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Invented Modernisms: Getting to Grips with Modernity in Three African State Buildings

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Abstract This article examines recent attempts to create specifically African forms of modernist political architecture that draw on ‘traditional’ or ‘pre-colonial’ aesthetic forms and ideas. Taking examples of three prestigious structures – the presidential palace in Ghana, the parliament in Malawi and the Northern Cape regional parliament in South Africa – the article shows how vernacular ideas have been incorporated into state-of-the-art political architecture, producing new or explicitly ‘African’ forms of modernism. It explores how such buildings, which draw on ‘invented traditions’, are used alongside conventional, monolithic representations of the state to produce ‘invented modernisms’ that both uphold and question the African state as a project of modernity.

Some of the most celebrated architecture in Africa is found in the “high-modernist” monumental buildings constructed after independence to articulate confident modern states (Gutschow, 2012; Hertz et al., 2015; Hess, 2000, 2006; Hoffman, 2017; Uduku, 2006). Yet modernism in African state-building has an ambiguous history. The style seemed to embody the independence agenda of modernisation, of ‘catching up’, with its representation of centralized power, rationality and confidence. But the state-project that was meant to drive modernisation proved problematic and difficult to realize (Oloko, 1980), leading to analyses of it as a veneer (Bayart & Ellis, 2000), morally hollow (Ekeh, 1975) or even zombie-like (Mbembe, 2001). Its high-modernist architecture, like the state itself, can be criticized as shallow, a rearticulation of colonial state forms (Murray, 2007) or a mere borrowing from the West (Ciarkowski, 2015).

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More recent modern state architecture projects have, instead of following the ‘universal’ ideas of high-modernism, explored more complicated, locally-referential styles and meanings. Some draw on vernacular forms and concepts – often not explicitly from indigenous architecture but from art and philosophy – and use them to create new aesthetics intended to present a more ‘authentic’ modern state. Although these buildings can lack the bravado of high-modernism, they might in some ways represent more confident, self-assertive states that are finding ways to respond to the complex challenges and potentials of modernity.

This article is driven by questions emerging from these different articulations of modernism. In it, we draw on local reactions to recently-built state buildings to discern the ways in which the state itself – one of the core projects of modernity – is being expressed and understood in three African countries: Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. We ask what architectural modernism informed by cultural symbols¹ tells us about African statehood as represented in buildings by political elites and architects, and as read in them by the citizens who live with them.

Modernism was a creative response to modernity, an attempt to engage and make sense of a world dramatically disrupted by capitalism, colonialism and the new conceptions of society and subjectivity they created.² It led to an explosion of artistic innovation over the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, influencing art, literature, music and architecture around the world. Such a widespread movement, over such an extended period, produced a huge variety of expressive forms, making it difficult to pin it down to a simple set of styles or approaches. But this is useful for our discussion because it allows us to define modernism in a way that helps us to think about different ways it is manifest – in particular, African modernisms.

In relation to architecture, Sarah Williams Goldhagen describes modernism as a ‘discourse’ rather than a single ‘style’, a set of ‘proposals or hypothetical propositions’ (2005: 159) that ‘grapples with (rather than categorically reject[ing] or ignor[ing]) the phenomenon of modernity itself’ (Ibid: 145). Such an approach posits that modernism is an attempt to make sense of modernity and to make life possible – bearable – within it. As Seth (2012: 1,379) writes: ‘It is only by simultaneously accepting the modernity that we inhabit, but also by shaping it to our purposes—and modernism is the means to this end—that we can ever hope to be at home in this world.’

In this reading, modernist architecture engages supportively *and* critically with modernity. It catches modernity’s excitement and reproduces its methods and forms while attempting to deconstruct, challenge, make sense of and humanize it. Modernism is passionate about modernity but, driven by an awareness of its destructive power, always reimagining it and the people in it.

As modernity in much of Africa was part of the colonial project, so too was early modernism. Modernist architecture was the backdrop to the late colonial period, taking a variety of forms, including tropical modernism (Uduku, 2006), brutalism (Tostões, 2016), Italian rationalism (Denison et al., 2006) and the International Style (Murray, 2007). Some of these made attempts to incorporate vernacular ideas or respond to local conditions; others were uncompromising imports. Either

way, bound up with colonial-modernity, colonial-modernism played on and enlarged some of the genre's biggest problems, in particular its origins in and expressions of racial hierarchy (Cheng, 2020) and its use of architecture and urban planning to effect heavy-handed social control (Demissie, 2012). As Enwezor puts it, many Africans largely experienced modernism as part of a European 'master narrative' (2009: no page number).

At independence, modernist architecture became 'one of the tools of constructing a new identity of the independent African states' (Ciarkowski, 2015: 246). New state architecture often adopted conventional modern aesthetics and methods in attempts *to be* modern. So in many places, modernist buildings closely followed imported styles – as in Accra, where a European-style triumphal arch was erected to mark the moment of independence from Europe (Elleh, 1997), in Abidjan, where the new state was represented by a 'little Manhattan' of glass and steel skyscrapers (Ciarkowski, 2015), and in Libreville where brutalist modernism was employed to create the impression of a rational, commanding state (Hoffman, 2017).

The state itself is a core part of modernity. Struggles to establish and exert authority – to give the state capacity and meaning – were a hallmark of many African countries after independence (Ekeh, 1975; Englebert, 1997). They were often painful and difficult, described as the struggle of a centralizing impulse attempting to pull highly diverse societies together under an ill-fitting political entity (Scott, 1998). The ways in which aesthetics and ideas have been coopted into nation- and state-building projects have illustrated this, with competing cultural, linguistic and historical approaches used to define 'authentic' statehoods (Jethro, 2020; Tendi, 2010; Vogel, 1991).

As Mbembe (2001) has argued, getting to grips with modern statehood has been intimately bound up with post-colonial anxieties. We suspect that these anxieties were partly addressed and partly hidden in parts of the continent by the adoption of imported modernist architecture, which could give the impression of centralized and collectively meaningful modern statehood, even where it had little depth. Post-colonial parliaments, presidential palaces, ministry buildings and courthouses largely followed international forms, and most of them were designed by Western architects (Hertz et al., 2015). Adopting the idea that modernism could be aesthetically 'universal', the new state buildings helped avoid painful choices between competing local ideas.

However, there was a price to pay for this borrowed 'universalism'. Imported aesthetics implied that local state-ideas would be irrelevant or even destructive to the whole project. As a result, the new architecture might *reflect* modernity, but it had relatively little *to say about* modernity from African perspectives.³ In particular, it was difficult to use modernist forms that incorporated local aesthetics and ideas. Le Corbusier had concluded that the 'traditional vernacular' had no part in modernism (Passanti, 1997),⁴ and this approach had been amplified by colonial aesthetic hierarchies that proposed a 'post-vernacular architectural style' (Uduku, 2006: 6).⁵ This opinion went beyond political elites – for example, in Nigeria, as Sonaiya and Dincyurek (2009) argue, vernacular forms, materials and techniques came to be despised as the antithesis of modernity. For African modernism, there

were apparently few local ideas that might be used to make architectures that could explore ways of living with modernity which continued to be presented as given.⁶

But there has been a shift in the last 20 years. Vernacular aesthetics are being used in a number of highly prominent new state buildings in attempts to inject the state with ‘regional Modernism[s]’ (Sanders, 2000: 73). It remains, however, a challenge to decide what makes an appropriate local aesthetic, given the diversity of lifestyles, languages and histories of communities in many African countries. Further, it remains a puzzle as to how far these new forms of modernism are able to encapsulate and express local ideas about modernity and enable the state to become something that can be better understood and lived with.

To address these puzzles, the rest of the article explores three recently-built modernist state forms: Jubilee House in Ghana (2008), the new Parliament in Malawi (2010) and the Northern State Legislature in South Africa (2003). We look at the buildings themselves and what they were intended to represent, and we explore how they are being received by citizens who live and work in and around them. To do this, we draw on 31 interviews and 22 focus group discussions collected from fieldwork in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa, carried out over six periods between 2016 and 2019. We ask, how is modernity expressed and read in these projects, and to what degree are new modernisms able to *reflect on* as well as *reflect* modernity? In other words, how far do such ‘African modernisms’ support Seth’s argument Seth (2012) that modernism accepts *and* shapes modernity?

We argue that there has been a tendency to invent new national traditions that can cut across different groups, similar to colonial methods that simplified and rationalized complex social processes (Ranger, 2012). Each of our examples offers representations of local aesthetic forms – for example, a stool for Ghana’s palace, a calabash for Malawi’s parliament and a bull-horn for South Africa’s local legislature. Each offers an approximation of national culture, either drawn from a particular ethnic tradition (in Ghana) or from a generalized, unspecific ‘African tradition’ (in Malawi and South Africa). We show how these ‘invented’ national traditions are deconstructed and incorporated into monumental representations of the modern state. We argue that the resulting forms amount to ‘invented modernisms’, the juxtaposition of decontextualised vernacular forms and conventionally monumental state forms between which modernity is both affirmed and challenged.

As we explore the ways in which these invented traditions enable reflections *on and of* the state, we find tensions between elite and popular conceptions. Elite reflections often offer critiques of the colonial state, rooting the post-colonial state in ideas of the spiritual origins of power, ideas of ‘African’ values such as hospitality or a rebalancing of formerly racialised state-society relations. In contrast, popular conceptions represent the post-colonial state as founded on artificial or exclusive conceptions of nation, dependent on foreign support or continuing colonial characteristics. Between them, these conceptions both affirm and critique the state. It is in this sense that our three examples can be said to provide examples of African modernism.



Figure 1. Jubilee House, Accra, Ghana. Source: Julia Gallagher, March 2019.

GHANA'S PRESIDENTIAL PALACE

The architecture of Ghana's Presidential Palace represents the challenges of building one new nation out of the multiple nations, polities, communities and kingdoms that colonialism forced together. It is an attempt to tackle the problem of how to symbolically represent the (head of) state in ways that can be read by people inside and outside of the country. Its 'invented modernism' is an amalgamation of sociopolitically-constructed national traditions and symbolism centred on Akan culture⁷ on the one hand and a physically-constructed symbol of the modern Ghanaian presidency and state on the other. Architecturally, it marks a significant break from the earlier modernisms that dominated state-building in the country post-independence. Politically, it marks significant breaks with both the prior use of the colonial Osu Castle⁸ as the office of the president of Ghana and the association of the building site with Nkrumah's preferred Flagstaff House (Figure 1).

The Presidential Palace is pristine and monumental, especially compared to the other buildings in its immediate vicinity, reflecting perspectives of the state as grand and ostentatious. It sits in an area of high land value, set back from Liberation Road, just north of Accra's city centre. Embassies, residences and a former zoo were demolished to make room for the new complex, which comprises the main building, Jubilee House, facing the road, and other auxiliary buildings, including presidential and vice-presidential villas and the original colonial Flagstaff House. The entire complex covers an area of 284,000 square metres. Jubilee House, which covers 10,960 square metres, contains offices, administrative and meeting spaces, and is about 40 m tall, is the most visible and symbolic of the buildings. To the west of the site is an exclusive residential area known as Kanda. To the east are flats for Ghana's Police personnel. To the north are apartments for government officials, some of which were marked for demolition on account of the complex, and the Flagstaff Basic School. To the south is a recreational facility called the Afrikiko Leisure Centre.

The history of the construction of the Presidential Palace, as well as subsequent contestations over its naming and use, speak to several issues that have dogged the modern Ghanaian state since Kwame Nkrumah's presidency (from 1960 to 1966), such as foreign influence and control, ownership of the state by political parties, and government overspending. Completed in 2008, the complex was financed, designed and constructed as a 'gift' from India to Ghana. The project was overseen by the Indian company Shapoorji Pallonji (Murthy, 2021). The entire process – from design and construction to even the naming and the use of the presidential palace has been marked by controversy and contestation. For example, although Shapoorji Pallonji was required by law to work with Ghanaian consultants, the company's involvement in the design of such a national project was criticized by some in the Ghanaian architecture and construction industry who thought that the design of national architectural edifices ought not to be led by 'foreigners'.⁹ In this view, even though the architectural design was influenced by and inflected with motifs and symbols from ethnic groups in Ghana, the fact that the designers were not nationals detracted from the national character and identity of the buildings.

The project's high construction cost of between USD 50 million (Arku, 2013; Korto, 2020) to USD 80 million (Koomson, 2009) was also heavily criticized – notably by the then main opposition party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), whose flagbearer was Professor John Evans Atta Mills. NDC campaign communicators even threatened to use the building as a poultry farm (Quansah, 2009) if the party won the December 2008 election. Mills won the election, and although he did not carry out his chicken farm threat, he refused to move into the building, continuing to use the Osu Castle as his seat of government (Arku, 2013). Yet, although Mills did not use the Presidential Palace complex,¹⁰ his government decided to name it 'Flagstaff House' in remembrance of the original building on the site, which was The Office of The President of Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah. This name was considered an affront to President Kufuor and the NPP, which had proposed naming it the Golden Jubilee House and saw it as an NPP pet project. Thus, when the NPP came back into power in 2016, it controversially changed the name again to Jubilee House, as it is currently known.

The designers of the Presidential Palace drew on cultural symbols from Ghana to symbolize the state rather than use ostensibly neutral or imported forms as earlier modernist designers of the 1950s and 1960s did. Yet, the architectural symbolism of the Presidential Palace, which is meant to reflect a national Ghanaianness, is predominantly based on the culture of one – Akan – ethnic group.¹¹ Jubilee House itself evokes at least one of two things depending on how conversant the viewer is with Ghanaian architectural forms and cultural motifs. The first symbol evoked and confirmed by the local architectural consultants during a tour of the facilities in 2008 and later interviews with architects, 12–29 April 2018 is that of an Asante royal stool.¹² The second is the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum, which opened in the early 1990s, designed to resemble a grand tree cut short.

The heavy use of Akan and Asante cultural motifs as representative of Ghanaian culture is part of a construction of national identity and tradition that can be traced directly to Nkrumah's nation-building activities during the early days of post-independence. One of the ways in which he tackled the problem of creating one nation out of many was by using symbolism. Some of his use of cultural symbols predominantly from the Asante then resulted in other issues with how people perceived the new state – as Akan or Asante. Fuller (2014) reads Nkrumah's 'symbolic nation-building' through nationalization of cultural elements perceived as Asante,¹³ such as Kente cloth, 'as an attempt to anchor himself and his party to a particularly strong ethnic group that embodied Ghana's traditions without necessarily legitimising the Asantes' (p.319). More recently, in the same vein, the Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye has used symbols of Asante culture to represent Ghanaianness in his design of the proposed national cathedral of Ghana (Ofori-Sarpong, 2022). But as various interlocutors pointed out, not all Ghanaians accept Akan or Asante culture as 'embod(ying) Ghana's traditions'.

Yet these uses of traditional symbolism are not always obvious to casual observers, many of whom do not belong to an Akan group.¹⁴ Apart from architects who correctly identified the royal stool symbol the building was meant to evoke, many others were slower to recognize it. Once mentioned, people did see it. However, feelings about this aesthetic were ambivalent. In one group discussion, a woman said: '[T]he structure doesn't depict any form of African or Ghanaian structure.' When it was pointed out that the shape was that of an Asante stool, everyone in the group agreed: '[Y]es it can be described as the *asesedwa*.'¹⁵ One man described it as 'like a Ghanaian thing, but in a modernised form',¹⁶ but another was less convinced: '[I]t doesn't look like an African way of building, it looks more of European standard. . . everything there is foreign'.¹⁷

Furthermore, not all Ghanaians could or wanted to relate to the symbolism of the Asante royal stool, and the ostensibly national symbols found on Jubilee House, drawn predominantly from Akan culture, were not universally recognized and accepted as representative of the whole nation. One respondent pointed out that, where he was from in the Upper East Region of Ghana, 'the chiefs, they sit on skins'. He did not feel any particular affinity for the stool motif. Neither did he find the *adinkra* symbols compelling as national symbols. To him, they were Akan symbols for the 'Akan presidents', even though Ghana had a Gonja president (John Dramani Mahama) based there at the time of our interview.¹⁸

Though people perceived the presidential palace as inaccessible to ordinary¹⁹ Ghanaians, they did not always consider this to be a bad thing. Their perceptions about its inaccessibility were reinforced by their ambivalent perceptions concerning the lack of a truly national identity in the architecture. Most non-elite respondents could not imagine entering the facility, and some were frightened of even walking too close to it for fear of being accosted by the soldiers who served as security guards. Indeed, several interview requests were turned down because people did not feel comfortable talking about the building. Yet many of them also found it fitting that the Presidential Palace was inaccessible because it reflected the high status of the nation's leader. Even relatively more elite respondents spoke about their access to the building as dependent on trappings of wealth, importance, or power. One interviewee observed that nobody could 'get up and walk into'²⁰ Jubilee House because they would be stopped at the first security points, but one could certainly drive in with an expensive car and get quite far before being stopped. They also remarked that it would probably be much easier for 'diasporans'²¹ (meaning Western-based Black people), non-Black foreigners, and white people to access the building. For elite and non-elite interlocutors alike, the building was viewed as aloof and inaccessible to ordinary Ghanaians despite the choice of form and ornamentation, although this was not necessarily perceived as a bad thing.

Ordinary Ghanaians may not have received the messages of national symbolism in the invented modernism of the presidential palace exactly as intended by its proponents and architects, but through their experiences and perceptions of the Jubilee House, they express their understandings of the nation and their relation to the modern state. For people from non-dominant/majority ethnic groups, their perception of the nation is one in which some cultures are privileged over others as representative of national identity. This perception is compounded by the aloofness and inaccessibility of the Presidential Palace, which reflects the distance ordinary people perceive, and perhaps desire, between themselves and (representatives) of the state.

MALAWI'S NEW PARLIAMENT

Our second example illustrates the tensions between national ownership of the state and dependency on foreign ideas, expertise and finance. Malawi's ruling elites invented a Malawian modernist architectural aesthetic rooted in traditional symbolism to project their ideas of national identity through the parliament building. The building was conceived as the centerpiece of Lilongwe, the post-independence capital city designated for its central location and hence emblematic of the elites' quest to forge a unified Malawi nation (Potts, 1985). Although the post-colonial ruling elites drew heavily on imagined indigenous traditions to construct their idea of 'Malawianness', they sought help from beyond Malawi to make this national identity concrete. The process and output of the design, construction and use of the parliament building offers insights into the invented modernism of the architecture of Malawi's new parliament as, from the outset, the complex was intended to consist of 'modern facilities'²² that 'really look Malawian' (Figure 2).²³



Figure 2. Parliament of Malawi, Lilongwe, Malawi. Source: Innocent Batsani-Ncube, Date July 2019.

The idealized quest for ‘Malawianess’ was combined with the search for conventional ideas of the methods and ideas of modern statehood. The Malawian government hired white architects from apartheid South Africa to design Lilongwe as the capital city. Through the Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC), the South African architects envisioned that the new parliament building would be at the heart of Lilongwe, ‘placed on the site where it will be in full view of the new city centre, the pedestrian access across the central park leading to it, the Processional Way and the centre of the pedestrian precinct between the government administration buildings’ (Gerke & Viljoen, 1968, p.39). The actual construction of the parliament complex was finally achieved in 2005 during President Bingu wa Mutharika’s first term and then completed and commissioned during his second term in 2010.

The parliament complex consists of a security reception office at the main entrance gate, a mini-stadium complex abutting Greek-style colonnades, and the main building, which houses the chamber and administrative offices (Batsani-Ncube, 2022). The chamber is capped with a dome and is the largest theater in Lilongwe. It covers 1,256 square metres with 282 fitted seats for members of parliament and an upper floor gallery for visitors.²⁴ Other features of the chamber include a map that depicts Malawi’s three regions (North, Central and South), 28 districts, and 193 legislative constituencies. Each of these 193 constituencies is represented on the map by one stone brought by the

sitting MP during the inauguration of the complex. At the centre of the mini-stadium stands a bust of Mutharika that was designed and sculpted in China.²⁵

The building was initially designed by MD Initiative, Norman & Dawbarn and ABC Design (MNA), a consortium of Malawian architectural firms.²⁶ The formative construction stages were carried out with funding from Taiwan by Terrastone and Deco, two long-established Malawian construction companies. However, these local actors were removed from the project when Malawi switched diplomatic relations from Taiwan to mainland China.²⁷ The Chinese government offered to fund the project and brought in their architects and contractors to take over. Therefore, the final building can be said to be a fusion of Malawian, Taiwanese and Chinese involvement.

The initial plan to engage local architects was predicated on the government of Malawi's desire to draw on local ideas in the production of this building.²⁸ According to one of the lead architects, President Bingu wa Mutharika 'was very specific with the kind of parliament he had in mind. That it should really look Malawian, it should have features which depict Malawi and also make sure that all the regions in terms of traditions are also incorporated into the design'.²⁹ This was easier said than done because the designers essentially needed to invent a "really Malawian" look.

Malawi's parliament building's invented modernism involved an external benchmarking involving pilgrimages to other countries; and attempts to ascribe aspects of Malawi culture onto facets of the building. Officials at the Ministry of Public Works in Malawi stated that before the architects started their design work, they were directed to visit other places 'where they have got such modern facilities'.³⁰

*One of the places they [MNA Architects] went to was South Africa. They went to Mpumalanga Provincial Legislative in Nelspruit and to other [provincial] parliament buildings in South Africa. That is when they actually came up with what we are going to design, which was approved by us technical people in the government. In addition, visits were made by parliament, ourselves and the consultant to Dodoma in Tanzania.*³¹

It is instructive that while the architects had been given a brief to design a building steeped in local tradition and culture, their preliminary site visits had nothing to do with the Malawi hinterland but with foreign countries. This was ostensibly to view comparable modern facilities. This suggests that while the elites wanted a building they could reference as an embodiment of local values and tradition, they also wanted it to reflect the archetypical nature of modern state buildings in Africa.

The traditional and indigenous symbolic meaning was most clearly represented in the dome, which caps the debate chamber, presented as symbolic of traditional Malawian hospitality. The architect who was involved in designing the dome described it thus:

If you look at the dome the way it was designed, it had a meaning on its own, it is like a pot. You know Malawians always would want to invite their guests, sit down to have some meals. The idea was to bring

*this element of a dome as a pot, meaning despite the fact that we have different parties, ideologies but still people can sit down, cook food together and eat on a table just like, you know, in a family.*³²

A former Speaker of Parliament gave a slightly different but reinforcing interpretation of the dome when he described it as representing an overturned calabash. 'In most African societies, the calabash is a symbol of communal gathering where people brew local beer and partake of the same.'³³ President Bingu wa Mutharika is also said to have invoked the traditional Malawian symbolism of the dome. During a discussion with civic society leaders, a participant narrated his recollections of Mutharika's interpretation:

*He told us during public rallies that he spent sleepless nights designing that building. . . [that it] is so beautiful. It is representing our interest as a nation because it has a dome on top of it. According to him, that dome represents nkhokwe (granary). So, to him, that iconic dome represented our interests as Malawians because we wanted to be food-sufficient at that particular time.*³⁴

Symbolically the dome carries an inherent contradiction – on the one hand meant to represent local culture and self-sufficiency, and yet it is popularly read as symbolic of Malawi's dependence on foreign ideas, technology and funding.³⁵ Public interpretations of the dome by ordinary citizens are diametrically different from what the elites intended. Ordinary people appeared unimpressed, such as one woman during a FGD who commented that the dome was 'some sort of technology, maybe there are some cables connected there for communication. Just my thoughts. But to say that there is any symbol depicting Malawian culture or tradition, we don't agree on that one'.³⁶ And a male colleague insisted that 'there is nothing about Malawian culture or tradition [about the dome] since the building was constructed by the Chinese'.³⁷

Practically, the dome is a source of consternation for sitting MPs because of its propensity to leak during the rainy season (Khamula, 2020). The Chinese contractors remain on-site as part of the maintenance agreement between China and Malawi, trying to mend the dome for the past 10 years without lasting success.

However, while dismissing the elite's ascription of invented Malawi tradition to the building, ordinary Malawians are positively disposed towards the building for the very reason the elites seem to downplay: being an example of modern cosmopolitan architecture. Two young women in an FGD with inner-city youth highlighted the proximity of the building to the city centre as a good thing. The first stated, 'I feel good when I am passing by that building. Sometimes you take your phone to take pictures and post them on social media so that those who are not in Malawi should see how Malawi has developed'.³⁸ The second concurred, 'When passing through the parliament, I feel like I am in America'.³⁹ This streak of positive attitudes towards the building was a sustained trend in other FGDs, including in Chinsapo – one of the largest slum settlements 6 km southwest of Lilongwe (Doe et al., 2020). In Chinsapo, one of a group of elders pointed out that they 'feel very proud because the building is beautiful and it beautifies the city centre'.⁴⁰ This connection between this building and its urban environment is central to how the Lilongwe residents rationalize its existence.

They see it not in isolation but as part of a larger story of the city's development and branding (Lynch, 1960).

Furthermore, during a FGD with executives of a vendors' association who trade in central Lilongwe, one noted that the building was 'a sign of development and a dream come true for Malawi Parliament to have its own building that can be appreciated and respected by people from outside'.⁴¹ Emphasizing the importance of location during an FGD with civic society leaders, one of the participants mentioned the strategic placement of the building in the city centre, saying: 'the building contributes to the development of the country when you look at the way it has been placed, it is at the centre of the city where we expect different development projects from different sectors'.⁴² These citizen perceptions show support for the idea of the state alongside a critique of its perceived dependency.

SOUTH AFRICA'S NORTHERN CAPE LEGISLATURE

Our final example highlights a further challenge of creating a post-colonial state: that of the incorporation and rejection of colonial legacies. It deals with the Northern Cape Legislature, a daring attempt to create a building complex that breaks with the colonial and apartheid past (Malan, 2003).⁴³ It sits not in Kimberley, the state capital, but next to Galeshewe, a large township outside Kimberley. The complex is surrounded by waste-land (untidy, smelly, and locals report, dangerous) rather than the buildings of the town, or manicured gardens one often finds encircling state buildings, notably at the British-built, neoclassical Cape Town Parliament built in 1884, which sits in the middle of the Company's Gardens, created in the 1650s by European settlers (Figure 3).

The building complex was designed by South African firm Luis da Silva Architects, who wanted it to be integrated into the landscape 'in an organic manner':

[T]inted plasters exploring the earthy tones of the top-soil found on the site, hardy sun-screens and hand-crafted finishes. . . Where possible these surfaces will make reference to indigenous craft and decorative traditions. . . Surfaces, colours, textures, sculptural elements, and incised designs will contribute to a sense of a complex of buildings that, in their exterior and interior treatment, will speak of their context. (Architect's Report, quoted by Malan & Lange, 2003, p.26)

This attempt at a sympathetic reflection of the landscape represents a desire to make a state form that fits into South Africa rather than to bend and control it. It tries to shake off colonial-era modernism, first fashionable in 1930s South Africa and used to reinforce racial segregation aesthetically and spatially (Manning, 2007). Since the end of apartheid, modernism's stylistic tendencies towards universalism, monumentalism and rationality have been viewed as inappropriate for a country that 'speaks with several voices' (Raman, 2009, p.17). Like other post-1994 buildings, the Northern Cape Legislature complex tries to reflect a gentler state-form embedded in the country's diverse communities, a post-apartheid architectural style that reflects hybridity and fluidity (Murray, 2007, p.57).



Figure 3. Northern Cape Legislature, Galeshewe, South Africa. Source: Julia Gallagher, Date September 2019.

The invented modernism of the Northern Cape Legislature buildings, like many of their contemporaries, looks to vernacular architectures to find ways to reflect the voices that apartheid architecture repressed, such as spatial configurations that reflect ‘ancestral belief, tribal values, environmental adaptation, and social symbolism’ (Frescura, 2020a, p.370), more specific Zulu beehive forms and Ndebele mural decorations (Joubert, 2009, p.9), and ‘soft’ materials that ‘metaphorically translate. . . a cyclical conception of architecture and nature’ (Noble, 2011, p.40).

But this has often been an awkward affair. One problem is official and popular admiration for ‘images of industrialisation’ (Frescura, 2020b, p.417) and the idea that the end of apartheid would mean access to modern materialism for everyone rather than a return to the local. This perspective sees ‘African modernism’ as an assimilation of local forms producing second-rate, parochial architecture. Indeed, some of the attempts since 1994 to ‘Africanise’ architecture have superficially equated African identity with ‘the adoption of African motifs, often purely for surface decoration’ (Silverman, 2014, p.265). Noble (2011, p.11) argues that this has led to a hybridity where new structures have what he calls ‘white’ internal structures made of steel and concrete, covered over with decorative ‘black masks’. The discomforts produced by this process are exacerbated by the fact that the majority of South Africa’s architects are white (Silverman, 2014, p.265).

The Northern Cape Legislature complex illustrates some of this awkwardness. A collection of differently-shaped and brightly-colored buildings that look from afar like a scattering of toy bricks, this is not a conventional modernist structure. Up close, the buildings draw on traditional political ideas in the use of outdoor space where locals are meant to gather and petition their leaders. The conical main building references the bull-horn, an instrument once used to call people to meetings in traditional settings.⁴⁴ There is a small balcony on the side of it for representatives to receive petitions and address the people. These vernacular forms speak to pre-colonial political arrangements in a diffuse way, often taking generalisable ideas rather than specific local forms. They seem to have little to do with monumental modern statehood. There are further rejections of modernist design principles. Malan (2003, p.98), commenting on the juxtaposition of different shapes, points to the architect's 'reluctance to rationalise'; Noble (2011, p.11), in a discussion of materials, argues that the structures' disguise of steel and concrete with vernacular-style surfaces and decoration rejects modernism's focus on 'honesty'.

Yet many aspects of these buildings speak to modernism's admiring-criticizing intent: they are excited by the state *and* reflect critically on it. The structures are a remarkable sight, placed incongruously in the untidy landscape, 'like a space ship on the moon' (Lange, 2003, p.78) as if to proclaim the arrival of the state to the township. Despite their playfulness, they are a serious statement of the importance of the state, monumental in their own way, even 'ostentatious' (Freschi, 2006). State legitimacy is burnished by mosaic shapes and images of local anti-apartheid heroes that link the foundation myth of the state to the local community.⁴⁵ At the same time, the buildings challenge the apartheid division of communities by spatially re-describing the city (Malan & Lange, 2003, p.15) and even making suggestions towards a different kind of state. Their '[n]arrative remains open, totality unresolved' (Noble, 2011, p.105) so that they are 'thoroughly non-bureaucratic in character', implicitly questioning 'the institutional image associated with government buildings of the apartheid era' (Ibid, pp.84–5).

However, in the end, the buildings' popular receptions reveal some of the ambivalence that surrounds the post-1994 state. For a start, some of the buildings' more radical questioning of the state sits oddly with local people. The 'African' aesthetics and forms of the building provoke a vague sense of affection and pride – people said they liked how the building looked 'different' and most appreciated its closeness to the township. Some described, with pride, memories of how local artisans helped build and decorate it. But the ideas and engagement engendered by the complex were often linked to conventional forms of modern statehood rather than the open, cosmopolitan ethos that Noble suggests. People said it was 'beautiful' because it was 'huge' and 'serious',⁴⁶ 'neat' and 'law-making',⁴⁷ 'proper'.⁴⁸ Many spoke approvingly of the security around the complex, 'you feel like you are in a safe place'; it's 'feng shui'.⁴⁹

Often its 'Africanness' failed to resonate. Instead, people linked it to more conventional modern ideas. The horn-shaped building, for example, was not associated with a vernacular form, but with modern symbols. One young woman thought it was like a 'giant lipstick',⁵⁰ and an older man explained how 'it's built like a ship' with a chimney. His view was less that the building embodied a

traditional 'African' authority but that it properly and finally realized a state project imperfectly executed under colonialism. 'Jan van Riebeeck was supposed to make a ship out of [the Cape Town Parliament], but he didn't do that. . . he didn't do it properly'.⁵¹ For this man, the Northern Cape Legislature did not represent a new state-form but a proper realization of a project only half-finished by the colonialists.

Accessibility was a common theme in discussions. Despite early ambitions to keep the complex open, it is encircled by security fences and only accessible through guarded gates. Only the community activists felt very welcome. They described how 'you can actually identify yourself with those pictures [of anti-apartheid activists]' and that when they watch debates, 'they are talking about *us* when we are *there*'.⁵² But others felt more detached: one group of young people described it as 'hidden and gated',⁵³ while a group from the local arts centre said it was inaccessible, 'designed for a particular group'.⁵⁴ A group of care home workers said they went to community events there and described food, entertainment and freebies, but were bored by the debates.⁵⁵

In various ways, people saw the buildings as supporting, rather than questioning, the overarching authority and power of the state. One woman described it in distinctly transcendental terms, saying that it has 'that spirit' of a Catholic cathedral, a sacred atmosphere that 'brings those goosebumps'.⁵⁶ For people who were less involved in local politics or impressed by state symbolism, its capacities of organization and provision were used to judge it. The focus here was on more tangible benefits found at the regularly organized public events. One man explained: '90 per cent go for the freebies' handed out at public events.⁵⁷

This building's 'invented modernism' was found in its commitment to the state-project alongside attempts to question how this was framed. For local people, the project itself was framed locally in quite conventional terms – monolithic, grand, an instrument of organization and order. They liked the repositioning of what many viewed as a conventional state idea under new ownership rather than transformed in itself. But its ability to question modernity was there, concretely in its location and aesthetically in its unconventionality.

CONCLUSION

The examples of modern state architecture projects we have studied in these three African countries show how the state is described and critiqued by buildings and through citizens' readings of buildings. We found a gap between what governing elites and architects intend to express and what the governed public read and understand from the architecture of these state projects, due in part to these buildings being manifestations of what we term 'invented modernisms', which are in turn based on invented national traditions.

'Invented modernisms' highlighted engagement with the state project but also the tensions within it. In particular, post-colonial actors aimed to represent modern African states and to unify

diverse groups of people under common national identities, uphill tasks which have produced mixed outcomes in Ghana, Malawi, and South Africa. These architectural projects are modernist because they illustrate some of the difficulties of post-colonial state-building.

In the case of Ghana's Presidential Palace, the invented modernism is based on invented national traditional symbols, which are drawn predominantly from Akan and Asante cultural elements. And it is because this invented national tradition is drawn from certain ethnic groups to the exclusion of others that people from excluded cultures do not read this architectural representation of the state as unifying and genuinely national. The building highlights the challenges of uniting the country's diverse nations under a single state-project. Similarly, in Malawi's new parliament, invented modernism is based on the invention of a national tradition that attributes symbolic meanings to the built form of the dome by ruling elites. Yet the dome that is presented as either a granary which is a traditional symbol of plenty, or a pot which is a traditional symbol of hospitality, is not seen in that way by locals who view it as a begging bowl, a symbol of the country's dependency on foreign finance. This theme of public misinterpretation of intended traditional symbolism also occurs in South Africa's Northern Cape Legislature. There, invented national traditions show up in the use of the bull-horn as an architectural referent which some locals read as a giant lipstick or a ship – which appear to dismiss locally-authentic state-expressions and speak to continuing engagements with colonialism.

The inaccessibility of the state buildings exacerbates the gap between elite expressions and public understandings of ordinary people in the settings in which they are located. In all three cases, there is also, to varying extents, perceived aloofness, inaccessibility, or detachment of the buildings, which is not always seen in a negative light. These attributes represent the state as grand and powerful, distant and unapproachable, modern and admirable, but also as incompetent and dependent. If these appear somewhat contradictory, they only reflect the contractions inherent in state-making and nation-building in these diverse, multi-faceted countries, which are still emerging from the shadows of colonialism and apartheid.

END

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NOTES

1. By cultural symbols we mean objects, icons or other visual motifs which have shared meanings within communities, polities or ethnic groups.
2. In his book on modernist Brasília, Holston (1989: 6) writes about modernism's (largely unfulfilled) 'subversive intent'. The modernists' 'aim was to disrupt the imagery of what bourgeois society understood as the real and the natural, to challenge the taken-for-granted, to defamiliarize, disorient, decode, deconstruct, and de-authenticate the normative, moral, aesthetic, and familiar categories of social life'.

3. This is not to argue that colonial and post-colonial modernism was not admired and even loved locally – see Tostões (2016) on Mozambique and Angola and Denison et al. (2006) on Eritrea. Neither is it to suggest that African colonial and post-colonial modernisms were second-rate or derivative – many highly innovative buildings have been made throughout the continent.
4. Although as Passanti (1997: 438) writes, Le Corbusier did think that *modern vernacular* could help substantially, providing a ‘reserve of “original” architectural solutions’.
5. This despite the fact that some colonial-era architects working in Africa did try to incorporate vernacular forms into their work (Rifkind, 2011; Tostões, 2016).
6. Though European modernists practicing in Africa did not explicitly credit local architectures as inspiration for their ‘tropical’ architectural features such as courtyards, breeze blocks, and single bank room layouts, these features had been staple features of architecture in West Africa for centuries, having been developed as solutions to climatic concerns and expressions of culture and traditions. Jackson (2013) and Manful (2021) for critical discussions of the claims of originality and newness that (Tropical) Modernist architects in Africa made.
7. See Fuller (2014) for a discussion of the construction of national symbolism in independent Ghana.
8. Also known as Fort Christiansborg, it was built by the Dano-Norwegian Realm in the 1660s mainly for the trade in enslaved people.
9. Interviews with architects, 12–20 April 2018.
10. After Mills died in 2012, his former vice president and successor John Mahama of the NDC officially moved to the Flagstaff House on 7 February 2013 after, it is said, various purification prayers and rituals (Bonsu, 2013; Interview, 2018). It has since been occupied and used to different extents by all presidents of the country.
11. See De Witte and Meyer (2012) for a broader discussion of the use of Akan aesthetics in the creation of the Ghanaian nation.
12. Interviews with architects, 12–29 April 2018; Architects Registration Council (ARC), 2019.
13. Though Kente cloth, though colonization and postcolonial nation-building is widely associated with the Asante, the Ewe also lay claim to being originators of the Kente.
14. Akans are the largest ethnic group in Ghana, with about 10 million people.
15. FGD, Pentecostal church members, Accra, 18 August 2019.
16. FGD, elders, Accra, 13 August 2019.
17. FGD, manual labourers, Accra, 30 July 2019. See also Gallagher et al. (2021).
18. Interview with resident of nearby building, May 2016.
19. ‘Ordinary’ here refers to members of society who are not among or connected to political or social elites in Ghana.
20. Interviews with architects, 12–20 April 2018; Interviews with residents of nearby buildings 2016.
21. Ibid.
22. Interview with a former Ministry of Public Works official, 25 July 2019, Lilongwe.
23. Interview with an architect, 11 July 2019, Lilongwe.
24. Fieldnotes, Lilongwe, July 2019.
25. Ibid.
26. Interview with a former Ministry of Public Works official, Lilongwe, 25 July 2019.
27. Interview with a former cabinet minister, Lilongwe, 16 July 2019.
28. Interview with a former Speaker of Parliament, Lilongwe, 10 July 2019.
29. Interview with an architect, Lilongwe, 11 July 2019.

30. Interview with a former Ministry of Public Works official, Lilongwe, 25 July 2019.
31. Ibid.
32. Interview with an architect, Lilongwe, 11 July 2019.
33. Interview with a former Speaker of Parliament, Lilongwe, 10 July 2019.
34. FGD with civic society leaders, Lilongwe, 23 July 2019
35. This characterization of the dome as symbolic of Malawi's dependence on foreign donors is related to the ways Ethiopians perceive the dome of the Chinese funded and constructed African Union Building. See Mulugeta (2021, p.526).
36. FGD traditional leaders, Lilongwe, 14 August 2019.
37. Ibid.
38. FGD with inner-city youths, Lilongwe, 1 August 2019.
39. Ibid.
40. FGD with community leaders in Chinsapo, Lilongwe, 24 July 2019.
41. FGD with executives of a vendor's association, Lilongwe, 13 August 2019.
42. FGD with civic society leaders, Lilongwe, 23 July 2019.
43. The Northern Cape Legislature is one of eight regional parliaments established in 1995, with responsibility for regional government. Its remit includes health, schooling, housing, agriculture, environment and development planning.
44. The idea and role of the bullhorn is vague, another example of an invented tradition used in the service of locally authentic forms.
45. This is a familiar trope in South Africa, where the state uses monuments and structures referencing the heroism of the anti-apartheid struggle to create a state-myth (Marschall, 2004).
46. FGD with youth volunteers, Galeshewe, 23 January 2019.
47. FGD with care home employees, Galeshewe, 21 January 2019.
48. FGD with community activists, Galeshewe, 21 January 2019.
49. Ibid.
50. FGD with youth volunteers, Galeshewe, 23 January 2019.
51. FGD with community activists, Galeshewe, 21 January 2019.
52. Ibid.
53. FGD with youth volunteers, Galeshewe, 23 January 2019.
54. FGD with artists, Galeshewe, 22 January 2019.
55. FGD with care home employees, Galeshewe, 21 January 2019.
56. FGD with community activists, Galeshewe, 21 January 2019.
57. FGD with care home employees, Galeshewe, 21 January 2019.

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