

FRENCH WEST INDIES

Guadeloupe, the modern transition

■ CHRISTIAN GALPIN

Asking the question of modern architecture in Guadeloupe amounts to examining the transition that affected this 'old French colony,' which became in 1946 a French department (administrative division), just like her continental sister Guyana and her other insular sister Martinique.

AT THE TURN of the twentieth century, architecture and town planning become subjects of first importance within the French colonial empire. Used to promote the colonial undertaking, in particular via Fair pavilions, architecture and town planning are duty-bound to express its 'civilizing mission.'

Thus, the colonial or World Fairs, and the other celebrations of France's presence outside its geographic boundaries, showcases of the colonial undertaking, partake in the assertion of France's place in the entente among the Western colonial powers. These demonstrations are also authentic exercises in 'colonial narcissism,' meant to express within the country itself the nation's greatness.¹

AS EARLY AS THE 1930s the first expressions of modern architecture markedly contributed to the development of landscapes and life styles, but the most important changes started in the 1960s. As a result the years between 1929 and 1960 can be considered a period of 'welding' during which learned architecture contrived to blend in with the vernacular.

THE INTENSITY of this 'crossbreed' relationship tended to weaken as the penetration of the modern movement and international style increased. Herein, the expression "international style," coined by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in 1932, is used to describe the architecture and formal options that were carried out in

Fig. 1. Ali Tur, Saint-André de Morne-à-l'Eau church, main façade, circa 1935. This church was listed on the additional register of historical places



© L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui 3 (March 1936)



Fig. 2. **Ali Tur** and **Gérard Michel Corbin**, façade of the *Port-Louis clinic*, circa 1931



Fig. 3. **Gérard Michel Corbin** and **Edmond Mercier**, façade of the *Bank of Guadeloupe entrance*, circa 1937

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Fig. 4. **Gérard Michel Corbin**, *Nithila building*, façade, *Pointe-à-Pitre*, 1950s

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Europe by Le Corbusier and the members of the Bauhaus (in Guadeloupe, from the 1960s onwards). As for the terms ‘modernist’ and ‘modernism,’ meaning “that assumes the modern ideas,” they describe a rational architecture in reinforced concrete (in Guadeloupe, from 1929 and 1960), somewhat marked with ‘classicism.’

ALI TUR’S FOUNDING WORKS

A major expression of modern architecture emerges after a natural disaster in Guadeloupe’s landscape. In September 1928, a terrible cyclone strikes Guadeloupe, destroying a built environment consisting largely of architecture in wood.² The cataclysm occurs just before the celebration of colonization’s tri-centennial, scheduled in 1935 in the island. During a visit to Paris, Tellier, Guadeloupe’s governor, asks Ali Tur to reconstruct the government’s buildings. This will be the architect’s chance to realize the work of his life: from 1929 to 1937, he is the author of a considerable number of buildings (more than a hundred) on this island of 1789 sq.km. Despite his

Arabic first name, Ali Tur is the son of a high-ranking French civil servant, born in Tunisia around 1889. Trained at the Beaux-Arts school in Paris, he joins the Ministry of Colonies’ list of ten architects in 1925.

THE INITIAL COMMISSION concerns the governmental buildings, but quickly extends to municipal buildings.

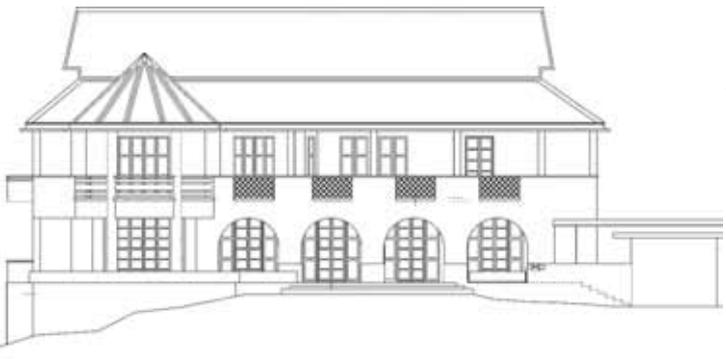


Fig. 5. **Edmond Mercier**, Longueueau-Gourbeyre House, façade, circa 1940

THUS, the following are entrusted to Ali Tur: schools, nearly all of the town halls, police stations, markets, civil servant offices, both Law Courts, the Regional Council, the Governor's residence (current Prefecture) and even some War memorials.

THE ARCHITECT'S QUESTIONS at the time, which he expresses in an article published in issue 3 of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, March 1936, have to do with the country's climate, the know-how of local skilled workers and local supplies in construction materials. As far as the workforce is concerned, he recommends bringing in building contractors who master the implementation of reinforced concrete to train local labor. This explains why M. G. Diligenti lands in Guadeloupe at the end of 1928 with some workers of Italian stock from his Saint-Étienne firm; he then brings in others from his native village of Coggiola, Italy. The latter undeniably contribute to the training of a first-rate skilled local labor in a few years' time; subsequently, they settle in the country and establish construction firms; some also become building sponsors—the Diligentis

build for themselves the Diligenti-Grand Hôtel that currently accommodates the Pointe-à-Pitre Chamber of commerce (Jacques Tessier, architect). As for building materials, they come from Germany's payment of the war debt to the Allies.³

MAIN FEATURES OF TUR'S WORKS

When Tur operates in Guadeloupe, in the conditions previously evoked, the question of 'overseas' construction is a real issue for architects in France. A text called "De la construction en pays chaud" (Of Building in Hot Climates), published in issue 3 of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, March 1936, penned by E. Weithas,⁴ bears witness to this concern and discloses a real guide or memento for the colonial architect's use, which outlines the conditions of a good tropical architecture in the colonies: "Hot countries are characterized by very special phenomena of meteorological nature and by equally special diseases due to the environment and to which the diverse human races are variously receptive. Herein we have in mind especially the white race, the colonizer's, transplanted in regions where it is important to make his life easier."

IN THIS ARTICLE, construction is considered from the angle of climatic conditions, with a scientific approach to the environment. It gives unsparing advice on how to use building materials, lay out and size spaces, site buildings, place openings, choose floor materials, and more widely on the general lay out. The use of reinforced concrete rather than wood for walls and floors (covering) is strongly advised. As for joinery, the use of windows with slatted shutters is encouraged, and raising ground floors and protection verandahs is recommended. The height to underside of ceiling is

Fig. 6. **Gérard Michel Corbin**, Villa Ferly, PetitBourg, circa 1960





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Fig. 7. **Creveaux** and **Tessier**, *Air France building*, Pointe-à-Pitre, circa 1961

determined at three meters minimum. The article suggests a set of construction rules that take into account the climatic realities as well as hygienist considerations. Concerning spatial layouts and more specifically outbuildings, the author points out that: "It is useful to bear in mind the direction of wintering winds if it is constant, so that no building can deprive its neighbors of these winds. Annex buildings that give off smells or fumes, pavilions for contagious patients, dwellings for the natives, must be located under the wind of European dwellings."

THE AUTHOR CONCLUDES: "For the white race, life in hot countries poses, beyond the problem of houses, other problems. In the first place, the problem of native houses whose principles remain the same with alleviations that are possible thanks to the black or yellow race's acclimatization or mistakes. Then come the problems linked to town planning: the problem of segregation, solved by the separation of European and native towns, the problems of sterilizing drinking waters." The modern conception of colonial architecture at the time considers the adaptation of architecture to the climatic context as a crucial factor, but it also

reasserts the position of each and every social group in the organization of spaces, in all parts of the world.

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that Tur was aware of these debates, but his architecture attests mostly to the influence of Perret (1874–1954): a rational, rigorous even, conception, a classical sense of layout and the use of simple materials that widely contribute to perpetuating his architecture in this country. Just like his illustrious contemporary,⁵ but without reaching the master's exceptional art, he designs an architecture of load-bearing structures with elements of infill, supports for geometric décor ensuring a generous ventilation of spaces. This affinity with Perret is striking if one compares, on some points, the Notre-Dame du Raincy church (1923, A. and G. Perret, architects) with the Saint-André de Morne-à-l'Eau church (circa 1935, Ali Tur, architect) (fig. 1). Ali Tur also draws from observation to develop answers adjusted to local conditions and practices: it is the previously evoked "crossbreed alchemy" of this period's colonial architecture.

IT IS NOTEWORTHY that this architecture incorporates a certain amount of traditional techniques and uses what



Fig. 8. **André Bruyère**, *Caravelle hotel* (currently Club Méditerranée), Sainte-Anne, 1962. In 1968 in his book *Pourquoi des architectes?* André Bruyère defines architecture as “the way of molding tenderness onto constraint”



Fig. 9. **Ali Tur**, *Lamentin Presbytery*, 1930s, rehabilitated by Christian Galpin/architect

would today be considered a matter of sustainable development. Thus, in the town of Lamentin, the buildings of the administrative ensemble⁶ surrounding the War memorial—town hall, law courts, presbytery, school and church—are all fitted with rain water tanks destined to supply water for the sanitary appliances.

Tur's works turn out to have had a powerful influence on the local architectural culture of the first half of the twentieth century. But, although his works can be evoked as the founding act of modernity for Guadeloupe's architecture, nonetheless the father of modern architecture in this country is doubtless Gérard Michel Corbin.

GÉRARD MICHEL CORBIN: A MAJOR FIGURE OF THE MODERNIST PERIOD

Gérard Michel Corbin (1905–1975) was born in Martinique of Guadeloupean parents. Between 1923 and 1928 he is a student at the ESTP (École spéciale des travaux publics) where he is awarded his degree as architect-engineer in 1929, but his career as an architect really starts in 1930. Corbin is co-author with Ali Tur of a few projects, such as the Port-Louis town hall, a strange piece of architecture of neo-classic intent, somewhat baroque, overwrought with elements of décor that resemble the works of neither architect (fig. 2). He is also the designer of many important works, such as the bank of Guadeloupe building (1940s), the music kiosk in Pointe-à-Pitre (1930–1931), of many ‘civilian buildings’ and elegant town houses (fig. 3). Corbin's works are the thread of the story of Guadeloupe's architecture in the twentieth century, and in this respect, he would deserve to be the subject of a monograph. Moreover, he is in 1953 the founder and president of the council of Antilles-Guyane association of architects.

After the 1928 cyclone, public commissioning is the main receptacle of the reinforced concrete architecture, referred to as ‘modernist.’ On the other hand, private sponsors tend to reconstruct in wood the destroyed heritage. Mostly, these are very characteristic town houses, with ground floor and one or two stories, which fit into the urban fabric of narrow and deep plots, with frequently an interior courtyard and a lightweight balcony overhanging on the street façade.

THE REINFORCED CONCRETE ARCHITECTURE of the 1930s, considered the more apt to last and resist natural disasters, asserts itself as a mark of progress symbolizing modernity and development. During the immediate postwar period, it is adopted by larger fractions of the population seeking to display their social ascent, and somewhat transforms the landscape of cities. In fact this new building mode replaces traditional housing, in the bourgeois districts and the outskirts alike. This architecture remains hybrid, borrowing from the traditional house its spatial layout, sometimes its proportions, while also incorporating new architectonic elements (flowerbeds, horizontal tubular railings, larger openings, bull's eye windows, rounded shapes, ‘broken’ angles, etc.) (fig. 4). As a result, this architecture, which “enjoys a harmonious relationship with the existing buildings,”⁷ is a very fine private heritage for our cities. It is also a period of villas erected in the new residential districts⁸ by middle-class families. Corbin confirms his position in the private and public sectors during this phase of production, and realizes varied and rich works. At the same period other architects such as Edmond Mercier (Villa Longueateau, circa 1941) or Henri Gabriel (former Ali Tur collaborator) also stand out (fig. 5).

THE END OF THE 1950s, THE 1960s: THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE

At the end of the 1950s, the newly created DOM (overseas departments) initiate a process of assimilation to France that triggers an important change in architecture. New players appear on the architectural scene. Architects Raymond Creveaux and Jacques Tessier are the main figures that emerge, among other reasons because they are the main contractors of the very important operation of urban renewal in Pointe-à-Pitre (RUPAP).⁹ The architecture of social housing increases dramatically and, like the *grands ensembles* (large social housing developments) in France, it produces only a second-rate heritage. But, unlike the mass production of social housing, projects for state or city facilities produce some interesting constructions architecturally.

THE INFLUENCE OF LE CORBUSIER'S architecture is very significant for Creveaux and Tessier, as well as the 'contextualized' approach of architects such as Oscar Niemeyer.¹⁰ These influences are also noticeable in the second part of Corbin's work (*fig. 6*) and it cannot be a coincidence if, in 1961, the latter organizes an important trip to Brazil, for an encounter with Niemeyer's Brasilia (*fig. 7*).¹¹

Architects from Guadeloupe, such as Gérard Corbin and Gilbert Amarias (a frequent Corbin collaborator), young architects like Robert Desgranges and Daniel Ricou, and designers coming from France, such as André Gomis (1926–1971) or André Bruyère¹² (1912–1998) also enjoyed their moment of fame during that period (*fig. 8*).

PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

In a conference held in 2004 in Pointe-à-Pitre, Jean-Pierre Giordani spoke about Guadeloupe's heritage as being "a stock shared by a creation that is old and contemporary, urban and rural, 'theoretically' available for the free recognition of, and appropriation by, the inhabitants." Herein, and in a nutshell, he expresses our main and crucial issues.

During the 1990s, within the framework of a thematic campaign, the French Minister of Culture, taking into account the built heritage of the first half of the twentieth century, carried out the listing of five works by Ali Tur on the additional register of historic places.¹³ However, government institutions cannot be the only players of the protection and development endeavor.

THE EFFORTS CONCERNING documentation and the elaboration of tools to communicate with the general public and to develop this heritage are starting to yield some results. The local communities aware of this heritage seem to want to implement preservation policies, and even to restore buildings from that period (*fig. 9*). Whatever one may think of the meaning or conditions of this architecture—colonial or inspired by the

international style—in the Antilles, it remains for local contemporary architects a set of references that should nurture their own considerations on the expression and signification of their work.

If, as August Perret once said, "architecture is what makes beautiful ruins," then ensuring its preservation is an important deed of citizenship.

CHRISTIAN GALPIN is an architect in Guadeloupe. He earned his degree at the School of architecture Paris-La Défense and has been in practice since 1986. Over the last few years, besides his professional practice, he has become interested in the architecture between the two world wars, focusing more particularly on the work of Ali Tur. His work has led to several publications and lectures in France and abroad. He has furthermore collaborated to the shooting of a fiction-documentary (2002) recounting the reconstruction of Guadeloupe after 1928. President of the Regional Council of the Order of Architects of Guadeloupe since 2002, he is the former president of the Maison de l'Architecture.

Translated by **Isabelle Kite**

NOTES

1 Notion evoked by Mia Fuller in her work on the Italian colonial process.

2 Since the beginning of colonization, construction in this island subjected to each of nature's whims and fancies (earth quakes, cyclones, active volcanoes) was as a rule implemented in wood.

3 Payment in kind settlement. Defeated Germany had to pay its debt by providing the Allies with products, in particular building materials. *The motherland*, in all fairness, demanded of Guadeloupe, her colony, that she pay back these supplies.

4 E. Weithas, "De la construction en pays chaud," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 3 (March 1936, 7th year).

5 Jean-Pierre Le Dantec, in *Architecture en France*, concerning Auguste Perret, talks about a language that is "classic-modern, in the sense that it unites principles reminiscent of the greco-roman antiquity to plastic inventions of the first masters (of which he was himself) of twentieth century architecture."

6 All of these buildings were designed by Ali Tur.

7 "noue une relation heureuse avec l'existant" in Jean-Pierre Le Dantec, *Architecture en France* (Paris: ADFP, ministère des Affaires étrangères, 1999).

8 Region of Vernou Petit-Bourg on the outskirts of Pointe-à-Pitre, and region of Saint-Claude the outskirts of Basse-Terre.

9 This very large scale operation of urban renewal for unsanitary dwellings followed André Malraux's visit in 1964 (senior French minister) and the Général De Gaulle's visit in 1964.

10 On this subject, see Brazil's pavilion at the 1939 Fair in New York, which uses brise-soleils and Le Corbusier-like shapes.

11 Architects, building contractors, local and State political figures take part in this trip.

12 He is the author of the remarkable La Caravelle hotel in Sainte-Anne (1962).

13 The following were listed: the former Governor's residence (currently the Préfecture), the Law Courts, the Regional Council palace in Basse-Terre, the Saint-André de Morne-à-l'Eau church and the former Pointe-Noire town hall.