

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE

(A Work in Progress)

Danny Hoffman

University of Washington

Danny Hoffman continues to pursue the limits of the essay form, combining text and images as a critical form of intervention. In this case the relationships between architecture, photography (aesthetics) and revolution are at the center of his new work on the lives of an old governmental building in Monrovia.

I
“Architecture or revolution. / Revolution can be avoided.” The radical conclusion to Le Corbusier’s 1924 *Toward an Architecture* – arguably the most significant text of architecture’s Modern Movement – announces a project of global social and political design. Le Corbusier’s aphorism actually invokes two revolutions: the revolution in human habitation that he helped to inaugurate, and the political revolution he hoped to avoid by doing so. Today both of these “revolutions” are woven into the fabric of many, perhaps all, postcolonial cities. Certainly, as Nnamdi Elleh (1997: 72) points out, the so-called International Style of modernist architecture dominates the built form of African urbanism. And those forms are inextricably bound to sweeping projects of social and political engineering. Any consideration of the future of African cities therefore requires a reckoning with the revolutions, actual and virtual, expressed in the built forms of the past.

“The Ministry of Defense” is one in a series of four



explorations of those forms in Monrovia, Liberia. In the aftermath of the fighting that consumed this region of West Africa from 1989 to 2003, thousands of ex-combatants remain in the Liberian capital. For almost a decade, hundreds of fighters and their dependents occupied the ruins of downtown structures, squatting in the dismantled infrastructure of the city: bank buildings, government ministries, hotels, office blocks. These buildings’ modernist elements – open floor plans, non-loading bearing walls, the separation of service spaces from “served” spaces – meant that the buildings’ residents could carve and configure these structures into massive vertical settlements. Partitions made of salvaged materials created domestic spaces; large communal spaces were kept open for meetings, sports, or protests; utility spaces were appropriated for shops, bars, or private assignations. The population of Monrovia in the aftermath of the war far exceeded the capacity of the devastated city’s infrastructure, and so Monrovia’s residents, like those in many African cities, had to live “beyond” the city’s architecture (Rao 2009). Adaptive re-use of modernist buildings like the Ministry of Defense therefore

realized Le Corbusier’s “architecture or revolution” in a literal sense: it allowed for the mass housing of a militarized urban populace that might otherwise have laid more violent claims to the city.

II

And yet over the past several years these buildings have manifested a different consequence of the International Style. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s government has been slowly reclaiming the city’s architecture. With funding from the World Bank and IMF, or at the behest of American and Chinese corporations, the Government of Liberia has begun to “develop” many of the city’s largest squatter settlements. Populations of combatants and non-combatants who lived in the Ministry of Health building, the Ducor Hotel, and the Old Government Hospital have been moved out so the buildings can be refurbished or demolished. All but a handful of caretakers were evicted from the Ministry of Defense building by the end of 2011, and now the colossal structure stands empty. At present the government is undecided whether to demolish the building to make way for a Chinese funded complex or whether to keep the structure intact.

Residents evicted from the Ministry of Defense largely ended up in the mangrove swamps behind the building, an informal settlement of some 30,000 known ironically as Peace Island. Those removed from other structures now squat on Monrovia’s beaches, in its graveyards, or in the few interstitial spaces of the city’s older and more established slums.

What is striking about these mass relocations is how little opposition they met from the buildings’ residents. When I spoke with ex-combatants who

had made the Ministry of Defense building their home for years, they were not only unsurprised by the government's evictions but strangely supportive of them. "It's the government's building," said Major Sandi, a former soldier in the Liberian Armed Forces, when I pressed him on why residents had not fought harder against the evictions. "It should be given to the Ministry of Defense." To be sure, residents demanded compensation for vacating their homes. There was a great deal of talk about the value of occupying urban space and many efforts to calculate what a home doomed for destruction should be worth. But at a time when "Occupy" movements were staking claims to urban space in cities around the globe, there seemed little effort to contest the use and ownership of Monrovia's built environment. The Torre David building in Caracas or the Christiana settlement in Copenhagen offer stark contrast: militant insistence on the rights of the dispossessed to space in the city. And elsewhere in Monrovia, as is true across the continent, the creative appropriation of space seems a hallmark of contemporary African urbanism. Yet in the Ministry of Defense such claims failed to materialize.

Here, then, may be a second actualization of Le Corbusier's "architecture or revolution." The same modernist elements that allowed urban squatters to make these buildings livable may ultimately have made them uninhabitable in a meaningful way. This was not, in the end, an architecture in which Liberia's ex-combatants could "dwell," to use Heidegger's term. In their own minds the residents of the Ministry of Defense never belonged in the Ministry building and never claimed the space as their own. This was not simply an artifact of the building's social and political history. Other spaces associated

with the past, with the dead, or with political repression did not carry so strong a taint of the past that they could not be appropriated and inhabited anew. There seems, rather, to be something about these structures themselves that forecloses the possibility that they can be occupied in new ways. That they can be made the possession of the people, that they can be inhabited differently and fully. In this sense the Ministry of Defense represents an architecture that does, indeed, successfully avoid revolution.

III

Photography is an integral part of this story. The camera is an agent in both the revolution in living and the revolution foreclosed by certain modernist architectural design.

At least since the end of the Second World War, the still photograph has been the primary means by which modernist architecture circulates. Designers learned about the new aesthetic primarily from photographic images in the popular and trade presses. As a consequence it was the still photograph's peculiar rendering of space that instructed architects in how to design "modern" buildings. Wide angle lenses made the open plan of Mies van der Rohe's work appear even more vast, and the compression of telephoto images made the symmetry of columns and ceilings more pronounced. The aesthetics of the image became more and more pronounced as designers copied not buildings but images of buildings (Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow 1993: 111-112; Pye 1978: 66; Zimmerman 2004). By the 1950s, architects in the New Brutalist school of modernists, the aesthetic that most obviously influenced the design of Monrovia's Ministry of Defense, had begun

to think of buildings *as* images and to design for the way their buildings would circulate in photographs (Banham 1955; Zimmerman 2012).

What's more, as the Modern Movement developed in architecture, photography was an indispensable tool for convincing residents that the improbable new aesthetic was habitable at all. The photographer Julius Shulman's most famous image, of two well dressed women seemingly suspended in the night air in a glass box over Los Angeles, was primarily a visual argument that Pierre Koenig's outrageous building was safe (Shulman 1997). Photography simultaneously disciplined the residents of the new architecture in modern practices of living. The intimate scenes of domestic life in advertising images for the famous Eichler homes in California, among the first mass produced modernist housing, were meant not only to sell the homes but to instruct home owners in how to use their unfamiliar spaces (Adamson, Arbunich, and Braun 2002).

In Brasilia, in Chandigarh, Abuja, Dar es Salaam, and in cities across the Global South, the image-logic of modernist architecture became even more pronounced, while the disciplining apparatus required to inhabit it became more fractured (see Holston 1989). The Modern Movement was inextricably but unevenly bound to the project of modernization and understandings of modernity. Le Corbusier's maxim appears ever more complex in light of the ways the image-based architecture was cathected to modernity's revolutions.

IV

The camera is therefore a unique diagnostic tool for exploring the spaces of modernist architecture. The photographs here were made in April 2012, not long

after the building's residents were moved out. The project is part of my own long-standing interest in how young men's bodies and labor became part of this region's war economy, and an interest in the spaces that continue to make these men available for deployment in that economy.

The poetics of the essay are therefore not that of high modernist architectural photography with its studied lighting and its emphasis on form. That approach would have produced images that emphasize the Ministry's status as ruins, images that capitalize on the shock of seeing destruction rendered as unintended architectural art. (As, for example, in the Detroit work of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre.) Nor is this project based on a poetics of straight documentary reportage, utilizing a deliberately messy aesthetic to offer a literal (though equally shocking) depiction of its subjects' lived experience. Both are useful projects, though at this point I am unconvinced that either has the power to raise new questions about what it means to inhabit Africa's urban spaces today.

The images collected here are informed instead by a less fixed, emergent poetics of envisioning the built environment. Exemplified by the work of the Ivorian photographer Ananias Leki Dago, South Africa's Guy Tillim and the Dutch photographer Iwan Baan, this is a poetics that shifts the emphasis away from either the formal composition of built forms or the realist depiction of everyday living within them. The visual argument is a more ambiguous and ambivalent one about the ways people can and cannot inhabit constructed space. Figures in these images make reference to scale and geometry, but mostly they raise questions about what may or may not be possible in such spaces, about what may

or may not come next. These are images that take seriously AbdouMaliq Simone's proposition that in African urbanism, people constitute the city's true infrastructure. But they do so by simultaneously asking what the limits to that constitution may be in an urban form like the Ministry of Defense. The camera becomes a tool for exploring the conceptual boundaries imposed by structures scaled to accommodate photography rather than the human form. A tool for seeing spaces sculpted to appear monumental in two dimensions rather than inhabited in three.

The camera becomes, in short, a means of exploring the complex relationship between architecture and revolution.

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE: PHOTO ESSAY

REFERENCES

- Adamson, Paul, Marty Arbunich and Ernie Braun. 2002. *Eichler: Modernism Rebuilds the American Dream*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith.
- Banham, Reyner. 2011 [1955]. "The New Brutalism," *October* 136: 19-28.
- Elleh, Nnamdi. 1997. *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Holston, James. 1989. *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Le Corbusier. 2007[1924]. *Toward an Architecture*. London: Francis Lincoln Limited.
- Mostafavi, Mohsen and David Leatherbarrow. 1993. *On Weathering*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Pye, David. 1978. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rao, Vyjayanthi. 2009. "Urbanism beyond Architecture: African cities as Infrastructure, Conversation with AbdouMaliq Simone and Filip de Boeck." *African Studies Reader*. 1: 23-40.
- Shulman, Julius. 1997. "The Fear of Architecture: A Photo-

essay," in Nan Ellin, ed. *Architecture of Fear*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2004. "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Public Culture* 16(3): 407-429.

Zimmerman, Claire. 2004. "Photographic Modern Architecture: Inside 'The New Deep,'" *The Journal of Architecture* 9(3): 331-354.

Zimmerman, Claire. 2012. "Photography Into Building in Post-war Architecture: The Smithsons and James Stirling," *Art History* 35(2): 270-287.