the years ahead. May they all push the boundaries and stimulate new possibilities in the architectural wilderness. In 2017, the Architectural Association will celebrate 100 years of women at the AA, and the programming leading up to this celebration has highlighted many new ways of understanding how and why women’s presence in architecture is as significant and innovative as it is—still, tragically—ignored and suppressed. The definition of “maverick” adopted in the Royal Academy exhibition did not allow for those whose risks in architecture took place not only at the drawing board but also in their very selves.

The exhibition’s principal aim, however, was to open up discussion of what constitutes exciting architecture and how tough it can be to produce such architecture, and at this it succeeded admirably. The design at the Royal Academy took hefty buildings like Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel’s St Olaf House and Charles Holden’s Senate House, both bold interwar gems for central London now listed and broadly admired, and transformed their bulk into bubbles, with an array of circles arranged to form fragmentary renderings of these buildings’ striking façades. George Atchison, master of Queen Anne splendor and Islamophilic fantasy for Frederic Leighton, the prolific Gothic Revival polemicist A. W. N. Pugin, and the visionary Victorian castle crafter William Burges were present too, although their names in aquamarine —tragically— ignored.

The need to assemble a large cohort of British architectural maverickhood into a challengingly tight space no doubt gave birth to this exhibition design idea, and the range of colors and summaries of selected radical designers and their projects made for pleasurable viewing.

Ultimately, however, even within the restrictions of budget and space, just one object per architect—a plan, an elevation, a model, a swift sketch on a cocktail napkin, a witty telegram—would have brought this exhibition to life and drawn out many of the strong points regarding surprise, innovation, and resilience that Hopkins makes in the accompanying book. As it was, the exhibition served as an eye-catching spur for the curious to seek out the nearest (or, even better, most eccentric) building by one of the show’s many mavericks, burst the bubble of the exhibition’s jaunty floating design, and journey out into the streets to see this risky architecture firsthand.

AYLA LEPINE
University of Essex

Related Publication

Note

Architecture of Independence: African Modernism
Vitra Design Museum Gallery, Weil am Rhein
20 February–31 May 2015
Graham Foundation, Chicago
29 January–16 April 2016
Maison de l’Architecture, Geneva
20 May–30 June 2016

Architecture of Independence: African Modernism was curated by Manuel Herz, with photography by Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster. The exhibition’s title situated the buildings displayed in the West African postcolonial period, spanning the decades from the end of World War II to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when all West African states attained self-rule or independence from colonial rule. This era was dominated by an architectural shift from the typical colonial “public works department” style to the International Style. This architectural movement was espoused in Africa mainly by groups of young expatriates, including a few indigenous architects whose Western training had been influenced by the design theories of Bauhaus pedagogues such as Walter Gropius, the manifestos of CIAM, and the architecture of Le Corbusier. In the tropical climate zone, which comprises much of Africa and Southeast Asia, this new version of the International Style was adapted to respond to the climatic concerns of these warmer regions; it became known as tropical modernism, a theme echoed in this exhibition’s title.

The exhibition was unusual in that it followed from the curator’s similarly titled 2015 book. This edited volume gives a more comprehensive account of Herz’s examination of African modernism, comprising a set of essays that support the book’s pictorial content. The exhibition therefore provided a curated set of photographs and supporting exhibits from the more extensive material to be found in the book.

The main exhibition, as mounted by the Graham Foundation, consisted of a series of curated pictures arranged by country across different rooms and floors of the foundation’s building. Most of the photographs displayed had originally been commissioned for Herz’s book and were taken by Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster; these were juxtaposed with some historical photographic material. The photographs were supplemented by a collection of documentation and artifacts related to the planning projects of the modernist era that the exhibition covered, displayed in a vitrine on the second floor.

As visitors walked through the unassuming entrance of the Graham Foundation in downtown Chicago, they were transported into a curated space of what, from a distance, seemed like a well-designed display of holiday snapshots of the past (Figure 1). On closer inspection, and having fully absorbed the introductory information, they gained a better understanding of the meaning of the exhibition’s two connected spaces. Organized by country, collections of photographs “snapshot” size produced a photo album–like collage of building views in contemporary settings. Viewers were guided by the terse commentary placed alongside the photographs but were otherwise left to contemplate the images, which depicted a body of architectural work evoking a bygone era.

On the second floor, the large vitrine mentioned above dominated the main gallery space, attracting scrutiny of its contents. More varied sets of pictures appeared on the walls—the majority were larger than the postcard size of those on the ground floor, and a few were blown up to a larger scale. This variability enhanced the “curated” visual effect of the walls. In the vitrine, documents relating to projects conceived and projects built were on display. The rare and unique nature of this documentation was clear, and the accompanying text provided some context for the often incomprehensible sociopolitical and socioeconomic background against which the noncompletion
or demise of many of these projects had to be understood. The exhibition tailed off on the second floor with little fanfare, but it left viewers with the distinct impression that they had been given an exclusive look at a significant volume of pictorial material from the five countries discussed in more detail in Herz’s earlier book.

A cast of predominantly male, expatriate architects dominated the buildings displayed. Dorothy Hughes’s Basilica Cathedral Project, Nairobi (1960), brought a desired breath of diversity, as did the significant body of work on display from two Senegalese architects, Cheikh N’Gom and Pierre Goudiaby Atepa. It seemed a shame that for Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda, the only African architect whose work was presented was John Owusu Addo, in connection with the Unity and Africa Halls of Residence (1964–67) and the Staff Club (ca. 1960) at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), all works on which Owusu Addo collaborated with others. His Cedi House (Accra, 1973), for which he was sole designer, was not displayed. S. O. Larbi, a younger contemporary of Owusu Addo, was unaccountably absent from the Ghana display. Larbi was involved in a number of projects in the 1970s, including the School of Basic Science and the National Cultural Centre in Kumasi, and he had assisted Owusu Addo with Cedi House.2

A number of interesting and previously uncelebrated pieces were included in the exhibition. Among the revelations were David Small’s Dag Hammarskjöld Memorial in Ndola, Zambia (1977–79); Jean Leon’s Lycée Mamie Adjoua schools complex in Yamassoukro, Côte d’Ivoire (1962–70); and Roger Tallibert’s somewhat later space-age Président Golf Club (1982), also in Yamassoukro. Further, the histories behind better-known landmarks, such as Karl Henrik Nøstvik’s Kenyatta International Convention Centre (Nairobi, 1966–73), William Pereira and Thomas Leitersdorf’s Hôtel Ivoire (Abidjan, 1973), and the unbuilt African Riviera scheme (1970) made for very interesting reading.

The number of “unknown” buildings from Dakar, such as the immeubles Briere de l’Isle and Kebe, added to the questions raised by this exhibition. Were local documentation and memory so ephemeral that no records existed concerning these significant contributions to Dakar’s urban fabric, or was there simply not enough time for the exhibition organizers to dig this information out? In Lusaka, Zambia, the Lorenz House (1967) and the “designer unknown” Evelyn Hone College building (ca. 1962) again showed the different sensitivities and scales of buildings that constituted Africa’s modernist legacy.

The intrigues of aspiration, political power, and economics played themselves out in the displayed drawings of an African Riviera project that was never built. The exhibition texts highlighted Israel’s largely unpublicized involvement in African construction projects, evident both in the uncompleted African Riviera scheme and in elements of Julian Elliott and Anthony Chitty’s unfinished University of Zambia master plan (1965–68) (Figure 2). One wonders what would have been had the...
African Riviera project not been aborted. Côte d’Ivoire’s role as the only approved West African refueling stop for flights to Johannesburg at the height of the apartheid era was not mentioned—did this have a bearing on the proposed Riviera project and its eventual demise?

Alas, the exhibition privileged the buildings and works of the main players, the expatriate architects, and visitors rarely got a sense of who the other actors were—contractors, builders—or indeed of the “voices and views” of today’s users. The one exception to this was found in the recorded activities of the protest movement centered on the Hôtel Ivoire during the civil insurrection in Abidjan in 2004, which brought a chilling reality to the material on display.

The exhibition represented a significant undertaking, presenting a major body of work in a relatively open-ended way, allowing visitors to view, engage with, and make their own sense out of its meaning. The African Modernism book, with its critical essays by a range of authors on specific countries and themes in African architecture of the time, provides a much more in-depth contextualization of the material that was displayed in the exhibition.

Architecture of Independence worked at a much more intimate scale than the more extensive 2014 exhibition Africa: Big Change, Big Chance, which was presented in Milan. Architecture of Independence succeeded in presenting material that had, until that point, remained uncollated and “silo-ed” within national and linguistic boundaries. The amalgamation and paring down of the exhibits to essentially a large body of photographs, with a vitrine display of tightly curated documentation, meant that the exhibition succeeded in presenting a neat, edited version of the messiness of the lived-in “everyday modernism” that characterized much of urban Africa from the 1950s through the 1980s.

OLA UDUKU
University of Edinburgh

Related Publication


Notes

2. This information relating to Owuso Addo and Larbi was obtained through personal interviews I conducted with both architects during the conference Conserving West African Modernism, held at KNUST Kumasi, 13–14 July 2015.