

Introduction

Recognizing African Modernisms

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Remains of modernism

Travelling around twenty-first-century African landscapes, one comes across modernist buildings: sometimes radical in their formal language, either as adaptations from classic continental European modernism or in experimenting with African sculptural elements translated into brutalist concrete; at other times mundane and trivial – what one, at the time of their construction would have described as ugly, or more likely not have spoken about at all (Hoffmann 2017). Most of these buildings are found in cities, but also – as some of the examples below will show – dotted across savannah and rainforest. They are more or less derelict today, showing marks of time – of human use and reuse, aspiration and failure, non-human intrusions, moss, insects and ingrown tropical vegetation, or the effects of civil war and violence – which contradict the imaginary permanence of concrete as their preferred building material, as well as the futurity of modernist forms, such as the ‘International Style’.

These buildings – government offices, railway termini, airports, schools and universities – and to some extent larger urban plans and unrealized architectural projects, have recently received, sometimes renewed, recognition in scholarship and arts. They are a source of intrigue, not only for the traveller from afar, but also for the people living around and with them, most of whom were born long after the mid-twentieth-century modern moment, between the 1940s and 1970s, when these buildings were conceived of, built and put to use. They are recognizable to Africans and non-Africans at this point in time, partly as a function of figure-background relations. Their usually well-planned and distinct shapes stick out from the backdrop of progressively ‘informalized’ urban landscapes, and stand in contrast to the fast-built, disposable, sometimes half-heartedly postmodern architectures of

neo-liberalism (Spencer 2016) – gated communities, shopping enclaves, conspicuous office-towers, with little connection to urban texture, indeed often intentionally insulated from it – that overgrow, seemingly without a larger plan, the older urban structures of the postcolonial city (Boeck 2011), and that often remain ‘half built ruins’ that never attain completion, or even the spectre of durability (Tousignant 2016).

But these edifices also are striking on account of their distinct language of expectation and predictability that they imply, the will to create an ordered social space, which seems alien, even exotic, from the vantage point of the African, and increasingly the global present (Uduku 2006). While a visitor to an African capital city in 1970, or indeed an urban dweller and citizen of a young African nation, would either have taken these buildings for granted or admired them as expressions of the emerging universalist future, they now stand as intriguing remains of a past that, as noted above, is beyond the experiential horizon of most living Africans, as well as that of current international graduate students of architecture, history or anthropology. Like equivalent modernist buildings in other parts of the world – notably in the former socialist countries – these are not only traces of the past, or, to be precise, of past futures (Geissler and Lachenal 2016), of long-lost assumptions about progress and, in particular, as viewed and proclaimed by contemporaries, modernization, welfare, nation-building and development, but also, as Schwenkel states, of a long-lost predictability and durability that stands in stark contrast to the current experience of precarity (Schwenkel 2013).

The archaeology of modern Africa

Such buildings – and related urban forms, as well as infrastructures – can be approached in at least three different archetypical ways,

depending on one's disciplinary angle and personal inclination, each commencing with different questions. To an architect, or a classic Vitruvian architectural historian, the first questions would be about the architect, the author and about the building as work; from there arise further questions about formal language, meaning and intention, aesthetics, the historical origins and references made by the building as well as possibly the building's relationship to landscape and context. This approach fully appreciates the singularity of the building and is for that reason particularly suitable for spectacular, authored architecture and planning in Africa (Tostões 2013; Herz 2015), leading to laudable efforts of complementing the architectural map of Africa (Kultermann 2000; Albrecht 2014; Meuser and Dalbai 2021), but in a deplorable form, to a (re-)commodification of 'forgotten' and now again celebrated masterpieces discovered on African soil, as was the case with Jean Prouvé's *Maison tropique* (Touchaleaume 2006); it lends itself somewhat less obviously to mundane utilitarian architectures, although, of course, modernist model housing and replicable low-cost architectures also provide valuable material for this approach (Jackson and Holland 2014; Avermaete and d'Auria 2015).

Other architectural historians, with stronger historical and social history inclination, might focus less on the building itself and its allegedly single author, the architect, instead foregrounding the context, not only of drawing and planning, but also of financing and construction as well as of ownership and utilization. This can of course overlap with a 'reading' of the building and its aesthetic language, but it also can simply use a building as crystallization point for a historical analysis of the period in which it was built, engaging with the ideological context of its production, or, put differently, the 'politics of design' (Wright 1991; Çelik 1997). More recently, others have

been more interested in bringing to the fore political economies of architectural labour in Africa, by following for instance the flows of money enabling architects to develop a practice on the continent (De Raedt 2017; le Roux 2019; Stanek 2020, see also references in the Epilogue of this book).

The anthropologist of architecture, finally, would generally be assumed to have less of an interest in the past and the distant origins of a building, and indeed less of a focus on the building itself, investigating instead the use and habitation of a building, or the social processes involved in its construction and maintenance, or the demise (for an overview, see Buchli 2013). Earlier anthropologists following Claude Levi-Strauss studied the 'house' as a social body, rather than as an architectural artefact (see Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995); however more recent studies of houses, building and dwelling have addressed more specific material and architectural dimensions, but usually of 'traditional' housing (e.g. Moore 1986; Prince and Geissler 2010). Only more recently, partly associated with anthropological interest in post-socialist and post-developmental transformations and associated loss and decay, contemporary – if not necessarily explicitly modernist – architectures have moved into view, sometimes with explicit inspiration from archaeology (e.g. Humphrey 1988; Cassiman 2011; Pelkmans 2013; and in particular Hoffmann 2017).

Still, such increasingly architecturally curious anthropologists usually start out from the present, sometimes moving backwards into the past or explicitly focusing on issues of temporality, as some examples in this collection do (see also, for example, Navaro-Yashin 2009; Schwenkel 2015; de Boeck and Baloji 2016; Nielsen 2016). Needless to say, such ethnographic interest in the use of buildings can also be part of architectural analysis or part of a longer history of a building; but while the final

aim of the latter is to understand a building, the purpose of the anthropological study is to understand the social life of a particular place, of which the building is one part.

While the anthropological perspective is grounded in the present, the past and the passage of time come into the ethnography of architecture as points of interest in buildings' change, decay and modification – be it by human inhabitants or intruders, or by non-human invaders, such as plants, insects or rain. More than the original state of the building at the time of its inception, or the idealized version of the plan, this implies an interest in process in time, including the dissolution of a building's architectural order, and in temporality, that is the experience of time and its passage, and the social production of relationships between points in time, such as in the anthropology of nostalgia, or indeed that of modernist aspiration itself (Ferguson 1999; Piot 2010; Lachenal and Mbodj 2014). These concerns are shared by related disciplines, such as geography, science and technology studies, and (contemporary) archaeology, from which social anthropology has learnt in recent years (e.g. Dawdy 2010; Holtorf 2012; Harrison and Breithoff 2017).

Beyond ruin porn

Across the disciplines concerned with modernist architecture and Africa – and among interested publics in Africa and beyond who begin to explore past architectures (e.g. Buranyi 2018) an important theme is the notion of the 'ruin', and the process of ruination which has received much recent attention in the humanities (Hatherley 2011; DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). Many modernist buildings in sub-Saharan Africa are today more or less ruined, in particular in comparison to their immaculate, seemingly unchangeable appearance when they were first built. Scholars and artists

engaging such quasi-ruins often describe the affective dimensions of dealing with them, entering them, leave alone inhabiting them, which some go as far as to describe as some form of 'haunting' (Edensor 2005).

Yet, although many visitors of derelict modernist buildings – be they in Africa, Siberia or indeed at the heart of the former metropolis – will recognize the experience of familiarity and bewilderment that the term haunting tries to denote, and although affective engagements with the materiality of buildings therefore are a central dimension of scholarly engagements with African modernist architecture – and, arguably, among the more enjoyable dimensions of this emerging scholarship – the notions both of the ruin and of affect raise critical questions in situations marked by lasting inequality and social differentiation, be it the ruins of industrial capitalism, of colonial domination or of postcolonial nationalism. Put bluntly: who is haunted, and by whom? If a comparatively wealthy twenty-first-century European graduate student establishes contact with the 'spirits' of a 1970s African university campus, a modernist housing estate or a laboratory space, whose spirits does (s)he encounter and in what relation? Or: what import have the haunted sensations of middle-class humanities students, irrespective of their skin colour and origin, on the occasion of visiting a derelict modernist space, for those who inhabit them day-to-day, or make a living in and from them? How does the universalist language and aura of modernist architectures, experienced in its mossy, cracked twenty-first-century incarnation, speak to contemporary politics of difference, or present renderings of progressive politics? And of course: is ruination here a loss, or liberation, or rather an extension of a long-term destructive process that colonialism, so to speak, built into its architectures (see Stoler 2008)?

Ambiguous architectural heritage

These intriguing ambiguities of the project that could be described as the ‘archaeology of modern Africa’, including attention to the affective dimensions of African modernist traces, apply in equal measure to the discussion of ‘heritage’ as pertaining to these architectures. A classic heritage approach to colonial and postcolonial iconic buildings would – usually with funding from the former metropolitan countries for whom these buildings are part of their own heritage – attempt to preserve iconic, historically and architecturally valuable buildings, defending them against the combined pressures of neglect and decay, and of current rebuilding and erasure, stabilizing them as close as possible to their original state. This approach is critiqued by postcolonial, radical young African thinkers like Chibundu Onuzo (2016), either on theoretical political grounds or as misguided use of scarce resources for urban renewal. Also, in architectural circles, voices have emerged that critically question previous approaches which were articulated around traditional notions of ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘authenticity’, arguing instead for a more open-ended appreciation which sees the building no longer as a ‘static embodiment of culture’ but rather as a ‘social construct’ to which multiple values are ascribed (Legault 2006; Casciato and D’Orgeix 2012). Nevertheless, preservation remains a dominant perspective among western heritage funders, including, but not limited to, those who cannot let go of empire (see Sherwell 2016).

An alternative approach, at the opposite end of the spectrum, which acknowledges the colonial and (in equal measure) postcolonial ambiguity of African modernist architectures, and in line with Stoler (2008), the historical continuities of ruination, might instead argue for ‘letting go’ of colonial remains, for a heritage practice ‘beyond saving’ (see DeSilvey 2017; d’Auria and le Roux 2017), which

allows the ruins and architectural traces of African modernity, that anyway was always fraught, enmeshed with colonial and post- and neocolonial violence, to be appropriated and recycled, possibly misused and assaulted, and eventually to dissolve and vanish – positing not preservation, but rather a kind of compostation and dissolution as adequate, healing counterpoint to the lasting agony of ruination. Rather than trying to repair, such an approach would instead seek recovery and restoration through abandonment and decay.

The book’s origin

While this collection does not attempt to solve the conundrums of the African modernist heritage, what is clear from these reflections on affect and heritage is that we do need to approach African modernism, and the spectacular architectures that the mid-twentieth century has bequeathed upon Africa with an open gaze, combining thorough architectural documentation and history – respectful to architects and their works, as well as sensitive to the social and political context of planning and building – with both reflexive architectural ethnography, including questions of postcolonial positioning, and an openness to experimental practices that allow for the ambiguities and contradictions of buildings and plans to unfold (instead of excising them with simple evaluations and righteous attempts at cleansing or erasure [Lachenal 2020]). If we treat such architectures as if they belong to a suspect (or, worse, newly appreciated) colonial, developmentalist past, and ignore the productive contradictions that they since their conception have embodied – between social control and transformation, aspiration and subjection and so on – we miss out the most intriguing feature of architecture: its durability across eras and contexts, and its ability to intertwine and juxtapose even radically contradictory social orders and projects, from colonial occupation,

via postcolonial nation-building, to post-austerity realism. If we, on the other hand, revel in the affect of modernist ruins without knowing the original meanings and contexts of a building and the conditions of violence from which it sprang, or if we claim to be haunted, without knowing the actual social conditions of a building's production and use, and without reflecting upon our own positioning in that regard – that is, without knowing who exactly haunts whom – then we are unlikely to progress beyond apolitical 'ruin porn'.

This book is the result of common interests in Africa's 'past futures', manifested in the symposium *Forms of Freedom: Legacies of African Modernism*, held in Oslo in 2015, on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition at the National Museum – Architecture, which had previously been shown in the Nordic Pavilion at the *Venice Architecture Biennale* in 2014, and later travelled on to the Nairobi National Museums of Kenya. This exhibition, curated by Nina Berre (with co-curator and exhibition architect Gro Bonesmo and project manager Nina Frang Høyum), explored the so-far undocumented projects by Nordic architects during the 1960s and 1970s as part of aid programmes (Berre and Høyum 2015). Revolving around two main concepts, 'Building freedom' and 'Finding freedom', the exhibition referred, on the one hand, to the actual nation-building that took place through master plans for cities and regions, infrastructure, industry and institutions for health, education, and governance, and, on the other, to the modernist, experimental free zone that emerged (for the Nordic architects) during the encounter between Nordic aid and African nation-building. Photographs commissioned from Mette Tronvoll and Iwan Baan (reproduced in this volume) provided a sense of how some of the materialized modernist architecture was received, absorbed, adapted and transformed over time.

The 2015 symposium was an attempt to broaden the discussion on the material of the exhibition and the contemporary relevance of engaging with such modernist architectures in Africa. To do so, the exhibition's curators started a conversation with Wenzel Geissler, anthropologist at the University of Oslo who, in turn, invited Johan Lagae, an architectural historian from Ghent University. The symposium started from the assumption that, when speaking about African modernism, architecture and its interpretation, history and the history of architecture, the anthropology of architecture as well as the ethnography of building and buildings need to go hand in hand. Or rather: they need to be continuously juxtaposed, and related to one another; not to ignore, narrow down or try to eliminate disciplinary differences, but to seek opportunities for raising new questions by confronting and engaging with them. The book follows this principle by including contributions offering divergent takes on particular projects, such as on certain buildings of the Norwegian-Kenyan 1960s' star architect Nøstvik (Berre, Anyamba and Derbyshire), or, on the topic of African housing policies and typologies in estates in Nigeria and Nairobi, which are discussed by a historian, an anthropologist and an architect (Livsey, Smith, Makachia).

The book's organization

Despite its broad title, the book makes no claim of being a definitive, comprehensive volume of the broad topic of 'African modernism and its afterlives'. Several prominent scholars who have worked or are working on this topic are not included, and not all of sub-Saharan Africa is covered by this book: the reader will find (almost) no discussions related to West Africa or South Africa, nor on the former Portuguese colonies or on Ethiopia, or those territories once under German rule, all of which recently have been the subject of

stimulating scholarship in the field of architectural history (Milheiro 2017; Osayimwese 2017; le Roux 2019; various contributions in *ABE Journal*). Indeed, the book retains, in line with the project's origin in the *Forms of Freedom* exhibition, a large focus on former British East Africa: Kenya and Tanzania in particular.

Venturing into a joint exploration of Africa's postcolonial architectural legacy from a combined perspective of (architectural) history and social anthropology, the book is organized in two large sections. The first batch of contributions, written for the largest part by architectural and planning historians and compiled under the heading 'African Modernism', engages with the way common surveys of twentieth-century architectural history have tended to write the narrative exclusively from an 'export' perspective, whereby architectural modernism originates in the so-called 'centre' to arrive in the 'periphery' due to the agency of travelling architects. As some of the contributions here illustrate, such a perspective is not completely obsolete, as many of the episodes of what Dennis Sharp once called the 'diaspora of modern architecture' still need to be written (Sharp 2000). Indeed, even if much new scholarship has emerged in recent years that brings to the fore talented, yet long-time overlooked, architects and designers, much work still needs to be done in this regard, also to shift the perspective more to designers from Africa, as some have recently argued for (Meuser and Dalbai 2021). In line with what the exhibition *Forms of Freedom* set out to do for architects from the Nordic countries, some of the contributions included here similarly highlight architects and projects that have remained more of less 'under the radar'. Yet, with this volume we also explicitly want to go beyond those projects, which according to the standard criteria of a formalist architectural history would be labelled 'iconic' and could thus easily be inscribed in canonical surveys of post-war

global architecture. As Iga Perzyna's chapter on Liberia makes clear, we believe that even what some would consider 'ugly architecture' deserves attention. Moreover, since the emergence of postcolonial scholarship in the early 1990s, it has become evident that we need to complement the more conventional approaches to architectural history in a continent like Africa, which put the architect at the centre of the narrative, with analyses that account for the agency of others, human and non-human. Multilateral donor agencies and their African interlocutors, for instance, played a major role in shaping the built landscapes in post-1945 Africa, as the chapter written by Kim De Raedt, shows. Ruth Prince's discussion of a Russian-funded and -built hospital in Kisumu, Kenya, forms a powerful reminder that in such development aid contexts African agency and the anticipation of another future among African stakeholders should not be overlooked. The first part of the book also underlines the importance of engaging with a somewhat prosaic yet seldomly answered question: who actually built those new architectural landscapes? If we want to expand our understanding of the 'geopolitics of concrete' (Forty 2012) to Africa, then we also need to investigate how building technologies developed in the continent during the post-war era and how the division of labour was organized in its various locales. The chapters of Yacobi as well as of Lagae and Fivez provide some first responses to this question, while stimulating new work is now also being done on the relation between architecture and environment, tackling questions of materiality, ecology, extraction and obsolescence (Hochhäusl et al. 2018; see also references in the Epilogue to this volume).

The second part of the book, titled 'Afterlives', consists of contributions authored mostly, although not exclusively, by either historians proper or by anthropologists. The focus here

is on the user's perspective and the way people have appropriated and transformed their everyday environments, leading to sometimes striking adaptations, while in other cases the architecture has proven quite resilient to changes in usage. Some contributions engage with the issue of memory and forgetting, and the past futures that are embedded in often derelict remains of African modernism, as in the research institute in Amani, Tanzania, presented in the chapter by Geissler, or in former fish storehouses and processing facilities in Turkana, Northern Kenya, documented and reflected upon in the chapter by Derbyshire and Lowasa. Such contributions accept more readily the mundane and everyday-built environment as subjects worthy of scholarly inquiry, although similar stories could and should be told on the architecturally beautiful or spectacular (see, for example, Hoffman 2017; d'Auria and le Roux 2017; Boonen and Lagae 2020). The interest of much of the scholars contributing in the later chapters of the book, however, lies elsewhere and triggers questions of how time and agencies over time should inform our gaze on African modernism.

The book deliberately contains a wider range of 'genres' than is common in academic edited volumes, as we believe the dialogue between disciplinary positions can and should benefit from more free forms of writing. While several contributions are conceived as fully referenced academic texts (with few images as illustrations), some authors have used a more essayistic tone and style of writing, or draw on a more open and creative text-image relationship by building their argument around a very elaborate series of images, for instance, or by using particular images as entry points for developing broader reflections. The array of images is deliberately broad. Architectural drawings and high-quality contemporary photographs of projects stand side by side with historical images, snapshot-like photographs

of (parts of) buildings and sites, technical drawings, biographic data, and, on occasion, blurry images taken from the internet. While the archaeology of modern African architecture and the experimental use of photography could be pushed further (see, for example, Hoffmann 2017), the approach of the book extends the use of visuals in the original *Forms of Freedom* exhibition, which included archival material, historical images and commissioned, professional photographs. Tronvoll and Baan's contribution to the original exhibition is included here in the two portfolios inserted between the two parts of the book, documenting some remnants of Nordic aid: the Zambia World Bank Educational projects and two projects designed by architect Karl Henrik Nøstvik.

If the selection of contributions presented in this book on some occasions allows for a direct confrontation of different (disciplinary) takes on the same projects, thus showing what an encounter between disciplines might achieve, all in all the dialogue between architectural history and social anthropology that this book sets out to stage is still largely one of juxtaposition rather than of direct engagement. In order to peel out what such a more direct dialogue could entail, the book ends with an edited conversation between Wenzel Geissler and Johan Lagae. Drawing on a number of encounters over the last years, of which the 2015 Oslo workshop was one, Geissler and Lagae make explicit their own disciplinary positions and search for commonalities and shared interests, all the while accepting that such interdisciplinary encounters can benefit as much from an open-mindedness to academic experiment as it can from a clear understanding of the limits and autonomy of one's own discipline.

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