

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Duerksen. *Waterhouses: Landscapes, Housing, and the Making of Modern Lagos*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2024. 304 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780896803329.

In *Waterhouses*, Mark Duerksen, a historian and research associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in Washington, DC, explores how the meanings, forms, and functions of houses in Lagos have evolved over time, showing their role as significant sites for negotiating colonial and postcolonial power, identity, and inequality. The book demonstrates how housing served as a medium through which individuals and institutions influenced the city's social, political, and environmental development. By tracing the historical and political forces that shaped Lagos's built environment and urban life, this work makes a valuable contribution to the fields of urban history and African studies.

The book is organized into five thematic and chronological chapters, each examining distinct phases of Lagos's urban transformation. From colonial time, British officials viewed African homes as unsanitary, which prompted segregationist planning policies. Early colonial officials—including William MacGregor, Walter Egerton, and Lord Lugard—implemented spatial segregation that separated African quarters from European enclaves, leading to forced relocations. Ikoyi was designated a government reserve, colonial workers settled in Yaba and parts of Ebute Metta, while many Lagosians were pushed to the northern half of Lagos Island. Consequently, housing became a tool of colonial control over space, labor, and identity. As urban planning evolved, multistorey houses emerged as symbols of colonial modernity, reinforcing spatial inequality, citizenship distinctions, and indigenous resistance. Local chiefs sought redress in colonial courts, and women protested urban exclusion in Lagos.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, British officials shaped Lagos's urban modernity with significant social consequences. The Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB), comprising key colonial officials, directed urban planning and land management. With authority over land acquisition and allocation, the LEDB primarily served a limited elite—high-ranking clerks and local chiefs—who amassed properties to rent to wage laborers. Many residents without resources faced worsening poverty and turned to hawking and other strategies to survive.

Waterhouses effectively illustrates how colonial urban modernity in Lagos fostered the emergence of an elite society, as houses became a significant form of wealth accumulation. The introduction of private property rights and crown grants under British rule transformed land and housing from communal assets into individual capital. Prominent Lagosians, such as Taiwo Olowo, used property ownership to enhance their social status, while architectural landmarks like

J.A. Otunba Payne's Orange House in Tinubu Square and J.J. Thomas's residence symbolized wealth and cosmopolitan identity. Supported by colonial courts, landlords amassed considerable economic and political power, creating stark divides between a privileged elite and the many tenants struggling to secure adequate housing. In this way, housing architecture both reinforced British visions of order and reflected African aspirations for respectability and influence. By the end of colonial rule, private homeownership had transformed the traditional Yoruba lineage system. The book contends that tropical modernist architects overlooked and undermined important historical and local knowledge.

The book reveals the colonial legacy of urban exclusion and spatial injustice in Lagos's landscape. From Nigeria's independence through the 1980s, homeownership in Lagos became a marker of elite status and political influence, especially as housing was increasingly used to access state patronage and accumulate wealth. While elites profited from rising rents and speculative development, the urban poor endured forced evictions and the demolition of long-established communities to make way for gated mansions disconnected from civic life.

Duerksen's innovative use of visual archives—such as maps, photographs, and building plans—is effective in highlighting architectural changes in Lagos over time, showing both the material and symbolic meanings that housing acquired across distinct historical periods. In addition, he draws on archival documents, travel accounts, sanitary reports, and newspapers to trace the phases of spatial transformation from the colonial era to postindependence. Most significantly, the inclusion of oral interviews enriches the book's narrative by grounding urban shifts in the lived experiences of Lagosians, which capture how ordinary residents navigated, contested, and adapted to these evolving landscapes.

Although the book acknowledges the effects of housing inequality on Lagos's urban poor, its primary focus remains on elite actors, architectural forms, and policy-driven changes. An in-depth exploration of informal housing and everyday strategies of marginalized residents would offer a comprehensive view of the city's social complexity. Such a bottom-up perspective would reveal how ordinary Lagosians shaped urban space, resisted exclusion, and adapted outside formal frameworks. This approach would complement the top-down analysis and better capture the resilience and agency of those often overlooked in urban histories.

Waterhouses opens productive avenues for further inquiry into how housing shaped elite power and urban hierarchies in Lagos. At a time when African cities face intensifying debates over displacement and spatial justice, the book offers a well-researched historical lens for understanding how built environments both reflect and reproduce power. Its thematic depths and clear narrative make it valuable to scholars and policymakers as well as graduate students and general readers interested in colonialism, postcolonial urbanism, housing architecture, and development.

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