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Danny Hoffman. *Monrovia Modern: Urban Form and Political Imagination in Liberia*. Publisher: Duke University Press. 205 pp. Year: 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6357-6.

Reviewed by: Karl E. Johnson, Ramapo College of New Jersey

Danny Hoffman, who is both a photojournalist and an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, provides a unique perspective in his book *Monrovia Modern* by using both photography and social analysis in his approach. Hoffman believes that photography is a powerful medium for exploring hidden meaning in the visible world (pg. 181). He uses images quite well in covering the aftermath and impact of Liberia's past civil wars on its architecture and populace. He also focuses on the more recent Ebola crisis in the city of Monrovia. Overall, Hoffman's book can be considered both an anthropological text and a modern, urban social study of a West-African city.

Hoffman's photographic, social analysis is organized around the distinct history of disrepair of four major architectural structures in Monrovia: The E. J. Royce Building, The Ministry of Defense, Hotel Africa, and Liberia Broadcasting System. Additionally, Hoffman gives some commentary on the Monroviaans who currently live in or around these buildings of disrepair. These inhabitants have complex personal histories as citizens in Liberia intersecting with the recent history of the capital city of Monrovia. For example, Major Sandi currently lives inside the Ministry of Defense building as a "squatter" or "caretaker," depending on your perspective, in the uncertain life of urban Monrovia (pg. 2-4). However, Hoffman reserves his judgement of the individuals in and around these architectural monuments of disrepair, as the unique stories of these Liberians are interwoven throughout this book.

Interestingly, Hoffman sees most of the dilapidated architectural structures as useful or still viable. He certainly takes the perspective that they could be at least "reimagined" for social space in modern Monrovia despite the political backdrop of the Liberian failed state mantra. Hoffman asserts, "For many architects, planners, and designers, as for many anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists, the question that dominates the postmodern present is how to deal with the failure of those earlier mass utopian interventions. How do we make the modern city habitable for those who experience it primarily as a site of alienation and dispassion—largely thanks to the unworkability and eventual demise of modernists dreams? The goal is to no longer invent a new world of forms or to invent a new world through form. The goal is to learn to inhabit ruins" (pg. 4). In the long run, the author hopes one of the structures might get physically remodeled to serve and benefit the citizens of Monrovia.

In referencing a wide array of architectural and urban theorists, Hoffman manages to avoid the folly of a Eurocentric perspective. Thus, he uses theorists such as Gil Doron, Rem Koolhaas, Robert Neuwirth, Jill Stoner, Okwui Enwezor, and David Adjaye. Yet at the same time, he draws on his previous experience as a photojournalist in periods of

conflict in Southern Africa and the Balkans between 1994-1998. Hoffman's past experiences also serve as references for comparisons and social commentary on modern Monrovia's use of public space and architecture.

Hoffman believes that out of the fore mentioned four architectural structures in Monrovia, only the Hotel Africa is beyond repair or reimaging. Demonstrating with expert photography and commentary, Hoffman depicts the Hotel Africa as a "ghost," stripped of all useful materials and disintegrated completely (pg. 116). Hoffman also astutely mentions that the Hotel Africa has a metaphoric meaning, as it was strongly connected to Liberia's prewar past. Indubitably, during the war periods in Monrovia throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the Hotel Africa was frequently a war target and is no longer viable for habitation (pg. 121).

Hoffman's study could delve deeper into the intimate personal lives of the citizens he comes across in his research. It would seem with his anthropology background, he already knows the value of culture as means to understand with greater depth. Finding out more about the people who lived among these ruins would add to his work. What religion do they identify with? Do they attend a Liberian Church or Mosque or neither? What type of music do they play among the ruins where they dwell? Are the youth in Monrovia inspired by Hip Hop culture from America or are they developing their own brand?

Often, if you understand the music and culture of a people, you will discover more subdued social messages, possibly including hope or rebellion. Hoffman does insinuate that West African cities like Monrovia probably will not have an "Arab Spring-like" rebellion with political upheavals (pg. 74-75); this is much more difficult to surmise without a more in-depth analysis of the music and culture on the ground. Who lives in Monrovia now after the Ebola epidemic; is it mainly Liberians from rural areas or those that were born there? With turmoil from the war displacing many people, which countries now host Monrovia refugees? The answers to these questions certainly inform a more nuanced, holistic view of modern Monrovia.

Overall, Danny Hoffman has produced a book that is unique, visually gripping, and tells an extraordinary story of a once troubled, resilient West African city. Hoffman's captions under each photo are useful in bolstering his assessment of the social situation. Additionally, he summarizes each photo towards the end of a chapter with what he calls a "Photographic Postscript," which provides both an architectural theoretical perspective and a brief ethnographic commentary. All in all, I give Danny Hoffman high praise for such a strong effort and memorable photographic-social analysis of current-day Monrovia.

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