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Architecture, Planning and Foreign Policy: Israeli and GDR Development Cooperation in sub-Saharan Africa 1950-1990

As a so-called 'playground of the Cold War', postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa was contested territory in the ideological power game that dominated the second half of the twentieth century. Within new African nations the international competition for economic and political allegiance was particularly hard fought. Amongst those nations vying for influence, recognition and legitimacy were the newly founded states of Israel and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). They were viewed as attractive development partners by African governments because they had achieved successes in their domestic nation building projects, were committed to forms of centralized socialist government, albeit in different degrees, had reached a high degree of industrialization and were ostensibly free from colonial legacies.

Employing a comparative methodology and interdisciplinary approach, which has the inherent added value of enabling us to learn from differences as well as parallels, our research project will critically investigate the international relations and foreign policies of Israel and the GDR in sub-Saharan Africa through the lens of architectural and urban planning work carried out by the two nations in Ethiopia and Tanzania between 1950 and 1990. For, as well as playing a crucial role in space-shaping processes and in the construction of the territorial and cultural identity of Israeli and GDR citizens during the first decades of their own states' existences, architecture and planning projects were also employed to effectuate the desire for post-colonial national unity, modernity and progress in newly independent African countries.



The 3-year research project will enable us to comparatively analyze the political, economic and social implications of the buildings and planning projects of Israeli and GDR development cooperation-e.g. textile plants, university campuses, housing schemes, hotels, printing presses, city extensions-in the local African context as well as in Israel and the GDR. Through studying the institutional frameworks in Israel and the GDR, documenting the key actors involved in policy design and implementation, analyzing the reception and results of the projects in Africa and conceptualizing the role of development cooperation as both means and goals of foreign policy we will bridge a substantial research gap and break new ground, extending research on architecture and planning knowledge in new directions and providing a stronger basis for understanding current urban development processes and development cooperation policies in the Global South.

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