

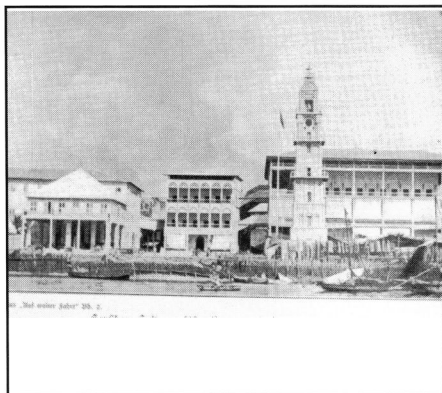
BUILDING GLOBAL BUT MEANING LOCAL: READING SULTAN BARGHASH'S POLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE

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Sub-Saharan Africa's urban forms and architectural history have attracted increasing attention from scholars over the past two decades. An ever-expanding body of literature is emerging that highlights the multiplicity of Africa's built environment. However, due to the historiographical heritage of this scholarship, this history has usually been neatly compartmentalized as either 'traditional'--i.e. 'authentically African,' 'colonial,' and/or 'postcolonial'--i.e. modern. Of course, one is well aware that these are limiting analytical frameworks, yet they still resonate strongly when facing the complex intellectual construct, historical entity and global presence known as 'Africa.' This paper engages these definitions and meanings of African space and place as a concept and historical reality at a moment when many scholars are drawing on the field of diaspora and globalization studies¹ to complicate our notions of what constitutes 'Africa.' I thus turn to questions of architectural patronage and style and the politics of the production of urban space in Stone Town Zanzibar² during the reign of the Busaidi sultan Barghash (r. 1870-1888) in an attempt to begin understanding the intersection between certain practices of self-representation and the material discourse of architecture.

When Barghash came to power in 1870, Zanzibar was already the capital of the Omani Arab Sultanate for three decades and represented an Omani consolidated regional state. Zanzibar was also experiencing an unprecedented economic boom as the centre of an extensive merchant capital economy based on long distance caravan trade from the interior of Africa and plantation slavery on Zanzibar Island. But the legitimacy and stability of Omani rule was also under threat from various European forces. Local patriots and merchants were also at once mercurial allies and competitors, as they were not only intermediaries between different markets and social networks across the Indian Ocean and beyond, but also had the power to legitimize certain claims or political maneuverings. It is from the unstable but promising vantage point that Barghash embarked on the most aggressive building programme Zanzibar had witnessed to date, transforming the entire waterfront of Zanzibar town. Known as the 'The Builder,' Barghash began an ambitious town planning initiative, building new roads, the first railway on the island, a water supply system and a public bath.³

Significantly, his building programmes were a complex synthesis of local sign systems and uses of space and western architectural forms associated with international



imperial expansion and technological innovation. His palaces and administrative centre on the seafront (figure 1), finished in the 1880s, completely obscured the older town. His numerous private residences, like Chukwani palace (figure 2), were in part a departure from local archi-

Fig. 1. Beit al-Sahel on the left, Beit al-Hukm in the centre, and Beit al-Ajaib on the right.

tectural styles and at times imaginative mixtures of various cultural streams. Built in the 1870s and located on the southern promontory of the seafront, no details remain regarding the architect or its interior layout or decorative programme, as is the case with all his residences. But its balconies, corbelled projections, piers and columns, which create as much open and shaded space as possible, employ the architectural vocabulary developed for extending Victorian manners and life styles into tropical territories during the British Empire. Ten years later Marhubi palace (figure 3) was built in a manner that seems a more free verse fusion of various styles. Here the solid space of an Omani Arab crenellated square core is broken up by multilevel extensions-- such as towers, porches and balconies--which extend into the surrounding space. Barghash's architects and designers drew on imperial architectural typologies of the era, which transformed not only European and British Raj Indian metropolises, such as London and Bombay, but also Islamic centres like Cairo and Istanbul.

His most ambitious building was Beit al-Ajaib, or House of Wonders (figure 4), built in the 1880s and can be understood as Barghash's most powerful articulation of a vision of his empire on par with global innovations and styles. The construction alone was unlike anything undertaken in the city. A massive square block with rooms lining the four sides of the building, it has wide and high galleries around the entire building constructed from reinforced concrete slabs, which are supported by cast-iron pillars and balustrades imported from England. Its commanding position facing the harbour and its gleaming white colour dominated the entire cityscape when it was finished.

Barghash also installed a generator, and later on decorated the House with European chandeliers and diverse furnishings, ranging from French chairs and mirrors, Egyptian decorative objects, American clocks and Persian carpets.⁴ The House was paved with black and white marble slabs imported from Europe, and monumental staircases coil up from one floor to another.

Even today the House is celebrated for its sophisticated ornamentation. Scholars have seen direct connections between the House of Wonders and the Crystal Palace in London, which Barghash was very familiar with, having attended functions and perform-

ances there. The Victorian and Indian decorative hybridity of British Raj India is certainly also evident in the decorative details of the House. But it is important to remember that such decorative details as the neo-Gothic stained glass windows and other interior decorative programmes, as well as the clock tower that is so essential to the House today, were not incorporated into its design until after the bombardment of 1896 when the structure was significantly damaged. In fact the original version of the House seems consciously devoid of the more elaborate woodwork of British Raj architectural detailing—which was the popular style patronised by wealthy residents of Zanzibar at the time. Although a purely ceremonial building, in its layout and conception of space, it in part corresponded to local precedents.

For example, originally the verandahs were connected by covered galleries to adjacent domestic palaces (figure 1), which in turn adhered to pre-established local practices. Integral to both Sunni and Ibadi Omani Islam, these galleries were central to providing privacy and seclusion for users of the space. The basic layout and presentation of the House of Wonders in many ways conforms to local conceptions of architectural space and decorum. In fact, rather than based on a British plan, the overly elongated columned outer verandahs are in many ways simply enveloping a core of an austere square building, which shares parallels with the three storey royal residences and administrative structures (figure 5) lining the waterfront and dominating the dense cityscape of Stone Town. Like many of the patrician houses, which were based on Omani precedents and adapted for local use, the flow of rooms and spaces are organized around an internal courtyard

Furthermore, the visual lexicon of the elaborately carved door, long noted as characteristic of Swahili cityscapes, becomes transformed into an ostentatious hybrid Euro-Swahili-Omani-Indian form in the House of Wonders (figure 6). Thirteen such massively carved doors decorate the exterior and interior of the House. The grand and public wooden door, a locally established marker of patrician status and urban refinement, was adapted by European, Omani and Indian immigrants in their own houses and civic building programmes in the nineteenth century. The House of Wonders doors were specifically carved under the patronage of Barghash, who had brought Indian artists to

carve a synthetic style that appropriated Gujarati floriate woodwork in the tympanum, European pseudo baroque Indo-Beaux-Arts column capitals and shafts and Koranic inscriptions. But the stylistic origins of the various parts would have little impact were they not anchored in the



Fig. 2. Chukwani Palace
(Source: National Archives of Zanzibar-NAZ)

framework of local status sign systems.

The Barghash door design was soon copied or elaborated on by other wealthy residents as the wealth and prosperity of local and newly arrived merchants increased. Zanzibar's dense and winding streets were visually and symbolically remapped by an unprecedented increase in the numbers and decorative lavishness of the doors. No matter how simple or traditional the interior of houses and public buildings, the wooden doorways displayed competitive decorative programmes that suggest specific local processes of domesticating and personalising the global interconnectivity of the period in the public cityscape of Zanzibar. The stylistic languages and visual references chosen by patrons can be understood as a highly complex and contradictory process by which allegiances and cultural identities, and of course wealth and power were proclaimed. While the elite, like Sultan Barghash, signalled its globally defined sophistication by 'internationalising' Swahili space, Zanzibar was also firmly defined by local idioms as well. As scholars have already noted, a permanent house was a *de rigueur* sign of local legitimacy within the shifting landscape of local class and prestige negotiations.⁵ A permanent stone built urban center signaled a host of interconnected cultural ideals, which encompass a sense of cosmopolitan refinement, adherence to Islam and some sense of being connected to the Middle East. As noted by Jonathan Glassman, a carefully constructed image of 'difference' was vital to Swahili coast elites precisely because of the constant influx of newcomers to the coastal centers such as Zanzibar; and this 'difference' was most visibly signaled by a permanent stone house.⁶ In fact, the site where the House of Wonders now stands was once occupied by the palace of the Swahili ruling dynasty that the Busaidi dynasty had slowly disenfranchised in the first half of the nineteenth century. Remapping this particular space was therefore not speaking only to the would-be imperial aggressors or international interests who were perhaps the most obvious audience for such a grand landmark. One can therefore begin to understand Barghash's tactics of self-presentation vis a vis local and international allies, competitors and potential enemies.

While scholars always emphasise his exile in India and his enthusiasm for western

technologies and consumer goods, his visit to Cairo and audience with his fellow Muslim sovereign, the Khedive Ismail in 1875 also had a lasting impact on his future construction and conception of his space and place in Zanzibar. For example, under Barghash's patronage many



Fig. 3. Marhubi Palace
(Source: National Archives of
Zanzibar)

Zanzibari scholars of Islam went to Cairo for further studies, and as is well known, in the cultural realm, Barghash introduced Egyptian court music to Zanzibar, sending musicians to train in Cairo as well. Egyptian forms of personal adornment and prestige items also became immensely popular in Zanzibar. Interestingly, Khedive Ismail seemed to have shared similar visions of transforming Cairo's cityscape into a vital imperial and independent city in the face of British incursions. Already in 1863 he had commissioned European architects to design his new palace, known as the Gazira Palace. In collaboration with these architects, Ismail ordered several tons of cast iron decorative facades, pilasters and stairwells - just the way Barghash did for his many projects. Ismail's style

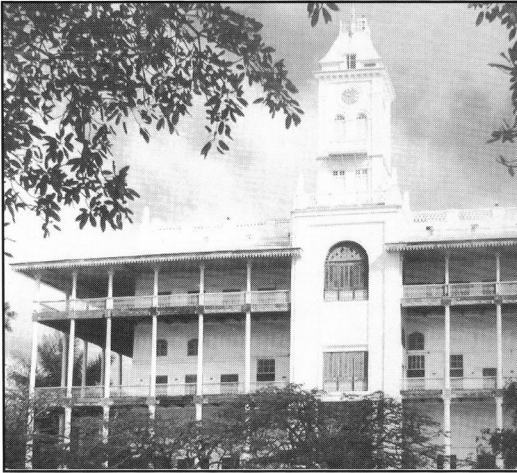
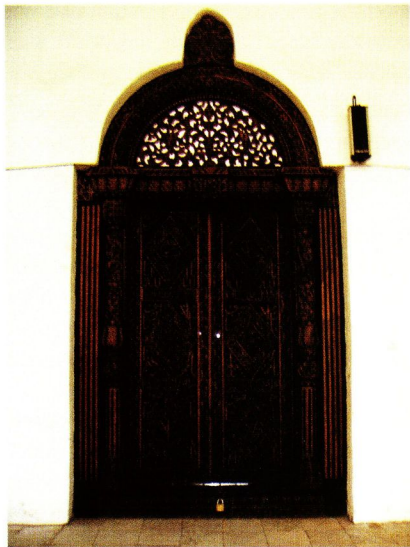


Fig. 4. Clocktower added later
(Source: NAZ)

today is known as neo-Mamluk revival, which already in the nineteenth century was seen as the exemplary and authentically Egyptian. Indicative of western nineteenth century architectural theory, the neo-Mamluk style was celebrated as being both 'modern' and authentically Egyptian because it was firmly based on specific local styles that were retranslated using technologies imported from abroad.⁷ By the time Barghash arrived in Cairo in 1875, Ismail's new palaces and town planning schemes had completely transformed medieval Cairo into what Ismail hoped would be a world city on par with Paris.

This dialogue with the Muslim world was in fact immensely important to Barghash. As documented by Professor Sheriff,⁸ Barghash was actively involved in and a staunch supporter of what is generally called the Ibadi renaissance early during his reign when religious leaders in Oman called for a re-examination of contemporary religious practices. Although it seems that later in life he became less focused on translating Omani Ibadi reforms into everyday practice, he continued to harass and imprison many other-minded clergymen. From this perspective, the most obvious iconographic programme for the House gains new significance. While most commentators have emphasised the Western luxuries imported to built and decorate the House of Wonders, it is in fact the expansive gilded inscriptions on the monumental second and third storey doors that dominate one's experience of the interior. Framed by ornate vegetal engaged columns and baroque and neo-classical decorative flourishes, carefully selected Koranic suras and other prayers and supplications cover the wings of the doors. The beginning of this



programme is the first door one reaches after climbing the stairs to the second floor (figure 6). On one level the inscriptions offer words of welcome and good will to all who enter and deflect any negative intentions from would-be enemies. On another level they function as a dense laying out of the Islamic faith, pairing the sacred ninety-nine names of God with the most widely known suras of the Koran, the *Ayat al- Kursi* and *Surat*

Fig. 5. One of the carved doors with inscriptions in the House of Wonders.

(Source: Prita Meier)

Yaasin, which are often recited after the five daily prayers or when invoking the protection or blessing of God. The declaration of faith and various other duas or prayers of protection also serve as textual and symbolic supports to the main Koranic texts. Injunctions to praise and pray for Prophet Muhammad are interspersed throughout the programme. Statements from the Koran emphasising the essential oneness of God are also repeated over and over on both floors. In fact, read as a complete programme, the texts are evocative reminders of the essential message of the faith, reminding believers of the primacy of God in shaping and directing their daily lives and the role of Prophet Muhammad. Thus, it emphasizes the common bond between Sunni and Ibadi Muslims by stressing the primacy of the Koran and the Sunna, or Prophet's tradition. Furthermore, the entire *Surat*

Fig. 6. Omani-type houses along the sea front
(Source: NAZ)



Yaasin is written on the back of the eight doors on the first and second floors, and one elder recalls that in the past the entire text of the Koran embellished the now white walls of the House. Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Amawy, who as a Sunni scholar was at times patronised by Barghash and at others imprisoned by him, conceptualised this programme.⁹

In fact, for his architectural patronage Barghash was locally celebrated as the Zanzibari version of the famous eighth century caliph Harun Rashid, who was known throughout the Muslim world as the creator of the mythic brilliance of Baghdad - a splendour that still signified the ideals of Islamic governance and a united global Muslim community in the nineteenth century. His legitimacy as a Muslim leader for his Zanzibari subjects must be understood as being essential, for no would-be Western coloniser could claim this. Thus, while a celebration of western technological innovation on one hand, the House of Wonders also firmly and opulently speaks another language to its local audience.

In conclusion, this preliminary paper has attempted to highlight such compelling parallels and dialogues between Barghash and Ismail's use of architecture, and cultural forms more generally, in order to complicate our understanding of the emergence of sites and moments of trans-culturation at the end of the nineteenth century. While scholars have noted how such figures as Barghash reshaped the built environment to counter, resist or emulate the ascendant colonial powers, studies of how such idioms as monumental architectural landmarks also engaged in dialogues that localised international typologies in the physical and conceptual spaces of eastern Africa invite new understandings of these processes. Among other things, from this perspective Zanzibar's position in the wider Islamic world also emerges. Such cultural objects or sites as the House of Wonder therefore can be understood not simply as 'inauthentic'¹⁰ impositions but rather as a physical space and cultural statement visualising and articulating an intense process of re-articulation and appropriation of global designs. Furthermore, a careful reconsideration of these processes of choice - that is, how the endless 'noise' of global products, artefacts, and cultural signifiers was edited, reformulated and integrated to construct a locally coherent and relevant House of Wonders - will allow for a more nuanced understanding of local ideals of being 'cosmopolitan.' Considering the importance of the city-scape in negotiating the expectations or desires of various audiences or users of architectural space, Barghash's House of Wonders can be understood as a literal construction of an emergent local mode of self-description, which is not necessarily tied to such categories as 'colonial,' 'traditional,' and 'modern,' or bound by a single source for imagining a sense of place. This architectural legacy highlights the crosscurrents between Zanzibar, the Middle East, Indian subcontinent, African interior, and Europe, reframing the 'Age of Empire' as a period producing a space and place in Zanzibar when definitions such as 'African,' 'Swahili,' 'Arab,' 'European,' 'Indian,' 'pre-colonial' and 'colonial' are interesting slippages, but cannot fully encompass the imaginaries at work locally.

NOTES:

¹This paper draws on perspectives and theoretical issues discussed by Mark Crinson, *Empire Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge) 1996, Richard Eaton, 'Islamic History as Global History.' In Michael Adas, ed. *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press) 1993. Al Sayyad, Nezar. *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*. London: Ashgate Publishing, 1992. Metcalf, Thomas. *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*. Berkeley University of California Press, 1989. Bozdoʻan, Sibel. *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001. Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine. 'The Process of Urbanization in Africa: From the Origins to the Beginnings of Independence,' *African Studies Review* 34/1 (April 1991) pp. 1-98.

²Two recent studies of the politics of urban planning at work in colonial Zanzibar are Garth Myers, 'Reconstructing Ng'ambo: Town Planning on the Other Side of Zanzibar.' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California), 1993 and William Cunningham Bissell. 'City of Stone, Space of Contestation: Urban Conservation and the Colonial Past in Zanzibar.' (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Chicago), 1999.

³Barghash's projects and palaces are documented in Abdul Sheriff, 'An Outline History of Zanzibar Stone Town,' in Abdul Sheriff, ed. *The History and Conservation of Zanzibar Stone Town*. London: James Currey, 1995. pp. 8-29. and Abdul Sheriff, *Zanzibar Stone Town*. Zanzibar: Gallery Publications, 1998.

⁴For an innovative reading and documentation of late nineteenth century Zanzibari domestic consumer objects and their 'sign-value' see Jeremy Prestholdt, 'East African Consumerism and the Geneologies of Globalization.' Ph.D dissertation, Northwestern University, 2003.

⁵While most Swahili coast scholars always include some mention of the importance of the house for the Swahili elite, Linda Donley-Reid has most thoroughly investigated the social and symbolic significance of stone houses. She argues that the multi-story house of the Swahili elite acts like a 'structuring structure' for life in coastal cities (as this terminology would indicate, her analysis is overly structuralist, not to mention that her focus on the symbolic significance of houses is completely ahistorical). Donley-Reid conceptualises the progression from non-exclusive public spaces to the inner-sanctums of each individual house as the central cultural motif of Swahili society. Thus the physical cityscape is seen as sustaining and validating the hierarchy so essential to the Swahili social system. Her most recent work is 'A Structuring Structure: The Swahili House.' In Susan Kent, ed. *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space: An Interdisciplinary Cross-Cultural Study*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 114-126.

⁶Jonathan Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (London: Heineman, 1995), 32-34.

⁷While beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that the construction of a 'modern' vs. 'traditional' Egypt in the late nineteenth century has engendered a large body of work analysing the production of this binary by both Western and Egyptian cultural workers during this period. But why Khedive Ismail sought to sponsor and patronise a neo-Mamluk style in the context of contemporary theories about what constitutes a valid and vibrant culture in the late nineteenth century is significant to understanding Barghash as well.

⁸Abdul Sherriff, 'Mosques, Merchants and Landowners,' in Abdul Sheriff, ed. *The History and Conservation of Zanzibar Stone Town*. (London: James Currey, 1995).pp. 46-66..

⁹For a discussion of carved doors on the Swahili coast, see Aldrick, Judith. 'The Nineteenth-century Carved Wooden Doors of the East African Coast,' *Azania* 25 (1990) pp. 1-18.

¹⁰It is also important to note that understandings of the House's local relevance have changed over time. Today the House is a key landmark in the local dialogue of what constitutes a 'valid' Zanzibari heritage worth preservation. Aspects of the colonial and recent history of the House of Wonders is discussed in Garth Myers, *Verandahs of Power: Colonialism and Space in Urban Africa* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003)