

FEATURE

Good or bad...architecture...impacts on us all

By Cynthia Stacey

THE Architects Association of Tanzania, turned 25 last year, but did anyone know of this quarter century landmark, more important did they care? Yet architects have a major role to play in the nations well being, social and otherwise. This particularly applies to a country in the process of building a new capital, and unwisely degrading the old one.

In February 2003, at the 2nd International conference of the African Union of Architects held in Arusha, Ambassador Anthony Nyaki, then Chairman of the National Construction Council, criticised its members for failing to address the issue of housing for the poor, but these charges could more directly have been leveled at the government of course.

However, at the same time, architects have kept quiet, and remained passive, on many issues in which they could be active. Notably the many demolitions that have occurred in Dar es Salaam, and the subsequent building of badly designed un-eco friendly structures. These can either impact negatively on the overstretched inner city environs, be out of context, or more often both.

Mr. Nyaki had also said there's great disregard of traditional building materials in the profession, with too much emphasis on modern resources and technology, unaffordable for most citizens. Correct, but yet again, how many government buildings have set an example in this respect by using innovative methods and low cost materials, that could have helped inspire a trend?

...None that I know of, and it's usually the government who want to copy the worst of western style architecture, in wasteful prestige projects, however inappropriate for Africa.

Mauritian architect Gaetan Siew, says 'many third world leaders wrongly think high tech buildings broadcast

success, and show the power of the nation.' He feels however, that instead, they further diminish national identity, aid architectural homogenization and re-inforce the pseudo universal culture

Architect Nuru Inyangete, from Land Plan International in Dar es Salaam would agree with this, saying "there's certainly a need to find our own style, which mirrors our african heritage."

It's a struggle trying to resolve the contradiction between conservation and modernization. Though in many parts of the country, this has been crudely resolved by mass (and often illegal) demolitions.

The prevailing collective mindset in Tanzania, is well revealed in a newspaper photo recently, which bore the caption, "some old buildings which will soon be pulled down, to give way to multi storey structures and skyscrapers, then the Haven of Peace, will have the semblance of a modern city". This is naive. Cities do not become 'modern,' merely by the building of concrete blocks against the skyline, but can also be despoiled by them.

Whilst the general public might be unaware of the role that architecture plays in their lives, the profession and students of it, has been given a reminder, though events running during the past week. For those involved, or participating, it has been an interesting time, and the organisers are to be congratulated.

A group of Dutch architects have been in the country, as part of a three day programme, where they've toured the city, and visited well known buildings, by local architect Anthony Almeida, B.J.Amuli and others. The programme has been funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy, The Netherlands Architecture Fund, and the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture. There has been lectures, and discussions, but the highlight was the launch of the documentary *Many words for*

Modern, at New World cinemas earlier in the week. The film was produced by Dutch film maker and architect Jord den Hollander, and Joep Moi, and will have another showing at the start of the Ziff programme in Zanzibar today.

Executive Producer Mr. Moi, is from ArchiAfrika, a Dutch organisation formed by architects from Holland who've worked in Africa, and have a strong continuing interest in the continents cities and its buildings. A written trailer for the film says "After World War II, modernism appeared as a new phenomenon in architecture, and urbanism on the African continent...in Dar es Salaam, Anthony Almeida was one of the first to introduce this new architecture in Tanzania. Since he started his practice in 1950 he has designed a large amount of beautiful, functional buildings, perfectly adapted to the tropical climate of East Africa".

The film shows what's been preserved from the marvellous examples of modern architecture in the country between 1950 and 1975, questions what is left from the dreams and ideals of the architects, and documents the everlasting human pursuit of modernity, in all its aspects.

This documentary, which takes its name from the discussion at the beginning, when four wise scholars debate the meaning of the word 'modern' and attempt to come up with a Swahili equivalent, certainly sparked heated debate when shown at the Dar es Salaam Institute.

The subject that the well made and thought provoking film covers, (though it has a wider appeal, beyond its confines), should always be in the public eye, and promote vigorous discussion. The famed British chronicler and diarist Dr. Johnson, referring to his city, once said "If you're tired of London, you're tired of life"...that's the level of importance architecture can aspire to in our lives!



A task well done!.. Dutch film makers with a love of architecture, pictured at the Dar es Salaam Institute recently. Jord den Hollander and Joep Moi...questioning what's left of the dreams of first generation Tanzanian architects, in their documentary "Many Words for Modern". (Photo: Moshy Kyungi).