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Introduction: Buildings are the stuff of politics

DANIEL MULUGETA, JOANNE TOMKINSON AND
JULIA GALLAGHER

In 2019, to considerable global fanfare, the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, opened the former palace of Emperor Menelik II to the public for the first time. Located in the heart of the capital, Addis Ababa, with sweeping views across the city, the buildings – used by successive Ethiopian regimes since the late nineteenth century – represent some of the most significant centres of political power in recent Ethiopian history. Breaking with centuries' old traditions of secluding state buildings from popular view, the buildings now lie in a vast public complex called Unity Park alongside examples of indigenous architecture from each of Ethiopia's nine ethnic regions. The Park is intended to be a symbolic national site that embodies and condenses Ethiopia's cultural and material diversity. However, from the outset the purpose and official meaning of the Park as a symbol of unity have been contested by alternative narratives, reflecting how architecture and built spaces take on political meanings beyond the expressed intentions of their creators. In particular, the Park is accused of being a foreign-funded political vanity project which represents an oversimplification of the complex history of the country. The site has fuelled wider debates regarding Ethiopian history and politics in relation to where the country has come from, what constitutes its diversity and where it is going.

Such political contestations over the Unity Park underscore how public spaces and buildings function as political texts. The controversy surrounding Unity Park particularly captures how built spaces serve as arenas where national politics and cultural identity are tangibly negotiated across Africa, where buildings are overlaid by complex meanings associated with colonialism, nationalism and globalisation. Maurice Amutabi, for example, describes the powerful political effects of buildings in his account of colonial architecture in Kenya. Enormous buildings erected by the British in Nairobi

were designed to ‘civilise’ Africans and held many of them ‘everlastingly ... spellbound’, anxious that they might be ‘trespassing’, impressed by a seemingly overwhelming power (Amutabi, 2012: 326).

Colonial architects often set out to use architecture to entrench dramatically unequal power relations, and to reshape African subjectivities in the process. Quoting words attributed to Christopher Wren, colonial architect Herbert Baker, who designed South Africa’s Union Buildings, wrote in 1911 to Prime Minister Jan Smuts: ‘Architecture has its political use: public buildings being the ornament of a country; it establishes a nation, draws people and commerce, makes the people love their native country, which passion is the origin of all great actions in a Commonwealth’ (Baker, quoted in Metcalf, 1989: 193). The Union Buildings have been the heart of the colonial, apartheid and post-1994 regimes.

However, as in Ethiopia, the commissioners and designers of these buildings did not get to exclusively determine their meanings: public opinion and patterns of ordinary usage have also defined them and shaped their perpetual reinvention. The Union Buildings also became the site of popular protest. They embodied the nation, both as a projection of power and an object of dissent. Now they house a democratically elected presidency; but also represent the Women’s March against the pass laws in 1958 and Nelson Mandela’s 1994 inauguration that overturned its colonial rationale. It is the embodiment of a different form of nation, still the place to which people take their political grievances, but also a carrier of a painful history (Gallagher, forthcoming).

In this way, buildings both describe how political regimes wish to be perceived by citizens and the international community (see Vale, 1992) and how they collect and become inscribed with popular descriptions, stories and myths about political power and social relationships. Public buildings are the constant referents in everyday urban life and assume significant roles in the development of national consciousness. Their visibility can provoke vigorous political controversies and their association with particular identities can reinforce or challenge insider/outsider status. They host public ceremonies, political rites and national festivals, serving as the backdrop to the national drama. Sometimes they embody national aspirations of modernity and technological advancement; and at other times, ideas of conservation and tradition. Buildings in Africa, as everywhere else, are thus ‘politics with bricks and mortar’ (Beck, 1998: 115). They constitute political space that is normatively inhabited by politicians and bureaucrats, but also shaped by citizens, who engage with ideas, policies and practices that shape political imagination such as the nation, community and society (Milne, 1981).

The point here is that buildings are the subject of discussions about power, distribution and identity from the moment they are conceived and for as long

as they are used – and perhaps even longer, if they survive in popular memory. In this sense, architecture is possibly the most political of all the arts, bringing elite and everyday ideas of politics together. As the Ethiopian example shows, this is not just a colonial story – there are powerful examples of the political uses of monumental architecture in pre- or non-colonial Africa (Hughes, 1997; Biruk, 2020). Post-independence elites have similarly used architecture to articulate and exert post-colonial political power (Elleh, 2002). The dynamics of this architecture-as-politics vary enormously – just as architectural styles do – and they can be studied to explain and expose new facets of the nature of political systems and socio-political relationships in different contexts. It is these dynamics then, those created by these most ubiquitous of material representations of political authority, that this book explores.

Stylistically, Africa's rich and varied architectural heritage and building traditions reflect the diversity of material life across the length and breadth of the continent (Adjaye, 2012). Builders across the continent have also adopted and transformed architectural ideas and built forms from other cultures, further adding to diverse local tastes, traditions and building practices (Elleh, 1997). Architecture usually requires large capital investment and tends to be commissioned by political and cultural elites, illustrating and shaping wealth distribution and reflecting the socialised construction of 'taste'. Colonial-era buildings include those in classical European style, such as the Union Buildings, as well as those in the supposedly more locally sensitive tropical modernist style. Post-independence architecture betrays the influences of modernism, as well as pre-colonial architectural aesthetics – all bidding to assert confident new forms of nationhood (Hess, 2006). The continent's recent building boom has seen a plethora of new foreign-financed public buildings that are dramatically reshaping many African capitals once more (Biruk, 2020). These developments have engaged Africa in long-standing debates about the impacts of globalisation, capitalist expansion and cultural homogenisation on architecture (Sklair, 2017). Hybrid physical forms, weaving together local, national and global influences and power relations, thus lie at the heart of architecture in Africa.

Yet, despite the rich and varied politics to which they speak, buildings in Africa receive scant attention in political science literature. This volume sets out to address this lacuna, offering a multifaceted reflection on the dynamic and co-constitutive relationships between architecture and politics and political institutions. The book is distinctive in seeking to understand the materiality, use and meaning of public buildings, and to use them to begin new debates about political life in Africa. The overarching question that frames our analysis is: what can architecture tell us about politics in Africa today? As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, looking at politics through the optics of

architecture opens up many new avenues for research, including on popular perceptions of politics in Africa, the legacies of colonial relations, the spatial practices of governance, the gendering of space, in both pre- and colonial contexts, the role of religious architecture in the service of political power, conceptions of modernity and the politics of identity construction.

A significant point of departure for all of the book's contributors is their reading of buildings as part of a repertoire of material culture that structures political imaginaries and social relationships. Yet our conceptualisation of the material is different from the classic formulations used in the African politics literature to date. Here the concept of the material tends to be used in relation to the notion of patronage and distributive politics (Bayart, 2009; Schatzberg, 2001; Chabal and Daloz, 1999). It is in part taken to mean the things that politicians dispense (benefits, salaries, jobs) to their followers in exchange for political support (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997). It is also taken to mean the reverse: the things politicians accept (bribes) in exchange for favours. In its classic sense, the material supposedly demonstrates the distinctively African patron-client model of leadership, that is, the reciprocity of eating and feeding and practices of 'chopping' and looting public resources or 'dividing the national cake' (Isichei, 2004; Schatzberg, 2001). Broadly cast under the catchphrase 'the politics of the belly' (Bayart, 2009), in Africa, the material is usually deployed as a metaphor for practices of corruption and given as a cultural explanation of political behaviour.

In contrast, this book moves the concept of the material in discussions of African politics beyond the confines of the politics of patronage, which although important, offers partial insights into the politics of the continent. By fully engaging with the architectural objects and spaces that help to constitute the political world, we uncover a much broader and more complex set of political stories, encompassing issues of ideology, aesthetics and agency that are channelled through and embodied in public buildings. By taking architecture, not resources, as the material matter of politics, the book provides a richer understanding of the array of relationships, ideas and power that constitute political life in Africa.

The material is viewed broadly, conceptualised both in terms of the assemblage of built forms, physical artistic elements and the political contexts that form the intertwined poetics of socio-political life in Africa. The study of architectural materiality involves looking at building forms, designs and layouts; the political processes of commissioning, financing and producing public buildings; as well as controversies over the selection of sites, stylistic preferences, the choice of architects and material elements (Yaneva, 2016). Hence, the contributors apply the concept of the material to a wide variety of themes in different contexts, taking stock of the physicality and the representational significations

of architecture. The authors insist that material and value systems need to be conceptualised as one complex and inter-related phenomenon.

By focusing on the relationships between built and socio-political forms, this book builds on three important existing approaches. The first has been to explore how architecture reflects the societies and cultures that produced it (Lawrence and Low, 1990). Within this tradition, scholars have laid bare the representational mechanics through which buildings can be seen as resonant symbols that evidence broader social, cultural and kinship relations, political contexts and cosmic structures. The built space in this sense is conceived as a purveyor of social and political processes (Bourdieu, 1979; Moore, 1986). Meanings are thought to be inscribed in the built space and the task of the scholar is to decipher and decode their underlying social and cultural messages (see Pierre Bourdieu, 1979; Vale, 1992). A second approach draws on the intellectual tradition deriving from Foucault, wherein architecture is viewed as a medium of social control and power. This approach emphasises the manner in which the hegemonic power structures of what Michel Foucault calls disciplining institutions such as hospitals, schools, the military, factories and prisons, is effected through architectural and spatial practices (see Foucault, 1975; Mitchell, 1988; Barnard, 2005). The third and final influence has been to understand buildings as mediators that can ‘transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’ (Latour, 2005: 39). Crucial here is a relational conceptualisation of humans, spaces, objects and events as entangled in constant processes of mutual shaping and reshaping. In so doing, this understanding moves beyond and problematises essential dualisms between agency and structure, human and non-human, knowledge and power, materiality and sociality.

Bringing together these three approaches to the study of architecture illuminates some of the different facets and textured layers of meanings of buildings and how they shape and are shaped by the political system. Buildings as material forms are intertwined with the fabric of social and political life – in Africa as in other contexts – so that their meaning and function are contingent upon their imbrication within the wider relational field in and through which both humans and things are interwoven. Thus, we suggest that balance should be sought between different ways of exploring buildings through their physicality, symbolism and political connotations. This means our approach accounts for symbolic resonances, socio-political practices and material considerations and illustrates the ways in which politics is mediated by concrete, social and sensorial, entanglements (see Ingold, 2013) of different actors and actor-networks (Latour, 2005). We posit that buildings are key symbolic media of social relations and instruments of political power. But they can do more than represent existing social arrangements, cultural

and political ideologies, or modes of thought. They can help to create them. Buildings inform thoughts, affect the human, mediating emotions and stimulating imagination and meaning-making. As Martin Heidegger (1971) notes in his seminal study on the relationship between dwelling, living and thinking, buildings are an integral part of human experience and existential meaning-making. We treat buildings as more than an epiphenomenon of social and political processes. Such an approach helps us move away from the patronage literature that compartmentalises socio-political life in Africa into bounded units of material and ideational domains. We suggest that buildings as material allow for a dynamic and multifaceted perspective on political dynamics in Africa.

Constructing the volume: methodological approaches and scope

From inception, this book sought to effect new kinds of dialogue between buildings and the study of politics in Africa. It began life within the interdisciplinary African State Architecture research project based at SOAS University of London, which comprises academics with training in African Studies, politics, architecture, anthropology, sociology and development studies. This has shaped the approach taken to the book which, as it evolved, has been characterised by a keen interest in understanding buildings within the politics which coalesce around, converge within and emanate from their physical forms. In calling for contributions for this volume we were interested in bringing together diverse perspectives on the ‘politics’ of architecture.

The question of how this was to be done was deliberately left open. It was an intention, in deciding to publish an edited volume, to see what fresh perspectives might emerge from a process of active dialogue between our contributors as the chapter drafts developed. Potential contributors were invited to attend a workshop, entitled *The Politics of Architecture in Africa*, organised with the University of Johannesburg in December 2019. This proved particularly fruitful for sharing and developing ideas across disciplines and across Africa, many of which have become chapters for the book. Indeed, by bringing together a group of predominantly young, early career scholars, the workshop opened dialogues that were at times challenging and searching. Architects were invited to see the bigger politics that their buildings speak to. Political scientists were encouraged to put more of the building within their work. Political economists were entreated to see beyond the flow of resources and goods and examine the symbolism underlying their buildings of study.

To a large extent, the themes presented at that workshop confirmed our instincts that buildings provide a rich vantage point for the study of elite and everyday politics. They ranged from the quotidian such as gas stations and

motels, libraries, shopping malls, houses, airports and prisons to grand institutional headquarters, parliaments, palaces, ministerial buildings and cathedrals, and they took in challenges to ‘big-A architecture’ made by citizens,¹ and discussed in the ways architecture should be taught, studied and produced. But, in addition, they also unsettled our assumptions and posed distinct challenges. Chief among these was how to ensure the connection between the kinds of politics being found through the study of the building and the debates residing within the literature on African political practices, its international relations and post-colonial state building. The fit between the empirical material and these established intellectual traditions was not always neat, and posed challenges for our contributors in terms of situating their buildings within existing academic conversations. Yet, as well as posing challenges for the authors, looking at African politics from the ground up has also exposed the limits of existing conceptual tools, and we have, as a result, encouraged our authors to tie their studies into such moments of departure.

A second issue was more circumstantial and logistical. With the workshop taking place shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic took root, several contributors had their subsequent research and travel plans disrupted, and have had to adapt and innovate with more collaborative methods of data collection, or by replacing them with virtual interviews. The study of buildings does indeed pose particular kinds of challenges here. Their initial encounters with the structures, followed by subsequent triangulation from more distant sources, have thus provided some insights into how academic work might be rethought going forward.

The methods deployed by authors within the volume are diverse. Many authors begin with the elite agendas driving building conception and construction and use elite interviews, archival, document and media analysis to do so. Several others were more interested in how buildings are understood and perceived by those that use or negotiate them, and so adopted interviews and focus groups with ordinary citizens and users of the buildings, as well as photography, participant observation and techniques from auto-ethnography. Other authors had the challenge of studying buildings that do not yet exist – located in the imaginaries of elites and communities rather than actual bricks and mortar. Yet the politics of these buildings is no less real for that, and their study encompasses much the same methods as their already existing counterparts. This diversity of tools to study the same relationship can provide a guide to others researching Africa, as politics in the continent – as demonstrated

¹ The term ‘big-A architecture’ denotes prestigious projects designed by named architects. But see Kuukuwa Manful’s Afterword, this volume, for an even stronger push back against big-A architecture.

by this book – resides not only in corridors of power and between the flows which pass between elite actors, but in the intersections between place, space, power and perception.

In terms of their original disciplines, many of our participants and ultimate contributors are architects. They brought expertise and precision to the conversations and encouraged new, sharper and more material ways of seeing buildings. Others are historians, political scientists, political economists and anthropologists, and they tended to be looser in their understandings of how politics could be seen through buildings, deploying metaphor where the architects deployed rich description. All contributors' chapters have benefited from the rich and extended exchanges which have occurred as the chapters have evolved.

Even though not all workshop delegates eventually submitted their papers for inclusion in the book, they all contributed to the development of the volume through their ideas, questions and enthusiasm for studying politics through architecture. For this reason we think it important to mention them all here: Irene Appeaning Addo, Awut Atak, Julia Gallagher, Marie Gibert, Tonderai Koschke, Thandi Loewenson, Jabu Absalom Makhubu, Kuukuwa Manful, Daniel Mulugeta, Innocent Batsani-Ncube, Emmanuel Kusi Ofori-Sarpong, Yusuf Patel, Laura Routley, Giulia Scotto, Caio Simoes de Araujo, António Tomás, Joanne Tomkinson and Tony Yeboah. Lesley Lokko from the Graduate School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg was instrumental in setting up the workshop programme, and read many of the early drafts of papers, even though she was not able to attend.

The mechanics of putting together this volume have also generated some useful lessons. To future research which seeks to centre the study of Africa around the contributions of authors located on and from the continent, and thus to decolonise the sources of knowledge, we would stress the significance of research funding to allow those participants to meet and collaborate together, to build research relationships and networks which transcend country and disciplinary boundaries.

Finally, having sought to define a new way of reading African politics through architecture, we need to point out some limitations of this volume, the main one being the lack of comprehensiveness. We raise many debates, but we cannot pretend to be able to present a complete picture of the architecture, or the politics, or even the politics of architecture in Africa. We explore the politics of buildings in eight countries – in a continent of fifty-four this is necessarily narrow – and there are important gaps, not least in the absence of any Lusophone countries, and limited engagement with Francophone ones (see Map 0, p. xiv). We do not include examples from North Africa in this collection, a departure that would have helped challenge some of the artificial,

colonially inspired boundaries erected within the continent. Any collection must choose to make omissions, either in the service of depth, or in the face of practical constraints. Ours were created by a mixture of both, the themes and geographical reach we chose to tackle being those of particular interest to the editors, or those that fell out because of the contributors we were able to assemble.

However, one of the delights of bringing together a variety of scholars working in different contexts has been to trace *both* common themes *and* huge differences that are manifest in African politics. Every story turns up a new variation. We hope that the volume will be read as a provocation to scholars of politics in Africa to understand difference and complexity, rather than through reductive parsimonious theory. More broadly, we do not wish to over-claim on the political stories we can tell through architecture. Our focus on public buildings misses the array of politics that happens beyond them – through commercial exchange, in the media, online, within crowds and open spaces, to give just a few examples. However, although not everything political can be pinned down to a physical form – rhetoric, stories, dreams, financial transactions, secrets, etc. – our point is that buildings can enable us to think about these things in rich, productive ways that help open up the study of African politics.

Contributions in this volume

The book is structured around three themes: making, living and imagining.² This framework was designed to help us translate the ways governments and populations have between them shaped their political life through public buildings. ‘Making’, therefore, highlights the politics embedded in how buildings are produced; the politics that surround their funding, the materials and methods used in their construction, and the ways in which identity is reflected in their aesthetics. The objectives, arguments and outcomes governing these issues tell us about how political elites conceive statehood, how well they can carry their ideas through, the compromises they have to make along the way and the forms of resistance they may encounter. ‘Living’, in contrast, is about the ways people live in, use and think about buildings, who is allowed in and who isn’t, how far their aesthetics are accepted, as well as in what ways they can be resisted and changed. These issues are about how members of society respond to the environment that is shaped around them, and the degree to which they choose, and are able, to reshape it. Finally, ‘imagining’ is about

² In doing so we are loosely following Heidegger’s treatment of architecture as building, dwelling and thinking (1971).

how both elites and citizens think and dream about wider political possibilities, in the ways they imagine what buildings might once have meant, and about what they might mean in the future. In this final theme, we examine the ways people conceive of political possibilities, both as a way to consider existing political realities and to explore how they might be changed. All three themes are explicitly political, involving: the tensions present in power struggles – which ideas are best expressed in the buildings and who gets to choose; the distribution of resources – who pays and who gets to use the buildings; and relationships – how ideas and opinions about the buildings describe the ways in which citizens and users comply and contest elite objectives.

This three-part structure has also allowed us to surface other themes which have added depth to this basic framework. These help to highlight some of the particularities of building and politics-making in sub-Saharan Africa.

‘Making’, it is clear from the contributions in Part 1, is underpinned by tensions between domestic autonomy and a dependence on foreign actors in the construction process. Debates in these chapters focus on funding, materials and methods, and questions about how to express local identity. The chapters ultimately coalesce around an international/local nexus that sheds light on African agency and struggles for autonomy. Making deals with planning, resourcing and constructing new buildings – the Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, the planned national cathedral in Ghana, Malawi’s new parliament building and the post-war public housing programme in Ghana. All, in different ways explore what dependence on foreign funding does to shape key national building projects, the degree to which local forms are deemed ‘good enough’ and how modernity is often associated with foreign architecture.

Joanne Tomkinson and Dawit Yekoyesew, in their chapter about Bole Airport, Ethiopia’s global gateway and symbol of the country’s swift modernisation, explore connections between state-building efforts, national identity formation and international relations on the continent. Bole has been funded by Chinese investment, and has an apparently generic form and aesthetic, raising questions about how far Ethiopian elites have been able to shape it. Tomkinson and Dawit show how assumptions of a zero-sum relationship between the Chinese funders and their ‘less powerful’ Ethiopian recipients is misplaced – ideas of modernity and internationalism sit (sometimes uneasily) alongside ideas about local aesthetics, revealing the airport to be the site of a deeply embedded and complex domestic state-building project.

While the Ethiopian airport discussion is intensely focused on the country’s projection of itself to the outside world, Emmanuel Ofori-Sarpong’s chapter on the proposed national cathedral in Accra focuses more on the borrowing of rhetoric and imagery from the outside world to shape and control domestic

power struggles. In his examination of the rhetoric and ritual surrounding plans for the new cathedral, Ofori-Sarpong describes how foreign ideas of religious imagery and progress are used to support political power divisions, rather than representing a truly national endeavour. In this account, Ghana's political elites harness the power of foreign ideas for political leverage at home. In particular, the discussion explores how this takes place within the context of a large religious building project, highlighting the important place of religious architecture across much of the continent. Ofori-Sarpong asks what the cost of such activities might be on domestic state-society relations.

If the Ethiopian and Ghanaian elites are able to carve out some space to instrumentalise international relationships, Innocent Batsani-Ncube highlights the limits for Malawian elites in their negotiations with the Chinese Government over their new parliament building. Batsani-Ncube finds the Malawian elites in unempowered relationship with their donor partners and traces the ways in which problems with the building's design highlight the Malawians' relative lack of agency. He further explores how the project has created mistrust of China among the wider population in Lilongwe and uses the parliament building as a template for discussing the tensions, asymmetrical gains and future implications of China-Africa relations.

Finally in this section, Irene Appeaning Addo returns us to Ghana in her exploration of the public housing programmes that shaped the transition to independence in the 1950s. She shows how a series of foreign schemes was brought in to meet high housing demand in expanding urban areas. She highlights the painful tension expressed by a government keen to show its modernising credentials as an independent country but faced with the realities of dependence on ideas and funding from international partners; and she examines the eclectic legacy of a programme that relied on so wide a variety of foreign ideas and capital.

All the chapters in Part 1 demonstrate struggles for independence in one form or another. By focusing on prestigious public architectural projects they show just how high the political stakes can be in creating the material structures of statehood within contexts of unequal international relationships. 'Making' in these African contexts continues to involve managing considerable foreign constraints.

In Part 2, 'Living', we find the idea of inheritance looming large, particularly in popular imagination. The chapters here – about state buildings in Côte d'Ivoire, a shopping centre in Zimbabwe, municipal libraries in Kenya and a police station in South Africa – deal with uncomfortable colonial legacies and the ways in which these can or cannot be domesticated by citizens after independence. None of them reach for easy answers, all detailing the

compromises that have been made in accommodating the material reminders of painful histories.

Julia Gallagher and Yah Ariane N'djoré explore citizens' understanding of the state in Côte d'Ivoire by examining popular discourses about the aesthetics of post-colonial state buildings. They show how citizens imagine their state as both beautiful and ugly – at once a source of wonder and fear – and examine the degree to which such an aesthetic reveals a state that appears distant and miraculous, ostensibly local but in many ways alien. Gallagher and N'djoré show how these aesthetic engagements with state buildings enable citizens to measure and manage their relationship with the state.

Tonderai Koschke looks at the Sam Levy shopping centre in Harare, Zimbabwe showing how both the ideas and the physical exclusionary structures of colonialism are reproduced in a commercial space, built after independence but designed to look like a 'little England'. Koschke shows how racial and class exclusivity are embedded in the architecture and spatial design of the centre, discusses how and why colonial tropes persist in Zimbabwe forty years after independence, and explores the continuing damage they do to the social fabric.

Marie Gibert's chapter is about public libraries in Nairobi, Kenya, all built before or immediately after independence, and now being renovated by a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Book Bunk. Gibert discusses how colonially gendered spaces and aesthetics erected as a quintessential emblem of European civilisation and embodying its patriarchal structures are being 'decolonised' both in terms of the structures and decoration of the buildings and in the books they stock. Gibert explains the difficult compromises made by Book Bunk, sitting between private and state sectors, and the class dimensions of the effort to create a decolonial library within a politically ambiguous space.

Finally, Yusuf Patel looks at the legacies of a notorious police station, John Vorster Square in Johannesburg, South Africa, used under the apartheid regime as a place to hold political prisoners. Many prisoners died here in unexplained circumstances, and Patel explores the uses of the building itself in forms of torture and murder. His chapter reveals the complicit nature of architecture as an instrument of state violence and addresses the larger challenge facing the South African judicial system of dealing with eye-witness accounts that show agency in memory and architectural contexts.

Together these chapters powerfully communicate the historical constraints of post-coloniality. The buildings they discuss represent these constraints in physical form, but also in the ideas and memories of colonialism. They speak to decolonial debates in painful ways, exploring the enormous difficulties of living with, and seeking to create life beyond, colonial histories.

Part 3 of the book takes on the theme of ‘imagining’, and the ways in which buildings express ideas of transcendence beyond concrete realities that are often characterised by constraint and contingency. Here, buildings are used to describe an idea or ideal, sometimes by projecting into an idealised past or future, in ways that help highlight critiques of reality and possibilities of change.

Daniel Mulugeta’s chapter explores the African Union building in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, its ability to embody pan-African ideals and its attempts to transcend national difference across the continent. Daniel draws on descriptions of the building from citizens in Addis Ababa and Abuja, Nigeria, to explore the tensions between different strains of pan-African imagination and the ambivalent aspects of people’s relationship with the AU. He shows how embedded in the building are both the imagined possibilities of pan-Africanism and the AU’s failure to deliver on the ideal.

In contrast, Tony Yeboah looks to the past in his discussions of efforts to rebuild the Asante Kingdom’s palace in Kumase, Ghana. Destroyed by the British, the palace has not been rebuilt despite repeated efforts over many years. Yeboah explores the role played by the idea of an imagined ideal past which underpins discussions about rebuilding, and how the failure to give this new palace material form helps to preserve an imagined perfection of the Asante as a political community.

Turning from the past to the future, Laura Routley’s chapter examines Freedom Park in Lagos, Nigeria which has been built on the site of a colonial prison. She looks at the ways in which the histories of incarceration are memorialised and imagined in the architecture of the Park and how they are used to produce a hopeful, forward-looking narrative, reinforced by the prosperity and artistic creativity on display. She explores how the Park overwrites Nigeria’s colonial history in an act that protects its heritage as well as building beyond it.

Together, the chapters in Part 3 show the ways in which imagination can be used to construct new political ideas, and to escape from political realities. Ultimately, they speak to the role of ideas in political processes and show how these can be explored and extended through physical and aesthetic experimentation.

The book ends with the Afterword by Kuukuwa Manful, in which she challenges the neglect of what is often called ‘informal architecture’ such as slum dwellings, places of worship, schools and industrial facilities erected without planning permission or the use of an official architect. This architecture makes up the bulk of the built environment in Africa. Manful discusses the political forces that lead to the othering of such ‘not-architecture’ and argues that its inclusion in a study of architecture and politics will hugely expand our understanding of both.

All the chapters in this book demonstrate the powerful contribution the study of architecture can make to the study of politics, from grand ideas to the mundane processes of making do and making marginally better, to compromises, assertions of strength in the face of greater powers, to tales of countries caught between the drag of history and the unlimited potential of the future. The result is not a neat theorisation of how politics works in Africa, but a complicated, diverse set of conversations, struggles and ideas that are the real stuff of everyday politics. By reinforcing and undermining established conversations about politics on the continent the book provides a fresh agenda for understanding the complexity of contemporary Africa and its place in the world.