The DELIGHT of the YEARNER

ERNST MAY and ERICA MANN
in NAIROBI 1933–1953

Ernst May’s prototype for the Native House for Concrete Pre-manufacture, Nairobi, ca. 1944. Courtesy the estate of Ernst May and the Ernst May Gesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main.
n January 1945, the émigré German architect Ernst May was busy refining a new kind of modular housing architecture for use in the growing East African city of Kampala, working from his office in Nairobi. These homes were intended only for native Africans and were designed to be cheap, easy to construct, expandable, and adaptable. Self-sufficiency, independent home ownership, and modern construction methods were all hallmarks of the architectural methodologies May had brought with him from Weimar Frankfurt to British East Africa. He had by then been living there for eleven years.

After a term as Frankfurt’s chief architect from 1925 to 1929—when he oversaw the construction of vast housing estates across the city, helmed by teams of other architects—May left Germany due to the rise of the National Socialist government and began a project to build mining cities in the Soviet Union. But when that project also ran politically aground, May renounced architecture altogether and withdrew to the wilds of Africa to recuperate his spirits. With his family in tow, May arrived in Mombasa in the final days of 1933. Long an enthusiastic gardener, he purchased a 160-acre coffee plantation in the village of Arusha in the mountain highlands surrounding Kilamanjaro, in what is today Tanzania, where an ethnically German population remained from the previous colony. He immediately set about tearing down the few existing structures on the new property and replanning it as one of his own early designs for a Silesian farming village. He single-handedly built a miniaturized Germanic landscape: he surveyed the land, brought in wood and stone, and constructed irrigation pipelines and housing infrastructure for his growing workforce. He raised sheep and cattle and grew rye, corn, vegetables, fruit trees, and coffee. In a letter to his friend Martin Wagner dated October 20, 1935, May claimed that he had created “my own third Reich.”

While farming was surely a respite from the convoluted political realities of urban planning in Europe at this time, the obsessive farm architecture indicates that May certainly wasn’t interested
in yielding his capacity for control. It is clear that May truly enjoyed gardening and plausibly moved to Africa, at least initially, in an honest attempt to become a gentleman farmer. But May was also seduced by the frontier myth of Africa—that it was uncorrupted by modernity and politics and was a clean slate on which to reckon with his faith in technology away from the catastrophe in Europe. The claim to universalism had already been attached to modern architecture by the time he left: it was supposed to work everywhere, and for everyone.

After three years of farming, his spirits were rested, but also restless. In 1937 he sold the property and moved his family to Nairobi, then the capital of British East Africa, to reestablish his architectural practice. His first major projects from this time still resonated with the aesthetics of the New Frankfurt. In 1938 he built a small shopping plaza in downtown Kampala called the City House for the prominent Goan businessman Norman Godinho, a building which borrowed many of its design tropes from the Siedlung Römerstadt in Frankfurt. That same year, under the patronage of the British colonist Sir Derek Erskine, he drew plans for a Nairobi apartment complex aimed at middle-income European settlers who yearned for modernist design. Borrowing from his own blueprints for the sprawling housing estates in Frankfurt, May drew a simplified cluster of nine three-story apartment buildings. Sited on a small hill near downtown Nairobi, they would eventually become known as the Delamere Flats, though they were not actually constructed until some years after the war.

This brief return to architecture also included some shopping plazas, industrial buildings, and a number of private homes, but then, in April 1940, May was abruptly interned—along with all the colony’s German nationals—in a series of British penal
camps, chiefly one called Ganspan, near Andalusia, South Africa. Intellectually restless, he read books and elaborated some potential projects, as he still had vast ambitions for African planning work. He corresponded with many friends and colleagues, including Walter Gropius and Martin Wagner, who were then both at Harvard University, and the American urban planner and theorist Lewis Mumford, but none could secure his exit via an American professorship. Ultimately, due to support from a few prominent British figures, May was released in the spring of 1942 and returned to Nairobi.

Finding in wartime Kenya an echo of 1920s Germany—which had similar supply limits during a crisis of dispossession—May eagerly returned his attention to questions of large-scale social housing, reviving his own earlier technical innovations from Breslau and Frankfurt. He tested prefabricated shapes, simple methods of construction, and locally available materials. By the early weeks of 1945, he had been granted his first large-scale public commission since leaving Germany: a redesign of Kampala, whose large populations of Indians, Africans, and Europeans posed a special challenge, as May felt that each racial and ethnic group had distinct architectural and planning needs.

Initially proposed as part of this Kampala scheme, May’s Native House for Concrete Pre-manufacture was to be a simple, low-cost way for colonial Africans to purchase their own homes. The Native House was a one-room structure made by extruding a set of parabolic standards, pinning them together with cross bracing, and covering the framework with a skin of curved concrete panels—a method May called “hook-on-slab” architecture. It was an opaque shell of a building, with windows on the two short sides and a door in the center of the long wall. May claimed that the Native House was simply a clean, modern version of the traditional East African grass hut, which he imagined the “native” had always lived in and still desired, and hoped that his new version would help acculturate Africans to European standards of civilization.

The Native House thus sits at the uneasy nexus between the utopian impulse of modernist planning and the power hierarchies of the colonialist project. By distributing the proposed architectures of Kampala neighborhoods across an ethnic matrix, May’s formal logic supported a racial order. His own Frankfurt-era apartment block designs and material strategies—the same forms that had originally aimed to restore an egalitarian German society after wartime devastation—here manifested the ideological framework of colonialism. Ultimately, the Kampala plan foundered due to a change in the British planning authority, but, as it happened, the Native House had stalled even earlier, in the prototype stage, when the Ugandans to whom he tried to sell these homes rejected his design—in part because the form reminded them too much of their traditional grass huts. They requested instead that he build for them the same housing he was building for the whites.

Another signal inversion of form and ideology within the context of May’s transplanted modernism was the Delamere Flats housing complex, which was finally completed in 1951. The complex’s bold conjunction of geometric shapes, the elegant typography of its labeling, and the arrangement of its
blocks into a miniature community all plainly echo its antecedents in the Frankfurt estates, though May shrewdly adapted his old plans to local climatic and material conditions. The nine buildings face east-west across a hillside so as to minimize their exposure to the equatorial sun. All the buildings are elevated one story off the ground, both to provide parking spaces and to keep dust out of the units. Windows and doors are often covered or recessed to create pockets of shade, and the inner stairwells are aerated by an open lattice pattern in the concrete walls. The original color scheme of the buildings was bright shades of red and pink in order to hide the accrual of Kenyan dust. It was one of the first residential buildings in Nairobi to deal innovatively with sanitation and waste disposal. Each unit has a trash chute, whose piping to the ground level is hidden inside the central stairwell columns, and each apartment is outfitted with its own version of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s famed Frankfurter Küche, the model of Weimar society’s vogue for domestic hygiene, efficiency, and order. The Delamere complex can be seen as a critical early example of “tropical modernism”—the idiom resulting from the contact between European architectural genealogies and the climatic, social, and political parameters of the equatorial state. Interestingly, today these rental units are still at full occupancy and house a diverse cluster of immigrant families, chiefly from Burundi and Somalia, many of whom arrived in Nairobi during the war-torn 1990s. Immigrant Africans now occupy homes designed expressly for immigrant Europeans by an exiled German architect.

Nairobi today has 3.1 million people. When it was formally planned in 1948, it was projected to have only 250,000 people by 1975. Regional conflict, environmental strain, and unforeseen patterns of migration have swelled its numbers. “The Nairobi you see today is not the Nairobi that we planned,” wrote the Romanian-born urban planner Erica Mann in the early 1990s, after retiring from some forty years of service as an officer in the Kenyan town planning department, which had been established by the British in 1946, just a few years after her arrival. One of May’s colleagues in the colony, Mann participated in the city’s master plan in 1948, which was the first major project of her career.

Mann and her husband Igor had initially fled from Bucharest in 1942 and finally arrived in Nairobi after a complex itinerary that included Palestine and other parts of Africa. She had studied architecture at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and so when she heard that the British administration was establishing a Ministry of Towns and Settlements, she eagerly took up a position there. Commuting into Nairobi each day by hitchhiking, she rapidly established herself as a skillful and committed urban planner in the service of the colonial authorities, eventually becoming the lead regional planning and development officer for almost every inhabited district of Kenya. Mann’s core responsibilities were in generating the field research and sociological evidence for major decisions: the size and scale of neighborhood units, placements of schools and churches, proportions of housing stock and zoning requirements. She was an active leader in the Kenyan professional community, founding both Plan East Africa and its successor, Build Kenya,
the first two architectural magazines in the country. She was in touch with a wide circle of architects, artists, and intellectuals from across the globe throughout her five decades in Kenya. Mann was close to the British architects and historians Dennis Sharp and Yasmin Shariff and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Greek architect Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis’s “Ekistics” movement—a holistic approach to town planning and urban systems, viewing them through long historical trajectories of human settlement. Through Plan East Africa and Build Kenya, Mann advocated for the work of innovative architects like Roberto Burle Marx, Buckminster Fuller, and Paolo Soleri, all of whose radical projects envisioned greener, more ecological outcomes from the application of architectural technology.

In 1952 Mann was involved in the master planning strategy for the coast province that included the city of Mombasa, where Ernst May was in the midst of one of his final Kenyan projects, the Oceanic Hotel. At the home of Mann’s son, I found her original site plans for the area, including the grounds of the unfinished hotel. The Oceanic would go on to become an architectural landmark of the country: a great curving mass of a building, decorated with palm trees and a large outdoor pool. Designed in 1950 but not finished until 1958, the hotel was one of the first major coastal tourist resorts in Africa. Early in its construction, in 1953, May finally returned to Germany for a position designing social housing blocks in Hamburg, as well as nearby Bremen and Wiesbaden, after a protracted and halting job search in his home country. While it is worth noting that the brewing Mau Mau rebellion made the future murky for technocratic colonials like him, May’s decision to return home is more likely the culmination of his frustrations at the foreclosure of opportunities he faced as a gruff and arrogant German trying to do business in a British colonial society. After effectively twenty years in Africa, May had failed to accomplish a single project anywhere near the scale of the work he had been charged with in Frankfurt.

Mann’s situation after Kenyan independence was markedly different: her attentions broadened


Build Kenya, January–February 1983. Image courtesy Oscar Mann, Nairobi
to human rights and sustainable development issues, and she became an international emissary. It is a peculiar cultural reversal that a white, Jewish, immigrant woman, alone in a field dominated by men, came to represent a newly independent African country at dozens of lectures and conferences around the world. Jomo Kenyatta's policies of gradual adjustment and social continuity meant that civil servants like Mann—who, as a self-identified socialist, was eager to support the independence movement—stayed in their positions under the new government. Though she sometimes patronized Africans as primitives who needed elevation to European standards of culture, she also loved Kenya and intended, upon arrival, to stay there. Mann never looked back on having left Europe, and she embraced her new life as the fulfillment of an adventurous wanderlust she had dreamed of as a child in Bucharest. She once claimed, "Hitler was the best thing that ever happened to me."10

Following her eventual retirement from government in 1984, Mann focused on adding to the vast garden of succulent plants she had been cultivating for decades. Though lost when the family property was sold some years ago, this garden was said to have been a unique phenomenon and, at its prime, the largest private collection of succulent species in Africa.11 Traveling across the continent over the course of her decades there, she had collected diverse specimens, grouping together in one plot species that would never be found near each other in nature. Mann had a deep memory for the Latin names of all her plants and took great pleasure in walking around her garden, which she had designed to be softer in height, proportion, spatial depth, and color combinations than the urban neighborhoods that she planned professionally. It is said that botanists from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England, when visiting East Africa, would make trips to Nairobi specifically to study her collection.12

In the background of these two stories is a third character: another architect, with another garden, and another narrative of travel. He is a cipher for both the fascism that gave rise to these African exiles and the contest of architectural ideologies that framed their professional discourse. The American art historian Barbara Miller Lane has drawn a comparison between Ernst May and Albert Speer, who, following the death of Paul Ludwig Troost in January 1934, effectively became Hitler’s chief architect at the age of twenty-nine.13 Lane’s thesis is that both May and Speer relied on vast reservoirs of political power to enact large-scale public works, and thus each imposed a very personal aesthetic paradigm on a large population. However, Speer’s and May’s postwar narratives bring their similarities into sharper relief. Both effectively disappeared from architectural discourse immediately after the war, and both later felt insufficiently recognized for their contributions to that discourse. They each envied and critiqued the canonization of their colleagues Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, though for opposite reasons: May felt he ought to be lionized along with them as a foundational modernist, while Speer was their ideological antithesis.14 After the Nuremburg trials, Speer was sentenced to twenty years in the Spandau prison complex in West Berlin, and his incarceration there forms a kind of obsidian mirror to the developments in Kenya at this same time.15

Spandau’s courtyard garden was available for Speer and his six fellow inmates to tend from early in their sentences, beginning in August 1947.16 While the others were ranking military officers, Speer alone was a restless former architect: by the spring of 1948, his obsession with gardening was crystallizing, while the others largely sat idle as he worked. By the summer of 1951, Speer had a section of the garden entirely to himself and had begun
an increasingly ambitious and expansive landscaping program. At the end of his eighth year, in the autumn of 1954, he happened upon the idea that would occupy him for the remainder of his sentence. In addition to his continual landscaping work, he began to walk the perimeter of the courtyard and imagine that he was traveling on foot. “I have marked out a circular course in the garden,” he wrote on September 30, 1954. “Lacking a tape measure, I measured my shoe, paced off the distance step by step, and multiplied by the number of paces.” In this way, he produced a path of some 270 meters, which he repeatedly circled for the following decade, keeping accurate track of his kilometers by shifting small beans (plucked from the garden) from one pocket to the other at a given mark along the route, and tallying the total at the end of each day. His first trip took him to his family home in Heidelberg: 626 kilometers. From there, the walking project began to take on unexpectedly vast dimensions. With the aid of travel guides borrowed through the prison library, he pictured himself traveling east: from Heidelberg, he set off across eastern Europe toward Istanbul, then through Afghanistan into India and China. After traveling across all of Russia he arrived at the Bering Strait, which he crossed, continuing southward down the western coast of North America.

Landscaping and walking continued in tandem throughout the remainder of Speer’s sentence, and by 1959, the garden had taken over practically the entire courtyard, a leisure park of one man’s design. On April 14, 1959, he wrote: “About two years ago... I systematically set about landscaping our garden, making a park of it. I graded uneven ground into interesting terraces, sowed lawns, planted forsythia, lavender, hydrangea bushes, and roses... Spandau has become a meaning in itself... The garden has taken full possession of me.” Three months later, just days after his notional arrival at the Imperial Palace in Peking, Speer noted a critical final development in his garden’s structure. On
July 19, he wrote: “For several weeks I have been building a new walk, twenty meters long and eight meters wide. It leads from the prison exit to my avenue lined with flower beds, which in memory of the planned Berlin grand boulevard is aligned in a north-south direction.”

And so, in effect, the proposed German capital was here imagined again, but this time in miniature, holding to the same logic we have already explored: that the restless intellectual grapples with exile by attempting to reduplicate precisely what he or she has lost. Speer had accidentally created a kind of self-imposed exile, where the city, the garden, and the journey all collapsed into an endless loop. He never actually saw the world he had helped to destroy until he imagined himself walking through it in prison. His trip ended in 1966, twelve years after it had begun. In the final week before his release, he sent a postcard to a friend, asking to be picked up some thirty kilometers outside Guadalajara, Mexico. His diaries tally the total distance he walked: some 31,936 kilometers.

If part of the tumult of modernism was the crisis of reconceiving the relationship between past and future, then the diverse architectural claims that run through this narrative—from Paolo Soleri’s technological ecology to May’s climatically adapted industrialized housing—reveal competing efforts to shape ideas of time through the production of space. But time cannot be shaped in a garden: plants regrow, exceed their boundaries, threaten disorder, and need constant attention. Perhaps that is why these three modern-era architects and planners found their refuge there: they were relieved...
of linear thinking. While designing a garden may share much with designing a city, tending to one is an activity lightened by its submission to the circularity of nature. A garden can be a temporary respite from the crises of technology and politics; an expression of an alternate, parallel self; or a sanctuary composed of pure repetition. Ultimately, it is through their complex relationship to horticulture that these architects elaborate three structures for the shape of exile: you can wander endlessly without compass, you can resettle and begin again, or you can forever yearn for a return home.

Notes
This is the research accompaniment to a project in the form of photographs, video, and sculpture titled An Echo without a Medium. It was first published in Munich in 2011, in the collection Netzwerke des Exils, by the Gebr. Mann Verlag and Ludwig-Maximilian University.


2. Ibid. Gutschow finds this in a letter in the Gropius Nachlass, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

3. Author’s notes from personal conversation with Kai Gutschow, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, July 2010.


5. Eckhard Herrel, Ernst May: Architekt und Stadtplaner in Afrika 1934–1953 (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 2001). See the chapter on the Native House. This is also discussed in May’s letters to Lewis Mumford (specifically one dated June 16, 1945), archived in Mumford’s papers at the University of Pennsylvania, photographed by the author in the fall of 2010. Gutschow further elaborates on this idea, placing May’s African work within a clear genealogy of specific forms and techniques that informed his vocabulary throughout his career.


8. Betty Caplan, “A Woman of Substance,” East African, July 17, 2007. This twenty-five-hundred-word obituary is the sole long-form piece of writing I could find about the life and career of Erica Mann. I have further specific information about her career from a group of unpublished texts Mann wrote after she had retired, which were given to me by her son Oscar in the late autumn of 2007. A recorded interview with Oscar provided yet more insights and details about her work. Interviews about Erica were also conducted with Yasmin Shariff (Dennis Sharp Architects, London) and with Lisa Rozsa, the widow of one of Mann’s architectural colleagues in Nairobi, Imre Rozsa, best known for designing the Nairobi Synagogue.

9. Erica Mann’s curriculum vitae, given to the author by Oscar Mann, autumn 2007.

10. Ibid.

11. Author interview with Kenny Mann, fall 2010.


13. Barbara Miller Lane, “Architects in Power: Politics and Ideology in the Work of Ernst May and Albert Speer,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 17, no. 1 (1986): 297. Lane notes: “After the death of Troost in 1934, Speer became principal architect to Hitler and, in 1937, Generalbauminsektor für die Reichshauptstadt (general supervisor of building for the imperial capital).” He continued architectural work until 1942, when he was picked to become minister of armaments.

14. The notion of May’s rueful resignation toward his eclipse from the high canon of early modernists comes from author’s notes from conversations with Gutschow (Pittsburgh, PA, summer 2010) and with Eckhard Herrel, Ernst May Gesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main, November 2010. On Albert Speer’s mild tone of resentment, I draw from his book Spandau: The Secret Diaries, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Macmillan, 1976), first published as Spandauer Tagebücher (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1975). Speer evidently followed the architectural discourse of his generation from his cell. On May 7, 1955, he wrote: “I also have an issue of American Builder. With astonishment I note the many German names: Gropius, Mendelsohn, Neutra, Breuer, Mies van der Rohe. Naturally I know them all. When I studied under Tessenow in Berlin, many of them were working only a few halls down, so to speak. . . . It is plain now that at age twenty-eight I did not understand the Bauhaus. But even now, at fifty, I am deeply convinced that the glass high-rise is wrong when it is used outside the industrial realm” (Spandau, 273).

15. The remainder of this essay focuses on some small aspect of Speer’s personal activities in Spandau from 1947 to 1966—his gardening—for which I rely specifically on Spandau. As art historians like Christian Fuhrmeister (and more popular journalists, like Dan van der Vat, in The Good Nazi: The Life and Lies of Albert Speer [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997]) have shown, Speer’s prison-era pose of penitence and introspection was a shrewd effort to formulate and control his legacy. I allow quite plainly that Speer’s words are dubious and suspect, perhaps in some cases outright falsehoods or constructs. Speer’s obsessive garden work appears, at any rate, to be true in the most generic sense; and his sense impressions, or fantasies, are as verifiable as anyone’s. However, even if Speer’s garden (and walking project) were entirely a fabrication, it would still serve the purposes of this project and its specific inversion of urban planning, gardening, and the mental space of exile. I am very grateful for a conversation with Mr. Fuhrmeister in Munich, in the fall of 2010, which helped clarification here.

16. The other inmates in Spandau were Karl Dönitz, Konstantin von Neurath, Baldur von Schirach, Erich Raeder, Rudolf Hess, and Walther Funk.

17. June 4, 1951: “I can now do whatever I please in my part of the garden. In the spring I dug out the ground to a depth of about half a meter, and created a sunken rock garden; using thousands of bricks, I made a series of retaining walls twenty to forty centimeters in height. . . . My determination to do something, to make something of my time, has now found a new object. . . . This garden, this ridiculous architecture in bricks, has the priceless advantage of being concretely tangible and still there every single morning” (Speer, Spandau, 179).

18. Ibid., 254.

19. Ibid., 335.

20. Ibid., 339.

21. Ibid., 446.
An ECHO WITHOUT a MEDIUM
An Artist’s Project by Benjamin Tiven

Delamere Flats Apartment Complex, staff housing, Nairobi, 2008. Digital C-Print, 20 x 24 in.
The Delight of the Yearner, single-channel HD video, color, stereo, runtime 2:00, 2008 (video still)
Benjamin Tiven is an artist and writer in New York. In 2012, he completed the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program in studio art and has recently contributed to Triple Canopy, Bidoun, and Bulletins of the Serving Library.