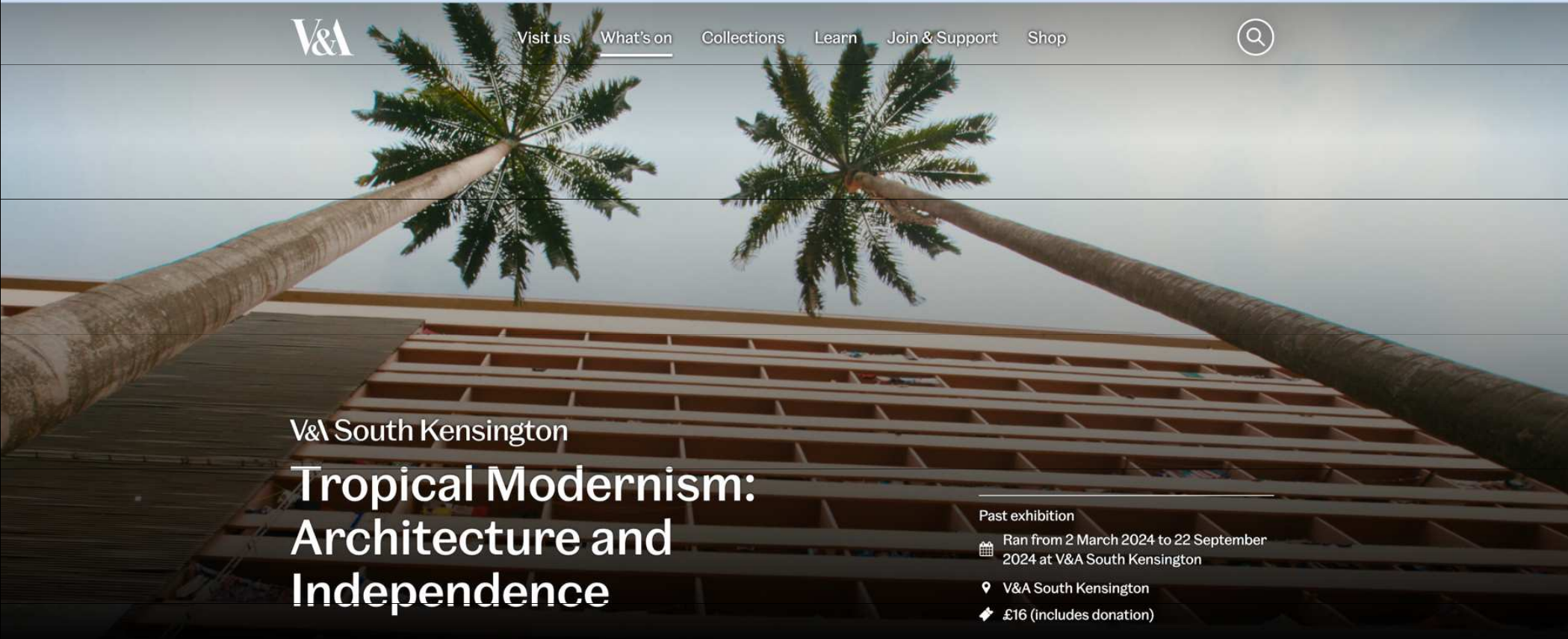


# Tropical Modernism





V&A South Kensington

# Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence

Past exhibition

 Ran from 2 March 2024 to 22 September 2024 at V&A South Kensington

 V&A South Kensington

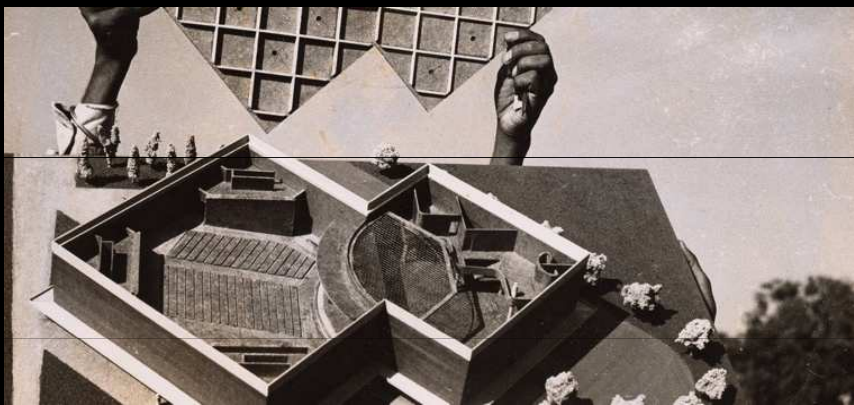
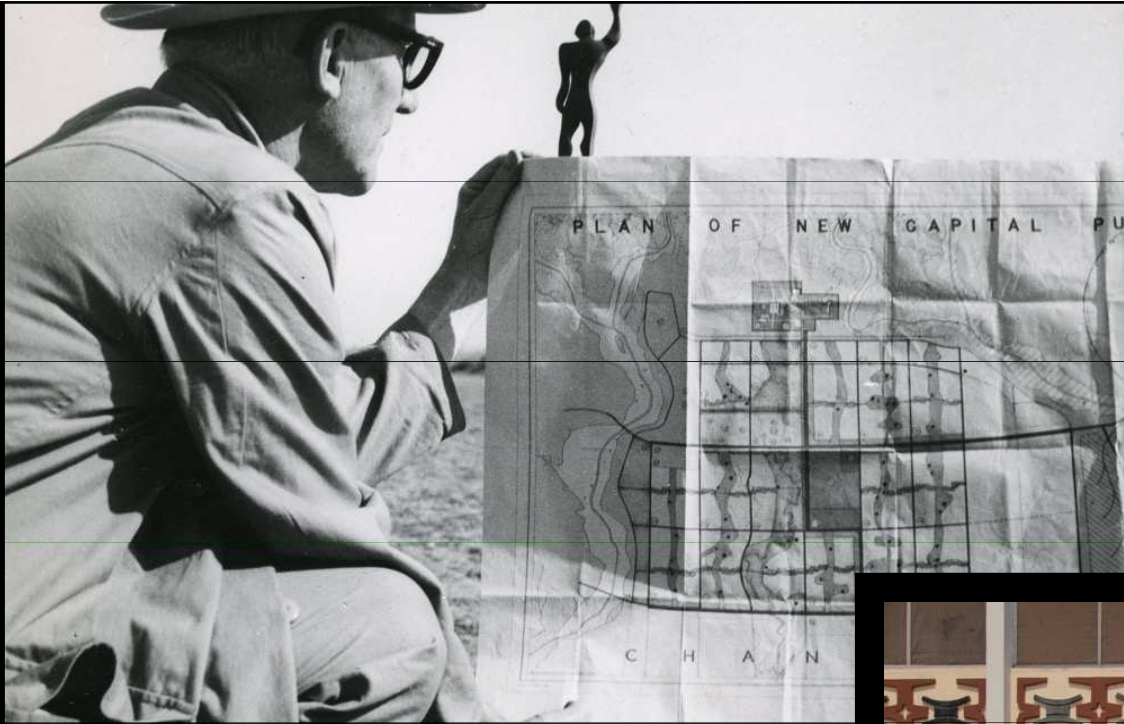
 £16 (includes donation)

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Tropical Modernism was an architectural style developed in the hot, humid conditions of West Africa in the 1940s. After independence, India

This exhibition is now closed at V&A South Kensington

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Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry with a model of one of their many buildings for the Gold Coast (1945). Image courtesy RIBA



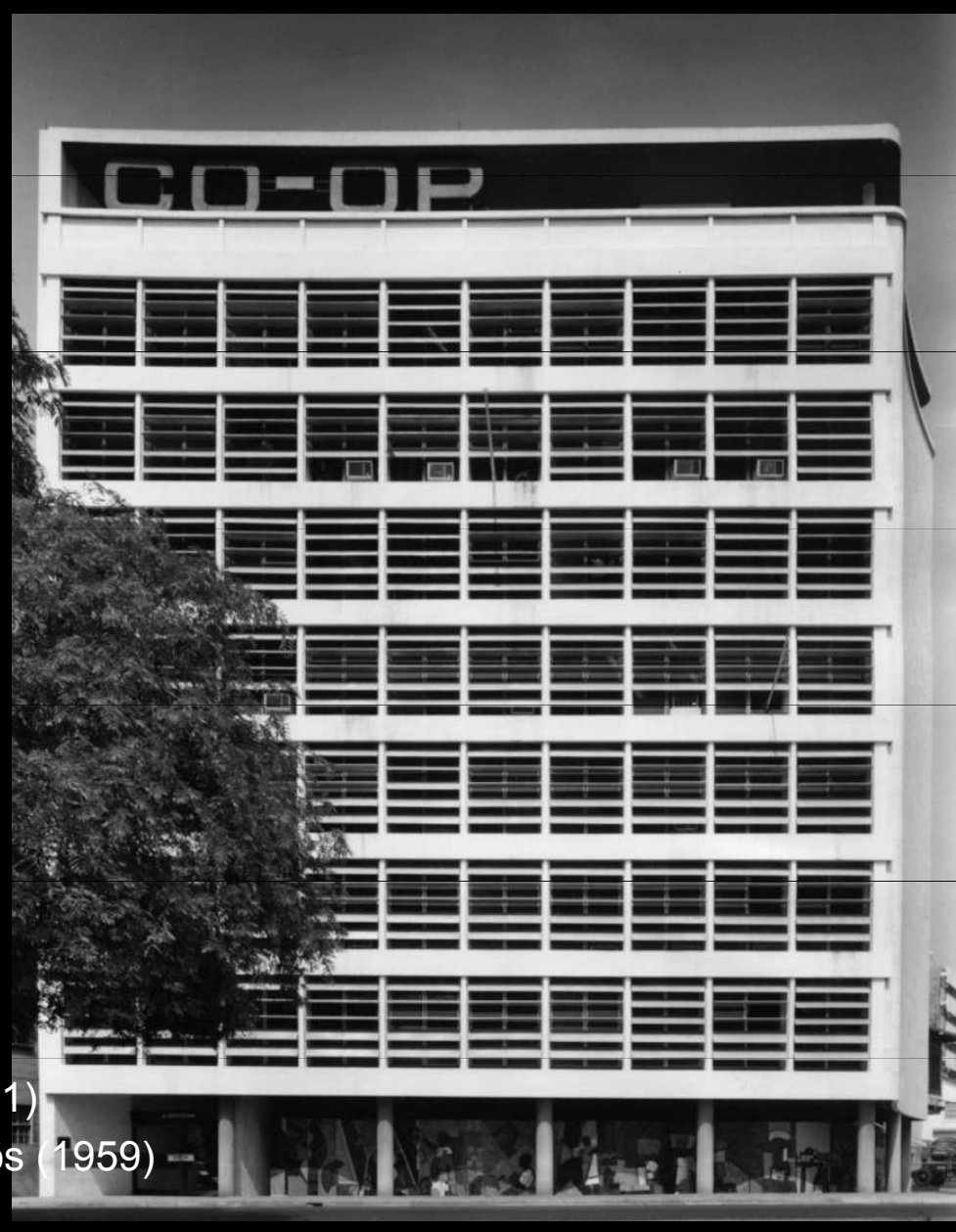
Africa, ca. 1945

Jane Drew and  
Maxwell Fry, University  
of Ibadan Campus  
(1949-1960)





Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, Mawuli School, Ghana (1955)



- Fry and Drew,
- L: BP Building, Nigeria (1961)
- R: Co-operative Bank, Lagos (1959)



## Tropical Modernism as a Hybrid Practice:

### Adaptation of design to environment

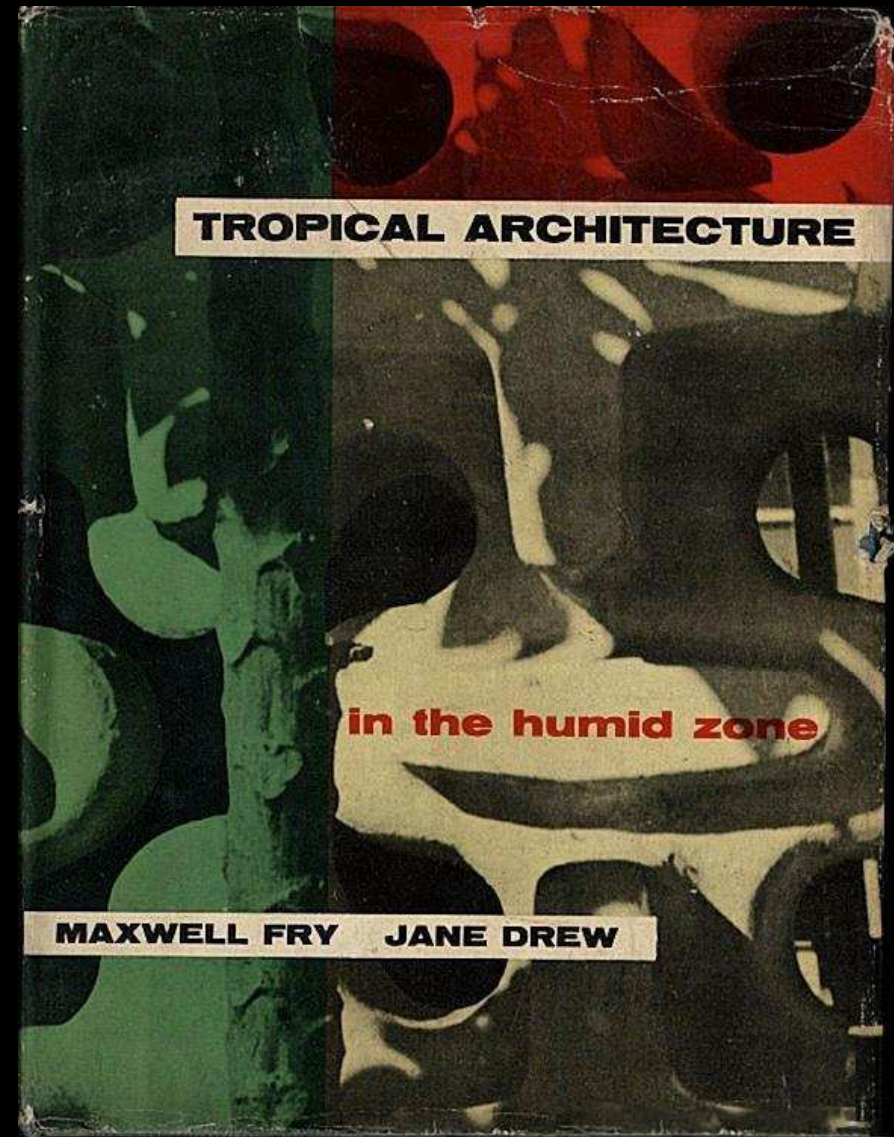
- Climate (passive cooling)
- Ventilation
- Wall sunscreens against solar glare
- Stylistically, indebted to European modernism, but with the addition of details that gesture to local cultures

“ ... while my fellow architects took what I thought to be the easy course in buildings of mass concrete and violent even menacing proportions ... I sought for what materials still bore the natural and human impress, using brick, slate, burnt tiles, timber, but of necessity brick in the laying of which the last building skill still flourished.”

Maxwell Fry, *Autobiographical Sketches* (London, 1975)

“Modern architecture, and its extension into town planning, has above all the task of interpreting applied science in humanistic terms. Of making industrialism fit for human use; building cities that ennoble life instead of degrading and destroying it; and of creating everywhere, out of the disparate and anti-social manifestations of machine production and centralized power, unities of resolved thought and feeling, in the form of buildings, groups of buildings and larger aggregations, in which life may know its bounds and flourish.”

Fry and Drew, *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* (London, 1956) p. 22



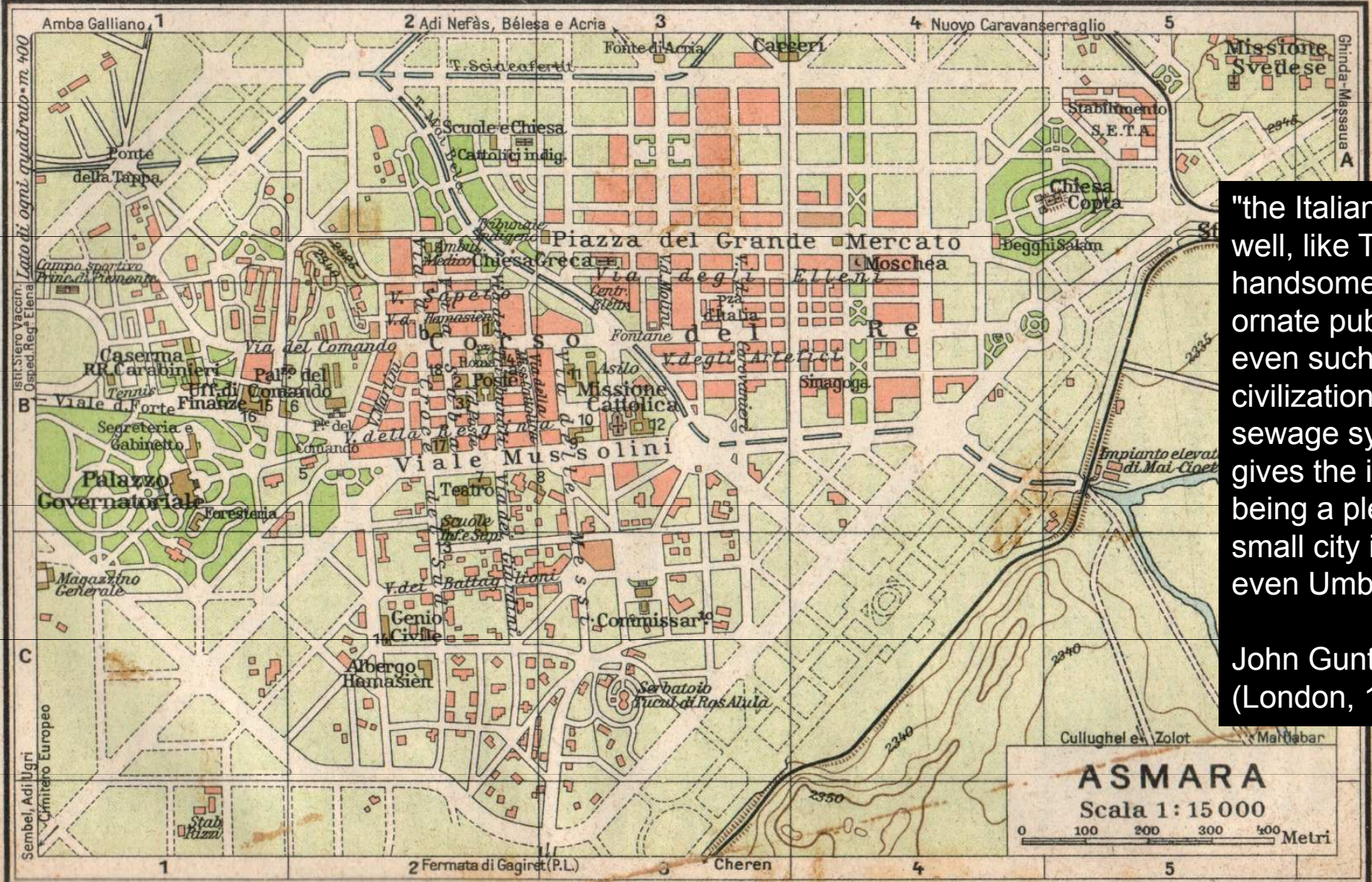




Asmara (“La Piccola Roma”)

Italian Architecture in  
Asmara, Eritrea (1930s)





"the Italians built [Asmara] well, like Tripoli, with handsome wide streets, ornate public buildings, and even such refinements of civilization as a modern sewage system ... [Asmara] gives the impression of being a pleasant enough small city in Calabria, or even Umbria."

John Gunther, *Inside Africa* (London, 1955) p. 278

“I consider the following basic principles to be essential:

1. Without question, the conviction that the white man is the ruler and therefore has the right to all conceivable privileges;

2. That, consequently, the law is one thing for the whites, and another thing for the natives;

3. That the houses and dwellings of whites are always the first priority when solving any architectonic problem; indigenous dwellings, on the other hand, are only of interest to the whites if solving a problem with them would improve the wellbeing of the white population;

4. That there are to be no whites and coloreds living together in the same house;

5. That the white man's house must be outfitted with the best comforts available as it is preferable if he can enjoy his time in the colony, and because he should be able to enjoy the privileges that come with being white.”



Carlo Quadrelli in *Problemi di architettura colonial* (Milan, 1936) p. 18. Cited in



Jane Drew, Housing Designs, Chandigarh, India (1951-53)

Le Corbusier,

Above: The Assembly Building,  
Chandigarh, India (1951-1962)

Below: Punjab and Haryana High Court  
(1956)

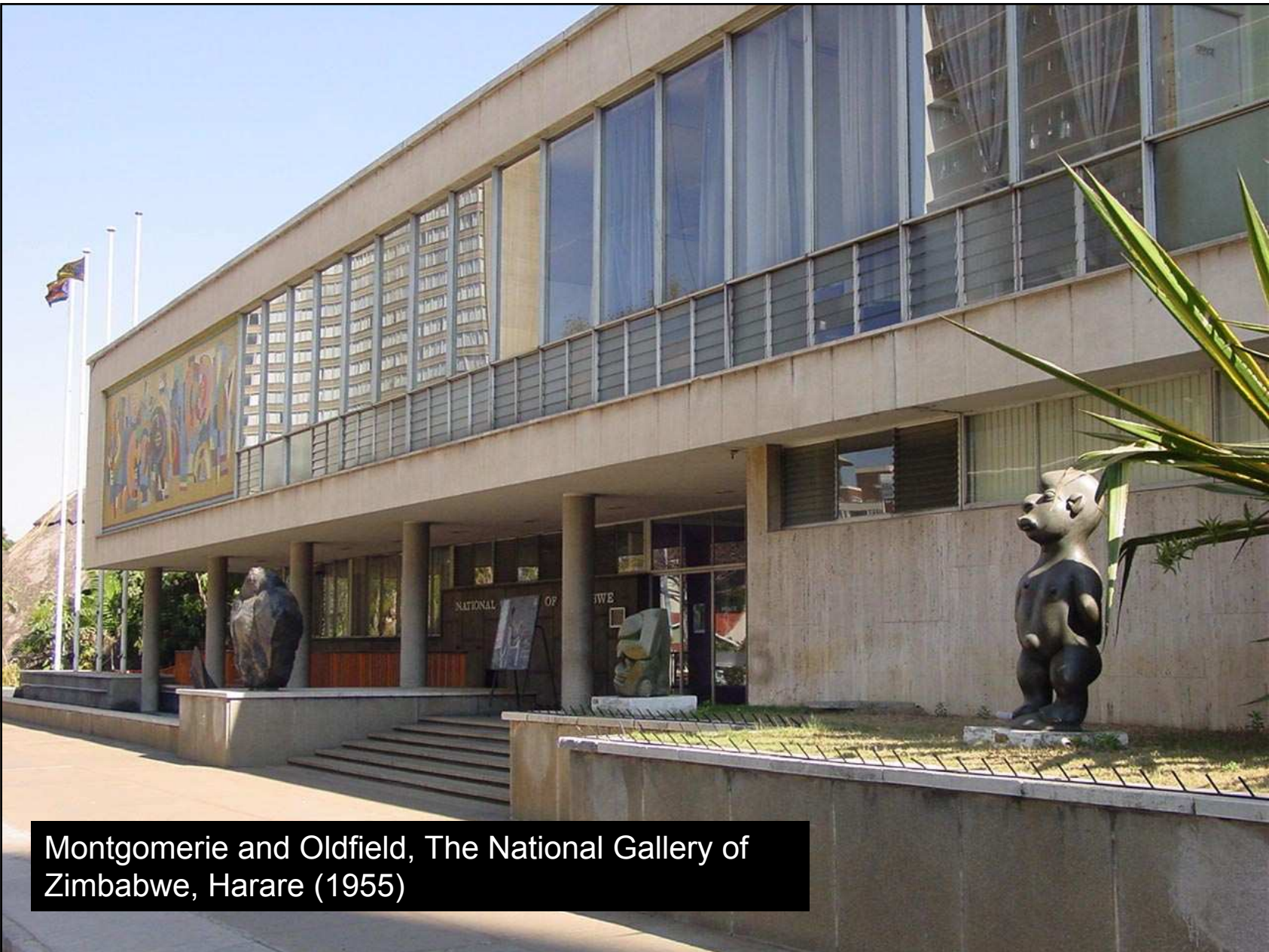




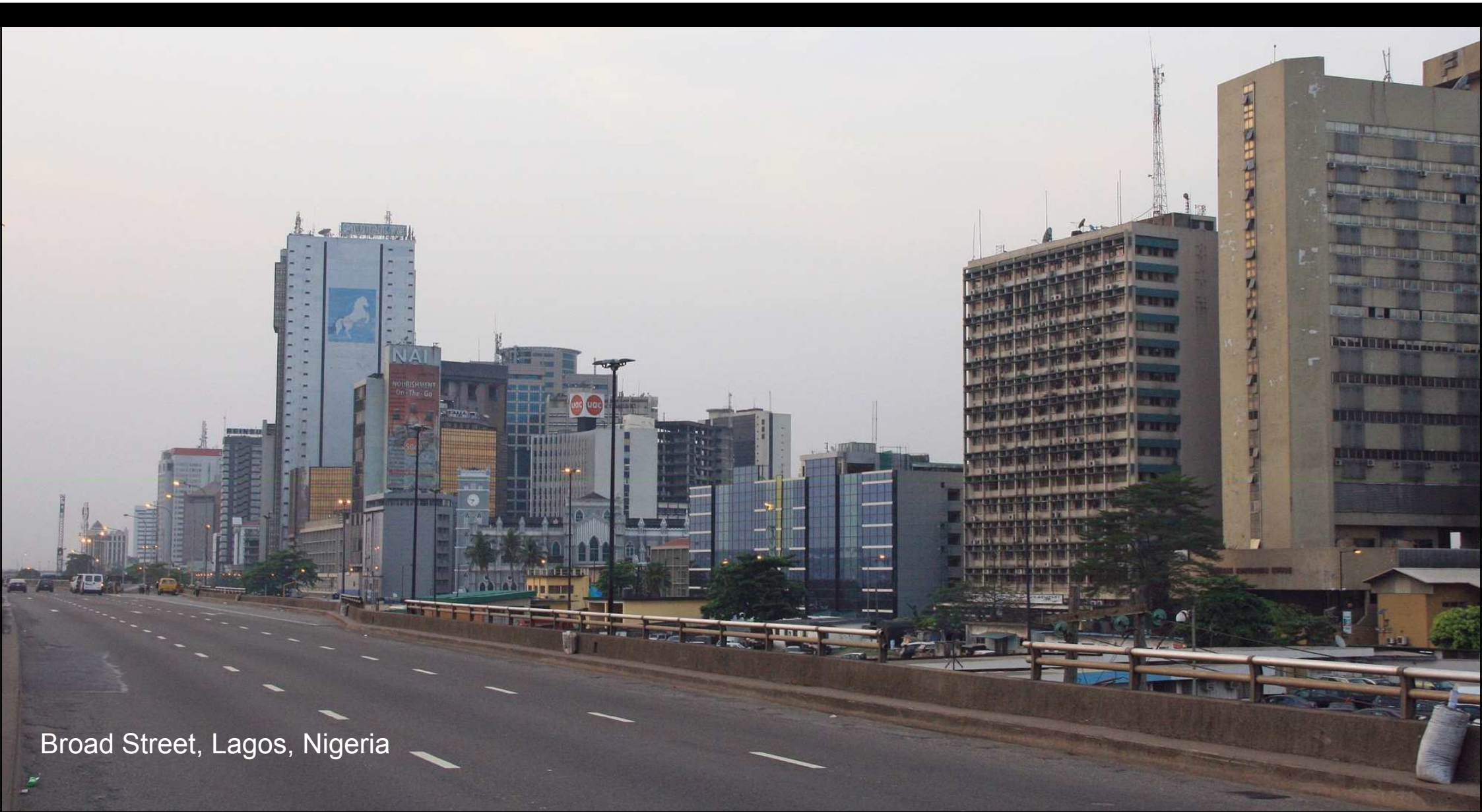


Maxwell Fry, Housing Complex, Chandigarh  
(1953)

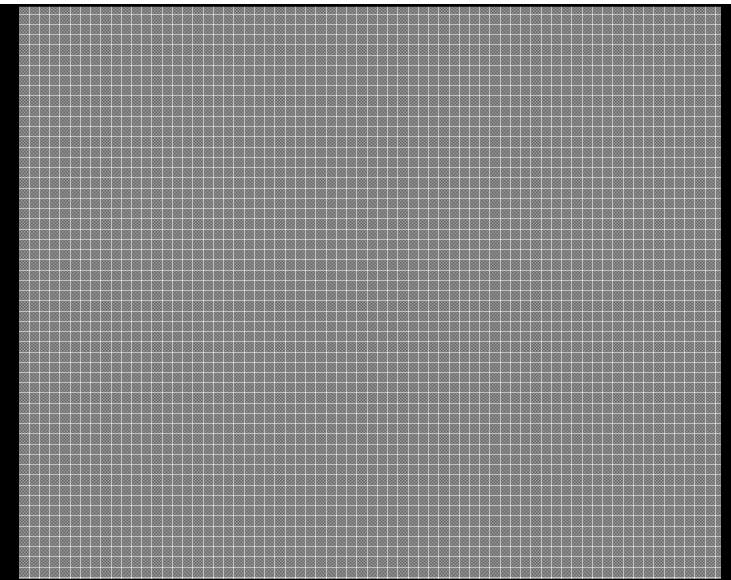
# Not-tropical modernism in the tropics



Montgomery and Oldfield, The National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare (1955)



Broad Street, Lagos, Nigeria



AMY Architects,  
Lagos City Hall (1968-70)



## Symbolic value of Modernism:

- Signifier of modernity – not being backward
- A sign of social class
- A sign of wealth – air conditioning
- Submission to the cultural dominance of western countries, e.g. suburbanization and the 'American style' house in Ceylon / Sri Lanka:



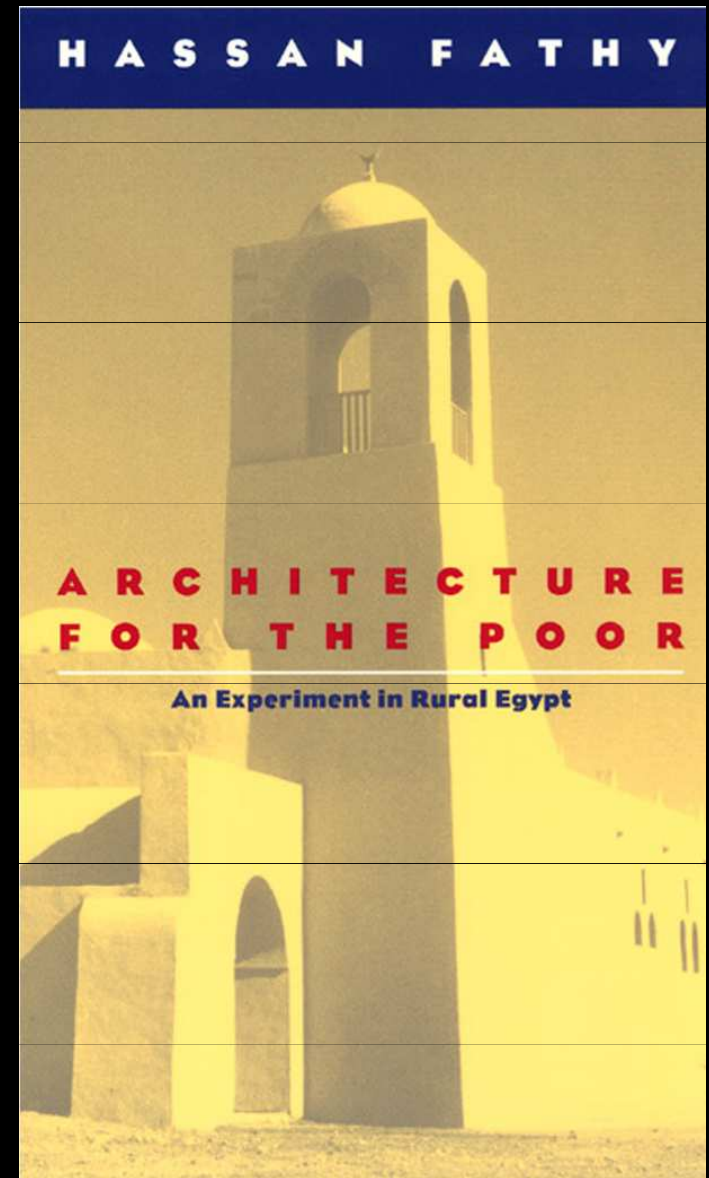
# Critique of Modernism

“Mass communications, mass production, mass education are the marks of our modern societies, which, whether communist or capitalist, are in these respects indistinguishable.

A workman who controls a machine in a factory puts nothing of himself into the things the machine makes. Machine-made products are identical, impersonal, and unrewarding, as much to the user as to the machine minder.

Handmade products appeal to us because they express the mood of the craftsman. Each irregularity, oddity, difference is the result of a decision made at the moment of manufacture”

*Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago, 1976) p. 27







“Modernity does not necessarily mean liveliness, and change is not always for the better. On the other hand there are situations that call for innovation. My point is that innovation must be a completely thought-out response to a change in circumstances, and not indulged in for its own sake. Nobody asks that an airport control tower be built in some peasant idiom, and an industrial structure like a nuclear power station may force a new tradition upon the designer.

Tradition among the peasants is the only safeguard of their culture. They cannot discriminate between unfamiliar styles, and if they run off the rails of tradition, they will inevitably meet disaster. Willfully to break a tradition in a basically traditional society like a peasant one is a kind of cultural murder...”

*Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt, p. 25*

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Hassan Fathy

Above Left: Housing in New Baris

Above Right: The Mosque in Kurna, Luxor

Below: The Stoppelaere House



“The modern advance in technology which has given us new materials and methods in building has also necessitated the intrusion of the professional architect ... This architect with his expertise has taken all the pleasure of house building away from his client, who is unable to catch up with the rapidly advancing techniques. Now, instead of the unhurried, appreciative discussions with the craftsmen as the house is being built, the owner has the opportunity to exercise his choice over marks on a plan in the architect's office. He doesn't understand the idiom of architectural drawing nor the architect's jargon, so the architect despises him and browbeats him.”

Hassan Fathy (1900-1989)

*Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago, 1976) p. 29



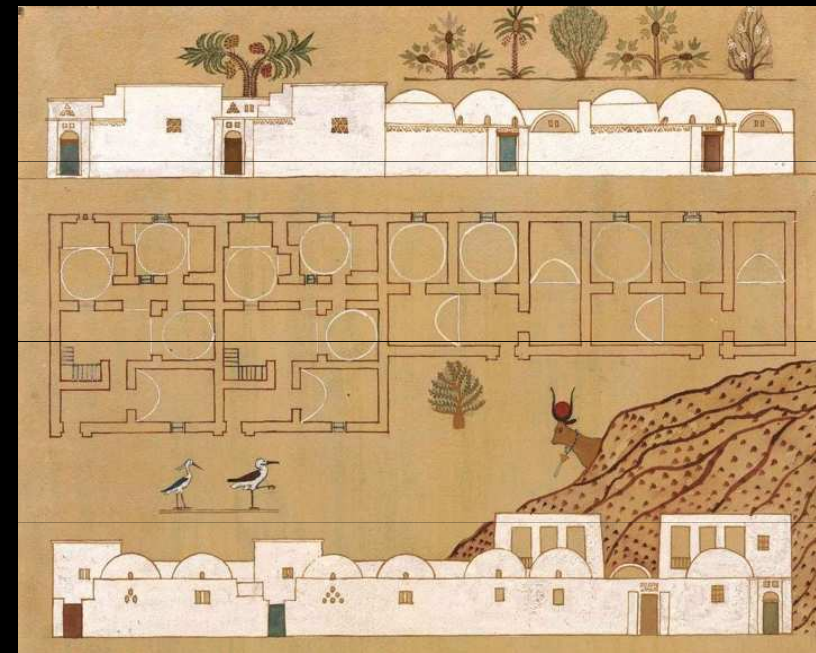
## The Economics of Building

- The materials given to the peasants must be cheap
- The materials given should be such as the peasants will be able to obtain for themselves
- The materials should not need skilled labor to handle them
- materials such as steel or concrete or even timber should be regarded with the utmost suspicion

“ ... no architect normally designs for peasants in the villages. No peasant can ever dream of employing an architect, and no architect ever dreams of working with the miserable resources of the peasant. The architect designs for the rich man and thinks in terms of what the rich man can pay for. Most of the architect's work is in the town ....

he assumes the existence of the experienced building contractors and the sophisticated materials that are always used in town building.”

*Architecture for the Poor*, p. 114.

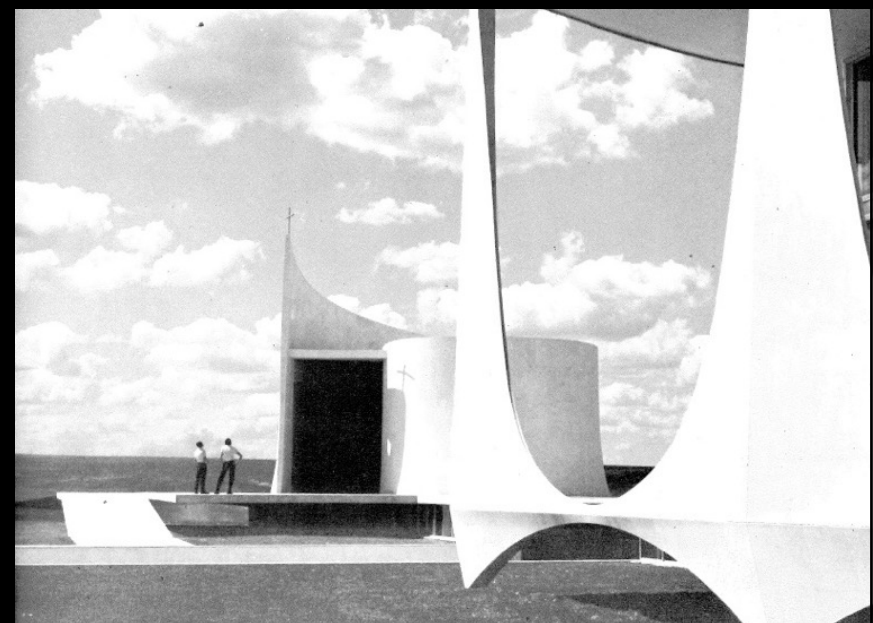


Modern vs. National



Oscar Niemeyer

Presidential Palace, Brasilia (1957-58)



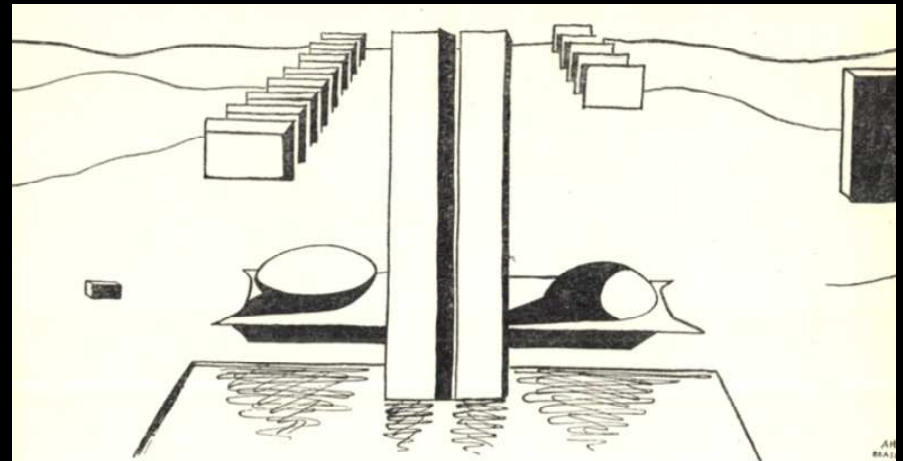
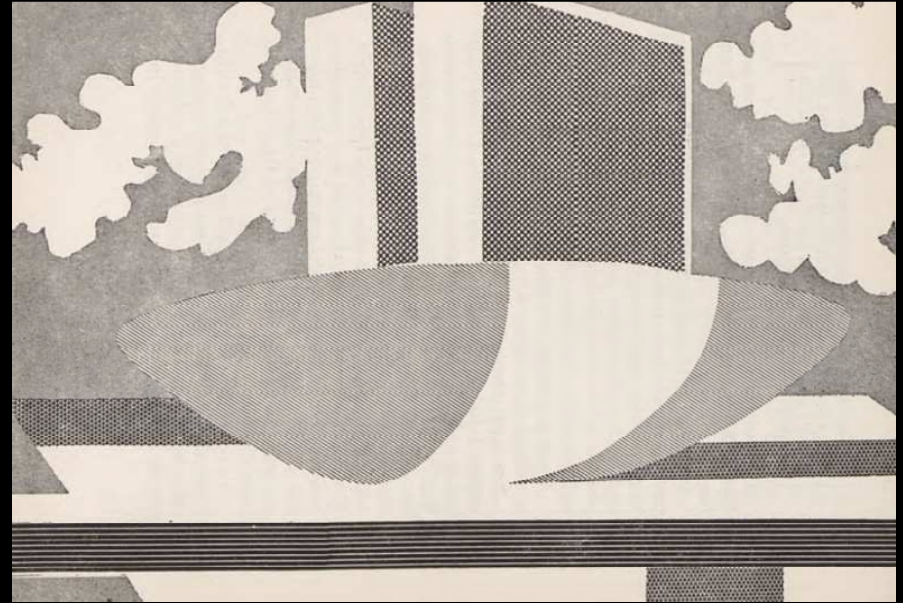


Oscar Niemeyer  
The National Assembly Building (1960)  
The Metropolitan Cathedral (1970)

# MRAKODRAPY V PRALESE



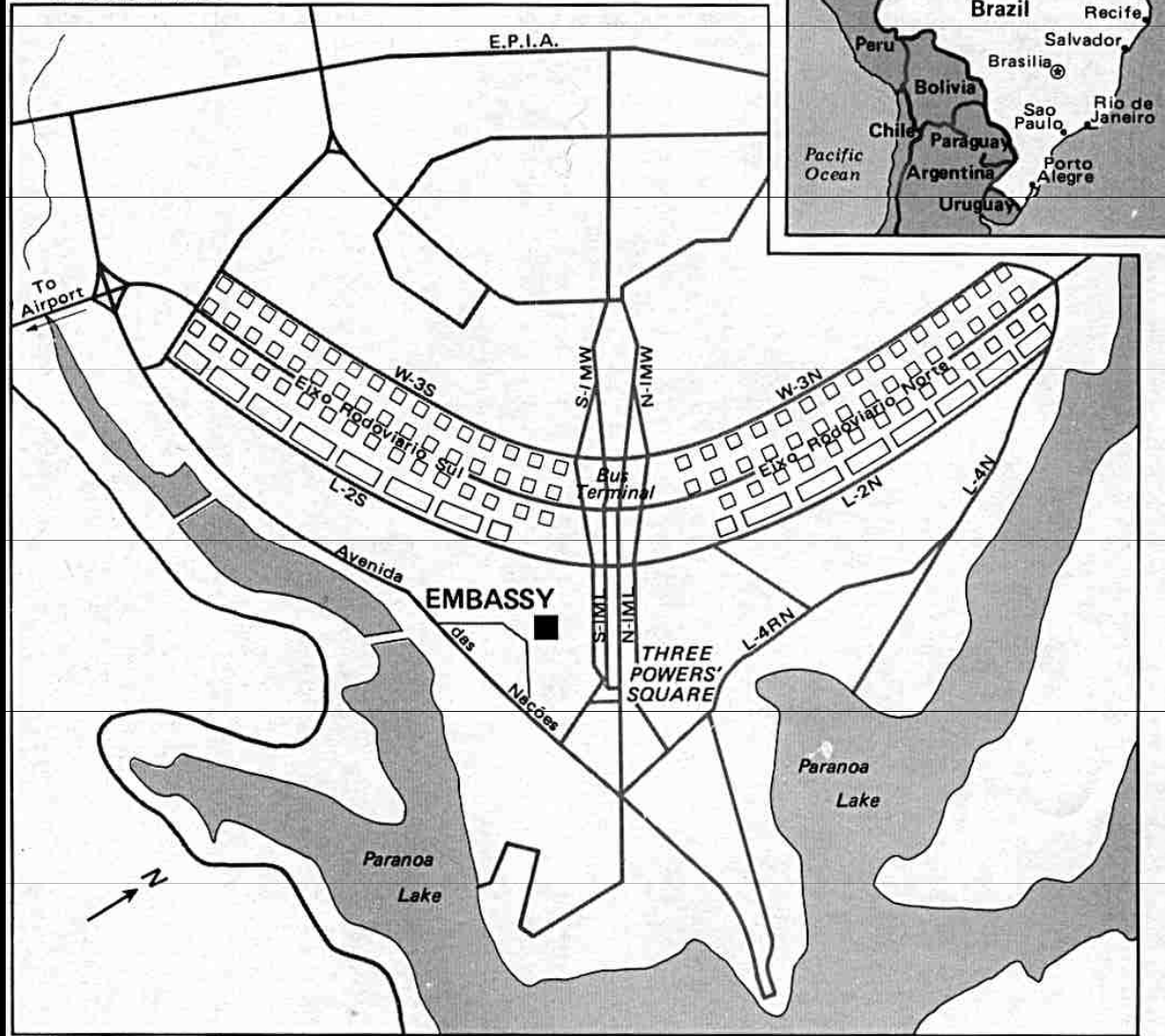
ADOLF HOFFMEISTER



*Brazilia, pohled od budov národního shromáždění k ministerstvům*

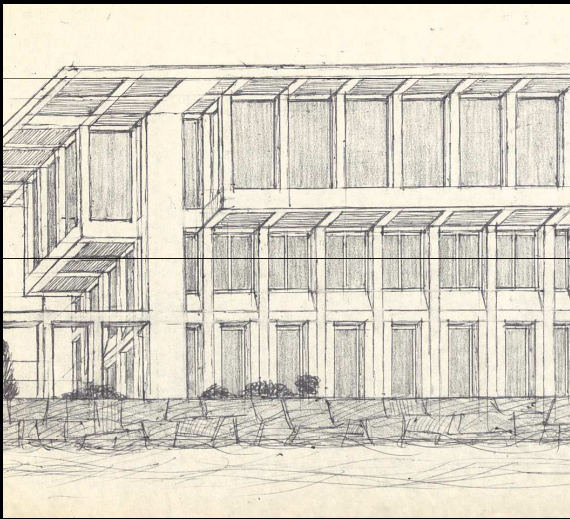
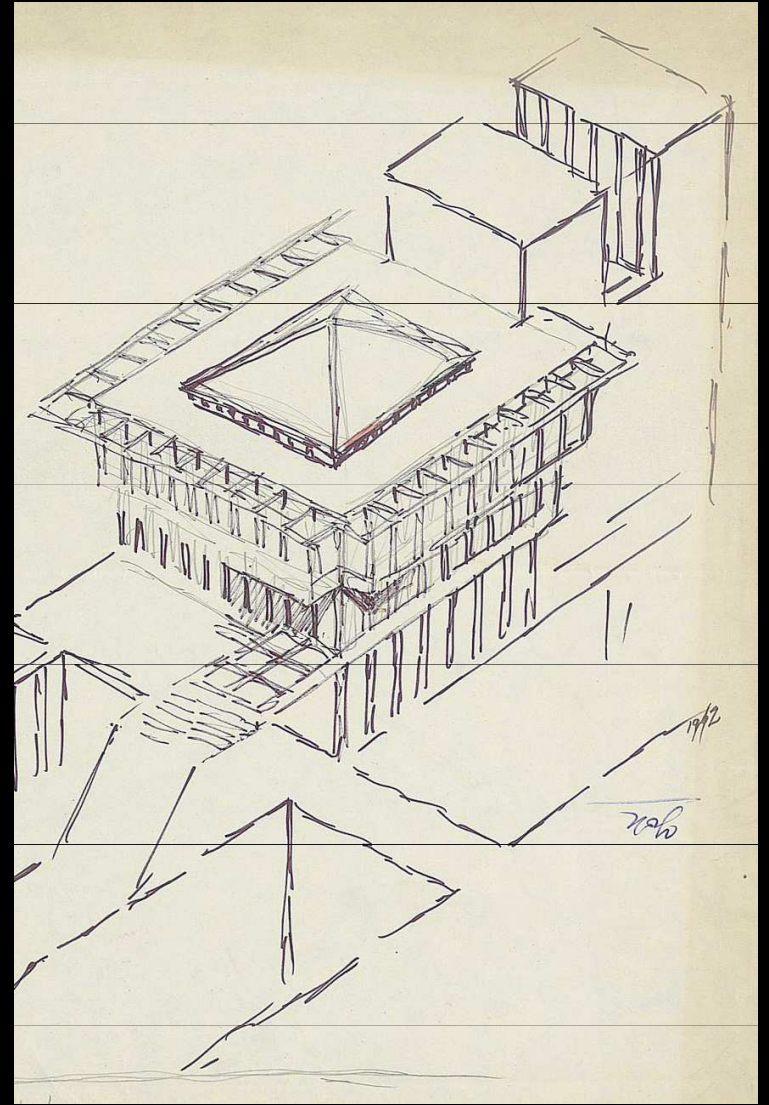
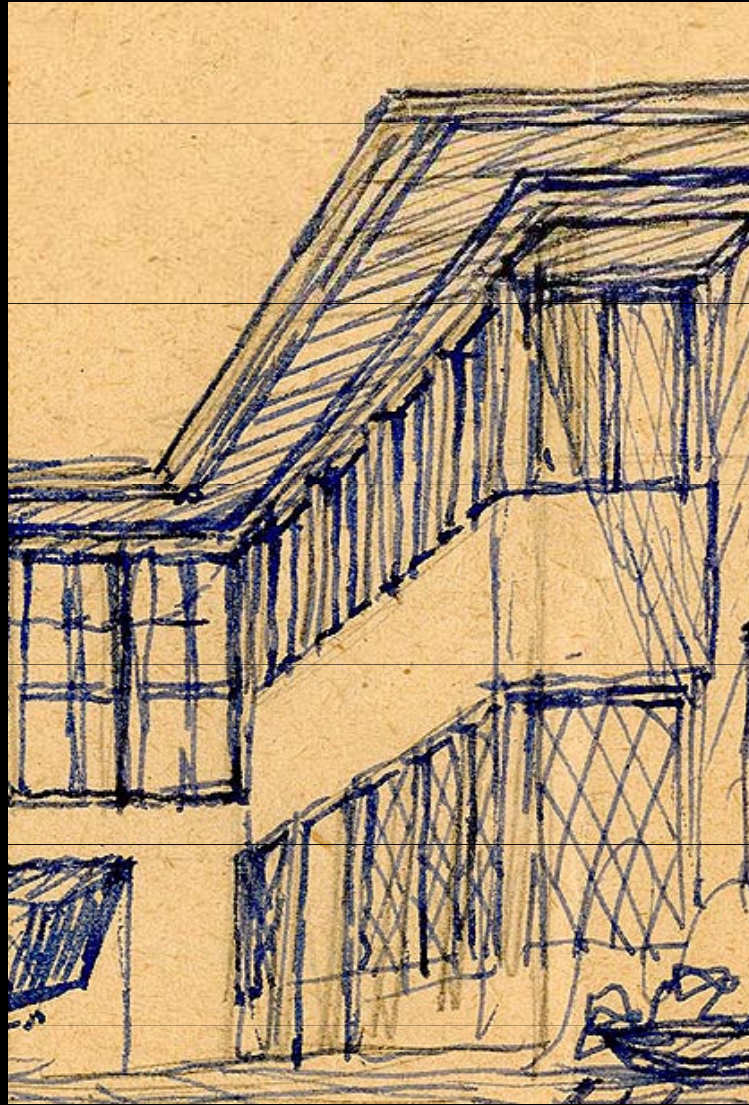


# Brasilia



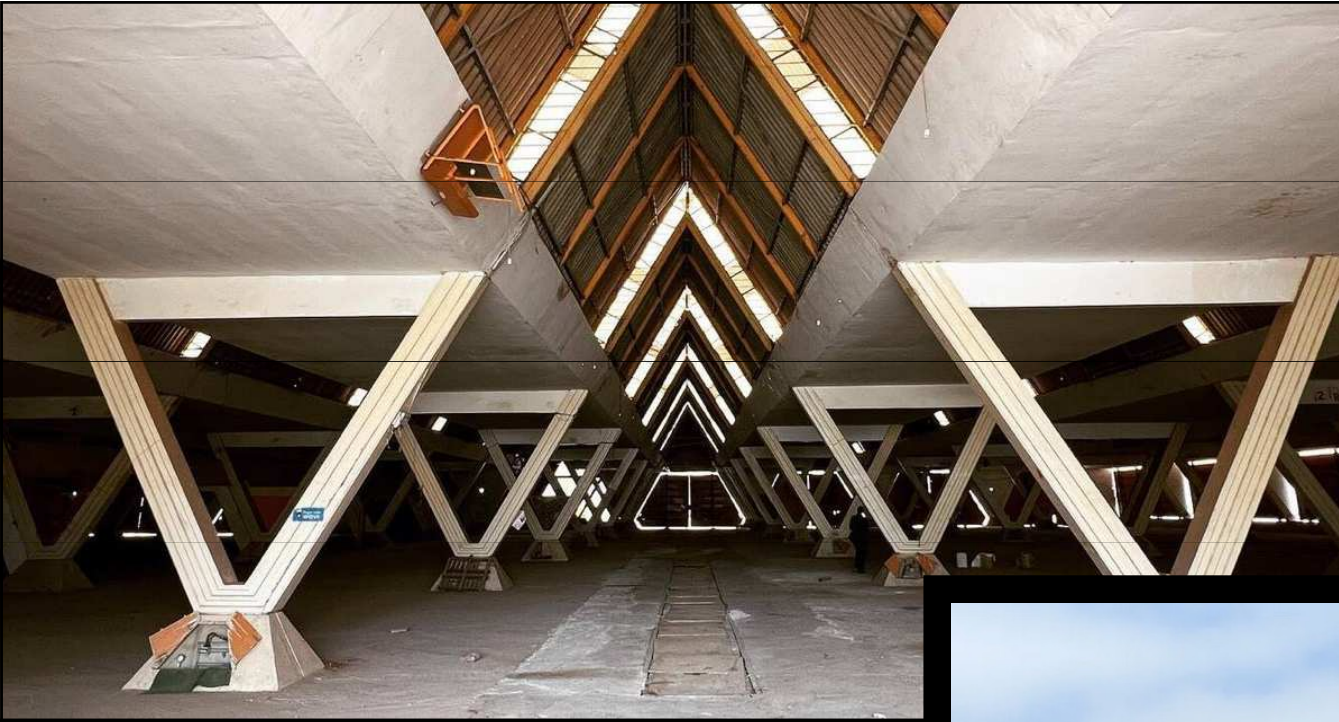


Sedad Hakkı Eldem, Social Security Building, Istanbul (1962-64)





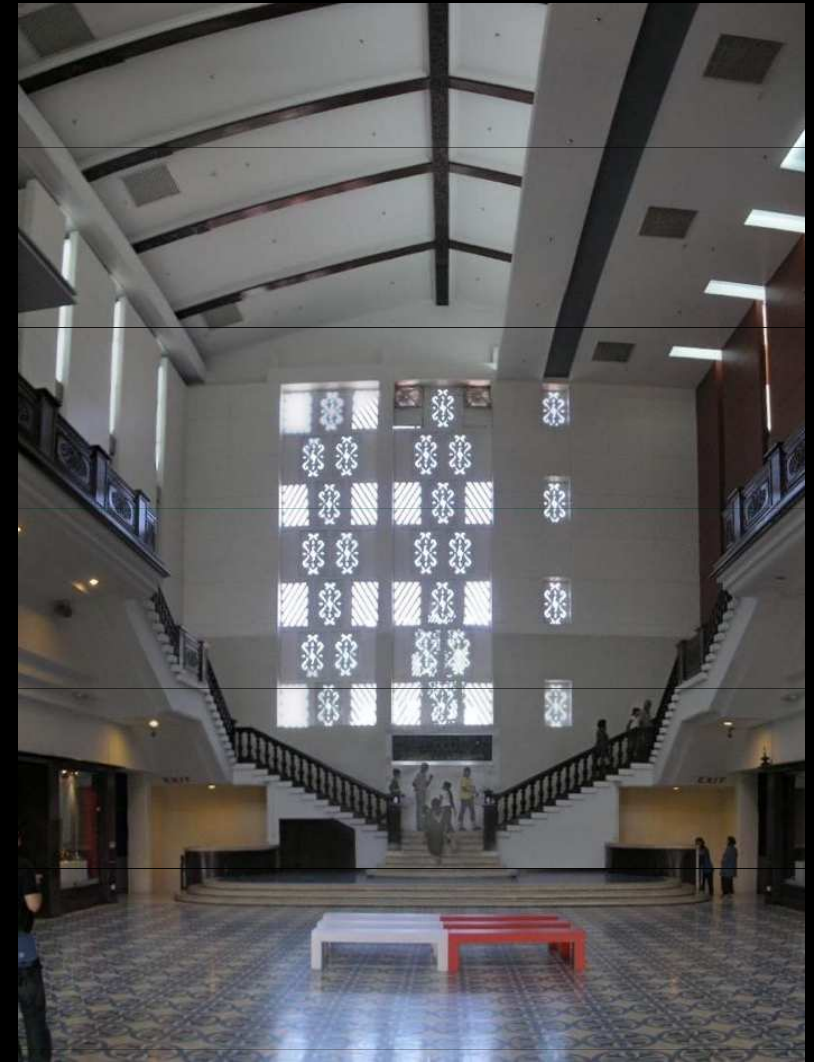
Clemens Hozmeister, Turkish Parliament Building (1939-1960)



Jean-François Lamoureux & Jean-Louis Marin, Trade Fair Centre, Dakar, Senegal (1972-74)



ADC Architect, Palace of Culture, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1999)



Ho Kok Hoe, National Museum, Kuala Lumpur (1959-63)



Kumpulan Akitek, The Malaysian National Library, Kuala Lumpur (1994)





Ken Yeang  
Singapore National Library  
(2005)