

I wish that Lodge's book been available when I was writing my own work, cited above. Had this been the case, it would have saved me months (possibly even a couple of years) of searching for (often obscure) details about organisations and people. The book represents a long-awaited and significant contribution to scholarship. It should be widely read and cited.

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## Africans, Israelis, and the Postcolonial Built Environment

### *Architecture and Development: Israeli Construction in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Settler-Colonial Imagination, 1958–1973*

By Ayala Levin. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. Pp. 320. \$107.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9781478015260); \$28.93, paperback (ISBN: 9781478017882); ebook (ISBN: 9781478091820).

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Ayala Levin's book gives a comprehensive account of Israeli projects in sub-Saharan Africa, based on access to extensive archival material from Israeli architects and contractual firms that worked in Africa from the 1950s to 70s. Levin supplemented these archives with interviews with key actors in this period of activity in Africa. The book uses these materials to explore architectural projects with a focus on three sub-Saharan African countries: Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ethiopia.

Using various theoretical frames — such as the interrogation of selfhood through Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and African positionality as explored by Mahmood Mamdani in *Citizen and Subject*<sup>1</sup> — and working with the archival records of the key actors, Levin argues that the Israeli state's unique engagement with Africa, from shortly following its creation through the present day has been complex and oftentimes contradictory. That Israel positioned itself as an emerging nation-state made it a unique actor in the early postcolonial development aid sector in sub-Saharan Africa, which was dominated by former colonial powers and their Western allies. She argues that Israel was successfully able to reframe its involvement in the 'aid-game' as a genuine collaboration with emerging African partners who shared their aspirations with Israel to break colonial ties and invest in development projects, educational, institutional, and, eventually, commercial ventures.<sup>2</sup> However, Levin also highlights the contradictions in Israeli involvement, as it sought to distance itself from colonial powers and America whilst often being actually or seemingly involved with these same states in the financing and planning for many such African projects. She also charts the transition of Israeli involvement from altruistic collaboration and development to the more

<sup>1</sup>F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1963); M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>For more on the 'aid game', see H. Singer, 'External aid: for plans or projects', in J. Bhagwati and R. Eckaus (eds.), *Foreign Aid: Selected Readings* (London, 1970).



opaque links with international intelligence activities in Africa, including with the evacuations of hostages and refugees from Uganda and Ethiopia in later years.

Levin does not neglect the geopolitics while focusing on the histories of both architects and construction companies that were involved in building projects in Africa. These include Arie Sharon (Ife University, Nigeria), Dov Karmi (Sierra Leonean Parliament), and Zalman Enav (various Ethiopian Projects). She is especially focused on the evolution and development of the construction firm Solel Boneh, an Israeli company that often acted as exclusive contractors for the construction of Israeli projects in Africa. Levin's extensive archival research reveals that Israel was deeply involved in the design and construction of a number of significant architectural projects in these countries. Her work is thus reminiscent of other recent scholarship that has shown the similar involvement and arrangements of Eastern European architects and construction firms during the Cold War. Indeed, *Architecture and Development* provides a good companion read with Łukasz Stanek's *Architecture in Global Socialism*, which focuses on Eastern Europe's contribution to postwar development in Africa, and challenges many postcolonial narratives of tropical modernism's origins and spread.<sup>3</sup> There is clearly further room for definitive monographs on Scandinavian, German, Chinese, and other countries' involvement in postwar Africa's development landscape.

It is important to recognize Israel's involvement in significant architectural projects, as earlier histories have tended to focus on former colonial powers and Western-aligned nations' involvement in Africa's postindependence infrastructure projects. Moreover, many African countries themselves prefer to 'forget' Israel's involvement in development schemes, particularly after Israel's wars with both Palestinians and other Arabs from the 1970s-on, when most West African states pledged allegiance to the Arab Union and cut ties with the Israeli state. Nigeria's case was the most pronounced, as it joined the oil cartel OPEC, which had no ties with Israel.

Israeli projects on the continent also wound down as more developed countries like Ghana and Nigeria set up their own architectural institutes and were able to ensure all architectural projects from the 1960s would need to be undertaken in association with indigenously registered firms. Thus whilst Arie Sharon's design and involvement in the then-named University of Ife was widely known internationally, for many Nigerians the university was thought to have been designed by the Nigerian firm Egbor Associates, which had been Sharon's local Nigerian architectural firm collaborators. Levin's scholarship ensures these facts are made public to all.

Levin's extensive introduction explains the book's evolution and background. Five chapters follow; Chapter One describes the construction of Sierra Leone's parliament building, which would eventually take decades to complete. This is followed by a chapter on the evolution, creation, and reception of an urban development plan for the country. Chapters Three and Four detail the evolution and design of the University of Ife, based on extensive archival material and interviews with key characters involved in the project. Finally, Levin considers the work of Zalman Eyav and his Ethiopian associate Michael Tedros to present a different take on Israeli involvement in Ethiopia, and its more implicit links with military intelligence operations in the country and farther afield.

Her analysis and the lens through which she considers the development processes of these projects draws on contemporary philosophers such as Jean-François Bayart and his view on the specificities of African politics and, as mentioned above, Fanon.<sup>4</sup> It also delves into the 'realpolitik' of Israel, in its exploration of how Israeli actors proposed to use architectural and construction expertise in the hope of gaining a foothold in Africa for its own reasons, such as access to African commercial markets and in some cases mineral reserves (mining in Sierra Leone and oil in Nigeria). Even though many projects did not achieve the resolution that had been imagined, Israel still developed significant links with Africa.

<sup>3</sup>Ł. Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton, 2022).

<sup>4</sup>J.F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (2nd edn, London, 2009).

Whilst this is a well-researched and significant volume, it struggles to engage with the experiences of the Africans who were part of this enterprise and who lived and worked in these edifices. This might be due to difficulties in local access and the limitations of time the author had in Africa to access the archives and individuals who might have provided this contribution. Regrettably, the illustrations are unevenly distributed: whilst Ife is well illustrated, the Sierra Leonean parliament illustrations are limited, and there are generally few plans or sections which would have better illustrated parts of Levin's building analyses. Also, some name-checking might have picked up that the internationally known British contracting firm mentioned in Monrovia was Taylor Woodrow, the same involved in working on the parliament building in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and not Woodrow Taylor.

One feels that the postscript, or final chapter, is an important part of the volume that might have been better explored and unpacked. In it Levin focuses on 'outliers', including the work of Israeli architects on the Abidjan French riviera project, work in Liberia, and later 'humanitarian' work elsewhere in Africa.<sup>5</sup> This postscript arguably gives a much broader background and context to Israel's past and ongoing involvement with states across the African continent. Levin also deftly links these projects to planning policies and ideals in the Israeli state.

In the final parts of the book, Levin references the late Okwi Enwezor's view that we are still waiting for an 'Architecture yet to Come' in Africa.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective this volume could be seen as an apologia for a set of essentially flawed project case studies. This view is perhaps too critical. All of the projects Levin considers were significant and conceptualised differently from the postcolonial infrastructure being delivered by Britain and other Western countries. Thus whilst the Solel Boneh-delivered Lagos Dolphin housing scheme might have been seriously compromised by the difficulties associated with the introduction and use of prefabrication, the Israeli-Nigerian collaboration deserves credit firstly for the introduction of prefabricated construction in Nigeria, whose building industry had till then neither the infrastructure nor expertise to adopt this method. Secondly, it successfully heralded the introduction of mid-density housing for the middle class in the Lagos metropolis. Sharon's dramatically different conceptualisation of the University of Ife buildings defied the 'international tropicalism' style conventions of the British tropical modernists, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, as well as James Cubitt and Kenneth Scott, as evidenced by their earlier university campus designs in Ibadan and Kumasi, respectively. Instead Sharon's University of Ife presented a different design interpretation of a tropical architectural style which responded to both climate and the cultural-contextual specificities of an African tertiary education campus in its own unique and successful way.

Thus, instead of viewing the Israeli development mission in Africa as ultimately unsuccessful in achieving the aim of using edifices and projects to both enhance African national development ambitions and greater Israeli-African trade and economic collaborations, Levin's text reveals the complex histories and background to this period in Israeli-African relations. It also successfully describes the physical and cultural 'bridge-building' that the Israeli actors, from architects to contractors, undertook in delivering these edifices, which have underpinned Israel's relationship to the continent to the present day.

Aside from students, historians, and West African architectural historians, Levin's volume will be of interest to those interested in Israeli 'soft' politics in Africa, as a precursor to its involvement in African security affairs and military intelligence today. It provides an excellent source of archival information on key architects who worked in Africa in the 1950s–70s, and contractors such as Solel Boneh.

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<sup>5</sup>For more on the Riviera project, see M. Hertz, 'Project of a nation: the African riviera and the Hôtel Ivoire' in M. Hertz, *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence* (Zurich, 2015), 382–97.

<sup>6</sup>O. Enwezor, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (Munich, 2001), 45–9.