



LA TRIENNALE DI MILANO

BIG CHANGE

Africa

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element specially made in response to certain conditions. The project becomes the point of intersection and superimposition of these components: *dispositifs* can act on very different scales and should not be considered merely as technical elements but rather, as Michel Foucault puts it, as "formations which, in a certain historical moment have the essential function of responding to an emergency; the *dispositif* therefore has an eminently strategic function."

The strategic function of the architectural element proved to be key to understanding what the fundamental African characters sought by Fry & Drew might be: an architecture in which impelling climatic conditions and social habits form each element by means of a continuous process of interaction and fusion between man, the environment and the community. The *dispositif* interacts strategically with these various stimuli and acts on different levels: on the architectural level it may constitute a technological system that adapts to changing conditions, while at the urban level it acts as a trigger and a means for containing planned or spontaneous expansion processes. In any case, the strategic function is always key, and the architectural element becomes a manipulation of existing power relationships, both to point them in a certain direction and to stop them, fix them and use them once again.

Architecture as the intersection of *dispositifs* is therefore a strategic act of combining the available data. By doing so, it makes a vast amount of data accessible and intelligible: every decision is made by processing selected data and by strategic decisions dictated only by the concepts of economy and opportunity. The concept of the economy of decisions is inspired by the Greek term that gives us the word, *oikonomia*, the administration of the *oikos*, or "house": this is not a theoretical concept but a practical task that on each occasion needs to deal with a problem using a series of strategic decisions that need to be continuously renegotiated.

This laborious research remains as the most important legacy of the ideas of Fry & Drew, creating an anti-vernacular vision of Africa which views the difficult starting point as an opportunity to come up with high-

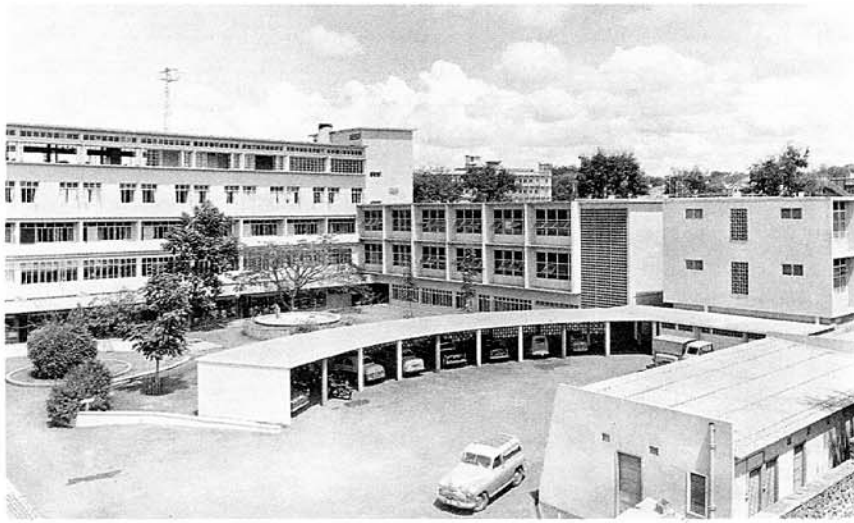
quality solutions. Fifty years after it was first published, the *Tropical Architecture* manual remains a formidable tool and its influence, with some changes and innovations, can be seen in the development of African architecture.

ERNST MAY. KILIMANJARO NATIVE
COOPERATIVE UNION | Kai Gutschow

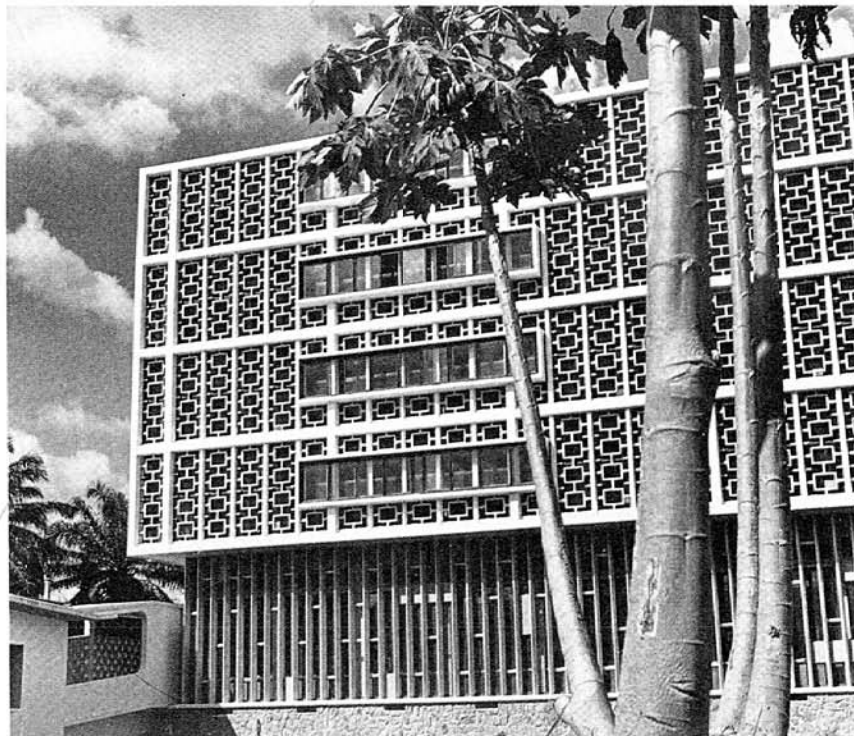
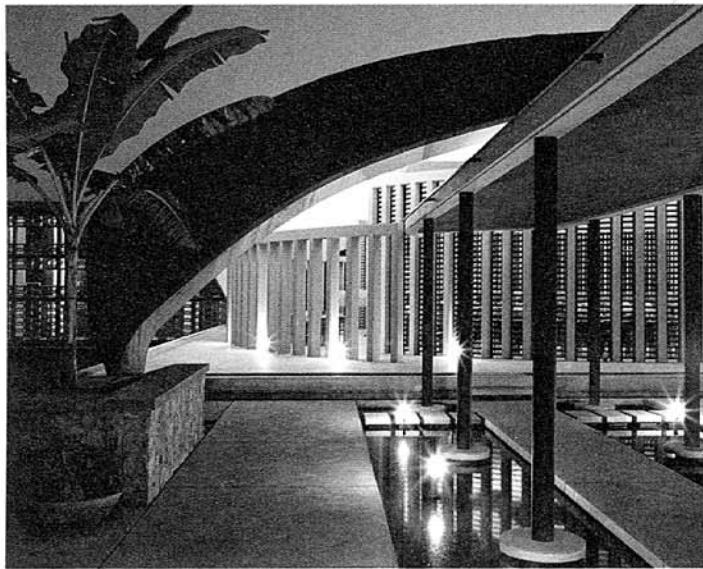
The Kilimanjaro Native Cooperative Union (KNCU) building in Moshi, Tanzania, was designed 1949-52 by the German emigre architect Ernst May and his English-trained partners I.W. Patterson, E.W. Miles, and W.H. Saunders. It is significant as one of the first large modern buildings to be financed and built by African clients, a prominent example of modern architecture's spread to the Third World in the postwar era, and an early example of "tropical modern" architecture with a sensitivity to local climate. It represents simultaneously the beginning of a trend towards modernization and independence of African architecture, and the last gasp of a fragmenting English colonial empire implanting its metropolitan, technocratic ideals on a foreign people, culture, and place.

Moshi, founded as a German colonial garrison town, was a growing city at the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro that had enjoyed considerable development under English rule as a center of increasingly profitable coffee farming by local African farmers, primarily of the Chagga tribe. The building was commissioned by a cooperative union of Chagga coffee farmers as a multi-use cultural and business center, open to all races, and eagerly promoted by the English colonial government. Although May and his English colleagues still held very paternalistic views on the primitive nature of Africans, the KNCU and its building were part of larger plans to propel the primarily agricultural population towards greater urban and economic development, and eventually towards more independent existence and self-rule. May, in fact, returned to Germany to pursue larger building opportunities before the building was completed, in part because of the increasing tensions and struggles for independence in Kenya and Tanzania. May had become famous as the chief city architect of large-scale, CIAM-sanctioned, social housing projects in Frankfurt, Germany,

* | Ernst May, Kilimanjaro Native Cooperative Union, Moshi, Tanzania, 1949-52.



* | Fry&Drew, Ibadan University, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1949-55.



between 1925 and 1930. After a brief stint building industrial cities in the Soviet Union, May emigrated in 1933 to British East Africa, where he purchased a large coffee plantation in nearby Arusha, Tanzania. Although he gave up coffee farming after a few years to start an architectural practice in Nairobi, with offices in Kampala and Mombassa, and built projects all over East Africa, his early connections in the Moshi area undoubtedly helped him land the large KNCU commission.

The building is set back on a large triangular parcel jutting out from one of Moshi's central roundabouts. A drawing suggests that it was supposed to include manufacturing and warehouse facilities closer to the traffic circle. The realized building consists of three multi-story, single-loaded corridor blocks arranged in a rectangle to enclose a central courtyard, joined at the corners by stair towers, and open to the north and views to the scenic mountain. The central and eastern blocks along Old Moshi Road contain retail shops on the ground floor and offices on the first floor. The central block contains a hostel on upper floors that were built in two phases. The third block consists of a restaurant, an auditorium, meeting rooms, and parking. A library was included over the shops along the road, a museum was planned to teach locals about old traditions and the geology of Kilimanjaro. At the official opening in 1952, the English governor suggested that a training school should be added to the cultural center to further bridge the races and advance the Chagga people in their quest for development and independence.

The reinforced concrete frame, plain-surfaced white building is emphatically part of the international style of modern architecture that May helped pioneer in Frankfurt, and that he helped import to Africa in the mid 1930s. By the late 1940s, however, May was but one of a series of English architects such as Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew, Amyas Connell, and others that began to spread what they saw as a contemporary, rational, and functional style across much of Africa. The modern style was increasingly promoted through the English architectural press, which celebrated and helped circulate the style and its potential to bring together a broad variety of ideals and agendas. Its "rational" com-

positional strategies allowed program and performance to be primary drivers of design. Although clearly a European import, modern architecture's abstract forms were easily read as "new" and different from the colonial predecessor. May's rendering of the cultural center's auditorium and museum spaces, whose very functions represent European cultural constructs, present more questions about the interaction of races than they answer. Do they show a European display of "primitive" masks or locals exhibiting their own art? Do the murals represent May's rendition of local art or his own attempt at "primitivism", borrowed from Le Corbusier? Or is it contemporary art in the spirit of Robert Motherwell? Was this an African attempt at self-expression or a colonialist attempt to find an adequate representation of others? From Brazil and India, to Japan and Africa, the myth arose that modern architecture was increasingly able to adapt to a variety of cultural and climatic settings, and able to be read as simultaneously international and local, both fashionable European import and the first steps in the development of an independent African architecture.

Critics and historians including Udo Kultermann and Dennis Sharp, and even Ernst May himself, highlighted the climate-oriented concerns that increasingly drove May's design process and decision making in his African work from 1933-53. His architecture is included in Fry and Drew's original *Tropical Architecture* book from 1956, and since then in the great volume of literature on tropical architecture, regional architecture, climate-oriented design, and even green architecture. From its site strategy and room arrangement to construction details, May insists that the KNCU was designed with deference to the African climate. The central building block is oriented East-West to minimize the exposure to the sun, as well as take advantage of views towards Kilimanjaro. The entire complex has an array of sun-shading devices, from asbestos panels blocking the open corridors on the southern facade, to perforated concrete block screens in the stairwells to maximize ventilation and yet allow light in and glimpses out. The stores are shaded by deeply overhanging porticos, and wicker trellises covered the early rooftop restaurant. The concrete frame construction, as well as roof cavity details are designed to maximize

airflow and passive cooling. Despite these efforts, the KNCU was far from sustainable or green, and very few details were local or regional. And yet, as studies of postwar architecture are increasingly confirming, buildings such as May's KNCU were important stepping stones in decolonization and the move from a colonialist and starkly modernist universal, functional design sensibility, towards a more flexible design paradigm that can be molded to suit a variety of cultural, technical, and climatic sensibilities.

LOUIS MIQUEL, AÉRO HABITAT AND UNITÉ D'HABITATION | Dorothea Rügger, André Ravéreau

In 1949 the HLM cooperative commissioned the architects Louis Miquel, Pierre Bourlier and José Ferrer-Laloe to design a residential complex. With 284 apartments of different types, from single-bedroom to split-level apartments, it was to be built for the employees of the Ateliers Industriels de l'Air, which gave the complex the name Aéro Habitat. The housing complex, which covered an area of about one and a half hectares, was built just above the Malglaive park in Algiers. The four buildings stand on the hills that surround the city, which in those days were planted mainly with olive trees and cypresses, creating interactions with the lay of the land. Two buildings with three floors above ground lie parallel to the contour lines, while the other two, one with 16 floors above ground and the other with 22, lie at right angles to them. The main entrance is on the Boulevard Colonel Krim-Belkacem, at the end of the taller building, where an entrance hall contains a lift that leads to the shopping mall on the tenth floor¹.
L. Miquel, *Algérie, Techniques & Architecture*, 329, 1980, pp. 60-61.

This building is considered to be one of the most important works by Louis Miquel, an Algerian architect who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers and later in Paris. Here he was admitted to Le Corbusier's firm, where he completed his studies. The influence of Le Corbusier is clear to see in the Aéro Habitat and the similarities between the main building and the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille are immediately evident: the architect's clear reference appears almost to reinforce the Marseille-Algiers connection theorised by his

teacher². Le Corbusier, letter to the mayor of Algiers, 1933.

In spite of the origins of the parent company, the housing complex remains a typical example of European architecture exported to Africa. On this matter, issue number 60 of the French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* of 1955 is revealing, for just after the complex was built, the publication referred to it under the title almost propagandistic "A European-Style Habitat".

Leaving aside geopolitical and economic issues, the housing complex played an important role in the urban planning of Algiers, for its size and position as well for the fact that it was an important opportunity for experimentation.

In this regard, the views of the architect André Ravéreau are interesting, because they illustrate how the building adapts to its setting, unlike the original model. In an intriguing comparison of the two buildings, which imaginarily face each other on opposite sides of the Mediterranean, his account is very frank in its very favourable critical opinion of the Algerian complex. This is all the more significant since Ravéreau, unlike other French architects working in the African colonies, always displayed great independence from the modernist language of Le Corbusier. The following account is the outcome of a long conversation between André Ravéreau and the present writer in Lentillères on 20 March 2014.

According to Ravéreau, in order to understand the fundamental difference between the two buildings, it should be borne in mind that the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille is pure theory: concentrating a whole city in a single building raised entirely off the ground, bringing the communal areas of an apartment block into the public sphere. To achieve this, Le Corbusier set the Unité d'Habitation on stilts. This is the first obvious difference from the Aéro Habitat, a building that does not need to detach itself from the ground, but rather accepts its bond with the slope. This is the first indication of Miquel's non-dogmatic approach when it comes to applying his teacher's principles. But then the free space beneath the stilts in the Unité in Marseille is underused because, since it is exposed on two sides, it creates annoying draughts and it is not at all pleasant to spend any time there.