Mies as Transparent Viewing Cabinet for Pancho's Crazy Façade

Crown Hall built between 1950-1956 on IIT Chicago campus - Mies van der Rohe Dragon House completed 1961 Maputo, Mozambique – Pancho Guedes

By the time I started working on Crown Hall/Dragon House I had already spent some time dwelling on the modernist phenomenon, particularly on modernist architecture in Africa. A constant factor in these thoughts was the lack of a single approach that could explain, condemn, or celebrate the larger modernist architectural phenomenon that had spread almost worldwide and included Africa. At first, the fact that the issue was not simple was a great source of frustration. Later the complexity proved to be a field of richness and serve as a metaphoric parable for a larger understanding of the Africa that I am trying to fathom: the Africa that has struggled to create healthy economic and democratic societies; the continent with countries that remain painfully underdeveloped or devastatingly corrupt and poor; the unending prejudice and disrespect which prevails in the West's relationship with Africa. So, the possibility of studying the origins of the modernist movement was too tempting to abandon. The difficulty for me was in how to make it artistically meaningful and politically pertinent.

Most of my initial thoughts were around issues questioning modernism's exportability. I wondered how it appeared in Africa. Whether architectural modernism made any sense in such disparate locations as India, Brazil, Mozambique, and the USA. I have never been able to shake the uncomfortable feeling that this imposition of "style" is at once inappropriate to the African needs and context, and yet one of the most marked and interesting features of some contemporary African cities. The way it was clearly appropriated by the colonial project and imposed on several countries was to me obviously offensive. I also suspected that the high-minded principles of early modernist thought (even Team Ten!)[i] were rather too easily appropriated by autocratic political ideologies. And for me this was a great sign of weakness. For many years I looked for the "fascist" side of modernism (its unquestioning belief that it was good for everybody and yet never consulted anybody) as a problem to identify and condemn. This sense of ambivalence has prevailed. The utopian project of modernism reveals some shocking failures. No doubt internationalization has physically taken place, as one can't question that the buildings exist, but its principles do not flourish and multiply with equal success and its architectural manifestations are not equally useful or admired by all societies. The other unique factor is that there seems to be a right and a wrong time for modernist architecture, so that sometimes derelict buildings may be "rediscovered" to become flourishing museological and commercial examples (this was explored in my project Maison Tropicale,

2007).

Unable to settle for an outright easy condemnation, I was compelled to look further. I began to see buildings as a key to the complex trail of history and as containers that permitted further thinking about the end of colonial power and the early years of independence. I had learned from other artists, like photographer David Goldblat, that one could interpret buildings and so I developed my own way of reading them. I began by looking at older Portuguese fortifications along the coast of Africa that point to the history of the Portuguese sailors and serve as memory containers of the history of the slave trade. I went on to look at modernist architecture in Africa that tells us parts of the more recent history. I was driven by a desire to push ahead past the initial, if still dauntingly valid, feeling to blame slavery and colonialism for the prevailing problems. So, for example, more recently, while investigating Cape Town's shopping mall, Werdmuller Centre, I studied modernism as a possible model for South Africa. I found that although produced with an apparent sense of democratic thought in mind, the building failed during apartheid as it does now in the new free South Africa. One cannot help but continue to wonder about the validity of the modernist proposal? And my intuition is that the buildings can be seen as thinking models or prototypes which may help us understand contemporary society.

Shortly after being invited to participate in the Learning Modern project I decided to work with Mies Van der Rohe's Crown Hall building in Chicago. I specifically chose it because it was the paradigmatic building in the early establishment of Mies's own architectural discourse and therefore played a role in the formation of the mainstream modernist narrative. I set off to work with the spirit of a learner. I began by accepting that Mies's buildings would have much that I could learn from. In the back of my mind I also knew that I could never do a work singularly based on one of Mies's buildings or his oeuvre alone. His relevance for me was based on the widespread acceptance of the part he played as a modernist discourse maker and inevitably as a reference for the architects who had designed the buildings which held my curiosity. The buildings that I loved were clearly not part of the mainstream modernist discourse. They were strange and eccentric periphery manifestations. They were mostly the buildings which I had lived with for most of my life in Africa and whose formal language I was familiar with: the many works by Pancho Guedes in Maputo, which include the famous Smiling Lion and Dragon House apartment buildings; Gawie Fagan's own house in Cape Town, Die Es: and Werdmuller Centre by Roelof Uytenbogaardt.

I was acutely aware that I had learned the principles of modernism (art and architecture) by looking at these buildings, as well as through apanoply of slide images of other buildings in different parts of the world. To start off I had

even contemplated the possibility that my view of modernism was warped because my introduction to it had not come from the source. After all, I had been "'underprivileged"' and only experienced pure modernism very late in life! Although now I see this apparent disadvantage as the trigger that pushed me to a critical analysis, at the time it drove me on in an attempt to make sense of my ideologically incoherent fear. Furthermore, I had learned to recognize formal traits in the buildings. The fundamental structure of buildings which I liked were mostly rooted in a modernist form, but also exhibited the most amazing formal deviations with which African architects attempted in various ways to integrate their work into the land and social fabric of Africa. Most of these architects had started working in the colonial time and their buildings lived through the most amazing political changes and upheavals. I was interested in how the modernist buildings exhibited these changes. Going to study Mies was accepting a part of the origins of a movement and a personal strategy to try to understand this.

I started my study of Crown Hall like studying the enemy—with a half measure of respect and mistrust. I assumed that understanding Crown Hall would help me decipher some modernist codes and, therefore, serve as a key to understand some of the architecture in Africa. And in many ways it did. So let me take you through an example of my quasi-comparative initial thought process.

I already had these two images present in my work space and paired them off by making a decision that Pancho Guedes's work should be brought into this project at the time I attended a talk by Salah Hassan at the Maumaus School of Visual Arts in Lisbon. This talk on comparative modernisms proved to be an important factor in shifting my critical discourse. I was ready to learn my lesson here for two reasons. Firstly, the Maumaus was my milieu in Lisbon and was part of my own discourse context. Secondly, Salah Hassan, as a fellow African analyzing the political future of historical buildings on the continent, had previously engaged in a dialogue with me about Maison Tropicale. So, with likeminded people and common preoccupations, I was ready to learn to acknowledge the axiomatic but simple fact that there are many modernisms, rather than one, that modernism resulted in a complex network of manifestations to varying degrees and interpretations. This comparative approach was the key to decipher the images I focused on, the reading of the two buildings in hand, and the starting point of my sculpture project.

I perceived the original mainstream modernist narrative as belonging to faraway places and monolithic. In my initial uncritical and naive approach, I had surrendered to this rule. As a result I had been trying to read architectural modernism in Africa through that monolithic canon. I had been falling into

modernism's trap of autocratic thought, of accepting that there was only one main discourse. Even worse, I had accepted that there was only one correct discourse. And now, obviously, because this was an erroneous method, I was unable to untangle the aesthetic and conceptual knots that presented themselves when I looked at Mies's oeuvre next to Pancho Guedes's. I was just using the wrong critical tools.

With a refreshed approach in mind, I started to unpack the two images. They represented symbolic evidence of the diametrically opposed manifestations of modernist thought. They are both portraits of the architects: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with his Crown Hall model, photographed on….. at….. and Pancho Guedes photographed in his studio in Polana, Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) in Mozambique in the 1950s. In the case of Mies we have the image of the domineering male, a single figure, proudly towering over the maquette of his piéce de resistence—the metallic structure of Crown Hall at IIT in Chicago. The image is all about power, male pride, egocentric confidence, authorial space. The architect is larger than the building and the latter functions as a balustrade for the architect to lean on. The building's most important factor—its lightweight structure which beholds the most

transparent and luminous of spaces—is shown off fairly well, but only if the viewer knows what to look for. The portrait is about Mies the man. It bears no connection with context, no Chicago, no IIT. It could be anywhere in the world.

The second is quite different. The architect chose to be portrayed in his studio. His own studio space is a modernist one showing off his visual and architectural language, too. But Pancho Guedes (the bald-headed man sitting down on the left hand side behind the woman), chooses to present himself as a mere part of a community. A surprisingly multiracial community, too, if we consider this is Mozambique before the end of colonial rule. His role is unclear, probably intentionally so, but it is certainly not a central omnipresent role. He has also included his wife, his children, his collaborators and artistfriend Malangatana Valente, which further impresses his need to represent a portion of a complex society. It speaks of his wish for sharing of credits and authorship. In the foreground of the image there is no building but rather a sculpture, possibly alluding to Pancho's wish to present the role of architecture as an art form. It is well known that he saw himself as a multidisciplinary artist.

Having devised a point of view through my appraisal of the portraits helped me tackle the conceptual challenge of the work. I was able to understand that my modernism was not the same as what Mies presented as the modernism. The whole concept of modernism needed to be revised. I needed to look at the different modernisms side-by-side. Sculpturally I needed look at them all through a new lense of equality. So the idea was born of making a sculpture that could be the visual rendering of the idea of looking at different

modernisms together and simultaneously.

The early stages of the thinking behind the sculpture Crown Hall/Dragon House were
fully occupied by the structural analysis of Mies's discoveries of how to build a large,
free space inside a building. This was done through a series of photographs that showed the implanting of the structure on the site by a system of cranes. (The modernist/minimalist Serra-like sculptural references were very alluring.) This caption set this process of investigation and sculptural design in motion:

One of Mies van der Rohe's last buildings erected on the Illinois Institute of Technology campus is Crown Hall, a superb example of his clear span designs. The roof is suspended from the underside of four steel plate girders which in turn are carried by eight exterior steel columns. These columns are spaced 60 feet apart with the roof cantilevered 20 feet at each end.... Crown Hall, in which architecture, city planning, and design are taught, has a symmetrical plan about its short axis... A. James Speyer. Mies van der Rohe. P. 73[1].

I was immediately taken by the hierarchical role played by the four arched beams in the devising the system of the Mies's discovery. I was also taken by the evocative potential of the idea of hanging a space from a structure. I particularly liked the double-hanging system shown in the photographs and facilitated by the cranes that put the four arched beams in position on site. I knew that these would be the crucial part of my sculpture, too, so I played with them by distorting and enlarging and trying to move them around. I finally observed that I could just metaphorically "hang" Mies's idea on the same principle which he had proposed, by creating four more arched beams, then turning them upside down and forming a hooking system to hang the sculpture from the ceiling. Ironic.[1]

Hanging the structure upside down, I could use Mies own trick on himself. By taking the hanging principle and inverting it back on itself, I intended to create a sculptural rendering of Crown Hall in Sullivan Galleries, thereby activating the exhibition space — itself an important architectural landmark in Chicago!

I realized I could create a large "open space," a transparent viewing cabinet space. I imagined that this second level or plane would be based on Pancho Guedes's facade of the Maputo apartment building which I so admire—Dragon House—rendered like the surface of a precious and delicate lace doily, waiting to be preserved and looked after, light and fragile! Looking

[1] A. James Speyer, Mies van der Rohe (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1968), 73. Published in conjunction with an exhibition held at the Art Institute of Chicago, April 27-June 30, 1968 with catalogue entries by Frederick Koeper

through a sheet of transparent Plexiglas in Pancho's favorite orange color, I could bring new focus to this other masterpiece of modernism. Looking through one structure to see the other, the two buildings are distinct yet here share a space and time.

i Team 10 was a group of architects and others at the 1953 Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne whose dissenting views on led to a schism within the organzation over the approach to urbanism. Through their teaching and publications, they had an impact on the architectural thought in the latter 20th century, primarily in Europe.