Architecture in Sudan 1900–2014; An Endeavor Against the Odds

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Architecture in Sudan 1900-2014; An Endeavor Against the Odds

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Introduction
Scant information exists on the subject of architectural heritage in Sudan in the pre-colonial era, namely before 1898. This article provides a brief history of the architecture of Sudan through the construction of an eco-systemic base, which incorporates relevant dimensions of the country’s local culture that influenced its built culture. The study is meant to help fill the lacunae existing in the knowledge of Sudanese architectural history, architectural research, place-making and the interpretation thereof.

Early Colonial Architecture (1900–1920)
Since the last decade of the 19th century, there is strong evidence that the invading British architectural practice was under the influence of the modernist movement initiated by the construction of the Crystal Palace in 1851.

Herbert Kitchener (the first Governor-General of Sudan) did not believe that indigenous construction techniques were suitable for the necessary civic edifices and housing facilities for the new rulers, who needed facilities comparable to the standards they were accustomed to—be it in Britain or in Egypt. Despite the fact that Sudan was under Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Rule, British culture was the dominating element in that period. The British had the upper hand both in town planning and in architecture; they supplied the engineers, whilst builders were mostly recruited from Egypt. This process led to a transformation of the construction industry in the twentieth century, a transformation that was extremely significant, yet very slow in pace, due to the recession caused by World War One. In regards to town planning, Kitchener employed a renowned town planner of the period, W. H. Mclean, to prepare the first master plan for the capital, Khartoum. Mclean was much influenced by Ebenezer Howard, the creator of the garden-city concept.

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1 This article is a modified version of a longer version by the authors titled: Sudanese Architecture (1900-1970); A Firm Foothold in the Modern Movement.
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Concurrently with the renovation task of his Governal Palace, Kitchener called for funds to build an educational institute in commemoration of his predecessor, the late General Charles George Gordon.

The job of designing the main building was assigned to Fabricious Pasha, the architect for the Khedive of Egypt, who completed the building in April 1899. Lieutenant George Frederick Gorringe, a self-educated architect, was then assigned the job of producing the architectural details and supervising construction of the Gordon Memorial College which was inaugurated in February 1902 by Lord Kitchener, a year in advance of the completion of the construction.

Another significant building of which Kitchener oversaw the construction was All Saints Cathedral. Except for the elegant tower that was demolished by the current Islamist rulers in Sudan, the cathedral, designed by Robert Weir Schultz, still stands as one of the finest buildings of the early colonial period.

In addition to administrative, educational and public service facilities, the colonialists were obliged to consider the wishes of the predominantly Muslim population. In that respect, the Khartoum Central Mosque was erected at the same time as the first batch of colonial buildings. The mosque is situated in the middle of Abbas Square, which occupies a central plot in Kitchener’s plan of the town.

**Late Colonial Architecture (1921–1956)**

By the 1950s, the colonial authorities had started training local recruits to assist the foreign experts and learn from them. This helped fill the gap in skills in the construction domain, which had, until that moment been lacking. The architectural heritage of the closing years of condominium rule could be said to be represented by two buildings that have very little in common: the Farouq Mosque in Khartoum (1951) and the Omdurman Municipality (1954). The two buildings, though both built by the bi-partite authority, depict very different architectural approaches and conflicting cultural attitudes. This could be attributed to the very different functions they were meant to serve.

The Egyptian government financed, prepared the design, and built the mosque that carries the name of the Egyptian king of the day, King Farouq. Although only half the size of the solemn and prestigious mosque in Abbas Square, the Farouq Mosque is nevertheless an aesthetically-pleasing building.

Omdurman Municipality was designed by D. H. Mathews Ariba and British influence is shown in the details of the building. It is a composite structure with massive
exposed brick walls as well as large spans indoors where reinforced concrete columns are used.


After independence in 1956, Sudan faced an era of unrest and uncertainty that had a negative impact on almost every aspect of life. The political scene was in turmoil and consequently most developmental plans were brought to a total halt. Under such conditions, the priority for the new government was to consolidate the integrity and unity of the country, at the expense of development. Following this period, the contribution of the architect Fartinal La vangia, as chief architect for the Ministry of Transport, was positive and well-documented, particularly in reference to the Sudan Hotel. This finely built structure faces the Blue Nile, close to the confluence of the two Niles, and is still considered one of the finest architectural features in the capital.

The Public Works Department continued to lead architecture practice in Sudan after the country’s independence. The Aboulela Commercial Building (1956) in the Khartoum Central Business District (CBD) occupies an outstanding location and character and is the most notable example of the architecture of the Public Works Department. The building was designed by George Stefanidis, a well-qualified architect, and exhibits the characteristics that came to define modern architecture in Sudan.

When American aid programs commenced in 1958, Khartoum’s first architectural private consultancy was opened. Peter Muller, an Austrian architect who had graduated from a school in Paris, in partnership with Robert Ayoub, a structural engineer from Lebanon, had the lion’s share of the aid projects. The most prominent of these projects by Muller and his team is the Khartoum Senior Trade School as well as several other trade schools in the province. Additionally, the team designed the Sudan National Museum, the Bata Factory and several apartment blocks for government officials.

The Department of Architecture, University of Khartoum was established in 1957. In the ensuing years; this Department became a main center of architectural education in the region. During his time as the first head of this department, Professor Alick Potter designed various minor buildings for the University, mainly residential villas and apartment blocks. Nevertheless, his Examination Hall remain an outstanding architectural benchmark for generations to come.
Before the 1960s, architecture by Sudanese architects was scarce as most architects working in the country were foreign, for example Peter Muller, George Stefanidis, Alick Potter and Miles Danbi. However, in 1962 onward, there was a great construction boom initiated by massive demand for housing in the new Khartoum extensions, and this created increased need for the services of architects. Four architects who were educated at Leciester in Britain were lucky to come back at the apex of that demand; hey had the opportunity to explore the relevancy of the knowledge they acquired in Britain, in their home land. Two of these British-educated architects, AbdellMonim Mustafa and Hamid ElKhawad, were able to distinguish themselves through their authentic design approaches.

AbdellMonim Mustafa, is now considered the father of modern architecture in Sudan. Examples of significant buildings designed by Mustafa include the Headquarters for the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, El-Ikhwa Commercial Building, El-Turabi Primary School and Nifidi and Malik Mixed-Use offices and apartment building in Khartoum Central Bussiness District.

**Architecture from 2000 onwards**
During this period, architectural practice in Sudan seems to have regressed. With the discovery of oil, and aspirations for images of Dubai, glass towers and aluminum cladding came to dominate the architecture style. By then, as Rowan Moore puts it “form started to follow budget”. The Salam Centre for Cardiac Surgery in Khartoum, designed by Studio TamAssociati, a firm from Venice, represents the best of what has been built in Sudan after 2000. The project opened in 2010 and has won the 2013 Aga Khan Award for Architecture. The building manifests an outstanding marriage between the use of local materials and careful use of space. Mixed modes of ventilation and natural light enable all spaces to be homely and intimate.

**Conclusion**
As mentioned earlier, this article does not aim to trace all architecture development in Sudan. Rather, it intends to present a selective summary of the evolution of architecture in Sudan between 1900 and 2014.

While early Sudanese architecture was clearly influenced by the modern movement, it also developed with an appreciation for regional factors that make it unique to Sudan. The degree of acceptance and influence that this development had on future architectural production in Sudan remains to be seen. The break that this trajectory constituted in the natural development of the architectural heritage of
the country also needs to be studied, as well as analyzing the influence on future built culture. What appears to be undisputed is that the above factors, established by the colonial architects, and later exerting a strong influence on Sudanese architects, seem to have shaped the architectural scene up to the end of the 1970s. Additionally, due to Eurocentric approaches to education and a history of colonialism, some architectural academics in Sudan take little pride in local culture and how it impacts the built environment. Architectural production in the country is today characterized by imitation and a rootless character. Attempts at emulation of a regional approach are usually misguided or politically motivated. The economic aspirations resulting from oil wealth, have led to a trend of imitating the current architecture of the United Arab Emirates or Malaysia.