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13  2008
 **Butterfly**
Publishing
www.constructionahead.com



Fasil Giorghis, Ethiopia and the borderland of the architectural avant-garde

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Addis Ababa contains numerous fine examples of buildings that are visible evidence of the city's cosmopolitan and complex relationship to modernity. Many of these structures were designed by foreigners from as far a-field as India, Italy, Switzerland, the former East Germany, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, the former USSR and now China. Though dozens of dissertations have yet to be written about these exchanges, I would like to highlight the work of a young, forty-three year old Ethiopian architect, Fasil Giorghis, who also teaches now at the school of architecture at Addis Ababa. Building opportunities for the country are still few, and for Ethiopians even fewer; on this account alone, his work is noteworthy, but he is also part of an emerging Ethiopian avant-garde architectural movement, the significance of which comes into focus when one recalls that during the military dictatorship era, which ended only in 1991, architecture was in the hands of the state; there were no private commissions, and architectural education received little governmental support. Architectural students were more likely than not used as convenient day laborers to be sent into the provinces to build cheap rural housing. Fasil had no choice but to leave Ethiopia in pursuit of his studies, which he did in Finland, getting his degree there in 1991.

The demise of the communists meant that architecture, and architectural education could be nursed back to life. One sees thus the emergence of a preservation movement and of a growing interest in Ethiopia's rich architectural history, spawned to no small degree by the growth of tourism. But Ethiopia's rapid turn into the world of globalization - with the impetus these days coming largely from the Chinese - has created an architectural production that is as aesthetically depressing as it is economically vibrant. The streets leading into Addis Ababa have become vast construction sites lined with hundreds of cheap, concrete slab buildings, surfaced with glass skins. Not all Ethiopian architects will be able to resist the Siren Call of these globalized productions. And, there will also be more than a few who will reach for the predictable rhetoric of loss and nostalgia. Fasil, as a person and as an architect, like most in his generation has thus to make profound and life-determining decisions about how to operate in this increasingly charged climate.

The two buildings of his that I will discuss, a theatre on Churchill Street and a hostel in the mountains to the east of Addis, show a high level of critical engagement with the issues and are, in many respects, almost unique in the architectural landscape of Ethiopia. Churchill Street was planned by the French as a 100 meter wide allée running from the early twentieth century train station up a hill to the city centre. Today it is lined with an assortment of modernist buildings, one and two storey high shops and an occasional monument. About half way up the hill there is a structure that might seem at first like a dilapidated factory typical of the shabby condition of some of the buildings around it. A more discerning eye, however, catches not only the unmistakable touch of an architectural imagination, but also certain references to the Russian Constructivists. [Fig. 1] The building, an outdoor cinema, built on an extremely low budget, was designed in collaboration with Elias Yitbarek and the engineer, Mesele Haile.

From the street, one sees a rusty wall of corrugated metal with a roof that like a broken wing of a giant mechanical bird angles its way down the street. [Fig. 2] Rising over the building is a spidery, tripod structure holding below its apex a circular mechanism through which the cables that support the canvas roof are tightened. The bleachers, arranged in the manner of an open-air Greek theatre, are of concrete and under them, there are rooms for a school and exhibition needs. It is not a complicated building, but ingenious in the formal decisions that were made, in its siting, and in the legibility of its elements.

Before discussing the building further, I would like to introduce another building that Fasil designed, a

lodge-hotel located some 100 km to the northeast of Addis. It sits on top of a steep conical hill with spectacular views into a vast valley rimmed with lofty mountains. [Fig. 3] Today, the site is reached with great difficulty, but in former centuries it was an important city, Ankober, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was actually one of Ethiopia's regional capitals. The royal palace was at the top of the hill (right under where the lodge is located), and at its base a city of about 50,000 people. The palace and city were burned in the 1860s in a power struggle with the rulers of neighbouring Gondar. The city has long since vanished.

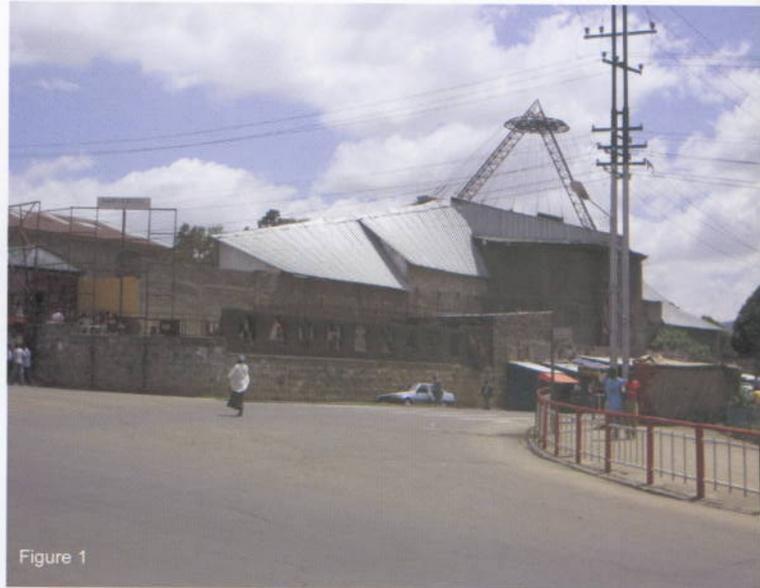


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1 - Addis Cinema, Exterior - It might seem like a dilapidated factory but a more discerning eye catches the unmistakable touch of an architectural imagination.

Figure 2 - Addis Cinema, Interior - Its minimal structure and flimsy canvas roof defies the rhetoric of stability that has been so fundamentally associated with the modernism-as-nation-building.

Figure 3 - The Ankober lodge-hotel is located some 100 km to the northeast of Addis. It sits on top of a steep conical hill with spectacular views into a vast valley rimmed with lofty mountains.

Figure 4 - Ankober Lodge - The building, with its long thatched roof, draws on vernacular motifs, and indeed the architect used locally available materials (Ethiopian pine) and local craftsmen.

Figure 5 - The house in which Ilg lived was a long oval-shaped building with a traditional, thatched roof.



Figure 3

The building, [Fig. 4] with its long thatched roof, draws on vernacular motifs, and indeed the architect used locally available materials (Ethiopian pine) and local craftsmen. The government, however, well aware of the importance of this site in the history of Ethiopia, mandated that the building be two meters above the ground so that excavations could be done some time in the future. To solve this requirement, Fasil raised the building up on piloti, which is most certainly not how vernacular buildings of Ethiopia are made. The columns rest in shallow foundations and the walls that enclose the ground-floor rooms were made with dried mud that can be easily removed by the archaeologists. [Fig. 6] To strengthen the posts, the builders added cross bracing making the lower floor appear like a low bridge grazing the surface of the site. The building may look traditional to the untrained eye, but it most certainly is not.

The two buildings might seem to have been built by two different people, one with a more progressive urban leaning and the other with a more conservative bent, but in this case these categories do not apply. The distinction, here, between modernism and tradition, and between city and rural is not as poignant as one might assume given that both buildings take full advantage of modernism's disruptive potential. In that sense, these buildings are not part of the discourse of modernist-as-national-progress that conditions most of Ethiopia's twentieth century architectural production. That history, and a venerable one indeed, began when King Menelik in the early

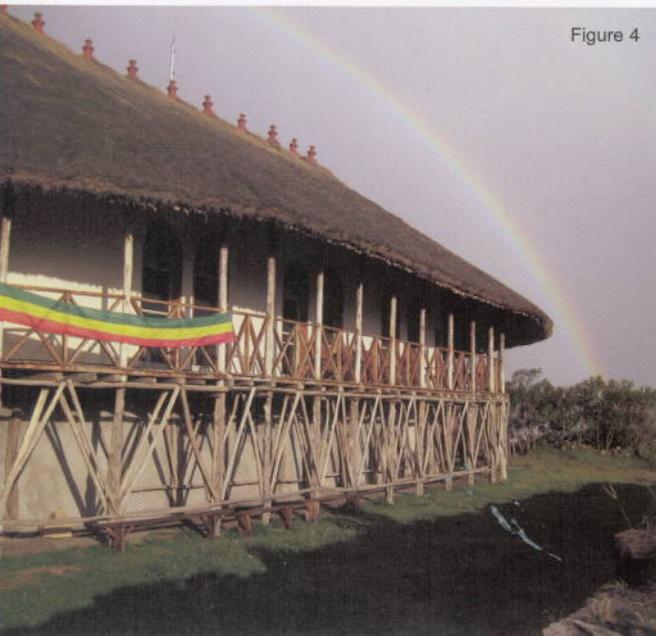


Figure 4



Figure 5

twentieth century brought in a Swiss engineer and bridge builder – Alfred Ilg (1854-1916) – to help in the layout and design of Addis Ababa. Ethiopia has been on a path of modernization ever since.

The lodge references back to that moment in Ethiopian history, for the house in which Ilg lived was just such a long oval-shaped building with a traditional, thatched roof. [Fig. 5] Living in this way was a conscious decision on the part of Ilg, fulfilling, for that age, the standard Enlightenment-driven bourgeois desire to experience the origins of civilization. Ilg had decided, in essence, to “go native.” By way of contrast, the Ethiopian princes of the period, accustomed to castles since the 15th century and to stone and wood architecture since probably as far back as 400 BC, were living in houses that were, what people in the West would call “Western.” Some of these mansions still exist; many were designed by English-trained craftsmen who came from India. If one knows that Ilg also designed Ethiopia’s first bridge, then the building, which is part bridge, can be read as a quiet homage to modernity, but fused with the tropes of tradition.

Complex reversals of the tropes of civilization and primitivism lie at the heart of the design of the Ankobar Lodge given that it supports the vernacular over and against the loss of the modern. But it is by no means to be interpreted as a recreation of the experience of Ethiopia’s anthropological history as written against the symptoms of alienation. It is only our predilection to see modernity as Western and everything that was pre-Western as “vernacular” that clouds our capacity to see the irony inherent in the design. The lodge, a native house hovering over the landscape on piloti, quite literally suspends the question of the vernacular over its dual modernities, the bridge, which separates it from the ground, and below that the datum of an archaeological veritas that is, however, still unexcavated, and thus outside the field of perception.

Ghiorgis’ cinema building also places the discourses of architecture in suspension. Its minimal structure and flimsy canvas roof defies the rhetoric of stability that has been so fundamentally associated with the modernism-as-nation-building. It is thus very specifically a different type of modernity that is on view here. The building seeks out and even celebrates the space of its difference in the urban landscape. Its steely triangular apex makes it into a type of Eiffel Tower of Addis Ababa, but designed with a functionalist minimalism that leaves one uncertain about its symbolic status. If the Ankobar lodge challenges the notion of tradition, this building challenges the languages

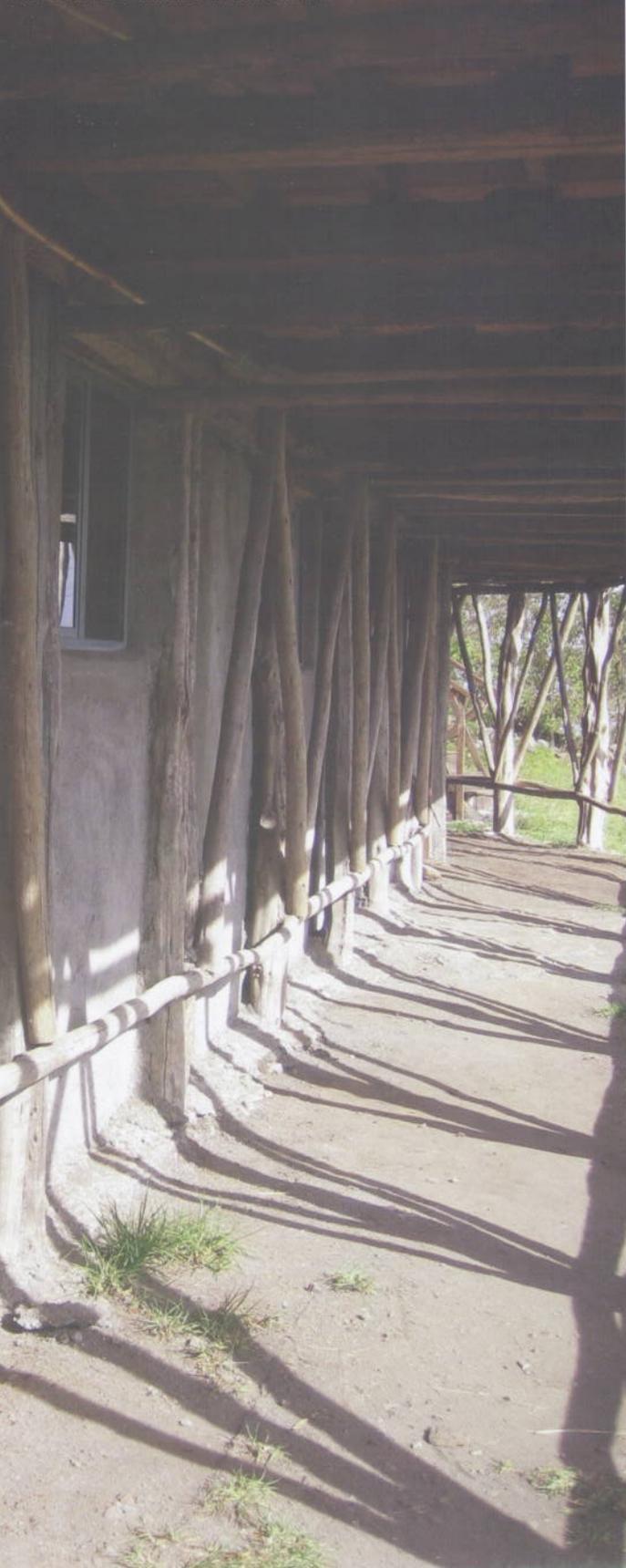


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Figure 6 - Ankober Lodge - The columns rest in shallow foundations and the walls that enclose the ground-floor rooms are made with dried mud that can be easily removed to allow archeological excavations some time in the future.



of establishmentarian modernity. It is a modern-day coliseum, part spectacle space, part monument, part ruin, and part urban symbol.

Putting the two buildings together, as I have done, admittedly defies the realities of their usage, since a visitor to Ankobar would never be found sitting in the Addis Ababa cinema, and vice versa. But the architect did not try, naively, to bring one social group into contact with the other, but to play out the theoretical issues of their separation. If the lodge was made to be read through the lens of the ambivalences of the elite, including those of the Ethiopian elite, the cinema was made to be read through the lens of the ambivalences about mass culture. Ethiopians, especially in Addis, know that just down the road of the cinema there is a vast outdoor theatre built by the communists in the 1980s that was used as a parade ground. The cinema is designed as a type of answer to that space; it is a celebration of the return to a more open and yet more intimate society, but one that is also - and I would think purposefully - meant to be read as in a state of disrepair.

These buildings may seem to be far removed from the centre of discussion about contemporary avant-gardism, but to place them in a third world periphery would do them injustice given that they are part of an architectural project that is located at the fractious borderland with modernization, the front lines of which are not in Europe and the US, - and certainly not in China given its status as a quasi-colonial power - but in places like Ethiopia where one sees first-hand the dilemma that architects face in thinking through the questions of modernity. The discourses that they force into the open about Ethiopia's history and its future are by definition incomplete, standing as they do in the context of various theoretical, historical and geo-political time zones.

Buildings like these can be thus be only transitory in the discourse of the history of Ethiopian architecture which will inevitably drift, should the economy improve, in the direction of the international avant-garde where the political problematic of architecture is more often than not simulated in an aesthetic of elegant stripped-down surfaces. Here, at least with these two buildings, architecture - as an interrogation of and entanglement with the messy, cultural uncertainties of our age - is in a very real, political-economic battle to find a voice unto itself. ■

About the Author

Mark Jarzombek, Professor of the History and Theory of Architecture, currently is also the Associate Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, USA. He has taught at MIT since 1995, and has worked on a range of historical topics from the Renaissance to the modern, and worked extensively on nineteenth and twentieth century aesthetics.