

## GUEST EDITORIAL

**Prologue: Locating the Modern**

Shahid VAWDA, and Edward DENISON

This issue of the *Curator* is the result of 2 years of intense discussion with colleagues mainly living and working on the African continent in the broad field of heritage studies. Colleagues from other places and institutions, co-hosted by University of Cape Town and The Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL (UK), including various UNESCO agencies, the Getty Conservation Institute, Modern Cities Network have also made immeasurable contributions to this inclusive and collaborative process, actively participating in the workshops that preceded the *Modern Heritage of Africa* conference and in the conference itself. They have all contributed in significant ways. In the articles that follow this Prologue to the conference held in September 2021 and the co-curating of *The Cape Town Document on Modern Heritage*, we provide more details of this intellectually stimulating journey. The articles published here are a selection of the 46 presentations made at the conference. The articles in this issue have themselves benefitted from the intense debates and hold within them the seeds of those critical discussions, in particular deconstructing one of the central facets of the claim to universal heritage, the historic cultural significance and aesthetics of the built environment constructed by and cast within a western frame.

MoHoA was very deliberately conceived to be disciplinarily broad and inclusive, as open to the archaeologist's perspective of the modern spanning millennia, as it is to the architectural historian's

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Edward DENISON is Professor of Architecture and Global Modernities at The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, and has twenty-years' experience as an independent consultant specialising in urban and cultural heritage. He is Director of the MA Architecture and Historic Urban Environments, Module Coordinator of 'Multiple Modernities Architecture' on the MA Architectural History, and a PhD Supervisor. Professor Denison's wideranging research is motivated by the notion of 'otherness', exploring the resistance to and the role, practice and imperative of non-canonical architectural histories, especially outside the west and in relation to modernity. Underlying all of his work is a deep concern for sustainability – ecologically, culturally and socially. Current research is focussed on other histories of architecture, the Anthropocene and the modern heritage of Africa. This has evolved partly from two-decades of work in Eritrea, culminating most recently in the inscription of Asmara, Eritrea's capital city, onto UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2017 - a first for Eritrea and a first for modernism in Africa.

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view that it began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, it is perhaps inevitable that the built environment looms large in our collective experience and imagination of the modern, irrespective of its perceived value as heritage. The seductive glamour of soaring skyscrapers, electric light, fast cars, smooth surfaces, and straight lines have helped not merely to define an age of modernism, but to claim it. Despite its internationalist pretensions, the idea of modernism was conceived by, for and largely in service to a relatively small minority of the international community comprising mostly of men from Europe or North America. The same internationalist systems and processes that generated, materialized, promoted and sustained this idea have enjoyed a free reign, largely uncontested, for much of the 20th century, generating an entire transdisciplinary genre constructed on the projected wisdom of these founding fathers, or, perhaps more aptly, modern masters. Enjoying much less attention are the contributions of and debts to the majority of this global community whose lands, customs, cultures, resources, ideas, and people were appropriated and extracted, invariably forcibly, over the course of assembling the idea of the modern, modernity and modernism over centuries.

In the 21st century, a form of conceptual and intellectual restitution is underway in which the centuries-long contributions of the global majority are at last being acknowledged and treated with increasing equality, albeit not yet the kind of equity that is needed to redress centuries of historiographical imbalance. Nevertheless, the process is underway, adding diversity, richness, and a greater level of historical accuracy to the singular, universalistic and homogenous framing of modernism, modernist historiography, and modern heritage, leaving us all richer for this long-overdue transition.

Contributing to this process has been one of the aims and great privileges of MoHoA. It has also been a challenge for the many researchers, academics, and practitioners who presented their work at our first conference and who have subsequently contributed to this special edition. They have all risen to this challenge in many ways, their work making critical, original, and often profound contributions to global knowledge. While the subtleties and nuances of each article cannot be summarized or assessed comparatively, we are indebted to all the authors for confronting, honestly and self-reflexively, the common themes and, to paraphrase the Deputy Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Dr Jyoti Hosagrahar, for challenging the master narrative.

Olga Bialostocka, in the first article in this volume, confronts this master narrative through her critique of European and North American linear progressive modernity. By making analytical use of the notion of 'colonial matrix of power' (or coloniality of power) in the writings of Mignolo, Dussel, Quijano, among others, she refers to a systemic application of epistemic, aesthetic and material resources to create and maintain a condition of coloniality well into the 21st century. The colonial matrix of power refers specifically to the way colonial power continues to be infused in the post-colonies as manifested in the widespread adoption and use of Eurocentric knowledge systems. In such conditions, modernity, whose discursive origins in the European Enlightenment and Renaissance, becomes the civilizational standard to celebrate present day cultural, social, economic and political achievements, whilst simultaneously obscuring its dark side, coloniality. Where colonial subjects are relegated to peripheral or underdeveloped status, perpetually trying to bridge the gap between tradition and the modern, their own cultural achievements are relegated to 'differences' from Eurocentric

norms, values, criteria and standards of measurements. She advocates delinking from the colonial matrix towards 'border thinking' that foregrounds other epistemologies as alternatives to modernity, advocating for a concept of transmodernity.

Many papers took aim at the built environment, and specifically modernist forms of architecture. Manful, Batsani-Ncube and Gallagher drew on their impressively inclusive and collaborative pan-African experience to interrogate specifically African forms of modernism through three case studies in South Africa, Malawi and Ghana. Their focus on political buildings was insightful in the way that this particular typology tended to draw on precolonial aesthetics, ideas and spatial arrangements, to invent new forms of modernism that simultaneously construct and question the notion of the African state. Similar themes of precolonial aesthetics feature in the essay by Jaiyeoba and Efrat, but here the focus is on how they fused with the imported ideas and forms through the campus of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in Nigeria, designed from 1960 to the 1980s by Israeli architect, Arieh Sharon. For Jaiyeoba and Efrat, the campus design embodies and celebrates the fusion of Yoruba culture and the ideas and philosophies of the Bauhaus, a German school of art and design established in 1919 and closed in 1933. Supporting the case of multiple modernities, the essay reflects on the film directed by Efrat that celebrates this campus and documents its appreciation by staff, students, and the public, which featured in the recent celebrations for the Bauhaus centenary.

Such transcolonial temporal reverberations remind us of the ruptures and continuities that Mbebe spoke about in the preparatory workshop, and which features in the published conference proceedings. A similar theme was adopted in another multi-authored paper by Kordonouri, Teame, and Denison, which drew attention to the essential African skills, labour and materials that Italian colonizers relied upon to construct their celebrated modernist colonial capital of Asmara. This debt, too often overlooked by the conventional object-oriented modernist historiography, is framed here as a form of modernism intimately entwined with a past spanning millennia; a factor that the authors argue was unacknowledged or certainly not fully appreciated by the assessors of the city's comparatively recent UNESCO World Heritage nomination. Much has been said about Asmara, being the first and still only solely modernist World Heritage Site in Africa, but Kordonouri takes a different perspective by adopting the lens of bricolage to make a compelling argument for a more different architectural reading of colonial encounter and drawing on the example of the unique St Mary's Orthodox Cathedral as a principal case study. The idea of bricolage is further extended by Noormahomed who makes the case for heritage through the re-appropriation of a Portuguese apartment project, Torres Vermelhas, in Maputo, Mozambique. Here the heritage layering, in a palimpsest register, is not so much about the building materials, skills, and design appearance, which were obviously colonial in its initial conception, but the multiple ways the building was re-appropriated by different social groupings, including the state, during the course of Mozambique's several post-colonial transitions from socialism, internal civil unrest and the adoption of neo-liberal free market frameworks. The Lusophone theme is also highlighted by Kelouaze's article of Afro-Brazilian and neo-Moorish influences on the African continent. It is especially relevant when we consider how the slave returnees from the Americas to Africa brought the new and complex influences to a continent already at the

centre of long histories of engagement in multifarious and divergent ways that do not fit the linear project of modernization.

Religion plays the leading character in the articles by von Reinersdorff and Michieletto and Mukanya. Both essays contend with the complicated and potentially paradoxical triumvirate of religion, colonialism and modernity. While Michieletto and Mukanya examine these issues through the selected works of a single figure, the Belgian architect, Paul Dequeker, Von Reinersdorff focusses on the singular building of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire, a central and monumental element of former President Félix Houphouët-Boigny's plans for the new post-independence capital. In the case of Dequeker, the archive plays a major role, revealing fascinating insights into the work and its context in time and space, which in turn raises questions about documentation, memory, legacy, institutions, and privilege. Conversely, von Reinersdorff, faces the familiar problem of the absence of an archive. The author's self-reflexive and self-critical response is particularly notable, especially in his laudable attempts to avoid adopting the same gaze as that which he critiques, instead trying foregrounding African experiences. To some extent, both papers challenge the western gaze not only of modernism but also of late-20th century religious architecture, especially in an African context. Dequeker's work is celebrated for its sustainable and contextual approach, which he wrote about and published in the 1960s, while the Basilica serves to highlight the complex and contested nature of what can constitute modern heritage of Africa and the inseparability of decoloniality and neo-coloniality.

Foregrounding the African experience is a method also adopted by Murray and Josephy who upend the western gaze by playfully interpreting Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's famous book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). Their essay, titled *Learning from Steinkopf*, focusses on a building in the Northern Cape province town of Steinkopf designed by a former Professor of Architecture and Planning at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Roelof Uytenbogaardt. This important research demonstrates how place and experience in an African project helps us to reconceptualise the modern in ways that are not bound by, built on, or framed in western experiences. Employing the term 'apartheid modernities', the authors also introduce us to a new prefix that joins the growing list of prefixes assembled largely in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that evidence the appetite to pluralise and diversify the modern. Paying homage to Scott-Brown and her photographic methods, their research, like that of Michieletto and Mukanya, draws heavily on the archive, in this case Uytenbogaardt's personal collection deposited in UCT Library after his death in 1990. The precarity of such rich and precious historical material was brought into sharp focus when a fire destroyed the Jagger Reading Room located above the archives at UCT in April 2021. Precarity is also the subject of the insightful and important perspective piece by Bodei and Harber, which draws urgent attention to the plight of a building in Durban designed by the architect Barrie Biermann and completed in 1962. Facing demolition once again, the sensitive and contextual modernist building has become a symbol of the precarity of modernist heritage, not only in Africa, but all over the world, and the urgent need to understand, protect and invest in our past if we are to achieve a sustainable and equitable future.

Retaining the African experience but turning away from the built environment per se, the article by McKay, questions the museumification of Gandhi's home, Satyagraha House, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her honest critique is evident in finding it difficult to understand because it does not fit neatly the definition of a house museum, although there is attention to 'authentic detail' of the furniture and architectural layout. The dual function as a bed and breakfast guest house further jars against conventional museological imaginations. It is here that Gandhi began to evolve his philosophy of non-violent resistance to colonialism, but the museum does not acknowledge contemporary research and activism that problematises Gandhi the person, his philosophy, politics and evident acceptances of imperial racial hierarchies at the time. This may well fit into the category of difficult heritage that needs to be confronted, not least whether such house museums/guest houses are considerations for the future of cultural heritage.

Difficult and contested history is also the subject in Kadi's piece on Red Location in Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth), South Africa, deemed by the post-Apartheid government as a historic site of resistance to Apartheid. The Red Location cultural precinct built at great cost won various architectural awards, but was rejected by the local community as an affront to their continued poverty and ever worsening economic and social plight and abuse of their human rights. At stake is not only the question of what the relationship between cultural heritage and development might be, but also the gap that exists between official heritage policies that self-evidently rely on officials and experts, and the contrasting desires and needs of local people in a constitutional democracy. Indeed, the meaningful incorporation of a community's ideas and needs of what a cultural precinct should be seems lacking, and points to the issue of what does consultation and community engagement consist of with regard to cultural heritage, as often directed by policies of municipalities, nation states or the World Heritage Centre and its supporting agencies with their highly skilled experts.

Although the methodology to access contested and difficult history is not a specifically large theme in these papers, an approach that attempts to capture such heritage is developed by Stewart. Known as counter-mapping, it depends heavily on documenting oral testimony and poses the question as to whether these can be incorporated into a set of official checklists of what is considered heritage, drawn from and influenced by the policies and procedures for World Heritage listing.

Equally arresting is the idea of refugee camps as heritage. This is the subject of Siddqi's article on the Dadaab refugee camps, Kenya. Built as temporary shelters in times of recent crises in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, refugee camps in places such as Kenya and Lebanon, have morphed into permanent settlements. Refugees, as they unpack their meager belongings into United Nations defined shelters, re-create in their surroundings as best they can their culturally meaningful lives as it intersects with local and global events, non-governmental organizations and the states that provide shelter. Their contemporary existence has its traces in multiple pasts, not least that of coloniality, but rather than succumb to dictates of security and control, highlight paradoxes, among the larger regional and global forces responsible for this migratory transience, the permanence of family bonds and emergence of a bare social and economic life against the ever-present danger of dissolution. The irony is of land usage in the recent past by pastoralists and now a refugee camp whose inhabitants are

rendered landless, rightless and without a country. What of this recent history and lives of a displaced people makes it worth considering as modern heritage of Africa, and indeed globally, as recent events in the Middle East and Europe attest?

If refugee camps are temporary structures, Kopedi works with a more enduring form of structure in researching road infrastructure as more than merely a rational technology to aid getting from point A to point B as part of production image of the political economy of everyday living in the villages, townships and cities of South Africa. Kopedi draws attention to indigenous notions of roads as metaphorical pathways to the sustenance of culturally meaningful lives well lived. Lack of maintenance by the state in the post-colony is a disruption to such well-being in contemporary times. Kopedi compels us to ask the question of what cultural rationality should underline the creation of transitional just spaces in the post-colony that shifts away from merely a service to capitalist production.

These articles, part of ongoing research, discussion and debate within the MoHoA collective, hopefully will also presage further debates in other forums, particularly in institutions and organizations that are responsible for cultural heritage. For MoHoA, this is the first of a series to be published in *Curator*. We, the guest editors, would like to thank profusely not only the contributors, but also the invaluable assistance and unwavering patience of John Fraser, the journal's editor, and his team for the wonderful experience of bringing this issue to publication.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest with the production of this paper.