Abiodun’s effort to broaden art history by incorporating the conceptual vocabulary of African traditions suggests an alternative methodology that foregrounds linguistic and cultural paradigms grounded in embodied experience. *Yoruba Arts and Language* is therefore a significant intervention in African art history, in an era where scholarly engagement with indigenous African art is receding in favor of a focus on the contemporary. It comes at an opportune moment and provides a methodology for studying African art that is both obvious and radical. It calls on scholars of African art history to secure a deeper understanding of how African philosophy and languages can aid scholarly exegesis. In this regard, the book proves valuable to both scholars of African art and a broader general public interested in the unique workings of the arts and culture of Africa and its Diaspora.

Abiodun brings four decades of work as an art historian to bear in his research for the book and his discussion of visibility in Yoruba aesthetics is grounded in Yoruba epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. The book is therefore unspiring in its demand that readers engage the philosophical and linguistic underpinnings of Yoruba art. Abiodun’s excellent transcription and translation of Yoruba *oríkì* creates an immersive experience for the reader, resulting in analysis that is difficult but not alienating to read. Abiodun transcribes *oríkì* using Standard Yoruba orthography, which sometimes creates a disjuncture between its spoken and written forms. It would be virtually impossible to create certain effects of *oríkì* in English, a problem common to interpretation generally. *Oríkì* is chant and Abiodun notes that the only way to properly render *oríkì* in English would probably be to set it to music. Words in *oríkì* carry both overt and covert meanings. The spoken form relies greatly on complex meanings that emerge from a vast acoustic mélange of drawn-out vowels. Above all, the flow of *oríkì* in performance is affective and calls objects and subjects into action through gestures and dances that accompany recitation.

Art objects and visual culture are texts of sorts. They carry interpretations of synchronic and diachronic data, serve as mnemonic devices and, in many cases, constitute indigenous forms of rigorous historical documentation. Given Abiodun’s stress on African ontologies and interpretative concepts are irrelevant (go ahead: ask an expert on Seydou Keita’s photographs what Mande people call a photograph in their indigenous tongue). Strangely enough, it is the discourse on contemporary art that finally provides art history with relevant tools to understand African art, which is not static and visually structured, but active, affective, multimedia and multidimensional, network oriented, and most importantly, performative.

Abiodun’s *Yoruba Arts and Language* challenges art history to invest in methodologies that champion intercultural perspectives. In a small field such as African art studies, it is easy to mistake the criticism this challenge implies as personal attacks on individual scholars. Such a reading makes it difficult to engage previous research, which often reduces research on specific African art and cultures to the work of a single interlocutor. A field where extant research cannot be subjected to criticism is moribund and unprofessional, since challenges to existing orthodoxy are the only way to advance knowledge. Abiodun calls for radical interrogations of research protocols and methodologies in order to make the study of indigenous African art newly relevant to a younger generation of art historians. Such significant revision is necessary if the study of indigenous African art is to survive without as Abiodun contends, effacing the “African” from African art.

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Edited by Manuel Herz with Ingrid Schröder, Hans Focke­yen and Julia Jamroziel, photographs by Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster

Zürich: Park Books AG, 2015. 640 pp., 909 color and 54 b/w ill., 246 plans. €68, paper

reviewed by Mark Duerksen

Manuel Herz and his team of researchers and photographers have put together a stunning collection of material on Africa’s little-known modern architecture. The book’s 640 pages covering Ghana, Senegal, Côte d’lvoire, Kenya, and Zambia—countries chosen for practical, geographic, and architectural reasons—contain hundreds of photographs of the modernist office towers, schools, parks, private residences, and hotels that shot up throughout the continent during the buoyant era of independence. These structures were often constructed of minimally adorned industrial glass, steel, and concrete, yet adopted “African” inspired forms, patterns, and climatic considerations (especially an emphasis on shade and air circulation), resulting in a distinct physical record of the triumphs, contradictions, and disappointments of decolonization and independence.
Herz’s introduction, “The New Domain: Architecture at the Time of Liberation,” considers what scholars might learn from studying Africa’s robust—yet quickly disappearing—modernist archive and considers what “independent” and “modern” mean in an African context. Drawing on the work of James Ferguson and Frederick Cooper amongst others, Herz discusses the audacity and ambiguities of the independence project as states with colonial borders sought to quickly establish national identities and sovereignty. Modernization provided a tool for both tasks as African leaders commissioned abstract (non-ethnic but still vaguely “African”) symbols of nationhood through architecture and claimed their place amongst established nations by constructing world-class hotels, airports, and government facilities in the international style of the time. However, as the authors comment throughout the book, the fact that predominately non-Africans designed ‘African modernism’ points to the limits of independence and continued circuits of neocolonial influence.

Hundreds of pages of photographs from the five countries profiled follow Herz’s introduction and are spliced with six short additional essays examining specific architects and projects, along with summaries of each country’s political-architectural history. The selection of countries covers a slice of both Francophone and Anglophone Africa and spans the continent geographically, but we can only hope for a second volume covering Nigeria (which is mentioned throughout the essays) and Mozambique (including the work of Pancho Guedes, who is also mentioned in the book).

The photographs of each country are simply unmatched in the field of African architecture. David Adjaye introduced modern African architecture to a broader audience several years ago with Adjaye, Africa, Architecture, but the book’s images were so small that they served as little more than peepholes into the unknown. Here Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster provide the full-page resolution Africa’s architecture deserves. Each country’s chapter includes an introductory set of photographs depicting daily city-life before moving onto specific sites of African modernism. The renowned architectural photographer Baan, along with the equally talented Webster (who recorded Ghana), have captured African cities in a light rarely seen beyond the continent. Thankfully, they made the decision to include people in their photographs, thereby illustrating how the buildings are in a sense living spaces—lived and worked in, adapted, and worn. Gems include Kwame Nkrumah University (James Cubitt and Partners, Kumasi, 1951), Ministry of the Interior (year and architect unknown, Dakar), École Nationale D’Administration Ena and Hotel Independance (BEHC Henri Chomette with R. Depret and T. Melot, Dakar, 1970s), Immeuble Kebe (architect unknown, Dakar, 1973), La Pyramide (Rinaldo Olivieri, Abidjan, 1968–1973), Kenyatta International Conference Centre KICC (Karl Henrik Nostvik, Nairobi, 1966–1973), Faculty of Architecture, Design and Development Add, Uon (Poul Kjaergaard and Partners, Nairobi, 1972), and Evelyn Hone College (architect unknown, Lusaka, ca. 1962).

The additional essays expand on important themes and provide overviews of several seminal architects who worked in Africa. Hannah de Roux, who has published widely on African modernism, discusses four “sites” of postcolonial architectural experimentation: the “unequivocally modern” (p. 134) Nigerian architect Oluwole Oluumuyiwa; the European architect Alan Vaughn-Richards (whose work de Roux and Ola Oduku are archiving online: sites.cca.ed.ac.uk/avarchive/), who settled permanently in Nigeria and worked to combine traditional housing with modern materials; the well-known art critic and patron Ulri Beier, who criticized European architects such as Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew for lacking “the basic principle of African life: rhythm” (p. 137); and the innovative Kumasi School of Architecture. Léo Noyer-Duplaix contributes a chapter on the largely forgotten but prolific modernist Henri Chomette, who saw Africa as an architectural “escape” from postwar Paris. Chomette’s incorporation of local aesthetics into his extraordinary interiors and facades is remarkable for the era and worth a book in itself. In the chapter “Proxy Colonialism: The Export of Israeli Architecture to Africa,” Zvi Efrat writes on the significant linkages between Israel and Africa during the independence era as Israeli architects provided architectural expertise and a nonaligned source of modernization in exchange for influence amongst the rapidly multiplying African states. Efrat discusses the University of Ife in Nigeria in depth as a structurally incredible example of Israel’s architectural diplomacy.

In the introduction, Herz sets out two purposes of the book: to document Africa’s modern architecture before it’s demolished and to challenge mainstream portrayals of Africa as a land of squallor and conflict, thereby “normalizing” Africa. Clearly the book succeeds in its dual purpose. In addition, one of Herz’s main theses—that the architecture of the independence era allows us to trace the specific nature of the different processes of decolonization (p. 8)—is exemplified by his chapter tracing Hôtel Ivoire’s turbulent history. The Hôtel was conceived in the 1960s as a five-star welcome to Félix Houphouët-Boigny’s “open-door policy,” and later it was used as a military garrison during the country’s civil war, abandoned, and recently renovated and reopened. Likewise, in a chapter on the African pavilions in the Montreal Expo 67, Ingrid Schröder looks beyond the continent to the history of World Fairs and Expos, skillfully interpreting how “each Exposition in turn condensed the whole of the world into a curated reflection of itself” (p. 627). She examines how “Africanness” was interpreted over time from primitivizing notions of tribal “otherness” in the nineteenth century’s proudly imperial Expos to the more decentralized Expo 67 where African nations began to brand “Africanness” in new—often explicitly modern—ways.

Yet much of the rest of the text falls flat in explicating Herz’s thesis of architecture as archive. Most of the blurbs accompanying the photographs are formalist interpretations and include little perspective on how historic processes intertwined with the changes these structures have visibly undergone. The book’s layout presents modernism from the 1950s onwards alongside structurally similar buildings from the 1980s without thorough consideration of the dramatic difference between how colonial regimes employed modernist designs and how independent African leaders did. Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew’s 1950s plans for the University of Ibadan were not intended as a sign of emancipation from a colonial legacy (p. 620) as Till Förster suggests, but were in fact the product of deeply racist assumptions about Africans (the University’s geometricMass orientation and climatic controls were intended to “awaken” Africans who had “slumbered on for centuries” in “agricultural apathy” [Fry and Drew, 1982: 24, 22]) and were part of a ploy to increase productivity by molding a “proper” industrial labor force in Africa. Further interrogation of these strands of thought embedded in architectural designs will help illuminate the sticky questions regarding the limits of liberation and the chimera of modernization that Herz begins the book with. Additional interviews and archival work will help overcome the research limitations that Herz readily acknowledges in the introduction.

As David Adjaye is fond of saying “Africa is an extraordinary opportunity”—and, as African Modernism shows, this is true not just for contemporary architects but also for research on architectural history. African Modernism’s documentation and scholarship will help form the backbone of this extraordinary field for years to come.

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