

JAMAICA TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Modern Trinidad outlined

AND THE WORKS OF COLIN LAIRD AND ANTHONY LEWIS

■ MARK RAYMOND

Trinidad is the southernmost island of the Lesser Antilles.

It was discovered in 1498 by Columbus but remained an underdeveloped Spanish colony until the late eighteenth century when there was large scale migration of French plantation owners and their slaves from the region. The island was subsequently claimed by the British who imported indentured laborers from throughout the Commonwealth and governed the island until independence in 1962.

THIS ESSAY OUTLINES the development of the production of modern architecture in the city of Port of Spain, Trinidad with specific reference to the work of two architects, Colin Laird and Anthony Lewis.

THE MODERN ARCHITECTURE of Port of Spain can be seen to have evolved in four distinct phases: 1900–1938,

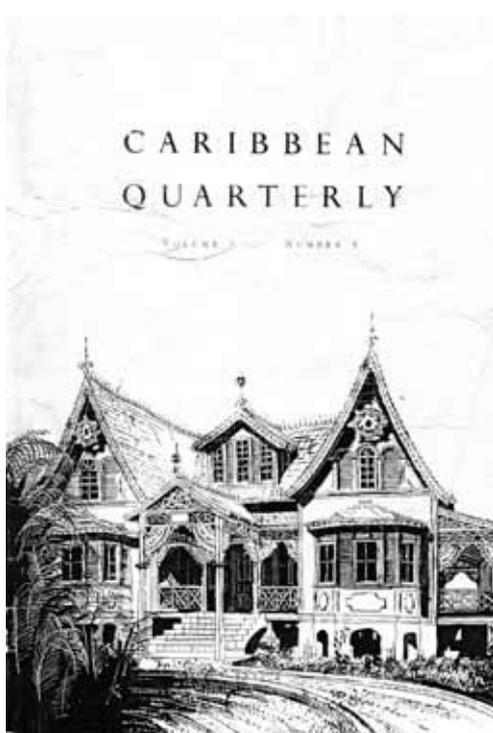
1939–1961, 1962–1980 and 1981 to the present. Laird and Lewis were independently active after World War II and demonstrate the two primary tendencies which informed architectural production during this period. These influences revealed themselves through, on the one hand, an exported postwar British architectural culture—‘tropical modernism.’ This was a form of

Fig. 1. House at 1 St Clair Avenue, Port of Spain typical of pre-WWII modernism



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Fig. 2. Cover of *Caribbean Quarterly* illustrated with reproduction of Colin Laird's pen and ink drawing of 9 St Clair Avenue



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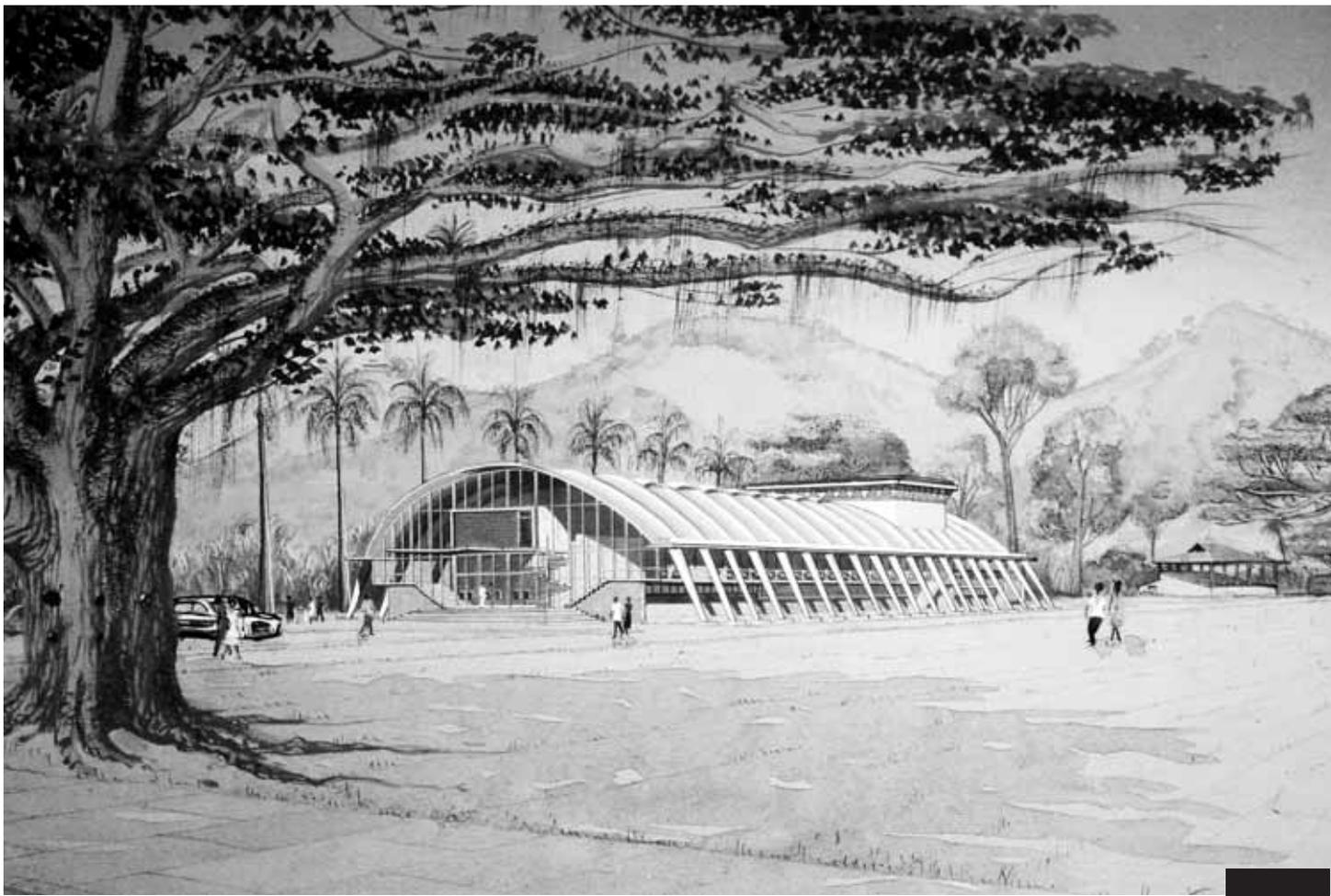


Fig. 3. **Colin Laird**, Water color rendering of the *Community Centre*, later *Queen's Hall*, on original site at George V Park St Clair

modernism derived from the functional, formal and programmatic tenets of mid century European modernism, modified by an interest and concern with the climatic conditions imposed by tropical climates.¹ On the other hand, a tendency was evolving which embraced the concerns and the formal preoccupations presented in the debate in the US at this time surrounding regionalism, as expounded by Lewis Mumford and others. The regionalist movement, represented by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, was opposed to the universal and essentially European modernism. Laird's work can be seen as a product of the former whilst Lewis's work reveals the influence of the latter.

The cultural evolution of independent Trinidadian society represents an archetypal post-colonial search for identity and authenticity. This search or struggle confronts the common dilemma of developing nations as described by Paul Ricœur in his essay *History and Truth*—quoted by Kenneth Frampton in his seminal essay on critical regionalism: "Thus we come to the crucial problem confronting nations just rising from underdevelopment. In order to get on the road toward modernization, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the *raison d'être* of a nation?"²

Whence the paradox: on the one hand, it has to root itself in the soil of the past, forge a national spirit, and

unfurl this spiritual and cultural claims before the colonialist's personality.

In the case of Trinidad, Ricœur's paradox is further compounded by the effective absence of any authentic cultural past. The indigenous population had been wiped out by the Spanish colonizers and the racially diverse population grew from immigration, whether through the importation of slaves of African descent, indentured laborers from India, China, Madeira or entrepreneurial immigrants hailing from various parts of the world and drawn to new opportunities and the promise of the new world.

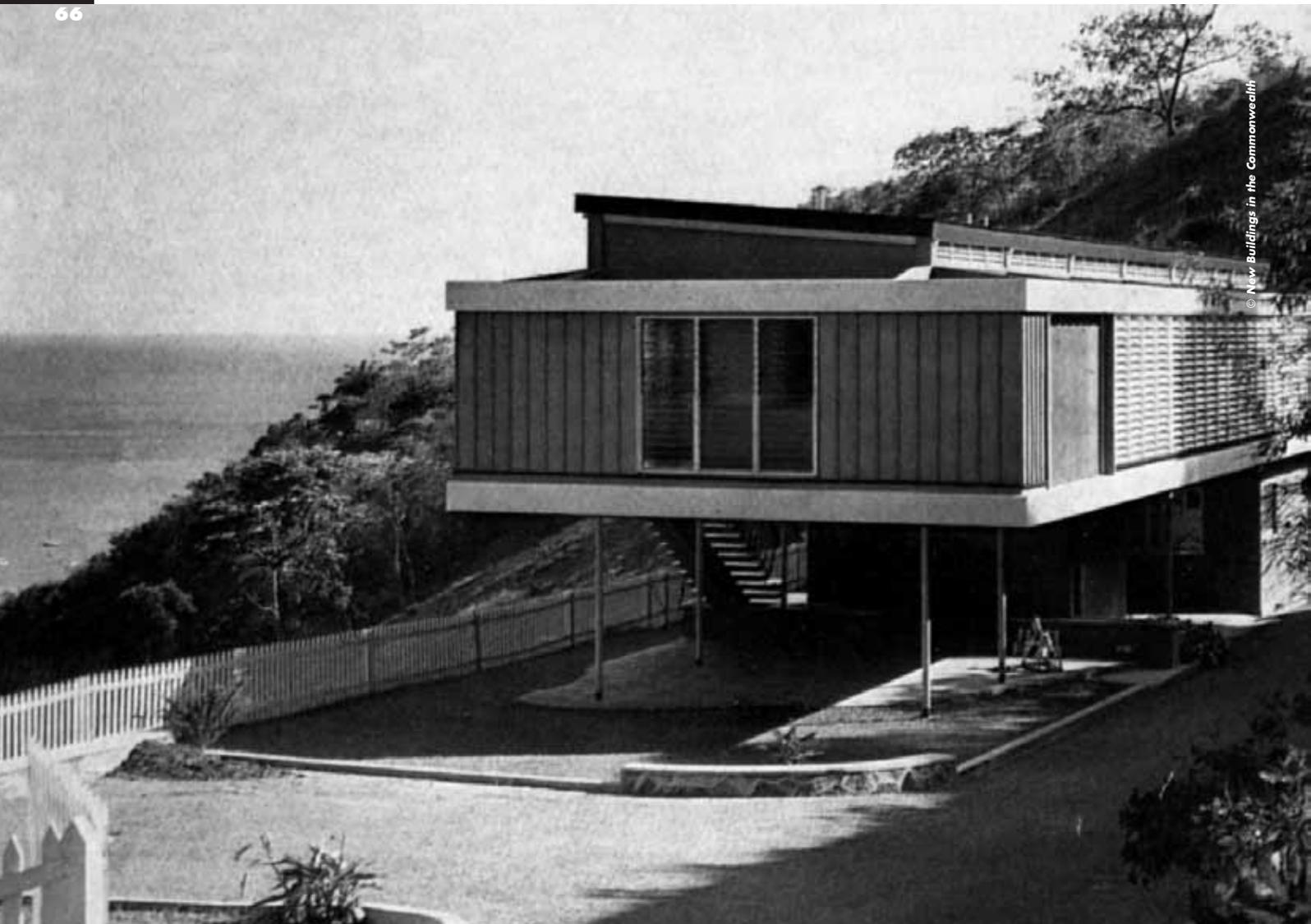
INDEPENDENCE

In the 1950s, as in many colonies, British colonial domination of Trinidad was emphatically rejected. The British political, social and cultural structure that had been maintained was an integral part of the formation of the society and thus, in the absence of any indigenous culture or clearly identifiable cultural past, whilst the political presence was expelled, the cultural framework was unavoidably retained, modified substantially by the burgeoning influence of North American culture.

Thus in the 1950s and 1960s the work of regional poets, artists and writers focused on the establishment or assertion of a regional language albeit influenced by



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Fig. 4. **Mies van der Rohe** seated far left and **Anthony Lewis** seated far right at Art Institute of Chicago studio, December 21, 1942

modernism. Architecture other than domestic architecture, whilst part of this enquiry, was still pursued in a highly universal manner mediated only by a preoccupation with and scientific attention to climate.

The social, economic, political and cultural initiatives that informed the physical reconstruction of the post war European and North American landscape were thus mirrored in the gradual reconfiguration of the nineteenth century city of the Port of Spain underscored by a quintessentially modern and universal agenda. This scenario was subtly informed by the cosmopolitan influences of the racially diverse populace.

1900-1938

Prior to World War II the idea of modernism appeared in the urban and architectural landscape of Port of Spain intermittently and largely through the construction of private houses and a few notable buildings of significance such as the Queen's Park Hotel. Architecture had been for the most part undertaken by visiting European architects commissioned to undertake large-scale public buildings or by local builders who functioned as architects providing design through catalogues and pattern books from Australia, India and the southern United States; places which shared climatic similarities. The bungalow in numerous forms and guises became the predominant domestic typology.

HOWEVER, a number of distinctive buildings appeared at this time, demonstrating clear modernist stylistic tendencies such as the private residence at 1 St Clair Avenue (fig. 1). The period was characterized by a significant expansion of the city in the form of suburban type development, notably the development of Woodbroo. It is noteworthy that the influence of centralized planning was still evident in this growth and an effective city council maintained a firm grip and control on physical development, maintaining a high quality of urban space and amenity.

1939-1961

History, trade and the political status of Trinidad as a British colony determined a strong political and cultural link with Britain and to a lesser, but nevertheless significant extent, Europe. The postwar reconstruction of Europe triggered idealistic social, cultural and economic activity that extended worldwide and had a marked impact on the colonies in the Caribbean. This influence enjoined a series of issues that defined the elaboration of modern architecture in Trinidad marking the advent of a second phase of modernism.

Fig. 5. **Anthony Lewis**, *Wight House*, Goodwood Park Trinidad

ARCHITECTURE EVOLVED in Trinidad during this time in response to three primary factors. Firstly the impact of American culture, secondly the radical politics of late colonialism and then post-colonialism and thirdly the nationalist search for a local and regional identity.

This phase effectively began with the arrival of US forces to establish naval and air bases in Trinidad during the war. The sheer scale of US presence at the naval base at Chaguaramas and at the air base at Waller Field had a profound cultural, social and political impact on Trinidadian culture, politics and society. Trinidad was reputed to have been the single largest US military base outside of the US.

THE NORTH AMERICAN presence resulted in a fundamental influence on the infrastructure with the comprehensive road network that was rapidly created to accommodate the massive military presence. Trinidad was the site for rapid and effective implementation of infrastructural and technological projects on a scale unprecedented in the history of the island.

BRITISH INFLUENCE was still very present at this time and its impact on architectural and other areas of culture, made evident through the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (CDWA). This colonial mechanism facilitated the engagement of initiatives which drove the need for development and modernization not only in Trinidad but in all former British colonies.

A PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT influence was the work of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, two British architects who worked in West Africa in the 1950s and who published an important text named *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* in 1956.³ The book married the contemporary socialist preoccupation with social transformation through the implementation of modern planning and architecture with specific reference to the 'tropics.' Fry and Drew's work developed in Nigeria and Ghana produced ideas focused on an analysis of climate and social programming as the key elements for what became a widespread modernist trend in many parts of the Commonwealth.

Fry and Drew's promotion of a specifically tropical modernism gave modern architecture within the Commonwealth a universal dimension, through its climatic adaptation responsive to the peculiarities of its geo-climatic location. The book influenced a generation of British architects in the colonies after the war and coincided with the evolution of the idea of independence. This architecture became synonymous with the subsequent movements of independence. In 1961 the Architectural Press published *New Buildings in the Commonwealth*, a comprehensive record of this architecture. The work of Laird and Lewis is featured in the section on Trinidad.⁴

FOR THE SOCIAL IMPERATIVE of self-determination and change which defined the postwar social and political climate of Trinidad, modern architecture and town planning represented a tangible, prominent and visible cultural symbol. The inter-linked disciplines simultaneously addressed the need to demonstrate technological advancement—thus signifying participation in universal culture—whilst also offering through iconographic representation a symbol of modernity, authenticity and identity.

The two leading practitioners of this period in Trinidad were Colin Laird and Anthony Lewis. The formation and subsequent work of both of these architects demonstrates the fundamental ideological and theoretical

of ourselves as trying to engender an architecture whose form was totally unprecedented. Instead we already saw our task as a qualified restoration of the creative vigor of a movement which had become formally and programmatically compromised in the intervening years.¹⁵

HAVING COMPLETED HIS STUDIES at the Regent Street Polytechnic and worked on the Festival of Britain, Laird married a Trinidadian, adopted Trinidad as home, and established a successful practice in Port of Spain. He was active in the burgeoning cultural and political independence movement, embraced the notion of a socialist independent Trinidadian culture and was an

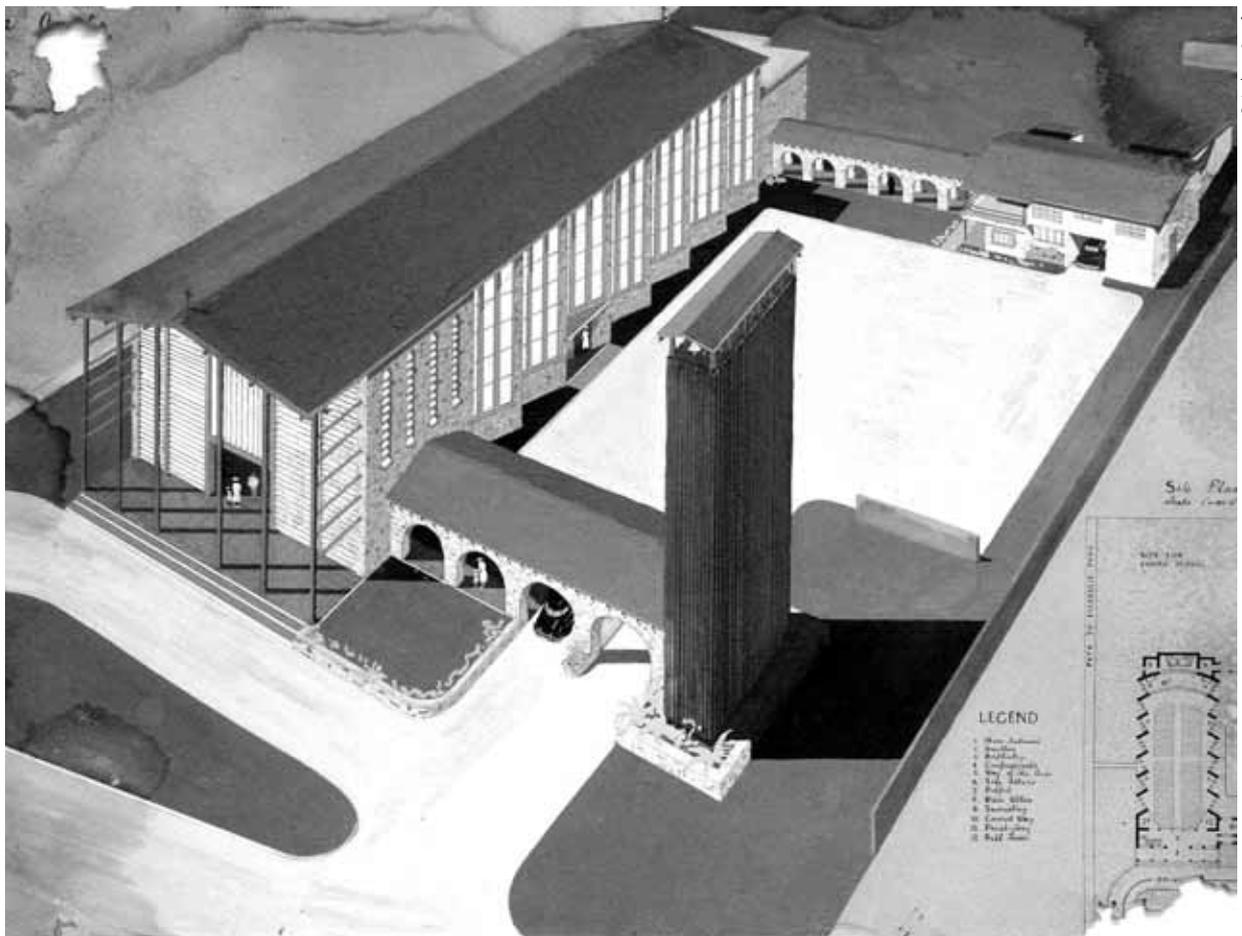


Fig. 6. Anthony Lewis, original presentation painting for the Church of the Assumption, Maraval

preoccupations and influences of the period and the way these tendencies were adapted to the circumstances presented by post WWII Port of Spain.

COLIN LAIRD

Laird belongs to that generation of British architects described by architect and critic Kenneth Frampton as follows: "a member of that generation of so-called modern architects . . . whose concept of modernity (like that of the immediately previous generation) was already historically mediated; that is to say, unlike the pioneers of the inter war period (1918–1939) we did not conceive

active participant in many forms of contemporary culture. His production and achievements in Trinidad and in other locations in the Caribbean over the past fifty years have been prolific.

Two important contributions to the evolving discourse around architectural production at this time from Laird were the *Caribbean Quarterly* article "The Trinidad Town House"¹⁶ and his design for the Queen's Hall.

THE *CARIBBEAN QUARTERLY* (fig. 2) devoted itself to the exploration of regional cultural production and the assertion of regional identity. The essay produced by



Fig. 7. Queen's Hall, 1965

Laird for the journal focused on a study of domestic architecture in Trinidad. The essay is the first modern critique of architecture in Trinidad and reveals the fascination of the architect with the architecture's capacity to manifest the peculiarities of location. The drawings and studies of the houses in the essay interpret their planning and construction. The essay concludes with a statement concerning the effective climatic function of the traditional houses whilst criticizing the absence of such consideration in contemporary domestic production. This is the enduring value of the study's historical focus and a view consistent with the ideas of Fry and Drew, which were simultaneously being developed in their work in West Africa.

A STUDY of Laird's later work, particularly the National Library in Port of Spain completed in the 1990s demonstrates an effective resolution of this investigation into what Laird describes as a rational regionalism; a modernism inflected by an adapted, local, although not vernacular, tectonic; the adaptation being ultimately represented through the articulation and expression of climatic devices.

LAIRD WON THE QUEEN'S HALL competition by in the early 1950s. The original site for the project was to be in George V Park in the St Clair area of Port of Spain (fig. 3). The brief called for a multi-purpose community center. The architectural landscape of Port of Spain at the time would have been characterized and dominated by the buildings and structures of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century; a highly colonial and Victorian architectural landscape. The addition of this structure with its radical modern design and inverted catenary roof was a phenomenal achievement and a remarkable event.

THE BUILDING was eventually built on a prominent site adjacent to the President's Grounds and the Queen's Park Savannah. Unfortunately the recent re-modeling of a new entrance and interiors—which was undertaken without the courtesy of consultation with Laird—has

undermined the integrity of the original building. Laird's architectural and intellectual formation contrasts with that of Anthony Lewis. Whereas Laird's work fitted into a social program, Lewis's engagement with architecture centered around a more poetic and esoteric, but equally potent, engagement with materials and the language of modern architecture.

ANTHONY LEWIS

Anthony Lewis was born in Trinidad in 1918 and began his studies in architecture in London at the Regent Street Polytechnic. Lewis returned to Trinidad in 1938 for a brief interlude, working on the American Naval Base at Chaguaramas and designed a house for his father in Port of Spain before continuing his architecture studies at Mc Gill University in Montreal. Lewis won the Canadian Governor General's Award and a scholarship to continue his studies at the Illinois Institute of Technology under its newly appointed head Mies van der Rohe and the architect and urban planner Ludwig Hilberseimer (fig. 4).

AFTER THIS EXPERIENCE Lewis returned to the Caribbean and was responsible for a number of projects in Barbados, including the re-planning of St Lucia which had been destroyed by fire and the Church of the Assumption in Maraval, a suburb of Port of Spain (fig. 6).

The form of the church is a single clear span supported by a system of sophisticated and robust timber trusses. The form is expressed with the deliberate use of local materials, including Guyanese hardwood columns which frame the entrance of the building and full height painted white jalousies, which flank the entrance and form the northern façade.

The pink limestone facing of the structural piers and openings on the east and western flanks, colors the reflected light at the time of morning and evening mass to dramatic effect. Light, form, material, color and texture conspire to generate a highly poetic statement clearly guided by a regional rather than universally modern sensibility.

IN THE LATE 1950s Anthony Lewis designed for the Wight family a house in Goodwood Park (fig. 5). The house departs from the regionalism evident in the Church of the Assumption. In the Wight House the relationship to the context is articulated by means of the climatic device of the framed louver, not by the latent or associative value of the materials employed in the Church. The work reveals an exploration of a clearly universal language both in its composition and tectonic form.

Subsequent houses designed by Lewis curiously reverted to the exploration of materials and structure evident in the Church of the Assumption reaching their apotheosis in the stunning hilltop house for the British society photographer Norman Parkinson in Runnymede Tobago.

1962-1980

Post independence architectural production in Trinidad had a massive impact on the urban morphology of Port of Spain and represents the effective breakdown between the discipline of planning and architecture. The form and fabric of the city began to rupture with the largely expedient and careless modification and expansion of the city.

However, what distinguishes production at this time is the program of public buildings inspired by the precedent set by the bold statement of Laird's Queen's Hall (fig. 7) in the form of schools and other civic buildings undertaken by, or commissioned and overseen by the Government through the Public Works Department.

The work of architect and former Chief Architect Peter Bynoe merits further research in this field.

1981-PRESENT

If the work of Laird and Lewis represents the advent of a comprehensive modernist ideology in the architectural landscape of Port of Spain, the work of John Newel-Lewis and Roger Turton expanded and continued this trend.

The theoretical investigation into a more specific regional identity began with the research of the Guadeloupean architect Jack Berthelot⁷ and in Trinidad in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the work of John Newel-Lewis. Newel-Lewis began to move away from orthodox modernism to a more fluid and sculptural architectural expression. This work began the rejection of the tendency towards universalized building technique and proprietary building products which dominated architectural production. In his work, he employed local tectonic devices such as the *jalousie* or *demerara*⁸ window. Newel-Lewis's ideas were articulately expressed in his florid evocation of a national architecture in his book *Ajoupa*.⁹

NEWEL-LEWIS'S THINKING was embraced and adopted by Roger Turton. Turton was very close to Newel-Lewis and, after returning from his architecture studies at Oxford Polytechnic and the Architectural Association in the mid 1980s, collaborated with Newel-Lewis on his work in the conversion of the Normandie Hotel for local businessman Fred Chin Lee before Newel-Lewis's untimely death.

Turton went on in his own tragically short life to produce a number of small, largely domestic, yet remarkable works which bridge the gap between the dialectic presented in Ricœur's developmental paradox by artfully and seductively infusing the syntax of a 'white' modernism with reference to the vernacular architecture of Trinidad.

DESPITE the fine examples of modern planning and architecture still evident in the architecture of the city, the failure of planning and the absence of coherent discourse amongst architects continues to undermine the

architectural quality and inhibited qualitative production. Architecture appears to have adopted an expedient and ad hoc tendency that is accelerating the deterioration of the fabric of the city.

MARK RAYMOND is an architect in private practice in Port of Spain, Trinidad. He studied at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London and worked in London and Germany for Conran, Norman Foster and DEGW on projects in Europe before returning to Trinidad in 1993 to establish his own practice. He is currently a director of *acla:works architects* and urban planners in Port of Spain, Trinidad, a member of the Advisory Committee of the Caribbean School of Architecture in Kingston, Jamaica and is the chair of Communications of the Commonwealth Association of Architects.

NOTES

1 The development of architecture in this context is discussed by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in *The Suppression and Rethinking of Regionalism and Tropicalism after 1945, Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalisation* (Wiley-Academy, 2001).

2 Kenneth Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance, the Anti-Aesthetic* (Seattle and Washington: ed. Hal Foster, The Bay Press, 1984), 16.

3 See Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1956).

4 J. M. Richards, *New Buildings in the Commonwealth* (The Architectural Press, 1961), 165-70.

5 Kenneth Frampton, "Place-form and cultural identity," in John Thackara, *Design after modernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998).

6 Colin Laird, "Trinidad Town House; or the Rise and Decline of a domestic architecture," *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol 3 no 4 (ed. Government Printing Office Trinidad, August 1954, Phillip Sherlock and Andrew Pearse): 188-98.

7 Jack Berthelot and Martine Gaumé, *Caribbean Style* (Thames and Hudson, 1985; Éditions Perspectives Créoles, 2002). Also Kaz Antiyé, Jan Moun Ka Rété, Jack Berthelot.

8 A top-hung timber louvered shutter operated by means of a timber prop and which rests at an angle when closed. The name derives from Guyana where the type originated.

9 John Newel-Lewis, *Ajoupa* (John Newel-Lewis, 1983); also published as *Architecture of the Caribbean and its Amerindians Origins in Trinidad* (American Institute of Architects Service Corporation, 1984).