture, and the
Claiming of Modern Milan,
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As historians continue to probe the
recesses of the totalitarian politics of the
interwar years in Italy, it seems that we are
gaining a more complex and variegated
view of the fascist regime and its cultural
legacy. These studies lead one to reflect on
the disparity between the rhetorical asser-
tions of Mussolini, particularly as conveyed
in the many instruments of propaganda
that were under state control, and the
expression of political ideals and imple-
mentation of political policies through the
arts and architecture. While the gap
between art and architecture and the reac-
tionary politics of the fascist era was used
in the immediate post–World War II
period as a way to save certain individuals
and their work from the stain of negative
political associations, for some time now
that gap has allowed a deep and produc-
tive questioning of this cultural legacy and
its relationship to an intransigent and
highly conflicted political movement.
As much as this has been a constructive
and useful development in the history of
the arts and architecture of the modern
period, quite rightly one can ask in each
specific case to what end this kind of criti-
cal inquiry is moving. In short, how can we
understand the artistic and architec-
tural legacy of Italian fascism, and what
picture does it create of the political ideals
and initiatives of the regime?

In tackling these and other difficult
questions, Lucy M. Maulsby’s Fascism,
Architecture, and the Claiming of Modern
Milan, 1922–1943 provides some impor-
tant insights into the kinds of urban nego-
tiations in which the Fascist Party was
involved regarding some of its most sig-
ificant symbolic projects in this important
northern Italian city. The basic assertions
of the book are quite clear, the most impor-
tant of these being that almost all of the
scholarship concerning urban transforma-
tions during the interwar period has
focused on Rome. Quite naturally this has
led to the assumption that fascism’s urban
ambitions were almost exclusively directed
toward the legacy of ancient Rome and
Italy’s Mediterranean origins, though with
some references to the practical problems
of the modern city. Two recent, and quite
compelling, books support Maulsby’s con-
tention of a Rome-centric scholarly focus
on Italian fascism: Paul Baxa’s Roads and
Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist
Rome and Joshua Arthurs’s Excavating
Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy.

In concentrating on the city of Milan,
Maulsby offers a different understanding of
the relationship between architecture
and politics during the fascist era—one
that more clearly acknowledges the highly
disputed agenda of the regime. Indeed, as
she recognizes, Milan was not only the
most important industrial, commercial,