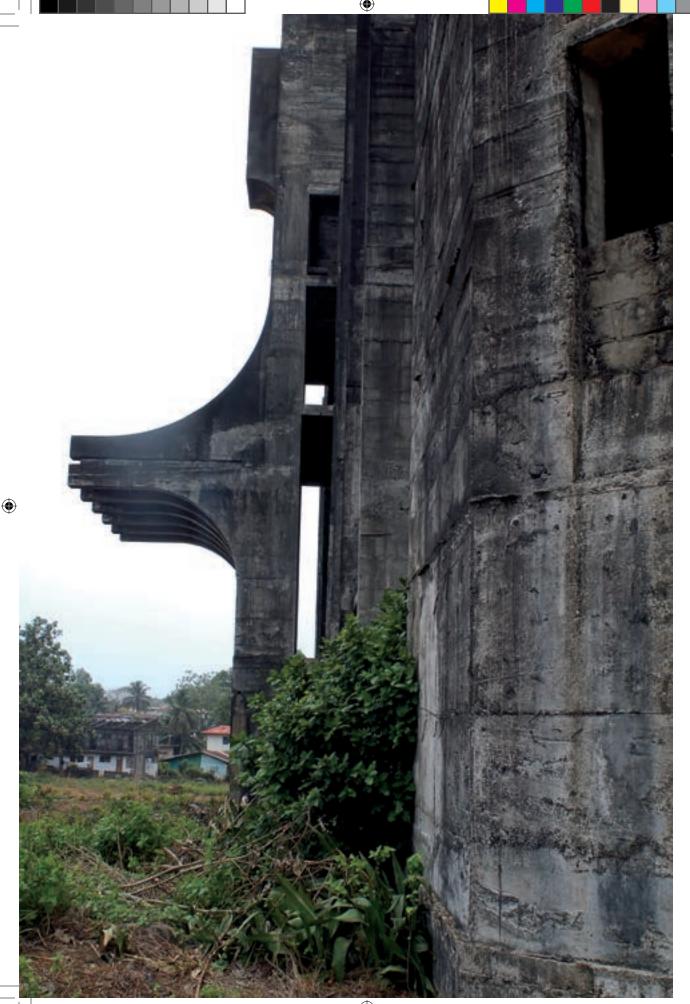# Monrovia Modern | Urban Form and Political Imagination in Liberia

Danny Hoffman

Monrovia Modern
Urban Form and Political Imagination in Liberia

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Porte cochère, Liberia Broadcasting System

Dedicated, as all things are, to
Julie, Corey Rose, Lucy, and Eve.

Modern architecture, and its extension into town planning, has above all this task . . . of making industrialism fit for human use; [making] buildings and larger aggregations in which life may know its bounds and flourish.

—Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, architects and advisors to the British colonies in West Africa, 1956

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BUSHROD
ISLAND

WEST POINT

DOWNTOWN/
CBD

MESURADO
RIVER

SINKOR

CONGO
TOWN

ATLANTIC OCEAN

N

Illustrations

This is a story told largely through four buildings as they existed in early 2012. Each was a landmark in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. When the long decade of fighting ended in this part of West Africa in 2003, all four lay in ruins.

The oldest, the E. J. Roye Building, was for many years the most prominent built form in the city. From the early 1960s it was the headquarters of the True Whig Party, a high modernist testament to Liberia's history of one-party rule. During the 2003 siege of Monrovia, the forces of then president Charles Taylor posted gunmen throughout the building's eight floors. From there they sought to prevent rebel forces from crossing the bridge into the city center.

Two of the buildings were brutalist constructions, massive concrete edifices intended to house government ministries and services. The Ministry of Defense and the Liberia Broadcasting System were both commissioned in the 1980s by Samuel Doe, the young military commander whose presidency ended 133 years of rule by the nation's Americo-Liberian minority. During and after the war both buildings were home to hundreds of refugees, internally displaced people, and ex-combatants from the various fighting factions.

The final structure is a five-star hotel, the Hotel Africa. Its remains sit on a beach at the outskirts of the city. Liberian elites, expatriate relief and development workers, and a cosmopolitan class of financiers and traffickers once swam in the hotel's Africa-shaped pool and gambled in its large casino. As rebel forces advanced on the capital in the final clashes of the Mano River war,

the residents of a slum settlement next to the hotel quickly took the building apart as they scavenged useful or saleable materials.

In their design and construction, each of these four structures represents a vision of the modern city and the modern African state. So, too, do their ruins. These are visions that map uneasily onto one another and onto the struggles many Monrovians face as they shape a future for themselves in this "aftermodern" city (Enwezor 2010). These mismatches and mismappings are the subject of the book.

Because this is a story told through built forms, *Monrovia Modern* is a book about architecture. But it is a book about architecture viewed through the prism of my own long thinking about violence in contemporary West Africa. As an anthropologist focused on this region's recent conflicts and their aftermath, my approach to the built environment is rooted in a concern with how young people in Monrovia, particularly young ex-combatant men, inhabit the material world around them.

Architecture has long been an issue of importance to anthropologists, but an emerging literature of materialisms has reinvigorated the theoretical and ethnographic possibilities for thinking the built environment anthropologically. Works by Victor Buchli (2013), Tim Ingold (2013), and Mélanie van door Horn (2009) exemplify attempts to theorize the materiality of architecture as an anthropological problem. A good many more texts have taken complex organic and inorganic assemblages as their object of study, assemblages that include the built environment. Ethnographies by Alex Nading (2014), Kristin Peterson (2014), and Mun Young Cho (2013) are not about architecture or built form per se. But they incorporate sophisticated analysis of the structural forms of the city into projects that remain resolutely devoted to the anthropological project of understanding urban "lifeworlds" (Jackson 2012).

While *Monrovia Modern* bears a family resemblance to these and other texts that have resulted from critical cultural anthropology's material turn, it is, in the end, very different. It is neither an ethnography of the social life of things nor a metatheorization of architecture as an anthropological object.

What *Monrovia Modern* is, is the story of political imagination and its relationship to the built environment. It is anthropological in its focus on everyday urbanisms in modern Africa. It is anthropological in that it tells the story of how lives are shaped by the city in which they are lived, and how those lives shape the city in turn. But to craft these chapters and their arguments I have relied more heavily on architectural theory than on ethnographic practice.

This is less a thick description than what the landscape historian Thaisa Way (2013) calls a "thick section." Its historical detail and theoretical explorations are not layered onto narrative plotlines, as in Clifford Geertz's (1973) famous definition of ethnography. Instead they are layered upon the architect's drawing, with its concerns for relationships of space, use, form, and representation. The nuances of how humans inhabit those forms is, of course, always the sine qua non of the work. But much of the emphasis and much of the insight is layered on the built forms themselves.

Monrovia Modern follows an earlier book that explored the lives of combatants in the Mano River war, in which Monrovia was one of multiple battlegrounds. *The War Machines* (Hoffman 2011b) analyzed violence as a form of labor for young men in Sierra Leone and Liberia. As the war developed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, it seemed male youths were increasingly living lives organized through processes of containment, rapid assembly, and deployment. In cities, rural camps, mines, and plantations, young men were propelled by forces larger than themselves through cycles of waiting and movement, cycles determined by the overlapping logics of violence and commerce. The barracks, I argued in *The War Machines*, seemed to have become the organizing principle of West African postmodernity.

The current project extends *The War Machines* both chronologically and theoretically. In the decade since the last open warfare in Monrovia, some of the dynamics of mobility and waiting I described in *The War Machines* have changed. Some elements of the barracks logic have calcified; others have disappeared. The city and what it represents has changed along with new population flows, new streams of capital, and the continued evolution of the global apparatus for the distribution of labor and profit. This project takes up some of those regional and global changes.

In *The War Machines* I argued for a certain conception of space but largely set aside thinking about the materiality of that space. In this project, the question of forms and their habitability comes to the fore. Here I have attempted to understand the built environment of Monrovia not just as the context of unfolding lives, but as part of the machine that produces them. The approach I have taken excavates the "affordances" of forms, to use the literary scholar Caroline Levine's (2015: 5–11) term. It is a mode of inquiry that asks what a given ordering of things, understood as both a material object and as a sociopolitical arrangement, invites and allows us to do.

"What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet *capable* of doing?" Levine

writes. "Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities" (2015: 6). And, by implication, it forecloses others. That is what interests me here.

MONROVIA MODERN RESTS ON three assumptions. The first is that there is no natural or authentic way to live in the urban spaces of the modern world. The material, social, economic, and political activities of creating spaces and occupying them are experimental processes, processes of repeated invention. Urban residents must continuously learn to live an urban existence. In an enigmatic essay that has become a touchstone for architects and architectural theorists, as well as for philosophers and anthropologists of the built environment, Martin Heidegger wrote that "mortals . . . must ever learn to dwell" (1993: 363). Contemporary urban spaces demand constant evolution, a process that is messy and unpredictable. It is also a task at which a city's inhabitants do not always succeed.

My second assumption in this book is that urban warfare lays bare the challenges and opportunities of creating urban lives. The instability and uncertainty of urban ecosystems that have been altered physically, psychically, socially, and economically by widespread violence present occasions for radical experimentation, as well as for virulent forms of reactionary conservatism. Some of the furthest-reaching innovations in politics, philosophy, architecture, and the arts were born from efforts to understand and make city life out of the creative destruction of war.

That said, the urban warscape is not a tabula rasa. Those who live there must wrestle with histories that haunt the city and with powerful forces from within and without that shape its future. They must contend with the city's ruins. *Monrovia Modern* is an effort to understand at least some of those forces, some of the emergent possibilities for living through the ruins of the city's built form and some of the limits those ruins impose.

The final assumption at the heart of this project is that the political and economic flows of the city are sometimes quite distinct. "Urbanization" is originally a term of economy. It describes the techniques for managing a complex marketplace and all of its attendant systems of transportation, communication, and labor. Coined in the 1860s, but with roots going back to Roman imperialism, urbanization names the process through which the ever-

shifting relations of production in the metropolis are regulated and temporarily stabilized.

The city, by contrast, suggests a political ideal. It names a space in which diverse interests meet. It is a site of agonism, the zone for working out the meaning and the mechanics of citizenship and difference. Though these terms, the city and the urban, are often used interchangeably, their orientation and the trajectories they open do not always overlap or intersect.

Indeed, in both social organization and built form it is possible to find urban economic life without citizenship or even political subjectivity. Michel Agier (2002, 2008) vividly describes massive refugee camps like Dadaab in East Africa, camps that have become densely populated urban spaces (meaning they host complex economies and are organized around the functioning of those economies) but are not cities (meaning those who live there have no rights of citizenship or formal political agency). Despite being home to more than 400,000 people,[1] many of whom have now lived there for decades, Dadaab is a space of economic production but not a space for the production of citizens. Its residents live in urban space but politically they belong nowhere.

In an architectural parallel, Pier Vittorio Aureli (2011: 16) describes the contemporary design of many cities as one that produces structures of economic flow but offers no space for political engagement. Much of the modern built environment works to regulate economic relationships. Even radically new kinds of space are often designed purely to accommodate flows of capital and relations of production. More rarely do built forms, or elements within built forms, facilitate the political encounters that transform urban space into political space. There are few contemporary built forms that serve as catalysts or platforms for negotiating collective demands or inventing new kinds of urban citizenship and participation.

Monrovia Modern is an attempt to make particular built forms speak to the nature of urban flows and political imagination—and to do so within the space of possibility of an African city contending with its history of war. My focus is four buildings in a postwar West African capital. But ultimately this is an effort to understand conditions that make it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to learn to dwell.

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Fourth floor, Ministry of Defense. 2012. On the northwest tower, a Chinese telecommunications firm has installed a cell tower overlooking the otherwise empty building.

Between 2008 and 2010, hundreds of former fighters with the Government of Liberia Armed Forces and their families were evicted from the Ministry of Defense building in Monrovia. Some had lived in the building for more than a decade. Others arrived in 2005 when they were forced out of the ruins of the Barclay Training Center barracks at the behest of U.S. security contractors. Liberians from all corners of the country were among the building's residents, making for an unusually cosmopolitan and vibrant community.

The hulking ministry was originally one element in a building campaign launched by Samuel Doe, the junior military officer who took over the Liberian presidency following a 1980 coup d'état. Monumental architecture, for Doe as for so many other political leaders, was a project of state making and personal aggrandizement. The ministry building was to be one of the largest structures in West Africa, and one of several government projects that enshrined Doe and his cohort on the Monrovia landscape.

The Ministry of Defense was never finished. War broke out in Liberia at the end of 1989. The Israeli firm contracted to design and construct the building completed its concrete supports but little more. Even before the fighting reached Monrovia, the ministry building was a skeleton, though a structurally sound one. Through successive waves of urban warfare the building became a squatter settlement, a vertical neighborhood of fighting men and their families living rough within the building's raw form. Government soldiers

and their dependents from upcountry or from contested neighborhoods in Monrovia were barracked in the structure to defend the man who ultimately succeeded Doe, Liberia's warlord president Charles Taylor. Taylor was ousted in 2003, but the men who fought to defend him remained in the ministry building, squatting in their makeshift community.

Then in 2008 the government of Taylor's successor, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, ordered the building's occupants to leave. Most moved into the swamps next to the building, attempting to find places for themselves in an already over-crowded slum known as Peace Island. Though they complained bitterly about the eviction, they put up surprisingly little resistance. No one I spoke with in the aftermath of the evictions ever claimed they had a right to stay in the ministry, despite their long residence there.

Major Sandi was an exception. He has lived in the ministry building for ten years. While the building's other residents were evicted, Major Sandi was allowed to remain as caretaker and night watchman. A Chinese telecom com-pany has placed cell towers on the roof of the ministry and so it is useful to have a few eyes on the property. But where once there was a dense, populous community, Major Sandi now lives virtually alone in a closet, surrounded by thousands of square feet of vacant concrete.

Recently the Johnson Sirleaf government has begun a survey of the build-ing. Its original blueprints are gone. No one at the Ministry of Public Works knows exactly how large the building is or how it was configured or con-structed. When I asked Major Sandi what he hopes will be done with the building once the survey is complete, he pauses. This, apparently, is not a question he has ever been asked before. "It should be given back to the Min-istry of Defense," he says finally. Then: "Maybe a hotel. It would make a nice hotel."

THE QUESTION I PUT to Major Sandi ("What futures can be imagined in ruins like the Ministry of Defense?") and his surreal answer ("It might make a nice hotel") are entry points to a constellation of uncertainties that define many Monrovians' experience of the city. How do the city's poorest residents understand modernist urban forms and their place within them? What do the built forms of the city evoke for them as possible futures, futures for them-selves and for the city writ large? The makeshift way in which Monrovians

Major Sandi, Ministry of Defense. 2012. After the main eviction of squatters from the ministry building, Major Sandi was allowed to remain as a caretaker to the vast, empty property.

Major Sandi's quarters at the Ministry of Defense. 2012. Major Sandi's small room is now virtually the only evidence of human habitation in what was once a sprawling, crowded network of domestic spaces.

like Major Sandi occupy the city bears no resemblance to the vision of urban living that animated the design of the modern city, in Liberia or anywhere else. Monrovia, like the majority of capital cities across Africa and throughout the Global South, is a young city dominated by a built aesthetic conceived as a tool for progressive social transformation. While never uncontested (a point to which I return below), the modern movement and its architectural offshoots began as politically hopeful interventions for addressing the needs of cities seemingly ill equipped for industrialization, urbanization, and the "dream worlds" (Buck-Morss 2000) of totalizing economic systems. What Le Corbusier (2007) called the "new architecture" was intended to address the unmet need to accommodate and foster life in a very new age. Yet today many of Monrovia's youths inhabit spaces that they refer to in Liberian English as Monrovia's *gaps*: the ruins of public buildings, urban beaches, cemeteries, alleyways, parking lots, or dump sites. These gaps are created by a history of conflict, aging, and voluntary and involuntary neglect. But they are also created and re-created by the very form of the city itself. Though Liberia is one of the rare spaces on the African continent never to have fallen under a European colonial sovereign, its capital city is strewn with what Stoler (2013) has called "imperial debris": not just physical ruins, but ongoing, multifaceted processes of continued and active ruination. It is a fluid and unstable existence, but it is one shared by an alarming number of young Monrovians. This leads to a disturbing question: in this West African city, are those modernist ruins actually habitable today?

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 dispossession—largely thanks to the unworkability and eventual demise of modernist dreams? The goal is no longer to invent a new world of forms or to invent a new world through form. The goal is to learn to inhabit ruins. Hence a rash of early twenty-first-century literatures on the creativity and entrepreneurialism of squatters and slum dwellers (Koolhaas 2002; Neuwirth 2004); celebratory accounts of the temporary architectures of Occupy movements (Massey and Snyder 2012); and a fascination with urban invasions like the Torre David tower in Caracas (Urban Think Tank 2013) or Christiana in Copenhagen (Østervang 2008).

Facility converted from grain storage to condominiums, Copenhagen. 2013. In a pattern repeated in various forms in cities throughout the world, an obsolete industrial element on the city landscape—a ruin—has been repurposed as housing.

There are calls for a "transgressive architecture" (see Doron 2000) and calls for a "minor architecture" defined by the "making of spaces within the already built" (Stoner 2012: 16). Even architecture's mainstream adaptive reuse efforts are largely founded on the idea that the future of urban spaces can and should be crafted from existing forms, forms that would otherwise continue to exist principally as real or metaphoric ruins.

Such re-imaginings of ruin spaces are important efforts. They have helped, among other things, to tell the story of urbanism outside the relentlessly negative and ultimately unbelievable tropes that dominate how much of the world understands cities in Africa and across the Global South (Enwezor 2006; Robinson 2006). They have underscored the limitations of universal solutions and standards of value. They have highlighted hope and illuminated the many small challenges to hegemonic systems upon which it is possible to build.

The more celebratory case studies and manifestoes of building upon ruins, however, often underplay the meaning of *ruin* in its verb form: an ongoing

process that names not just the devastated structures of the past but the "possibilities foreclosed" for imagining and crafting a different future (Stoler 2013: x). Both the material and immaterial detritus of violent histories in Monrovia exist as active forces on the urban landscape. They form boundaries and limits to what can be imagined and what can be done. Attending to the built environment not simply as the context for crafting an urban existence or as the raw material for inventing new urban forms requires a different, perhaps more pessimistic orientation. "Asking how people live *with* and *in* ruins redirects the engagement," Stoler argues, "to the politics animated, to the common sense such habitations disturb, to the critiques condensed or disallowed, and to the social relations avidly coalesced or shattered around them" (2013: 14).

My "redirected engagement" in *Monrovia Modern* concentrates on four structures in the Liberian capital. Each of these—the E. J. Roye Building, the Ministry of Defense, the Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS), and the Hotel Africa—embodies a modernist project that many Monrovians experience today as part of a ruined and ruinous landscape. As with all built forms, each of these sites is a web of physical spaces and narrative constructions, a material and immaterial aggregation that speaks to the relationship between the forms of the city and the lives of its inhabitants.

These histories are not self-contained. While they have unique aspects, they are of course linked to one another and to other urban forms. I use *form* here, and implicitly throughout this work, in Caroline Levine's (2015: 2) broad sense: forms are the work of making order. As such they travel the divide between material or immaterial, aesthetic and social. And as forms they have a politics; they are the condition of possibility for some ways of being in the city and a limiting factors in others. Reading these structures, I am also trying to read the structure of political possibilities and political limits. This is an effort to excavate from ruins a sense of the urban imaginary.

My detailed readings of these four sites on Monrovia's landscape are, of course, contiguous with other readings of Monrovia's everyday urbanism. Therefore, I bookend the four chapters devoted to these specific structures with other engagements with the modern city and its modernist legacies. The first is the most ethnographic of the chapters in *Monrovia Modern*. It is a reading of the politics of space and movement among the young men who made up the bulk of the population squatting in Monrovia's massive informal

E. J. Roye Building

Ministry of Defense

Liberia Broadcasting System

Hotel Africa

vertical settlements after the war. This first chapter is in some ways the an-
thropological foundation for the four photo-essays at the heart of the book. It
presents an argument about the politics of habitation and dwelling that plays
out somewhat differently in each iteration, but that nevertheless represents a
common denominator in each of these spaces.

The concluding chapter takes the argument into the future city by asking
how the modernist affordances of form that give meaning, or limit meaning,
in the E. J. Roye, the Ministry of Defense, the LBS, or the Hotel Africa, came
into play during the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. The quaran-
tines of Monrovia were surrounded by talk of extraordinary interventions
in the policing of urban space at a time of crisis. At the same time, however,
quarantine measures were in many ways the extension of a ruinous logic of
habitation with which Monrovia's poor have dealt for a very long time—a
logic that is legible in the existing built forms of the city.

In what remains of this introduction, I present the contextual background
for the chapters that follow. I begin with a necessarily brief history of the in-
stabilities of the city of Monrovia. This is followed by an equally cursory but
nonetheless important overview of debates regarding the habitability of mod-
ernist architecture and design. These two discussions set up a third: the way
African urbanism and its political possibilities have figured into the anthro-
pological literature. Finally, I conclude with an explanation of the method of
Monrovia Modern. Having relied heavily on what Dennis Tedlock (2013) calls
a "photowriting" approach to understanding architecture and built form, I
provide some background for thinking the tripartite relationship between
word, image, and form in the anthropological study of architecture and the
built environment.

Monrovia: Liquid City

The architect David Adjaye, in his omnibus survey of African cities, claims
that "the feel of [Monrovia] is horizontal" (2011: 176), meaning that the life
of the city is to be found on its streets and in its vast expanses of markets and
microarchitecture rather than in tall buildings and the fixed geometries of
urban design and planning. But the city's horizontal feel is also the product
of a populace constantly on the move, shifting around the city in cyclical
stop-start waves.

This has been true of Monrovia throughout its surprisingly short his-

tory as a city. As a name on the map, Monrovia has existed since 1822, when American former slaves and freemen built a permanent settlement at Cape Mesurado on the Saint Paul River.[1] Yet at the beginning of World War II, the population of Africa's oldest republic was still primarily rural; only 12,000 people were estimated to be living in its capital city (Lelong 1946, cited in Fraenkel 1964: 27).

A city that had been principally an administrative center and home port for Kru mariners expanded rapidly with the end of that war. By 1959 the population had grown to 53,000, and by 1989 to an estimated 600,000. The wartime expansion of Monrovia's port facilities (largely under the direction of the U.S. Army), along with President William Tubman's postwar open trade policies, radically increased the possibilities for up-country Liberians and foreigners to find work in Monrovia. A good deal of this labor was, however, seasonal, piecemeal, and casual. The disproportionately male populace of the city was highly mobile both within the city and around the region. The physical infrastructure of Monrovia, inadequate even for the small prewar population, came nowhere close to accommodating an influx of stevedores, construction workers, traders, and tradesmen. Though the city had a number of ethnic enclaves, even those permanently residing in the city often preferred temporary architecture because of the city's chaotic and ill-defined land tenure regimes and laissez-faire approach to housing controls (Fraenkel 1964: 52). Layered on top of a weak city government dominated by the patrimonial rule of the nation's president, such rapid but unstable growth gave much of the city a provisional, ad hoc feel. Merran Fraenkel, an anthropologist who conducted ethnographic research in the city in the late 1950s, describes "modern Monrovia" as a place that is "not really a town in the generally accepted sense of the word" but exists more as a "conglomeration of settlements and communities which participate to varying degrees in a common social and economic structure" (1964: 33).

Those infrastructure improvements to Monrovia enacted under President Tubman in the postwar years were heavily concentrated in the area of the city historically associated with its "civilized" residents, most notably (though not exclusively) with the Americo-Liberian elite.[2] Office complexes, bank buildings, cinemas, churches, mosques, and shopping centers were constructed on the high ridgeline downtown, looking out over the informal settlements and improvised architecture that made up most of the rest of the urban fabric.

The concentration of both modern design and concrete construction in the *kwiklo* (the so-called white man's town) was so predominant, in fact, that Samuel Doe's decision in the 1980s to build enormous, brutalist ministry buildings on the outskirts of the city was widely interpreted as an assault on Americo-Liberian hegemony (see Kaufmann 2016: 91). Visually, the skyline of Monrovia is dominated by this relatively small number of monumental, postwar modernist forms. But neither Tubman's nor Doe's building programs translated into a more stable urban environment for the bulk of Monrovia's residents in their everyday lives. Housing arrangements and housing stock remained largely informal, though this included a diversity of architectural styles as well as land occupation strategies.

Both the presence of squatters in the Ministry of Defense and their eviction therefore seem remarkably consistent, if somewhat exaggerated, urban logics in Monrovia. When war broke out in late 1989, up-country fighting and lack of economic options pushed many more people into a city that was no better equipped to accommodate them than it had been prior to the outbreak of violence. The city's populace of roughly 600,000 at the outset of the war reached as high as 1.5 million at the height of the conflict. By 2006, when an official UN resettlement program ended, there were still an estimated 1 million people living in the city. The Ducor Hotel, one of the city's most famous urban landmarks, was informally occupied for much of the war and for years afterward. The ministries of health and agriculture, at least three of the largest downtown banks, the national stadium, various political party headquarters, factories, beachside and suburban villas, and a major metropolitan hospital were all claimed as housing during the country's tumultuous decades of conflict. Informal settlements that were already crowded by the late 1950s became vastly more so in the 1990s, with little decrease in pressure since then. Phenomenologically, what this has meant is a city experiencing the effects of conflict not only as direct violence, but as a further compression of already shifting urban space.

Even a decade after the war, the majority of Monrovia's residents still have no clear title or demonstrable claim on the land they occupy, and tenure insecurity is a fact of life for most (see Williams 2011; as well as Hughes 2013). The laws governing rights of occupation in Monrovia remain unclear to most of the population, despite efforts to clarify the Liberian legal code's gray areas around squatters' rights and property disputes. Informal settlements continue

to be the norm, though as the urban geographer Garth Myers (2011: 70–103) has argued, *informal* is a term that covers an unhelpful variety of habitation patterns in African cities today.

The Ellen Johnson Sirleaf government, which took power in Liberia in 2006, has brought with it a measure of political stability. With that stability, however, Monrovia has experienced urban growth of a different sort. Liberians who fled the war, which included a large number of wealthy and educated elites, are returning or remitting capital. Global financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are bankrolling development projects, as are a dizzying array of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies. Multinational corporations trading in West Africa's natural resources and the financial industries that support that trade are all returning to a country that generates tremendous wealth for those willing to manage the risk. The influx of refugees and the internally displaced has thus been followed in postwar Monrovia by an influx of capital and "development-induced displacement" (see de Wet 2006; McDowell 1996).

The common thread that runs through both the wartime and postwar inflows is the way it lays claim to and shapes scarce urban space. Interventions in the built environment have happened quickly and with often dramatic, unpredictable results for the city's poorest residents. In the war's aftermath, the Monrovia City Corporation, which has primary responsibility for slum clearance along with the Ministry of Public Works, has received mixed reviews from NGOs and activists monitoring postwar land security issues (see, for example, Hughes 2013; Norton 2011; Williams 2011). By early 2012, there were efforts to regularize the way evictions were conducted and efforts to make them less militaristic. But large, sometimes violent sweeps of sectors of the city remain common. The chairman of the residents' association in Old Government Hospital, for example, claimed to have 137 families registered in the building when it was suddenly demolished in April 2012, at least some of them having lived in the building since the 1970s (Lupick 2012b). A significant portion of West Point, one of the largest and oldest settlements of the city with a population of some 60,000, was slated for demolition, and smaller slums were being bulldozed regularly. Many of these evictions and demolitions happened with little advance notice or relocation assistance. As Mary Broh, Monrovia's mayor, told one journalist in a 2012 interview: "As a post-conflict country, we need to go through some rapid changes" (Lupick 2012a).

Ironically, then, even as the politics of Monrovia were becoming more stable, the physical space of the city became more unstable for many of its inhabitants. Monrovia, like many African cities, appears both to outsiders and to its residents as more liquid than solid. As the writer and critic Simon Njami puts it, describing African urban spaces in general, "It seems to me that as soon as one sets foot on the African continent, searching for the meaning of the city no longer refers in the least to any geometry, to any agreed and verifiable logic, nor to any urbanist ambition. It's no longer a question here of a physical city, with its street names, its signs, but of an intangible phenomenon" (2001: 72).

The liquidity of the city is perhaps most acutely experienced by the city's large population of men affiliated with the country's long war. Fighters from around the region have settled in Monrovia, a city widely seen by veterans of the Mano River war as more promising than Freetown, the capital of neighboring Sierra Leone, and easier to access for Anglophones than Conakry, Guinea, or Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.[3] By the UN's own conservative reckoning, the majority of that populace is living an extremely precarious existence. The final disarmament report frankly acknowledges something that is obvious to Monrovians: efforts at postconflict economic reintegration were largely unsuccessful, and social reintegration efforts were nonexistent.[4] For the country as a whole, unemployment and underemployment estimates of 70 to 85 percent circulate widely, with most accounts stressing that unemployment is disproportionately weighted toward Liberia's youth.[5] Monrovia is a rapidly changing landscape for all its residents, but arguably most of all for male residents who played some part in the 1990s regional war. As a result, large and small groups of men, many of whom fought together as units during the war, share temporary accommodations until forced out by police, by neighbors, or by fences and construction equipment.[6]

The irony of Njami's observation is that Monrovia, like many African cities, has for all its liquidity and intangible phenomena been profoundly shaped by the most rigid and tangible of geometries: the rationalism of modernist architecture and urban design. The spaces that make this horizontal city what it is—a fluid, liquid place of shifting forms and rapid displacements—are the product of a very different impulse and a seemingly contradictory history. It is to this history that I now turn.

Uninhabitable Architecture

For over half a century, the so-called international style has dominated not only Monrovia's but most African cities' skylines (see Elleh 1997: 72, 2002; Lepik 2013: 11). The early twentieth-century modernist movement and its many offshoots in architecture and urban design were a central, complex part of the colonial project in Africa (Avermaete, Karakayali, and Osten 2010; Fuller 2007; Rabinow 1989; Wright 1991), and in most cities played an equally important role in the nation-building and regime-building projects of the postcolonial era (see Chalfin 2014; Crinson 2003; Elleh 2002; Hess 2000, 2006; Larkin 2008). From the 1920s until arguably well into the 1980s, a great deal of the large-scale infrastructure of African cities was built with a strong commitment to the formal principles of modern design. More free to experiment in Africa than in Europe or North America, architects (African and non-African) could take modernist ideas to their extremes (Gogan and Rowley 2011). The clients for large-scale building projects in Africa (newly independent governments, religious institutions, and occasionally wealthy individuals) were eager for built forms perceived to be at the sophisticated cutting edge of global design.

As a result, Africa's cities are in fact among the world's most modern, at least as measured by the architectural aesthetics associated with high modernity. Certainly this was the case in Monrovia. Though never part of the European colonial empires, in Monrovia, modern nationhood meant modernism in the built environment (Olukoju 2006: 75).

In the broadest sense, in Africa as elsewhere, being modernist in design implied an architecture not bound by tradition, an architecture guided instead by the rational use of basic geometric forms to create new, functional spaces. Philip Johnson coined the term *international style* in 1932 to connote a global movement intended to be (like the industrial machines that often inspired modernist architects) an object whose style was no style at all. It would function free of cultural context or social influence.

Not surprisingly, then, the rhetoric surrounding the new architecture was often liberatory. Le Corbusier's famous dictum that the modern house was to be *la machine à habiter* [the machine for living or living in] was intended to reflect a new freedom through efficiency in form and function. Modernist architecture would harness and channel the productive forces of modernity itself: the labor power of industrial workers; the productive capacity of new domestic machinery like air conditioning and the electric oven; and mass-

Along UN Drive, Bushrod Island

produced building materials. It would take advantage of the radical new modes of seeing and thinking opened up by photography, and it would profit from the spaces of possibility (literal and figurative) created by the industrialization of modern war (see Cohen 2011; 2012: 16–17). The scale and abstract forms of structures like Le Corbusier's Unités d'habitation or the mass housing projects of Walter Gropius were intended to free workers (at least male workers) from the work of domesticity and habitation.

In reality, the history of modern architecture is more nuanced and conflicted. Despite its pretensions otherwise, it is inextricably linked to its sociohistorical contexts, especially the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expansion of industrial capitalism, colonial empires, and urban spaces. If its rhetoric was liberatory, the politics of the new aesthetic was not always pro-

gressive. A second Le Corbusier aphorism captures the ambivalent nature of at least some of the developing modern design ethos. In his 1922 *Vers une architecture*, perhaps the most influential tract of the early modern movement, Le Corbusier concludes by writing, "Architecture or revolution—revolution can be avoided" (2007: 307). The revolution Le Corbusier was primarily concerned with avoiding was a communist revolution inspired by the shortage and inadequacy of urban housing. It was not only in the colonies that the architecture of the modern movement was intended as a kind of pacification campaign.

There has therefore always been a concurrent debate as to whether modern architectural spaces are actually habitable. Thinkers on both the political left and right argued that the new architecture destroyed communities. The styleless style of the international style was for many a catastrophic loss of identity rather than a vehicle for realizing a new, more cosmopolitan future. Architectural modernism may have freed modern urbanites from tradition, but for many theorists it seemed to subject them to other, more subtle exercises of power and control.

For Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, for example, writing prior to World War II, the European city was experiencing the proliferation of spaces that were alienating, that forced urban residents to move through them without forming any real attachments or community. Benjamin famously wrote that modern Paris bred a new kind of subject, the flaneur or stroller who wanders the city observing his surroundings in minute detail but who remains unable to engage those surroundings fully (Benjamin 1978b; Buck-Morss 1986). For Simmel (1976), the modern city generated a "blasé attitude" of alienation and noncommitment, a product of the city's overwhelming population but also of its physical forms.

After World War II, critical evaluation of the impact of modern built forms was even more pessimistic. As Ian Buchanan and Greg Lambert put it, at least some theorists of the modern condition began to argue that modern spaces were "uninhabitable by definition" (2005: 3). The war's devastating impact on cities across Europe and Asia and the industrialized slaughter of the Holocaust, followed by the massive infrastructure projects needed to accommodate urban immigrants, workers, and refugees, suggested a built environment that could no longer consist of meaningful places, only of spaces of regulation, containment, and control. Architecture became a disciplinary

Downtown central business district, Monrovia. 2005. Like many African cities, the downtown core is dominated by international-style architecture.

tool, as Michel Foucault put it in his analyses of the modern European clinic, prison, and asylum. No one knew how to live in the spaces modernity had created. They were simply uninhabitable: "that state in which the modern subject no longer recognizes the space in which it is located" (Buchanan and Lambert 2005: 6).

Nowhere, perhaps, are the contradictory and confusing legacies of modern built forms more evident than in contemporary African cities. The most modern of cities, they have long been the laboratories of modernism's and modernity's successes and failures. The interventions have been especially sweeping, and the rhetoric of liberation especially pronounced. Like Monrovia, many of the continent's largest cities are in fact quite young, meaning their infrastructural development occurred almost wholly under the rubric

Unité d'habitation (Cité radieuse) #1

Unité d'habitation (Cité radieuse) #2

Le Corbusier's first *Unité d'habitation* (the *Cité radieuse*) at Marseille. 2014.
The revolutionary design of the *Cité radieuse* made it an icon—and an often
repeated model—for modern architects globally.

Unité d'habitation (Cité radieuse) #3

Unité d'habitation (Cité radieuse) #4

Unité d'habitation (Cité radieuse) #5

Unité d'habitation (Cité radieuse) #6

of modernist design technologies and principles (see Gandy 2014; Koolhaas 2002; Wainaina 2005). Ironically, then, it is the urban spaces least visible in the critical thinking about modernism and its legacies that provide the richest ground for understanding how urbanites live in modernism's spaces.

Thinking Africa's Urban Architecture

Debates about the habitability of urban form took on a particular cast in Africa south of the Sahara.[7] From the late 1930s until at least the 1970s, rapid urbanization in colonial southern Africa produced heated debates about the fate of ethnic identities as populations moved to the expanding cities, largely looking for work. Even for some anthropologists, the city seemed to be a major threat to an authentically African existence. To move to the city meant the loss of culture, the loss of identity, and the loss of social bonds to the (rural) tribe.

It was in the context of this debate that the South African Max Gluckman wrote one of the most-cited phrases in Africanist anthropology: "An African townsman is a townsman, an African miner is a miner: he is only second-arily a tribesman" (1960: 57). The city, he argued, did not simply erode the identities of those who occupied them. It created new forms of belonging and self-regard that were not limited by ethnicity. Ethnic identities continued to matter, but in the city one was always many things at once. It is what Gluckman said next, however, that I find most significant for thinking through the present moment in Monrovia: "That is, I would anticipate that as soon as Africans assemble in towns and engage in industrial work they will begin to form social relationships appropriate to their new situation: they will try to combine to better their conditions in trade unions and so forth" (1960: 57). For Gluckman and for others, the proliferating identities of the city in-evitably produced new forms of collective living, and collective politics, that responded to specifically urban concerns. Facing the challenges of life in the city, urbanites would naturally find ways to make common cause and create a common identity around which to mobilize.

Indeed, the subsequent literature on associational life in African cities (mostly notably West African cities) is filled with accounts of how churches and mosques, ethnic associations, lending and social welfare societies, brother-hoods, hunting collectives, sports clubs, school groups, guilds, and fraterni-ties all provided migrants to rapidly growing urban spaces with a social and

People's Movement for Democratic Change rally, Freetown, Sierra Leone. 2007. Demonstrations in support of political parties remain the most visible instances of collective popular action in this region of West Africa.

political framework within which to understand and participate in city life (see, among many possible examples from this region alone, Cohen 1969, 1981; Fraenkel 1964; Little 1965, 1974; Nunley 1987).

The emphasis on multiplying identities and on the associational life that springs from them has remained a central theme in studies of African urban life long after the heyday of functionalism and structural Marxism. Much of the more recent work on Pentecostalism in West Africa (see, for example, Piot 2010; Quayson 2010; Shaw 2007a) is concerned with how the movement provides a vocabulary of belonging in response to the almost impossible challenges of modern urban life. In contemporary Abidjan, anthropologist Sasha Newell (2012) describes how practices of conspicuous consumption and

largely fictional performances of wealth become techniques for cultivating a network of dependents and relations. Brian Larkin's (2008) ethnography of Nigerian cinema traces how both the symbolic and material spaces of the urban film industry work as sites for the creation of a modern Muslim identity and community (see also Meyer 1999). Associational life has hardly disappeared from the landscape of African urban studies; indeed, it has become richer and more complex as African cities have done so.

Yet at this moment, for many of its residents, the challenges of an African city life require such a proliferation of identities and performances that it becomes virtually impossible to imagine the city milieu generating the collective, transformative social and political movements through which to conceptualize and agitate for different rights to the city. The result is a landscape of remarkable inventiveness, but one in which it is exceedingly difficult to find solid ground for a common identity or project (see de Boeck 2013; Mbembe and Roitman 1995). Living in almost continuous crisis, a large proportion of young urbanites in Monrovia seem to survive by exploiting the fluid, provisional nature of relationships and identities in the city. There is little advantage in holding too tightly or too strictly to any one way of being or being known. For the ex-combatant men with whom I have spent the most time in Monrovia, all forms of identity become secondary, to use Gluckman's (1960) word: townsman and miner, along with youth, rebel, ex-combatant, student, man, Muslim, hustler, Pentecostal Christian, taxi driver, father, son, footballer, activist, NGO employee—as well as tribesman. Any identity may be foregrounded as necessary, along with the web of social relationships and social practices they invoke. But they are just as easily abandoned, sublimated, or renounced as circumstances require. In an urban milieu in which it can be difficult, even impossible, to predict which associations will be lasting or profitable, and which will be dangerous or fragile, all associations become provisional and contingent.

Urban associations forged by imaginative social bonds may, as Andrea Kaufmann (2016) has argued in her analysis of three civic associations in postwar Monrovia, provide a space for articulating modest expectations from the state. But such claims fall far short of a "political society" (Chatterjee 2004), as I take up in chapter 1. They make unstable material from which to form an effective political community. And in the post–Cold War era, the African state is itself a largely absent presence (see Mbembe 1992; Piot

2010), making it exceedingly difficult for oppositional coalitions to form and place demands. More often the collective activities of young urban men in this region have taken on the cast of the zero-sum, fantasmatic politics that the philosopher Achille Mbembe (2003) has described as a "necropolitics": practices of violence for profit and power, relationships of obligation and debt understood strictly according to the value systems of modern capitalism (see also Mbembe 2006). The idea of union factory workers mobilizing in the streets of Monrovia seems more fanciful than the mobilization of militias and mobs. Indeed the most common mass actions of young men in the past decades have been for the performance of wartime violence, or as political campaigners in the region's notoriously violent, cynical elections (see Christensen 2013; Christensen and Utas 2008; Hoffman 2011a).

Crucially, this shifting landscape of belonging also produces a remarkably dematerialized city. The associational life that interested Gluckman (1960) was one that could develop from recognizable, material spaces: mining hostels, factories, and churches, to name but a few of his examples. These were locations for specified activities and roles, a physical infrastructure that could facilitate the formation of a distinct kind of collective identity and action. But the more fluid, amorphous identities of Africa's city dwellers at this historical moment are accompanied by, and accomplished by, a more amorphous city. Urban forms seem to work against the kind of political coalition building that it was possible to imagine in the urbanizing southern African cities and towns that Gluckman invoked. As scholars such as Filip de Boeck (de Boeck and Plissart 2005), Simon Njami (2001), and AbdouMaliq Simone (2002) have put it, much of what constitutes the essence of the African urban fabric today is invisible. Literally invisible in many cases, as in the occult practices of urban residents or the unforeseeable consequences of people's gambles and entrepreneurial projects. But invisible also from the point of view of conventional urban design. Most of what urbanists know of the city simply fails to recognize the ways in which many urban Africans inhabit their built spaces (see Myers 2011; Pieterse and Simone 2013; Robinson 2006). City master plans, infrastructure projects, and even individual architectures, where they exist at all, are often put to use in ways they were never intended, and much of what matters in African urban life takes place in the gaps between those more recognizable, visible urban forms (Simone 2004: 22).

A new African urban literature has therefore begun to capture African

urbanism's synthesis of movement, in/visibility, and experimentation. The productiveness of the city, for many of its inhabitants, is found in the creative ways they work these intersections and empty spaces. The materiality of the city becomes a backdrop to the city's more significant immaterial processes. Built forms function as raw material open to endless reworkings.

In a phrase that nicely captures the new urbanist thinking, de Boeck argues that the African city exists "beyond its architecture" (2011: 271; 2013: 95). In this dematerialized urban milieu, residents experiment with myriad ways to imagine and perform themselves. These are performances that take place in space, of course, but the result is a kind of "genericness" to many African cities (de Boeck 2013; see also Pivin 1999: 3). They become urban environments made up of spaces, not places, neither one thing nor another. Unformed spaces can be worked and reworked endlessly. Urban space becomes uncategorizable, neither public nor private in any of the usual senses.

It is a description apropos of modern Monrovia. There is certainly a genericness to much of the city, and the metaphors of liquidity are appropriate both materially and metaphorically. Monrovia's slums and interstitial spaces have their unique characteristics, but for the most part they are not spaces that invite different kinds of imaginaries about what it might mean to live there or what kind of people it is possible to become within them. Monrovia is a difficult city in which to find anchor points. Spaces in the city are interchangeable for many Monrovians, not least the young men who knew the city as a battle space during the war.

And yet there are forms in the city with histories and material aspects that have never been fully subsumed by the genericness of the rest of the city. Half finished or ruined, there are still locations in the city that, due to their material monumentality, their specific historical connotations, or their cultural or political significance, are not entirely tabula rasa for those who inhabit Monrovia today. These spaces may be subject to the same creative reworkings as every other space in the city. They host the same experiments in living and micromovements of habitation, but they resist being completely reduced to raw urban material. There are, in short, individual spaces in the city that it is impossible to exist "beyond." Many of these are forms that emerged directly from the global proliferation of the international style. It is not always easy to read those structures as architecture, given that so many exist in a state of ruin or at least neglect, and given the hyperbolic discourses that surround so

Downtown ruin, Monrovia. 2012. As in many West African cities, the boundaries that would demarcate public and private, boundaries that would give the city shape and structure, seem especially permeable.

much African urbanism.[8] But there are spaces of difference in Monrovia, as in all cities: forms that offer a unique purchase and perspective on the city, forms that exacerbate or challenge the city's dominant flows and trends. The modernist ideals they express may not, and generally do not, match the realities of the lives that people live within them. But as structures they give order to the urban world, an order that forecloses some possibilities for a future even as it opens others.

Understanding the spaces in the city that it is impossible to live beyond means attending to individual forms and their particularities. The chapters that follow therefore present this argument vis-à-vis microanalyses of specific ruins and the possibilities that those ruins both enable and foreclose. Like all analysis of architecture, and indeed all analysis of African urban life, it is an exploration deeply enmeshed in the politics of representation. And so I conclude this introduction by thinking specifically about the photo-essay approach that animates the chapters to follow.

Photowriting the Built Environment

In photojournalist Tim Hetherington's book *Long Story Bit by Bit: Liberia Retold*, the Ministry of Defense building sits like a reprimand in the midground of a single image. The photograph was made in 2006, three years after the war ended. Only a fraction of the structure is visible: an imposing corner tower and part of one façade. The building takes up a third of the frame. Another third is ominous gray sky, the rest lush tropical bush. What is visible of the building's face is enough to show how squatters have hung reed mats and cardboard to form makeshift walls on two floors. The ad hoc patterns underscore the improvised, parasitic nature of their construction (2009: 72–73). It is a powerful image and reads, as do many others of urban infrastructure in the book, as an indictment. It is a photograph of ruins, but like all representations of ruins its meaning is difficult to pin down (Hell and Schönle 2010: 6). The object of Hetherington's critique could be war and the ruination that has forced Monrovians to seek out clearly inadequate shelter. It could be the disastrous and unsustainable politics of patrimonialism that resulted in such inappropriate forms. It could be a critique of Africa itself.

Photographs of the built environment, whether classified as architectural photography, reportage, fine art, or snapshot, always present an argument. They are a "provocation," as Jane Tormey (2013) puts it. Though frequently thought of as the most anodyne and banal of photographic genres, architectural photographs are never mere illustration. Like Hetherington's Ministry of Defense image, what photographs of architecture argue may be ambiguous or ambivalent. But the combination of content, aesthetic, technology, and context that makes up the photograph, both inside and outside the frame, are invariably evidence in a case for, or against, something.

At what point, however, does that visual evidence become anthropological evidence? More and more frequently that term circulates around an approach to photographing the built environment that attempts a break with the strict formalism of traditional architectural image making. Iwan Baan, the Dutch photographer whose reportage aesthetic has made him one of the most celebrated contemporary architectural photographers, is routinely described as performing a kind of anthropological analysis with his images of informal settlements, modernist icons, and aerial cityscapes, as well as his documentary work for global architecture firms (*Artweek.LA* 2013; Häntzschel 2013; Schim van der Loeff 2014). South African Guy Tillim's documentary photographs of

Johannesburg apartment blocks and the colonial modern architecture of central Africa is similarly described as social analysis (see, for example, Enwezor 2010). Calling these approaches to architectural photography anthropological seems to be shorthand for images that include people and show how they occupy built space. But architectural photographs, whether they are populated or not, have always been anthropological, have always been ethnographic. They always theorize, more or less explicitly, a relationship between human beings and the forms that surround them. The more important question, then, is not at what point does photography of the built environment become anthropology, but what kind of anthropological arguments can architectural photography make? One answer to that question can be found at the intersection of two legacies of the photograph: its role in defining the improbable, sometimes impossible space of modernist architecture, and its role in defining the improbable and sometimes impossible place of African modernity.

Photography has arguably been the most important technology in the development of modern architecture. The medium's portability means that most people's experience of canonical structures, including most architects' experience of them, comes from photographs rather than from the direct experience of space itself. Modern designers learned about new works, and developed their theoretical and philosophical positions, through circulating photographs of built forms from around the globe.[9] Their own designs were therefore a response not only to other architecture but to the peculiarity of how the still camera renders architectural space.

The results could be dramatic. Claire Zimmerman has, for example, argued that the widely circulated professional photographs of Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House in Brno (in what is now the Czech Republic) led this rather unusual and unrepresentative example of Weimar modernism to become the signature, frequently imitated aesthetic of global modernist architecture. Photographed in the early 1930s, the images have to be understood as the product of multiple technical and aesthetic determinants: the wide-angle lens's tendency to warp space, especially midground space, making elements in the background appear condensed and farther from the camera; contemporary pictorial landscape painting conventions that favored strong foreground elements, a middle void, and crowded backgrounds; and the predominant focus in the images on the open common areas of the house rather than the smaller private spaces. The result is a peculiar rendering of modern-

ism, a rendering that overemphasizes compositional symmetry, openness, and transparency while underemphasizing the experiential qualities of occupying space. It is a modernism dominated by the pictorial qualities of looking from a fixed point of view. Especially as it spread globally, the image of modern architecture increasingly became the image of modern architecture as depicted in still photography. Architects working in the modern mode were in dialogue with a distorted image of the object they hoped to produce: "Internationalism in architecture was," Zimmerman concludes, "the result of photographic circulation and its concomitant modes of cursory and inattentive seeing" (2004: 349).

In some cases, the camera's role in turning impossible spaces into ideal modernist space is even more central. Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* is richly illustrated with photographs of modern machinery, vehicles, and industrial buildings from early twentieth-century America. But his images of grain silos, one of his quintessential exemplars of pure functional geometry, were doctored for publication. Service elements that make the building work but that distract from its purity of shape were removed from the image in the darkroom. The versions printed in the book appear much more elemental and abstract than their originals on New England farmscapes and the plains of the American Midwest (see Brown 1993; Steiner 2006: 108).

In short, the image of modern movement architecture is in many ways a uniquely photographic image. Inhabiting the spaces of modernism is in large measure a process of learning to inhabit spaces crafted by and for the camera's, rather than the human body's, unique relationship to built forms.

The camera not only played a central role in creating the spaces of modernism. It also played a central role in the debate over what it might mean to live in those spaces. The photographs of Mies's Tugendhat House helped precipitate what is, according to Zimmerman (2004: 343–345), often referred to as the "Can one live in the Tugendhat House?" debate. Critics and supporters of the building's design disagreed whether the materials, lines, and most of all the spatial arrangements of the architecture were a liberating advancement or a dehumanizing misintepretation of what it meant to dwell at home. But while each side included advocates who had actually been in the building, for the most part the debate was staged around interpretations of photographs of the building's interiors, photographs that, as Zimmerman explains, are remarkably unfaithful to the experience of the place. Julius Shulman (1997),

one of the most renowned architectural photographers of the midcentury modernist period, has described his role in producing images like that of two women suspended over the Los Angeles nightscape as part of a project of convincing viewers that the spaces of modern architecture were actually habitable. Ernie Braun's intimate scenes of domestic life in advertising images for the famous Eichler homes in California, among the first mass-produced modernist housing, were meant not only to sell the homes but to instruct homeowners in how to use their unfamiliar spaces (Adamson, Arbunich, and Braun 2002). Photography, in other words, played as much a role as the built environment in structuring the imagination of what kinds of spaces were habitable and how in modern architecture.

A parallel argument has run long and deep in African studies: that Africa and Africans are largely understood, by those both outside and on the continent, through images—often impossible images. Okwui Enwezor (2006: 12) starkly summarizes the argument when he writes, in his introduction to the *Snap Judgments* catalog of African photography, that the dominant images of Africa, images of unrelenting misery or untrammeled natural beauty, are simply "no longer plausible" after decades of repetition. Like the image of modern architecture, the image of modern Africa takes on a kind of hyperreality, a signifier without referent, more real than the thing to which it supposedly refers.

Here, too, the critique is more than semantic. There are material consequences to this political economy of the photograph. Young men who participated in the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia did so not only as combatants but as media consumers. They understood in a sophisticated way that they participated in a global economy of image production and dissemination. Many of their techniques and strategies for the performance of violence can and should be understood as efforts to reproduce images of themselves as modern African warriors in a crowded mediascape with clearly defined ideas of what African violence looks like. It is, however, an image that largely divorces violence from its consequences, or at least from its politics (see Hoffman 2004, 2011b; as well as Richards 1996).

While arguably the hyperreality of images in the Mano River war makes it among the first truly postmodern conflicts, it is of a piece with a much deeper history of photography in Africa as the arbiter of the modern. Magazines like *Drum* and the advertising images of billboards and newspapers, for example, have long used photography to promote an image of the modern African

Julius Shulman
photographing the
Stahl House, Case
Study House #22.
Photo credit:
J. Paul Getty Trust.

subject as a particular kind of consumer, an image intertwined with the social injustices of colonialism, apartheid, and economic inequalities (see, for example, Burke 1996; Thomas 2006). Studio portraiture has been a privileged site for exploring what it meant, and continues to mean, to be a modern African and what it means to share or be excluded from other people's modernity (see, for example, Lamuniere 2001; Matt and Mieβgang 2001; Mofokeng 2012; Oguibe 2001). The still camera has, in short, long been a key technology in writing the story of what kinds of modernity are possible and what kinds impossible across the continent.

Both of these genealogies of photography and modernity, the one distinctly architectural and the other distinctly African, inform my own process of "photowriting the built environment," as the anthropologist Dennis Tedlock (2013) puts it. The fact that prose writing and photographic production now rely on so many of the same technologies, according to Tedlock, has further eroded the disciplinary boundary between media. A long-held notion that each medium requires specialist competencies that a single author cannot master is crumbling. It is increasingly possible to pair the two and employ their individual communicative and analytic potential in a single coherent essay, one that need not necessarily prioritize one medium over the other. And where the object of photowriting's inquiry is the human experience of

place, the built environment holds special potential, "replete with the echoes, traces, and results of speaking, writing, and other human acts that have taken place within that world" (Tedlock 2013).[10]

Chapters 2–5 of *Monrovia Modern* are each devoted to a single structure, and each employs a photowriting methodology. Each package of text and images therefore consists of a selection of photographs that deploys the camera's unique ability to render space and to reflect how photography shaped the modernist imaginary of architectural form. What's more, they are images imbued with the legacy of photography on the continent, images haunted by older images of what African modernity should be. They are, in that sense, double provocations (to return to Tormey's term). They make visible the "photographicness" of modern movement design and the political economy of images in African urbanism.

While I am content to have those provocations, the arguments of the images, be somewhat open-ended, there is a logic to how the images are selected and organized. It is a logic that I believe requires some explication. At the end of each chapter, then, I have used a short postscript to outline my own readings of these photo packages. Without attempting to foreclose the excess of meaning inherent in ethnographic images (Taylor 1996: 75; Sniadecki 2014: 26), I nevertheless recognize that a certain amount of framing would increase, rather than diminish, a reader's ability to divine meaning within these frames (see Desjarlais 2015: 214).

TAKEN TOGETHER, THESE CHAPTERS present a portrait, albeit a partial one, of the political imaginary and its relation to urban form. They do not offer a yes or no answer to the question of whether Monrovia's modernist ruins are habitable. They are intended, rather, to probe the limits of what a city's residents can think and do with the form of the city in which they live. Together these chapters constitute an anthropology of the forms of Monrovia's modernism. They are a mapping of the city's imperial debris.

Notes

Preface

1 According to the UNHCR, at the end of June 2013 the registered Somali population at Dadaab stood at 409,000. By the end of September 2016 the camp population had been reduced to 261,000, and the camp is scheduled for closure in mid-2017. See http://data.unhcr.org/horn-of-africa/region.php?id=3.

Introduction

1 This history is examined in greater detail in Fraenkel (1964) and Liebenow (1987).

2 The term *civilized* was, and to some degree remains, a widely employed if ill-defined local designation in Liberia. It refers, as Fraenkel put it in the late 1950s, to Liberians considered to be well educated, but even more importantly to those who adopted "Western dress . . . house type and furniture" (1964: 68; see also Moran 1990, 2006: 74–100).

3 There is no easy way to disaggregate the various groups of actors in the story of Monrovia's wartime and postwar urbanization. There is, therefore, no precise way to know how many of the young men who make up Monrovia's male underclass are ex-combatants. Those statistics that do exist, however, paint a staggering picture. The United Nations' final report on the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme (DDRRP), for example, claims that the program enrolled nearly 104,000 ex-fighters. The first disarmament at Camp Schieffelin, a military base just outside the capital, registered almost 13,000 people, and was followed by a number of other disarmament exercises in the Monrovia area. In other words, a significant percentage of those who disarmed after the war did so in the capital and its immediate surroundings, and there is every reason to believe that a good many more ex-combatants made their way to Monrovia

in the war's aftermath. There is no doubt that a significant population of men who bore arms during the war now reside in the city.

4 The UN's final report on the DDRRP was available as of March 16, 2014, at https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/1289.

5 See, for example, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/liberia/economy.htm [accessed 19 November 2016]; Teage (2015); Yangian (2013).

6 While there are valid reasons to question whether "ex-combatant" remains a useful demographic denominator a decade after the end of the war (see Käihkö 2015, 2016), my own interest has long been in understanding how the young men caught up in this conflict constituted a labor pool for a particular order of global capitalism. It is, therefore, not so much their historical association with any of the various fighting factions that is relevant here, but their continued subjection to global processes that buffet them at every turn and structure their experience of the city just as it did during the war.

7 For more on the French and Italian colonies of Mediterranean North Africa, see Fuller (2007), Wright (1991), and the essays collected in Avermaete, Karakayali, and von Osten (2010).

8 This is not to say that such efforts are nonexistent. The historian Nnamdi Elleh's (2002) *Architecture and Power* provides one compelling example, analyzing in depth the Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix in Yamoussoukro (Côte d'Ivoire) and the Grande Mosquée Hassan II in Casablanca (Morocco) as material manifestations of a particular kind of sovereign authority in Africa. A generation earlier, Udo Kultermann (1969) used individual building projects as an entry point for addressing the opportunities and challenges that cities provided newly independent African states for crafting distinct national identities. In postapartheid South Africa, architecture has played an important role in the symbolic crafting of the "rainbow nation," and architects, historians, and theorists have produced a rich body of analysis and critique that looks at both the past and emergent built environment as formal designs and as political forms (Bremner 2004; Judin and Vladislavić 1998; Murray 2008, 2011; Noble 2011). Across the rest of the continent, the 2013 *Afritecture* exhibition and catalog; the ArchiAfrika network's various online and print publications; the anthologies of African writing, theory, and art edited by Edgar Pieterse; and works like Folkers's (2010) *Modern Architecture in Africa* all read new African built forms as serious architecture. Each is an effort to make African forms part of a larger conversation about the role and meaning of the built environment, to understand what might be uniquely local about these forms and how they fit into the global conversation about cities and how we build and inhabit them.

9 Among many analyses of the importance of photography to modern architecture, see for example, Forty (2012), Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow (1993: 111–112), Murphy (2012), Pye (1978: 66), and Zimmerman (2004, 2012).

10 See also Jane Rendell's (2010) useful, though considerably more challenging, *Site-*