

Transcontinental Modernism: How to Find the Shortcut¹

By Ana Tostões

More than ever, it is urgent to expand the new emerging consciousness focused on the need to include other territories in our efforts to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the “modern Diaspora”.² Recently, the development of concepts such as hybrid or the otherness³ has been promoting a nuanced historical analysis on architecture and politics in the 20th century beyond a Eurocentric vision.⁴ The recognition that a widespread awareness of the Modern Movement architecture has always been serving colonization⁵ involves rethinking the basic principle of Modern welfare society and practiced architecture as a mission. How Modern principles have been exchanged, resulting from a Eurocentric culture, with the cultures of East and Africa. In addition, it must be said that the case of sub-Saharan Africa Lusophone is now beginning to be studied in depth, and putting together peripheral universes: Portugal, Brazil and South America. In fact, Brazil in particular and Latin America in general, form a world decidedly challenging in the context of architectural culture and modern city that has been recognized for a long time as periphery. Several researchers argue today on rather centrality of these innovations so that it is possible to sustain a sense of a kind of transcontinental modernity driving these places and cultures, the architecture and urbanism of these cities. The reception and nowadays the reinterpretation of the modern movement architecture imply the preservation of the physical, conceptual and cultural identity. The paradox lies on the fact that Modern Movement architecture deals and stresses a special moment of political affirmation, free expression and democratic values. The question is: how could this modern expression be the vehicle of colonization? As Anatole Kop (1915–1990) argued, Modern architecture is not an aesthetic but the proposal of a better life.⁶ We all are aware that we live in a postcolonial period. In other words, we are former colonies or colonising countries going through a post-colonial era. So, I believe that the most interesting way to approach this issue is through such

concepts as identity, memory and exchange.⁷

In the early 60s, Udo Kultermann (1927–2013) gave the alert when Africa began to develop under the scope of new laws, in a way that the world started to see the “black continent” differently. If Leo Frobenius’ (1873–1938) investigation made possible to understand ancient African culture, the current aim was to focus on the newborn culture. 1960, the great African year, brought not only political separation, but also gave origin to a decade that made possible an excellent outcome by gathering on one single work all *Neues Bauen in Afrika*⁸ by grouping them into an orderly set. Kultermann believed that architecture in Africa lived from a millenary tradition entering a whole new period. In 1963, his book aimed to prove the existence of an African architecture, an idea still denied till today. Moved by the 60s optimism, Kultermann’s approach questioning the link between tradition and innovation on African architectonic production has no precedent.

In fact, the local circumstance approaching an awareness of regionalism was till then exclusively articulated through climate factor as one of the design tools increasingly developed by Modern architects.⁹ According to Baweja, since the 50s the climate-responsive design is a reality in expansion in the African Sub-Saharan countries, as a pre-history of Green design that emerged in the 70s.¹⁰ In fact, the formal, technological and ideological principles of the Modern Movement emerge through the 50s in the Portuguese African colonies as a cultural stimulus articulated by geographic and climate specificities promoting Modern vocabulary in acquiring new expression and scale. Firstly influenced by the Brazilian Modern architecture,¹¹ followed by Fry and Drew,¹² or Koenigsberg researches,¹³ the climate adaptation was based on architectural programs and solutions developed to potentiate the use of the open spaces, using circulation galleries, and introducing devices in order to maintain a permanent air circulation and to control the direct sunlight incidence, namely trough *brise-soleil* used in the horizontal and in the vertical position, fixed or mobile, as prefabricated



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grids in concrete or ceramic.¹⁴ The Angolan architect Vasco Vieira da Costa (1911–1982) took this concept further, and, as Le Corbusier did in Chandigarh’s High Court Building, he associated the grid concepts creating several variations of grids of different dimensions coordinated with fixed devices that guaranteed the solar protection and natural ventilation.

Kultermann underlined the local factor stating that “when analyzing tropical countries architecture one must not neglect some characteristics: wide information on temperature, air humidity, wind’s order and orientation, solar movement and types of vegetation, should all be carefully studied if one wishes to create useful construction.” Therefore, he dared to defend that “it was not easy to correctly satisfy all tropical construction requirements, being on a drawing board in Europe.” But for Kultermann the question was not only by mechanically aligning all these elements, because the art to build is related to space, volume, light, movement and harmony. When critical re-

Figure 1. **Pancho Guedes**, Tonelli Building, Maputo, Mozambique, 1957.

Figure 2. **Vasco Vieira da Costa**, Mutamba Building, Luanda, Angola, 1968.

Figure 3. **Pancho Guedes**, Abreu, Santos & Rocha Building, Maputo, Mozambique, 1953.

Figure 4. **Pancho Guedes**, Dragon Building, Maputo, Mozambique, 1951-1953.

Figure 5. **Pancho Guedes**, Tonelli Building, Maputo, Mozambique, 1957. Plan of floors 4,7,9,12; Plan of floors 5,10; Cross Section; Southwest Elevation. Ana Braga, 2012.

Photos by Ana Tostões, 2010.

gionalism began to be discussed in the early 80s, retaking thoughts from the end of World War II, the search of identity was understood as something vital to the development of postcolonial societies. In 1955, on *Histoire et Vérité*, Ricoeur analyses the growing phenomenon on universality considering its progress and subtle destruction, not only to traditional cultures but also to great cultures creative core, questioning if the path towards moderniza-

tion implied abandoning the “ship” of passed culture that stood as a nation reason for being?¹⁵ Kultermann defends that the evolution from colonial African architecture to “the maturity of early African identity” took place in a short period of time¹⁶, therefore promoting the introduction of occidental contributions to the development of construction techniques and new technology. At the same time, these quick changes promoted to awake a return to tradition. From all the architects active in Africa of Portuguese expression, Pancho Guedes¹⁷ (1925) is repeatedly analyzed establishing a parallel between the regional and global scene.¹⁸

Fantasy Must be Brought Back into Architecture

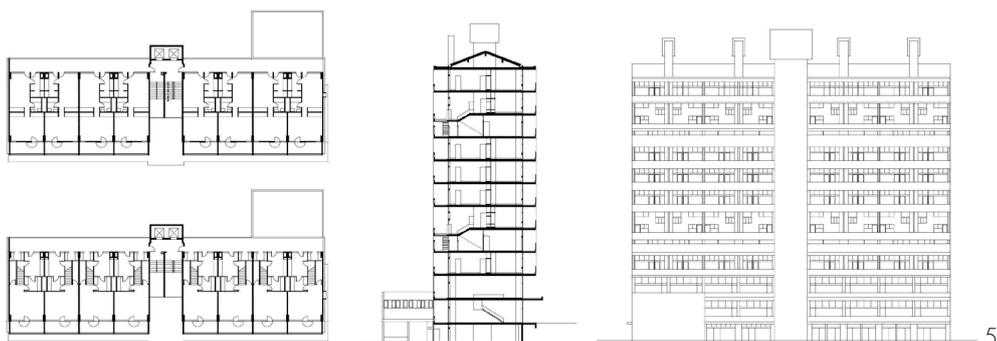
A radical and innovative approach far from the common canons of the Modern Movement is followed by Pancho Guedes, the luso-african architect (Witwatersrand University, 1953) active in Mozambique, made in his writings and architectural production a major contribution to the reassessment of architectural modernity, connecting different disciplines and cultures and carrying out affinities with various creators namely with the painter Malangatana Ngwenya (1936–2009). His fantastic and magic architecture comes from the stimulus of a large worldwide network of artists and thinkers that he himself put up from different sources such as: the Modern Movement architects, namely the South African contributors as Martienssen; Frank Lloyd Wright inspiring legacy or the CIAM’s critic contestation movement under the scope of Team X; or finally the new African artists which he promoted. Besides being one of Mozambique’s major architects, Pancho had the sagacity to detect talent, to promote creativity, having the ability to establish a network of creative,¹⁹ functioning himself as a sort of mediator between art and architecture.²⁰

At the time, Maputo (former Lourenço Marques) witnessed a significant impulse towards development in the period between the end of World War II and the revolution that shook Portugal on April 25th 1974, leading to the independence of Mozambique the following year. In an Africa of Apartheid between Mozambique,

Rhodesia and South Africa, Pancho knew that there was the need to found an authentic and raw art, the art for authentic artists.²¹ Therefore he sought for an Architecture full of significance, carrying a personal dimension based on a research focused on all formal dimensions and on the possibility for architectural elements to contain and express emotion: “I claim for architects to have the same rights and freedom painters and poets have for so long.”²² Pancho wanted to appropriate the primitive’s universal motifs, mixing them with his own sophisticated architectural culture, in order to achieve in his buildings the ambience of Chirico’s painting. Pancho knew that Architecture is not perceived as an intellectual experience but as a sensation, an emotion.²³ Therefore he was interested in the quest for such quality “long ago lost among architects but able to reach a spontaneous architecture capable of magic intensity.”

In the 50s, this search resulted from the desire to create an alternative modernity, different from the mechanical international style growing also in Africa, assuming the creator’s right to innocence stimulated by the sensuality and drama of the surrounding African culture. The objects he collected, helped him free himself “from the dominant Eurocentric point of view of the white man who lives in the land of others.”²⁴ The will to discover an alternative modernity was the answer to an inner appeal, but also to an Africa dawning to contemporaneity, to a new world which was in a state of ferment.²⁵

Pancho witness and acts in a time when Architecture is open to popular culture, when architecture without architects and architecture of fantasy are accepted.²⁶ But it is also the time for complexity and multiple solutions opened through the Modern Movement continuity or crises,²⁷ the ones Giedion identified as a result from reason and emotion related equation²⁸. He gathered the conditions to follow an alternative, original and idiosyncratic path of his own. Besides his huge talent, wide culture, experimentalist and genuine curiosity, he had the term of living in Africa at the time: conditions he managed with cleverness. On one hand being apart from the Eurocentric European culture spreader, living in Africa in an Eu-



ropean imperialistic peculiar colony; on the other hand, living the period of colonial emancipation spreading throughout Africa, where, despite the imperialistic presence “anything seemed possible.”²⁹

From technical issues to poetic approaches, pop art and African expression, Pancho promoted the possibility of modernity issued from a complex procedure nourished from diverse and eccentric cultural sources. Pancho divested himself of the colonial hegemony of his time and immersed the myriad of cultural influences and motifs that constituted the very particular African cosmopolitanism of the city of Lourenço Marques in the beginning of 1960s.³⁰ An intense cultural input drove the fundamentals of his work: open and unorthodox, eclectic and irreverent, freely revisiting and reinventing both modern and primitive art in his constructions, with his architectural projects borrowing from his painting and sculpture in the overall creative process. Establishing links with the local population, he found in Africa a favourable atmosphere for the realization of his projects. Malangatana recognized that “no architect had ever linked architecture to indigenous culture. In his designs we see a geometry that reflects patterns resembling the tattoos of African mythology”. Famous for his fertile imagination, for him, each project springs naturally from its surroundings, climate, geology and the culture of those who use it. With its prolific output, Guedes anticipated various trends and ways of thinking that are still to be found today in the international context inspiring the relations between art and architecture.

Notes

- 1 This work integrates the research project “EWV Exchanging World Visions: modern architecture in Lusophone Africa looking through Brazilian experience”, FCT-MEC(PTDC/AUR-AQI/103229/2008) developed by IST(ICIST)-UM.
- 2 Sharp, Dennis; Cooke, Catherine (ed.), *The Modern Movement in Architecture-Selections from the docomomo Registers*, Rotterdam, O10 Publishers, 2000.
- 3 “Other Modernisms” 9th International **docomomo** Conference, Ankara, Proceedings, 2006.
- 4 Henket, Hubert-Jan, Heynen, Hilde (ed.), *Back from Utopia : The challenge of the Modern Movement*, Rotterdam, O10 Publishers, 2002.
- 5 Kultermann, Udo, *World Architecture. A Critical Mosaic 1900-2000*, vol.6, Central and Southern Africa, Omslog, 2000.
- 6 Kopp, Anatole, *Quand le Moderne n’était pas un style mais une cause*, Paris, ENSBA, 1988.
- 7 Carlos, Isabel (ed.), *Exchanging Visions*, Lisboa, Instituto Camões, Autores e Artistas, 2007.
- 8 Kultermann, *Neues Bauen in Afrika*, Wasmuth, Berlin, 1963.
- 9 Olgay, Victor, *Design with climate, Bioclimatic approach to architectural regionalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963.
- 10 Baweja, Vandana, *A Pre-history of Green Architecture: Otto Koenigsberger and Tropical Architecture, from Princely Mysore to Post-colonial London*, University of Michigan, 2008.
- 11 Goodwin, Philip, *Brazil Builds: Architecture New and Old 1652-1942*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1946.
- 12 Fry, Maxwell; Drew, Jane, *Tropical Architecture in the Dry and Humid Zones*, London, BT Batsford Limited, 1964.

13. Koenigsberger, Otto; Ingersoll; Szokolay, *Manual of Tropical Housing and Building*, London, Longman, 1974.
14. The brise-soleil, mobile grids that moved around a central axis, was innovatively used in the north façade of the Education and Health Ministry of Rio de Janeiro (1936-1942). After that, it was exhaustively used in the great public buildings of Brasília, as well as the fixed version of the prefabricated brise-soleil in concrete or ceramic, popularly designated as *combogó*.
15. Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1955. Cf, Kenteff Frampton, Kenneth Frampton, *Em direcção a um regionalismo crítico: 6 pontos para uma arquitectura da resistência*, Hal Foster (ed.), *La Posmodernidad*, Barcelona, Kairós, 1983.
16. Udo Kultermann, Kenneth Frampton, *World Architecture 1900-2000: A Critical Mosaic. Central and Southern Africa*, vol. 6, New York, Springer-Verlag Wien, 2000, 32.
17. Pancho Guedes full name: Amâncio d’Alpoim Miranda Guedes.
18. Pancho Guedes joined Team X as founder member at CIAM’s Roy-aumont meeting together with the Smithson’s, Aldo Van Eyck, Candilis and Giancarlo di Carlo.
19. Malangatana Ngwenya, “Pancho Guedes visto por Malangatana”, *Savana*, 5 de Março de 2010. Alexandre Pomar (ed.), *the africanos of pancho guedes, the dori and amâncio guedes collection*, (Lisbon: CML-Sextante, 2010), 56.
20. Tostões, Ana, “Correspondences by Pancho Guedes, Architectural Elective Affinities, S.Paulo, EAHN-FAUSP, 2013.
21. Amâncio Guedes, “Mr. Tito Zungu. Master of the Decorated Envelope”, in Pancho Guedes, *Manifestos, Papers, Lectures, Publications*, op.cit., 111.
22. Amâncio Guedes, “A Wrightian Thesis from the Early Fifties”, in Pancho Guedes, *Manifestos, Papers, Lectures, Publications*, op.cit., 12.
23. Bernard Huet, introduction to: Amâncio Guedes, “Y aura-t-il une architecture?”, *l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* 102 (1962), 42.
24. Pancho Guedes, *Vitruvius Mozambicanus*, (Lisbon: Berardo Collection Museum, 2009), 165.
25. Tristan Tzara, “introduction to Guedes’ lecture”, A. D’Alpoim Guedes, “things are not what they seemed to be”, *Proceedings of the First International Congresso n African Culture Held at the National gallery, salisbury, Rhodesia, 1-11 August (1962)*.
26. MoMA exhibition in 1960 “Visionary Architecture”, Bernard Rudofsky (1905-1988) “Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture” (1964), “Architectural History , as written and taught in the Western World , has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures.”
27. Ernesto Nathan Rogers, “Continuità o Crisi”, *Casabella-Continuità* 215 (1957).
28. Sigfried Giedion, *Space Time and Architecture. The Growth of a new Tradition*, (Massachusetts: Harvard, 1941).
29. Amâncio d’Alpoim Guedes, “Lembrança do pintor Malangatana Valente Ngwenya quando ainda jovem”, in Júlio Navarro, *Malangatana Valente Ngwenya* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1998), 9.
30. Pedro Gadanho, (ed.), *Pancho Guedes. Ein alternativer modernist*, Basel, Christoph Merian Verlag, 2007.

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