

# The Multiple Faces of: Inspiration, Domination and Identity - African Bites of Modernism

Barbara P. Jekot

## Introduction

This study does not focus on the history of buildings and urban developments, but instead on the patterns of inspirations and the implementation of specific ideas in approaching architecture. It deals with the theme of the intersection of influences that may emanate from fascination as well as notions of progress and the implications of international attitudes. This investigation culminates in the search for contextualised architecture and identity.

## Modernism and the African art influence

Modernism, defined as ideas that are contrasted with earlier ideas and methods<sup>1</sup>, was a rejection of the tradition of the "codified" form of expression. Modernism stressed freedom of expression, experimentation, radicalism, and primitivism in disregard of conventional expectations. Somehow the label Modernism was applied to a tired Western artistic tradition which was influenced by other (traditional?) cultures, mostly African and Asian cultures which were introduced as discoveries when Europe colonised the world. Many artists found what seemed like an "un-codified" form of expression in non-Western cultures. The "civilised" sought for inspiration by tracking "uncivilised" cultures seemingly uncluttered by the weight of tradition.

Picasso claimed that the "virus" of African art that struck him in Paris in 1907 stayed with him all his life. To him, the African masks were not simply sculptures, but magical objects. Although these sculptures would influence his work and fascinate him, he never travelled to Africa. In 2006 Picasso's work travelled to Africa in an exhibition which displayed his and African art together with the specific aim of highlighting the African influence on his work. It was the first exhibition of its kind - "nowhere else in the world has there been an exhibition showing the relation between Picasso's work and African art"<sup>2</sup>. It illustrated how Picasso was fascinated by African art<sup>3</sup>. The exhibition marked 100 years since Picasso's first encounter with the "other"<sup>4</sup> and formalised the acknowledgement of the substantial influence of African art on Modernism. The intention was to put names, cultures and places to the different objects which might have inspired Modern works, but were presented out of the African context and spirituality woven into Western society. Picking and choosing from African art was intellectually stimulating,

but produced an accompanying prejudice that other cultures not being able to speak for themselves could be understood solely through Western interpretation. Moreover, it was not important who made the artworks or where they came from. The European search for the new disregarded the fact that these African objects were born of age-old traditions themselves.

## Modernism and colonialism in Africa

Modernism evolved during the peak of European colonial empires<sup>5</sup> – although this is rarely acknowledged. Did Modernism mark its end or their continuation by other means?

Entering the twentieth century, Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902) had the ambition and inspiration to build a dominion of the British Empire that would stretch from the Cape to Cairo. Architecture was to embody the expression of his ambition through his architect-protégé Herbert Baker (1862-1946).

At the end of the nineteenth century mainly Britain, France and Portugal claimed Africa for themselves – as did Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium on a smaller scale. Between then and World War I, Europe colonised virtually almost all of Africa and added one-fifth of the land area of the globe to its overseas colonial possessions. Its countries claimed territories many times larger than themselves with an attitude of superiority and a sense of mission – a commitment to "civilise" Africa<sup>6</sup>. The contrast between profit-taking and humanitarian motives<sup>7</sup> created conflicts between economics and underlying motives. The treatment of Africans – specifically under the Belgian system – was particularly brutal and harsh ("culture" of lack of culture). The British did not accept equality – even for Africans adopting British ways and giving up their African culture – and did not accept mixed marriages. The French were able to accept Africans as French and to accept mixed marriages. The Portuguese were more tolerant concerning mixed marriages, but viewed full-blooded Portuguese as superior. Somehow one million people of African descent fought for the Allies in World War I and two million in World War II<sup>8</sup>. Colonial powers used Africa as a source of labour and of raw materials for European industry and therefore as a continent which was not to be industrialised<sup>9</sup>.

1. John Sinclair (ed.), *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, Collins Publishers 1987, p. 930.

2. Marilyn Martin, the SA curator of the "*Picasso and Africa*". Recent Exhibitions, South African National Gallery 15 Dec. 2006. [http://www.iziko.org.za/sang/r\\_ex.html](http://www.iziko.org.za/sang/r_ex.html) (Accessed 3 Aug. 2009).

3. Madeline Laurence, a curator at the Picasso Museum in Paris which has lent most of the artworks in the exhibit on <http://users.telenet.be/african-shop/picasso> (Accessed 3 Aug. 2009).

4. Like Modigliani, Brancusi, Braque, etc.

5. Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, Ashgate Publishing, 2003, pp. 1-3.

6. Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876-1912*, Avon Books, 1992, pp. 316-616.

7. Embodied by, for instance David Livingstone.

8. Vincent B. Khapoya, *The African Experience*, Prentice Hall, 1998, p. 115

9. Vincent B. Khapoya, *The African Experience*, Prentice Hall, 1998, pp. 134-43.

### The spread of modernism and African interscction of influences

Modernism spread from Europe to America and was acclaimed as international, but the history of how it spread and how it was translated to the rest of the world is fragmented. In addition, the term "international" has been implied rather than articulated. Does it stand for a world culture unconstrained by national ties or global technological development? Somehow the non-western world has been ignored in the standard histories of Modern architecture. According to many mid-twentieth century statements, Modernism was credited with the salvation of the underdeveloped – no room was left for dialogue to take place. Only in later accounts did Modernist pieces become bridges from the West to "approved" non-western architects<sup>10</sup>.

It is quite complex to track the spread of Modernism in Africa which contains 23% of the world's total land and is the second largest continent, housing 13% of the world's population. This huge and complex continent has oppressive climate ranges from heat to humidity, and from the dryness of the world's largest desert to conditions cold enough to support glaciers – complex diversity that makes it difficult to generalise. Infertile soil, polluted water and exotic diseases add to an unfavourable environment. It is a land of both isolated villages where life remains largely the same as it has been hundreds years ago, and sprawling cities with skyscrapers showing a mixture of international cultural influences.

### Formalising the architectural education & profession in Africa

Africa as a continent can be divided into two distinct regions – North and sub-Saharan Africa. North Africa has become an immediately recognisable region – more so than sub-Saharan Africa – deriving from a common language (Arabic) and a common religion (Islam). The countries of North Africa have developed their own cultural identity and historic perception of themselves. The European colonial experience was short-lived and relatively bloodless in this area, with the exception of Algeria. The first half of the twentieth century was European directed and European driven. Architects and developers aimed to recreate Europe in Africa, with few exceptions. Boulevards imposed on the organic city. The garden suburbs were laid out on European lines for a mainly European settler population. The few Egyptian architects in practice in the early decades of the century had studied abroad<sup>11</sup>. Not until the 1920s were indigenous Egyptians able to study architecture in their own country<sup>12</sup>.

Similarly, until the 1920s, architects of the southern African subcontinents were obliged to study abroad before the first local architectural school at Wits<sup>13</sup> was established in 1923 in Johannesburg. Until decolonisation, the region was a direct reflection of the European colonial powers with waves of immigration during the gold rush at the end of the nineteenth century and long lines of supply and communication during the colonial war (Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902) which forced industrialisation<sup>14</sup>.

In 1925 Stanley Furner arrived in Johannesburg and, through his European contacts, introduced Le Corbusier to the school of architecture (his enthusiasm for Le Corbusier was more intellectual than architectural). This was before the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) was founded in 1928 by a group of 28 European architects. Furner published a paper entitled "The Modern Movement

in Architecture" writing about the revolutionising spirit of architectural design in Sweden, Finland, France, Germany, Holland and America<sup>15</sup>.

The fascination with the Modern Movement really started in 1933 when Wits students published *zero hour* (the sans-serif lower case lettering showing their solidarity with the Bauhaus movement). Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier were presented as role models.

In 1934 Rex Distin Martienssen (1905-1942), a South African architect, was greatly influenced by Le Corbusier. Travelling frequently to Europe, he met him, adored his work<sup>16</sup> and established a mutually beneficial relationship. Martienssen was nominated by Le Corbusier as a member of CIAM and joined in 1937. Two years later Martienssen was elected President of the *Transvaal Institute of Architecture*. Unfortunately his early death – while training as a lieutenant in the South African Air Forces in World War II – prevented him from implementing many of his ideas, but his influence lived on.

### Fascinated followers

Le Corbusier first used the term "the Transvaal Group"<sup>17</sup>, a name that has stuck. South Africa was thus at the cutting edge of the Modern Movement in the post-Depression years. Monuments to this period are the residential blocks in the developing higher-density suburbs of Johannesburg and Pretoria. In the 1940s, Expressionist Modernism became popular on the subcontinent after the "Brazil Builds" exhibition (1943). Graduates from architectural schools in Johannesburg and Pretoria promoted the style building a "Little Brazil" (styled against sun penetration – exaggerated louvers, brises-soleil, and egg-crate sun guards) and later "Johannesburg – Berlin", "Johannesburg – New York", "Johannesburg – Philadelphia"<sup>18</sup>, terms illustrating the influences or borrowings from other cities. It was the architecture of the white elite and unfortunately the implementation of the apartheid policy in 1948 transformed the ideology of segregation and division that had already become evident during the colonial era into a set of laws. Apartheid destroyed humans and their relationship leaving a flaw in the architecture of the Modern Movement created in South Africa. However, exceptional work stands for itself. Johannesburg, the industrial and financial hub of South Africa, was central to the expression of *Heroic Modernism* which became the *International Style*<sup>19</sup>. In Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, the architecture of a *Modern Vernacular* manifested<sup>20</sup> as *Critical Regionalism*. South African architecture was continuing struggles over identity against the apartheid and colonial categorisations of race within the architectural profession.

During this period there was a need in Europe and America to rebuild rapidly and economically because of World War II. Aspects of the Modern Movement emphasising the social and managerial role were embraced and applied in cheapened form as mass housing in identical faceless multi-storey blocks based on ideas such as Le Corbusier's Athens Charter. However, the situation in southern Africa was different. The war had hardly touched the subcontinent. There was no demand for mass housing or building industrialisation. The colonial history has created white elite affording houses in low-density suburbs or luxury apartments in the cities. In Portuguese colonies "apartheid" was avoided and since Portugal had been neutral in World War II Mozambique's ports serving Africa experienced a business boom. The

10. Crinson Mark, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, Ashgate Publishing, 2003, pp. 1-3.

11. Mostly in Paris and Constantinople.

12. Stephen Sennott, *Encyclopedia of 20th Century Architecture: Vol. 1*, Routledge, 2004, pp 19-22 (architectural schools in Cairo and Zamalek).

13. Wits states for University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

14. Roger Fisher, "Southern and Central Africa", in Sennott Stephen, *Encyclopedia of 20th Century Architecture: Vol. 1*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 22-25.

15. Norman Hanson, "The 30s: A reminiscence South African Modern Movement", *Architecture SA* Sep./Oct. 2007, pp. 72-74.

16. Clive M. Chipkin, *Johannesburg Style: Architecture and Society 1880-1960*, David Philip CT 1993, pp. 162-70.

17. *South African Architectural Record* (vol.20, no 11 1936, pp. 381-83).

18. Style terms used by Chipkin (1993), the first derived from Pevsner's (1953) observation that Johannesburg was "a little Brazil within the Commonwealth".

19. Particularly in the works of Rex Martienssen, John Fassler and Bernard Cooke.

20. Particularly in the works of McIntosh, Norman Eaton and Hellmut Stauch.

architect Pancho (1925-)<sup>21</sup> designed in Mozambique between 1950 and 1974. He admired Le Corbusier's paintings and the forms of his buildings, but not the machine aesthetic of the International Style which was based on an analogy between the production methods and functions of cars, ships and aeroplanes. Pancho's architecture consisted of one-off products, rooted to the ground, built by hand and responding to African culture. His Latin temperament connected him to the expressive forms of architects from Brazil (Alfonso Reidy and Oscar Niemeyer) and Mexico (Juan O'Gorman) as well as Antonio Gaudi and Frank Lloyd Wright. Unfortunately, social unrest and political and economic instability forced him to leave Mozambique like many others. After the economic collapse his buildings were abandoned and neglected, but their astonishing originality and visual quality of designs – despite their condition – led to the creation of a permanent archive of his architectural work in the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

### Decolonisation / postcolonial Africa or after independence

In the rest of Africa, Modernism is generally imagined as a postcolonial sensation. Most of Africa won independence in the 1950s and 1960s. This reduced the amount of raw materials being transported to Europe and prompted the creation of local industries that in turn caused the creation of new towns, and existing towns doubled and tripled in size. The citizens of these new nations generally had little to bind them together in terms of history or culture – ironically they had to use foreign languages such as English, French, Portuguese and German as common languages. After independence Africa engaged with international architecture on a new scale. Liberated states needed new capitals and the ambitious intentions of pedestrianised boulevards and vehicular routes derived from this need. Postcolonial Africa needed new symbols of independence and started a programme of high-rise building that was not new to the subcontinent (high-rise buildings existed in South Africa which was on forefront in building the tallest modern structures on the continent). There was a great demand for schools, hospitals, civic and administrative infrastructures, roads, electricity, running water and mass housing which ran parallel to the call for radical social changes and reformations that the Modern Movement had the ambition to accommodate. However, Niemeyer said that the answer to these changes is not architecture, but revolution<sup>22</sup>.

The CIAM disbanded in 1959 due to conflicting views. The utopian trend of Modernism was identified as a fundamental fault. "The grand narratives of social and historical changes were rejected as part of machinery of domination of an enlightenment seen through tinted glasses"<sup>23</sup>. But liberated Africa needed liberated spaces. What was achieved in the Western world by employing the potential of new industrially produced materials made of concrete, high tensile steel and float glass did not represent the skills and technology of the majority of newly independent African countries.

From the 1950s through the 1970s dream projects were part of the visions and the agenda of independent movements in different parts of Africa, but many of them were not completed. African architecture of this period reflects the Brazilian influence and in the 1960s was generally International in style and character as can be seen in the simple appearance of buildings, the ubiquitous use of concrete and the clean lines of Modernism representing Le Corbusier (who worked on projects in North Africa and influenced South Africa) and Bauhaus. Blank walls with small openings and wide overhanging eaves acknowledged the influence of tropical and subtropical climates. Similar solutions could be found in South America, South-East Asia,

India and Mexico proving that the Eurocentric/Western aesthetic of the Modern Movement cannot be nothing if not adapted to particular environmental and socio-economic circumstances. The attempts to use local materials and local patterns as well as the silhouette of the top of building have formed the identities of African Modern architecture. They were incidental to the basic concept of International Style architecture<sup>24</sup>.

### Perceiving African flavour / innovation versus inspiration

Indigenous African architecture has been powerful and it has been matter of time to recognise its quality and achievements and implement them. South African architect Norman Eaton<sup>25</sup> (1902-1966) made professional visits to Europe and America, but frequently travelled to East Africa which was already influenced by Islam. He sketched and photographed African culture. This represented more than recognition – it was fascination which was translated into his architecture<sup>26</sup>. He was the founder of a movement with regional and nationalist roots, but without an overt political agenda which opened the "possibility of another way of looking at things"<sup>27</sup> as an outsider in the society of indigenous inhabitants.

North African visionary architect and advocate for the Modern approach to the vernacular, Hasan Fathy (1900-1989) – Egypt's best-known architect since Imhotep – was teaching mud construction in the north. Both tradition and vernacular were explored as precedent. Based on the structural massing of ancient buildings, he incorporated dense brick walls and traditional courtyard forms to provide passive cooling. His book *Architecture for the Poor*<sup>28</sup> became very influential and he pioneered the appropriate technology to implement his designs.

In the late 1960s an international interest in traditional African architecture and styling arose and culminated in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Architecture without Architects* (1964). The oil crisis of the 1970s gave further impetus for alternative low-tech architecture. There was now a concern in conserving traditionally African cities, monuments, and settlements. Critical sensitivity catalysed a re-evaluation of the architectural heritage of the African continent such as the stone city of Great Zimbabwe, Mozambique Island and the Arabic heritage of Zanzibar with the assistance of the Aga Khan Foundation.

Somehow searching for inspiration became searching for innovation<sup>29</sup> – an innovation of seeing a new way of addressing global problems – and imagination embracing the entire world<sup>30</sup>.

### Heritage / memories and conservation

Produced in 1986, programs "The Africans: A Triple Heritage"<sup>31</sup> refer to the three main cultural influences on Africa: traditional African culture, Islamic culture, and Western culture. The guiding wisdoms of this series are: "knowing what one has, and knowing how to protect it" and "what is good for the world is good for my country". South Africa was presented as being a leader for other African countries (because of its expertise and industrialisation). African countries have been stimulated to growth by more influential members of the world. Mazrui stated that "in any

24. Ronald Lewcock, "Architecture in Africa", *Southern African Architect*, March 1998.

25. Graduate from the school of architecture at the Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg.

26. His finest testimonies are the two Banks of Netherlands, Pretoria 1953 and Durban 1966.

27. Conor C. O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 47.

28. Originally published in 1969 as *Gourna* and republished in English in 1973.

29. Oscar Niemeyer stated: "inspiration is not important to me but invention is".

30. Viereck, "What Life Means to Einstein", interview, *The Saturday Evening Post* 26 Oct. 1929.

31. Ali Mazrui, nine of 60 mins programs presented as documentary series in 1986.

21. Amancio d'Alpoim Guedes, known as Pancho.

22. An interview with Oscar Niemeyer on <http://www.metropolismag.com/story/20060515/the-last-of-the-modernists> [Accessed 5 Aug. 2009].

23. Alan Lipman, "The 20th century seen by dim candlelight", *Architecture SA*, Jan./Feb. 2007, p. 95.

fruitful union of the Triple Heritage, the indigenous culture must be the foundation", but I would add that shared heritage requires shared conservation in terms of initiatives, resources and decision-making.

Architectural conservation movements should not be based upon romantic and reactionary values resulting in the falsification of memories. "A city without old buildings is like an old man without memories"<sup>32</sup>. The landmarks of one's heritage are the common property of a people as a whole. Removing them is a kind of vandalism of our common consciousness. Architecture in general forms our memories of time and place, regardless of their style and function. Depending upon who erects and looks after these works of architecture, they become symbols of the power and the privilege of the ruling elite.

In South Africa the question of where and how space for the African heritage can be provided has been widely debated. In 2005, the ANC majority Gauteng provincial government proposed the demolition of ten city landmarks in order to create a new heritage square in Johannesburg<sup>33</sup>. At least four of these buildings had been created by important politically progressive white architects. Imposing their own layer of overriding ideology instead of illustrating history, the project Architect Black with ANC links insisted on demolishing a hotel which had been an important gathering place for left-wing unionists while retaining the Volkskas Bank building, one of the keystone symbols of the apartheid economy<sup>34</sup>. This was based on the lack of real investigation and studies, combined with the claim that anything they proposed must be African because they are African. The reinterpretation of heritage is needed to bring peace that overrides the hurts and prejudices of previous eras. Critical discourse around issues of race and identity at play in the architectural profession is now more urgent than ever to discover common ground between different groups. Collective memory is subject to reinvented and new memories, but false memories should not be introduced.

### Conclusion

Despite being an international style, Modernism has not had international evaluation criteria as part of its heritage. Followers of the movement hold a democratic view, which means that insisting on any kind of architecture would seem to be a wish of "cultural imperialism". However, criteria can be negotiated. We may evaluate architecture in terms of the essence of architecture, namely the fabric and space contemplated with our senses while others may perceive architecture just as profitably as, for example, symbols of oppression or freedom, exclusion or inclusion. Additionally, it is tricky to assess contradictory claims made from within different sets of beliefs. Applying one's own cultural view, when proposing conservation in different regions, is an "empty" desire, especially when one is not financially or emotionally supported. Conservation should be negotiated as shared responsibility, especially when the heritage is shared and multilayered as it is in African context. The process of collaboration is important as well as empowering the people by educating them about their and others' history which will stimulate their freedom to use initiative in their country.

The idea that buildings which have been artistically expressive could lift the human soul and provide pleasure to people is not convincing in the current South African cultural climate in which questions are being asked about whose values are being imposed upon whom<sup>35</sup>. The humanising and spiritual qualities of architecture may be neglected in favour of architecture as external realisations of human attempts

to realise their aims and existence. The potential for individual growth and group actualisation must be explored by acknowledging all parties involved. Historic preservation should allow one to participate in the positive benefits of a globalised economy while resisting the adverse impacts of a globalised culture which will provide an opportunity to Modernise without having to Westernise. Modernism often suffers from a lack of understanding of its historical significance which may be counteracted by bringing advocacy and education to the forefront and viewing it from a broader perspective.

In 2005, during the conference on "Modern architecture in East Africa around Independence" (1950-1975), "both the European and the African viewpoints mostly agreed that the objects of the Modern Movement which were realized in East Africa in the immediate postcolonial areas embody particular kinds of knowledge and lessons that are worthy to be studied"<sup>36</sup>. However, European participants suggested the conservation of the structures derived from the Modern Movement heritage, but – because so many of those independent movement dreams have not been realised – Africans wanted the continuation of the Modern Movement vision rather than a heritage that needs to be diagnosed and preserved. It appears that there is tension between the idea of a Modernist heritage which should be preserved and the idea of reclaiming a Modernist future which has not yet been designed and built.

There have been intellectual landmarks, revolutionary ideas and crises of consciousness in the first half of the twentieth century. It is the right approach to examine African Modernism from critical postcolonial perspectives<sup>37</sup> and to argue for a consciousness and multiculturalists' ethos that operates, after the deconstruction of Euro-centrism, in dialogue with cultural reciprocity. As Oscar Niemeyer stated, anyone who is going to be an architect should invest part of his time in the knowledge of humanism<sup>38</sup>.

Historic preservation should meet the criteria of "authenticity" and "quality" which are crucial elements in economic development. Heritage conservation reinforces the five senses of quality communities: sense of place, sense of identity, sense of evolution, sense of ownership, and sense of community. Historic preservation as an economic development strategy consists of five components: globalisation, localisation, diversity, sustainability, and responsibility<sup>39</sup>. When the physical context is at risk, the quality, character and sustainability of the other assets are at risk too. Perhaps exposing the African inspiration of Modernism could support the conservation of Modernism in Africa as the part of international history.

36. Nnamdi Elleh, "Conserving Modern Architecture in East Africa in post-'colonial/modern' context" in the proceedings of the conference, 2005, pp. 207-11.

37. Michael Janis, *Africa after Modernism: Transitions in literature, media and philosophy*, Routledge 2007, pp. 250-75.

38. An interview with Oscar Niemeyer on <http://www.metropolismag.com/story/20060515/the-last-of-the-modernists> [Accessed 13 Aug. 2009].

39. Rypkema Donovan D., "Globalization, Heritage Buildings, and the 21st Century Economy", in *21st Century Opportunities and Challenges*, Washington: The World Future Society 2003.

32. An old Italian proverb often used by Italo Calvino.

33. Lucille Davie on <http://www.joburg.org.za/content/view/472/58/#ixzz00MVAouQu> as well as <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=287009> [Accessed 18 Aug. 2009].

34. Series of discussions lead by Neil Fraser on <http://joburgnews.co.za/citichat> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2009].

35. Anton Coetzee, *Art and architecture as opportunities to act upon the world* on [http://www.unisa.ac.za/default\\_ID=7234](http://www.unisa.ac.za/default_ID=7234) [Accessed 15 Jul. 2009].