

By Antoni Scholten Folkers

# AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE : FORWARD TO THE PAST

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Africa is making its way forward and is reconstructing and extending its cities at a great speed. This building activity takes place in a cloud of dust and clamour, blurring the image of what the city will eventually look like. The construction process is so fast and of such an expanse that you cannot but take a distance and wait until the frenzy is over. Yet, in order to try to understand what we will see when the dust has eventually settled it may be worthwhile to capture what image is in the mind of the conceivers of this new African city. What is the ideology behind all this building activity, and, consequently, what ideology is being built? Is the architecture of

the new city representing an African interpretation of free-for-all neo-liberalism? And, the other way around, what is the ideology of the architecture itself, what is perceived as 'the true architecture' that should be at the foundation of the modernization of Africa in an African way? What, for want of a better notion, will be the African architectural answer that will respond to the continent's aspirations to modernity?<sup>1</sup>

In order to find sensible answers to above questions, it may be helpful to know where we come from. Building activity in Africa is not new, and the continent has passed through other stages of landslide development which created new cities and architectures. What ideologies were constructed during these periods and what memories did they leave behind to which we can refer in creating prophecies for the future?

The process of unravelling the past of Africa's built future reveals that the common academic memory of Africa's architectural history is eschewed and showing serious lacunae. By filling these lacunae, a richer and multiple-layered understanding of the current architectural situation of Africa will come to the surface.

## ROMANTIC MODERNIST ARCHITECTURAL MEMORY

The common and widespread academic African architectural memory is predominantly a Romantic Modernist construct. The 'Romantic Modernists', a term coined by the Dutch architectural historian Willem Denslagen<sup>2</sup>, rewrote

the architectural history to rid it from the eclectic ballast of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to create a clean slate for a new start of honest and pure modern architecture. In this operation, the architectural history had to be purged of redundancy and the architectural development of the preceding centuries was simplified into a linearly sequence of steps, from Greek and Roman rationality, via Renaissance, the encyclopaedic Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution into a 'freed' modernism<sup>3</sup> of cleanliness, democracy and rationality.

Next to this history of architecture with capital A, there always was and is vernacular building. Vernacular buildings are constructed by empirical builders without the intervention of architects.<sup>4</sup> Vernacular or ethnic building did hardly appear in the Romantic Modernist's writings. It was seen as an interesting cultural expression of past and primitive times, but irrelevant for the architecture of today and tomorrow.

In Africa, during the European 'exploration' of the continent, first by the adventurers and soon followed by the cultural anthropologists, vernacular architecture became subject of extensive recording and research, and remained so until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through this research, authentic African culture was defined. Piece by piece, tribe by tribe, Africa was reconstructed as it would have been before the advent of European modernity. This creation of authenticity is a quintessential part of the Romantic Modernist construct, and it managed to establish the perceived image of a primitive but Arcadian African, a continent in balance with nature and cosmos, a notion that has persisted up to today.

[African Arcadia]

Authenticity however, is a misleading notion, as it assumes a fixed moment in time, which cannot be defined, as everything is constantly changing. In African architecture, fixing authenticity in time is possibly even more complicated as in Europe because of the fact that architecture was intentionally ephemeral.

[Djenné with caption on whs and establishment of authenticity]

It was against this backdrop of 'mis-en scène' African Arcadia that the European imperialists built up their colonies. Modern engineering and later modernist architecture became the building tools for the creation of the colonial state. Africa soon became prime playing ground for modern-



African Arcadia ca 1930 (AAMatters)

Ashantene Palace at Kumasi ca 1870 (source unknown)

House of Wonders, Zanzibar, 1888 (Zanzibar National Archives)

Kariakoo ca 1900 (AAMatters)



ist architects as the continent did not have to be freed of the neo-gothic, neo-renaissance or eclectic styles as was the case in Europe, and the young European architects did not have to fight heritage institutions or conservative clients as was the case in their home countries.

[pretty modernism in Africa]

This simplified memory consisting of pure and shining modernism against the backdrop of the exotic African vernacular, continued its dominance until well after independence of the African nations. However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the last parts of African Arcadia are retreading into the remotest corners of the savannah and the fantastic collection of modernist architecture of the 1930s to the 1970s is being engulfed by the booming African metropolis.

The current interest in Africa's modernist architecture through documentation, study, publication and exposition<sup>5</sup> is of great importance for the creation of awareness on the great beauty and value of this heritage. A welcome side-effect of this enhanced academic interest is that, through this re-exploration of the African continent by scholars from all over the world, new strands of modern memories are being discovered. The 20<sup>th</sup> century modernization of Africa's architectural landscape appears to be far from an exclusive north-south influx. Freed Brazilian slaves brought a tropical modern architecture on their way back to Africa as early as the late 19th century, and a tropical art-deco style of reinforced concrete typologies developed in India appeared in Africa in the 1930s. More recently, during the Cold War years, Polish, East-German, Russian, Yugoslav, Chinese, North Korean and Cuban architects and engineers introduced socialist modernity into Africa next to the architects from Western Europe, Japan, North America and Israel.

[East German arch, Chinese arch]

Possibly, Africa can claim to be the home of the most varied and cosmopolitan development of modern architecture in the world. As Nnamdi Elleh states, modernity and modern architecture in Africa is a composite of multiple stories brought in from the East, the West and the North.<sup>6</sup>

Yet this is not where Elleh's interpretation of the African architectural history ends. It may well be that the history of African architecture of the modern period is strongly influenced from all the quarters of the compass, but the African reac-

tion to these influences was far from absent, and over time, it created through a continued process of influence, adaptation, appropriation and reaction, its own strong memories. The fact that these have hardly been recorded stands cause of the lacunae in the common memory of the history of African architecture.

## EARLY AFRICAN ROYAL MODERNITY

The origins of modern architecture are shrouded in the fogs of time. Depending on the applied definition of modernity, they may be found around 1920 with the emergence of the Modern Movement in Architecture in the Global North, in the 19th century with the architectural expression of the Industrial Revolution, in the late 18th century with the rationalized and encyclopaedic architecture of Enlightenment, in the Renaissance with the emergence of individualized architectural expression, or as far back as in Pharaonic times with the African genius Imhotep being the first world star architect.

For the sake of clarity, in this current search for an answer to the question of 'where we come from', the emergence of modernity is assumed sometime in the early 19th century, with the emergence of industrialized building components and the up-scaling and global spreading of academic architectural production.

By the mid- to late 19th century, an increasing number of Africans went to Europe for trade visits and for academic studies. These Africans originated from the upper class of the society, and were often

from royal descent. Coming back to Africa, these African princes, sultans, queens and princesses not only brought with them university degrees and European table manners, but also ideas about architecture.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a wide range of villas and palaces built by African Royalty and elite thus saw the light. These buildings, to be found over the continent, share a strong departure from traditional residential architecture in terms of technology, typology and architectural appearance.

[pagoda, Madagascar, house of wonders]

The Ashantene of Kumasi erected a new palace before 1874, a neo-gothic mansion worthy of a Horace Walpole. Unfortunately, this building was destroyed in 1874 during a British punitive raid. Menelik II, the emperor of Ethiopia built his palace complex in Addis Ababa as a maze of steel, timber and glass pavilions interlinked with bridges in the late 1880s. The royal Rova palace complex, in Antananarivo was modernized from the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards and the queen of Madagascar added an airy steel and glass belvedere to the complex in the 1890s.

Nigerian noblemen and princes dotted the country with their modern country villas and urban palaces over the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the king of Cameroun, Auguste Manga Ndumbe constructed his towering residence in Douala in 1905. Ndumbe's palace would become known as the Pagoda, as it strongly reminiscences oriental architec-



tural influences. Possibly, back in London during his university years, Ndumbe became befriended with Asian students or teachers?

Sultan Bargash' new ceremonial palace on Zanzibar, constructed in the early 1880s, was baptized the House of Wonders, and for good reason. With its four stories of cast iron columns and reinforced concrete beams it towered over Stone Town, and was brightly lit by hundreds of electric light bulbs at night.

Closer observation of these palaces unveils that, although strikingly modern, these buildings contain important elements of traditional typologies. Menelik's palace reverts back to the traditional compound with a number of double-storied circular Tukul, and so does the Antananarivo pavilion incorporate the traditional timber building typology of the Rova palaces.

Bargash's House of Wonders can be dissected into a clever combination of the traditional, introvert Omani desert palace, the Indian breezy bungalow and the traditional Swahili house with the barazas and umbrella roofs of Zanzibar.

This early emergence of Royal African architectural modernity proved to be short lived. By the turn of the century, the whole of Africa, with the noteworthy exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, was conquered and colonized by the European imperialists. In this scramble for Africa, African royalty was banished, killed or subdued. The same fate befell their palaces; they were destroyed or appropriated by the colonizers and converted into administration buildings or residences for the new masters. African originated modernity and modern architecture fitted uneasily in the justification of the colonization of the continent, which was based on the badly needed civilization of the African continent. Africa was the dark continent, full of misery caused by decesses slavery and other primitive behavioural, and needed to be saved and modernized. Henceforth, African modernity had thus to be better forgotten.

A typical case in this context is what fate befell the Pagoda in Douala. The royal family resisted German imperial intrusion, but lost their independence and their prince, who was hung for insubordination by the new rulers of the country. The Pagoda was converted into a German administration building, and after the First World War, when Cameroon was placed under the protection of the French, it became the colonial forestry office. In the 1980s, the Pagoda

proudly re-appears on the front cover of the book by Wolfgang Lauber on colonial German Architecture in Cameroun,<sup>7</sup> but it can be seriously questioned if the Pagoda should qualify as a German colonial building.

The development of African originated modern architecture was thus frustrated around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to make place for the introduction of a Eurocentric modernity. Instead of a continent that was modernizing itself, an image of Africa as the exotic but primitive continent was created that acted as backdrop for the necessary modernization to European template, thus establishing a construed Romantic Modernist memory. The modernization process was taken into hand by engineers, architects and urban planners of exclusively European origin.

## UNDERCOVER AFRICAN MODERNITY

However, the African originated modernization process that so promisingly commenced with the great palaces of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not come to a standstill. The development of African modernity actually increased in momentum and spread wide and far by the turn of the century. Yet this time in an undercover fashion, in a way that has fashionably become known as 'informal' architecture and urbanism.

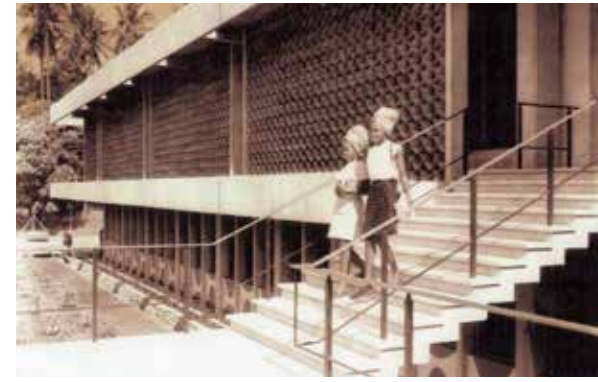
In the organization of the new colonial state, the Africans were, by and large, separated from the colonial settlers. The settlers planned and built themselves modern settlements on the most attractive locations, not accessible for the

African population who were thus deprived from the benefits of the 'formalized' modernity, with its neatly laid out streets, infrastructure and breezy architecture.

The Africans lived in informal settlements, next to the European towns, which quickly expanded and soon overtook the formal towns in terms of size. These informal settlements started off in traditional vernacular building typologies and technologies, but soon commenced to modernize themselves. Traditional vernacular building in rural materials such as earth and thatch made room for modern industrial materials such as galvanized iron roof sheets and cement building blocks. Traditional typologies and organic forms, compound-based housing and loose types of rural fabric were replaced by modern rectangular one-family homes aligned along urban streets and alleys.

[Ouagadougou, ng'ambo]

This modernization process took place and takes place up to today almost unnoticed, but has been of an impact on African architecture and the African city that is at least as important as the formal Eurocentric modernist development of African architecture and the African city. What makes this modernization even more important is the efficiency and standardization of the building production process that resulted in a near-continent wide homogeneous building market. The gi-roof sheets have the same size and gauge all over Africa, and so do the cement blocks. Construction timber elements, doors, windows, steel gates and grills, even precast



Library in Dar es Salaam by Antony Almeida, ca 1970 (AAMatters)

Mosque at Djenné (Joep Mol)

Ng'ambo 2013 (Berend van der Lans)

Ng'ambo around 1900 (Zanzibar National Archives)

Ouagadougou from the air, 1930

Precast column workshop on Zanzibar (Antoni Folkers)  
Queen's summer palace at Ambohimanga rova Madagascar (source unknown)  
Tazara Railway Station (Joep Mol)  
The Pagode at Douala around 1910 (Danièle Diwouta)  
The Pagode at Douala around 1910 (Danièle Diwouta)  
Urban development (Antoni Folkers)

decorative elements such as banisters, ventilation screen blocks, complete Ionic or Corinthian columns and pilasters, all these are standardized and produced in small and specialised workshops along the roadside, from Tanzania to Senegal and from Ethiopia to Angola.

[mabati, mtofali, prefab columns]

Initially, the African town houses were simple and straightforward, meant as temporary shelter. After all, the move to the city was thought to be temporary, intended to make money for a comfortable old day to be spent on better pastures, back in the village. Many Africans built their retirement home, more often than not large family mansions, in the home village or the suburb. These mansions, that are mushrooming over the continent, have little in common with the traditional vernacular.

[the African suburb building itself]

Yet, the African does eventually become an urbanite as well, and commences to see the urban life not as temporary anymore. This shift from a rural to an urban future for enjoyment and retirement enhances private investments leading to densification and a new town culture, in which the small town houses are converted into mixed-use multiple story buildings, eventually creating a modern vertical city, which aspires to become the African metropolis.

[the duka asf]

In this process, the work of the Congolese artist Kingelez assumes a central position of inspiration. Kingelez produced models of the African metropolis, the 'Ville Fantôme', the city

that not yet is but will be, in a formal expression that appeals to the aspirations to African modernity.

Most of the above processes on the modernization of the town house, the suburban villa and the multi-storied town building evade formal regulation, education or structure. There is rarely an academic designer involved. The building permit, if at all required, is more a matter of network and money than of professional agency and the builder may well be the craftsman from around the corner.

Kingelez' image of the 'Ville Fantôme' is however also carried on by many other artists, architectural students and architects. They now create an expressionist typical African modernity in architecture that is unmistakably of the same inspiration as Kingelez' work, informally emerged but now formalized in the 'surmodernité' of Pierre Goudiaby Atépa and his epigones, as Danièle Diwouta-Kotto has christened it.<sup>8</sup>

[duka, kariakoo development]

## RE-SURFACING AFRICAN MODERNITY

For the sake of the argument, the above image of African originated memories on architectural modernity has been outlined in rough brushstrokes. Of course, there are many overlaps between the different modernization processes, blurred boundaries between them, and exceptions to the rules.

However, it can be safely stated that, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were no Africa-born architects





Precast column workshop on Zanzibar (Antoni Folkers)

Queen's summer palace at Ambohimanga rova Madagascar (source unknown)

Tazara Railway Station (Joep Mol)

The Pagode at Douala around 1910 (Danièle Diwouta)

Urban development (Antoni Folkers)



active, with the exception of South Africa, and there was no writing on informal architecture<sup>9</sup> which confirms the split between the European-originated and the African-originated memories of modern architecture in Africa.

Since the 1950s, a new academic African modernity commenced to surface. The first generation of academically trained African-born architects came to stage and some Africanized architects of European descent joined their search into a renewed modernist architecture for Africa. However, the works of this first generation of African originated architects was still firmly embedded in the European modernist narrative, as told by Udo Kulterman and a few others.<sup>10</sup>

After the Portuguese born architect Pancho Guedes, active in Mozambique and South Africa from the 1950s to the 1980s, it is the Nigerian autodidact Demas Nwoko who took a fresh position in designing and writing resurfaced academic African modern architecture into being. Nwoko states that the nature of technology is such that it is not the preserve of any race or time, and, according to Giles Omezi, '(...) Demas Nwoko sought to resolve in his architecture, a crisis at the heart of contemporary Africa; the nature of its modernity. He seems to have understood, that the process of modernity is not the sole property of Eurocentric thought and actions.<sup>11</sup> This is the first time that an African architect and scholar expresses self-consciousness in writing on challenging the Romantic Modernist memory, and it is to be hoped that it is only the first step towards a new histo-

riography of modern architecture that takes the African perspective as starting point. This new historiography, coupled with the self-conscious work of a now emerging new generation of African architects, with already famous names as Francis Kéré, Kunlé Adejemi and Heinrich Wolff, will, in weaving together the multiple strands of African modernity, provide the answer as to what ideology the modern Africa is built.

[demas nwoko] ???

- 1 Modernity here is understood as expression of the (aspirations to) a modern life, in typology, technology, materials and aesthetics.
- 2 Denslagen, J.W. Romantisch Modernisme. Nostalgie in de Monumentenzorg. Amsterdam (SUN) 2003.
- 3 Modernism in this context refers to the Modern Movement in Architecture that originated in the 1920s and created its own socially-oriented ideology and language, rejecting the notion of style and decoration.
- 4 Rapoport, Amos. House Form and Culture, Englewood Cliffs (Prentice-Hall) 1969.
- 5 Amongst others: Africa Big Change – Big Chance, Triennale di Milano (2014), African Modernity, Vitra Weil-am-Rhein (2015)
- 6 Elleh, Nnamdi African Architecture. New York (McGraw-Hill) 1996.
- 7 Lauber, Wolfgang Deutsche Architektur in Kamerun – 1884-1914 Stuttgart (Karl Krämer) 1988.
- 8 Diwouta-Kotto, Danièle (text) and Sandrine Dole (photographs). Suites architecturales – Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar. Epinal (d'architectures d'Afrique Association VAA) 2010.
- 9 Not from a cultural perspective that is.
- 10 Kultermann, Udo New Architecture in Africa. New York (Brazilier) 1963.
- 11 Omezi, Giles, in paper delivered at African Perspectives Delft in 2007.



Idumuje House by Demas Nwoko (Gillian Hopwood)

Kariakoo 2007 (Thierry van Baggem)