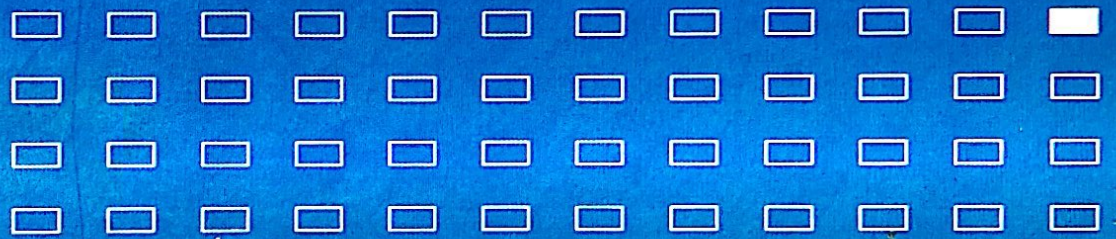


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14th
international
conference
proceedings



adaptive reuse



the modern movement
towards the future

EDITORS

ANA TOSTÕES
ZARA FERREIRA



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6-9 SEPTEMBER 2016

CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION
LISBON · PORTUGAL

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**CASA
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CREDITS

TITLE

Adaptive Reuse. The Modern Movement
Towards the Future

PUBLISHER

docomomo International
Casa da Arquitectura

EDITORS

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Zara Ferreira

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DESIGN

TVM Designers

PRINTING

Gráfica Maiadouro, Portugal

ISBN 978-989-99645-0-1

978-989-96790-4-7

LEGAL DEPOSIT 413 278/16

LISBON, 2016

Indexed by SCOPUS.

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Proceedings of the 14th International **docomomo** Conference
6-9 September 2016
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon

Early Ghanaian Architects

Kuukuwa Manful

SOCIARCHI, ACCRA, GHANA

The story of tropical modernism has been told mainly as the history of European architects in Africa, yet from the 1940s a number of African architects were beginning to practice in their home colonies. These architects have been largely excluded from the histories and discourses of architectural practice in this period. What was their relationship to tropical modernism, and how did their sociological relationship to the colonial system and to European architects influence their reactions to tropical modernist ideas? Understanding this is important to understanding the trajectory of tropical modernism in Ghana, its apparent demise in the 1970s, and its legacy, because these architects were responsible for training subsequent generations of architects after European architects had left post-independence Ghana. I address these issues using historical records and interviews of several Ghanaian architects from this period. I discuss their positioning in relation to tropical modernism as a movement as well as to the British colonial system, and how this impacted their thought and practice. I supplement this with analysis of a selected number of their buildings. Though these Ghanaian architects all self-identify as tropical modernists, their architectural responses and relationship to the movement were coloured by their positions in the socially and racially stratified systems that existed in the architecture industry into the 1970s, and by their personal relationships with European architects. These sociological and stylistic tensions mirror the apparent discord between tropical modernism and its parent Modern Movement: whereas modernism was predicated on opposition to a traditional past, in its tropical modernist incarnation it transformed into an architecture that responded respectfully to climate, context and culture. The dynamics of this transformation – and the role and positioning of Ghanaian architects in it – sheds new light on the trajectory of post-independence Ghanaian architecture, and the relevance of tropical modernist buildings to contemporary architectural discourse and practice in Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tropical modernism is a foundational part of modern Ghanaian architectural identity and yet the story of the style has been told solely through the lens of the European architects involved, even though it is known that during this period there were an increasing number of indigenous architects beginning to practice in Ghana. Who were these architects, how did they relate to tropical modernism, and how can this help us understand the uncertain legacy of tropical modernism in Ghana?

Modernism is usually pitted against the traditional, and in west Africa where colonial cities were virtually empty and the traditional was perceived as primitive, modernist architects had freedom to experiment. Though the initial work of architects such as Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry in the colonies was directed by modernist ideals¹, they soon discovered that the “power of their modernist abstract functionalism to transcend climate, political, and cultural variation proved less potent than they... supposed”². The flat roofs and aesthetic didn't often work³ and thus, tropical modernism evolved in response to the tropical climate, context, and intended users. In later projects in the Gold Coast, Fry and Drew even “inflected local motifs and references”⁴. Similarly, indigenous architects

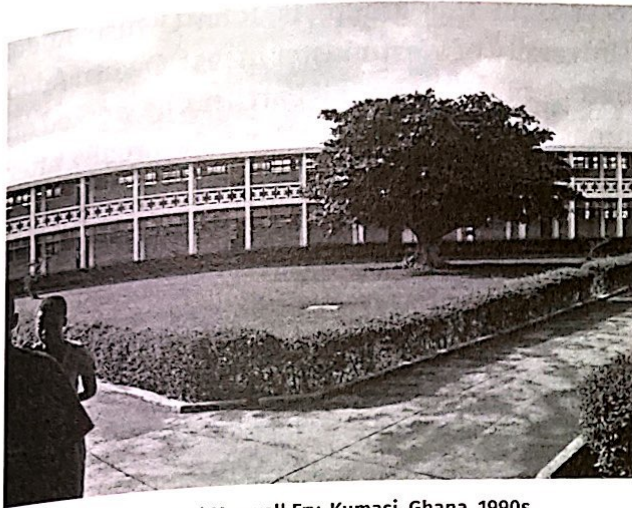


FIGURE 1. Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, Kumasi, Ghana, 1990s.
Honeycomb wall at Opoku Ware School with Asante Stool Motif.
© Kuukuwa Manful, 2015.



FIGURE 2. John Owusu Addo, Cedi House, Accra, Ghana, 1953.
© Kuukuwa Manful, 2015.

responded to tropical modernism in different ways coloured by race, class and personal circumstances by adapting it to suit their specific contexts.

A halt of all major infrastructure projects in the 1970s and a series of coup *d'états* resulted in a mass exodus of foreign architects, leaving Ghanaian architects in charge of the profession for the first time. They influenced much of the current architectural landscape in Ghana through the design and construction of buildings, by training of the majority of architects who are practicing teaching and today, and by setting trends in the built environment⁵. In spite of power crises and rising energy costs, the naturally ventilated and solar-shaded edifices of tropical modernism as well as its minimalistic aesthetic have been missing from much contemporary Ghanaian architecture. Once the bastion of modernist discourse in Africa, and second only to the Architectural Association (AA) globally, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology now proclaims an ethos of "Commodity, Firmness, Delight and Culture" without much documentation about the process of arrival at this ethos. In the last section of this paper, I theorize about how the legacies of tropical modernism and early Ghanaian architects have influenced the current status of the Ghanaian built environment, particularly in Accra, using interviews with 3 architects across 2 generations in academia and in active practice. Tropical modernism's closeness to colonial centers of power affected how it was received, and in Ghana's political upheaval, many turned away from it.

2. EARLY INDIGENOUS MODERNIST ARCHITECTS

Some of the first "formal"⁶ architects in the early colonial period were from elite Gold Coast families and trained in Europe, fuelled by familial wealth and connections⁷. After WWII, others were beneficiaries of scholarships from the colonial government and other institutions⁸. These became the Ghanaian contemporaries of European tropical modernists.

One of the last surviving architects from this group⁹ is John Owusu Addo. After studying architecture at the University of Westminster in 1954, Owusu Addo returned in 1957 to work with Kenneth Scott. At Scott and Partners, he worked on the 37 Military Hospital and the Kumasi Stadium, among others. Eventually, after not being allowed to take the lead on any projects, he left to the University of Science and Technology (UST) Development Office. In 1963 he studied for a year at the Tropical School of the AA after which he took up an appointment at the UST Department of Architecture (DOA) as the first African lecturer.

The DOA at the UST was set up in 1958, based on the British Architectural Education system, placing it in a Commonwealth network even long after independence. Among the first batch of students were Daniel S. Kpodo-Tay and Samuel O. Larbi, who studied there from 1959 to 1965.

Kpodo-Tay is part of a family tradition of building professionals whose artistic instincts and propensity for anticolonial rhetoric showed in his designs and his relationship to the European establishment. He thinks he was purposely failed in his final year thesis and not selected for a scholarship at the AA even though he was an excellent student. He was formally trained as a mason by his father, one of the first building contractors in the Volta Region, and worked as an artist, drawing signs for beer bars in his town. His work includes the Ghana Museum of Science and Technology.

Larbi had a natural instinct for physics and mathematics, and though he struggled with designing "airports and other buildings he had never seen before", he excelled at calculations necessary for designing the angles for solar shading devices. He was part of a group of eight students who were sent to the AA, and in 1970 he returned to teach at the UST. He worked on several buildings, including the Bank of Ghana Cedi House (with Owusu Addo) and the UST Library annex.

3. TROPICAL MODERNISM BY GHANAIAN ARCHITECTS

Form Closely Follows Function: The Dominant Ghanaian Tropical Modernism

Some Ghanaian architects adopted much more of the philosophy of tropical modernism than others, by virtue of their training and relationship to the colonial system. AA-trained Owusu Addo and Larbi interacted with masters of the style such as Drew, Koenisberger and Scott. This put them in a position of privilege within the Ghanaian architecture industry hierarchy¹⁰. Owusu Addo, being the first Ghanaian lecturer at the DOA as well as the first Ghanaian chief architect at the Development Office of the KNUST had privileges that other Ghanaian architects did not. His public buildings such as the Cedi House easily fit aesthetically with those designed by Europeans.

Owusu Addo's indigenous influences feature mainly in the planning of the spaces he designed. A first-hand awareness of family and community dynamics led to his placing of a courtyard in almost every residence he did. He felt "local

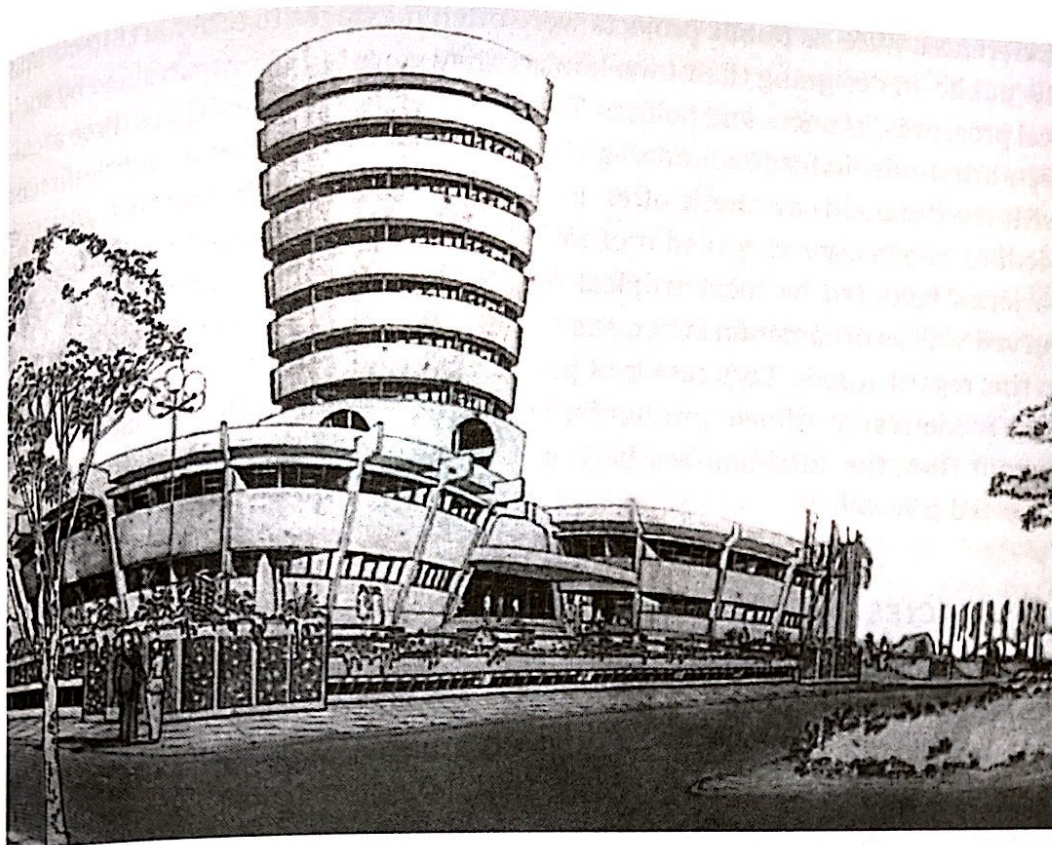


FIGURE 3. D.S Kpodo-Tay, ECOWAS Headquarters Competition Entry, Lomé, Togo. © D.S Kpodo-Tay, 2015.

aesthetic" should be applied only to "local" buildings – for instance office buildings were "foreign to Ghana" and thus should not be imbued with "local aesthetic". Applying art after the building was erected was preferable to incorporating traditional motifs in the form of the building. Similarly, Larbi used courtyards, solar shading and verandas to control climate. In his public architecture however, he was more open to incorporating traditional art and symbols. In the Bank of Ghana in Kumasi, for example, he uses Asante Adinkra symbols generously on the façade of the building.

Form Loosely Follows Function: Tropical Modernism of Dissent

Other architects sought to establish an aesthetic that was visually distinct. They accepted the climatic control, technological and material aspects of the style, but were decidedly expressive in the aesthetic of the buildings they designed. Kpodo-Tay's artistic confidence, his distance from colonial centres of power and his anti-colonial politics led him to this different approach. He was fascinated by symbolism, and often started his design with an overt symbol or a symbolic thought. The forms he adopted were sculptural and often departed from the vertical and horizontal planes preferred by the dominant school of tropical modernists. His entry for the ECOWAS headquarters competition illustrates his sculptural tropical modernism.

Analysing the personal residences of Ghanaian architects – buildings that they designed for themselves – is a helpful way to gauge what their own personal

preferences were, as public projects were often messages to other architects and the public. In designing their own houses, they were far less constrained by societal pressures, finances and politics. The personal residences of these three architects are studies in form, volume, light and profusion of vegetation. Subtle dissent with the dominant aesthetic often appears. Owusu Addo for instance adopts a Mediterranean-style clay-tiled roof rather than the low mono-pitched or hidden varieties favoured by most tropical modernists. He even inserts a protruding curved wall as ornamentation on the façade of his house. Larbi's house is similar in this regard. Kpodo-Tay's case is of particular interest as his choice of the dominant modernist rectilinear profiles for his personal residence hints that his public dissent from the dominant aesthetic of tropical modernism may not have been reflected privately.

4. LEGACIES OF TROPICAL MODERNISM

In its contemporary manifestation, the Ghanaian architecture industry began to form in the time of British colonial rule, and gained momentum in the era of nationalism and independence in the late 1940s to late 1960s – a period which coincided with the peak tropical modernism. It matured in the 1970s when a combination of activism by indigenous architects and an exodus of European architects resulted in the leadership of the Ghana Institute of Architects becoming, for the first time, almost entirely black. The association of tropical modernist buildings with independence also meant that although the style was initially conceived of by Europeans, it became the *de facto* basis of architectural identity in the country for many.

Yet tropical modernism was closely linked with British colonial power, and in the industry hierarchy, the Ghanaian trained in Ghana was at the lowest level. This may explain why architects who by virtue of their academic backgrounds



FIGURE 4. John Owusu Addo, Personal Residence, Kumasi, Ghana, 1975.
© Kuukuwa Manful, 2015.

had better relations with the colonial centre adopted the tenets of tropical modernism more than those that did not. In the political and economic instability of the 1980s, high-ranking indigenous architects were also driven out of the country, targeted because they were highly educated and wealthy. The people that rose in their place were unlikely to have fond feelings for modernism, as it was associated with centres of power they had little access to. However, they did not have much to draw on to form a new basis of identity – for beyond the pyramids, they had not been taught much about African architectural

history before European influence. In fact, it had been disparaged. Fry thought there was nothing useful in the African architectural past¹¹ and even Ghana's first national artist Kofi Antubam insisted that "as far as it is known, Ghanaians have no great concrete architectural, sculptural, ceramic, painting, musical, or literary works to be shown"¹². In Kumasi, which was fully urbanized pre-colonization, all the great edifices had been destroyed by the British. Financial concerns also led to design being driven by easily obtainable materials and clients' directions. This could explain the apparent lack of architectural identity in much of the built environment from the 1980s to the 2000s in particular.

Interestingly, among some young architects there are signs that tropical modernism is making a resurgence. A small new school of architects are revisiting the aesthetics and philosophy of tropical modernism in their practice as they search for a basis for their personal architectural philosophy. For example, Augustus Richardson's design ethos is inspired by a visit to the Scott house as a child. As the architectural world grows more connected and competitive, architects like him are looking to the tropical modernist past to craft an improved future.

NOTES

- 1 Jackson Iain and Jessica Holland, *The Architecture of Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew: Twentieth Century Architecture, Pioneer Modernism and the Tropics*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014.
- 2 Liscombe Rhodri Windsor, "Modernism in Late Imperial British West Africa: The Work of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, 1946-56", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 65 (2), 2006, 188-215.
- 3 Ken Scott for example lost his staff-housing contract at KNUST and all his buildings had to be re-roofed.
- 4 Jackson Iain and Jessica Holland, *op. cit.*
- 5 In an interview with Augustus Richardson, he recalls that the Wangara hotel, designed and constructed by architect Ekow Sam started the trend of covering buildings in (floor) tiles.
- 6 Prior to this, there is ample evidence of precolonial building design and construction specialists such as the Fante builders of the Aban, the Adansi and the Atakpame.
- 7 5 such examples are named in Hutchison's *Pen Pictures*: Rev. Ebenezer Amos Sackey, George Ekem Ferguson, Charles Arthur Albert Barnes, John Buckman, and C. Annan Vanderpuye. See Doortmont Michel and Charles Francis Hutchison, *The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities by Charles Francis Hutchison: A Collective Biography of Elite Society in the Gold Coast Colony*, Leiden, Brill, 2005.
- 8 After WWII, British thinking about their colonies changed significantly and under new education policies, some Gold Coasters from ordinary backgrounds had the opportunity to travel abroad for training. There was a conscious drive

- towards the "Africanization" of the civil service and the opportunities for training were due to the fact that there were actually very few Africans qualified to take up positions in government agencies. See Stanley Shaloff, "The Africanization Controversy in the Gold Coast, 1926-1946", *African Studies Review*, 17 (3), 1974, 493-504.
- 9 Under these scholarships, Peter Turkson, Kwame Frimpong, Victor Adegbite, D.W.K Dawson, T.S. Clerk and John Owusu Addo went to architecture schools in the United States and Great Britain. From the mid-1940s through the 1950s they returned to Ghana to take up positions in the Public Works Department the Architectural and Engineering Services Company, foreign-owned firms and later on to some of the few indigenous companies that hired architects.
- 10 In this stratification in the architecture industry, (white) European architects were at the top of the pecking order, followed by indigenous architects who trained in the UK, then those that trained in the US and other Western countries, and finally at the bottom of the hierarchy were the architects who had trained (or, more accurately at the time, architects who were about to finish training) in Ghana.
- 11 Stanley Okoye, "Architecture, History, and the Debate on Identity in Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 61 (3), 2002, 381-396.
- 12 Hess Janet Berry, "Imagining Architecture: The Structure of Nationalism in Accra, Ghana", *Africa Today*, 47 (2), 2000, 35-58.