

Otto Koenigsberger and the Course on Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association, London. Some Notes on the Portuguese Context

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Otto Koenigsberger is considered a pioneer in researching specific models and technical solutions for architecture and planning in the tropics. Educated within the core of the European Modern Movement, under the mentorship of Hans Poelzig, Bruno Taut and Ernst May, Koenigsberger moves away from the ideal and expressionist realm to the real and specific context whilst working in India. This non-western experience triggers an interest in developing countries, mainly tropical ones. In 1954, Koenigsberger conceives a new course on Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association in London, followed by a great number of architects, such as the Portuguese Luís Possolo, António Seabra and Schiappa de Campos, who would apply their learning in the countries of “Portuguese Africa”, as it was formerly known.

By Jorge Figueira and Bruno Gil

The path of Otto Koenigsberger (1908–1999) is an eloquent example of the challenge that the methodologies and the agenda of the Modern Movement faced at the onset of the 20th century and within non-western contexts. Koenigsberger challenges the boundaries of Modern universalism with the introduction of anthropological, social and technical concerns.

Koenigsberger graduated from the *Technische Hochschule* in Berlin, where he studied under Hans Poelzig, Bruno Taut, and eventually Ernst May.¹ The polarity, as described by Rhodri Windsor Liscombe,² between an approach determined by a desired connection between architecture and industry and an expressionist path, where history is a given, is evident in the work he carries out in India between 1939 and 1951, having fled Berlin in 1933.

The positions he held in India, first as Chief Architect and Planner for the State of Mysore between 1939 and 1948, and then as Director of Housing of the first independent Government of India, where he worked until 1951, allowed Koenigsberger to test the accomplishments of the Modern Movement outside its traditional context. The India years would serve as a basis for his work as a mentor, then as the Head of the Department of Tropical Architecture³ at the Architectural Association School of Architecture between 1957 and 1971, and finally as professor in the Development Planning Unit at the Bartlett Faculty of University College London, where he remained until his retirement in 1976.

Koenigsberger, according to Liscombe, “began a process of modification in both his understanding of Modern design and the formulation of planning policy.”⁴ In this sense, he was a pioneer when adapting the aesthetic

models of the Modern Movement to urban planning and interior design, policies and local cultures.

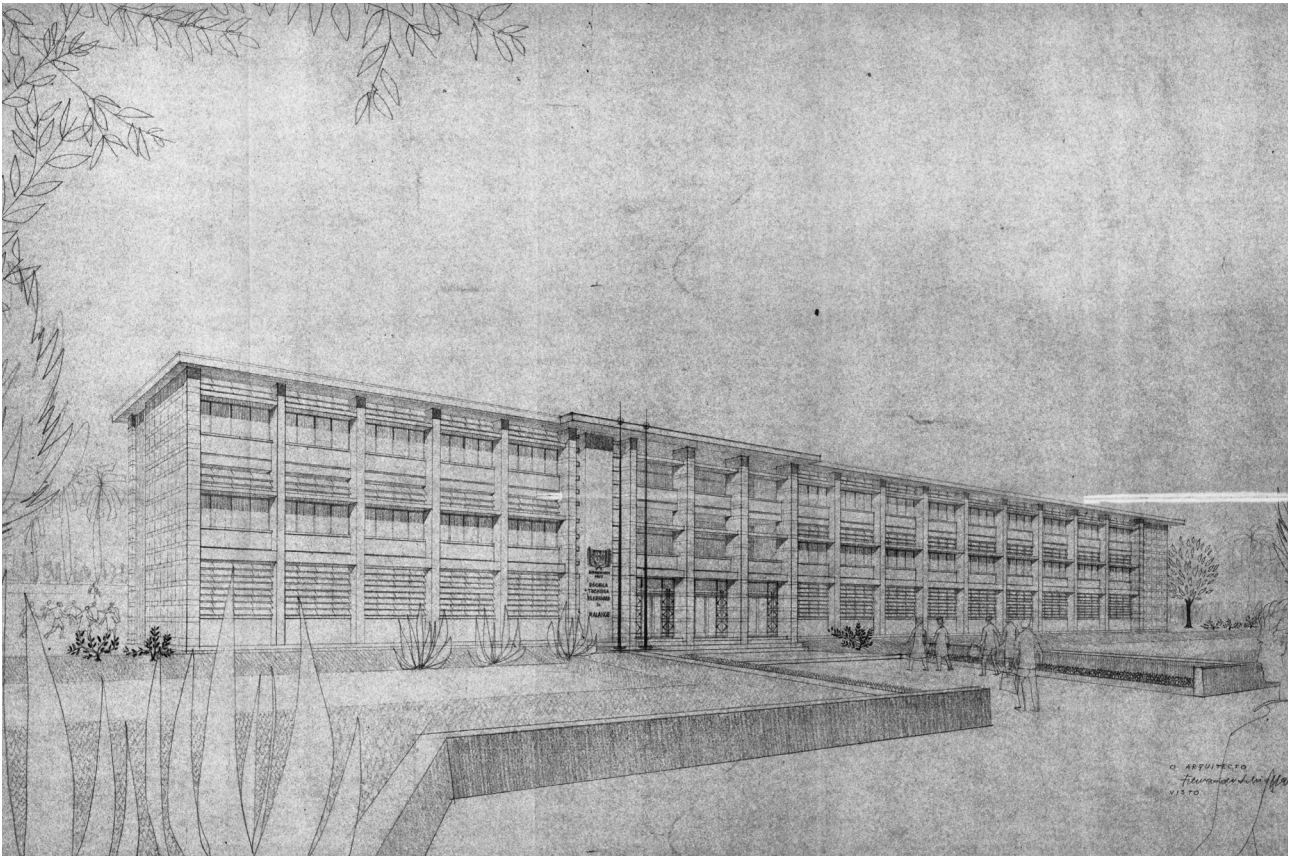
The post-colonial status was equally at stake as India’s independence in 1947 was accompanied by a growing mistrust of universal models, that is, colonizing models, preferring models of activism, with local emphasis. Liscombe wrote: “Koenigsberger’s intellectual and geographical journeys had convinced him that the post-colonial city required not imposed expert order but indigenous public activism.”⁵ In this sense, he initiated the themes that would be fundamental in the 1960s: “participation”, “*le droit à la ville*” and “architecture without architects.”

Koenigsberger moved to London in 1951, where he worked at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.⁶ In March 1953, he participated in the Conference on Tropical Architecture, which triggered the appearance of the course on Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association in 1954. The course was motivated by the dissatisfaction of the students that came from tropical countries, who felt that the contents of the architectural courses were distant from the context where they would later practice.⁷

The conference organized by Koenigsberger entitled “Tropical Planning Problems”⁸ addressed the need for specific planning for countries with different climates “where winter never comes,”⁹ or with nomadic, settled and hybrid communities.¹⁰ The accompanying paper is complemented with images which can be consulted in the AA archives as part of the assets donated by Renate Koenigsberger, and which depict several typical West African scenes of outdoor living and bird’s-eye views of local settlements.

With George Atkinson and Leo de Syllas, Koenigsberger elaborated a detailed programme for the course where the ‘hygienist’ approach, imported from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, plays a significant role. During the first years, the head of the course was Maxwell Fry, following his return from Chan-

< Figure 1. Luís Possolo in Guinea-Bissau around 1960–1961. Luís Possolo Archive.



digarh, where he had elaborated the curriculum with Jane Drew, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret—a collaboration promoted by Koenigsberger.¹¹

The course initially envisioned a mediation between architecture and urban form with the express aim of preventing disease. However, it would progressively be enlarged to include themes of appropriation and comfort. The main purpose was to overcome the empiric understanding of what it meant to build in the tropics. Instead, it called for the specialization of knowledge when designing for a determined physical and social context. This approach reflected an anthropological concern in parallel with a technical and scientific vision, which focused on the analysis of the different climates and the properties of construction materials.

The premises and personalities of this pioneering course would confront the reality of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, then undergoing significant, though late, development. The planning and architecture of state-owned initiative on the five countries of the then called “Portuguese Africa”—Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe—fell under the responsibility of the Colonial Planning Office,¹² which worked under the tutelage of the Ministry of Overseas, and was associated with the political and administrative policies of the *Estado Novo*, the dictatorship that ruled Portugal between 1933 and 1974.

By referral from the Portuguese state, three architects attended the course on Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association: Luís Possolo,¹³ António Seabra and Fernando Schiappa de Campos. As listed in the AA records, Luís Possolo attended the first edition of the course,¹⁴ along with “Miss Lakofsky, D.,” otherwise known as Denise Scott Brown,¹⁵ and Kenneth Frampton. This fact is significant in view of the path both would take, whereby the “learning” in Las Vegas and the Critical Regionalism proposals, though in opposing ways, refer to locality, identity and materiality.

The 1957–1958 session, with Koenigsberger already leading the course and followed by Portuguese students António Seabra and Schiappa de Campos, had a broad programme, covering subjects of artistic and technical nature. Climatology was a central theme as well as engineering and economy, but anthropology, painting and sculpture also featured on the pedagogical agenda: *Types of Tropical Climates*, John Page; *Building Materials in Tropics*, O. Koenigsberger; *Earth as Building Material*, G. A. Atkinson; *Urban Planning*, P. Stevens; *Cultural Patterns and Tropical Architecture*, P. Smithson; *The Tema Village Plan*, Denys Lasdun; *Hospitals in the Tropics*, R. Llewelyn Davies; *Schools in the Tropics*, Jane Drew; *Painting and Sculpture*, Eduardo Paolozzi.¹⁶

The three Portuguese architects would build in “Portuguese Africa” but also in Dili, Timor (Schiappa de Campos), drawing on the knowledge they acquired on the Tropical Architecture course and by means of their interactions with Koenigsberger himself. The influence of Koenigsberger’s teaching is being further investigated in a work that we are currently developing, and of which we hereby present a glimpse.

Koenigsberger’s projects in India bear witness to his rationalist and expressionist matrixes, dialoguing between the values of prefabrication of the demiurge building and expressionism. His conclusions lead him to believe that “master plans and reports are not enough. It is necessary to create a live organization, preferably anchored in the structure of local government,”¹⁷ ensuring expertise, coherence and continuity—a notion that has not ceased to be pertinent.

In the field of architectonic and stylistic expression relating to time and history, Koenigsberger was also a pioneer. Liscombe, referring to the Institute of Sciences, Bangalore Auditorium and Dining Hall (1945–46) stated that “the novel reinterpretation, blending Modern motifs with Classical *antis* colonnade, registered Koenigsberger’s profound respect for ancient design [...] and its reverberation in the abstract and functionalist aesthetic of the Modern Movement.”¹⁸

Figure 2. Esplanada, Guinea-Bissau, **Luís Possolo**, DSUH DGOPC, 1959. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon.

Figure 3. Technical School in Quelimane, Mozambique, **Fernando Schiappa de Campos**/Gabinete de Urbanização do Ultramar, 1956. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon

Figure 4. **Fernando Schiappa de Campos** at the AA, London, around 1958–1959. Fernando Schiappa de Campos Archive.





Figure 5. Banco Nacional Ultramarino, Dili, Timor, by **Fernando Schiappa de Campos**, 1968. Arquivo Banco Nacional Ultramarino/Caixa Geral de Depósitos, Lisbon.

The articulation of different epochs, the adaptation of antique, classical and traditional models to the logic of the Modern Movement, will be a constant in the Portuguese context from the 1950s onwards, be it in the “Portuguese Africa” or the “Metropolis”. The course on Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association, under the tutelage of Koenigsberger, is a fascinating facet of this process.

Notes

1. Cf. Otto Koenigsbergerr, “Koenigsberger: Early Days Abroad”, interview by David Toppin, *The Architect’s Journal*, July 7, 1982, 36.
2. Rhodri Liscombe, “In-dependence: Otto Koenigsberger and modernist urban resettlement in India”, *Planning Perspectives*, 21, 2006, 157-178.
3. In 1967, it changed the name to Department of Development and Tropical Studies, which in part coincided with a revival of the planning school at the AA with Leslie Ginsberg (cf. Koenigsberger, *Op. Cit.*, 37).



4. Rhodri Liscombe, *Op. Cit*, 158
5. Cf. Rhodri Liscombe, *Op. Cit*, 173.
6. In this school Koenigsberger produces a draft of a research text-book which would be the theoretical basis for his *Manual of Tropical Housing and Building*, published later in 1974, jointly with T. G. Ingersoll, A. Mayhew and S. V. Szokolay.
7. Cf. Otto Koenigsberger, *Op. Cit*, 36.
8. Other communications included George Atkinson's "Tropical Architecture and Building Studies", from the Building Research Station.
9. In his paper, Koenigsberger quotes this title of a 1952's study, by the

- American zoologist Marston Bates, on man and nature in the tropics.
10. Cf. Otto Koenigsberger, "Tropical Planning Problems", Paper presented at the Conference on Tropical Architecture, Otto Koenigsberger Archive, AA Archives, 1953.
11. Cf. Liscombe, *Op. Cit*, 159.
12. The Colonial Planning Office was created in 1944. In 1951, it changed its name to Overseas Planning Office until 1957, and subsequently to Department of Urbanism and Housing Services at the Ministry of Overseas, until 1974.
13. In Luís Possolo's diploma, there are four works referred to as: "Onitsha Market" and a "Health Centre", with the annotation "Store" (reference meaning "for archive", but it was not possible to locate these works) and a "House at Accra, Gold Coast" and a "House at Chandigarh", both with the annotation "Pass".
14. The name "Brown, R. B.", probably Robert Scott Brown, is also listed in the same records.
15. As detailed in a lecture programme, Autumn and Spring Terms 1957-58, Department of Tropical Architecture, AA archives.
16. Cited by Rhodri Liscombe, *Op. Cit*, 173.
17. Rhodri Liscombe, *Op. Cit*, 164.

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