Modernist Architecture in Algeria: An Elegy

British photographer Jason Oddy toted his 5x4-inch plate camera to Algeria twice, in 2010 and 2013. Long interested in “the politics of place,” he spent a total of one month in the country, training his lens on three projects built nearly fifty years earlier by legendary Brazilian modernist Oscar Niemeyer (p. 60).[1] Oddy’s starkly beautiful images of those sites, accompanied by Niemeyer’s drawings and four short essays—three by Oddy and one by architectural historian Samia Henni—have been published with stylish flair by the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture under the slightly puzzling title The Revolution Will Be Stopped Halfway.

The title derives from a June 1968 conversation between Niemeyer and Houari Boumediene, president of Algeria. Both men were wrestling with acute political dilemmas. Niemeyer, a member of Brazil’s Communist Party, had just flown to Algiers from Paris, where the French had granted him refuge after he fled Brazil’s 1964 military coup. Boumediene was a soldier who, after serving in the Liberation Army that won independence from France in 1962, had seized the presidency only three years before this meeting. According to Niemeyer’s own testimony, when he showed the president his design for a new mosque in Algiers, Boumediene observed that it was rather revolutionary. The architect responded, “It’s a revolutionary mosque. The revolution can’t stop halfway” (p. 40). When titling his book, Oddy changed the tone of Niemeyer’s remark from an optimistic admonition (can’t, as in shouldn’t) to a sad negative (will stop), thus signaling the elegiac nature of his project, apparent in both his photographs and the text. High modernist hopes for a new world are at stake here, and the title suggests they are not going to fare well.

It is impossible to divine precisely what was going on in the minds of the architect and the
president on that June day in 1968. Niemeyer may have been suggesting that the liberation of the Algerian nation from French control was only part one of the revolution achieved by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). Part two would be the creation of a democratic and egalitarian country where, Oddy surmises, Niemeyer intended his buildings to “imbue the fledgling state with dignity and hope” (p. 121). Boumediene, on the other hand, may have been suggesting that popular taste might be shocked, even affronted, by a modernist mosque, one whose forty-meter dome would be supported not by interior columns, as customary, but by three external walls. Perhaps even more revolutionary would be the stained glass window punctuating the dome. As Henni writes in her preface, pointedly subtitled “When Militarism Meets Modernism,” Boumediene probably objected to the untraditional form of the mosque, while endorsing other revolutionary projects, like new schools that would modernize local “mentalities” (p. 33). The new president wanted to raise Algeria’s international profile by asserting its independence from French influence. And so his government hired not only Niemeyer but also a galaxy of other star architects—Jean-Jacques Deluz, Fernand Pouillon, Ricardo Bofill, Anatole Kopp, Luigi Moretti, Tange Kenzo—to change the face of Algeria.

When militarism met modernism, militarism—or at least the tastes and needs of the FLN—won. Rejected by the committee charged with planning a new Algiers, Niemeyer’s mosque was never built. Most of his Algerian designs—drawn from the Niemeyer archives in Rio de Janeiro to fill the book’s last section—were never actually constructed. Boumediene’s death in 1978 robbed Niemeyer of the support he needed to build, for example, an ecologically progressive zoo to be viewed from a revolving restaurant atop a “space needle,” as well as a new administrative district across the Bay of Algiers, which would, in Niemeyer’s proud words, “boast ... great originality with its architecture and location” and express “the future filled with progress and well-being that the Algerian people are now building” (p. 149).

Users tend to give Niemeyer’s structures, at best, mixed reviews. Some appreciate the open workshops he designed for Algiers’s architectural school, seeing them as honest and effective efforts to ensure that students interacted free of hierarchical divisions. On the other hand, people complain that his classrooms are too hot in summer and too cold in winter. Some feel oppressed by the sheer quantity of concrete. And then there is the problem of the vast empty spaces. Oddy’s unpeopled photographs make them look particularly forlorn. The pictures seem to contradict the claim that the spaces were meant to instill democratic ideals: the wide plazas make individuals look insignificant. It is rumored that Boumediene feared they could be places for subversive assembly: he had the university bearing his name built in a swampy suburb of Algiers far from the city center.

It would probably be a mistake to think that the militarists and modernists were entirely at odds. Modernists, while swearing fidelity to high democratic ideals, often treated a wide range of significant obstacles—contemporary popular taste, historically rooted traditions, and even the landscape—in a high-handed fashion. They preferred the spectacular to the intimate, the expansive plaza to the small square. When Niemeyer helped design Brasilia in the late 1950s, he intended its vast spaces, sculptural buildings, and curvilinear forms to presage a fresh, democratic start for the one-time South American empire. Today it is commonly recognized that the sprawling bureaucratic city is best experienced from the air. An aerial perch is similarly preferable for those trying to appreciate the auditorium at the university in Constantine: it is shaped like an open book, though a vantage point from above is necessary to reveal the pages curving out and down from a central spine. Niemeyer was competing with extraordinary natural landscapes: Algiers is built on a steep coastal escarpment, and the old town of
Constantine sits on an island above a deep, encircling gorge. In these settings, spectacular buildings—like the book-shaped auditorium—demand attention as if the architect were asserting the primacy of his own artistic vision not only above local desires but also above local natural forms.

Oddy displays considerable generosity of spirit toward Niemeyer’s schemes. He admires the architect’s exploration of the “sculptural, even poetic limits” of concrete (p. 61). He appreciates the “progressive and lyrical possibilities” Niemeyer was aiming for as he sought to create a “potentially less-hierarchical spatialization of power” (pp. 64, 109). The key concepts here are “possibility” and “potential,” as opposed to actual “success.” Oddy’s photographs may strike viewers as disheartening, an affect he has achieved in some of his prior, similarly unpeopled projects, like those shot in the Pentagon and Guantanamo. Paint is peeling. Food wrappers sit on a window ledge near some forlorn graffiti. Broken chairs and stools are heaped up, unlikely to be repaired, while sofas are losing their stuffing. Windows are unwashed, grass uncut, the pool dry, and a wooden panel has replaced a broken window. Oddy’s exploration of the “undeclared forces that both give rise to and operate in architectural space” may not require the human presence, but, without people, his photographs are suffused with a sense of emptiness and disappointment: a blurry woman walks down a long concrete passageway; students sitting near the auditorium are dwarfed by its “pages” or walls (p. 60). Like South African photographer Guy Tillim in Avenue Patrice Lumumba (2008), he has taken us for a dispiriting walk down an avenue of postcolonial African dreams.

After overcoming his 2010 difficulty in gaining official Algerian permission to photograph his sites, Oddy went on to produce a book that, in effect, invites his readers to reengage with the progressive political rhetoric of the 1960s. He now understands that his earlier hope—“that an art project could somehow reinscribe [into contemporary political discourse] the ideals that had been lying dormant in Niemeyer’s Algerian projects for decades”—was actually “hubristic and naïve” (pp. 64-65). Neither an architectural nor an urban historian, Oddy is an artist who has not needed to use footnotes, do research in Algerian archives, or provide a comprehensive survey of Niemeyer’s work in Algeria. (Ecole Polytechnique d’Architecture et d’Urbanisme [EPAU], the architectural school in Algiers, is missing, for example.) With engaging humility, he confesses that in Algeria he is an outsider.

Oddy’s readers should benefit from the abundance of thought-provoking ironies he has revealed in this elegy to the ideals of the 1960s. Three stand out for me: that Niemeyer sought refuge from a military dictatorship in a country whose former colony—for which he worked—was itself on the road to military rule; that buildings meant to connect Algeria to the rest of the modern world stand in a country now unusually cut off from that world; and that modernist optimism can look both authoritarian and quaintly utopian today.

Notes

[1]. They comprise buildings on two university campuses (University of Science and Technology Houari Boumediene at Bab Ezzouar and University of Mentouri at Constantine) and one Olympic sports hall (La Coupole, Algiers).

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Citation: Diana Wylie. Review of Oddy, Jason, The Revolution Will Be Stopped Halfway: Oscar Niemeyer

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