
Johan Lagae

**Ana Tostões (ed.), *Modern Architecture in Africa: Angola and Mozambique*,
Lisbon: ICIST, Técnico, 2013**

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- 1 The colonial history of Portugal is particular in several ways. Not only was Portugal among the first European powers to create an empire; its colonial territories in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe) were among the last to become independent in the aftermath of the *coup d'état* of 1974 that brought an end to Salazar's regime of the Estado Novo. The colonial wars that preceded this independence profoundly marked the collective memory of the country's colonial past, to the extent that the topic remained taboo when Portugal sought to reinvent its national identity. It was indeed not until the mid-1990s that Portugal was ready to deal with its colonial past. This particular context helps explain why there existed 'amnesia' about twentieth-century architecture in Portugal's overseas territories, long after architectural historians had started to rediscover modern architecture in Africa in the late 1980s.¹ Indeed, the first substantial publication on the topic, José M. Fernandes's book *Geração Africana. Arquitectura e cidades em Angola e Moçambique, 1925–1975*, was published only in 2002. Over the last five years we have witnessed the production of important new scholarly work, notable examples being a series of articles on the topic by Ana Vaz Milheiro, compiled under the title *Nos trópicos sem Le Corbusier. Arquitectura luso-africana no Estado Novo* and Maria Manuela da Fonte's PhD research *Urbanismo et Arquitectura em Angola*, both published in 2012.² Yet, as these publications are written in Portuguese and locally edited, they have had little impact on architectural historiography so far. As such, the book under review, *Modern Architecture in Africa: Angola and Mozambique*, edited by Ana Tostões, forms the first substantial account in English on the topic and has the potential to bring it to an international audience.
- 2 The voluminous and richly illustrated book results from a research project led by Tostões, which was initiated in 2008 with funding from FCT, the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (or Portuguese research funding agency). The title of the project, "Exchanging World Visions: modern architecture in Lusophone Africa (1943–1974). Looking through Brazilian experience established since the 1930s", is telling. As the book demonstrates throughout, the research indeed aims to link the built production in Angola and Mozambique to wider currents of twentieth-century architecture. The chronology presented at the beginning and spanning the period 1942–75 is revealing in this respect, as it juxtaposes events and buildings in Portugal, Angola and Mozambique with those occurring on the international scene, the latter largely being defined as the 'centre' (p. 24–59). Throughout the book resonates an agreement on the strong impact of Le Corbusier's work and thinking on architects operating in the lusophone territories in Africa—one of whom actually worked in the French master's office at the Rue de Sèvres³—while it is repeatedly suggested that the free-form modernism and climate-responsive architecture that emerged in Brazil in the 1930s forms the crucial vector of influence to understand the architectural production in Angola and Mozambique between roughly 1942 and 1975. This line of reasoning is emphasised by the strong focus on the formal analysis of projects, with a recurrent effort to highlight the use of characteristic features such as pilotis or *brise-soleil* (the latter being, due to an odd editorial choice, always referred to as "brise-solei").
- 3 The thesis of a Brazilian *filière* in Portuguese architectural culture is not new. Actually, Ana Tostões herself was one of the first to discuss this link in her pioneering book *Os Verdes Anos na Arquitectura Portuguesa dos Anos 50*, and Ana Vaz Milheiro also touched on its importance in her PhD research.⁴ But, as the suggestive title *Nos trópicos sem Le Corbusier* of her aforementioned collection of essays makes clear, one does not necessarily need Le Corbusier to discuss all architectural production in Angola or Mozambique, as a large

part of it stems from architects operating in idioms that reveal an adherence to Beaux-Arts models or to the rather bureaucratic architectural types developed within the milieu of colonial administrations. The reader should thus be aware that the book edited by Tostões focuses only on that very specific part of the built environment that in canonic historiography is most often termed “Modern Movement” or “International Style” architecture. What this book is about, then, is very much what Dennis Sharp as early as the 1990s called the “Diaspora of Modern Architecture,”⁵ a notion meant to describe the export of modernist architectural ideas, practices and models invented in the “centre” to the “periphery” since the 1930s. The lengthy text in which Ana Tostões provides the larger framework for the book indeed starts with the notion of “the Modern Diaspora” and defines the African continent in terms of a “Colonial Lab”, thus reiterating what has become a trope in recent literature on modern architecture in Africa, namely that in African colonies “the architectural expression was freer than the one practiced on [sic] the metropolis” (p. 66).

4 Browsing through the book, one cannot but be struck by the high standards of the architecture produced by Portuguese architects in Angola and Mozambique. Apart from the idiosyncratic work of Pancho Guedes, which was already picked up by Udo Kultermann in his 1969 book *New Directions in African Architecture*, buildings like the Beira Railway Station by João Garizo do Carmo, Paulo Melo Sampaio and Francisco José de Castro, which was inaugurated in 1966, the Monteiro & Giro Ensemble in Quelimane by Arménio Losa and Cassiano Barbosa (1954–1960), the Veterinary Academic Hospital in Huambo by Vasco Vieira da Costa (1970), the Prenda Neighborhood Unit in Luanda, designed in 1963 by Fernão Simões de Carvalho, the Terrace Cinema Flamingo in Lobito, a 1960s project by architect Francisco Castro Rodrigues, or the 1970 project for the Reguladora Factory in Maputo by João José Tinoco are all striking pieces of architecture, testifying to the talent of their designers.⁶ The same holds true for all projects selected, which, because of their formal and often sculptural qualities, have the capacity for seducing the viewer, a characteristic forcefully captured in the photographs of Inês Gonçalves that are included in a 2009 panoramic survey entitled *Moderno Tropical. Arquitectura em Angola e Moçambique 1948–1975*, for which Ana Tostões wrote the preface.⁷ Yet, as photogenic and seductive as these projects might be, there is a need to go beyond the celebratory discourse on the rediscovery of this remarkable modernist legacy in Africa and start to reassess it in historiographical terms. As such, there are some fundamental critical observations to be made regarding the chosen approach of the book under review, on the level of both its documentary and interpretative objectives.

5 In terms of documentation, the editor should be credited for having included architectural drawings for almost all the projects discussed. Part of these come from archives either in Portugal or Angola/Mozambique. But in the context of the research project, new drawings have also been produced for specific projects. In a short text, in which he points to the different challenges met in terms of existing documentation, Vincenzo Riso explains the objectives of this “redrawing operation,” which partly resulted from the fact that working conditions did not always allow high-quality reproductions of original drawings. The result is a set of drawings along common graphic criteria that, according to Riso, serve to “represent the morphological, constructional and aesthetical values that the Modern Movement architecture experienced in Lusophone African countries” (p. 23). Laudable as this ambition might be, the book would have gained considerably from stricter editing of the new drawings. Newly drawn façades provide little added value to the photographs. As no legends indicating the various different functions are included, it is often very difficult to relate the drawings to the detailed information on a building’s programme and organisational concept in the descriptions. The choice to produce sections is, of course, commendable, as they reveal the climate-responsive nature of a specific project, but often their small size, and the lack of indication where exactly a section is made, make it hard to fully understand them. Finally, given the fact that many of the selected projects are urban landmarks, it is a pity that virtually no site-plans are included, as these would have enabled the reader to measure the way in which architects often skilfully integrated their design in a particular urban surrounding, an aspect that is explicitly mentioned in several of the project descriptions. This last remark is also applicable on a more general level. Even if Tostões does

spend some words in her introduction on the emergence of the particular urban landscapes in the Portuguese overseas territories, the book very much presents us with “masterpieces” as isolated architectural objects. The project description of the TAP-MONTEPIO building in Maputo, written by Maria Manuela Oliveira and Jessica Bonito, forms a notable exception in this respect, as it succeeds in pointing out the innovative ways in which the design of this landmark building, which is situated in the city centre, responds to the challenges on various scales, from the urban to the domestic (p. 274–89). But here as well, a precise site-plan would have been a welcome addition.

6 In terms of the interpretative framework used, one can wonder to what extent the stylistic categories such as “Modern Movement” or “International Style” are still relevant as critical tools. Despite the often detailed descriptions of formal aspects of selected projects, most contributors fail to define in a precise manner what makes these works really specific translations of larger formal currents and remain stuck in rather generic, and often clumsily formulated, definitions of the characteristics of “international Modern Movement architecture” such as: “control of the design by accurate resolution of the climatic adaption, by the modular expression of the structural elements and constructive systems and by the methodological association of type-elements that resolve the functional program” (p. 352). More than once, interpretations of influences seem of little relevance or even inaccurate, as is the case in the description of the Palace of Public Offices of Quelimane, a 1960 project the language of which is said to have a “particular affinity” with Antonin Raymond’s Golconde Dormitory in Pondicherry (1936–45) (p. 340). While the latter indeed offered a source of inspiration to a wide variety of architects operating in the tropics,⁸ it remains hard to see what exactly could have been the influence of this building on the project discussed, given that its formal language and spatial distribution are quite different. Similarly, it would be more logical—and possibly more in line with the book’s underlying thesis of a Brazilian affiliation to this architecture—to link the use of a “split-level apartment organization” in some blocks of the Prenda Neighbourhood Unit in Luanda to contemporary (sub)tropical projects of Oscar Niemeyer or Georges Candilis that had just appeared in the pages of *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, rather than to state that “this organization has a clear inspiration on the Corbusian studies, namely in the work of Mosei Ginzburg and Ignaty Milinis in the housing block Narkonfin, where the most innovative systems were rehearsed” (p. 170).

7 On a more general note, one can regret that the book rather uncritically adheres to the common trope that Africa constituted a “laboratory” for architectural modernism, providing architects with a freedom they did not possess in the home country. Given the very particular context of Portugal, where the architectural profession in the home country was confronted with the rather conservative taste of the autocratic regime of the Estado Novo under Salazar, this thesis sounds, of course, tempting, and the playful architecture indeed seems to substantiate it. But the work of Ana Vaz Milheiro and Maria Manuela da Fonte has demonstrated the existence of an architectural production in the African colonies that is far less progressive than the one presented in the book under review. Indeed, the rather mundane, everyday buildings they discuss invite us to at least nuance the “laboratory” thesis. Moreover, such a perspective offers too simplistic a rendering of the context in which even architecturally progressive projects are realised. In her lengthy introduction, Tostões points to the paradoxical situation that modern architecture, with its supposedly inherent emancipatory ideology in Angola and Mozambique, served in fact a colonial agenda. But she still clearly adheres to a position on the topic already taken by Udo Kultermann in the 1960s, when she writes that architects working in Africa were working as “good missionaries”, “not only to support the colonial welfare but, in many cases, to support the new independent nations in the name of human progress and justice” (p. 67). There is a certain *naïveté* in such reasoning, as architectural history scholarship has since long undermined the idea that architectural modernism by definition flourished exclusively in democratic regimes favouring the social advancement of “the greatest number”. Even if Tostões seems aware of such more recent literature, she fails, however, to translate it to the specific Portuguese context and articulate in a precise manner the historiographical challenge at stake when doing research on this particular modernist legacy. This comment applies to the

entire introduction. One senses that the editor is aware of the ongoing debates in circles of architectural historians on modern architecture in Africa, but her reading of the recent literature lacks the necessary accuracy that would have allowed to open up new and meaningful paths in the research on Portuguese colonial architecture. Her view remains largely romanticising and does not delve into the (post)colonial politics of modern architecture in Angola and Mozambique.

- 8 Overall, this book does not help us gain a profound new insight into the very specific conditions in which these architects were actually operating. Little or no information is given on how architects got commissions, on the modes of production of the projects discussed, or on how these buildings were received and perceived. In line with recent scholarship on other colonial territories, however, it is indeed timely to reassess the striking modernist architectural legacy in Portugal's overseas territories within the specific societal context that produced it, both economically and politically, rather than continuing to present architects as geniuses working in a vacuum. Especially the case of Pancho Guedes comes to mind here, as despite the large attention given to this particular figure and his work, no sound study exists to this day that provides a reading of his truly remarkable designs stepping beyond the common trope of his invention of a personal, "authentic" and "genuine" African architecture, informed by both international and local influences.⁹
- 9 Moreover, it would have been interesting to gain insight into the conditions that allowed municipal authorities in Angola and Mozambique to commission public buildings whose formal language was truly progressive, as some of the projects presented in Tostões's edited volume demonstrate. Was this just a matter of modernist architects trying to build in a climate-responsive manner? Was it rather a deliberate choice to represent the colonial state as a modern one? Or could it have been part of a larger "shared culture" among European colonial powers in defining their image vis-à-vis one another? In her introduction, Ana Tostões provides some elements on the crucial role of the Office of Colonial Urbanization (GUC), as well as the impact of the international circulation of ideas,¹⁰ but overall the book under review still sticks to a rather conventional definition of the notion of authorship, privileging the role of the architect over that of a more complex interplay of actors, including the client, the entrepreneur, the municipal authorities, the experts etc. In all fairness, we should add that, in this respect, Tostões's book remains in tune with a large part of the current scholarship on twentieth-century architecture in Africa, as only a few studies have started to venture into new, less conventional frameworks of analysis.
- 10 Given that Ana Tostões is the current president of Docomomo International, and as such is very much involved in the worldwide effort to safeguard the legacy of the Modern Movement, it should come as no surprise that an important agenda underlying the book is that of the preservation of the modern heritage in Angola and Mozambique. Tostões is explicit on the topic when she writes that "we are now approaching a crucial moment. Today, profound changes threaten this architectural and urban heritage. Especially Luanda and Maputo, but also other cities of these countries live a critical demographic and economic development, which necessarily addresses the problem of conservation and reuse of structures" (p. 16). One needs only to think of the recent demolition of the Municipal Market of Kinaxixe in Luanda, a landmark building designed in 1950 by Vasco Vieira da Costa, to realize that the postwar modernist architectural legacy is indeed under threat and that any action to start a reflection on the topic should be welcomed. Most project descriptions point explicitly to the challenges posed to these modernist buildings as a result of decades of neglect and lack of maintenance, as well as of processes of reappropriation and transformation. Part of the research project actually consisted of a workshop on modern heritage with students of the Faculty of Architecture and Physical Planning of the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique, some results of which are presented at the end of the book (p. 426–35).
- 11 Commendable as such an initiative might be, it is telling that the contemporary status of many projects presented in this book is most often discussed in negative terms such as "abandoned", "deserted" or even "degraded"—although what is meant is "dilapidated"—and that alterations are most often defined as "unfortunate". One notable exception is, again, the project

description of the TAP-MONTEPIO building in Maputo, written by Maria Manuela Oliveira and Jessica Bonito, which is, by far, the best contribution on a single building in the entire book. In addressing the current functioning of the building, Oliveira and Bonito remark that the building shows a “surprising resilience, quite common among modern buildings that, designed with great consistency and particular attention to climatic conditions, show a spatial and tectonic worthiness, which have enabled them to survive the test of time” (p. 282). This statement thus acknowledges the value of transformation by inhabitants, much in the way that Philippe Boudon, as early as the late 1960s, wrote positively on Le Corbusier’s Pessac project as an “architecture habitée”.¹¹ It is also in tune with the viewpoints that the South African architect Hannah Leroux has recently articulated, in her PhD as well as within a Docomomo context.¹² Such appreciation for the resilience of modernist buildings offers, we might argue, a more promising perspective for the development of an innovative heritage policy rather than the conventional statement that Tostões formulates at the end of her introduction, arguing that, by recalling the “utopian vision of the role of architecture of the Modern Movement in improving living conditions for all, this heritage can become a cultural resource, being also economically sustainable” (p. 113).

- 12 The last statement clearly reveals the position of the editor and the position presented in the book as a whole. Indeed, a conviction that modern architecture has the capacity to make the world a better place, and that, as such, the modernist legacy holds lessons for the future, making its rediscovery a necessary undertaking, pervades the whole text. In that respect, the main merit of the book lies not in an attempt to rewrite the history of a series of remarkable modern buildings along the lines of current scholarship, but in presenting a substantial documentation on this still little-known legacy of the postwar era in Africa. All the more regrettable, then, that the final editing and English-language proofreading are of such poor quality, resulting in an appalling number of typos and nonsensical passages that substantially narrow the potential readership of the book. The decision to publish this work in English, acknowledging the importance of bridging the existing gap in global awareness, should have been followed by a serious investment in professional translation and proofreading: this legacy, and those talented architects who designed it, deserve a better introduction to an international audience.

Notes

1 Madalena Cunha Matos, “Colonial Architecture and Amnesia. Mapping the work of Portuguese architects in Angola and Mozambique,” *Oase*, no.82, 2010, p. 25–34.

2 José Manuel FERNANDES, *Geração Africana. Arquitectura e cidades em Angola e Moçambique, 1925–1975*, Lisbon, 2002; A. VAZ MILHEIRO, *Nos trópicos sem Le Corbusier. Arquitectura luso-africana no Estado Novo*, Lisbon: Livros Horizonte, 2012; Maria MANUELA DA FONTE, *Urbanismo et Arquitectura em Angola: de Norton de Matos à revolução*, Casal de Cambra: Caleidoscópio; Lisbon: Faculdade de Arquitectura, 2012. Milheiro’s book was previously reviewed in this journal, in Ricardo Agarez, “Ana Vaz Milheiro, *Nos Trópicos Sem Le Corbusier: Arquitectura Luso-africana no Estado Novo*,” *ABE Journal*, no.3, 2013. URL: <https://abe.revues.org/500>. Accessed 11 September 2015.

3 Vasco Vieira da Costa worked in LC’s office from 1945 to 1948. Another Portuguese architect operating in Africa, Fernão Lopes Simões de Carvalho, worked with André Wogenscky from 1956 to 1959.

4 Ana Tostões, *Os Verdes Anos na Arquitectura Portuguesa dos Anos 50*, Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1997. Ana Vaz Milheiro obtained her PhD in Architecture and Urbanism at University of São Paulo, Brazil (2004), with a dissertation on the relation between Portuguese and Brazilian architectural cultures, published in 2005 as *A Construção do Brasil – Relações com a Cultura Arquitectónica Portuguesa* (Porto: FAUP Publicações).

5 Dennis Sharp, “Registering the diaspora of Modern Architecture,” in Dennis Sharp and Catherine Cooke (eds.), *The Modern Movement in Architecture. Selections from the Docomomo Registers*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2000, p. 10–5.

6 Few monographic studies on these architects are available so far. A notable exception is Antonio Matos VELOSO, José Manuel FERNANDES and Marie de LURDES JANEIRO, *João José Tinoco. Arquitecturas em Africa*, Lisbon: Livros Horizonte, 2008.

7 Ana MAGALHÃES and Inês GONÇALVES, *Moderno Tropical. Arquitectura em Angola e Moçambique 1948–1975*, Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2009 (Preface: Ana Tostões).

8 Raymond's project appears, for instance, in Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew's seminal book *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1956, ill. 284–8).

9 The literature on Pancho Guedes is expanding rapidly; see, among others, the 2009 exhibition and catalogue *Pancho Guedes: Vitruvius Mozambicanus* (Lisbon: Centro Cultural de Belem) and a recent discussion of his work in Fabio Vanin, *Maputo. Open City. Investigations on an African Capital*, Lisbon: Fundação Serra Henriques, 2013. An important reference book is Ana Vaz Milheiro, João Afonso and Jorge Nunes (eds.), *Pancho Guedes. Manifestos, Papers, Lectures, Publications*, Lisbon: Ordem dos Arquitectos, 2007.

10 Ana Vaz Milheiro recently finished an FCT-research project on the topic, entitled "The Colonial Urbanization Offices: Architectural Culture and Practice," that ran between 2010 and 2013 and resulted, among other things, in a public exhibition *Africa: Visions of the Colonial Urbanization Office (1944–1974)*, held in 2013–14 in the Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon.

11 Philippe BOUDON, *Pessac de Le Corbusier*, Paris: Dunod, 1969 (Aspects de l'urbanisme).

12 Hannah Leroux, "Filling in: The Creative Potentials of Africa's Modern Spatial Legacy," in Maristella Casciato and Emilie d'Orgeix (eds.), *Modern Architectures. The Rise of a Heritage*, Liège: Mardaga, 2012, p. 141–6.

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