

A Tradition in Transition: Ali Tur in Guadeloupe, 1929-1937

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Following the great hurricane of 1928 the architect Ali Tur was commissioned by the Ministry of Colonies to rebuild the government buildings on the island of Guadeloupe in the French West Indies. Within eight years he designed some one hundred edifices. Ali Tur's architectural manner was everything but traditional. Born in Tunisia to French parents, he had been influenced by Orientalism. His architecture also introduced reinforced concrete and responded genuinely to the risk of hurricanes and the need for bioclimatic adaptation on the island. Paradoxically, this exogenous production is now considered a part of the Guadeloupean heritage. Ali Tur's style may now stand for a creative alternative to current design ideology in an environment in transition.

In the age of globalization, the concept of "creolization" has been invoked to anticipate the creation of a single worldwide culture based on a combination of local identities.¹ However, the reality of such an exciting metaphor, standing for a fusion of Western and non-Western traditions, is probably too good to be true. In the Caribbean, one of the places where Creole styles were forged, creolization was based on very different conditions from the current global processes.² First, "exchange" between European cultural patterns and the traditions of African slaves in the colonial Caribbean was extremely unequal, with the values of the colonizers clearly emphasized, and the patterns of the dominated crudely denied.³ Second, cultural models imported to the Caribbean from Europe and Africa were themselves transformed through three centuries of isolation from their origins. Thus, for example, the oral transmission of language from one generation to the next in the West Indies, both among European masters and African slaves, gradually led to the creation of genuine "local" languages based on English, Spanish, Dutch, and French, but also including references to Amerindian and African languages.⁴

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The present condition would seem to differ from this Caribbean model of creolization, which has resulted in such vibrant forms of speech, music, and vernacular architecture. Contemporary cultural globalization implies instant and permanent communication between partners who, even when they have disproportionate levels of cultural or economic power, are no longer engaged in a purely colonial or dependent relation. For this reason, the Creole metaphor may not be pertinent to understanding the present global cultural fusion. Nevertheless, the Caribbean example may still be useful in revealing how abrupt evaluations may be misleading in attempts to appraise cultural transformation. A main paradox in such instances of cultural change is the role played by external patterns in the making of local identity. Creole cultures, probably more than others, are based on such transformations of external patterns into internal ones.

The case of the buildings designed on the island of Guadeloupe by the French colonial architect Ali Tur from 1929 to 1937 is emblematic of such issues. When Ali Tur introduced new building techniques and modern design language to this island in the French West Indies, he opened an era of transition. His works, some now classified as historical monuments, eventually generated a new style, which was widely imitated, and thus became “Guadeloupean.” The story of Ali Tur’s buildings suggests that local identity is not a closed box, but that local styles change. And it suggests that such identity may be fortuitously influenced by the importation of exotic models, as long as these models are able to trace their own roots within the new environment.

Ali Tur’s work on Guadeloupe was far from anonymous. Yet his talent as a designer was sufficient to overcome both the routine qualities of the local vernacular and the obtuse canons of official, academic architecture. On Guadeloupe, Ali Tur changed the rules of the game, and imposed his personal style. Yet in accomplishing this tricky feat, he neither offered a blind pastiche of local style (as enchanting as it was), nor obeyed the conformist models of his time. Rather, his creations were based on a clever and elegant combination of European “Avant Garde” style and local requirements for climatic comfort. The study of his buildings today may help answer some of the questions involved in making a transition between a dead past, the vernacular heritage, and the current brutal alternative of the “nowhere” buildings now being erected from Bangkok to Paris. Following the lead of Ali Tur, it might be possible to find another way to associate creative design with local adaptation, and so face the challenge of contemporary design in traditional contexts.

THE MAKING OF A CREOLE STYLE IN FRENCH WEST INDIES

When Ali Tur was invited to rebuild the devastated government buildings on Guadeloupe in 1929, local buildings

were of several different types. Bourgeois and popular dwellings used the old Creole style, which can generally be called “traditional”; public buildings reproduced metropolitan academic architecture; and other influential models were imported directly from overseas, like the American villa. Tradition may be a rather inadequate concept to apply to such a Creole architecture. It might be better to call it “customary.”⁵ On arrival in the Caribbean, European colonizers tended to reproduce their own patterns of construction, which tended to be those of the European vernacular of the period. Yet, as their technical means were scarce, they had to use more simple techniques. Some such techniques were borrowed from indigenous groups, like reed- or palm-thatch roofing. Others, like wattle-and-daub infill for walls, probably came from their labor force of African slaves.⁶ On Guadeloupe, French peasants also brought techniques like timber framing and weatherboard cladding.

The very first colonizers in the French West Indies made rustic shelters of planks, reeds or palms. Of the original buildings on the island, only the Governor’s House and some military and religious buildings were made of stones or bricks, which were often imported from Europe as ballast on ships.⁷ Soon, however, naval carpenters contributed their know-how to local construction, and their skills were rapidly learned by slaves.⁸ With the development of the sugarcane plantation system at the end of the seventeenth century, a model for rural settlement was developed, including the master’s house, various functional rustic buildings, and slaves quarters, which took the form of makeshift huts. While public, military and religious buildings generally imitated more formal models, masters’ houses reproduced contemporary European models for rural bourgeois houses. Such imitation of the French provincial style may be illustrated by the master’s house at Mont Carmel Plantation, built in 1726. It resembled the design found in the eighteenth-century engravings describing the



FIGURE 1. A planter's house, engraving of the eighteenth century. (Source: Père J.B. du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les Français.*)

French West Indies: a small symmetrical house built in coated masonry with a tiled roof (FIG. 1).

Despite such roots in imitation, the imported architectural styles, like imported languages, progressively tended to diverge from their original European models. Both material and nonmaterial culture were orally transmitted through generations of masters and slaves on Guadeloupe. As a result, a creolized architecture emerged, which included the basic traits of European dominant cultures transformed by local interpretation. The main residence at the Plantation La Pagésie, built at the end of the nineteenth century, might serve as an example of such a rustic but refined type. It was a large wood structure with board filling, with a two-story gallery shading the first and second floors. Such paradoxical links between external and internal models continued through the centuries. And by the end of the nineteenth century, the island had also received a full complement of more formal public buildings according to various colonial building programs — schools, market places, town halls, churches, etc. — that strictly reproduced prevailing academic patterns.

Alongside this official architecture, popular dwellings, ranging from self-help huts to sophisticated villas made by skilled craftsmen, continued to be built according to customary patterns fixed through three centuries of colonization. The small wood huts used by Guadeloupean peasants and poor townspeople took a rectangular form, with a double-slope roof covered with corrugated iron sheets. Some of these huts had only one door, which opened on the gable end. Laid on only a few stones, such a structure was a “mobile home,” which could be transported wherever its inhabitant needed to go. This type of shelter seems to have been inherited from the slaves’ cabins of sugarcane plantations, and other models were derived from it, such as larger rural huts, or even urban houses.

In contrast to such humble dwellings, masters’ houses, as well as the urban houses and country villas of the more well-to-do, included specific elements aimed at ensuring climatic comfort, such as perimeter porches for shading interior rooms and overhanging roofs to protect from tropical rains. Such houses had high windows, symmetrically arranged on opposite walls, which could be closed with wooden slatted shutters to filter the light and provide cross-circulating breezes. Additional heavy plank shutters could be installed when necessary to protect from the strong winds and heavy rains of hurricane season. In urban houses, balconies and galleries usually complemented such window treatments (FIGS. 2-4). According to Bernard Autin:

The aprons used as the basement of windows are one of the most outstanding elements of urban scenery. In wood, in forged iron or cast iron, their design is infinitely varying. Geometrical forms, simple or crossed railings, mosaic assemblages, symbolic vegetal representations, all of them always remain transparent, so as to let circulate the breeze and permit views onto the street.⁹

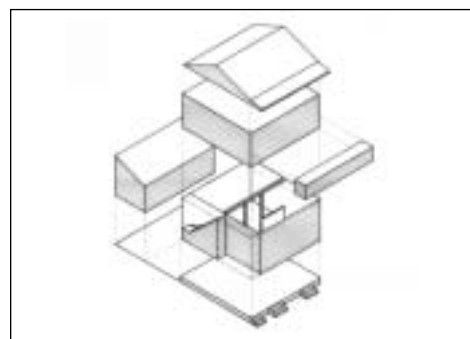
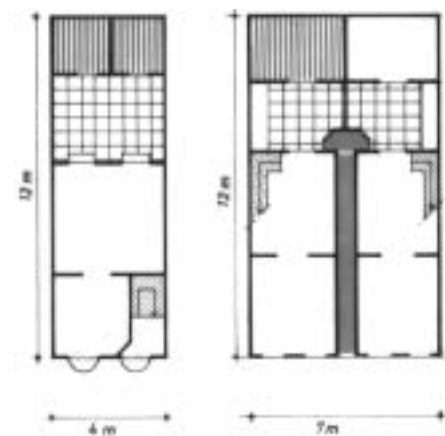


FIGURE 2. (TOP) Urban House in Pointe-à-Pitre. (Source: B. Autin, *Croquis à Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, Imprimerie Darantière, 1992.*)

FIGURE 3. (MIDDLE) Layout of an urban house at Pointe-à-Pitre. (Drawing by Christian Galpin.)

FIGURE 4. (BOTTOM) An urban house at Pointe-à-Pitre. Study of volumes. (Drawing by Christian Galpin.)

1780	March 21	Fire burns 111 out of a total of 123 houses.
1843	February 8	Level IX earthquake leaves city demolished and 3,000 dead.
1867	September 6	Violent hurricane ravages the entire island of Guadeloupe.
1871	July 18	Fire entirely demolishes Pointe-à-Pitre.
1897	April 29	Level VIII earthquake entirely demolishes Pointe-à-Pitre.
1899	April 17	Fire destroys 313 houses in Pointe-à-Pitre.
1928	September 12	Hurricane of exceptional force leaves 1,500 dead.
1931	January 6	Fire burns a whole sector of Pointe-à-Pitre.

FIGURE 5. *Main Disasters at Pointe-à-Pitre, 1780-1931.* (Source: Anne Hublin, *Case créole et ville coloniale*, Vol.II, 1846-1946, Paris, Ministère de l'Équipement, 1996, p.129.)

The adaptation of architectural form to climatic conditions was a major and constant factor in the making of the Guadeloupean style. Yet the process was less cultural than environmental, bespeaking the need for protection from heat, sun, and tropical rain, and expressing adaptation to the constant risk of fires, earthquakes and hurricanes (FIG.5). The Creole style also welcomed external architectural types. Thus, some structures were entirely imported from overseas — such as fashionable villas, called “chalets,” components for which came straight from

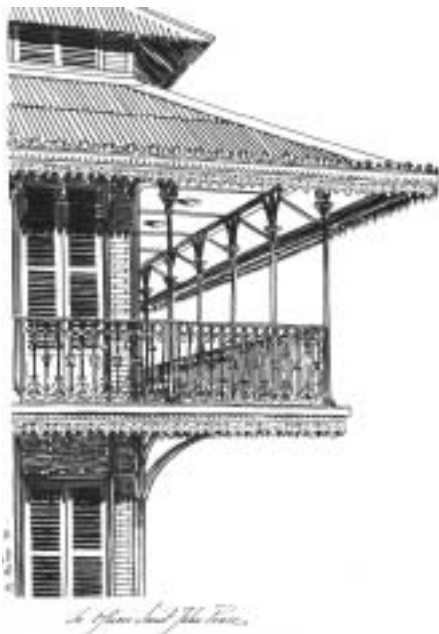


FIGURE 6. *Souques House, Pointe-à-Pitre.* Components of the house were imported from Louisiana in 1880 by the director of the town’s main sugarcane factory. Inhabited by the directors of the factory until 1967, the house, classified as a historical monument, was later transformed into the Saint John Perse Museum. (Source: B. Autin, *Croquis à Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe*, Imprimerie Darantière, 1992.)



FIGURE 7. *The St. Antoine Market in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe.* (Source: B. Autin, *Croquis à Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe*, Imprimerie Darantière, 1992.)

New Orleans and were erected for leading sugarcane-industry families (FIG.6). Meanwhile, public buildings were designed as replicas of prestige constructions in France. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, an exact reproduction of a Haussmannian building could still provide an appropriate model for a department store in Pointe-à-Pitre (FIG.7). Thus, in Guadeloupe, as in other parts of the Caribbean, architectural production was typified by the coexistence of local, creolized models and external types, reproduced without modification.¹⁰

THE ALTERNATIVE DESIGN OF ALI TUR

Following the terrible 1928 hurricane, which devastated Guadeloupe and killed some 1,500 people, the Ministry of Colonial Affairs commissioned Ali Tur to rebuild the island’s government buildings (FIG.8). The architect applied a technique



FIGURE 8. *Portrait of Ali Tur in 1946.* The French architect, born in Tunisia in 1889, is well known for his work in Guadeloupe, but also for housing projects in Paris. He died in Paris in 1970. (Photo courtesy of Isabelle Peltzer.)



FIGURE 9. *The patio in the Court Hall at Pointe-à-Pitre. Ali Tur used the model of a central courtyard or patio, in all his court hall projects. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)*

unknown on the island at the time, reinforced-concrete construction. He worked at reconstructing government buildings on Guadeloupe until 1937, when a court case opposed him to the Ministry of Colonial Affairs. Within this short period, he designed a series of outstanding buildings. Ali Tur never desired to imitate the local vernacular, yet neither did he arrive on Guadeloupe with ready-made solutions (as many modern architects of the post-World War II era might have done).



FIGURE 10. (LEFT) *In this drawing of the church at Morne à L'Eau, the steeple is standing separately from the church itself, like a minaret. When the church was built, the architect had to change its design to include the steeple within the sacred building. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)*

FIGURE 11. (RIGHT) *An aspect of the church at Morne à L'Eau in the initial project. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)*

As part of his court testimony, Ali Tur described his cultural background as follows:

One of my father's diplomatic postings led him to Tunisia, where I was born in 1889. He gave me an Arabic first name, which does not surprise me, coming from a graduate of the Polytechnique with an acquired taste for poetry and literature. But I can assure you, my Dear Sirs, that my father's ancestors being from the Cévennes and my mother's from Alsace, I am just an ordinary Frenchman, born overseas.¹¹

Nevertheless, the Arabic style he discovered as a child in Tunisia became deeply rooted in "Ali" Tur's architectural design.¹² Some forms he regularly utilized unmistakably recall Arabic architecture. For example, the slab-terrace roofs of his buildings seem derived from the flat, compact "skylines" of medieval medinas; their simple white facades, made ornate with complex shutters, resemble Arabic *claustras*; and the central patios he incorporated in many projects, often with running water and trees, correspond to the romanticized image of the Garden of Paradise symbolized in the courtyards of many Arabic mansions (FIG. 9). Also, the slim, ornate towers of Ali Tur's Catholic churches suggest the tall minarets of mosques (FIGS. 10, 11). It is important, however, to point out that Ali Tur's inspirations were based both on traditional Arabic style and on the Neo-Moorish style adopted in France's North African colonies by such architects as Henri Prost, Tony Garnier, and Joseph Marrast.¹³ According to Gildas Baudez and Françoise Béguin:

In Algeria, at the beginning of the century, the Neo-Moorish, one of the numerous variants of Eclecticism, became an established



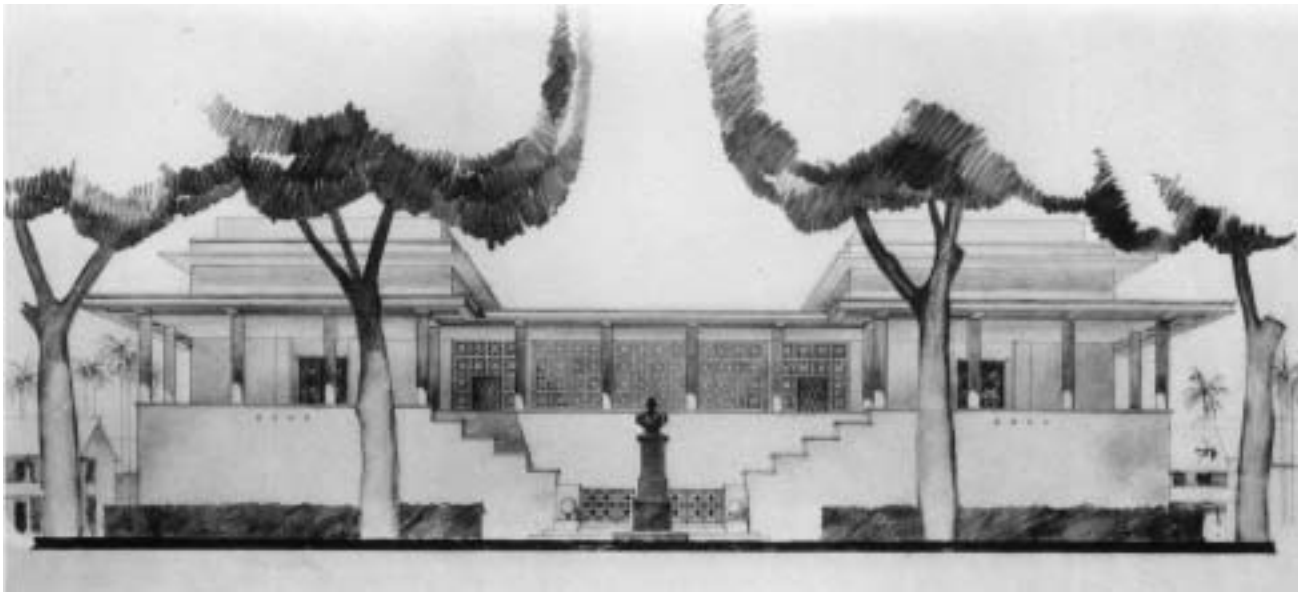


FIGURE 12. Main facade of the Court Hall at Pointe-à-Pitre. An overhanging concrete roof shades a series of doors and windows, which give the first floor a complete transparency in contrast to the thick basement of the building. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in *Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux*, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)

style. This surprising promotion, for a long time dismissed as a "café-concert" style, went on to experience a prodigious development. Almost every single public building built by France in North Africa between 1900 and 1930 was Arabized."

While the exotic quotations in Ali Tur's architectural design indicated a touch of Orientalism,⁵ his main inspiration came from the Art Déco style he had learned at the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris. The academy awarded several famous prizes to Ali Tur, and the influence of this period style is obvious in his monumental approach to design. In particular, a revealing comparison can be made between the works by Ali Tur and Auguste Perret. Both show an enthusiastic use of large halls, giant pillars that enhance facades, and immense, diaphanous walls of hollowed and carved concrete (FIGS. 12, 13). In their major public buildings, both architects also used traits of the Roman Revival such as projecting central pediments, porticos, and shallow domes.

Ali Tur's career had already taken several unusual turns before he arrived in the French West Indies. In 1918 he had been made a chartered appraiser in charge of investigating the compensation claims of war victims. But he soon set up his own office in Paris, and took on private building-maintenance installations and construction contracts. This work probably gave him a sensible approach to the material aspects of his profession, and may explain another characteristic of his work, the importance he gave to technique and materials. The smallest details of Ali Tur's buildings were carefully conceived, with the architect himself designing every decorative element, and even furniture.



FIGURE 13. The entrance hall of the church at Morne à L'Eau. Thin columns emphasize the impressive elevation of the hall, while the thickness of the concrete walls disappears in the orchestration of pilasters and geometrical enrichments. This elaborate manner is extended to the ceiling, also carefully sculpted and hollowed. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in *Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux*, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)

In 1925 Ali Tur was appointed one of ten architects attached to the Ministry of Colonial Affairs. Then, on April 1, 1929, a contract was drawn between Ali Tur and the French government, represented by Victor Tellier, “for the construction of various Government buildings in Guadeloupe.” The total cost was estimated at 40 million francs (1929 value), with a four-year building schedule. The contract stipulated that the architect would open a practice in Guadeloupe, and it authorized him to undertake additional work for local municipalities. This last clause was to substantially increase the number of Ali Tur’s commissions on the island, as municipal councils eventually took out loans of 50 million francs to cover their own reconstruction projects.

From 1931 on Ali Tur was involved in the construction of more than a hundred public buildings on the island (town halls, churches, tax offices, schools, health centers, etc.). Most of the materials used in this effort (cement, structural timber, iron rods, plumbing fixtures, tiles, and so on) were supplied from Europe, according to the debt owed to France by Germany following World War I. Materials were centrally stored at Fouillole, then distributed to local building contractors by the Guadeloupe Public Works Department. Ali Tur’s designs generally made use of a post-and-beam, reinforced-concrete structural system, with infill concrete and cement rendering. “This is the best solution in a country subject to hurricanes,” Ali Tur claimed.¹⁶ He never made reference to the alternative hazard of earthquakes.

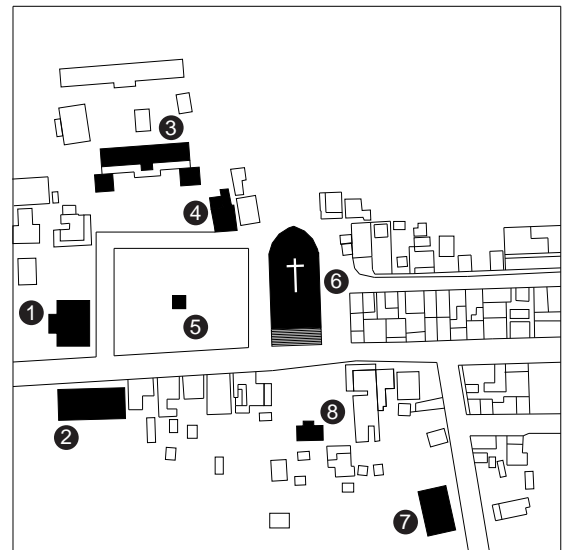
Not surprisingly, the gap between the type of structure chosen and the skills available among local contractors soon led to serious difficulties. As a result, with prior government agreement, Ali Tur recommended that contracts on the island be opened to large French construction companies. Since importing skilled labor to Guadeloupe was too expensive, these companies instead chose to bring expert overseers to train the local work force. In a 1935 book entitled *Public Works in Guadeloupe*, M. Robert, Head Engineer of the Guadeloupe Public Works Department, declared: “It was this local labor, at the origin so poorly skilled, but who very rapidly managed to catch up, that carried out all the main work. The resulting works proved the complete transformation of their skills, over the last few years.”¹⁷ Most other executives, engineers and architects involved in the building projects at the time also agreed as to the high quality of work achieved by local Guadeloupeans.

Competition being considered beneficial to the colonial economy, Ali Tur also recommended the introduction of “calls for tenders.” And the French government encouraged several major French public-works companies to develop organizations on the island. In 1935 the main ones operating there were the Société Française Diligenti-Payot, Kahn et Parcy-Baudin-Vincent-Tissot, Curiss Prass, and Lombard. Of Ali Tur’s major projects, the Diligenti Company carried out the construction of the Conseil Général Headquarters, the Governor’s House (now the Prefecture), and the building now used by the Commerce and Industry Chamber, originally designed as a hotel.



FIGURE 14. *The Town Hall at Petit Canal is a typical example of the more modest public buildings that Ali Tur achieved for small communities in rural areas. (Photo by Christian Galpin.)*

In addition to his architectural production, Ali Tur was also concerned with town planning, and most of his buildings played a major role in the arrangement of central-city areas. The church and town hall at Lamentin, and the Conseil Général Headquarters, Law Courts, and Governor’s House at Basse Terre are all living legacies of Ali Tur’s contribution to the reformulation of the urban design of Guadeloupean cities.¹⁸ In small towns, Ali Tur’s projects for town halls and



1-City Hall / 2 - Law Court / 3 - School / 4 - Presbitery
5- War Memorial / 6 - Church / 7 - Market / 8 - Tax collector’s Office

FIGURE 15. *Layout of the central square at Lamentin. Ali Tur ordered the public buildings of this town according to the archetypal colonial scheme of the union of religious, civic and judiciary powers. A similar ordering may be found in the reconstruction of the central areas of other villages and small towns by Ali Tur. (Drawing by Christian Galpin.)*

other facilities often resulted in a relocation of central activities, which had formerly been focused on churches, but which now became centered on renewed civic centers characterized by geometric designs for open public areas (FIGS. 14, 15).

In the early 1930s these characteristics of Ali Tur's architectural style had become well known. An entire volume of the *Encyclopedia of Architecture* had, in fact, been dedicated to his works, entitled *Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux, Ali Tur*.¹⁹ It included nearly all the ink and pencil drawings describing the design of his Antillean projects. Ali Tur, himself, never mentioned any architectural form as a source of inspiration. But he said all aspects of his art were based on environmental requirements. Regarding insulation and ventilation, he noted:

These two conditions have very largely conditioned an architecture of rebirth in Guadeloupe. On the one hand, I always had to be sure that my buildings would be correctly located to let the breeze ["Alizé"] flow freely through all the rooms. I also only had rooms which, on both opposite sides, opened onto the exterior. [And] I cared about openings: all the door panes, window-glasses, and even some interior partitions were replaced by slatted shutters which could be arranged according to variable necessities of ventilation. On the other hand, when the funding was sufficient, I built verandahs, or porch roofs to protect the facades and the bay windows from direct sunlight.²⁰

This brief comment indicates how Ali Tur's vision of architecture was based on the same topics as Guadeloupean vernacular, which had been shaped through centuries to fit the environment. Yet, even though Ali Tur's architectural design offered an appropriate response to such local environmental conditions as ventilation, insulation, rainfall and humidity, his style stood in total aesthetic contrast both to the island's traditional architecture and its previous official buildings. In his Antillean work, Ali Tur's paradigm seems to have been to generate variations, always subtly arranged with impressive elegance. Yet, by giving new form to customary patterns of climatic adaptation, Ali Tur technically and scientifically confirmed the legitimacy of traditional Guadeloupean designs. One might even say that Ali Tur's architecture represented an unselfconscious transposition of the local architectural vocabulary.

One reason for the contrast in style may have been that concrete provided new structural possibilities and the possibility for different forms of decorative expression. In particular, Ali Tur pushed the potential of concrete to produce sculptural effects to its limits. In his work, refined sequences alternate light and shade, while complex volumes give his buildings a sumptuous dimension. Yet, while many aesthetic values in his architecture may have been determined by the material he used, he also left a personal imprint on architectural and structural elements. Thus, the Orientalist theme of *claustras* emerged from his particular background and experience. He



FIGURE 16. *In the Market Hall at Port Louis, the structure of the basement contrasts with a heavy double roof, the whole design resulting in an aerial allegory of architectural elegance. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)*

also arranged architectural elements in certain recurring forms in his designs: thus, openings were usually conceived of as a series of rigorously geometrical, sophisticated and decorative forms, often obeying rhythms based on the number three. Their size and form also often provided severe contrasts: rectangular, square, circular, and sometimes even octagonal. In addition, Ali Tur took advantage of the necessity of shading facades by using large cantilevers and overhanging roofs to increase sculptural effects (FIG. 16).

In many ways Ali Tur's manner can be related to the influence of Auguste Perret and Tony Garnier. Leonardo Benevolo's remark about Perret and Garnier might as easily be applied to Ali Tur:

Perret and Garnier knew the outlines of the tradition they are relying on. The idea was that there is a kind of timelessness in architecture which allows its adaptation to the requirements of the day, but that, however, design is based on permanent forms, which thus, in a discrete but never forgotten way, refer to Classicism. That means that there is a pre-established harmony between the architectural heritage and the building and construction techniques, and thus, that one may confidently, with his own means, face all modern concerns resulting from scientific and social developments.²¹

One might argue that Ali Tur stood between several heritages, and that by staying within limits he assigned to himself, he managed to elaborate, with firm rigor, a Classical style of his own (FIGS. 17, 18).



FIGURE 17. *The Governor's House at Basse Terre, located in a vast park, obeys a "Grand Manner" that recalls the majesty of aristocratic palaces. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)*

LEARNING FROM ALI TUR

Several characteristics of Ali Tur's work on Guadeloupe in the 1930s suggest profitable points for present-day designers. Today's designers lack the certitude of the generation born under the reliable trees of the Classical academies. Instead, they may feel guilty when confronted with traditional contexts. The concept of heritage, formerly limited to historical monuments, has now been extended to a large range of urban areas and natural sites.²² And the conservation of vernacular architecture, urban as well as rural, has now become a major issue. In Guadeloupe, the studies of Jack Berthelot

(especially *Caribbean Popular Dwellings*, published in 1982²³) have forced local authorities to regard even the most modest Creole huts with new respect. While this new awareness of heritage has deserving aspects, it also bears negative consequences. For example, in protected sites, a mimetic architectural unity has been imposed, censoring innovative architectural designs.

Learning from the work of Ali Tur may allow contemporary designers more self-confidence when facing the collision between tradition and modernity. According to Gustave Flaubert, it is only through such collisions that it is possible to have a true meeting with self-consciousness. Avoiding the



FIGURE 18. *Conseil Général Headquarters at Basse Terre. Succession of porticos and peristyles shading the facades enhances the progression onto the core of the building. A square tower culminates at the top of the building, providing ventilation to the different rooms. (Drawing by Ali Tur, in Encyclopédie de l'Architecture: Architecture Coloniale, Guadeloupe: Bâtiments gouvernementaux et communaux, Ali Tur, Paris, Editions Albert Morancé, 1930.)*

shock by copying the past is not the best way for “imagining our future.”²⁴ In Ali Tur’s time, local architecture was accorded little consideration. This allowed him to design freely, without any hesitation, imposing change on local construction routines. On the other hand, Ali Tur was modest and sensible enough to respect local contexts. But he did not express this by copying the decorative aspects of the Creole style, as Neo-Vernacular projects so often do today. Rather he designed modern buildings to accommodate local needs for climatic adaptation and disaster prevention. Since his designs “fit” the local environment in this way, they can be compared to preceding local constructions.

After their appearance in the 1930s, the buildings of Ali Tur were admired on the island and generated many “clones,” mainly urban houses at Pointe-à-Pitre between 1940 to 1950. Ali Tur’s patterning thus gave a common “1930s” style to certain neighborhoods on Guadeloupe. But from the 1950s on, Ali Tur’s buildings were largely ignored. From that time to the 1980s, unsuitable international buildings, often designed like shoe boxes, were the norm in the French Caribbean, regardless of local conditions.²⁵ More recently, this International Style was severely questioned; and there followed a revival of the Creole vernacular, resulting in Neo-Vernacular styles that were more cosmetic than authentic. Looking back at its Creole roots, however, Guadeloupe has now also rediscovered Ali Tur’s designs, and some of his main buildings have been classified as historical monuments, part of Guadeloupean heritage.²⁶ By a strange alchemy, therefore, the disruptive attributes of Ali Tur’s work have now become a fully integrated and indisputable component of local tradition.

Various factors may have favored this integration. Considering the three centuries of Guadeloupe’s colonial history, the eight years during which Ali Tur practiced on the island may appear as only a brief incident. However, Ali Tur’s activity was of greater importance than his brief appearance may indicate, largely because his designs were produced over the entire island during a decisive period in its history. Due to the absolute devastation of the 1928 hurricane, Guadeloupean public buildings needed to be rebuilt everywhere — not only in main towns, but also in remote villages. His work also included all sorts of buildings, from churches to town halls, schools, hospitals, market halls and so on. Thus, his architecture marked all the aspects of society, except housing. (Even memory did not escape his imprint, as he rebuilt the World War I commemorative monuments of many villages.) Ali Tur’s architecture materialized a new public architecture, which islanders rapidly adopted as part of their everyday, common landscape.

A political strategy can also be discerned behind the substitution of older government buildings by Ali Tur’s designs. France’s colonization of Guadeloupe had begun in 1635, and the French government wanted to organize large festivals for the year 1935 to commemorate three centuries of French presence. In some ways, changing all the governmental buildings

was a way of creating a striking marker. The project to create a new architecture can thus be read as an attempt to revitalize the image of the enduring power of the colonial system.

Looking back, one can see how today’s re-embracing of Ali Tur’s work reflects a major aspect of Caribbean societies: their capacity to combine external traits and transform them into fully local patterns of culture. Thus, Creole identity is based on a vital ability to progressively incorporate complexity introduced from outside. Yet, while assimilation of external models may be considered a typically Creole trait, it may also be considered an ordinary effect of the passage of time. Time and architecture are great and opposing companions. As Stewart Brand has pointed out, “time devours buildings.”²⁷ With time passing, what was once a resplendent monument may become little more than a poor ruin, or even nothing at all. However, time may also give to some buildings a fresh significance, an unexpected beauty. In this case they get a second life, and join the vast and heterogeneous package that is called “local” tradition.²⁸ Any odd piece of architecture, through years, just because it is still there, may be acknowledged as a part of the “genius” of a place.

Nevertheless, the full assimilation of such an Arabic-Classical-Colonial-Modern-French style into a local image of architecture must still be questioned. Today, as Ali Tur comes back on stage, Guadeloupean architects might be tempted to continue in the style of a certified master. But there is a time for each style, and the best lesson to take from Ali Tur’s design philosophy may be to avoid imitating him. Contemporary Guadeloupean designers must today confront the same challenge Ali Tur faced in the 1930s: modernization and adaptation. And, like Ali Tur, they might seek to create a new local architecture, independent of the former vernacular, but, in a way, equivalent. Following the path of tradition is not going backward, but going forward, with the same care for the local. Thus, they might provide a new local identity, imposing their own artistic style and creating new markers for the same place. Discussion of which part of traditional architecture these designers might include or not include in their work is, of course, essential. But giving a unique style to a place is also fundamental. Even if such new buildings might seem shocking from the literal perspective of tradition-preservation, they might provide the best solution to the task of continually revitalizing local architectural identity. This will require significant invention, but it will also require, as with the work of Ali Tur, wise attention to the specificity of the Caribbean environment. Ali Tur’s buildings are a rich example of such an alternative architecture, based on multicultural experience, resulting in an integrated style supported by the designer’s inner talent.

CONCLUSION: FOR A PERMISSIVE “DIGLOSSY” IN ARCHITECTURE

It may be best to conclude here by discussing the limits of this case. Ali Tur only designed official buildings, and the merit

of his production consists in the new style he gave to public architecture on Guadeloupe. But prestigious projects requiring professional designers, as talented as they may be, represent only a small part of local construction.

Traditional architecture on Guadeloupe consisted for many centuries of domestic buildings which were the work of relatively unknown artisans who elaborated and refined vernacular patterns. But such local know-how and practice are now disappearing, leaving a void which cannot be filled by the deceptions of modernity. Since it is no longer possible to return to the anonymous genius of the artisan, is the only alternative to accept that such qualities of place can only emerge from the most creative designers?

A major trait of Creole societies is, and always has been, the split of local culture into two expressions: the first formal and official, reproducing the dominant culture of colonizers; the second informal and customary, preserving the cultural heritage of such subordinated groups as ethnic minorities, slaves, and the lower classes. For example, in the French West Indies people speak two languages: French, which is used at school and for formal occasions; and Creole, which is used at home, between friends, and for informal conversations. Linguists have called this division "diglossy." In the Caribbean, architecture, like language, conforms to a diglossic pattern. The language of official architecture is grand and impressive, open to modernist technologies that symbolize progress and prosperity. But at home the same pattern is not necessarily desirable. Thus, middle-class clients on Guadeloupe today demand so-called "colonial" villas that reproduce such typical traits of bourgeois architecture as pavilion roofs, dormers, enclosing porches or galleries, thin colonettes, gorgeous balustrades, and white-

washed rendering. Such a decorative Colonial Revival vocabulary is also used by self-help builders.

Professional designers, of course, hate this bad taste among the Antillean middle class. But they might be a little more tolerant and confident of such people's tastes, since such a naïve Neo-Vernacular style is itself a version of the everlasting talent of Creole society to imitate and integrate external traits. Copying bourgeois architecture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is today a way to escape the colorless modernist projects imposed during the last twenty years. Thus, the current ambiguity in Guadeloupe's domestic architecture may announce bright new developments. Popular architecture obeys the fundamental Creole dilemma, so accurately described by Edouard Glissant²⁹: as minor as it is, naïve creation may magnify the diglossic world where official and informal architecture are both in search of their present identities, surviving all sorts of disasters, cultural as well as natural.

In a short essay entitled "Bassin des Ouragans" ("Bay of Hurricanes"), Raphaël Confiant, gave a paradoxical view of the aftermath of a disaster which illustrates the wonderful Creole humor and ability to survive any circumstance with hope deeply rooted in the heart.

The hurricane had beheaded the trees, the houses, and torn out electric and telephone wires, drowned the huts which, by imprudence or colonial negligence, had been built along the Bouillé River. In short, the world had become a tremendous disaster. The silence of eternity reigned there and no living creature would have risked a bit of his nose outside. Anna Maria proclaimed with delectation: "We are the only creatures to be alive."³⁰

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