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The Empire Strikes Back

The Commonwealth Association of Architects Conferences, 1963-1983

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Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Citation (APA)

Gosseye, J. (2024). *The Empire Strikes Back: The Commonwealth Association of Architects Conferences, 1963-1983*. 132-133. Abstract from EAHN 2024 , Athens, Greece.

Important note

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PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS

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European
Architectural
History
Network

Eighth
International
Conference

ATHENS • JUNE 19-23, 2024

European Architectural History Network 2024 Eighth International Conference

Programme and Abstracts

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Graphic Design and Layout

Focus on Health Ltd

www.focusonhealth.eu

ISBN

978-618-86150-5-2

Publisher

Laboratory for the History and Theory of Architecture NTUA

42, Patission str, 10682

Athens

Printing

GS PRINT graphic arts

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Architectural Professionalization and Transnational Exchange in the Modern Arab World, 1900s-1960s

Nadi Abusaada, ETH Zurich

This paper delves into the professionalization of architecture in the 20th-century Arab world, with a focus on its institutionalization the establishment of professional bodies and associations. Engineering societies and associations, often led by architects, played a central role in this institutionalization. While the Egyptian Society of Architects was founded as early as 1918 in Cairo, similar bodies emerged in other Arab countries like Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon primarily during the 1930s and 1940s, coinciding with the transition from colonial rule to postcolonialnation-building.

By examining unstudied archival materials, including constitutional documents, reports, meeting minutes, and personal archives of founders, this paper reveals how Arab architects utilized modern bureaucratic language to define professional boundaries. It also explores the topics these associations deliberated on, reshaping professional identities and positioning architects as not just technical experts but also influential public intellectuals. The paper highlights the pivotal role of transnational connections in shaping these institutions. It explores regional dynamics through the Arab Engineers Congresses initiated in 1945, leading to the Arab Federation of Engineers in 1963. These congresses connected architectural and engineering bodies across the Arab world, fostering regional knowledge exchange. Additionally, the paper adopts a global perspective, examining links between Arab architectural and engineering bodies and their international counterparts. Notably, the Egyptian Society of Architects' founding membership in the International Union of Architects since 1946 and Arab architects' involvement in founding the Afro-Asian Housing Organization in 1963 demonstrate global connections. In sum, this paper offers a comprehensive view of the professionalization of architecture in the Arab world, emphasizing the role of local associations, transnational interactions, and the evolution of professional institutions within the context of changing global geopolitics.

The Empire Strikes Back. The Commonwealth Association of Architects conferences, 1963-1983

Janina Gosseye, TU Delft

In 1963 the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA) was founded as a liaison organization between various national architectural institutes throughout the English-speaking world. The CAA replaced the RIBA 'Allied Societies', which had emerged from the desire of British architects practising in colonial countries to adopt RIBA codes of conduct, ethics, and conditions of contract. At a conference held in London in July 1963, it was proposed that the 'Allied Societies' be replaced by a new association, the CAA, in which the RIBA would interact with other national architectural institutes 'on a basis of equality' rather than from a position of imperial paternalism.

In its first twenty years, the CAA was very active in organizing conferences. Following the inaugural CAA conference in Malta in June 1965, meetings were held in New Delhi (March 1967), Lagos (March 1969), Canberra (1971), Ottawa (November 1973), York (September 1976), Hong Kong (April 1979), Nairobi (October 1981), and Sydney (June 1983). Topics discussed at these conferences ranged from fee scales, registration,

liability, and codes of conduct to the role and status of the architect in society. However, CAA conference records reveal that the aspired-to interaction ‘on a basis of equality’ was difficult to achieve because of the vestiges of imperialism and profound professional and institutional differences between the various national architectural institutes involved in the CAA. Furthermore, the association also had to contend with a rift between different factions: there were the ‘gentleman’ architects loyal to Victorian codes of conduct; ‘messiah’ architects dedicated to producing ‘shelter for mankind’; and ‘hired guns’ entrepreneur-architects who pursued profit at any cost. This paper will examine the nine CAA conferences held between 1965 and 1983 to better understand how professional ethics and identities were (re)defined across the Commonwealth at a time when decolonization, globalisation, and neo-liberalisation were on the rise.