

The Masons of Djenné.* Trevor H. J. Marchand. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 376 pp.

Reviewed by Ronald Rael

The city of Djenné, on the banks of the Bani river, is one of the oldest cities in Sub-Saharan Africa and is historically well known as a center for education, trade, and commerce, for its ethnic diversity, and for a mosque that ranks as one of the most magnificent works of architecture in the world. The city's beauty has also attracted western tourists and scholars to this UNESCO world heritage site. The dynamic character of Djenné is reflected in the mud architecture that comprises its urban fabric. Literally, the surface of the city is constantly evolving as rains wash away the buildings' fragile mud plaster coat each year, only to be re-applied by masons each season—creating a ongoing and direct relationship between the architecture and the builders. While this fantastic architecture is well documented, the builders of this city are less well studied, which is what makes this book an important contribution to the increasing interest in the study of earthen architecture and the people who inhabit them.

The Masons of Djenné delves into the intimate and complex relationship of masters, apprentices, and laborers who grapple with the tensions between tradition and modernity as they attempt to reconcile materials, religions, culture, business, and craft. Trevor H. J. Marchand took on the physically challenging task of understanding the masons' work, lives, and knowledge by volunteering, over the course of several years, as a laborer cum apprentice—working side-by-side with the masons on the construction of several buildings. Through this experience, he earned the respect of the masons, apprentices, laborers, and their families, allowing him to reveal the subtleties and complexity of the art of building with earth, something that one could not acquire through mere observation.

Appropriately, the book is written as a biography, containing first-hand experiences and interviews. Marchand divides it into two parts. The first half is chiefly dedicated to the construction of a mud brick house for a Dutch client on the periphery of Djenné. The author guides the reader from the client discussions, hiring of building crews, and sourcing of materials, to the customs, traditions, and beliefs related to the supernatural, and finally to the construction of the foundations, walls, and ceilings. The second half of the book introduces other masons and their projects and delves deeper into the formal and informal relationships between workers in a crew and masons within the city, detailing the mason's artistry and craft. After completing the first half of the book, one might think that the close examination of a single building crew on a single project was limiting, and that the book might be better titled "A Mason of Djenné." However, in the second part it becomes clear that the intimate understanding of a single building crew can allow a reader to better understand the broader cultural relationships that exist within a crew and between the network of masons within the city.

Marchand's decision to select a construction project for a Dutch client that lies outside of the historic fabric of the city may leave some readers wondering if this is a misrepresentation of the

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traditions of building construction in Djenné. But the book does not romanticize these practices. Instead, it presents an account of masons adapting to increasing demands for western and industrial materials such as concrete and tile, evolving practices such as reading plans, and peculiar spatial arrangements demanded by western clients, making this book an important window into how Djenné transitions from the local to the global. Because the book is written by an architect, one might expect the book to contain more detailed drawings and diagrams than it does, and the photo documentation could have paid more attention to the building process and to emerging forms, typologies, tools, materials, and styles—offering a visual accompaniment to the book's useful glossary that reveals Djenné's linguistic richness. Nonetheless, the engaging and detailed descriptions throughout the book are compensation.

Whereas Jean-Louis Bourgeois, Carollee Pelos, and Basil Davidson's *Spectacular Vernacular: The Adobe Tradition* (1989) and Jean-Paul Bourdier and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *African Spaces: Designs for Living in Upper Volta* (1985) set new standards for photographic and graphic presentations of African buildings, Marchand's physical dedication to the back-breaking and tedious labors of earth construction is unparalleled. It allowed him to gain insight into the lives and minds of the builders of this great city. The complex and vast number of topics Marchand attempts to distill (ethnicity, religion, cultural hierarchy, tradition, industrialization, modernity, and language) are worthy of a dissertation in and of themselves, but Marchand synthesizes them lucidly, weaving a story of a society in flux as seen through the lens of the day-to-day activities of the mason. The banal tasks of mixing mud mortar, passing bricks, and climbing up and down hand-made wooden ladders evoke much greater meaning when we understand the interpersonal, cultural, historical, and linguistic relationships that are being constructed at the same time as the humble mud structures.

References Cited

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Ronald Rael is an Assistant Professor of Architecture in the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley. His research examines the convergence of digital, industrial, and non-industrial approaches to making architecture. He is the author of Earth Architecture (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).