



**Build Something Modern** tells the story of Irish architects who designed buildings in Africa from c.1955-1975, usually in the 'tropical architecture' idiom. While the tropical architecture movement has received more academic focus in recent years, there has to date been no filmic documentary of this significant aspect of modernism. Many of the key features of tropical architecture often derived from work undertaken in the 1930s, particularly Le Corbusier's use of sun-shades, piloti and single loaded outdoor corridors in his projects in Brazil, India and North Africa. Focused particularly on climactic conditions, another feature of this work was the use of pierced concrete screens, to decorative and tectonic effect. This approach to designing modernist buildings in hot climates became an orthodoxy particularly after certain networks were established, such as the inauguration of the School for Tropical Architecture at the Architecture Association, London (1954) and the dissemination of models and techniques through a series of publications such as special issues of *Architectural Design* and manuals by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew.

The work documented in the film differed from the bulk of tropical architecture in being undertaken for religious rather than colonial or civic clients. Instead, the churches, schools and hospitals discussed in the film were commissioned by the missionary orders that ministered to what was nicknamed Ireland's 'Spiritual Empire'. Created through direct labour working off plans and instructions sent from Ireland, these innovative structures following design by correspondence, were far more innovative in style and approach than ecclesiastical buildings in Ireland, the USA and much of Europe at this time.

Described in the *Journal for the Society of Architectural Historians* as hinting at 'the overwhelming complexity of contrasting cultures', the film features interviews with the priests who oversaw the construction of these buildings and the architects who treated Africa as a laboratory for their new architecture, the documentary draws attention to and subverts the universalising and totalizing claims of modernism. It also critiques much of the discourse around tropical architecture as founded on 'core' expertise being transmitted to peripheries through the utilisation of Nigerian voices speaking the words of European architects.