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# THE WARM CONTACT ZONE




**FIGURE 1**
British version of the *Manual of Tropical Housing and Building*, Longmann Press, 1974.

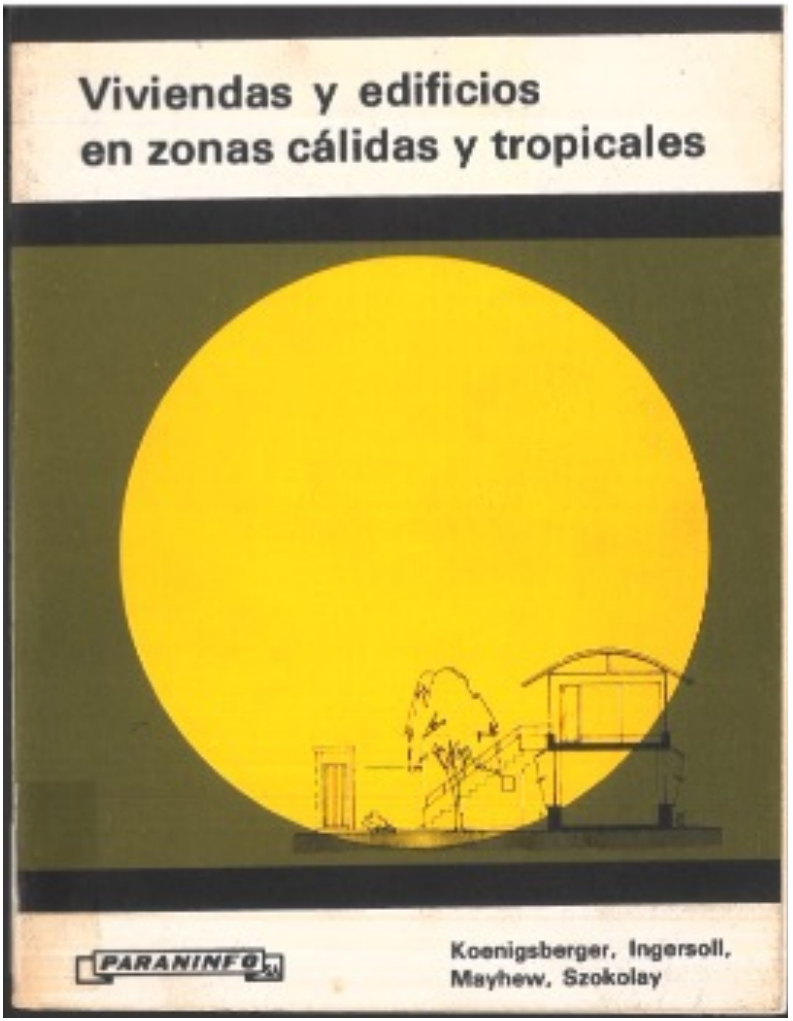





**FIGURE 2**
Spanish version of the *Manual of Tropical Housing and Building*, titled *Viviendas y edificios en zonas cálidas y tropicales*, Paraninfo, 1977.

What does it mean to be too warm? Warmth is kindness, touch, and protection within measure. An excess of warmth implies discomfort, heat, hot-headedness; it leads to a passionate reaction or drowsiness, towards love or hate. 'Warm wishes' or 'warmest' signs our emails to friends and loved ones, but 'warming' or 'heating' points at a climate, a relationship, a debate changing to hostile and inhospitable. 'Warm' is the sun kissing one's cheek, 'warming' is the sun burning one's skin, and heat is an unstable, changing relation of romance and violence. Here, I want to explore briefly how we speak of warmth in the architecture of climatic zones as expressed in two covers of *The Manual of Tropical Housing and Building* in 1974 and 1977.

Histories of mid- and late-twentieth-century architecture in the so-called 'tropical' region of the world are in vogue with examples at the Architectural Association and Venice Biennale in 2023, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2024, Wende Museum in California in 2025, or the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2026. Publications on the matter abound across journals such as *Architecture Beyond Europe* or *Architectural Theory Review* and in the books *Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence* (V&A Publications 2024), *As Hardly Found: Art and Tropical Architecture* (Architectural Association Publications 2025), and *Reconsidering Tropical Architecture and Urbanism* (Bloomsbury 2026). These exhibitions and publications build on academic work initiated in the 1990s that established tropical architecture as a historically widely used and situated term. The term 'tropical architecture' referred to the post-war post-colonial products of design and planning methods concerned with climate and rapid urban growth in newly independent nations situated in the tropical regions of the world. In this context, 'tropical modernism' is an anachronism because this term was not used during the period or in this context. Instead, 'tropical modernism' is part of a recent intellectual movement known as 'multiple modernities' that aims to consider modernism in regions other than Europe, Japan, South of Latin America, and North America. In doing so, however, an idea of tropical modernism inserts architectural histories of Africa,

South and Southeast Asia, and North of Latin America as appendixes or othered forms of modernism. As a result, we encounter terms like modernism referring to Europe and othered modernisms like African modernism, Asian modernism, and Tropical modernism next to it.

The renewed attention to these histories is motivated by a combination of movements and academic policies to decolonise architecture. In this field of tropical architecture, many postwar post-colonial leading architecture figures from Britain, the US, Portugal, China, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and others, are ageing or have recently passed away. As they leave their archives in public institutions, some of these architects expressed to me a concern with the present and future narratives about their professional achievements, i.e. they want to appear generous and important. Indeed, most of their professional careers, most of the time, were generative and impactful.

I also have concerns with the narratives that are and will be written about their professional achievements, although my concerns differ from theirs. First, only the most privileged architects, for the most part in imperial metropoles, have been able to collect a substantial archive because they had the space, the professional support, and the economic means to do so. Second, most of the institutions preserving these archives and the publications, exhibitions, and films about tropical architecture will be in the imperial metropoles. These two facts, I think, cause multiple points of conflict: the preservation of the work in the tropical zone by authors from the temperate zone, the location of the archive in the temperate zone about architecture made in the tropical zone, the representation/archiving of the tropical zone through the ideas of those from the temperate zones, and ultimately the construction of an idea of the tropical zone from imperial metropoles.

Some exhibitions and publications about tropical architecture explore responses to a globe too warm to live in, or as they call it: 'a new future in an era of climate change' (Turner 2014). Perhaps some examples of tropical architecture meant to cool down temperatures, dissipate humidity,

and tackle speedy urban growth could provide resources to the planet's now turbulent climate and highly populated cities. However, in doing so, these exhibitions reify heat and not warmth, conflict instead of understanding. By reattaching heat to the tropics, they associate the tropical zone to spaces that are hostile, excessive, other (Driver & Yeoh 2000; Lara 2009). In contrast, the temperate zone appears 'not too hot or cold', it seems that it is just perfect. These adjectives expand through language to the people in the zone: 'temperate' suggests an environment and people who are moderate, self-controlled, or tamed. We use this term and variations when attaching it to another word: 'tempered steel' and 'temper your mood'.

This expansive notion of 'the tropical' (as hostile, excessive, other) shapes the cover of the *Manual of Tropical Housing and Building*, still reprinted and used in some architecture schools worldwide. A London-based group of leading architecture consultants, planners, and educators published the book in 1974 after twenty years teaching tropical architecture at the Department of Tropical Architecture in the Architectural Association of London. During those years, the director of the Department, Otto Koenigsberger, had been thinking about what was too hot and too humid to work, play, live, and think. He reflected this in the first draft for *The Manual* in 1953: '[I]n the tropics it is not only the conditions of temperature and humidity which adversely affect man, the real danger appears to be the sameness of the climate with its demoralising effect upon the mind' (Koenigsberger 1953).

The cover in the first British version projected a sun spreading through the tropical region of the world as a generic hostile environment populated by lush green nature and dominated by a sun almost too excessive to be contained in the cover (Figure 1). *The Manual* insisted that most of the daily activities in the tropical zone took place outside the building, thus the cover needs no architectural construction. The title of the *Manual* that defined a tropical category of building and housing implied that housing and building in the tropical zone were part of the environment itself, instead of being placed in it. It was 'tropical housing and building'

and not 'housing and building in the tropical zone'. The Spanish version changed the title significantly to *Housing and Building in Warm and Tropical Zones*.[1] Suddenly, housing and building were not imbued with the characteristics of the zone but were independent of it. At the same time, the Spanish version (published in Spain) included a sense of a warm zone, different from the tropical zone. Was Spain the warm zone? This question points at an idea that there was a contact geography between the tropical (or too hot) and the temperate (or ideal warmth). Was the warm zone able to detach housing and buildings from their environments, unlike the tropical zone? This question points to the fact that the notion of tropical zone framed every possible way to think of people and architecture in the tropics (as in 'tropical modernism). Can these just be modern? Or even better, can these just be 'architecture'?

The graphic design on the cover of the Spanish version presented the warm contact zone.[2]The sun of the tropical version was spreading through most of the cover. This time, however, it included a house on pilotis within the sun. If warmth is kindness, touch, and protection within measure, then the architecture of the warm zone promoted the contact between interior and exterior spaces. If Spain was the warm contact zone, then perhaps it was also the geography where the tropical exteriority met the temperate interiority of life. The graphic gesture expressed the relation between the actual penetration of climate inside the building and the social life of Spanish homes that expand to their surrounding public space.

The warm zone, which the Spanish version highlighted, happened to be just halfway between the temperate and the tropical zone, just by the

1 *Viviendas y Edificios en Zonas Cálidas y Tropicales* [Housing and Buildings in Warm and Tropical Zones]

2 The 'contact zone' is a sociological academic term that refers to 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.' Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession* 1991, 1991, pp. 33–40 (p. 34).

Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of Spain: the *Manual* included photographs of the Southern parts of the Iberian Peninsula as 'warm zones' (Figure 2) that the British version had not considered. This is a fact that I am now grappling with. First, the Spanish version invented a definition that avoided the hostile connotation of the 'tropical'. Second, it grouped into the term 'warm and tropical world', which some might now refer to as subtropical and tropical zones. And third, it presented a division between two Spains: the temperate and the quasi-temperate or quasi-tropical.

I speculate on the possible tropicalisation of a Spain that was coming out of a dictatorship at the time of the publication, and which architects associated with 'tropical architecture' of the time visited and now speak about it in exotic ways. They tell me histories of poverty, of bullfighting, of people's kindness and welcoming spirit, of strange foods, and of a life in community, outside the home. It was a space of contact, where touching was promoted, where sun tourism promoted nakedness for those in the North, seen with jealousy by those oppressed by Franco's dictatorship in Spain and a long-lasting legacy of conservative mentality. In Spain, we think of the Northern white blonde stereotyped tourists that showed Spaniards what liberation, progress, and modernity, made of exposed flesh under the kissing sun, meant. A time where contact was possible, where warmth, both in temperatures and in behaviour, liberated the cold temperate mindsets; it was also a space of liberation for them. The setting was one of the origins of an architecture they called modernism, along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, Brazil, and other places, where modernists like Le Corbusier fell in love with the sun, the white flat roofs, the community life outside the home. Their skins entered into contact with nature's forces and the societies that inhabited them, and which served to shape what architects in temperate zones decided to call warm architecture: somewhere between the cosy temperate and the hostile, too-warm, tropical zone, that burned the skin instead of kissing it. With these ideas, I explore a colonial social construction of the tropical and the temperate, and their warm contact zone.

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## Figure References

Figure 1: Koenigsberger, O., Ingersoll, T. G., Mayhew, A., & Szokolay, S. V. (1974). *Manual of Tropical Housing and Building* [Book Cover]. Longmann Press.

Figure 2: Koenigsberger, O., Ingersoll, T. G., Mayhew, A., & Szokolay, S. V. (1977). *Viviendas y edificios en zonas cálidas y tropicales* (Spanish version of Manual of Tropical Housing and Building) [Book Cover]. Paraninfo.