

Modern Movement Houses in the Colonial Capital City of Nairobi

BY YASMIN SHARIFF

Architecturally, Nairobi was never a backwater. Modern architecture in Nairobi developed in the context of the tropical climate design vocabulary of Otto Königsberger (1908-1999), Maxwell Fry (1899-1987) and Jane Drew (1911-1996), within a racially segregated plan. Ideas and ideals of Modernism came with refugees, migrants and magazines from many cultures and places including South Africa, Europe, the Indian sub-continent and the Americas. Projects by internationally renowned architects and planners such as Herbert Baker (1862-1946), Ernst May (1886-1970) and Amyas Connell (1901-1980) set high standards of design. The Garden City Movement, International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), the Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS), and the work of many others was influential.

Imperial ambitions: the early years

Nairobi is a 20th century city with its architecture rooted in political machinations of European imperial powers, the Raj and consequences of two World Wars. Imperial ambitions fuelled the British state-owned Uganda Railway, crossing East Africa from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean to Lake Victoria.¹ 31,983 Indian artisans, clerks and labourers were recruited to build the railway and construction started in 1896.² The initial plan for Nairobi was conceived in 1898, when Arthur Church was commissioned to design a layout for the railway depot in an area the Masaai called Enkare Nairobi (cool water).³ There were no permanent buildings on this site and it was considered to be an open tabula rasa, 1,795 meters (m) above sea level. Church's plan included an Indian commercial area (the Bazaar) and there was no designated area for Africans in Nairobi until after 1919.⁴ The authorities failed to prevent outbreaks of bubonic plague in the Indian Bazaar and Professor William John Ritchie Simpson (1855-1931) was sent out from England in 1913 to advise the authorities.⁵ His report assumed Garden City principals for planning towns and recommended racially segregated zones.⁶ Thus, the die was cast and Nairobi was to be developed on Garden City principles with separated zones for European, Asians and Africans.

Opportunity and oppression: Garden City roots

In 1920, the same year that Welwyn Garden City was founded, British imperial power had

been consolidated and the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya established with Nairobi declared the Colonial Capital. The Colonial authorities commissioned South African architect and Professor of Architecture at the University of Cape Town, Thornton White (1901-1965), to design a Master Plan.⁷ Thornton White invited L. Silberman, a sociologist and lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand and P. Anderson, a town planning engineer, to join his team.⁸ These three South Africans visited Nairobi three times to draw up the plan.⁹ The Garden City vision published in Thornton White's Master Plan for Nairobi with a central Parkway and fountain are ideas virtually identical to Broadwater Park in Letchworth and Parkway in Welwyn Garden City.¹⁰ The spacing of the blocks embody the fundamental concepts of "sun, light, and air" of Modernism and green "lungs" of Garden City planning.

Modern Movement architects

Nairobi's Modernism is not a second hand copy of what was going on in other parts of the world. Two leading proponents, Ernst May and Amyas Connell, designed landmark buildings in the capital. Ernst May, vice-president of CIAM, moved to East Africa in 1937 after his socialist experiments in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) ended, and the fact that his mother was Jewish made it impossible for him to return to Nazi Germany. Connell, a member of the MARS Group, the British arm of CIAM, followed soon after the War when his practice folded.¹¹ Both architects had experience of designing in a tropical climate having worked in Tanganyika. The homes and studios

they designed for themselves in Nairobi, incorporated many of the techniques they developed to respond to the Nairobi context of dust, glare and tropical landscape.

Ernst May's Home in Kenya

Ernst May moved to Nairobi in 1937 and built himself a house and studio and set up in practice.¹² His house was built on a hilly slope surrounded by trees.¹³ The plan of the house and studio shows a grand living and dining room with dramatic views out from a west-facing terrace, well protected by a thin projecting concrete shelf, typical of Indian Modernist homes in Nairobi. The veranda is an extension of the living room with views over the valley beyond. A separated curved wing, with two bedrooms (presumably for servants) approached from the rear; a weaving studio and an open, covered workshop space, breaks away from the rectilinear block creating a turning area for vehicles.

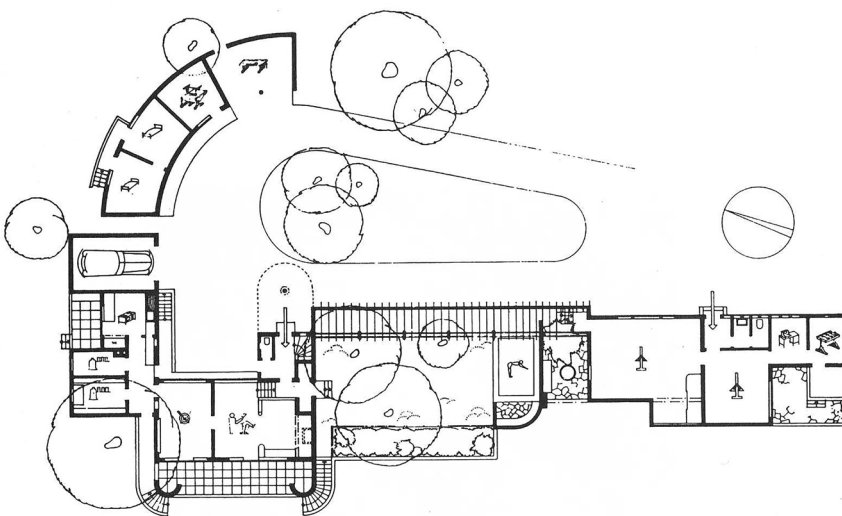
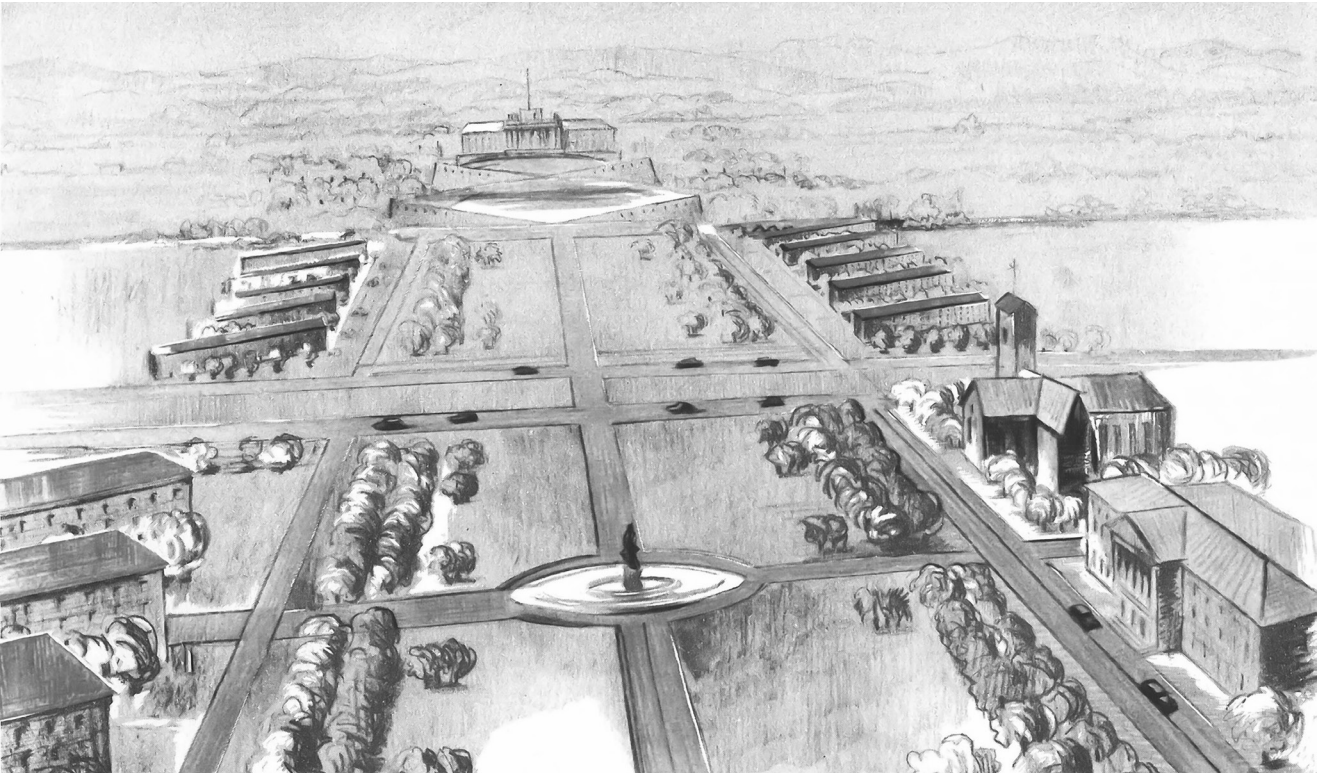
Above the living room two large bedrooms with a shared bathroom have an elevated view over the valley below. A third, north and east facing, bedroom with an ensuite, is located above the kitchen and linked by a long corridor on the east side of the house overlooking the drive.

The architecture studio on the south side of the house was erected later, in 1945. It is separated from the house by a formal garden with terraces, a plunge pool and a dramatic pergola along the entire length of the connecting east wall. The entrance to the studio is across a small courtyard garden with a circular feature. The north-south orientation of the house and studio is not ideal for the tropical sun, how-



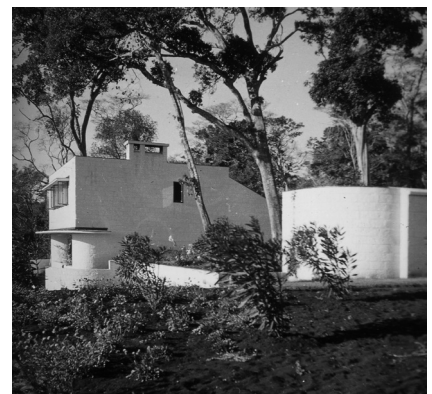
01 Front, (south) elevation, Delamare Flats.
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02 I. W. Thornton White, L. Silberman and P. R. Anderson, Nairobi Master Plan for a Colonial Capital, HMSO, Kenya, 1948, a coloured rendering of the Garden City Centre vision for the colonial capital city of Nairobi published in Thornton White's 1948 masterplan.



03 Ernst May's house and studio, Nairobi, Kenya, 1938, ground and first floor plan.

04 Ernst May's own house, Nairobi, Kenya, 1938, contemporary black and white photograph of Ernst May's house built in 1938 with the studio addition. © Ernst May-Archiv, Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main; Photo: Ernst May.





05 Amyas Connell's own house, Mile Seven House, Nairobi, Kenya, 1953. © Dennis Sharp Archive.

ever the integrated outdoor garden spaces provide shade and breeze. The high altitude of Nairobi creates an ideal climate which rarely goes above 28°C in the day and solar shading and planting can easily mitigate the consequences of a compromised orientation.

Amyas Connell's Mile Seven House

Amyas Connell was finding it hard to survive as a Modernist in Britain and his practice Connell, Ward & Lucas ceased trading in 1939.¹⁴ Connell continued to practice as an independent architect and entered a competition for Auckland Cathedral with Harold Thornley Dyer (1905-1989), a fellow student at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London University College, where Connell trained.¹⁵ Both Connell and Dyer found work in East Africa after the War. Connell was commissioned to design labourers' and managers' housing on a sisal estate in the village of Kanga, Tanganyika and Dyer was appointed as a Town Planning advisor to the Kenyan Government in 1946, at the time when the South African team under Thornton White were preparing their master plan for Nairobi.¹⁶

Connell, moved to Kenya when Dyer asked him to help with the designs the new legislative building in Nairobi.¹⁷ Soon after his arrival, in 1952, Connell built a studio and house for himself at Mile Seven in Roslyn, Nairobi. Free of the bureaucratic yoke of the British planning system, Connell designed a surprisingly eclectic home with decorative screens and pointed arched doorways. In a letter he wrote to his young assistant Simon Johnson in December, 1969, he eulogised Le Corbusier (1887-1965) but went on to deplore "the new Brutalist stuff ... in which all sense of architecture has been lost," in which "the emotional content has been drained away by an eclectic intellectualism."¹⁸ According to Connell, Le Corbusier "lacked an understanding of the meaning of ornament."¹⁹

Mile Seven bears many of the hallmarks of Connell's designs for the Nairobi Law Court and Legislative building designs, particularly the use of buff geometric *brise-soleil* and dressed stone plinths. The facade of the house is orchestrated using golden mean and double square geometries to define openings and walls and there is a dynamic play of asymmetrical form with the placement of the entrance door and chimney stack. The white rendered walls provide a perfect foil for the succulents that were planted in the beds on the perimeter of the front elevation. Two raised planters mark the location of the steps that lead down to the main entrance door on a diagonal route. The pointed arch is not a reference to Islamic architecture – in my conversations with Connell he explained that the form of the pointed arch is to do with the human form.²⁰ Connell's use of random dressed stone as a plinth is a highly effective way of dealing with the mud and dust thrown up, either by torrential rain or drought conditions.

His innovatory bedroom incorporated a sliding wall which came down to separate the marital bed in two so he could read late at night! The dramatic mono-pitched living room created a large expansive space opening up sweeping views over a landscape which falls away from the living room and terrace. This latter device – probably borrowed from Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), if not directly from Le Corbusier – was used by both Connell and Ernst May.²¹

Connell, like other Modernist architects in Nairobi, embraced the essential connection between nature and architecture as seen in Le Corbusier's influential Pavilion L'Esprit Nouveau (1924-1925) and the work of Frank Lloyd

Wright (1867-1959) and Richard Neutra (1892-1970).²² Connell worked closely with Peter Greensmith (1911-1992) on several city projects including the gardens for the Legislative buildings.²³ These landscape designs were strongly influenced by the works of Roberto Burle Marx (1909-1994), with whom Greensmith had established a close friendship.²⁴

Indian Modernism

Race was a determining factor in the allocation of land and what could be built. Most of the Modernist family homes in Nairobi were built on small plots for the Indian population. Europeans were allocated larger plots of land further away from the city center. Prior to independence there were few individually commissioned family homes by native Africans.

The Indians in Parklands shunned the old corrugated iron roofed beaux arts colonial style and embraced concrete constructions with white clean lines, curved balconies and cantilevered awnings and *brise-soleil* as shading devices, similar to contemporaneous examples found in India.²⁵ Some of these Indian Modernist houses were pattern book examples and others designed by practicing architects from very different training and backgrounds including Hungarian born Jewish architect George Vamos (1910-1999), Welshman Idris Davies and Kenyan born C. S. Thakore. Many of their Modernist designs were published in the *East African Institute of Architects Yearbooks*.

Inward-looking houses focused in on a courtyard, are a characteristic feature of Indian houses in contrast with European designs as typified by Ernst May and Amyas Connell's own homes that are outward-looking into

06 House for M. P. Shah, 95 Limuru Road, Parklands. © A. Hussein and T. Hart.





07 Parkland Flats designed by C. S. Thakore for the Ismaili Community, Nairobi, Kenya. © Akbar Hussein.

the landscape. An exception to this was the Modernist terrace housing designed by C. S. Thakore for the Ismaili community in High Ridge and Parklands in 1959-1961.²⁶

The flat roofs and terraced design of the social housing for the Ismaili Community was more at home in Stuttgart or Frankfurt and completely novel to Nairobi – there were few private terraced houses like these at the time. The development is referred to as a new garden suburb in the souvenir brochure.²⁷ The terraces were of concrete construction with metal windows, terrazzo floors, fitted kitchens, formica worktops and thermo-plastic flooring. There were rear kitchen courtyards and a back “street” for services and servants.

Post-independence. Modernism legacy

Modernism in pre-independence Nairobi was a way of expressing a forward-looking vision. After independence there was a great shortage of skilled labour as many Kenyan Indians chose to migrate to Britain. For many, the Modern Movement style was considered to be too simple – not *maridadi*²⁸ enough. There was a search for a new vocabulary and architects like Karl Nostvik (1925-1992) who designed the Kenyatta Conference Centre brought a new sensitivity to the architecture of independent Kenya. The Modernist legacy is being rediscovered just as it is on the threshold of its destruction, but some European houses further out of the city stand a better chance of surviving the ravages of time and economic exploitation. Little research has been done on these Modernist homes and their secrets have yet to be revealed.

Notes

- 1 E. D. Hughes, “Prospects for British Architects in the Empire”, *Architectural Design*, November, 1948, 250.
- 2 Thornton White, L. Silberman, P. R. Anderson, *Nairobi Master Plan for a Colonial Capital*, HMSO, 1948, 12.
- 3 R. A. Deissenge, M. Njuguma (Eds.), *Conservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage in Kenya*, UCL, 2016, 163.
- 4 The Native Passes Regulations – Ordinance of 1900 and 1903 – required that Africans needed passes for leaving their towns and/or villages – R. Home, “Colonial Township Laws and Urban Governance in Kenya”, *Journal of African Law*, October, 2012, 5.
- 5 Thornton White, Op. cit., 15.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Thornton White taught at the Regent Street Polytechnic and was vice president of the Architectural Association before being appointed as the first professor at the University of Cape Town in 1937 – see G. Herbert, *Martinsen and the International Style: the modern movement in South African architecture*, AA Balkema Cape Town, 1975, 177. Thornton White, like Amyas Connell, was a Rome scholar and it is interesting to note that when at the British School in Rome, in 1930, he was criticised for his modern design for a travel agency and bank, see D. Sharp, S. Rendel, Connell, Ward & Lucas. *Modern Movement Architects in England 1029-1939*, Frances Lincoln Editions, London, 2008, 14; and RIBA Drawings Collection, ref RIBA92828. <https://www.architecture.com/image-library/ribapix/image-information/poster/design-for-a-hall-for-a-travel-agency-and-banking-company-rome-interior-elevation/poster/id/RIBA92828.html>, accessed 29 August 2020.
- 8 The appointment of P. Anderson, a sociologist was novel and seen to be required “to tackle” the “sociological difficulties of a new and multi-cultural urban area” described to be the “Nairobi problem.”
- 9 Thornton White, Op. cit., 2. The visits were made in July 1945, December-January 1945-1946 and in July 1946.
- 10 Ibid. 60-61.
- 11 D. Sharp, S. Rendel, Op. Cit., 182. Ernst May and Amyas Connell both moved to Tanganyika before settling in Nairobi.
- 12 B. Tiven, “The Delight of the Yearner – Ernst May and Erica Mann in Nairobi 1933-1953”, *Journal of Contemporary African Art* – 32, NKA Publications, Spring, 2013, 82.
- 13 Photographs of the house are now in the Deutsches Arkitekturmuseum in Frankfurt am Main and a brief description and a model can be seen <http://archiv.dam-online.de/handle/11153/160-033-001>, accessed 17 August 2020.
- 14 Ibid., 181.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=404640, accessed 27 August 2020.
- 17 D. Sharp, S. Rendel, Op. Cit., 182. The Legislative building became the Parliament building after independence in 1963.
- 18 D. Sharp, S. Rendel Op. Cit., private papers refer to Letter to Simon Johnson, dated 5 December 1969, also referred to in D. Sharp, “The Modern Movement in East Africa”, *Habitat International Otto Koenigsberger Festschrift*, Pergamon Press, 1983, 320. The Legislative buildings became the Parliament building after independence in 1963.

- 19 Ibid.
- 20 I worked for Amyas Connell in London as an apprentice (1979-1980) and had the opportunity of discussing his work and ethos with him.
- 21 D. Sharp, 1983, Op. cit., 311-326.
- 22 D. Sharp, S. Rendel, 2008, Op. cit., 11.
- 23 G. Irvine, et al, “Nairobi’s Gardener”, *Kenya Past and Present*, 1944, 18. A particular feature of Nairobi gardens, Modernist or otherwise are the bougainvillea which were the passion of Peter Greensmith (Henry Powell Greensmith). Peter Greensmith joined the staff of the Nairobi Town Council in 1947 as Parks Superintendent after he was demobbed from the Navy. Peter Greensmith won the highest acclaims for his work in Nairobi including the Associate of Honour of the Royal Horticultural Society.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 T. Hart, “The Nairobi that Was”, *Kenya Past and Present*, Issue No. 30, 2006, 76.
- 26 *Souvenir of a Dream*, 1961. The Parklands Flats were based on an almost identical development for the Ismaili Community for 93 Maisonettes in High Ridge completed in 1959.
- 27 Ibid., 9.
- 28 Swahili for fancy or decorative.

Note from the Editors: Ernst May’s house in Nairobi, located at 61 Marula Lane, Karen, has been transformed into The Purdy Arms, a Bed & Breakfast, Bar, Restaurant and Archery Club, with unfortunate modifications and additions.

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