Chief among many excellent contributions of this compelling book is its brilliant explication of the role that conjecture, imagination, and reconstruction played both for Winckelmann and for the nineteenth-century scholars who created *Altertumswissenschaft*. Harloe brings into much sharper focus the likeness of Winckelmann constructed after his death by German scholars. She is rightly skeptical that Winckelmann founded a brand-new approach to the study of antiquity and its physical remains. Her position that he “fashion[ed] pre-existing ideas and approaches into an overarching framework” is a much stronger one (107). This, in turn, makes an important contribution to the history of scholarship and the historiography of classical studies as well as to art and architectural history. Harloe also points the way to future research. We need to know much more about Winckelmann’s Roman world, the habitat in which he spent the most productive years of his life. His willingness to, at turns, respect or violate the norms of this enclave of the Republic of Letters devoted to the study of antiquity seems critically important to an understanding of both his biography and his contributions.

In addition to these offerings, Harloe’s book presents benefits for architectural historians. Knowing something about the critical fortunes of Winckelmann and his “system” for interpreting the art of the ancient world seems very important to our field right now. At a moment in which the historical study of architecture in its global incarnations is becoming ever more important, thinking critically about our methods is especially valuable. Is there a way of doing history that is capacious enough to allow us to think and work as historians on a global scale? Opening up larger questions like these is one of the many valuable aspects of this book.

HEATHER HYDE MINOR
University of Notre Dame

Notes


Prita Meier

**Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere**

Bloomingon: Indiana University Press, 2016, 230 pp., 16 color and 68 b/w illus. $35 (paper), ISBN 9780253019158

Defining the Swahili, the peoples at the center of this book, is almost always fraught, not least because Swahili is only ever an approximate ethnic category, the putative constituents of which speak a unifying language that is one of the most thoroughly border crossing and widely spoken in Africa. Prita Meier’s exploration of Swahili histories of architecture therefore encompasses other questions not bearing directly on architecture: Why do the Swahili, who typically claim origins in places far from the East African coast, construct their identity through such extra-African affiliations? Are these claims true? And if so, are not Swahili peoples other than “Africans”? The book incorporates serious answers to these questions while constantly circling back to a critical address of its central issue: Can material culture, architecture especially, help frame such questions with more rigor and answer them more persuasively than have other disciplines? Perhaps because this world of Swahili things also helped construct its peoples’ rather unfamiliar kind of African ethnicity in the first place, *Swahili Port Cities* also explores how objects, broadly speaking, constitute and express Swahili identity and culture, even as they contest the former’s meanings internally.

Unlike other recent studies, Meier’s is distinguished in part by its modern-era focus and by its engagement with both the African world and Indian Ocean maritime circuits. Unusually attentive also to things noncanonical, the book is especially concerned with architecture. Buildings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often ignored in the scholarship in favor of centuries-old ruins and archaeological finds—the former thought either uninteresting or inauthentic, presumably because produced amid the unfolding of British colonialism. With determination, the author locates her account instead among the ordinary things of this period, viewed transculturally, while also bringing to their understanding a revaluation of both ancient histories and modern things.

Although the book is polemically complex, it is nevertheless straightforwardly organized into four chapters, not counting the introductory and concluding essays. Offering a historical description of the changing urbanscapes of Mombasa, among the oldest of the large Swahili towns, chapter 1 focuses on the intense shifts between a layered “patrimonial” rule and the slow coming of Europeans that culminated in British control. Meier explores the signifying constructional medium of whitewashed coral masonry, to which, even in British Mombasa, modern Swahili identity seems primarily affixed, especially as a means of distinguishing it from other East African identities. But we also learn of the tendency for Swahili identity to be fractured, with sections of the community occasionally pitted against one another. Contests over forms of authentication are often articulated in relation to specific buildings, thus otherwise diffuse identities are tied to architectural statements and other transformations enacted on the main streets of cities like Mombasa.

In chapter 2 and subsequently, Meier’s focus shifts to specific buildings, starting with Mombasa’s sixteenth-century Mandhry Mosque and the even earlier Basheikh Mosque. Through these singular structures, Meier teases out the internal dynamics of Swahili society as it was transforming itself in the face of colonizing Europeans. From her interpretations of these buildings and their strange minarets, we suspect that what drives Swahili identity production is often an imagined mapping of nearness or distance from “Shirazi” or “Oman” or even “Arabia.” The originality of Swahili imaginaries in relation to built identity markers is striking, given for example that the Mandhry Mosque is not exactly characteristic of such distant places. Here, too, Meier engages the materiality and significance of
in-betweenness vectored toward imaginary production of something like an ideology of mediums, above all coral stone acknowledges the agency of constructional dynamic approach distinguishes the book with permanently fixed meanings. This rather than a view of them as stable objects (6), require a dynamic reading over time mated in moments of sociopolitical crisis. Meier considers everything from colonial-era disparagement (which some Swahili inhabitants feel about our connections, real or imagined, to distant places. Not only does Meier recognize up front the astonishing presence of something like “cosmopolitan longing” (13), but she also confesses that there are historically produced fractures within the Swahili ethnic body linked to slave trading (and the many, often layered, colonialisms that replaced the trade with their own forms of viciousness). Even for this elusive matter, parsed in one instance as “histories of racialized violence and objectification” (13), Meier shows how a missed opportunity to grapple with these histories lies hidden in plain sight in previously unstudied buildings. Nevertheless, a nagging question remains for me about Swahili distancing from “Africa.” It is worth considering the obvious fact that the word swahili derives from suwahil, the Arabic term for coast, and that in its original meaning suwahili would therefore have meant something like the English word coastals, which islanders anywhere may use in reference to mainlanders. The contemporary Swahili identity’s anywhere-but-mainland—“Africa” version of an elsewhere then seems inescapably inflected by the bigotries of the trans-Indian Ocean slave trade and the fact that coastal mainlanders, the original suwahili, were perhaps the community to which islanders and the earliest Arab settlers felt superior. Indeed, Meier occasionally brings up the ways in which, for Swahili, ancestral identification with mainland indigenous Africa (also meaning identification with the mainland’s customary grass and adobe buildings) could be stigmatizing, and therefore possibly disavowed by the community at large, because it might signal slave ancestry. Exceptions to this general rule of nonidentification with the mainland occur only in rare historic instances connected to a continental realpolitik, reproduced as a will toward “authenticity”). For architectural historians, these issues may appear to diverge from our favored interest in buildings. However, here architecture and the politics of architectural style become persuasive means of understanding how the imaginary of Swahili ethnicity came to be located so self-consciously between Africa and places far beyond. Moreover, many readers will be struck by how Swahili ethnicity achieves such an imaginary without the angst many of us supposedly global citizens feel about our connections, real or imagined, to distant places.

Turning to interiors, especially of houses and mansions, the fourth chapter explores not only architectural space but also the objects, often foreign, that they contain, which were displayed mainly to express “the materiality of the faraway” (10). Meier considers everything from decorative schema (often featuring imported china) to furniture. She also interrogates historical photographs in relation to such objects, taking an almost ethnographic approach to their contemporary owners. In Meier’s hands, displayed objects are key sites through which to understand both the always ongoing internal Swahili sociocultural contestations and the ideologies of the in-between, even into their twenty-first-century manifestations. Meier accomplishes far more than the book’s simple four-chapter structure suggests. Near the beginning of chapter 1 she promises to explore “the power of built form and its attendant material culture to mediate human experience” (5)—in other words, to resolve the conundrum of how buildings could possibly be agents in how freethinking humans relate to one another at a given moment and across vast stretches of time. One of Meier’s aims in the book is to seek out and occupy the “very different vantage point from which to understand the African experience and the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world” (8), expressly by way of “built structures that have not received much scholarly attention” (18, my emphasis). These lofty ambitions indeed for a book of hardly two hundred pages, but Meier succeeds in writing an intricate narrative that remains crisp and clear even for readers not familiar with Swahili coast contexts.

For instance, the emphasis on origination from sites other than the indigenous local troubles the supra-identities of modern nation-states (here Kenya and Tanzania). Meier uses buildings and objects to craft a nuanced, theoretically grounded understanding of meanings generated by the Swahili (as opposed to those imposed from outside). She explains the valence of Swahili claims, arguing that it is misplaced to see them as a release mechanism or a way to avoid identification with indigenous Africa. By tracing how the Swahili produced and incorporated the styles of their buildings and objects into their identities, we see that one can claim, as do some Swahili, to be from Persia, for instance, while also being fully Kenyan. This argument presents a broader challenge to Africanist humanities interpretation, especially to anxieties regarding African culture’s indigeneity particularly in response to colonial-era disparagement (which some varieties of African studies, not to mention
barely recoverable era of early coastal communities founded by indigenous female rulers.

This is where readers may wish that Meier had pushed the matter further. The other zone of “port cities” constructed prior to European colonization that featured unique architecture with imagined claims to distant elsewhere lies just south of the Saharan “sea” in places like Timbuktu, Djenne, Agadez, and Kanem, where Arabs arrived as traders, settled in small numbers among locals, and founded ethnically mixed families. Yet, to the extent that these cities possessed cultures of in-betweeness, hinted at in written chronicles, this has not developed to anywhere near the degree found on the East African coast, and I am not aware of the existence of a Saheli people (although, incidentally, Sabel and Swahili share the same etymological root). The sustained earlier colonialisms of the Sahel people comparable to the Swahili), see John O. Hunwick, ed., Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa‘di’s Tahā kh Al-Sahn Down to 1613, and Other Contemporary Documents (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 50.

brief mention as “a port city to the south” of Zanzibar (107). Renowned for caverns, allegedly escape routes used by captives during the era of slavery, and for its subsequent role in missionary abolitionism, Bagamoyo is the site of a ruined ancient Muslim cemetery that it deserves more attention. I am also not entirely convinced the minarets of Mombasa have no identifiable foreign origins. Could they be reduced, simplified versions of Seljuk minarets? The slightly conical plumpness of Swahili minarets seems to recall the unarticulated rotundity of the Barsian or Sava mosque minarets stripped of ornamentation. Comparison with the Mbaraki pillar that Meier illustrates makes this plausible. The Swahili minaret’s slight curvature and fenestration could be a distanced translation of the Barsian model, although it arguably resembles even more closely both the tapering Kalyan minaret at Bukhara, Uzbekistan (Seljuk), with its barely visible, softly curved cap, and the slant-walled, circular, stout, capped Tughrul Tower in Rey, Iran.

It is likely Meier chose to be more cautious. My wishes and critiques above therefore do not take away from her wonderfully unexpected insights, for this book does sparkle with an overall brilliance. It ultimately turns our understanding of Swahili history on its head while also fully engaging the interpretive theories it uses and sometimes challenges, as any good work should. Written with admirable carelessness, Swahili Port Cities is an original, well-researched, and nicely crafted reading of the architectural and urban histories of a rare East African Islamic universe and its related aesthetic ways, which are somewhat removed from the worlds of Middle Eastern Islam and its architecture. At the same time, this universe challenges our received constructions of things African.

IKEM STANLEY OKOYE
University of Delaware

Kenny Cupers
The Social Project: Housing Postwar France
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 424 pp., 25 color and 167 b/w illus. $115 (cloth), ISBN 9780816689644; $35 (paper), ISBN 9780816689651

The grands ensembles—the large-scale suburban social housing estates, often featuring repetitive rows of tall concrete slabs—are a significant part of France’s postwar built environment. In North America, postwar suburban housing was tied to government financial incentives, private market developments, and individual homeownership, as in the famous case of Levittown tract housing. By contrast, much of France’s suburban landscape was defined by housing projects that were colossal in scale and subsidized by the state, much like their Eastern bloc counterparts. If the grands ensembles initially attracted popular interest as a potential solution to ongoing housing shortages, they quickly developed a poor reputation across the political spectrum and attracted criticism for their monotony and obliviousness to human scale. For many, the postwar French suburbs represent a bygone utopian past, an era French economist Jean Fourastié famously called les Trente Glorieuses, which has since devolved into an everyday reality marked by racial segregation, social alienation, and lack of employment opportunities. As Kristin Ross has argued in her now classic Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, the suburbs were central to France’s economic development and political discourse in the aftermath of World War II and decolonization. Yet, despite their crucial place within the postwar built environment and social imaginary, few studies on the grands ensembles have been available in English, a situation that Kenny Cupers helps to remedy with The Social Project.

Were the myriad postwar suburban housing schemes in France a long series of “monumental errors,” to use the title of a book by architectural historian Michel Ragon? Or do we, in hindsight, continue to underappreciate the humanist ambitions and the varied solutions proposed by French architects and planners for whom modernism was “not a style but a cause”? Those reading Cupers’s latest book may be