
Abstract

After the episodic interest in African architecture after the Second World War, it resumed towards the end of the last century and accelerated from the first decade of the New Millennium. Due to the historical events linked to European Colonialism coinciding with the advent of Modernism, architecture often lost contact with the cultural tradition of the place to become a transplant of external models and stylistic features or a caricature of local idioms, making it necessary to recover a specific identity. Tropical architecture is a specific category of architecture that, starting from the climatological condition, should develop its characters in a balanced balance of symbolic, cultural, technological, etc. aspects fused in the architectural project.

Keywords

Tropical architecture — Tradition and innovation — Richness and poverty



Fig. 1
 Diébédo Francis Kéré at Festival dell'Architettura of Parma, 2005. Festival dell'Architettura Archive.

A few years ago, in the *Architecture/World* section of the Festival dell'Architettura of Parma, in its second edition in 2005 entitled *Architecture: richness and poverty*¹, we went in search of figures and projects, native or allochthonous, that seemed to us worthy of attention for how they dealt with the theme of architecture in the so-called developing countries. Under the apparently general title there was the precise desire to invert the two words in polemical and reflective terms with the aim of arguing that so-called poor architecture was actually rich and authentic, even in meanings, while on the contrary rich architecture was often only a trivial display of wealth. Renato Pallavicini (2005), architect and journalist, accompanied an article in *L'Unità*, had juxtaposed the image of an agglomeration of straw houses in the Hidalgo valley in Mexico with the image of the skyscrapers of City Life in Milan. The contrast was not simply between architecture without architects, to quote Rudofsky, and designer architecture, but above all between authenticity and falsification.

On that occasion, a young Diébédo Francis Kéré came to Parma who, almost twenty years later, would be rightly consecrated with the Pritzker Prize for Architecture (the Nobel Prize for architecture), the Indian architect Raj Rewal, unknown to most but a figure of great interest in architecture and former professor at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi; we published projects by Kéré, ADAUA/Fabrizio Carola Group, Patrick Dujarric, Abdalla Mohammed Sabbar, Demas Nwoko, Abderrahim Charai and Abdelaziz Lazrak, just to stay in Africa.

This was before a general interest in African architecture broke out, as evidenced by a considerable number of research and publications developed especially since the beginning of the new millennium – the exhibition at



Fig. 2

Pier Paolo Pasolini interviews African students at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza'. Screenshot from the film *Appunti per un'Orestiade africana* (1970). From Wikipedia.

the Triennale Africa is worth mentioning *Big change, big chance* by Benno Albrecht (2014) – culminated with the entrustment of the direction of the 2024 Venice Architecture Biennale to the Ghanaian-born architect Lesley Lokko.

More recently, within a network of intercultural academic exchanges between European universities including the University of Parma and the University of Rwanda (Capacity Building in the Field of Higher Education) I had the opportunity to confront myself with a young Dean who submitted to me the study structure of the courses of the *School of Architecture and Built Environment* of the Kigali RU. If in the print of more than three hundred sheets there had not been written at the foot of the page “University of Rwanda, Department of Architecture”, that order of studies with the relative contents of the individual courses, educational objectives, reference bibliography, etc., could have been mistaken for any university course of study in Europe or perhaps in the world, so general was it, international and little characterized with respect to the territory in which it stood. I learned that the School of Architecture was born in 2009 with a European approach, not because of yet another act of cultural colonialist imposition, but because the leaders of the University of Rwanda at the time saw in the international generalist approach the possibility of inserting itself into a global circuit of university education in architecture and architecture in general, which was well framed in the broader phenomenon of Globalization. On the contrary, a counter-colonial movement was emerging to export a thought on architecture that recovered local building and linguistic traditions, modernizing them without imposing “out of place” techniques (interpreting this term in both a literal and metaphorical sense) that laid the foundations of an awareness as a cultural conquest that began to generate interesting results such as those we witnessed in that edition of the Architecture Festival, unfortunately the only one not to have seen a printed catalog published.

Nothing more came of that project to reform the educational system – the shared idea was to characterize the training course according to the principles of architecture and cities of tropical places – but from the discussions with Manlio Michieletto, former professor at the *Institute Superiore d'Ar-*

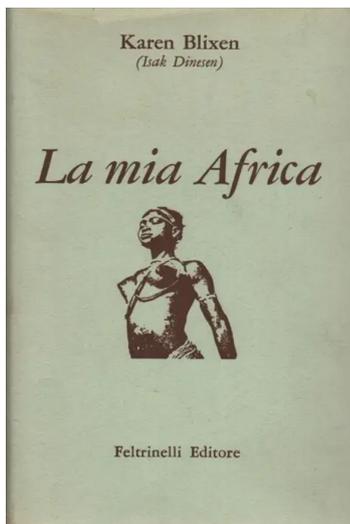


Fig. 3
Karen Blixen, *La mia Africa*, Feltrinelli, 1958. Cover of the Italian edition of the book *Out of Africa*.

chitecture et Urbanisme in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo and then Dean of the *School of Architecture and Built Environment* of the University of Rwanda the idea of deepening the theme of sub-Saharan tropical architecture remained. It can be said, therefore, that the idea of the monographic issue of FAM was born on that occasion.

Within the magazine we had already delved into the themes related to the critical Regionalism of Framptonian memory – to which the theme of African tropical architecture is evidently linked – within which Anna Bruna Menghini (2022) speaking of Sub-Saharan Africa in an article, to which we refer for a concise but exhaustive historical-architectural historical-critical analysis of Africa, posed the problem of the cultural identity of a vast and complex continent with a difficult history.

This aspect of contrasting characters is emphasized by many: Africa is a variegated continent made up of “vast prehistoric landscapes, its miserable villages inhabited by a peasant and primitive humanity, two or three very modern cities that were already industrial and proletarian.” These are the words of Alberto Moravia who shares with Pasolini and Elsa Morante the journey first to India and then to Africa in search of cinematographic settings. This crude contrast, which recalls the Pallavicini approach reported above, was the basis of Pasolini’s idea of constructing a Poem on the Third World in the form of an episodic film. (Chiacchiararelli 2013)

The episode shot in Africa will have as its specific theme the relationship between “white” culture (Western: i.e. rationalistic and typical of a bourgeois and already completely industrialized world) and “colored” culture, i.e. archaic, popular, pre-industrial and pre-bourgeois (with the conflict that follows, and all its dramatic ambiguities, its insoluble knots). (Pasolini 1968)

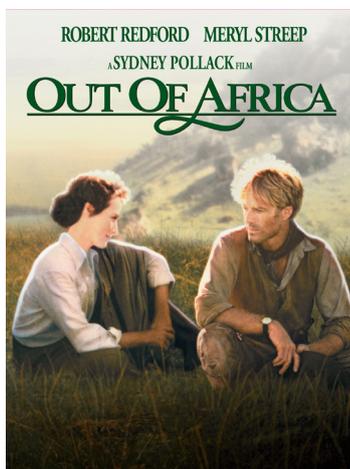
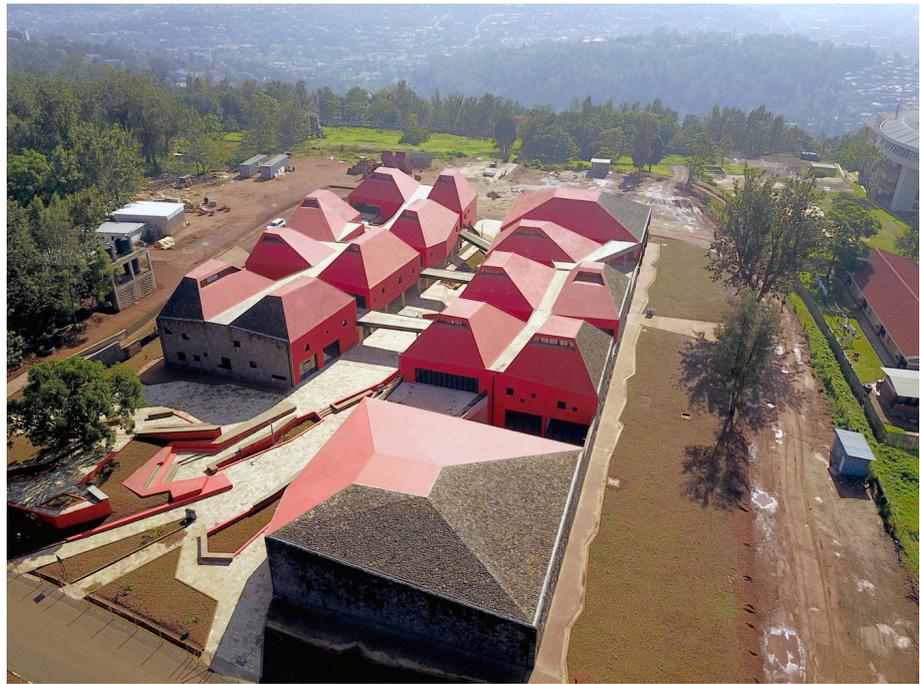


Fig. 4
Sydney Pollack, *Out of Africa*, 1985. Movie poster based on the novel of the same name by Karen Blixen.

The problematic knot was played, and in an architectural sense is still played today, between traditional native and archaic “colored” culture and rationalist modernism resulting from the “white (architectural) culture” imposed by the Western vision. Conflict and ambiguity have in fact accompanied the trials of the modern African, which has managed only in a few cases to achieve convincing results, albeit in a broad sense of modern that welcomes local declinations (what Luciano Semerani (2000) ultimately called “Altro Moderno”)².

The imagination always plays a fundamental role in all those who approach distant and different cultures. An imaginary often built on biased narratives because they were made outside the countries whose events are told, often for the use of colonizers according to clichés based on stories of slavery and imperialism. So that while waiting for a history made from the inside, such as that of Zeinab Badawi (2024) who recriminates *An African History of Africa*, the most important testimonies are those of explorers (anthropologists or ethnologists) who have entered the territories in order to document their physical environment but above all their culture, even symbolic. Above all Leo Frobenius of whom Lucio Valerio Barbera narrates well. Then there are those who have left their hearts on the African continent, such as Baroness von Blixen-Finecke. The English title of his famous novel, *Out of Africa*³ – from which the award-winning film of the 80s ruinously translated into Italian in *La mia Africa* (the Italian translation was already in the novel published in Italy in the Fifties) – is however the pretext to underline again the relationship between the before and the after, between pre-colonialism and post-colonialism.

Out of Africa is also the paleoanthropological hypothesis of the first human

**Fig. 5**

Patrick Schweitzer & Associés architects, Faculty of Architecture and Environmental Design, Kigali, 2012.

Photo @ Joules Toules

ArchDaily.com

<https://www.schweitzer-associés.com/single-project.php?albumID=8>.

migration by *Homo erectus* from which all of us (Europeans, Westerners) would have derived according to the most accredited scientific theories. In other words, humanity would have been born in the Rift Valley in the middle of tropical Africa also known as Black Africa. *Eve was African*, is the title of a book by Rita Levi Montalcini.

We architects, by general cultural training and by specific architectural cultural training, so attentive to the theme of history, tradition, memory of places, etc., cannot fail to consider Africa as our heritage to be defended from that “International of ideas” that flattens differences and homogenizes languages.

Claiming, therefore, the existence of a “kind of architecture” (understood as a classificatory category) that takes its name from the geographical strip crossed by the equator and delimited by the tropics in search of specific identity characteristics is no small thing. Of course, it is a type of architecture that owes a lot to specific climatic and natural as well as cultural conditions: from these, obviously including the set of construction techniques, which are fundamental for projects to be feasible by local workers, a specific interest of a generation of architects has restarted who, if on the one hand have grasped the need to address the theme, on the other hand, they have often adopted the modelling approach of the Manual as a tool of action that is too general to understand the differences in approach.

This is the difference between Otto Koenigsberger, former Head of the Department of Development and Tropical Studies at the Architectural Association, on the one hand, and Maxwell Fry & Jane Drew, who exemplify their theory with the numerous field tests represented by the buildings they have been building since the 1940s in Ghana, Togo and Nigeria. on the other.

After all, the experience (and value) of Fry & Drew earned him an invitation from Le Corbusier to join the design of Chandigarh.

That it is necessary to “design with the climate” seems all too obvious: it is, however, a matter of assuming that balanced attitude between tradition and innovation that has always characterized the good work of Architecture. In this regard, it should be remembered that Ernesto N. Rogers, in the first issue of *Casabella-Continuità*, juxtaposes the publication of Cameroon huts

as *Examples of equatorial architecture* (Tam Tam Group 1953), with the advanced technology applied to mass architecture by the self-taught Jean Prouvè (Zanuso 1953) to demonstrate that one must meet the other.

To conclude, returning to that cultural project of the School of Architecture and Built Environment of the UR of Kigali, which in the meantime had built a new headquarters that is an example of how European sensitivity can be combined with the characteristics of the place (I am referring to the new headquarters designed by the Swiss Patrick Schweitzer & Associés following the international competition of 2012) the core of the “capacity building” to which we were called, consisted in instilling awareness of the cultural richness of a tropical architecture on which the new school could base its teaching. To my knowledge, it could have been the first School of Tropical Architecture in which the themes of sustainability, technology but also history, tradition and memory could find a meeting point in the design laboratory.

Not an imposition, therefore, but a collaboration from the outside so that Africans could use *Out of Africa* as a warning to an economic-architectural neo-colonialism that now invades the great Africa from north to south.

Notes

¹ Red., Ricchezza e povertà al Festival dell'Architecture, in DomusWeb, 19 September 2005. Available at <<https://www.domusweb.it/it/architettura/2005/09/19/ricchezza-e-poverta-al-festival-dell-architettura.html>>. See also *Festival dell'Architettura 2. Ricchezza e povertà. Seconda edizione del Festival a Parma, dal 19 al 25 settembre 2005*. Available at <https://www.archweb.it/eventi_architettura/festival_architettura/festival_architettura.htm>.

² On the same line of research there is also the book by Kenneth Frampton (2015).

³ The original Danish title of the book is *Den afrikanske farm*, which literally translated into Italian would sound like *La fattoria africana*. Both the English titles *Out of Africa* and the Italian *La mia Africa* are an adaptation to different cultural contexts.

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