

# Books

Michelle Apotsos

## **Architecture, Islam, and Identity in West Africa: Lessons from Larabanga**

New York: Routledge, 2016, 216 pp., 61 b/w illus. \$205 (cloth), ISBN 9781138192454; \$67.95 (paper), ISBN 9781138192461

Over the past decade, scholars of the arts and visual cultures of Africa have made important strides in challenging long-standing Eurocentric and colonial frameworks that have isolated historical and contemporary African cultural production from global phenomena and presented Africa as the passive recipient of foreign innovations. Recent studies of postcolonial cultural identities and national arts movements across the continent have begun to place African actors and institutions at the center of global negotiations over the location and stakes of artistic modernism. Other scholars have turned their attention to Africa's historical role within far-reaching networks of material, artistic, and intellectual exchange—such as medieval trans-Saharan trade and commercial networks in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans—to elucidate the impact of diverse histories of global engagement on African cultural forms and identities. And yet, despite these developments, the architecture of Africa remains an underrepresented area of inquiry in architectural history. As Michelle Apotsos reminds us in *Architecture, Islam, and Identity in West Africa: Lessons from*

*Larabanga*, this persistent scholarly lacuna attests to a “Western conceptual scaffolding with regards to the architecture of non-Western spaces” (25), an approach rooted in a long history of racialized conceptions of technological advancement and creative agency that privileges some architectural traditions over others.

In contrast to this received wisdom, Apotsos approaches the study of architecture as a means to understand the specific symbolic structures, physical conditions, and human experiences that shape and express cultural identities in localized spaces. Arguing that architecture in Africa is highly adaptive and multifaceted, not unlike local variations of Islam, she develops a unique conceptual framework that attends to the shared histories and lived realities of the built environment for Muslim communities across West Africa and beyond, without attempting to pin down a specific set of “Afro-Islamic” architectural forms. Organizing her book into four chapters, along with an introduction and a conclusion, Apotsos sensitively combines a large-scale history of the movement of Islamic thought and practices across North, West, and East Africa with a study of the continuous reinvention of these structures via local traditions and social pressures. Her most important contribution, perhaps, is her attention to the “architectural everyday,” highlighting “the importance of the practical built environment as a structural language that accommodates the immediate needs of society and whose creative, versatile, and often informal language typically represents direct socio-cultural motivations and responses” (21). Apotsos skillfully elucidates the role of architecture as both producer and expression of Muslim identity in West Africa, using the rural Muslim town of Larabanga in northern Ghana as her central case study.

As she argues, neither vernacular architecture nor Islam is in conflict with processes of modernization across the continent. Rather, her study of vernacular Muslim architecture in Africa reveals a productive negotiation between tradition-based values and the pressures—or opportunities—of a constantly changing present.

In the first two chapters, Apotsos lays out the specific terms of her approach to Afro-Islamic architecture; these then frame her subsequent analysis of Larabanga's built environment as a space of dynamic cultural expression. The first chapter, “Locating Larabanga: Architecture and Contemporary Islamic Identity in West Africa,” explores the study of Afro-Islamic architecture across North and West Africa and emphasizes the need for a reimagining of traditional notions of monumentality that privilege static conceptions of “permanence” and “presence.” For example, in analyzing two African structural types that presumably represent the antithesis of such qualities, the tent and the rock-outlined mosque space, Apotsos demonstrates that permanence and presence indeed exist in Afro-Islamic spaces, although they are “informed by decidedly different frameworks of interpretation” (11). As her analysis shows, we must attend more to process and practice than to formal composition if we are to understand how Islamic architecture facilitates the performance of African Muslim identities. This turn from classification of formal elements to analysis of the “specialized apparatus for enabling cultural and religious practice” (17) allows Apotsos to avoid the problematic generalizations of grand narratives that often marginalize the architecture of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as conceptions of the vernacular that associate non-Western architecture with primitivizing notions of static or unspecialized building traditions.

---

*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 79, no. 3 (September 2020), 331–353, ISSN 0037-9808, electronic ISSN 2150-5926. © 2020 by the Society of Architectural Historians. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>, or via email: [jpermissions@ucpress.edu](mailto:jpermissions@ucpress.edu). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2020.79.3.331>.

Attending to the “architectural everyday”—which aligns closely here with the vernacular—Apotsos demonstrates how localized engagements with the built environment entail complex and changing relationships with a long history of cross-regional artistic, intellectual, and cultural exchange. Her second chapter, “The Road to Larabanga: A Short History of Afro-Islamic Architecture,” situates Muslim practices and Larabanga’s built environment within the historical movement of Islamic thought and practice across the African continent. Describing Islam as an adaptive system and elaborating on Labelle Prussin’s seminal research on Afro-Islamic design and space, Apotsos presents the advance of Islam as neither the diffusion of knowledge from East to West nor the implantation of foreign structures in African soil, in contrast to many surveys of Islamic art.<sup>1</sup> Rather, she shows how specific environmental and physical realities and socio-political conditions contributed to the adaptation of Islamic systems and the invention of new forms that shaped Afro-Islamic architecture and reverberated across the Muslim world—from the seventh-century Umayyad military campaigns in North Africa to Muslim traders and scholars interacting with the Sahelian empires of Mali, Ghana, and Songhai between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries to communities faced with the violence of colonialism and the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Apotsos also demonstrates important connections between Islamic and non-Islamic architectural forms and material cultures in Africa. For example, she compares the potent symbolism of the threshold in Afro-Islamic architecture to the piercing of the surfaces of Central African *minkisi* (power figures) to activate their spiritually charged contents, noting that both are instances of transformative opening (12); she also connects pre-Islamic *ksour* (fortified settlements) along trans-Saharan trade routes with the *ribats*, or fortress-like dwellings, of Muslim militias in the Sahel (77). Apotsos thus evokes iconic objects in the fields of both African and Islamic art not to determine directions of influence but to paint a picture of the complex interactions of visual and symbolic systems characteristic of the architecture of African Muslim communities such as Larabanga.

The third and fourth chapters investigate these localized strategies in greater detail. As Apotsos notes, Larabanga’s built environment is a “palimpsest of histories” revealing a “timeline of transformation and progression, beginning with its formative moment as a site of spiritual revelation in the seventeenth century and leading into its contemporary reality as a heritage destination and tourist attraction” (27). Her study of Islamic architectural form in Larabanga centers on human actors, from *mallams* (Qur’an specialists and spiritual advisers) to individuals engaged in the contemporary tourist industry, whose interventions continuously reanimate the community’s historic structures and resonate with ever-changing physical and social environments and symbolic systems.

Apotsos’s skillful interpretation of the multivalent significance of Larabanga’s environment for different actors underscores her extensive ethnographic research, yet the story she presents might have been strengthened by more frequent identification of her interlocutors and incorporation of their own language into her text. At the same time, her careful attention to multiple narratives avoids privileging specific voices and highlights her conviction that “architectural forms, sites, and communities [are] objects and areas capable of multiple identities, functions, and signification” (126).

More broadly, Apotsos is concerned with issues relating to critical heritage studies, including debates about who may claim authority over the past and its interpretations. Her nuanced understanding of the complex role that both local and global notions of heritage play in recent transformations of Larabanga’s historical built environment suggests a significant avenue for future research. Alongside Prita Meier’s recent evaluation of how the Swahili coast’s seemingly immobile and unchanging stone architecture “plays a central role in mediating shifting ideas of what it means to be fixed or mobile” in Swahili society, *Architecture, Islam, and Identity in West Africa* encourages us to move beyond notions of temporal and cultural fixity to investigate the role of architecture in negotiating the past and expressing modern identities, in Africa and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

ASHLEY MILLER  
*University of Michigan*

## Notes

1. Labelle Prussin, *African Nomadic Architecture: Space, Place, and Gender* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).
2. Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 3.

Lauren Jacobi

### **The Architecture of Banking in Renaissance Italy: Constructing the Spaces of Money**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 255 pp., 87 color illus. \$100 (cloth), ISBN 9781108483223

In *The Architecture of Banking in Renaissance Italy*, Lauren Jacobi aims to investigate buildings and other urban complexes related to banking activities and coinage in Italy from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, an undoubtedly ambitious undertaking requiring reconciliation of multiple skills and diverse areas of research. The title refers to Italy as a whole, but it quickly emerges in the introduction that the conditions analyzed are mainly those of Florence and Rome (especially the Rome of Florentine businessmen), with occasional reference to Venice, Milan, Genoa, and the European financial centers where Florentine merchant bankers were particularly active (e.g., Bruges).

In the first chapter, “Networked Agglomerations,” the central theme is less architecture than urban planning as linked to the development of banking and credit activities in Florence and Rome. In fact, as Jacobi acknowledges, there was no specific type of building for a bank. The same kinds of spaces—generally rented from ecclesiastical bodies, guilds, or private individuals—could be used by silk merchants, manufacturers of wool cloth, or bankers. Moreover, pure credit institutions did not exist; both large mercantile banking companies and more modest money changers were involved in varied transactions, ranging from loans and currency exchanges to trade in raw materials, manufactured goods, spices, and precious metals. The author’s contribution here is therefore limited to explaining three points: that companies carrying out banking activities tended to concentrate in certain streets and squares according to principles and regulations of a corporate nature