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THE POST-COLONIAL TURN AND THE MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE IN AFRICA

Abstract: Modernism as a trend in architecture is rarely associated with the colonial policy of the European powers. Nevertheless it was one of the tools of the "Western" expansion in Africa, simultaneously a constructive and a destructive force. It was a reflection of the changes in the modern world and at the same time it led to an unavoidable break with the local identity and tradition. "The Year of Africa" (1960), when as many as 17 states proclaimed independence, paradoxically did not bring any radical changes in architectonic solutions. Public facilities were still constructed according to "Western" modernist convention. Political dependence of the new countries on their respective "mother states" has been to a significant degree reduced and sometimes even broken. At the same time their relations on the level of architecture have remained almost unchanged, thereby pushing the "periphery" to the role of a "province". Critical analysis of the effects of colonialism merges post-colonialism with neo-colonialism, understood as control exercised by the metropolis over the decolonised peripheries.

Keywords: Africa, modernism, decolonisation, post-colonialism, modernist architecture

The concept of the post-colonial turn used in literary research is inextricably linked to the interaction between the centre and the periphery of the empire. Critical analysis of the effects of colonialism merges post-colonialism with neo-colonialism, understood as control exercised by the centre over the ostensibly independent (decolonised) peripheries. As claimed by Gayatri Spivak, the domination of the Western vision led to the cultural sterilization of the conquered regions. Modern architecture became one of the tools of the "Western" expansion in the African states. Hasan-Uddin Khan has called it a constructive and a destructive force at the same time. It was a consequence of the changes

in the modern world and at the same time it led to an unavoidable break with the local identity and tradition.¹

The post-colonial turn in culture

The main task in analysing the role of modern architecture in post-colonial Africa is to identify and define the basic concepts. In the research on colonialism and post-colonialism the starting point is almost always the empire, defined by Richard van Alstyne as "a dominion, state, or sovereignty that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and power".² Michael Doyle describes it as "a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society".³ Imperialism is then "simply the process or policy of maintaining an empire".⁴ The phenomenon of colonialism cannot exist outside of the imperial universe; the term refers to settlement in the remote parts of the territory, which then become the property of the metropolis and are controlled by it.⁵

The provinces subordinate to the central government become fully dependent on it in terms of politics, economy and culture. Those relations with one centre prevent them from becoming "peripheries", which Andrzej Szczerski, referring to Ljubo Karaman's theory, defined as crossing points of influence of various centres, which consequently leads to the creation of new values.⁶ A "province" is only a disfigured reflection of the idea of the metropolis, which often leads to its negative valorisation as supposedly inferior. In the times of post-modernism, researchers have paid more attention to marginal phenomena, and Gayatri Spivak has argued for seeing the relation between centre and margins as one of partnership rather than one of opposition.⁷

What then, in the light of the above-mentioned definitions, is post-colonialism? This notion is still a subject of debate, because the prefix "post-" strongly suggests that we are dealing with a consequence of the colonial era, which has passed in both chronological and ideological sense. Meanwhile,

¹ H.-U. Khan, "The impact of modern architecture on the Islamic world", in: *Back from Utopia. The Challenge of the Modern Movement*, ed. H.-J. Henket, H. Heynen, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 2002, p. 174.

² R.v Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire*, Oxford University Press, New York 1960, p. 6.

³ Michael Doyle. 1986. *Empires*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 45.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In A. Loomba, *Kolonializm/Poskolonializm*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2011, pp. 22-23.

⁶ A. Szczerski, *Modernizm na peryferiach. Architektura Skoczowa, Śląska i Pomorza 1918-1939*, ed. A. Szczerski, Wydawnictwo 40000 Malarzy, Warszawa 2011, p. 8.

⁷ G. Spivak, *Strategie postkolonialne*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2011, p. 204.

Leela Gandhi points out that talking about the consequences of colonialism does not mean that colonialism is already over.⁸ This is put in a more decisive terms by Frantz Fanon, who declares on the pages of *The Wretched of the Earth* that "colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories."⁹ Although his radical position may seem to be marked with the revolutionary buzz of the 1960s, we must not underestimate the importance of the decolonisation processes or the fact that the relations forged by the colonial governments set the grounds for the current imbalance between the "First" and the "Third" Worlds. The reaction to colonialism, understood as a period when the West tried to negate the cultural value and identity of the "non-West" was nationalism. The idea of national unity allowed for the integration of all layers of society hitherto perceived as subordinate to the colonizers. Fanon was convinced that, although a nation state does not have to be the best political solution, the very national anti-colonial mobilisation was an adequate response to the problem of the provinces becoming independent from the metropolis.¹⁰

The understanding of nationalism in post-colonial reality differs significantly from the European connotations of this term. Robert Young wrote about its "Janus face" - its dual character: while nationalism is positive as a model during the struggle for independence, after that it becomes something negative.¹¹ Similarly ambivalent is the theory of Pan-Africanism, personified by the Negritude movement, which "both simplifies the complex cultural formations and forms new exclusions."¹²

Modernist architecture as a tool of colonial policy

Colonial heritage is diverse and heterogeneous. The discourse based on the binary opposition of the occidental and oriental worlds misses not only the differences covered by those terms. The colonies which do not belong to the East-West axis are somehow automatically ascribed to it. It is thus important to draw a precise outline of the scope of the research area relating to those issues. The object of my analysis will be the modernist architecture of the colonial and post-colonial times in Sub-Saharan Africa, excluding the Republic of South Africa.

⁸ L. Gandhi, *Teoria postkolonialna. Wprowadzenie krytyczne*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2008, p. 16.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Transl. by C. Farrington. Grove Press, New York, 1963, p.101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹¹ In E.W.Said, *Kultura i imperializm*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, p. 77.

¹² A. Loomba, *Kolonializm...*, pp. 222-223.

Modernism as a trend in art and architecture is often linked with the ideas of social egalitarianism. It is rarely mentioned that its development took place in the heyday of the European colonial empires.¹³ Its status as an "international style" resulted mostly from the fact that it was developing and forming at the same time in various parts of the world. Its characteristic features were developed in Germany, Holland, and France – in the cultural, geographical and social contexts different from the ones the designers might have encountered in Africa. Nevertheless, modernism was treated as a boon for the underdeveloped countries.¹⁴

The policy of transferring the architectural patterns from the metropolis to the conquered provinces had functioned well before the crystallization of modernism as a style. The formal and technical solutions which were part of the European tradition "were codified in formulas which became the symbol of national identity [...]. Other issues than commonsensical use of local raw materials or adjusting to the climate turned out to be more important. Thousands of miles from home the colonists remembered who they were thanks to the shape of the houses they constructed. What was initially a technical and pragmatic issue became ideological and emotional."¹⁵ After World War I the leaders of the "modern movement" carried out their projects in the far corners of the globe. Alternatively, their ideas travelled there along with the Western infrastructure and technology.¹⁶

The architect who had the greatest impact on the development of modern architecture on the African continent was undoubtedly Le Corbusier. The fascination with his work dates back to 1933, when the students of architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg published a manifesto entitled *Zero Hour*, where they presented Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as the examples to follow.¹⁷ A year later, Rex Martienssen designed Peterhaus – a multi-family residential building, whose shape, structure and functional layout are a clear reference to Corbusier's five principles of modern architecture. Martienssen himself, during his visit to Europe, not only learned about the latest trends in Western architecture, but also met Corbusier, which resulted in his invitation to CIAM (the International Congress of Modern

¹³ M. Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot 2003, p. 1-3.

¹⁴ B. Jękot, *Afrykańskie oblicza modernizmu. Inspiracje, dominacja i tożsamość*, in: *Architektura pierwszej połowy XX wieku i jej ochrona w Gdyni i w Europie*, ed. M.J. Sołtysik, R. Hirsch, Urząd Miasta Gdyni, Gdynia 2011, p. 72.

¹⁵ Deyan Sudjic, *Kompleks gmachu. Architektura władzy*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2015, p. 179. Translation mine – B.C.

¹⁶ H.-U. Khan, *The Impact of...*, p. 177.

¹⁷ B. Jękot, *Afrykańskie oblicza modernizmu...*, p. 73.

Architecture).¹⁸ Corbusier was also a reference point for the architect Amancio d'Alpoim "Pancho" Guedes working in Portuguese Mozambique, who valued the formal aspects of his architecture, although he never accepted his idea of the house as "a machine for living."¹⁹ Instead of the industrial aesthetics of the international style, Pancho preferred the designs based on traditional African ones.

It is worth showing here how Le Corbusier perceived Africa. In his letter to Martienssen dated 1939 he wrote: "Johannesburg seemed to me just about at the end of the earth, in the middle of the lions and Negroes, that is so say... inaccessible."²⁰ His placement of the Republic of South Africa at the end of the earth, outside civilisation, is consistent with his reflections included in his notes from his journey to the Orient (1910-1911), which put him in the position of an observer, who visits East in search for exoticism. Such an attitude was accurately characterised by Said, who described the discourse about Africa as an organized language allowing the West to subjugate Africa to their needs. "If it wasn't for the European observer, who certifies their [native people's - BC] existence, it would not matter"²¹ - he commented ironically on the occidental sense of civilisational superiority.

The character of modernist architecture in Africa

The natural conditions in Africa enforced some limitations on the European architects, who had to adapt the buildings they designed to the climate. Sometimes they were also inspired by the traditional handicraft to introduce details and decorations of clearly local character. Ernst May, architect of the modernist housing estates in Frankfurt am Main, in 1937 opened his office in Nairobi. He was commonly believed to be one of the first Western architects who strived in a scientific, systemic way to adapt the avant garde solutions to the needs of the tropical climate.²² His approach is visible not only in the shape of the building (with verandhs or wide eaves and "brise-soleils" shading the windows), but also in aligning it with the directions of the sun. In Frankfurt, where insolation is higher than in Kenya, May designed the rooms along the North-South axis,

¹⁸ H.-U. Khan, *The Impact of...*, p. 178.

¹⁹ B. Jękot, *Afrykańskie oblicza modernizmu...*, p. 74.

²⁰ F. Demissie, "Controlling and 'Civilising Natives' through Architecture and Town Planning in South Africa", in: *Modern Architecture in East Africa around Independence*, ArchiAfrika, Utrecht 2005, p. 173.

²¹ E.W. Said, *Kultura...*, p. 218.

²² N. Ogura, "Ernst May and Modern Architecture in East Africa", in: *Modern Architecture in East Africa around Independence*, ArchiAfrika, Utrecht 2005, p. 82.

while the majority of his African realisations were planned on the East-West axis.²³ Ernst May's approach differed both from the construction policy, typical for the colonies, of implementing traditional architectural solutions from the metropolis and from the ignorance of the local character, which can be seen even in the rationalist solutions of the Italian architects, designing new edifices in colonial Eritrea in the 1930s.

In the 1950s, successive African states began their successful struggle for independence. It peaked in 1960, called The Year of Africa, when as many as 17 states proclaimed sovereignty from their former metropolitan centres. The emerging states saw the redefining of their identity as more important than ever before. The redefinition of symbolic space also encompassed the heritage of the colonial period, including its architecture.

It needs to be emphasised here that decolonisation was often a gradual process, whose end we are not able to define precisely. Ramon Garfuel dispelled the illusion of the possibility of considering it as a closed phase. "One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administration amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myth of the 'postcolonial' world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past fifty years. We continue to live under the same 'colonial power matrix'",²⁴ Even after gaining independence, the former metropolis remained the main trade partner of the colonies (e.g. France for Senegal and Niger) and maintained military its contingents there (France in Chad, Republic of Central Africa, Senegal, Mali and Ivory Coast) to protect the repatriates and to maintain the dominant political role in the region.²⁵

In the light of the political and social changes, also the attitude towards the modernist architecture, which in Africa was a foreign, alien creation, should have changed. But it did not. We can point to only single cases of the critical verification of the assumptions of the "modern movement" undertaken by the creators educated in Europe or the Republic of South Africa. Apart from the already mentioned "Pancho" Guedes in Mozambique, this group includes Richard Hughes (Kenya), Julian Elliott (Zambia), Justus Dahinden (Uganda) or Norman Eaton, Helmut Stauch and Gawi Fagan (RPA). Their attitudes towards modernism and their attempts to include the creative elements of local

²³ Ibid., p. 84-85.

²⁴ R. Grosfoguel, *The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms*, „Cultural Studies” vol. 21 (2/3) 2007.

²⁵ *African Modernism. The Architecture of Independence*, ed. M. Herz, I. Schroeder, H. Focketyn, J. Jamrozik, Prak Books, Zurich 2015, p. 6.

tradition in their work let us consider them as the exponents of Frampton's idea of "critical regionalism".²⁶

Until the 1950s, the architects active in Sub-Saharan Africa were solely the graduates of the European or South African universities. It was only when more states began to gain their independence, that the KNUST (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) in Kumasi (Ghana) and the Makerere University in Kampala (Uganda) were founded. Nevertheless, we can claim that the education of African architects was and still is dominated by the European universities and the Western way of thinking about space.²⁷

Modern movement in post-colonial Africa

Modernist architecture became one of the tools of constructing a new identity of the independent African states. It was part of the vision of modern, independent Africa. The luxury estates in the suburbs formerly inhabited by the white colonizers were to be replaced by new districts, bigger and more glorious. Some new architectural realizations show the great ambitions of the local governments, often of supra-regional scope.

In Accra, the capital of Ghana, the Public Works Department realised a grand complex commemorating the regaining of independence in 1957. A huge Independence Square was erected between the old town and the new developing Christianborg district. In the times of the British reign, this area was occupied by a horse racing track and a cricket field.²⁸ It was symbolic that the space which was used for the white colonisers' entertainment was turned into a monument of the regained independence. Completed in 1961, it consisted of tribunes for 30000 people which surrounded the Parade Square. The Independence Arch with the presidential tribune was erected on its edge. Kwame Nkrumah, governing independent Ghana, was an advocate of Pan-Africanism and he saw his country as the leader of changes in the region. Located on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, on the verge of Africa, the Independence Arch was to be a symbolic gate to the continent, highlighting the important role of Ghana in creating its most recent history.

President Kwame Nkrumah treated modern architecture as an extremely important political instrument. He considered the creation of Ghana's own infrastructure as one of his government's priorities, along with the development of education. The result of the president's initiatives was the erection of

²⁶ A. Folkers, *Modern Architecture in Africa critical reflections on architectural practice in Burkina Faso, Tanzania and Ethiopia (1984-2009)*, SUN, Amsterdam 2010, p. 385.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

²⁸ *African Modernism...*, p. 47.

the International Trade Fair complex in Accra (1964-1967) designed by the team of Polish architects Jerzy Chyrosz and Stanisław Rymaszewski, and of the KNUST University in Kumasi (1951) designed by James Cubitt. An extremely important investment in the times of Kwame Nkrumah was the National Museum in Accra designed by Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew, Lindsay Drake and Danys Lasdun (1956-1957). It housed the first national arts collection in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the building became a symbol of cooperation between the new government and the remaining colonial administration during the period of transferring power.²⁹ Although the shape of the building is close to Lasdun's British realisations conforming to the late modernism trend, the architects tried to adjust it to the specifics of the climate in Ghana.

In a different way, the designers of FIDAK (Foire Internationale de Dakar, 1974) – Lamoureux, Marin and Bonamy took into account the character of the place. Over the area of almost 60 hectares they created 120 000 m² of exposition space for the fairs to take place every two years. Next to general-purpose buildings they erected a number of pavilions in characteristic triangular form, which referred to different regions of Senegal. Their façades were finished with the materials characteristic for the given regions (ceramics, stone, mosaics). Combining modernist shapes with local materials or ornaments inspired by local handicraft became relatively common among the European architects working in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. In the building of Zambia's National Assembly in Lusaka (1966) Montgomerie, Oldfield and Kirby used the local natural stone, which they combined into a coherent whole with Corbusier's *béton brut* (raw concrete). Fry and Dew reached for transposed folk ornaments in the campuses they designed in Kumasi (Ghana) or Ibadan (Nigeria). Although the attempts to inscribe the "Western" modernism into African cultural context can be assessed positively, it needs to be remembered at the same time that those attempts were close to the "orientalism" criticised by Said and the perception of the world from the colonisers' perspective.³⁰

The symbol of progress

The aesthetics of the international style in post-colonial Africa became a symbol of development and progress. The discourse enforced by the West was as if spontaneously adopted by the independent states searching for their identity. When in the 1970s Louis Renard and Jean Semichon were designing the

²⁹ Ibid., p. 48-53.

³⁰ A. Loomba, *Kolonializm...*, p. 60.

administrative district in Abidjan (1973-1978), they rejected the solutions worked out in the previous decades within the so-called "tropical modernism". Separated from the city, the skyscrapers housing government agencies and offices did not differ at all from similar objects emerging in Europe or the United States.³¹ The simple "boxes" with smooth façades made up of glass and aluminium curtain walls were evidence of the progressive aspirations of the Ivory Coast, quite like the modern, "Western" hotels emerging on the so-called "African Riviera".

A couple of years earlier, when creating the "La Pyramide" shopping centre in Abidjan (1968-1973), the Italian Architect Rinaldo Olivieri openly declared that he had no intention to repeat the mistakes of the modernists designing glass towers in African cities.³² Working with the concept of a structure in the form of a steep pyramid, he was also inspired by traditional marketplaces, which he transferred into the building as open stalls located on two levels. The large scale of the building, containing not only commercial spaces, but also office spaces and an enormous underground car park, resulted from the architect's and the investors' faith in an uninterrupted development of the Ivory Coast. Unfortunately, economic problems prevented the pyramid in Abidjan from being completed and today only a small part of it is in use.

The ambitions of the governments of independent African states translated directly into the scale of the construction plans. Commissioned by the president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, the Norwegian designer Karl Henrik Nostvik started work on the new headquarters of the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) presidential party in Nairobi in 1966. Originally the building was to be of a modest size, but it was considerably expanded when it turned out that in 1973 Nairobi would host an official meeting of the World Bank representatives.³³ Finally, the edifice ended up as consisting of a congress hall with a conical top, and a 32-storey skyscraper. In time, the building, which in the meantime had become the icon of Kenyan independence, was transformed into a Kenyatta International Conference Centre, KICC.

Modernist architecture plays a dual role in Africa. In the 1930s it was part of the modernisation and Westernisation policy enforced by the European colonisers. In the period of the successive African states regaining their independence it became a symbol of their progressive aspirations. Paradoxically, even though the ideology underlying the new realisations changed, their form, except for a few cases, did not. For years Sub-Saharan Africa was waiting for its equivalent of Hasan Fathy - the Egyptian architect who combined the

³¹ *African modernism...*, p. 314.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 320.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 432-434.

achievements of modernism with the traditional way of shaping space and the construction materials known for thousands of years.³⁴ Fathy claimed that "Modernity does not necessarily mean liveliness, and change is not always for the better... Tradition is not necessarily old-fashioned and is not synonymous with stagnation."³⁵ His sentiment is close to the designers of the young generation, who consciously and consistently try to distance themselves from the modernist semantics enforced by the colonial dominance of the West. Its consequences are still visible and the attempt to change them is inscribed in the theory of the post-colonial turn, which, as Robert Young sees it, focuses on the changing world. The practitioners of post-colonialism desire to change it further.³⁶

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³⁴ B. Jękot, *Afrykańskie oblicza modernizmu...*, p. 75.

³⁵ W.J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, Phaidon Press, London 2005, p. 569.

³⁶ R.J.C. Young, *Postkolonializm. Wprowadzenie*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2012, p. 19.

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ZWROT POSTKOLONIALNY A ARCHITEKTURA MODERNISTYCZNA W AFRYCE (streszczenie)

Modernizm jako nurt w architekturze rzadko bywa łączony z polityką kolonialną europejskich mocarstw. Tymczasem stał się on jednym z narzędzi ekspansji „Zachodu” w krajach afrykańskich. Była siłą budującą i niszczącą zarazem. Stanowiła odzwierciedlenie przemian współczesnego świata, a jednocześnie prowadziła do nieuchronnego zerwania z lokalną tożsamością i tradycją. „Rok Afryki” (1960) kiedy to niepodległość proklamowało aż 17 państw, paradoksalnie nie przyniósł radykalnych zmian w obszarze rozwiązań architektonicznych. Obiekty publiczne nadal wznoszone były w „zachodniej”, modernistycznej konwencji. Polityczna zależność od „krajumatki” została w znacznym stopniu zredukowana, a niekiedy całkowicie zerwana. Równocześnie związki na płaszczyźnie architektury pozostały niemal niezmiennie, spychając tym samym „peryferie” do roli „prowincji”. Krytyczna analiza skutków kolonializmu łączy postkolonializm z neokolonializmem rozumianym jako kontrola sprawowana przez metropolię nad zdekolonializowanymi peryferiami.

Słowa kluczowe: Afryka, modernizm, dekolonizacja, postkolonializm, architektura modernistyczna