H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Gilson Miller, Mauro Bertagnin, eds. *The Architecture and Memory of the Minority Quarter in the Muslim Mediterranean City.* Aga Khan Program Book Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Illustrations. 227 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-934510-06-3.

Reviewed by Craig Larkin (Department of Politics)
Published on H-Urban (February, 2012)
Commissioned by Colette Apelian

A Cosmopolitanism Reimagined

New forms and understandings of cosmopolitanism in recent scholarship reflect a melding of approaches and themes typically employed in sociological, political science, and urban studies discourses. For example, Ulf Hannerz, Ulrich Beck, and Peter Burke, among other authors, question essentialist frameworks and assumed dichotomies, such as tradition/modernity, national/ethnic, and religious/secular. They encourage acceptance of cultural hybridity and individual agency. Each inspires complex and dynamic historical narratives, though mostly of Western and modern contexts.[1]

Susan Gilson Miller and Mauro Bertagnin's edited volume, *The Architecture and Memory of the Minority Quarter in the Muslim Mediterranean City*, both follows this trend and fills gaps in the discussion. *Architecture and Memory* includes nuanced explorations of cultural interaction in the minority neighborhoods of Palermo, Trani, Fez, Marrakesh, Tangier, and Istanbul from the medieval era to the nineteenth century. Essays challenge the notion that Islamic cities are composed of exclusive and insular religious enclaves that change little over time. Contributors to *Architecture and Memory* historicize and desegregate the ebbs and flows of communal life by elucidating what one author calls a "multiethnic conviviality" based on porous boundaries, shared spaces, and interconnectedness across religious divides (p. 206). The result is a significant contribution to the discourse on Islamic and Mediterranean cities, albeit focused on one particular minority group, persons of the Jewish faith.

Architecture and Memory is composed of an expansive introduction and six chapters. In the introduction, Miller, a historian, contextualizes the book's essays within issues significant to the Mediterranean minority quarters it covers, including integration, urban agonism, and violent divisions. Chapters are divided into case studies on each city, beginning with the emergence of Palermo's Meschita quarter in the Middle Ages (chap.1) and Trani's Giudecca during the medieval period (chap. 2), the incremental growth of Fez and Marrakesh's Mallâh during the sixteenth century (chaps. 3-4) and Tangier's Beni Ider and Istanbul's Balat district development up until the late nineteenth century (chaps. 5-6). In the first chapter, Arabic literature scholar, William Granara, draws on the tenth-century Arabic chronicles and travelogues of Ibn Hawqal to reconstruct the mixed heterogeneous Meschita quarter of medieval Palermo. In chapter 2, historian Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, architect and urban planner Bertagnin, and Miller turn their attention to the Jewish Giudecca of the southern Italian city of Trani. They rely on Jewish historical archives from yeshivots and state records from Bari and Naples to chart the changing legal status, fiscal obligations, and evolving nature of the Sant'Anna Synagogue until the expulsion of Jews from the city in the early sixteenth century. In chapter 3, Miller, Bertagnin, and Attilio Petruccioli, a scholar of Islamic architecture, investigate how the Jewish enclave (Mallâh) of Fez survived amid changes in its social milieu. The authors create an intimate social history from the chronicles of Jewish elite (Dibre Ha-Yamim), Arab notables (Anîs al-Mutrib), and Fâsî Jewish converts, then use these narratives to retrace the emergence of minority homes, marketplaces, and street networks within Fez. In chapter 4, historian Emily Gottreich uses city descriptions of foreign consuls and local families, among other sources, to show how the Mallâh of Marrakesh gave life to the rest of the city by acting as a "microcosm of … commercial activity" (p. 133). Chapter 5 also addresses a Moroccan context. Miller illuminates the cultural hybridity of Tangier's Beni Ider quarter as recorded in a selection of newspaper articles and indigenous memoirs. She describes a heterogeneous cityscape that was home to diplomatic offices or legations and neighboring syna-

gogues, mosques, and churches. The book ends with historian Karen Leal re-charting the multiethnicity of Istanbul's Balat district, by carefully integrating court records and travelers' accounts with architectural analysis, observations, and interviews with former residents. In so doing, she challenges the institutional nature and essentializing impact of the millet system on daily urban life by evoking "the fluidity of the social makeup of the district and the continual ongoing transformations among the various communities that characterized life in Balat prior to the nineteenth century" (p. 195). Essays are illustrated with a wealth of visual materials, including over fifty color photographs, thirty architectural surveys and sections, and numerous maps, many of which the contributors created.

Some of the great strengths and innovations of *Architecture and Memory* include its authors' multidisciplinary approach to cities, novel use of source material, and attention to everyday life and the passage of time. Historians, architects, and literary theorists draw on historical documentation and contemporary site surveys to deconstruct the material urban fabrics and reconstruct lived minority experiences. Information regarding ancient city walls, gates, markets (*souks*), houses, apartments (*yehudihane*), synagogues, and shrines is scrutinized to reveal conflicting processes of minority assimilation (or "osmosis" [p. 24]) and differentiation. Authors describe subtle shifts in identity and social practices, in addition to larger ruptures, displacements, and change. The result is an empirically rich and sophisticated reading of minority quarters and their micro-histories as reimagined through a disparate array of visual, oral, and written evidence.

Not only do these diverse ethnographic accounts explore Jewish, Christian, and Muslim coexistence and integration/segregation within bounded spaces and times, but they also contain analysis of how minority quarters functioned as an "epicentre." Contributors envision this epicenter as "a series of concentric circles that linked its inhabitants spatially and experientially to the city, the territory, and the greater region" (p. 14). The authors succeed in capturing how the rise and fall of minority quarters are implicated within complex networks of "dependencies, obligations and avoidances," involving local contests over taxation, commerce, and land ownership; regional interventions, such as religious persecutions and forced expulsions; and the rise of nation-states and colonial projects (p. 84). The concerted focus on the urban morphology of minority spaces, probing religious sites as nodal centers; the construction of material and immaterial boundaries; and dynamic negotiation of private and public space is not merely of historic interest but also of contemporary value to sociologists and urbanists concerned with the effects of urban division–whether in the form of gated communities, migrant neighborhoods, or public "sink" estates.

While *Architecture and Memory* must be commended for its sensitive and rigorous examination of Jewish quarters within Moroccan and Italian towns, one wonders why the authors halted there given the reference to minority quarters and Mediterranean cities in the title. True, Miller acknowledges the limitations in her introduction. However, the inclusion of Levantine or Turkish metropoles, in addition to Armenian and Greek minorities, for example, would have added a further breadth and depth to the historic analysis. It would also have enabled a useful comparison between how Jewish and Christian communities negotiated their *dhimmi* (minority) status in their daily urban lives.

A second more fundamental weakness is that the rich empirical research is not always matched by sufficient theoretical analysis. This is especially apparent in the chapters on Palermo, Trani, and Marrakesh, which offer fascinating syntheses of historical sources, but lack distinct frameworks with which authors might understand and dissect the urban morphology in relation to contemporary and previous publications on their topics. Miller attempts to address this imbalance in her study of Tangier, when she assesses the "Theorizing of Multiethnic Quarters" in modernist and postcolonial discourses. However, not only is her analysis too brief at only two pages long, but it also makes the lack of similar contexualization in other chapters all the more visible.

Some readers may also be disappointed by contributors not problematizing the act of remembering, including the writing of narratives, such as those in *Architecture and Memory.* Conserving built environments is also underexplored as a concept. Evoking the presence of Jewish populations in Islamic cities arguably offers an important view of inclusiveness in the premodern Italian and Moroccan contexts, as noted in the introduction. Yet contributors to *Architecture and Memory* seemingly forget how memory can be a heavily contested terrain subject to nostalgia, politicization, and international heritage concerns. Memory can also be manipulated to secure economic investment and bolster nationalist agendas especially when enshrined and displayed through urban restoration and architectural preservation. A case in point is the 1990s restoration of a number of traditional *riads* and the Ibn Danan Synagogue within the Fez Mallâh, a project jointly conceived, funded, and executed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, and the Moroccan government. In another publication, Joomi M. Lee challenges whether such restoration projects actually benefit Fez's local residents and the few remaining Jewish families or rather serve foreign investors and Western tourists, encouraging further socio-spatial exclusion while celebrating Fez's cosmopolitan past.[2] More specifically, the organizers left unanswered questions regarding how vestiges of minority presence can and should be remembered today and by whom. That is, who should be given the authority to shape mnemonic narratives and their preservation within city fabrics and urban imaginaries? Unfortunately, contributors to *Architecture and Memory* stop short in grappling with the thorny issues of remembering and documentation in textual and architectural forms, in addition to the roles and responsibilities of national governments and world heritage agencies.

In summary, this book remains a fascinating and perceptive account of an understudied and overgeneralized subject that should be of interest to architects, urbanists, and scholars of North African and Middle Eastern history, anthropology, urban studies, and political science. In providing original and complex historical readings of the Muslim Mediterranean and its built environment through the lens of minority quarters, *Architecture and Memory* offers insights into the intersection of identity, urban fabric, and social life, in addition to the overlapping forces of cosmopolitanism and homogeneity.

Notes

[1]. See Ulf Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (1990): 237-251; Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2009); and Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[2]. See Joomi M. Lee, "Riad Fever: Heritage Tourism, Urban Renewal and the Medina Property Boom in Old Cities of Morocco," *E-Review of Tourism Research*, 6, no. 4 (2008): 66-78, http://ertr.tamu.edu/attachments/169_a-6-4-1.pdf.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Craig Larkin. Review of Miller, Susan Gilson; Bertagnin, Mauro, eds., *The Architecture and Memory of the Minority Quarter in the Muslim Mediterranean City.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33810

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.