

# BOOK REVIEW

**Manuel Herz et al., eds. *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia*.** Zurich: Park Books AG, 2015. 640 pp. Photos, Line drawings, and Maps. €68.00. Cloth. ISBN 978-3-906027-74-6.

*African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia* is a compendium edited by Manuel Herz with Ingrid Schröder, Hans Focketyn, and Julia Jamrozik. In addition to essays by each of the editors, there are contributions by Zvi Efrat, Till Förster, Léo Noyer-Duplaix, and Hannah Le Roux, lavishly illustrated with photographs by Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster. Following Herz's introduction, the volume is organized into sections following the order of the countries listed in the title, with the contributors' essays in between. A synopsis of the political history of each country and the architects who worked there during the immediate independence era through the 1970s precedes each section. The inclusion of a double-page spread socio-political timeline with national insignia, flags, photographs of leaders, and iconic national monuments is helpful to the reader's understanding of the overall contexts of the featured structures.

Although the focus is on architecture, several images are visual narratives about life in the various countries, showing how people interact with their surroundings where the buildings under discussion are situated. Featuring about eighty buildings, with accompanying photos showing multiple views and line drawings of site plans and the surrounding urban fabric, this volume is a major contribution to the understanding of mid-twentieth century architecture in the countries covered, and in Africa at large. The inclusion of original plans and drawings from the architects' offices along with maps of the cities where the structures are located shows the attention to detail taken by the editors and the contributors in the preparation of this volume.

The thesis of the book is that "architecture of the independence era allows us to trace the specific nature of the different processes of decolonization. . . . By studying and analyzing the buildings we can gain an understanding not only of the ambivalences of decolonization, its contradictions and inconsistencies, but also its ambitions, aims and aspirations" (8). Also in

his introduction, Herz suggests that the differences between the buildings produced in each sub-Saharan African country emphasize the diverse developmental ideologies and political paths adopted by each country after independence.

Although a few of the images in the volume have been published previously, this is the first time many of the interiors of the edifices have been on display. The archival sources, photographs, and the essays all make the volume a primary source for the study of modern architecture in the countries discussed. The contributors' viewpoints on post-independence political environments in these countries are essential to the understanding of the architectural cultures of the era.

Le Roux's essay showcases the works of Oluwole Olumuyiwa, who was born in Nigeria, educated in Manchester, and has practiced in different European countries. Le Roux also discusses the prolific work in Nigeria of Alan Vaughan-Richards, Maxwell Fry, and Jane Drew, practitioners who created some of the most admirable buildings of the era on university campuses as well as public sector buildings in Ghana and Nigeria. Le Roux's inclusion of the poet, art critic, and writer Ulli Beier, who inspired many Nigerian artists and writers, shows that the era of the 1960s was a period of national optimism, when the artistic, the political praxes, culture, national development, and politics created an ongoing synergy among themselves.

Léo Noyer-Duplaix's summary of the work of Henry Chomette in over twenty countries is noteworthy. Noyer-Duplaix examines the way that Chomette practiced with the geography of the countries in mind, and with sensitivity to the environmental and cultural contexts, an approach to design that we would associate with aspects of regionalism in contemporary discourse. Chomette's elegant design for several national assembly buildings, universities, and town plans, along with his efforts to derive tectonic vocabulary from the local cultures for which he designed is significant. It should be mentioned that Chomette continued works begun by the French in the pre-World War II colonial exhibitions, wherein the designers explored ways to combine traditional African and modern design elements.

The thesis that the major buildings of the independence era in the respective countries reveal the different philosophical trajectories each country followed for its development is examined in Manuel Herz's essay on Abidjan, Hôtel Ivoire, and the project of the African Riviera, which was intended as a tourist and commercial destination. The ambitions of these projects and the skillful manner in which they were accomplished is a testament to the political skills of the late President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who pulled the programs together in a country that was ready to fragment at any moment. He held the country together until he passed away in 1993, after which all the threads that bound the country together gave way, resulting in civil wars. Zvi Efrat's essay on the city plans and the buildings of Israeli architects in several African countries including Chad,

Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Zambia underscores the focus on rapid development after independence.

The essays in the book are not just about architecture. Till Förster's contribution on "land and social order in middle Africa" examines diverse settlement patterns and land ownership models that engendered different kinds of political contexts and national development, while Ingrid Schröder's essay about the contrasts between the earlier colonial exhibitions such as the Parisian World's Fairs of 1878 and 1889 and the 1967 exposition in Montreal, Canada, sheds light on the gradual rise of autonomy among African countries.

All discourses on twentieth-century modern architecture have their shortcomings, and this study, in spite of its significant contributions, has only partially lived up to its intentions to focus on independence and the ideologies that guided national developments. The volume is a study of elite modern architecture in the five countries studied, and it should be emphasized here that the authors have followed the trajectories adopted by historians of twentieth-century modernism across the world, focusing on heroic and monumental architectural and urban design projects. The "Grand Médina, Dakar," designed in 1982 by Cheikh N'Gom (256–59) is a community planned by a trained architect. The urban poor of Africa were also building their houses, churches, and civic institutions in the period in which these nationalist buildings were constructed. Architecture and settlements planned and built by non-pedigreed architects and urban designers have many names in Africa: Bidonville, shanty town, township, ghetto. As Fanon observed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the people of the middle classes use these communities as a contrast to their assumed "successful life styles" by condemning them with exaggerated evil reputations. Fortunately, Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster's photographs of street life are a constant reminder to the reader that alternative modernisms and modernity(ies) existed in the immediate independence era and continue to manifest in the contemporary urban cultures of the cities discussed. Moreover, the photographs remind us that a majority of Africans still reside in houses and shelters designed and constructed by skilled people who are neither famous architects nor urban designers.

Regardless of the symptomatic assumption by historians of twentieth-century architectural modernisms that only architects' and urban designers' work should be privileged, which has been adopted by the editors and contributors, this book is nonetheless an original contribution to the study of African architectural history.

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**For more reading on this subject, see:**

- Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine. 1991. "The Process of Urbanization in Africa (From the Origins to the Beginning of Independence)." *African Studies Review* 34 (1): 1–98. doi:10.2307/524256.
- Malaquais, Dominique. 1999. "Building in the Name of God: Architecture, Resistance, and the Christian Faith in the Bamileke Highlands of Western Cameroon." *African Studies Review* 42 (1): 49–78. doi:10.2307/525528.
- Mark, Peter. 1996. "'Portuguese' Architecture and Luso-African Identity in Senegambia and Guinea, 1730–1890." *History in Africa* 23: 179–96. doi:10.2307/3171940.