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# INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE AND NILE HOTEL

## A faint memory of past geopolitical alliances and ideals in Kampala, Uganda

Milena Ivković, Frank van der Hoeven

**ABSTRACT:** The International Conference Centre and the adjacent Nile Hotel in Kampala were built in 1971-73 to facilitate the 12th Heads of State Summit conference of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) by architects from one of the founding countries of the Non-Aligned Movement: Tito's Yugoslavia. Being too young to be considered historic, both buildings appear out of place and out of time, undervalued and overlooked in a city without a registry and planning control. While the conference center is in a well-maintained and original condition, the hotel's renovation has transformed it beyond recognition. Their historical significance, particularly of the conference center, would hold value in any other context. However, in Uganda, it seems to bear no weight beyond the faint memory of past geopolitical alliances and ideals. The fact that the facility is disregarded as the venue for the upcoming Non-Aligned Movement summit reinforces this perception. This article describes these intricacies because they are rarely documented elsewhere. Consequently, it is a part of the Shared Heritage Africa project, aimed at rediscovering masterpieces of the Modern Movement.

**KEYWORDS:** International Conference Centre, Kampala, Organization of African Unity (OAU), Non-Aligned Movement, Energoprojekt



**INTRODUCTION:** Kampala, the capital of Uganda, has transitioned from colonial rule to independence, civil unrest, and now relative calm. Historic buildings have survived from various periods but often lack proper maintenance and are at risk of demolition or redevelopment. In a city without an official heritage register and planning control, initiatives to protect historic buildings and sites do exist. However, these initiatives currently only extend to the 1960s. For instance, as part of the 2019 African World Heritage Day, the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda launched an app and a photo book in partnership with the European Union (Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda 2019). The app and photo book lists a wide range of architectural styles from periods up to the year 1969, after which it abruptly stops. The absence of buildings built after 1970 may be attributed to a common practice of not considering buildings younger than half a century for protected status. In Uganda, this coincides with the beginning of the regime of Idi Amin in 1971 and a prolonged civil war in the country. Thus, there are numerous reasons these buildings are not considered for protection, which presents a challenge for protecting Modern Movement buildings in Uganda that were constructed from 1970 onwards.

This article is written in the context of the Shared Heritage Africa (SHA) project, which “aims to provide an African perspective on the documentary rediscovery of modern university campuses and other significant buildings in West and East Africa” (Architectuul, 2022). It focuses on the Uganda International Conference Centre (built in 1971, [FIGURE 01]) and Nile Hotel (built in 1972-1973) in Kampala—today known as Serena International Conference Centre and Serena Hotel.

## A TURBULENT CAPITAL

The conference center was commissioned by President Milton Obote in 1970 to host the 8th Organization of African Unity (OAU) Summit that was scheduled for June 1971. It was built by the Yugoslav engineering firm Energoprojekt during the heydays of the Non-Aligned Movement. Since then, the OAU has transformed into the African Union (AU), and Yugoslavia has disintegrated. The Non-Aligned Movement lost much of its influence after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of its founding member Yugoslavia.

The Nile Hotel and Conference Centre buildings are unique due to their political dimensions, which make them simultaneously exceptional and vulnerable. This article does not offer an assessment of the heritage values of the buildings, nor does it provide an architectural review. Instead, it emphasizes the complexity of their historical significance. As both buildings have lost their cultural and political frameworks, they face a lack of interest

and documentation that renders them vulnerable, which becomes evident in the radical transformation of the Nile Hotel building.

## A POLITICAL BUILDING

The conference center should primarily be understood as a political structure. If Uganda had not hosted the summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), this building would not have been constructed. The OAU, established in 1961, aimed for the political and economic integration of the African continent, aiming to end (neo)colonialism. President Obote of Uganda had requested to host the 8th Heads of State Summit of the OAU in Kampala in 1971. However, shortly after his request, Obote was ousted from power in 1971 through a coup d'état staged by Idi Amin. The scheduled OAU Summit was hastily relocated to Addis Ababa. It was much later, in 1975, that the OAU agreed to host the 12th OAU Summit in Kampala. In that same year, Nigerian President General Yakubu Gowon handed over his responsibilities in the organization to Idi Amin as the outgoing chairman of the OAU (Lubega, 2021)

The OAU Heads of State Summit in Kampala, Uganda, held from July 28 to August 1, 1975, was a significant event (The National Archives, 2009, [FIGURE 02]). Prominent figures such as Yasser Arafat, Muammar Gaddafi, Muḥammad Anwar Sādāt, and Yakubu Gowon attended the conference. Drama ensued during the summit, with Yakubu Gowon overthrown by a coup d'état back in Nigeria (Reuters, 1975). At the summit's conclusion, the Ugandan Army held a mock air and sea assault on an



02 Amin as Chairman of the OAU. © BBC News, 2015.



03 International Conference Centre. 1970s. © History in Progress Uganda, n.d.



04 International Conference Centre next to Nile Hotel, now Serena Hotel. 1970s. © History in Progress Uganda, n.d.



05 FINDECO House in Lusaka, Zambia. © Niebyl, 2022.

island in Lake Victoria, simulating a battle to conquer Cape Town, South Africa.

An impressive collection of press photos, videos, and even a postage stamp still document the events surrounding the OAU Summit, with the Hotel and Conference Centre as the backdrop.

## A NON-ALIGNED CONTEXT

The hotel and conference center were designed and constructed by Energoprojekt, an engineering and construction firm from Belgrade, Yugoslavia [FIGURE 03, FIGURE 04]. During the 1970s, Energoprojekt was one of the top

ten construction companies in the world (Energoprojekt, 2011 and 2021). Yugoslavia's prominent role in the Non-Aligned Movement is said to have significantly contributed to Energoprojekt's success and its international portfolio (Sekulić et al., 2013).

The Non-Aligned Movement was established in 1961 in Belgrade by Josip Tito (Yugoslavia), Jawaharlal Nehru (India), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Sukarno (Indonesia), and Gamal Nasser (Egypt) (Miskovic, Fischer-Tiné, and Boskovska, 2014). As a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia chose an independent course distinct from both the West and the East. It engaged in relationships with the Global South that critics often overlook in the contemporary discourse on (de)colonialism. Other North-South exchanges existed alongside those influenced by British-French late-colonialism or American imperialism (Van der Hoeven and Ivković, 2021).

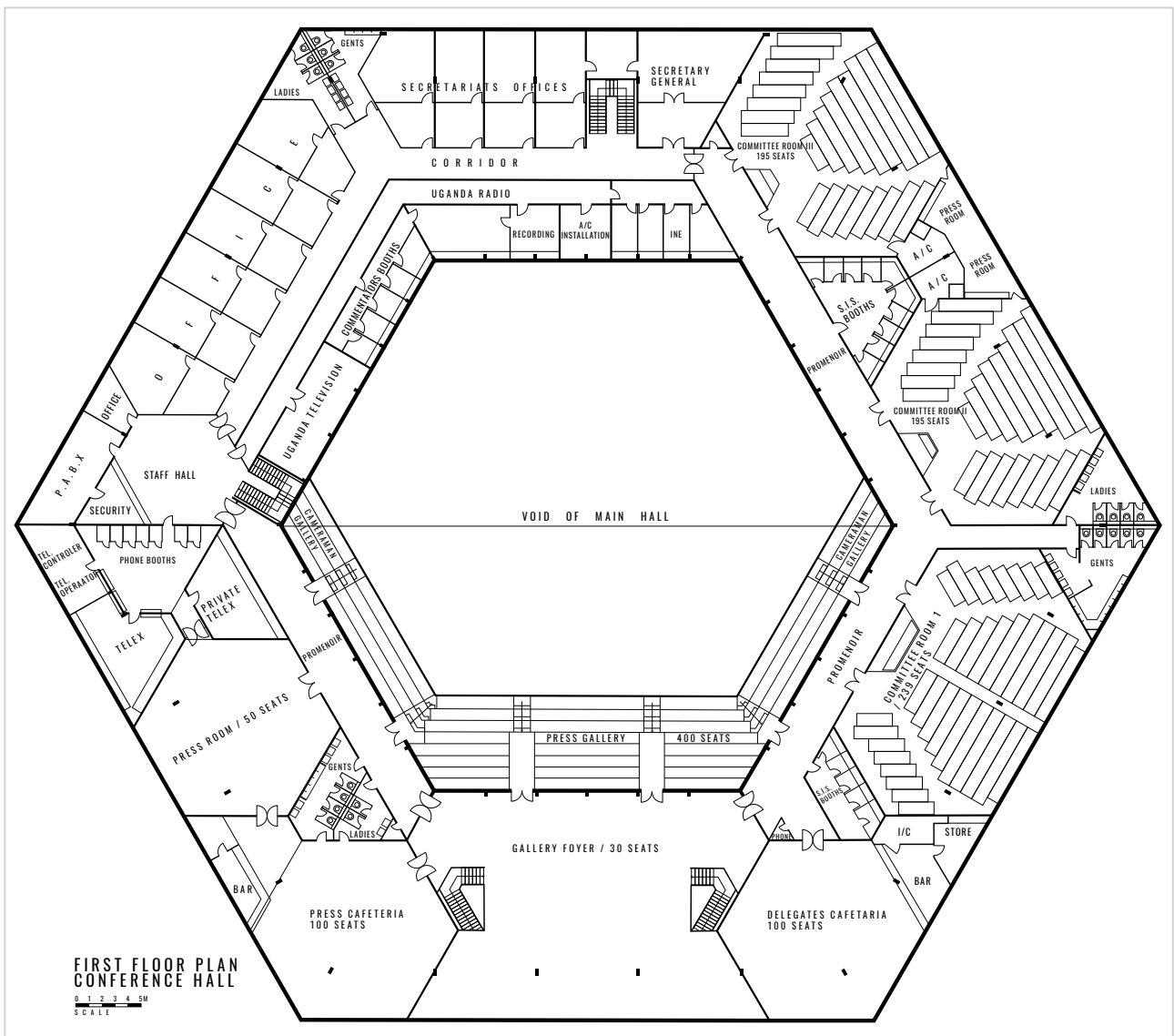
Yugoslav architects and engineers benefited from the unique non-aligned position of their country. Their work reflects influences from the capitalist West, the communist East, and their experiences in Africa and the Middle East: countries such as Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Iraq, Kuwait, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Niebyl, 2022). Experts point to the high quality and diversity of architectural production in former Yugoslavia, resulting from a practice of organizing design competitions. Unfortunately, all of this was lost due to the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the brutal civil wars that followed in the 1990s.

## SPARSELY DOCUMENTED

Perhaps it is no wonder that fifty years later, it is not that easy to pinpoint precisely when both buildings were completed. Some sources claim the International Conference Centre was 'unveiled' in 1975 (Niebyl, 2022). Others refer to 1971 as the completion date of both buildings (Energoprojekt, 2021). More detailed references include a construction timeline: 1970-1971 for the conference center and 1972-1973 for the hotel (Sekulić et al., 2013).

In a similar fashion, it is not easy to pinpoint who the actual architects were. While both buildings were built by the same engineering firm and for the same OAU summit, they do not constitute an ensemble. A small booklet published by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (Sekulić et al., 2013) reveals that the conference center in Kampala was the work of Dušan Milenković, who, during the same period, designed the FINDECO House in Lusaka, Zambia, in collaboration with Branimir Ganović. [FIGURE 05]

The conference center is a large, elevated, hexagonal structure [FIGURE 06]. As such, it bears a strong resemblance with the Palais de Conférences by Energoprojekt in Libreville, Gabon, completed in 1977 (and demolished in 2014), which hosted the 14th OAU Summit Conference.



06 International Conference Centre, floorplan first floor, redrawn by author based on original scan. © Government of Uganda, 1971.

The conference center in Kampala has a floor space of 13,000 m<sup>2</sup> and was built in 181 days (Wakabi, 2021) between November 1970 and May 1971. Its façade is adorned with decorative aluminum panels to shield against the sun while enhancing the building's aesthetics. [FIGURE 07, FIGURE 07]

The Nile Hotel, with its 140 rooms, was built to accommodate the heads of state [FIGURE 09, FIGURE 10]. It was linked to the conference center by a covered walkway. The hotel was designed by Aleksandar Keković, who also designed the passenger terminal at Entebbe Airport and later became the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade (Architectuur, n.d.).

07 International Conference Centre, today Serena International Conference Centre. © Author, 2023.



08 Today's Serena International Conference Centre, façade. © Author, 2023.





- 09 Nile Hotel before renovation.  
© Nile Hotel International Ltd, n.d.
- 10 Stamp showing the International Conference Centre and Nile Hotel. © British East Africa, 1975.

## UNDERVALUED AND OVERLOOKED

Currently, both buildings have been rebranded under the name Serena Hotel and Conference Centre. The conference center appears to be well-maintained and largely in its original state, while the hotel underwent an extensive makeover. It reopened in July 2006 after 18 months of refurbishments and renovations, being “inspirationally styled as a showcase for Ugandan art” according to Serena. All modernist features are now concealed under decorative façade elements. [FIGURE 11]

Both buildings seem orphaned. The OAU is transformed, Yugoslavia has disintegrated, and even the Non-Aligned Movement is no longer what it once was. Initially founded in Yugoslavia’s capital, Belgrade, the only remaining European member is Belarus. In 2024, it will be Uganda’s turn to host the 19th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Heads of State and Government Summit. The old conference center could have been a symbolic place to host such an event, designed as a summit of heads of state of an international organization by architects from one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the purpose of hosting the summit is no longer focused on

anti-colonialism or the balance between East and West. President Yoweri Museveni has made it clear that the summit is an opportunity to market Uganda and boost tourism. As such, the conference will be hosted at the Munyonyo Commonwealth Resort and Conference Center, 13 kilometers to the south of Kampala, on the shores of Lake Victoria.

## CONCLUSION

The complex political history of the International Conference Centre and Nile Hotel would add additional layers of significance to any other cultural environment that values heritage buildings. In the context of Kampala, however, it seems that this history has put both buildings at risk. The hotel has been recognized mainly for its residual redevelopment potential and has been refurbished beyond recognition. The conference center is no longer considered to be the place to host summits of heads of state. Both buildings are considered too young to be deemed historic. The organizations that could have acted as patrons for their protection and renovation (OAU and Yugoslavia) no longer exist. As a result, these built artifacts from a time of different geopolitical alliances might simply disappear, much like the OAU hexagon conference center in Gabon, also designed by Energoprojekt. [FIGURE 12]



**Name:** Serena International Conference Centre and Serena Hotel (actual name)

**Location:** Kampala, Uganda

**Architect(s):** built by Yugoslav architects of the Energoprojekt engineering/construction firm: Dušan Milenković (International Conference Center) and Aleksandar Keković (Nile Hotel)

**Year completed:** 1971-73

**Coordinates:** 0°19'03.4"N 32°35'11.2"E

11 Today’s Serena Hotel after renovation. © Tripadvisor, n.d.



12 a, b: Palais de Conférences by Energoprojekt in Libreville, Gabon (super resolution and rectifying by author). © unknown, n.d.

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**Milena Ivković** is an architect, urban planner and civic participation innovator specializing in place-led public space renewal. Milena's experience includes working for various Dutch and international consultancies and think-tanks on holistic public space design methodologies. She managed the ISOCARP UPAT programme for in-situ participatory workshops on urban regeneration in many countries. She is the creative director of BLOK 74, a digital design collective with expertise in serious games and gamified simulations for collaborative urban design and scientific communication, based in Rotterdam. Since 2021, Milena has been leading the Association Placemaking Western Balkans, a non-profit association of urban professionals based in Belgrade, Serbia.

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