

# Uniting Islands of Practice?

The Commonwealth Association of Architects (1963-1983) 1967-2021

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In 1963 the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA) was founded as a liaison organisation 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 practicing 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.<sup>1</sup>

In March 1963, a few months ahead of the conference, the RIBA sent out a questionnaire to its Allied Societies, which revealed that deep fault lines existed between the different architectural associations in the Commonwealth. First, the survey showed quite extreme differences in numbers. For instance, if the RIBA had 22,000 members for a population of 51 million, the Institute of Northern Rhodesian Architects had a total of 110 registered architects for a population of about 3 million; the Ceylon

Institute of Architects had thirty-four members for a country that then counted 10 million people, and the Institute of Architects of Pakistan had twenty registered architects for its population of 100 million. This meant that if Britain had one registered architect for roughly every 2,300 people; Northern Rhodesia had one for every 27,000 people; Ceylon had one for every 295,000 people; and Pakistan had one registered architect for every 5 million people.

The 1963 survey also showed that unlike in Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Malaya, Hong Kong, Fiji, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, East Africa, and West Africa, where the title of the architect was protected, in India, Malta, Ceylon, Pakistan, and New Zealand it was not. Furthermore, only five associations who responded to the questionnaire reported that in their country also the work of the architect – in addition to the title – was protected. Britain was not on this list.

Finally, sharp differences also came to the fore concerning architectural education. When the survey was conducted, Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Singapore reported that no architecture schools existed in the country. Several

1. Royal Institute of British Architects, *Commonwealth and Overseas Allied Societies Conference 21–25 July 1963: Final Report and Conference Papers* (London: RIBA, 1963); “Commonwealth Association of Architects,” *RIBA Journal* 83, vol. 11 (November 1976), 445.

associations reported that they had one or two schools only. Canada and South Africa both listed five schools, and Australia listed ten. Taking the crown with a whopping twenty-nine recognised architecture schools was Britain.

These differences, as well as others, would come to plague the CAA conferences that the association organised periodically. In the first twenty years of the CAA, ten such conferences took place, with varying degrees of success. Following the inaugural CAA conference in London in July 1963, meetings were held in Malta (June 1965), 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 that was increasingly taking shape between “gentlemen” 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 examines the ten CAA conferences held between 1963 and 1983 to better understand how professional ethics and identities were (re)defined across the Commonwealth at a time when decolonisation, globalisation, and neo-liberalisation were on the rise.