

Flexible Architecture for New Education: Nordic Institute for Development Management (IDM) in Tanzania.

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Abstract. In the second half of the 20th century, educational buildings played an important role in the process of nation-building of the newly independent African states. Between the 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of elementary and technical schools, teachers' colleges, and universities were endowed with the task of educating the new generation of African professionals and public administrators. Large university projects were among the most significant public buildings constructed at the time, contributing to public and civic life. The educational politics of "Africanization" was also reflected in the buildings' architectural language, as imported modernist forms were adapted to local climatic realities through a wide range of tectonic devices, local materials, and stylistic elements. Today, the architectural histories of these educational buildings and their role in national heritage remain severely overlooked. The paper aims to correct this shortcoming by dissecting the many architectural layers behind the project for the Institute of Developmental Management (IDM) in Tanzania, built in the early 1970s and financed through the joint effort of the Nordic countries. Originally intended to address Tanzania's manpower needs, the project underwent a series of design transformations introduced by local and foreign "experts." Its architecture then represented a site of negotiation between local Tanzanian needs and imposed Western techno-scientific education models of the late 1960s. Building on the original archival research, the paper investigates the many archaeological layers behind this seemingly typical "tropical modernism" university project, intending to complicate the long-assumed divide between the Global South and the Global North. Today, these buildings are still in use, and this paper, focused on histories of architectural inter-dependencies, suggests the term "mixed modernisms" to encourage a different line of thinking about the architectural value of such projects—and hence, their preservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1969, German art historian Udo Kultermann wrote that educational buildings were among "the most significant architectural achievements in Africa."¹ Indeed, as countries in the region acquired independence after years of imposed colonial rule, processes of nation-building closely correlated with the development of national educational systems. In the 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of elementary and technical schools, teachers' colleges, and universities were constructed across the region, translating abstract ideas of nation, statehood, educational and labour priorities into built form. University projects, in particular, played a crucial role in the political processes of decolonisation and served as catalysts for technological and social development, where different ideas of statehood were tested and negotiated.² However, while endowed with representational values, new national university projects navigated conditions of financial scarcity. Often, they required substantial financing from abroad and were sponsored by a string of international donors. This meant not only an influx of foreign capital but also technological and personnel "assistance"—architects, engineers, planners and bureaucrats who translated architectural and technological models from the Global North to the Global South.

Through a brief study of the Institute for Development Management, originally a branch of the University of Dar es Salaam built in the early 1970s

and financed via networks of Nordic foreign aid, this essay engaged with complex institutional dynamics behind educational buildings in post-independence East Africa. Financed from abroad, at the request of the Tanzanian government, designed by British architects under the supervision of Nordic “experts,” the project reveals the complex multi-layered nature of the architecture of foreign aid. Such transnational architectural projects not only delivered practical programmatic solutions but became complex instruments of nation-building and negotiating various geopolitical power alliances.

2. NORDIC SPIRIT IN EAST AFRICA

Nordic Involvement in East Africa began in the early 1960s with the establishment of an inter-parliamentary ministerial council, Nordisk Råd, which joined the efforts of respective Nordic organisations. Newly independent countries in East Africa—Tanzania, Zambia, Kenya and Uganda—were selected as “focus areas” based on the principle of geographic concentration.³ Within the Cold War geopolitical divides, Nordic countries fashioned a new image of “humane internationalists.” This meant generous international aid packages for large “developmental” projects to fill the void created by withdrawing colonial powers.⁴ Norwegian urban theorist Karl Otto Ellefsen, discussing Nordic involvement in the region, argued that it could be seen as an extension of the tradition of protestant missionaries, which strove to impose “good” by transferring ideas, knowledge and money—often with political gains at home.⁵ There was a shared belief among the Nordic politicians that the social-democratic model could be exported.⁶ Projects in education and healthcare were prioritised since they also contributed to creating the idea of the North based on “common goodwill.”⁷

And while Nordic financial support was generous, it came with an implicit assumption that the sponsored projects would also rely on Nordic technical expertise. Norwegian political scientist Terje Tvedt, describing Nordic involvement abroad, coined the term “regime of goodness.”⁸ Indeed, as Nordic specialists heavily drew from their building experience at home, they translated a Nordic version of a techno-scientific modernity into a different social and political context. They often introduced sophisticated building methods based on prefabrication, modular standardisation, and computer quantification, rarely appropriate for the realities of the local building industry. East African politicians, on their part, often prioritised the volume of financial assistance over suitability, leading to peculiar design hybrids.

3. MANAGERIAL PASTORAL

In the summer of 1968, Denmark received a request from the Tanzanian government to discuss the possibility of providing Danish capital costs and technical assistance in establishing the new Development Management Institute (IDM) as a branch of the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM).⁹ The new project was to complement the existing University’s profile and alleviate the pressing Tanzanian need for qualified manpower in the management field.¹⁰ Up until then, most managerial positions were occupied by expatriate staff, but Tanzania’s new politics of self-reliance emphasized the “Tanzanization” of all managerial positions. Thus, new educational facilities in the fields of management, administration, accountancy, and secretaryship became a top priority in Tanzania’s Second Five-Year Plan.

In 1968, initial designs for a new managerial institute were developed,

envisioning a facility of 12 classrooms for a cohort of 280 students. In January 1969, the plans were extended, and a request was filed for Danish—and possibly Nordic—capital assistance.¹¹ Eventually, the project was moved to Mzumbe, in Morogoro Region, 130 miles from Dar es Salaam, to both capitalise on the already-existing infrastructure of the Institute of Public Administration and to encourage educational decentralisation. The new Institute was to educate Tanzanian specialists in the fields of management, accountancy, secretaryship, public administration, local government and mutual development and, ultimately, “provide social, economic and political progress for the people of Tanzania.”¹²

Nordic states were to provide financial and technical assistance for these ambitious goals. A Nordic Study Group comprised of educational planners, architects, development advisers, and accountants was set up to evaluate the existing plans and cost estimates, examine construction drawings, draw up a work programme, and appraise educational programming.¹³ A British architectural firm of Norman and Dawbarn, experienced in designing educational institutions in the region, was contracted to draw new teaching blocks, administrative buildings and seven hostel blocks.¹⁴ As the Institute moved to a more rural setting, beyond 32 classrooms, it was to provide housing for 780 students, as well as teaching and administrative staff.

According to the Nordic Group experts sent to appraise the project, the new campus was located within “extraordinary fine scenic quality mountains” at an altitude of 500 meters, on a site with a “pleasant climate” and “beautiful growth.”¹⁵ The natural setting particularly stood out for the Nordics, and the new campus layout was to rely on existing infrastructure, preserve vegetation and exploit “the brilliant possibilities” of the site location. The plan proposed by Norman and Dawbarn comprised several elongated east-west orientated 3-storey teaching wings connected with the administrative building by corridors and covered walkways. The rectangular layout created an enclosed courtyard to be used for film projections and social gatherings. The administrative building housed staff offices and a common room for the teachers, while a separate assembly hall accommodated large university gatherings.¹⁶

However, as the Nordic specialists evaluated the project, they found its British-designed architecture “too formal” and “too rigid.” Educational wings were too uniformly shaped without accommodating the programmatic requirements of each department. Specialised building wings prevented the interaction of students from different departments. Instead, the Nordics suggested that the buildings should be differentiated in size and height for “functional and social advantages from an architectural point of view” and be more integrated within the existing landscape.¹⁷ Large lecture theatres were missing, as well as rooms for group and flexible work—in principle, the British-designed layout accounted only for individual classrooms. While moveable walls were proposed for some classrooms, this solution introduced acoustic problems.

As the Nordics claimed extensive experience in planning “newer schools and higher education institutions in Europe,” their vision of modern university buildings differed from their British colleagues. According to the Group, the campus layout proposed by the pre-WWII-generation British architects was not flexible enough and did not respond well to the new pedagogical principles and demands of its time.¹⁸ As the Nordic Group maintained, modern education required “flexibility, possibilities for extensions and space for experimental learning.”¹⁹ Indeed, new structuralist educational buildings in Europe—for example, the Candilis-Josic-Woods Free University campus in Berlin—offered a physical form to more democratic pedagogical principles.

The university campus was to serve as a microcosm of society, a model of the city, where individual study units were no longer isolated but connected through circulation spaces, which provided places for interdisciplinary encounters and overlaps. For the Nordic specialists, the new IDM project was an opportunity to experiment with a more flexible and open educational architecture.

Thus, the Group maintained that ideas of flexibility “could serve as an inspiration even in Tanzania.” The Group insisted that IDM’s architecture should be “a frame of construction,” which would not just “contain” different activities but rather “directly inspire” new educational approaches. The Group then suggested that the layout should be based on a standardised load-bearing frame to create “built-in flexibility” and avoid becoming a “strait waistcoat for teaching.”²⁰ A physical modular skeleton structure in concrete was designed to ensure “optimal flexibility.” Only staircases and bathrooms were constructed with load-bearing walls. Partitions between seminar rooms consisted of 6” by 9” concrete blocks that could be moved or removed, and windows could be adjusted with sliding glass panels. Ceilings were to be plastered and painted, while floors were to be constructed with a granolithic finish. Overall, reinforced concrete was to be left exposed, and timber constructions painted white. While the overall technical quality of the building was deemed “slightly inferior” to the buildings of the University of Dar es Salaam, the “simple style of architecture” set within a “pleasant climate,” as well as the need for larger educational areas with limited economic means justified the material and design selection.

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL LAYERS

Today, the Institute’s buildings conceal the many archaeological layers behind its architectural and political decision-making. From the original Tanzanian quest for new spaces for managerial education, British-drawn “tropical modernism” designs were modified by a group of Nordic experts. The Tanzanian administration much preferred the original, down-to-earth designs by Norman and Dawbarn, as the firm had extensive experience with university designs in the former British colonial context and did a “brilliant job keeping within the estimates.”²¹ At the same time, Nordic project funding arrived with a set of “quality compliance,” as Nordic experts attempted to translate post-1968 European educational models into the context of Tanzanian post-independence, all while maintaining frugal budgets.

As a consequence, IDM’s architecture falls within the category of “unpretentious” tropical modernism, with white-washed, clean-shaped concrete buildings placed within lush, undulating tropical terrain and with some local textures and elements included in the final finishes.²² Among the few modifications of the IDM buildings were large horizontal “tyrolean” overhangs to provide shade and a “breathing blockwork screen.”²³ As a later critical Nordic report from 1974 indicated, “The design represents a typical international style where only tropical climatical conditions have been taken into consideration.”²⁴ Throughout the 1970s, IDM underwent several expansions, also financed through Nordic assistance and later incorporated into Mzumbe University.²⁵

So, what are the preservation lessons for these kinds of “bread-and-butter” tropical modernism buildings? Unlike the more landmark university projects, IDM represents one of the many everyday educational buildings in East Africa. This paper argues that designs of buildings like IDM go beyond the conventional narrative of “tropical modernism.”²⁶ Driven by Tanzania’s

domestic economic interests and mediated with the imposed “expertise” of Nordic actors, IDM offers a version of “mixed” or “hybrid” modernism embedded into the project from the start. While the contemporary preservation approaches make a clear division between the “original” and the later “additions,” I argue that university projects built through networks of foreign aid forego such imposed dichotomies. Rather, projects like IDM are complex spatial hybrids, representing a type of “mixed modernism” from the start, originating at the point of encounter between different political interests.

The historical value of such a project comes to the fore precisely in the many archaeological layers behind its design, use and adaptation. In a 2023 *Docomomo Journal* issue, architectural scholars Babatunde Jaiyeoba and Bayo Amole argued for the preservation of the Awolowo University campus in Nigeria not only because it was a project which reflected the “machine-age aesthetics” but also because it uniquely reflected the Israeli-Nigerian technical development relations.²⁷ In a similar way, the IDM campus in Mzumbe serves as a unique testament to the Nordic-Tanzanian technical development aid. Detailed construction histories of such buildings—and histories of international encounters—should inform its preservation efforts.

5. NOTES

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7. BIOGRAPHY

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8. IMAGE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Norman & Dawbarn, Mzumbe IDM, Mzumbe, Tanzania, 1969-1970, project site plan. © Project drawings, Box L0315, Series RA/S-6679/E/Ea/Eea, Riskarkivet, Oslo, Norway.

Figure 2. Norman & Dawbarn, Mzumbe IDM, Mzumbe, Tanzania, 1969-1970, elevation drawings. © Project drawings, Box L0315, Series RA/S-6679/E/Ea/Eea, Riskarkivet, Oslo, Norway.

Figure 3. Norman & Dawbarn, Mzumbe IDM, Mzumbe, Tanzania, 1969-1970, Assembly Hall, longitudinal section. © Project drawings, Box L0315, Series RA/S-6679/E/Ea/Eea, Riskarkivet, Oslo, Norway.