

Bauhaus Beyond Borders

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Modernism Across Continents

A century after the inauguration of the Bauhaus school building in Dessau, Germany, an exhibition in Addis Ababa is examining the development of modernist architecture across Germany, Ethiopia and other African countries through photographs of buildings shaped by the movement's ideas.

Opened on October 2 at the Modern Art Museum, Gebre Kristos Desta Centre, the exhibition, "Bauhaus in Germany, Ethiopia and Africa," runs until October 31, 2026. It explores how architectural ideas travelled across continents, how modernist forms were adapted to different settings and what historic buildings reveal about the societies that produced them. It also raises questions about preserving architectural heritage amid urban redevelopment.

Organized in partnership with the Goethe-Institut Äthiopien, the exhibition features 76 photographs by Berlin-based photographer Jean Molitor. Most depict buildings in Addis Ababa, while others document architecture in cities across Africa and Germany.

By bringing buildings from different locations into a shared frame, the exhibition examines architectural similarities and cross-cultural influences while highlighting how modernist principles took shape in distinct historical and social contexts.

Despite its name, the exhibition extends beyond the Bauhaus school itself. According to the organizers, the photographs document buildings associated with Classical Modernism, tracing connections between architectural traditions across countries. They also invite visitors to consider the historical significance of structures that remain part of contemporary urban landscapes.

Founded in Weimar in April 1919 by architect Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus brought art, craft and design together in an educational experiment that sought to transform how objects, buildings and spaces were conceived and produced.

The school later moved to Dessau, where its purpose-built building became an influential reference point in modern architecture. Its approach emphasized function, materials and the relationship between design and production.

As the exhibition catalogue notes, however, the Bauhaus did not originate every principle associated with modernism. Classical Modernism emerged through several movements and institutions, making it a broader architectural tradition rather than the product of a single school.

That distinction is central to understanding the exhibition's international scope. The photographs invite comparisons between buildings across countries without presenting African architecture simply as an extension of a European movement.

Bonny Tesfaye, cultural programmes officer at the Goethe-Institut Äthiopien, said the exhibition reflects the institute's mandate to promote cultural exchange among artists, architects and photographers from Germany, Ethiopia and other countries.

"Buildings of a certain time period reflect the situation of the time," she told *The Reporter*. "They are part of history, and showing these buildings from a similar period with a similar architectural style reflects on the connection and sharing of knowledge."

For Molitor, the project began with a photography assignment in Bujumbura, Burundi, in 2009. He was invited to document buildings threatened with demolition, creating a visual record of the city's architecture before redevelopment altered its urban landscape.

Initially, he regarded the assignment as a job rather than the beginning of a long-term undertaking. But photographing the buildings prompted questions about their architectural forms, how they differed from local styles and how they had come to exist in Burundi.

Conversations with a French architect and friend encouraged him to investigate how architectural ideas and construction practices had travelled between Europe, the Americas and other continents. As he continued travelling, Molitor encountered similar architectural forms in other countries, gradually expanding the project beyond its original location.

Since then, he said, he has travelled to nearly 80 countries to photograph modernist architecture. His work has also drawn on the contributions of historians, architects and fellow photographers, who help trace the origins of buildings and the movement of architectural ideas across national borders.

"I think globalism started before the internet," Molitor said, describing one of the central ideas behind the project.

His photographs form part of a broader effort to document architectural connections across countries and continents. Beyond recording individual buildings, the project examines how design ideas travelled and were adapted to different social and geographical contexts.

The 76 photographs displayed at the Gebre Kristos Desta Museum span cities across Africa and Germany. In Africa, the collection includes Addis Ababa; Bujumbura and Gitega in Burundi; Asmara in Eritrea; Accra and Tema in Ghana; Douala in Cameroon; Kisumu and Nairobi in Kenya; Casablanca in Morocco; Maputo in Mozambique; Lagos and Ile-Ife in Nigeria; Cape Town in South Africa; and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

The German locations include Alfeld, Amberg, Berlin, Dessau, Friedrichshafen, Gera, Löbau, Munich and Weimar.

The photographs depict a range of building types, including homes, schools, hotels, cinemas, public institutions and commercial structures, illustrating how modernist architecture found expression in different settings.

For Molitor, however, photography has limits. While it can preserve a visual record of a building, it cannot replace the structure itself or fully capture its use and relationship with the surrounding community. Documenting architecture, he said, is also a way to encourage people to consider the place of historic buildings in society and their fate as cities change.

He said the project seeks to prompt discussion about whether buildings that represent earlier periods should be preserved for future generations or demolished without sufficient consideration of their historical significance. Exhibitions in different countries, he added, offer opportunities for communities to discuss their architectural heritage and consider ways to protect it.

“Architecture is part of our society, and it is important to encourage people to think about whether these buildings should be preserved for future generations or demolished. Through our photographs and documentation, we want to raise awareness of their importance,” Molitor said during his visit to Ethiopia for the exhibition’s opening.

Bonny similarly emphasized the historical and educational value of architecture, saying buildings preserve collective memories and serve as resources for learning.

About 100 invited guests attended the exhibition’s opening, and more than 250 people had visited it, organizers said. The exhibition’s international perspective also places Addis Ababa’s modernist buildings within a broader history of architectural development.

According to the exhibition catalogue, the capital’s 20th-century urban landscape was shaped by international architectural ideas, local materials and the political ambitions of the period. Research on the city’s architectural history identifies architects such as Arturo Mezzèdimi and Henri Chomette among those who contributed to its development, particularly from the 1940s through the 1960s.

Africa Hall, the headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, is one example of Addis Ababa’s modernist architectural heritage. The significance of these buildings extends beyond their appearance to the history of the city and the communities that have lived and worked around them.

Fitsum Wonduamlak, a third-year architecture student at Addis Ababa University, said the city's rapid transformation had changed how students and residents viewed older structures.

"Historically, most residents walk past icons like the ECA Building, the National Theatre, or post-war municipal blocks seeing them simply as background infrastructure or symbols of government authority," Fitsum said. "But right now, our mental state in Addis is hyper-aware of architecture because of the Corridor Project. When you see historic neighborhoods getting overhauled overnight, you suddenly stop taking older buildings for granted."

She said comparing buildings in Addis Ababa with those in Dessau and Weimar, two German cities closely associated with the Bauhaus movement, places the Ethiopian capital within a wider history of modern design. Postwar architects, Fitsum said, developed forms of African modernism shaped by local climatic conditions, concrete craftsmanship and diplomatic ambitions rather than simply reproducing European styles.





“Today, with the city transforming so fast, walking past a mid-century facade feels urgent—we catch ourselves asking whether the building will remain next month,” she told The Reporter.

Development and preservation

The exhibition comes as Addis Ababa’s streets, public spaces and buildings undergo significant change. Molitor said he had visited the city in 2023 or 2024, when he photographed houses. His return offered an opportunity to observe changes, although his brief stays made it difficult to understand developments beyond what he could see and learn through conversations with residents.

Urban transformation is also a subject of discussion in Berlin, where Molitor lives. Rather than claim to understand every city’s circumstances, he described his role as observing, photographing buildings and speaking with people about changes to their surroundings.

“The world is changing and it is not only in Addis, it is all over,” Molitor said.

His observations connect the exhibition’s international scope with the experiences of residents in cities undergoing redevelopment. Although the circumstances vary, the photographs encourage visitors to consider what older buildings represent and what might be lost when they disappear.

Fitsum said Molitor’s photographs offer lessons for architects working amid a shift toward glass curtain walls and aluminium composite panels.

“Molitor’s photographs show us that early Modernism achieved beauty through proportion, shade, structural honesty, and material durability without relying on cheap glass facades,” Fitsum said. She added that future architects should design buildings and public spaces that respond to Addis Ababa’s climate and social life rather than focus primarily on high-rise construction.

Bonny said the exhibition also seeks to make architectural history accessible to people who might not otherwise consider the significance of the buildings around them.

As the Addis Ababa exhibition continues through October 31, its photographs offer more than a record of buildings across different countries. They document the movement of architectural ideas, place Ethiopia’s modernist heritage within an international history and invite visitors to consider what the buildings around them reveal about the past—and what their disappearance could mean for future generations.

Molitor hopes to present the exhibition in Asmara, Eritrea, where he has also documented buildings, Bonny said. The proposed exhibition would extend the project’s photographic record and bring the discussion to another city whose architecture has been a focus of Molitor’s work.

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