Age of Concrete is an unusual book. Theoretically, it could be divided into three parts: the first one on the colonial history of Lourenço Marques, which is covered by chapters 1 to 3, the second on the postcolonial history of Maputo till the 1990s throughout chapters 4 and 5, and finally a concluding chapter 6. However, this would neither be useful to the potential readers, nor would it make any sense as regarding to how David Morton conceptualises this social history of „The Capital of Mozambique“, as the city is referred to in the book’s title. It is a history of place-making and the forming of an everyday life within, against or in accordance with changing political structures. It is presented as a set of dense historical narratives based on many interviews and archival materials, that for the careful reader elucidates how a city’s social and physical morphologies are interwoven and dependent on as well as changing according to each other. Furthermore, it informs on the many ways social, physical and political spaces constitute such a dialectical relationship and how, in a socio-cultural sense, a material’s symbol can hardly be separated from its substance. The Age of Concrete is, therefore, contrary to the notion of size and solidity that immediately comes to mind, not a static segment or period in a city’s history – a rather rare historical instance in any case. It is, on the contrary, a history of process and change, yet one that neither represents progress nor decline. Moreover, it is a history on the promises of modernisation, of which „concrete was the substance and universal symbol“ (p. 114).

After placing the case of the capital of Mozambique within the landscape of African urban scholarship and particularly the colonial and postcolonial history of urbanisation in Africa, David Morton invites the reader to a literary city tour throughout the first chapter. He presents the various spaces of Lourenço Marques and shows their relation to each other. From the „city of cement“ of the colonial rulers to the neighbourhoods in the subúrbios, one becomes acquainted with insiders and outsiders, with boundaries and means to cross them, and not least the significance and meaning of various styles of housing and different building materials, from reed to wood and zinc to concrete.

In chapter 2 David Morton discusses in three parts the relationship between colonial authorities and the people living in the subúrbios. The main aspects are constituted by the dynamics of provision and expectations of infrastructural services and housing and how they shaped that relationship during the 1950s and 1960s. First, he examines the power struggles and resulting conflicts between landlords and tenants in the context of rent, tenure and property rights, due to a lack of authority. In the second part Morton then locates the struggles over housing and infrastructure at a larger societal scale by examining colonial neglect in the subúrbios and illustrating how this neglect was more and more questioned. He discusses the means by which the liberal newspaper A Tribuna made use of a small crack in the system of censorship during the early 1960s in order to address the urban problems in the „city of reeds“ and locate them in the larger colonial context of unequal relations. In doing so, the newspaper was „creating a dialogue for politics and inviting the previously uninvited as participants“ (p. 103). The third part finally unveils how the coverages in A Tribuna led to a series of actions in the shape of social surveys and housing solutions conducted and established by African nurses, in order to further question and make visible the social realities in the subúrbios.

In chapter 3, „The Politics of Proximity“, Morton directs his attention to the clandestine and subversive means of urban spatial appropriation. He examines the ways with which inhabitants of the subúrbios were secretly building concrete structures, often hiding them behind reed and wood, since it was illegal and met with great severity, if caught
by the authorities, to build anything „that might give a bulldozer pause“ (p. 115).

In the following chapter the focus lies in the first years of postcolonialism and the process of nationalisation of the rental housing sector. Morton again uses individuals’ stories and experiences to demonstrate how the nationalisation campaign starting in the „city of cement“ was soon taken to the subúrbios, there, however, not as a top down program, but instead as a „Nationalization from below“ (p. 168). He further illustrates the transformation of the „city of cement“ from a symbol of modernisation and prosperity to one of social alienation, physical degradation and a rigid remainder of colonialism.

Chapter 5 takes account of the bottom up processes in the subúrbios that happened after the nationalisation campaigns, that is, the first real planning and upgrade scheme after independence, whereby the residents of the subúrbios took the initiative to bring infrastructure into their neighbourhoods and make them look „regimented and orderly“ (p. 188) by inviting planners and government officials. One of the many aspects of this initiative, which illustrates the strong vision of these residents to create urbanity around them, was for instance their insistence „that the new access roads be straight because that was part of what it meant to be „urbanized““(p. 193).

In the final concluding chapter Morton does not wrap up or point to any central arguments, but rather highlights the multiple trajectories that define the history of the capital of Mozambique. Its social history is also a political one, yet beyond political parties, movements or state formation, a history that „cannot be restricted to the „before‘ and „after‘ language of colonialism and postcolonialism“, since „far too much of the past remains embedded in the present“ (p. 266). Beyond theories of modernisation and development, the book exemplifies that the histories of urban Africa are neither necessarily such of progress, nor of decline, and that a different scale is needed to account for them.

David Morton has produced a fascinating read, densely written, deep, colourful, multi-layered, and illustrated by a great deal of photographs, maps and drawings. He has met his aim of not trying to create a master narrative, but instead a set of smaller narratives, in which „[t]he stories are the evidence“ (p. 25). That alone would not make this approach count as mere „storytelling in some quarters“ (ibid.), which he suspects this book could be dismissed as. However, Morton’s literary style, yet inspiring and captivating to read, might in fact just lead to such a notion. Indeed, one gets easily caught on the details and is drawn into the portrayals of individual accounts, but is sometimes left without an argument or explanation. Despite his intention of not using these narratives „for the purpose of making dry history more „accessible‘“(ibid.), accessibility is at least a side effect, so that the book might just as well be enjoyed outside academic circles. Although his narratives could by no means be qualified as descriptive, Morton still, for the most part, decided not to underpin them with a theoretical foundation or substrate, except for some mostly introductory references to African (urban) historiography. However, even if it might thus be read as a bit of a social history without social theory, Age of Concrete still adds rich detail to the scholarship of urban Africa.