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Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Architecture and Urbanism in the French Atlantic Empire: State, Church, and Society, 1604-1830*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 640 pp. Notes, references, glossary, timeline, and index. \$85.00 CAD (cl). ISBN 9780773553149.

Review by Benjamin Steiner, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.

This magistral work on architecture and urbanism in the early modern French Atlantic empire stands out as an invaluable contribution to our understanding of both global art history as well as colonial history in general. Its author is a renowned specialist in Baroque art and architecture who has published extensively on the history of the Jesuit order and has presented studies, similar to this reviewed volume, on colonial architecture and art in Latin America. More recently, Bailey has written a smaller study on the postcolonial building project of the palace of Sans-Souci in Haiti (ca. 1806-1813) that already serves as an introduction to the history of architecture in the former French colonial empire.<sup>[1]</sup> The book reviewed here profits from this scholarly experience, both in terms of a general understanding of art historical continuities and in terms of the dynamics of early modern colonial empires.

The building history of the early modern French empire has long remained understudied. As Bailey points out in his instructive introduction, this can be explained in part by the disappearance of most of its buildings in the former colonies in North America, the Caribbean, West Africa, and the Indian Ocean World. Many architectural and urban structures have been dismantled over time, destroyed by war, modern city planning, or rebuilt during the second French colonial empire in modern times (ca. 1815-1960). Thus, several layers hide what little remains of the early modern period in places like Québec City, Montreal, New Orleans, Port-au-Prince, Kourou in Guiana, or Saint-Louis in Senegal. But there are many differences that distinguish the former colonies of the early modern French empire from each other in the present global order. While Québec and Louisiana stand out as affluent societies with a strong sense of national and historical identity, other postcolonial societies inhabit precarious states, such as Haiti, which does not possess the same resources to devote to historical memory projects. Nation-states that gained independence from the French colonial empire in the 1960s, like Senegal, lack large resources for academic historiographical research, but nonetheless have invested considerable sums to commemorate national independence from France, for example, the impressive though controversial African Renaissance Monument built 2010 in Dakar. Some colonies, like Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Cayenne, never left the colonial realm and remain today as French territories—albeit as overseas departments on equal terms with metropolitan polities.

In this sense, it is not surprising that the author of this volume originates in one of the wealthiest postcolonial societies of the former French empire: Bailey is a professor and holds a chair in Southern Baroque Art at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. The sumptuous volume is published by the prestigious McGill-Queen's University Press. The exceptional quality of the book, its thick, glossy paper, the beautiful reproductions of images, paintings, maps, and plans present an opulence that only a thriving scholarly publishing culture can procure. Also, the amount of research that has been invested in collecting the fascinating material from archives across the Atlantic world, not only the metropolitan archives in Paris, Vincennes, and Aix-en-Provence, but also in the former colonies, and, not least, the access to private collections is a staggering proof of both privilege and ingenious scholarly accomplishment.

Bailey is aware of the advantaged position he holds as a Western scholar and reflects on the pitfalls historians often encounter while engaging with colonial history. First, he issues a warning that the memory of the early modern French empire in Canada and the United States is often held alive through "ethnic pride, tourism, and scholarship" that "frequently romanticized" its own colonial past (p. 3). Special emphasis is put on the notion that this book "is not meant as a *celebration* of colonial architecture or of French civilization overseas" (p. 13). Instead, he sees the French Atlantic empire "as one of the most ruthless and oppressive regimes in the Americas," having imposed metropolitan goals "upon places where the French had no right to be and upon peoples whom the French treated often with cruelty, neglect, and disrespect" (p. 13). He also recalls the violence and crimes against African peoples in the slave trade and through the system of agricultural slave labor. What Bailey, however, does not reflect upon is how his Canadian vantage point influences his own research both at home and abroad in places like Haiti, Senegal, or, in fact, the former mother country France that holds most of the archival material. It would be interesting to read about how indigenous scholars explore the past of this colonial empire, access material, information, sometimes through oral history, linguistics, archaeological excavations, and local narratives to understand this fragmented history.

Bailey divides his book into seventeen chapters, and it is necessary to give a quick overview of each of them before addressing some issues of critical importance for the study of colonial history. After an introduction, the second chapter starts with a historical overview of the French empire, focusing on its proneness to utopian fantasies, economic and financial fallacies like the failed scheme of the Louisiana bubble in 1720, and a bankruptcy case involving the Jesuit order in Martinique. He then turns to colonial church history, where he provides insights into the comparably weak role of the church in stabilizing the French empire. In the third chapter, Amerindian influence on French architecture is analyzed, resulting in the finding that the French were keeping to their own building techniques more than, for example, the Spanish did in their empire. The French held on to ambitious and grandiose city planning projects and even erected, next to rows of thatch roofed barracks, an equestrian statue of Louis XV on the Place Royale in Kourou, Guiana. The bronze monument would have cost 150,000 *livres tournois*, "a monumental extravagance in a colony which would spiral into catastrophic debt a mere three months later" (p. 87).

The following chapters concentrate on the agents responsible for the building, constructing, and planning of architecture in the French empire. Here, the book presents its most original discoveries about agency in colonial history. In order to shed light on African slaves and free people of color (*gens de couleur*), Bailey dug through notarial archives and found an impressive amount of detailed information on African carpenters, masons, metalworkers, joiners, and artisan

workshops in the Antilles. The picture remains full of blank spaces but indeed constitutes “the first study of slave builders,” a prosopographic microstudy that produces names, ages, gender, and expertise of African individuals in captivity (p. 94). In chapter five, information is presented on individual lives of the more fortunate free people of color, helping “to reconstruct much more about the personalities, training, social and family life, ethnic and cultural backgrounds—and even passions and goals—than is possible for the slave communities” (p. 106). In chapters six and seven, Bailey turns to white civilian architects, mostly responsible for the construction of private homes and colonial churches, and then to royal engineer architects. Some of the latter were highly educated individuals that pursued careers in metropolitan France but quite often had to spend time overseas to direct colonial building projects. Royal engineer architects were often influenced by Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban’s (1633-1704) theories of Cartesian architectural idealism, also present in Bernard de Forest de Bélidor’s *La science des ingénieurs* (1729), helping to style colonial architecture as a French brand, reflecting, for example, the *grand goût* of Louis XIV.

In chapters eight and nine, Bailey uses the multitude of maps and vistas that give a bird’s-eye view of French colonial cities and buildings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In jumping back and forth from metropole to colony, he develops a gridwork of architectural connections and influences in the French empire. Chapter eight shows how the urban idealism in France of the seventeenth century is transposed to the colonies. Ideal squares in France and especially Paris are adapted, sometimes changed from rectangular to round forms, like an anonymous author who proposed in a manuscript dedicated to Richelieu that a circular layout of Paris would better serve as a microcosm of the realm and of the yet-to-be-conquered “Empire françois” or “Galliarum Imperium” (p. 182). Bailey points out that “by using a language of empire the author shows that French philosophers were testing out ideas about imperialism at home before they applied them in any systematic way to France’s overseas possessions” (p. 182).

Chapter ten offers a change of perspective. Instead of viewing ideal cities from above, Bailey takes the reader on a walk with him through the urban landscapes of the French empire. City gates, for example, sometimes mimicking the arches of Ancient Rome and the modern ones in Paris, but rarely completed in full, are impressive examples of the underlying triumphant spirit that “belied the precariousness of actual French power” (p. 267). Hydraulics are another example of this ambition, water works with fountains in city squares crowned with royal insignias, such as fleurs-de-lys or dolphins. It is noteworthy that Bailey reproduces a rare watercolored view from 1790 of the Place Montarcher with fountain and the municipal theatre in the city of Cap François in Saint-Domingue, preserved in a private collection and hitherto unpublished. Chapter eleven focuses on colonial gardens, especially in West Africa, on Gorée Island and in Ouidah, a port city on the coast of Guinea, that saw only a very short French interludium. They represent geometric ideals, but also the necessity to test botanical growth and acclimatization, being “part of a global chain of scientific nurseries meant to receive, grow, and dispatch exotic plants from and to other colonies” (p. 316).

In chapters twelve and thirteen, secular architecture before and after the Seven Years’ War is further scrutinized. We see the emergence of a neoclassical style in government buildings that replaced the former seigneurial castle or medieval hall. Chapter fourteen takes a closer look at colonial church architecture, and chapter fifteen looks at Italianate façades in clerical architecture in Québec, in Martinique, and in Saint-Louis, Senegal, where the only gothic style church in the French empire still stands today. The last chapter before the epilogue addresses vernacular traditions: the slave hut in the Antilles, for instance, a remnant of Amerindian architecture, but

also West African building techniques in America. A discussion of new hypotheses about the origins of the open gallery as a specific feature in French colonial architecture in America and the famous façade with double staircase of the Maison Pépin on Gorée Island in Senegal closes this overview.

Bailey's definitive account of French Atlantic colonial architecture provides a comprehensive, almost exhaustive catalogue of the aesthetics and functions of architecture and urbanism in a colonial empire with a heritage so far only studied in part by historians and art historians. On a further note, Bailey addresses some issues that concern the general history of early modern empires, too, and deserve a short comment. Following the works of Chandra Mukerji and David Bitterling (whose last name is misspelled throughout the book), he departs from the premise that architecture is an extension of political ideas. Since the administration of Jean-Baptiste Colbert under Louis XIV, France became the capital of avant-garde architecture, with Colbert as head of architecture and of the royal government. Based on Bailey's reading of Mukerji, French architectural style projected "power, stability, and legitimacy within and outside France as it was about beauty" (p. 8). An expression of this connection was the *ceinture de fer*, the iron belt of fortified cities and castles that enclosed the territory of France in its ideal hexagonal form, or, using a term Bitterling proposed, in a "pré carré" (i.e., a "square meadow" in a fortification work), an expression used by Vauban to describe France as an organic territorial entity. This Cartesian logic as a *marque française* of colonial architecture appears all over the French empire—a correlation that served as inspiration to write this book. For Bailey, it seems on the one hand that the "Colbertian revolution in architecture" also created a new kind of empire that saw colonies as an extension of the French *pré carré*—an ideal of empire that proved successful, since people were impressed by its design, appearance, and its alleged strength (p. 6). It thus could serve as a model for a future language of imperial architecture. On the other hand, however, Bailey also disagrees with such an interpretation. The French empire, he states, turned out as a failure, "poorly organized, hopelessly unrealistic," rather an empire of ink and paper, more of imagination than one of reality: "this illusion of a colonial pré carré," he writes, "would vanish like smoke" (p. 33).

Is this not a contradiction? The content of the book itself gives a vast amount of evidence to support the claim that the French empire was a product of an epistemic power that architecture could translate into a material reality. The plans, maps, and images French architects, engineers, and cartographers produced helped to impress the idea of empire in the minds of their contemporaries; they created, to borrow an expression Benjamin Schmidt coined for the Dutch colonial empire, an "empire of geography."<sup>[2]</sup> What distinguishes the French empire from being a mere virtual expression of ideals and illusions is the fact that plans were continually put to realization. It is one of the strongest arguments of Bailey's book that the construction of buildings and cities was executed by a vast working force, consisting of African slaves, *gens de couleurs*, white *corvées* and indentured servants, put to work by the colonial administration under the guidance of royal engineer architects. This connection between planning and realization seems to fall short when one dismisses the whole process of empire building as nothing more than an illusion or a failure.

Bailey argues very convincingly that French colonial architecture was much indebted to metropolitan ideas and models. It is thus a centrist approach that seems most fitting to his interpretation of empire. There is African agency, Amerindian influence, and a hybrid element in French colonial architecture represented by the *gens de couleur* working in construction in the Antilles. But in Bailey's account, this evidence does not seem to be strong enough to refute the

centrist model that argues, contradictorily, that the French empire was a failed result of an imposition of goals and ideals upon other people and places. One wonders why the evidence of non-French agency does not invite the author to a revision of the centrist model, in favor of, for example, a polycentric or decentered model of the French empire. Furthermore, one could argue that Bailey's omission of material culture in colonial urban architecture is a consequence of adhering to a centrist model of empire. Most of the material to build colonial cities and monuments had to be taken from the locales in the Americas or Africa. Only in the early phases of French colonialism, and later on at a few exceptional occasions, building material such as timber, cut stones, and tools had to be imported from metropolitan France to the colonies. Bailey does not study the material side of the colonial building effort more closely and thus leaves an important aspect of local appearance and distinctiveness unnoticed.

This review closes with two observations on space and time. The book does not adhere to a chronological structure. Therefore, Bailey avoids strong claims about a possible transformation of French colonial architecture and urbanism that could have occurred over the two hundred years from ca. 1600 to 1800. He mentions two major historical turning points: the French involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and the epic confrontation between France and its rival Great Britain. It remains unclear, however, how this historical background influences changes or transformations in colonial architecture. This might be due to the (otherwise very reasonable) omission of French fortification architecture in the colonies. The construction of the fortified city of Louisbourg, for example, one of the costliest of all the French building projects, was necessitated by the growing aggression and military built-up between the two superpowers during the eighteenth century. A lot of resources had been diverted to military architecture in these years while the consequences for civilian building activities are only partially understood. African slaves from plantations, for instance, were commandeered to work on fortifications, thus weakening the plantation economy. Bailey mentions these struggles between plantation owners and engineer architects but does not elaborate in view to larger shifts in the historical process of colonial building activity.

Next to these questions of temporality there is the issue of dividing the French colonial space in two parts. One part is the French Atlantic empire with its dependencies in Canada, the Antilles, and West Africa, the other the colonial plantation islands and cities in the world of the Indian Ocean. In theory, these spaces were distinct since the navigational routes to the Atlantic and to Asia were two very different enterprises, especially since the latter route required more resources. In early modern French administrative practice, however, colonial possessions in the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans were not two isolated entities. Bailey does not address colonial architecture and urbanism in India, the Ile de Bourbon, or the Ile de France. Whatever his arguments for this division are, Bailey is far from ignorant about this part of the French colonial empire. A second volume, *The Architecture of Empire: France in India and Southeast Asia, 1664-1962*, was issued by the author with the same publisher in 2022, thus extending both the spatial and temporal scope significantly. As one can only expect a continuation of the brilliant account the author has unfolded until now, both volumes will become the standard reference for the history of French colonial architecture for years to come.

## NOTES

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[1] Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Der Palast von Sans-Souci in Milot, Haiti (ca. 1806-1813): Das vergessene Potsdam im Regenwald = The Palace of Sans-Souci in Milot, Haiti (ca. 1806-1813): The Untold Story of the Potsdam of the Rainforest* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2017).

[2] Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 10.

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