

Colonial Modern. Aesthetics of the Past – Rebellions for the Future, by Tom Avermaete, Serhat Karakayali and Marion Von Osten (eds.)

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Form Follows Appropriation - A review of a book about the postcolonial reciprocity between people and buildings

Colonial Modern - Aesthetics of the Past, Rebellions for the Future is the publication following the conference The Colonial Modern (Berlin 2007-8) and the exhibition *In the Desert of Modernity: Colonial Planning and After* (Berlin 2008 and Casablanca 2009).

The highlight of the publication is the large-scale housing development Cité d’Habitation of Carrières Centrales, built in 1952 to relocate the migrant population of the ever growing bidonvilles, or slums. Architects Bodiensky, Candilis, Piot and Woods, carefully studied the spatial and social structures of the adjacent non-planned settlements, and transferred their analysis onto two housing typologies - cité verticale and cité horizontale – which reflected a new concept of “habitat” in opposition to the classical modern “living machine”. In 1953, the project was presented in the ninth Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) and it drew the attention of Aldo van Eyck and the Smithsons. Eventually, Candilis and Woods would form part of the inner circle of Team 10: colonial Africa was becoming a fertile laboratory for Western modernity.

The book shows how North Africa’s architectural and urban experiments in the 1950s and 1960s represented a decisive shift in the modern movement paradigm. Centered mainly on Morocco and Algeria, this masterly edited reader offers a well-rounded debate on how

the modern Universalist positions merged with the adaptation to local cultures in the design and appropriation of colonial housing projects.

Together with the above mentioned CIAM, the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* is recurrently mentioned. Displayed in the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956, it had the participation of Alison and Peter Smithson, two young architects “challenging the modernist consensus”, as Mark Crinson puts it in his captivating essay *From the Rainforest to the Streets*. Their installation *Patio and Pavillion* (in collaboration with Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi) played around the basic elements of the human habitat, based on observations of non-Western cultures which aimed to find solutions to the crisis of post-war housing.

This crisis is in the basis for the contributions to *Colonial Modern*. Architecture and art history, visual and cultural studies, sociology and philosophy are agreeably presented through personal records, artistic and political perspectives, scholarly research, historical documents, images captured from a computer screen.

In a postcolonial Era, the negotiation of modern architecture in the everyday have its roots in the “arenas for social expression” (Smithsons) that Candilis and Woods successfully presented in Aix-en-Provence in 1953. A colonial modern adapted to local customs and no longer just to climate, claiming for a reciprocal relationship between people and buildings.

The book shows something different from a perfect version of modernism. People and buildings coexist in a state of dynamic tensions. *Colonial Modern* explores these tensions offering the most up-to-date perspectives into postcolonial theory on architectural modernism, giving attention to the roles played by the decisive non-Western actors in transforming it. *Colonial Modern* proves that form no longer merely follows function - form follows appropriation.

AVERMAETE, Tom; KARAKAYALI, Serhat; VON OSTEN, Marion (eds.) - *Colonial Modern. Aesthetics of the Past – Rebellions for the Future*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010.

Image captions:

1. Aerial view, Cité d’Habitation of Carrières Centrales, Casablanca, by architects Bodiansky, Candilis, Piot and Woods, 1952.

2. Sidi Othman settlement, Casablanca, by architects Hentsch and Studer, 1955. Photo by Marion von Osten, 2008.

3. Algerians rallying in support of Angolan independence, 1963. Photo by Élie Kagan.