Exhibition Review

Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence

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Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence at The Victoria and Albert Museum, London
2 March 2024 to 22 September 2024
Curated by Justine Sambrook and Christopher Turner

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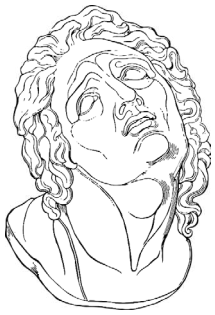
Split between three sections, the Tropical Modernism exhibition at the V&A attempts to unite two narratives anchored in two erstwhile colonised nations – Ghana and India (Fig. 1). In the first section, this is driven by British architects Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, their attempt at introducing Modernism in England with limited success, followed by better-received experiments in Ghana where, adapted to local climatic conditions, their approach transformed into Tropical Modernism. The evolution of this architectural expression in the years immediately following Ghana's independence, where it became inextricably linked with the country's search for national identity under its first prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, is picked up again in the third and final section. In the intermediate second section however, misinterpreting the Modernist development of Chandigarh as the prime exemplar of India's architectural identity under Jawaharlal Nehru, an entirely different narrative is introduced, tenuously connected to the first by the fact that Fry and Drew also worked on the city, albeit under the leadership of Le Corbusier.

Figure 1. *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2024 © V&A.



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Independent of this dissonance, the exhibition makes some commendable contributions. First, a consistent, if somewhat underdeveloped, attempt to forefront the often marginalised workforces behind construction is discernible in the attention paid to architectural models by Punjabi maker Giani Rattan Singh (Fig. 2), archival photos of Ghana's first generation of

Figure 2. Jeanneret, Pierre, *Portrait of model makers, Rattan Singh and Dhani Ram, at work on the model for Capitol Complex, Sector 1,* Chandigarh, India, c. 1960, Photograph, dimensions unavailable, Installation view, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2024 © Canadian Centre for Architecture.

qualified architects and planners Theodore Shealtiel-Clerk and Peter Turkson, and a reference to Drew and her all-female practice. Second, the curation includes a well-preserved and dramatically displayed array of rare photographs, architectural drawings and sketches, maps and charts, posters, publications, and personal correspondence. Third, where the few pieces of furniture, sculptures, and scaled models fail to balance the overarching two-dimensionality of the majority of materials on display, the exhibition design successfully intercedes to introduce volume and visual interest (Fig. 3). Presumably referencing sunbreaks, pergolas, and wide openings as some characteristic features of Tropical Modernism and accentuating them with bright reds, yellows, and oranges, the designers ensure that display spaces are made cohesive and inviting throughout. Finally, the juxtaposition of the two narratives results in several unexpected and thought provoking moments across the exhibition such as Nkrumah and Nehru sharing conspiratorial glances behind Eduardo Paolozzi's African Mask (Fig. 4), Edwin Lutyens being cornered in a space celebrating Nehru's Modernist vision for India (Fig. 5), and a toppled statue of Nkrumah reinstated only to be overshadowed by multiple screens projecting a film on Ghana's architecture (Fig. 6).

However, these do not entirely compensate for some wider issues of the exhibition – an undefined aim, a lack of criticality, and a tentativeness of stance that ultimately compromises its credibility. The narrative veers between Fry and Drew's careers, Indian Modernism, and Ghanaian Tropical Modernism, loosely clustered with the hope of deducing useful guidance on environmentally responsive architecture in an era marked by climate change.[1] With the well-established measures of eaves, louvres, and brise soleil finally presented as the answers to this inquiry, this line of thought is evidenced to be lacking in originality, while also trivialising both the climate crisis and more than half a century of advances in the discipline of climate responsive architecture since Tropical Modernism.[2] In a similar pattern of favouring simplistic summation of over-researched topics instead of critically reviewing them

Figure 3. (top left) *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence,* Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2024, Author's photograph.

Figure 4. (top right) *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence,* Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2024, Author's photograph.

Figure 5. (bottom) *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence,* Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2024, Author's photograph.

or creating new architectural knowledge, this time related to history and theory, the excessive emphasis on Le Corbusier's Chandigarh limits a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and experimental nature of Indian Modernism that could have been better balanced with the introduction of Otto Koenigsberger's Bhubaneswar, or more in-depth analysis of the designs and pedagogy of Achyut Kanvinde, Raj Rewal, and B. V. Doshi.

Figure 6. *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence,* Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2024, Author's photograph.

As the climatological question fails, and independent Indian Modernism and Ghanaian Tropical Modernism take radically different trajectories, the only common strand left running through the exhibition is that of the origin of Tropical Modernism in colonialism. While this is occasionally recognised with references to the condescension of the British purpose in Africa, or the superficies of abstracting ritual objects and using them as a surface treatment to indigenise architecture, these comments are also carefully offset by reminders of post-war funds used to 'modernise' colonies with the construction of institutions and the overarching portrayal of Fry and Drew as the source of architectural inspiration and identity for the nations discussed (Fig. 7). For an exhibition with origins in an interest in decolonisation, such affirmations of hierarchy and broad generalisations are unfortunate, if not entirely unexpected.[3] After all, the very concept of Tropical Modernism is contingent on colonial interest. As a teleological exercise homogenising disparate geographies with little regard for micro-climatic and socio-cultural contexts, it has historically offered few opportunities for intellectual gain and nuance. As a theoretical framework, its Eurocentric presuppositions have also been rejected in the post-colonial world in favour of alternative critically regional frameworks for appraising architecture. It is only as an inquiry into the legacy of the Empire that Tropical Modernism could still have been relevant, although the exhibition's output then would have been quite sombre.

Figure 7. Unknown artist, *Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry with a model of one of their many buildings for the Gold Coast,* 1945, photograph, dimensions unavailable. Installation view, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2024 © Royal Institute of British Architects.

In its initial days, Tropical Modernism had followed a strict hierarchical system where newly liberated countries continued to be dictated terms of better design by their erstwhile colonisers, with both parties appearing self-congratulatory of the inclusivity and contextual anchorage demonstrated by the adaptations of minor and often arbitrarily selected architectural elements from regional vernaculars. However, the 'gift' of Tropical Modernism as it has often been imagined was in reality not an entirely benevolent one, made evident even by a quick comparison between the Colonial and Tropical and/or Modernist architectures of regions at the receiving end of this 'gift'. Built by native labour and material, they both responded to local climates to some extent, but the most drastic difference between the two lay in the fact that while Colonial architecture produced monuments for the inhabitation of colonisers, under their very recommendation Tropical Modernism produced buildings stripped down to the very basics for use by the colonised. With their coffers having been drained by the Empire and its wars, the new nations offered little resistance, and with their traditional knowledge systems having been disrupted with centuries of colonial educational impositions, continued to look to the West for leadership, even as the imported ideals often remained socio-culturally distant and incongruent with ground realities. To examine such a legacy of multidimensional post-colonial impoverishment without rigorous socio-political inquiry is thus a missed opportunity, and in its diplomacy, ultimately an unreliable narration.[4]

References

1 No author, "About the Tropical Modernism Exhibition," *V&A*, No date, accessed 26 July 2024, https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/about-the-tropical-modernism-exhibition

2 No author, "What is Tropical Modernism," *V&A*, No date, accessed 26 July 2024, https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/what-is-tropical-modernism

3 Christopher Turner, "Tropical Modernism: Architecture and power in West Africa," *V&A Blog,* 19 May 2023, accessed 26 July 2024, https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/tropical-modernism-architecture-and-power-in-west-africa

4 The V&A press office informed the author in March that there will be no catalogue for Tropical Modernism. The independent but eponymous publication by Turner, due to be released in August 2024, has thus not contributed to this review.