

The Suburban Frontier: Middle-Class Construction in Dar es Salaam

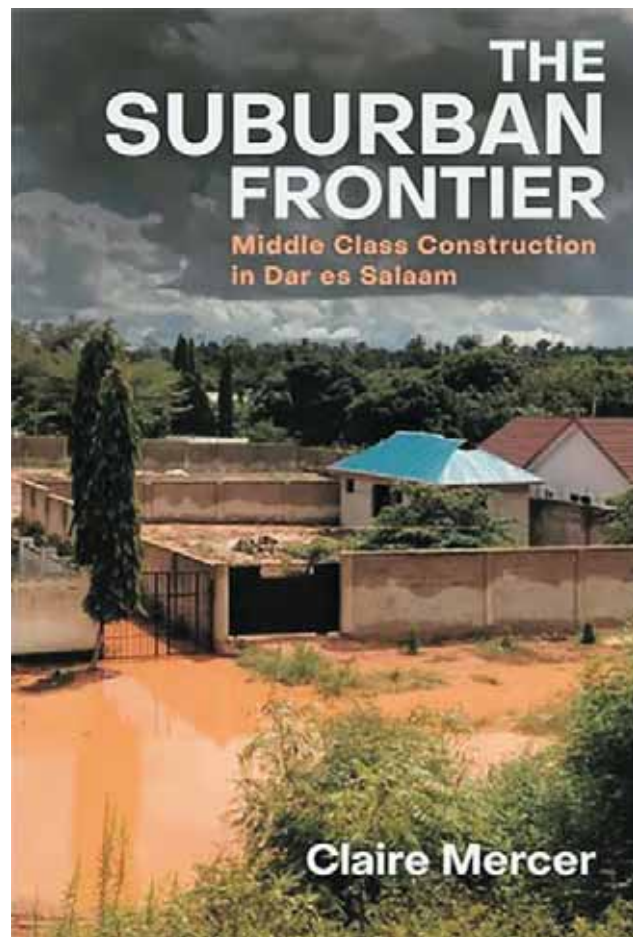
Claire Mercer

Reviewed by Duane Ebesu*

BOOK REVIEW

Claire Mercer's *The Suburban Frontier: Middle-Class Construction in Dar es Salaam* is a significant contribution to the study of urban transformation, social mobility, and middle-class identity within the context of African urbanization. As a sensitive combination of historical analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and theoretical reflection, Mercer challenges understandings of how urban spaces come into being and how class identities are forged on the peripheries of rapidly growing cities. Based in Dar es Salaam's suburban zones, focused largely on Salasala, Mercer forms a compelling account of aspirations, uncertainty, and precariousness within an emergent middle class in Tanzania. It is here that her central argument that middle-class status is both a process of becoming and an achieved state becomes truly original. It critically engages with Mercer's perceptions on property-making, architectural aesthetics, gender dynamics, and the colonial legacy that still characterizes and shapes urban landscapes within Tanzania.

What underpins Mercer's argument is the suggestion that suburbanization in Dar es Salaam is a social, *not just physical* process. The book argues that Tanzania's middle classes are actively fashioning their identities through property ownership, home-building projects, and lifestyle choices all of which become realized in its suburban frontier. It is not only a site for settlement, but also the social terrain on which respectability, status, and modernity become contested, as well as affirmed. By ethnographically engaging with suburban residents usually those with no formal land titles. Mercer unravels how land acquisition and house-building activities are integrally constrained to class formation. In this manner, the suburban frontier becomes a site of opportunity where



residents pursue upward mobility, but also a place of vulnerability marked by legal uncertainties, land disputes, and infrastructural deficiencies.

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Mercer's concept of urbanization deviates from more traditional models that rely on large property developments led by multinational corporations or state-led urban planning; here, she posits that urban growth in Dar es Salaam is generally anchored in self-built, cash-based developments initiated by individuals and their families. Mercer argues that these projects support the aspirations of the Tanzanian middle class for social status, accumulation of wealth, and stability (for the next generation). But these ambitions are tempered by the uncertainty of informal property markets, where land ownership is often not legally recognized and disputes over boundaries are common. The focus that Mercer places on such small-scale, individual projects problematizes dominant narratives about African urbanization, long dependent upon personal agency and local networks for shaping urban landscapes.

Undoubtedly, one of the more interesting dimensions of the book are the aesthetic descriptions of suburban architecture. Mercer reveals how the architectural styles in suburbs such as Salasala are anything but merely functional; they symbolize social identity. The residents of these neighbourhoods invest great time, energy, and money in designing homes that reflect their aspirations and signal an allegiance to global middle-class ideals. Pastel-coloured walls, decorative gates, and landscaped gardens are features that represent a desire for differentiation from lower classes, affirming ideals of respectability and modernity. Mercer exposes how class is more than an economic category, operating as a cultural practice in the aesthetics of everyday life. The book places the Tanzanian middle class within a larger global trend towards suburbanization, where domestic spaces are an arena to declare status and identity.

Expanding her analysis, Mercer discusses the gender dynamics within suburbia. Providing thorough portraits of people such as Gilda businesswoman and manager of several pharmacies and beauty salons Mercer describes how middle-class women negotiate the interaction of entrepreneurship, family life, and social expectations. Gilda's work ethos strikes a balance between business ventures and domestic chores, illustrating the changing role of women in Tanzanian society by combining economic activities with caregiving. However, Mercer resists simplistic stories of empowerment by recognizing the additional pressures facing women in dual roles, between professional and domestic services. This nuanced portrayal of gender challenges the assumption that uniform benefits accrue to women as a result of economic liberalization, as it is equally true that complex contestations

and contradictions shape their experiences of suburban life.

One of the running themes of the book is how aspiration is coupled with insecurity. Ironically, while most suburban residents have attained a degree of financial stability where they can afford a new home construction, they lead precarious lives because of risks related to land disputes, government interventions, and market fluctuations. Examples given by Mercer illustrate how residents employ a variety of measures to secure properties, from the construction of fences to negotiating with neighbours and seeking recognition from local authorities. These are widely understood precautions, since ownership in informal settlements remain bereft of legal footing. Mercer's analysis of these dynamics underlines the fragility of middle-class status in Tanzania and demonstrates that upward social mobility is an uneasy journey through obstacles and uncertainties.

The book also furthers the larger political significance of suburbanization; it is, according to Mercer, a process which furthers existing sociospatial inequalities in Dar es Salaam: by moving further toward the periphery to find land prices that are within their budget, middle-class residents outcompete rural populations and exclude lower-income groups from desirable residential areas. This is a process of suburbanization that Mercer argues reflects patterns of exclusion and inequality typical of rapid urbanization in many other cities of the Global South; not surprisingly, her analysis calls for more inclusive policies in urban settings, addressing the needs of marginalized communities and supporting sustainable development. In this regard, Mercer's view on the social costs of urban expansion (and particularly the challenges of attaining equitable growth in African cities) are particularly relevant.

This is furthered by more serious targets, where the book engages with the colonial legacy that continues to shape urban development in Tanzania. As Mercer suggests, suburbanization originates from a time when colonial bureaucracies first arrived in Dar es Salaam and created residential zones that were strictly segregated by race. These colonial planning practices left an enduring stamp on the spatial organization of the city, from neighbourhood layouts to social composition. Mercer describes how these historical divisions influence identities and views of contemporary suburban residents as they distance themselves from informal settlers by adhering more closely with the aesthetic ideal of planned, orderly neighbourhoods. This exclusive focus on middle-class residents raises significant questions concerning

the peripheral positions of *lower-income* groups and displaced communities in processes of suburbanization which may present a missed opportunity in finding how different social strata are impacted by contemporary urban transformations. Others may go further, arguing that Mercer's suburban frontier risks eliding heterogeneity and internal conflict within suburban communities. These limitations suggest a more macro, panoramic view of urban inequality; this being said, Mercer's work forcefully embeds a historical perspective that is key in understanding how colonialist attitudes toward space, order, and identity are maintained to shape urban imaginaries in Tanzania.

In fact, another critical dimension of the book is the reflection it offers on the role of the state with regard to shaping urban development. For Mercer, the Tanzanian state stands in a somewhat ambivalent relationship with suburbanization it enables and constrains growth at the same time. On one hand, liberalization of the land market has allowed more people to acquire property and build homes. On the other hand, the inability of the state to provide proper infrastructure and services within metropolises has forced suburban dwellers to refer to informal networks and community associations. She makes a strong argument for the role of local governance and community initiatives in addressing the difficulties of urban development when state capacity is insufficient.

Mercer supports her findings with theoretical frameworks; drawing on the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Max Weber, and E. P. Thompson, among others, she pursues her argument that class is not a category but a process, continuously produced by social practices, cultural norms, and material investments. This deconstruction of the suburban frontier confirms how class is constituted through everyday practices of land acquisition, house construction-retrofitting, and community involvement. It is this perspective that allows Mercer to capture class boundaries in motion, as people move across socioeconomic positions over time in Tanzania.

In a word, *The Suburban Frontier* is a detailed account of middle-class formation and urban transformation in Tanzania. Mercer's book is particularly critical for urban studies due to her ethnographic approach, complemented by her engagement with historical and theoretical perspectives. Her concern with the everyday actions of suburban residents resituates the process of urbanization and complicates typical narratives of large-scale development and formal development institutions. In promoting agency at the level of individuals and families shaping their futures, Mercer's work spotlights the need to understand urban change from below.