

Architecture in Sudan 1900–2014;  
An Endeavor Against the Odds\*

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Introduction

Scant information exists on the subject of architectural heritage in Sudan in the pre-colonial era, namely before 1898. This article provides a brief history of the architecture of Sudan through the construction of an eco-systemic base, which incorporates relevant dimensions of the country's local culture that influenced its built culture. The study is meant to help fill the lacunae existing in the knowledge of Sudanese architectural history, architectural research, place-making and the interpretation thereof.

Early Colonial Architecture (1900 – 1920)

Since the last decade of the 19th century, there is strong evidence that the invading British architectural practice was under the influence of the modernist movement, initiated by the construction of the Crystal Palace in London in 1851.

Herbert Kitchener (the first Governor-General of Sudan) did not believe that indigenous construction techniques were suitable for the necessary civic edifices and housing facilities for the new rulers, who needed facilities comparable to the standards they were accustomed to – be it in Britain or in Egypt. Despite the fact that Sudan was under Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Rule, British culture was the dominating element in that period. The British had the upper hand both in town planning and in architecture; they supplied the engineers, whilst builders were mostly recruited from Egypt. This process led to a transformation of the construction industry in the twentieth century, a transformation that was extremely significant, yet very slow in pace, due to the recession caused by World War One. In regards to town planning, Kitchener employed a renowned town planner of the period, W. H. Mclean, to prepare the first master plan for the capital, Khartoum. Mclean was much influenced by Ebenezer Howard, the creator of the garden-city concept.

Concurrently with the renovation task of his Governal Palace, Kitchener called for funds to build an educational institute in commemoration of his predecessor, the late General Charles George Gordon. The job of designing the main building was assigned to Fabricious Pasha, the architect for the Khedive of Egypt, who completed the building in April 1899. Lieutenant George Frederick Gorringe, a self-educated architect, was then assigned the job of producing the architectural details and supervising construction of the Gordon Memorial College which was inaugurated in February 1902 by Lord Kitchener, a year in advance of the completion of the construction.

Another significant building of which Kitchener oversaw the construction was All Saints Cathedral. Except for the elegant tower that was demolished by the current Islamist rulers in Sudan, the cathedral, designed by Robert Weir Schultz, still stands as one of the finest buildings of the early colonial period. In addition to administrative, educational and public service facilities, the colonialists were obliged to consider the wishes of the predominantly Muslim population. In that respect, the Khartoum Central Mosque was erected at the same time as the first batch of colonial buildings. The mosque is situated in the middle of Abbas Square, which occupies a central plot in Kitchener's plan of the town.

Late Colonial Architecture (1921 – 1956)

By the 1950s, the colonial authorities had started training local recruits to assist the foreign experts and learn from them. This helped fill the gap in skills in the construction domain, which had, until that moment been lacking. The architectural heritage of the closing years of condominium rule could be said to be represented

by two buildings that have very little in common: the Farouq Mosque in Khartoum (1951) and the Omdurman Municipality (1954). The two buildings, though both built by the bi-partite authority, depict very different architectural approaches and conflicting cultural attitudes. This could be attributed to the very different functions they were meant to serve.

The Egyptian government financed, prepared the design, and built the mosque that carries the name of the Egyptian king of the day, King Farouq. Although only half the size of the solemn and prestigious mosque in Abbas Square, the Farouq Mosque is nevertheless an aesthetically-pleasing building. Omdurman Municipality was designed by D. H. Mathews Ariba and British influence is shown in the details of the building. It is a composite structure with massive exposed brick walls as well as large spans indoors where reinforced concrete columns are used.

The Post-Independence Era (1956 – 2000)

After independence in 1956, Sudan faced an era of unrest and uncertainty that had a negative impact on almost every aspect of life. The political scene was in turmoil and consequently most developmental plans were brought to a total halt. Under such conditions, the priority for the new government was to consolidate the integrity and unity of the country, at the expense of development.

Following this period, the contribution of the architect Fartinal La Vangia, as chief architect for the Ministry of Transport, was positive and well-documented, particularly in reference to the Sudan Hotel. This finely built structure faces the Blue Nile, close to the confluence of the two Niles, and is still considered one of the finest architectural features in the capital. The Public Works Department continued to lead architecture practice in Sudan after the country's independence. The Aboulela Commercial Building (1956) in the Khartoum Central Business District (CBD) occupies an outstanding location and character and is the most notable example of the architecture of the Public Works Department. The building was designed by George Stefanidis, a well-qualified architect, and exhibits the characteristics that came to define modern architecture in Sudan.

When American aid programs commenced in 1958, Khartoum's first architectural private consultancy was opened. Peter Muller, an Austrian architect who had graduated from a school in Paris, in partnership with Robert Ayoub, a structural engineer from Lebanon, had the lion's share of the aid projects. The most prominent of these projects by Muller and his team is the Khartoum Senior Trade School as well as several other trade schools in the province. Additionally, the team designed the Sudan National Museum, the Bata Factory and several apartment blocks for government officials.

The Department of Architecture, at the University of Khartoum was established in 1957. In the ensuing years; this Department became a main center of architectural education in the region. During his time as the first head of this department, Professor Alick Potter designed various minor buildings for the University, mainly residential villas and apartment blocks. Nevertheless, his Examination Hall remains an outstanding architectural benchmark for generations to come.

Before the 1960s, architecture by Sudanese architects was scarce as most architects working in the country were foreign, for example Peter Muller, George Stefanidis, Alick Potter and Miles Danbi. However, from 1962 onwards, there was a great construction boom initiated by massive demand for housing in the new Khartoum extensions, and this created increased need for the services of architects. Four architects who were educated at Leicester in Britain were lucky to come back at the apex of that demand; they