

Mains, Daniel. 2019. *Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 240 pp. Pb.: \$25.95. ISBN: 9781478005377.

Book review by

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The geopolitical conflict around Ethiopia's construction of one of the largest hydroelectric dams in the world—the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam—has been at the forefront of global news in recent years. In *Under Construction*, Daniel Mains delves under the surface of large-scale infrastructural projects in Ethiopia to reveal the complexity of achieving “development” in practice. Ethiopia, one of the world's fastest-growing economies, also has one of the highest rates of public investment in infrastructure in the world (p. 13). Literally translated from Amharic as the “foundation for development”, infrastructure (*meseret limat*) has been key to stimulating promises of development and hopes for a brighter future. Focusing on construction as both an analytical category and a methodological tool to chart and understand urban change, Mains' book explores how people, materials, finance, and the state collide in the shared but messy process of building mobility and modernity.

The focus on construction brings a compelling contribution to the growing scholarship on infrastructure and urban studies. Shifting our gaze to the temporality and lived experience of construction work and to the affective dimension of infrastructures (Chapter Three), the book asks: ‘What does it mean to live in a time of construction?’ (p. 7). Through a selection of case studies ranging from hydroelectric dams (Chapter One) to asphalt (Chapter Two) and cobblestone roads (Chapter Five) set between the cities of Jimma and Hawassa, the book focuses on the people that occupy the temporary and

contested space of the construction zone, including construction workers, urban residents, government administrators and officials, shop owners, and *bajaj* (public taxis) drivers.

This subject is particularly well conveyed in Chapters Two and Five, which draw most heavily on ethnography to reveal construction as a process that builds roads and material structures, as well as people, communities, and dreams. As projects that serve a collective and public function, infrastructures are ideally suited to explore the intersection of personal and collective trajectories. As Mains shows, infrastructure projects provide desirable connections but also act as sites of tensions and conflicts. Infrastructure, such as new roads, dams, and public transport, provide much-needed collective benefits but entail individual losses and sacrifices (pp. 85; 125).

In the city of Hawassa (Chapter Two), the construction of an asphalt road brings about new business opportunities but also displaces existing residents to the edge of the city, in a new resettlement site lacking electricity and running water (p. 85). If roads connect as much as they disconnect, Mains argues that construction builds at the same time as it destroys: the displacement of residents compromised established community ties and important place-based associations (such as *ider*, funeral associations and *ikub*, voluntary savings association) that formed an integral part of residents' social networks and livelihoods.

By contrast, in the city of Jimma (Chapter Five), cobblestone roads create new job opportunities, forms of labour, and workers' associations. In 2007, the Ethiopian state embarked on the large-scale building of cobblestone roads in urban areas as a way of providing much-needed jobs (for young men in particular) and solving the issue of youth unemployment. In contrast to other construction projects largely financed by joint private-public investment, cobblestone road workers are organised into cooperatives that share the profits from collective labour. Mains argues that this distinctive organisation of labour is partly enabled by the material qualities of cobblestone itself. Whereas asphalt's material qualities of "speed" and "regularity" exclude informal settlements and livelihoods and often lead to their displacement (Chapter 2), cobblestone is labour-intensive, requiring quarrying, transport, chiselling and setting of the stones (p. 160). Focusing on the "vital materiality" of cobblestone, Mains argues, offers a way of thinking about construction as a process of producing work (p. 153), creating possibilities for social change as much as concrete infrastructure and buildings.

For young men whose aspirations of social maturation had long been thwarted by a lack of economic opportunities, cobblestone offered a path to dignity, maturity, and respect;

construction became a significant way to rekindle and fulfil projects associated with masculinity and adulthood marrying, having children, supporting relatives, and establishing a business. Nevertheless, as with all construction projects, this potential for financial independence and personal change was compromised by the irregular and temporary nature of work contracts. Like all “infrastructural labour”, Mains concludes (p. 166), construction work is uncertain, precarious, and (by its nature) temporary. Whilst infrastructural development is meant to achieve tangible and long-lasting change for its users, the lives of those who work to build them are often constrained by the limited lifespan of construction.

Mains convincingly demonstrates that infrastructure is crucial to understanding the complex nature of the state in contemporary urban Africa. A fascinating aspect of infrastructural governance in post-socialist Ethiopia that could have been more prominent in the book concerns the national politics of funding for infrastructure projects. As Mains notes at various points (pp. 35-36, 56-57, 98-99), citizens, civil servants and private businesses are strongly pressured to donate money and part of their salaries and profits to fund new roads and dams. Indeed, a large portion of the funding for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Chapter One) was raised from the sale of bonds sold exclusively to Ethiopians and the Ethiopian diaspora (p. 183). Infrastructure as a national project works along a logic of reciprocal exchange, national participation, and “sacrifice” (p. 94) between citizens and the state. Through these more-or-less voluntary donations, citizens and the state ‘[collaborate] on a shared vision of the future’ (p. 100), suggesting a participatory ideal of infrastructural governance that seems absolutely crucial for understanding the politics of the state in contemporary urban Ethiopia, and a far more compelling take on infrastructural politics than a discussion on affect affords (Chapter Three).

Offering a much-needed ethnographic investigation into the lives, livelihoods and labour relations that inhabit construction work in contemporary urban Africa, *Under Construction* contributes significantly to current debates and scholarship in urban studies, infrastructure, international development, and African Studies.