Stephen Stuempfle, *Port of Spain: The Construction of a Caribbean City, 1888–1962*.

Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2018. 465 pp. (Paper US\$ 80.00)

When you think of a city, it's usually physical structures that come to mind: the New York skyline and Central Park, the boulevards and Eiffel Tower of Paris, Rio's Christ the Redeemer or even its favelas. So too Stephen Stuempfle's hefty *Port of Spain: The Construction of a Caribbean City, 1888–1962* tells the history of Trinidad and Tobago's capital, through its buildings and neighborhoods, as they are shaped by the push and pull of political, economic, or cultural conflict from "the height of British colonialism ... through the independence of Trinidad and Tobago in 1962" (p. 1).

From colonialism to independence, Stuempfle's narrative traces the growth of the city through the impact of Trinidadian nationalism, an expansion of his previous and equally detailed *The Steelband Movement: Forging of a National Art Form* (1995). Although the nationalism that pushes *Port of Spain's* narrative briskly along is more than political, he starts *after* the 1882 "Canboulay Riots," when Trinidad's postemancipation conflicts and shifting alliances between the British governing class, the French upper class, and the African lower class wore a cultural guise.

Focusing on the built landscape, Part 1, "The Cocoa Boom Era, 1888–1920," treads lightly over the reactionary abolition in 1898 of the forum for local politics, the city's Borough Council. Instead, Stuempfle pays more attention to the 1903 Water Riots, when nationalist resentment with official high-handedness exploded into affray and the Red House, seat of Crown Colony government, was gutted. More constructively, the wealth of that period's economic boom funded many of the most well-known of the large planter's homes, including the eclectic and eccentric "Magnificent Seven" that line the West of the city's spectacular Queen's Park Savannah.

Parts Two and Three, "The Interwar Era, 1920–1940" and "World War II and the Postwar Years, 1940–1962," cover the rise of the working class and the middle-class nationalists respectively. The interwar period saw its share of new buildings, both official and private, such as the Treasury Building and the many cinemas sprinkled throughout the city. But the material developments emphasized in this period were the squalid barrack apartments that housed the urban working class.

World War II brought tens of thousands of American soldiers to bases outside Port of Spain, and they in turn brought money to the city's nightclubs and brothels. The narrative then follows the nationalist movement that carried the country to independence in 1962, and highlights the impact it had on the cityscape. Those were times of optimism bordering on naivety. For instance,

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© KIM JOHNSON, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09303014

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC 4.0 License.

Downloaded from Brill.com 04/26/2023 10:53:09AM
via free access

the Chase Manhattan Bank on Independence Square, whose façade consisted entirely of plate glass, was intended to “create a sense of transparency ... and thus enabled the public to view all operations inside, even the prominently displayed vault” (p. 334).

Other moments capture the anarchic Trinidadian response to these novelties, such as when the new town hall was opened in October 1961 with a pageant focused on the city’s history planned for the citizenry in Woodford Square in front of the new building. “However, when a large crowd in the square stampeded the stage and refused to make room for VIPs in a reserved seating area, the event was called off” (pp. 337–38). This tiny detail hints at an alternative approach to Port of Spain’s history, treating it as a conflict between a highly centralized government and a riotous, anarchic citizenry, both of which found expression in the buildings that were built and those that were destroyed.

Thus, for instance, Port of Spain’s neat grid of roads can be contrasted with the layout of roads in Kingston, which are as tangled as London’s. Jamaican landowners were too powerful for planners to bisect their properties, whereas Trinidad and Tobago always had a powerful state, both as a colony and an independent nation. Consequently, Port of Spain’s roads were neatly planned, except for those in Laventille, the slum at the east of the city. Like Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, that rugged, precipitous district, settled by ex-slaves, free Africans, squatters, and illegal immigrants, lacked rational planning, and grew a labyrinthine road network as impenetrable to outsiders as any medieval city.

That is not a criticism of Steumpfle’s work, however. His study unearths the previously unresearched work of the politicians, planners, architects, engineers and builders who created the city’s material structures. On those solid foundations many follow-up studies might explore the more obscure nooks and crannies of the city’s past and present.

Kim Johnson

The Carnival Institute of Trinidad & Tobago, Port of Spain

eshu55@gmail.com