



**Applied Arts Pavilion Special Project
Biennale Architettura 2023**

**organised thanks to the collaboration between
La Biennale di Venezia and Victoria & Albert Museum, London
for the seventh consecutive edition**

Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Power in West Africa

Sale d'Armi A, Arsenale
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La Biennale di Venezia and the V&A present *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Power in West Africa*. Organised in collaboration with the Architectural Association (AA), London, and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, this presentation at the Biennale Architettura 2023 critically reflects on the imperial history of Tropical Modernism through an analysis of the work of the Department of Tropical Architecture and a dozen key projects. It explores the ways in which this distinctive architectural style was initially developed and employed as a tool to support colonial rule before being adapted by new African nations to promote the excitement and possibilities of a Pan-African future in the

period that followed Ghana becoming the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence in 1957.

Curated by Dr Christopher Turner (V&A), Nana Biamah-Ofosu and Bushra Mohamed (AA), the Venice presentation in the Applied Arts Pavilion is centred around a multi-channel film installation featuring interviews with surviving protagonists and footage of remaining buildings. Responding to the theme of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition conceived by Director Lesley Lokko, who writes '*Africa is the laboratory of the future*' in her curatorial statement for the Biennale, the presentation also lays the groundwork for a larger exhibition scheduled to take place at the V&A in London in 2024.

The Department of Tropical Architecture

In the late 1940s, in the context of British West Africa, husband and wife architectural duo Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew developed the tools of Tropical Modernism, adapting an international modernist aesthetic to the hot, humid conditions of the continent. Their distinctive language of climate control - adjustable louvers, wide eaves and *brises soleils* that made only superficial reference to the locality - was propagated through the Department of Tropical Architecture they established in 1954 at the AA in London, where they taught European architects to work in the colonies and trained a new generation of post-colonial architects.

Fry and Drew's architectural innovations, which attracted international interest, appeared against the political background of decolonial struggle, which would soon come to fruition. The couple and their peers won commissions of a scale and quantity that architects in post-war Britain could only dream, and built numerous schools, universities, community centres and libraries for Africans. These commissions were paid for by the Colonial Welfare and Development Act's £200m post-war programme to reform, rebuild and modernise the colonies – a cynical initiative designed to offset calls for independence, and to make the colonies better producers for the world market and better buyers for European goods.

The 'winds of change'

This investment could not hold back the 'winds of change' that blew across Africa as two-thirds of the continent won their freedom in the decade that followed Kwame Nkrumah becoming the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana in 1957. In Tropical Modernism, Nkrumah saw the possibility not only for nation-building, but an expression of his Pan-African ideology, commissioning architects from Eastern Europe to work alongside Ghanaian architects to create monumental structures that were intended as beacons of a free Africa.

In 1963, the Department of Tropical Studies was invited to form a partnership with the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, where a first generation of qualified African and Black architects including John Owusu-Addo and Max Bond also taught. Whereas Maxwell Fry had asserted that nothing could be learned from traditional African architecture, the school questioned the colonial assumptions of Tropical Modernism and inspired a new architecture that appreciated vernacular forms and looked to create a unique national or African style.

Dr Christopher Turner, Keeper of Art, Architecture, Photography & Design at V&A and Lead Curator of *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Power in West Africa*, said: *"Through close study of the work of the Department of Tropical Studies and its collaboration with KNUST, our Venice presentation explores the ways in which Tropical Modernism was adapted by Ghanaian architects to promote Nkrumah's Pan-African ideals during a transitional moment in which new freedoms were won and a break with the colonial past was articulated through architecture. It considers the power of architecture, both as a means of colonial suppression and a symbol of nascent political freedom, as well as exploring the specific legacy of Tropical Modernism in West Africa."*

Nana Biamah-Ofosu and Bushra Mohamed, researchers and architects at the Architectural Association (AA), London and co-curators of *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Power in West Africa*, said: *"This exhibition investigates the AA's archives and institutional history in relation to its collaboration with KNUST in the 1960s. Our research centers the significant African figures of this collaboration whose voices and recollections are missing within the archives. By revisiting key buildings developed by prominent architects of the time, we are interested in the story of politics, power, resistance and freedom that this architecture came to represent in the post-independence Pan-African dream. This exhibition presents an important moment in centering African architecture, architects, and historians, and addressing the omissions and erasure evident in the archives."*

About the V&A

The Victoria and Albert Museum, London is the world's leading museum of art, design and performance with collections unrivalled in their scope and diversity, spanning 5000 years of human creativity. It was established in 1852 to make works of art available to all and to inspire British designers and manufacturers. Today, its purpose is to champion creative industry, inspire the next generation, and spark everyone's imagination.

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Image caption: Ghana Independence Arch, Accra by Public Works Department built by Kwame Nkrumah for Queen Elizabeth's visit to Ghana in 1961 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London