

On the Conservation of Modernist Architectural Heritage

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Towards the end of the twentieth century, the modern movement again started to attract interest. The main objective became registration of modernist buildings worldwide and restoration of their original appearance. It also proved necessary to conserve the most important works. At present, more and more modern movement buildings undergo thorough renovation during which old materials are being replaced extensively with their modern and more durable equivalents. At the same time research continues and some new facts from the history of the movement are uncovered, which somewhat changes the knowledge of this unique period in the history of architecture. It was unique in that it originated from opposition to tradition and rejection of the past with its ideological and aesthetic values. Pure, flagship modernism emerged in several places as a trend parallel to other movements in the twentieth century architecture. Although examples of its original design supported with ideological reasons are rare, the force with which it attacked the neo-historical style together with its contribution to the radical transformations in the system of values and aesthetics have been felt for decades. Its regional varieties can be found in every corner of the globe. They reflect local colour and add unique and original features to the movement that is in principle impervious to pluralistic deviations. At the same time, there appear new aspects of the phenomena which are regarded as fully documented. Sometimes the seemingly well-explored problem entails a surprising new range of issues.

The makers of modern movement architecture were full of good intentions; they declared that they would find solution to all the unsolved social problems and discard a parochial outlook for the sake of global well-being, cosmopolitanism and internationalism. They rejected history and old styles, evil regimes and kingdoms in order to completely annihilate the past. During a period called High Modernism the illusory visions dominated, especially in Europe. The public were fascinated with modernist asceticism which brought closer the utopian fantasies about a brave new world. But the illusion started to decline. Modernism got more and more bureaucratic and commercialized. Architects rejected formal constraints while clients did not accept the imposed framework. Meanwhile, critics continued to point out faults and flaws. This led to some spectacular gestures such as the blowing up, on July 15 1972, of an eleven-storey building in the Pruitt-Igoe complex. The complex consisted of 33 pre-fab high-rise buildings designed by the Japanese architect Minoru Yamasaki in Saint Louis. In many textbooks, the day is still believed to mark the end of the modern movement – the burial of Le Corbusier's idea of a building as a machine for living. Many years later,

modernism returned. The last decades of the twentieth century were the times of the reassessment of this type of architecture and changes in the ways it is perceived. There appeared first examples of successful conservation called "modern conservation" such as the Bauhaus building in Dessau in 1975, Giuseppe Terragni's kindergarten in Como in the 1980s and the remains of the Weissenhof housing estate. In 1988, DOCOMOMO was established. It was an association whose statutory aim was documentation and conservation of modernist architectural and urban planning heritage. The idea was to create an interdisciplinary forum with a view to exchanging opinions and knowledge of various manifestations of the movement. Initially, the attention focused on European issues. The first conference took place in 1990 and was attended by representatives of twenty countries. Two years later, the organization was joined by members from Argentina, Canada, the USA and Brazil. In this way, the institution included people from various corners of the globe where, surprisingly enough, there existed authentic, original architectural heritage which had all the features of universal modern movement although it was mostly tinted with local colour and culturally fitted in with the local atmosphere.

For this reason, the current actions of DOCOMOMO are aimed at the documentation and conservation of modernist objects worldwide as parts of the world's heritage of this historical movement, registration of the reception with which it met in local and global terms and at evaluation of its universal features on an international scale.

While following the actions of DOCOMOMO it is possible to discover excellent new sites with magnificent architecture. Such places can be found on nearly every continent and this type of architecture appeared there mostly with the arrival of colonialists. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, many international exhibitions and publications concerning the modern movement featured the achievements of African artists, including architects. African modern movement was displayed on many occasions starting with the exhibition called *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, 1989, through the show at the Museum of Contemporary African Art in London, 1991 and the Biennials in Johannesburg in 1995 and 1997. The works have the features of universal modernism but are also marked with traditional local qualities and like all the art from the area are dichotomous in nature: they are traditional and contemporary at the same time. The architecture of the continent was influenced by foreign trends and became sometimes colonial and sometimes postcolonial heritage.

One of the African centres of modernist architecture is Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. The city is one of the

biggest assemblages of the modern movement architecture with 400 buildings representing the style. They were built in the years 1925-1941 and designed by Italian architects who acknowledged and respected the new aesthetics of modern times. Their style was simple and functional. In the years 1861-1945, Eritrea was an Italian colony and the most significant buildings were erected there during the period when the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini was in power, that is from the 1920s. It was called City of Dreams owing to the outstanding and valuable modernist heritage which was preserved there. The most remarkable object is the Fiat Tagliero service station (Giuseppe Pettazzi, 1938) which resembles a fighter plane; the central part is a cockpit surrounded with spread wings which are 17 m long and a tail.

In Tanzania, the modern movement appeared together with independence after 1945 and meant transformations. The modern movement architecture that was implemented in Dar es Salaam, the capital city, aroused great interest a short while ago, in 2002, a research programme called "The Modernist Experience in African Art" Salah Hassan surveys the history of Western writing on African art and decries the exclusion of considerations of modernism in Africa, and by extension of African postcolonial modernity, from collection and publication practices in the West. ArchiAfrika¹ was set up. Its task was to register this interesting and unique heritage. The most noteworthy examples of the modern movement in Dar es Salaam include the Catholic church of St. Peter, Oyster Bay (H.L. Shah, 1960-62) and no longer existing building of National Co-operative, Kariakoo (B.J. Ammuli, 1969).

An interesting event concerning African architecture was an exhibition held in Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin from August till October 2008 and called *In the Desert of Modernity*². It showed urban planning and architectural designs which were made in North Africa in the 1950s and the 1960s. One of the cities shown was Casablanca from the period when, on the one hand, colonial administration still had the power to exert influence on new architecture but on the other hand, the architectural implementations of the time triggered anti-colonialism and encouraged the fight for independence. But the main focus of the exhibition was on architecture and its makers involved in modernity and the modern movement. Casablanca, the third largest city in North Africa was, beside Algiers, Oran and Tunis, the site where European architects strove to implement a modern new metropolis, a city of the future, according to the most radical models. Experimental visions had been realized there and in other parts of colonial Africa since the 1930s turning the cities into laboratories where radical new postulates of the modern movement were tested, In the 1940s and 1950s such architectural and urban projects for Algiers, Morocco and Tunis were drawn up by the French office ATBAT-Afrique. The authors of architectural designs included Le Corbusier, Moshe Safdie, Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Van Eyck, Georges Candilis.

At this point, it is worth recalling the project for Algiers. It was a revolutionary proposal by Le Corbusier which was a culmination of his achievements in the field of urban planning, particularly the concept of Ville Radieuse, from the 1920s. Le Corbusier's *Plan Obus* for Algiers³

became one of the most significant projects in the history of spatial planning. His eleven-year long involvement in planning for the city began in 1931 when he took part in a discussion about the prospect of developing the area. He then envisaged Algiers as the most important city in Africa. Half a year later, he started work on the first drawings for the project. Within a year he produced a number of possible solutions. The dominant features of the plan were linear forms, softly rounded housing estates, a viaduct over the Casbah spanning the downtown business district with the suburbs and an undulating housing and transition mega structure. This version of the project was rejected. In 1940, Le Corbusier began collaboration with Petain's government and in the early days of 1941, he arrived in Algiers to make changes in the plan. In the new version the centre was transferred from Quartier de la Marine to Bastion XV in the French district, housing and green areas were pushed 4 km away from the centre. The plan was ready in 1942 but the local authorities again rejected the project. The most serious reservation about the project concerned the planned complete separation of the new city from the vernacular cultural heritage, particularly the religious tradition as well as segregation of Algerians from European community and the brutal interference of the mega structures with the existing development. What strikes most in the *Plan Obus* is the contrast between Le Corbusier's drastic proposal to wipe out Algiers and his admiration for vernacular architecture expressed in his romantic, poetic drawings. This is what he said about his new project: "Here is the new Algiers. Instead of the leprous sore which had sullied the gulf and the slopes of the Sael, here stands architecture... architecture is the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of shapes in the light."⁴ Le Corbusier's great efforts and commitment resulted in a partial implementation of the project in 1952 but the project is a significant intellectual, historical and sentimental legacy.

While Algiers project remained basically at the conceptual level, Casablanca became a site where pioneering ideas in the areas of urban planning and architecture were implemented. It became a testing ground for innovative solutions. Modernism which emerged there was the first step on the road to the very expressive modern style of planning cities or rather suburban housing estates according to rigorous geometrical principles and often executed in pre-fab technology which was obligatory in mid-1900s. The residential solutions in Casablanca were experiments in every respect: urban planning, architecture, sociology and they took place on a site where modernity coincided with the still surviving colonialism. The city was adjusted to dynamic traffic by means of wide thoroughfares. The first underground car park and an American size swimming pool were built there to improve the residents' quality of life. Housing resembled the solutions used later on in European cities.

An example of this kind of urban solutions and architecture of the 1950s and 1960s is the huge housing development of Carrière Centrale, later referred to as a "monster plan" designed on a geometric grid by Le Corbusier's pupil, Michel Ecochard⁵. It was intended to house a growing

1. Carried out by the employees of the universities in Leuven (KUL), Delft (TUD), Eindhoven (TUE), College of Lands and Architectural Studies in Dar es Salaam (UCLAS) and members of Architects Association in Tanzania. Information from: Antoni Folkers, *Modern Architecture In East Africa around Independence*.

2. The exhibition also shows the residents of Casablanca at the time, active architects, colonial administration and scientists who dealt with the problem of the controversial introduction of modernism and resistance to modernization imposed in such manner. http://www.hkw.de/en/ressourcen/archiv2008/wueste_der_moderne/_wueste_der_moderne/projekt-detail_3_26186.php

3. The Plan Obus consisted of three main elements: a new business district on the Cape of Algiers at a site slated for demolition, a residential area in the heights accessible by a bridge spanning over the Casbah, and, finally, the ultimate expression of his "roadtown", which was

a transit system elevated 60-90 m above ground on reinforced concrete supports and joining the suburbs of St. Eugene and Hussein-Day with fourteen residential levels beneath covering the area of 15 km in length. Le Corbusier planned to fill in those spaces with *hygienic and beautiful* homes for the working class that would accommodate 180,000 people. His vision of new Casbah is condensation and restriction of the existing fabric. In the second version of the project made in 1941 he suggested removing the transit roadway and fragmenting housing to create a central Muslim district. This part of the project was implemented. (Nathan Dicks: cu-megablog.blogspot.com/2006/08/le-corbusier-algiers-plans-1931-1942.html)

4. "Here is the new Algiers. Instead of the leprous sore which had sullied the gulf and the slopes of the Sael, here stands architecture... architecture is the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of shapes in the light." Citation: Brian Ackley, *Blocking the Casbah: Le Corbusier's Algerian Fantasy*, http://www.bidoun.com/6_blocking.php

5. The development was designed in 1946 within the framework of the activities of French colonial administration *Service d'Urbanisme*.

number of rural immigrants who moved to the cities in search for work in industry. They first settled in the suburbs forming makeshift houses, shantytowns called *bidonvilles*. It was in such places that anti colonial protests and large-scale social conflicts took place. Therefore, they were removed by colonial administration and replaced by "hygienic" blocks arranged into rows with military precision and intended for thousands of people. Additional segregation by nationalities was introduced which resulted in a particular layout of districts with the centrally placed housing for Europeans, a Jewish district and a Muslim district. The latter was furthest away from the city centre.

Architect Michel Écochard, supported by CIAM members in zoning plans, collaborated with geographers and sociologists to draw up a plan for housing development known as Carrière Centrale. It consisted of two parts: the vast low-rise patio-houses called Cité Horizontale and the central high-rise Cité Verticale which comprised three tall blocks of flats. The urban planning solution of Cité Horizontale had for years remained a model for housing developments. Years after Morocco had regained independence the model was successfully employed. In fact, it was still used in the 1980s.

Écochard commissioned young, dynamic and inexperienced architects to design other housing districts such as El Hank, Sidi Othman (1951) which were designed by Swiss architects André Studer and Jean Hentsch while a team of architects including Georges Candilis, Shadrach Woods⁶ and Vladimir Bodiansky worked on Cité Verticale (1952).

In the Cité Verticale project, the designers referred to the vernacular housing where patios played an important role. The point of departure for the architects were the spontaneously erected neighbouring structures of *bidonville*. They scrutinized especially the interrelation of private and public space. The designers declared the intention to combine the vernacular with modernity but they stacked the housing units. The result was multi-storey buildings in modern technology equipped with contemporary facilities. The project was functional and referred to the "machine for living" principle but based on research into the vernacular architecture, its connections with the specific cultural background, for example, the elevated and shaded balconies were supposed to provide residents with privacy and protect the interiors against looks from the outside. These deviations from the rigorous rules of the "machine" and any concessions made for the sake of adjusting to the local climate and cultural environment were criticized by adherents of puristic modernism. However, it soon turned out that the European quality of the architecture was still too obvious so the residents made corrections themselves; to start with, all the open spaces in the buildings were built in and included in the living space of the flats, the whitewashed elevations were painted all shades of intensive yellow and bonbon rose, next, rooftops turned into terraces and the spaces among the blocks were filled with gazebos and gardens.

With hindsight, it seems that the austere, simple architecture or functional modernism served as a means of control over people and was a tool to attract Algerian immigrants to cities, although they were banned from the centre. Despite the designers' efforts, it had little in common with a traditional Moroccan home which could be extended as the family grew larger. The proposed and interpreted modernism was resented by the people it was intended for. The calculated experiment of European architects which lacked a clear reference to the local tradition as well as

cultural and aesthetic models was considered arrogant. Cité Verticale has been regarded as the most unfortunate realization of modernism.

Paradoxically, a similar interpretation of modernism appeared on the outskirts of European metropolitan cities such as Paris or London since architecture for masses of people which first emerged in the colonial cities of north Africa also appeared in Europe with an influx of immigrants. In this way, colonial history returned to metropolitan cities and European modernity was marked with the experience of independence movements. First riots which expressed social resentment and anti colonial attitudes took place in modernist districts of Casablanca. Similar housing estates in France were also the scenes of riots. Violent riots took place in Le Mirail,⁷ Toulouse in 1998 and in Paris in 2005.

It is worth mentioning that connections are currently found between French colonialism in North Africa, modernist architecture and urban planning and recent social unrests in European suburban housing estates. North Africa as a testing ground for modernism also generated resistance to colonialism and opposition to and criticism of modernism.

In conclusion we can recall the Nara Document on Authenticity.⁸ It stresses the role of vernacular cultural heritage which is particularly significant in the case of new African states and societies, it is common knowledge that global modernist architecture has not been quite successful. One of its drawbacks was unrestrained pursuit of universalism but its diversification through taking into account vernacular cultural identity and authenticity served many noble purposes. Specific regional mutations can be found in every corner of the globe and they reflect local colour and add unique and original values to the movement which in principle was impervious to pluralistic deviations. While modernist purism raised many objections, such departures from rigorous formal principles paradoxically arouse sympathy and interest.

7. Following the 1961 competition, the satellite housing estate Le Mirail was built near Toulouse two years later. It was designed by Candilis-Josic-Woods and could house 100 000 people. Information from: www.hkw.de/en/ressourcen/archiv2008/wueste_der_moderne/_wueste_der_modern/projekt-detail_wueste.php. Artistic director: Marion von Osten, Curators: Tom Avermaete, Serhat Karakayali, Marion von Osten. Accompanying text of the whole project, p. 9.

8. The Nara Document on Authenticity was drafted by participants of the UNESCO, ICCROM and ICOMOS conference on authenticity within the framework of the Convention on World Heritage held in Nara, Japan in 1994.

6. Georges Candilis, of Greek descent and Shadrach Woods, an American, met in Marseille while working on the project *unité d'habitation* in Le Corbusier's office in 1948. Later, they worked together for ATBAT-Afrique designing affordable housing in Morocco. Both Candilis and Woods were active members of CIAM and took part in the works of Team X. They coorganized the 10th CIAM Congress in Dubrovnik in 1955, and in Otterlo, 1959.