

Colonial Modern

Aesthetics of the Past—Rebellions for the Future

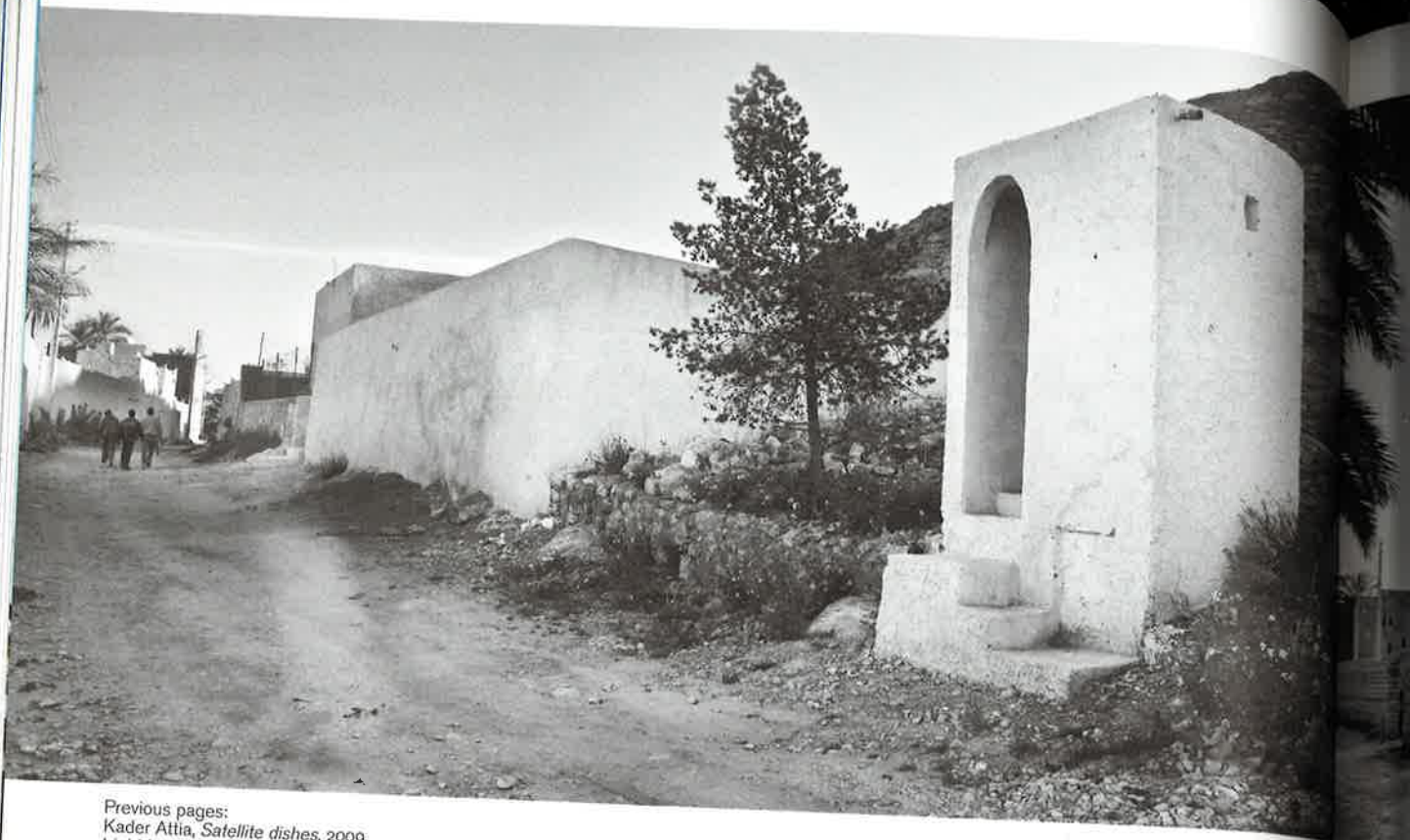
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Signs of Reappropriation

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Our economy is a system based on stock exchanges and "options". It functions in the same way as our contemporary world, in which amnesia and sophism fuel a short-term thought. People no longer invest in a real thing, but rather in an "option on an option to buy" that thing. In the same way, this thinking creates perspectives which paint "return on investment" in glowing colours, but the virtual nature of their foundations reveals their lack of judiciousness as soon as reality appeals to them.

In this formal and consensual thought, flattered by rhetoric, one

certainty drives the other away. Throughout this process, we class what looks like incoherency as nonsense, whereas history teaches us why true continuation always lies in the heart of metamorphosis and precariousness.

This is revealed in the photographs of eleventh century architecture, recently taken in the city of Ghardaia. Situated in the middle of the Algerian Sahara, this city has quietly influenced a lot of minds since its encounter with that genius of modernism, Le Corbusier. Today it is an amazing laboratory for "signs of cultural reappropriation".

Why is this?

The aesthetics of its minimal lime and gypsum architecture, which is thousands of years old, is reappropriated for a short time by its inhabitants, who create local contemporary street furniture such as public toilets. This act forms the antithesis of importing Western contemporary street furniture and, in its spatial and temporal context, comprises the sign of a change.

But is it part of a postmodernity which extends beyond the Occident? An innovation within the space of an urban



environment which continues the millennia-old evolution of a vernacular architecture, by and for Ghardaia's inhabitants.

In my opinion, anticipating the necessary debate on postmodernity and what will come subsequently raises the issue of an archaeology of modernity. Even if in art, as well as in architecture, reading this archaeology is based on a grammar composed of several layers of influences, ultimately spirituality and light can be seen as the basis of this minimalist desert architecture.

It can be found in the radical purity of mausoleums such as the black cube of the Kaaba in Mecca, as well as in the houses and urban style of the medinas—those typically walled districts with narrow streets—of the Ibadite people from this part of the Sahara.

Le Corbusier found the essential and poetic aesthetics he had been seeking in this architecture, which for centuries has been based on the humility and spirituality that people need in order to live in the desert's immensity. These are the pillars of the M'Zab civilisation.

When Le Corbusier discovered Marcel Mercier's 1922 book, *La Civilisation urbaine au Mzab, Etude de sociologie africaine (Urban Civilisation in Mzab: A Study on African Sociology)*, he was seeking what he called "the eternal Mediterranean architecture", which would have a great impact on him during his first visit to the casbah in Algiers.

However, after the two lectures he gave at the University of Algiers in 1931, he went to the city of Ghardaia for the first time, which was then situated in the ksar (or medina) of Beni Isguen.



This uncommonly constructed architecture presented him with answers to his questions. Ultimately, his thoughts on the city's culture and structure would even appear in his later architectural projects.

The appropriation of the details and some of the fundamental principles of M'Zab architecture, like those of Sidi Brahim's mausoleum, can be seen as what could be called a literary quote, as Alex Gerber suggests when evoking the Ronchamp chapel in his thesis, "L'Algérie de Le Corbusier, les voyages de 1931" ("Le Corbusier's Algeria: the 1931

Journeys"). This style anticipates several different directions of Le Corbusier's manifesto, the Athens Charter, such as the "terrace roof" and the "free facade". The globalisation of modern architecture, some elements of which have gone through the modern and postmodern eras, has Westernised some elements of non-Western housing, such as the "terrace roof", which was originally designed to allow people to take advantage of the fresh air at the end of the day in the Sahara. So, is modernity inevitably fed by otherness or

does it live as a parasite on it?

Le Corbusier never stopped showing his admiration for this vernacular architecture, which he believed combined "order with emotion". This influence continued with projects by other modernist architects, such as Roland Simounet (who was a student of Le Corbusier) or the Mexican Luiz Barragan (who often saw Le Corbusier in Paris after his return from Ghardaia in 1933). It is undeniably present in the first postmodernist experimentations in social housing, such as the Cité Radieuse, and above all in



projects of Fernand Pouillon in Algeria (see title image of this essay), which would later influence many dormitory towns all around the world. "Emotion" has slowly let "order" take its place.

This influence leads us to think that the evolution of modern and postmodern aesthetics in architecture, like the influence of "Africanity" on Western modern art, calls for an ethical way of thinking about postmodern and post-colonial cultural history, with one question: does it mean that this history is shared by both, but built in the shadow of the hegemony of

Western thought? Or vice versa?

It might be neither one nor the other; the influence that exists between two cultures never flows in merely one direction, but always in both. The same applies when reading signs of cultural reappropriation, which seems to precede an evolution.

Instinct for the native production of a modernity—which occurs through digesting what one learns from the other, then sublimating it—cannot exist and be read from a single geographical and cultural context, but rather from both. Nevertheless, the Western-centric

reading of modernity's history always remains on this side of Western borders, even when the Occident has been inspired by unknown ways of thinking. The Baroque is a good example—a synthesised Western vision, fed by a desire for exoticism which was aroused by the myth of the new world. And does this phenomenon happen outside the Occident?

One of the assorted objects I noticed during my numerous trips to Congo still keeps me thinking. It is a raffia loincloth called a *nshakokot*, traditionally worn by princesses of the Kuba ethnic group. This loincloth



is considered to be "royal"; its colours are natural and it is covered with two-dimensional abstract patterns. The old loincloth has been damaged in places; there are possibly some holes and rips, but I can only hazard a guess because the holes are in fact covered with "repair patches" made of European fabric, the pink gingham pattern of which is radically different from the light brown and soft yellow natural colours of raffia. However, the embroidery which holds these repair patches is made of the same technique and with the same care as the other patterns: it is indeed a repair.

But why is this repair so meticulous that the gingham fabric is integrated as an added value? Is it a modern interpretation of a traditional object, giving it a huge symbolic—imported—value, as Achille Mbembe writes when evoking "le potentat colonial" (the colonial potentate). Or is it a reappropriation of the freedom to give new meaning and power to what you choose, even if this thing is trivial?

From which cultural space could this act be read? What kind of horizon does it draw? Where is this horizon located? It is the intermediary space which separates and binds two modernities.

Maintaining this space as a "no man's land" has guaranteed the binary notion of civilisation (Western and non-Western) for centuries. However it is, like the fold of a sheet of paper, the space which separates two distinct but interdependent histories as much as it binds them.

The inevitable acknowledgement of the language of signs of cultural reappropriation may one day broaden our view of this hybrid space, which in reality is essential to the continuation of things and to our existence as a whole.



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Photo: Maurice Weiss/Ostkreuz.

