

The Gold Coast School Building Programme

Fry and Drew's Educational Facilities in Cape Coast

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Infrastructure, and for that matter educational buildings, were rolled out under the 1940 and 1945 Welfare and Development Act in British West Africa. This included the School Building Programme in Gold Coast (now Ghana). The significance of the program was multifaceted – both sociopolitical and economical. For the colonial government, one aspect was to serve as a vehicle to increase standards of living with the hope to ease the mounting tensions and protests calling for self-determination within the realm.¹

During and after World War II, the creation of educational facilities in the British territories of West Africa was largely advanced due to militarisation and postwar development.² In the quest of peace, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was established in 1946 to harness mutual understanding and cultural dialogue in order to carry out the ideals of intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind.³ UNESCO's activities at the international level influenced British colonial policies on education for the developing world.

Cumulatively, these factors found an expression in the built environment through town planning and architecture, where European Modernism intersected with vernacular and colonial architecture of the global south. In the case of Ghana and Nigeria, schools, training colleges, and universities were newly established or expanded under the building program. During this phase, British architects and later socialist architects, including other non-European players, charted the course of the architectural culture that directly impacted on what we perceive and experience today in West Africa.

Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew were pivotal in the School Building Programme as they were the first to be engaged by the colonial government in several commissions, making a significant contribution to the narrative.⁴ More than twelve schools were developed in the Gold Coast by their architectural practice headquartered in London and assisted by Ove Arup (structural engineers) and Widnell and Trollope (quantity surveyors).⁵ Construction of the schools were mostly undertaken by British and Italian firms, and overseen by site architects stationed within the periphery.

1.

Ola Uduku, "Modernist Architecture and 'The Tropical' in West Africa: The Tropical Architecture Movement in West Africa, 1948–1970," *Habitat international* 30, 3 (2006): 396–411, 397, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2004.11.001>.

2.

Rhodri Liscombe, "Modernism in Late Imperial British West Africa: The Work of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, 1946–56," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, 2 (2006): 188–215, 188, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25068264>.

3.

UNESCO, "History of UNESCO," accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/history>

4.

Public Works: Employment of Contractors, 195–53, RG 3.5.1755, 22, 39, Public Records and Administrative Department (PRAAD), Accra.

5.

Building Programme: Accelerated Development Plan for Education, 1951, RG 3.5.1276, 9, PRAAD, Accra; Iain Jackson and Jessica Holland, *The Architecture of Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew: Twentieth Century Architecture, Pioneer Modernism and the Tropics*, (Farnham: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612492>.

This paper closely examines a cluster of four of Fry and Drew's schools located in the Cape Coast of Ghana's Central Region, about 145 kilometres from the nation's capital, Accra. The schools represent a classic case of experimentation of modern architectural ideologies in the tropics. They are Wesley Girls High School, Mfantshipim School, Adisadel College and St. Augustine's College. These schools were established and administered by the educational units of the missions and churches. The first two are Methodist-affiliated senior high schools, the third is an Anglican school, and the last is a Roman Catholic institution. Being the only girls' school, Wesley Girls was also the only school built on a greenfield site, masterplanned from the start by Fry and Drew. It is readily identified by its bell tower, which defines the facility's central axis.

Each of the schools has been visited and observational data has been collected, while archival data from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra, Ghana has been assessed. The evidence collected provides a critical historical account through a discussion of their context, form, aesthetics, materiality,

construction techniques, and technology. The discourse also captures components of cultural inclusion and the possibility of engagement of local architectural labour. This analysis is tested against principles and strategies espoused in Fry and Drew's three seminal publications – *Village Housing in the Tropics* (1948); *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* (1956) and *Tropical Architecture: In the Dry and Humid Zones* (1964) – as well as other salient secondary sources. The examination of these schools builds an understanding of the process of cultural exchange; it also highlights the influence and significant contribution that Fry and Drew, and their cohort, made to local architectural culture in British West Africa.