

Why is African Architecture relevant?

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In this paper I ask what could bring about the proper endowment of Architecture in Africa, who will make the necessary investment in this subject and why? My observations are based on twenty years of practice in the UK, five years thinking and reading about, and a year of living in, West Africa, specifically Accra and Lagos.

1. Architecture is an essential instrument in city development

Going back to the 1950s and '60s, both in the developed and undeveloped worlds, state-sponsored architecture projects were a leading element in economic development and 'modernization' – viz. the legacy of Modern buildings in Ghana. But this phase of state-sponsored investment and development collapsed from the 1970s onwards, as the necessary borrowing and financing couldn't be sustained, and oil crises and other conflicts erupted. In undeveloped economies such projects also foundered, as their inability to make any real impact on housing and infrastructure problems in the face of the huge scale of urbanization and growth of informal settlements, became apparent.

At this time there was a strong reaction against development led by physical planning. Architects can be said to have retreated from involvement in the bigger questions of the city into the individual building and site. The ideology of 'self-help' as espoused by people such as John Turner came to the fore. UN Habitat was created in Vancouver in 1976 with a focus on poverty and informal settlements. Other questions about the city were abandoned, and have only recently begun to be re-tabled¹.

This divide, between Architecture and the problem of the City, is still with us, in the architecture schools and practices in the UK. And here in Kumasi – where are the planners, the city-makers?

In the UK, following USA, the investment in regeneration of dying cities entailed the revisioning of, reinvestment in, their decaying quarters. This called for new spatial skills which had by then become re-stated as 'Urban Design'. My recent experience of Master planning, as this process became called in the UK, is that it is predominantly the Landscape Architects or Town Planners-become-Urban-

¹ Refer to Paper for on Urbanisation for the Centre for Regulation and Competition, Manchester University UK at Cape town Conference July 2004

Designers who have the required skills for Urban Design, for looking at space and infrastructure over larger areas. The skills of the Architect remain limited to re-examining capacity and re-valuing specific sites. This has been reinforced by the fact that advances in technology have meant that the design of individual sites has also become immensely more complicated and demanding.

This current phase of 'urban regeneration', differs from the 1950-70 period of large-scale planned physical change, in that government powers, initiative and investment are used only to initiate and leverage private finance and ensure buy-in from the consumers/communities involved. This approach, which has become highly developed in the UK in the last ten years, is not so apparent in West Africa other than on one two major international investment and development sites such as Tinapa in Cross River State, Nigeria, or the recently announced special economic zone at the former Mutukula Airport in Uganda. It is not applied more widely to the problems of urbanization.

Meanwhile the reaction against physical strategies for urban development by the grant aided, poverty-focused development sector still remains. It is reflected in the Millennium Development Goals: essential as these are, they make no reference to, and have no categories which would cause anyone to relate to, spatial strategies. More recently, however, some UN Habitat projects have begun to look at holistic area-based (i.e. with a spatial element) strategic plans². There are issues of private and community land ownership, of regulation, investment and enforcement of 'wholly' sound urban development which are arguably equally important problems to solve as those of extreme poverty.

At the 'Next Stop Kumasi' seminar in Princeton, Deeplai Tewari, a trained architect who now manages the infrastructure investment projects for Lagos funded by the World Bank, saw the way ahead as being to develop local, autonomous, experiments in holistic regeneration akin to the master planning which I referred to above. To tackle this at the city level would be too overwhelming and too circumscribed by currently immovable existing powerful federal and state institutions. The potential of the visionary nature of design in the subject of Architecture means that Architects are well-placed to play a leading part in bringing such projects, which would have to be multidisciplinary, into being. A seminar held at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London last year was an excellent example of this. Convened by the London-based Nigerian diasporan Architects' group 'Bukka', it tabled the legal, educational, economic, literary, and cultural and other perspectives on the city which make design make sense. It showed how an Architect-initiated perspective could work.

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Who needs us? Investment Banks, Development Companies, Governments, International Development Agencies who are all faced with the problem of the African City: if one of the outcomes of this conference is to bring these parties to the table, it will have been worth it.

2. Architecture is a key instrument in the research, marketing and development of construction resources.

The importation of badly-fitting foreign construction systems and materials is an integral part of the importation of developed-world values which stunt Ghanaian modernity and identity. But Ghana's major export success stories such as cocoa products, and tropical fruit juices, are lessons in how the tables could be turned. These were created by innovative and daring, courageous individuals.

What are Ghana's exportable construction products? This question will not be answered without research, innovation and investment. In Kumasi there is an excellent Building Research Institute – does it spin-off successful construction export businesses?

Where is the inspiration and confidence that a new product will be better than so much of what we import, often from colder climates, which doesn't work here or is inappropriate? Where is the discovery that it could work well in other regions or climates, has export potential? What about use of natural fibres or sustainable hardwoods in organic-obsessed developed economies, or low energy low-cost systems such as mud?

Construction in Ghana, as in other less developed economies, has a huge cheap labour supply from the urbanization of those in rural subsistence areas which makes it fundamentally different from the developed economies. The divisions of labour, some continued from colonial period industrial methods long-since gone in the developed world, are comparatively very strong. This gives a rationale to construction which is opposite to the high-labour-value developed economies. It causes an immense schism between high value, imported and low value indigenous systems in less developed countries such as Ghana.

But the high value methods are also high energy methods. Ghana is using low energy organic systems by default. Is this a position from which we can innovate: what would the pre-fabricated African-made house that Europeans, Americans, Chinese, Japanese etc rush to buy, be like? The novelty of this very idea exposes the weight of influence of imported systems on local identity. With our technology comes our identity. Imported ceiling and partitioning systems, glazing, services etc. play their part in the maintaining a lack of confidence in Ghanaian/African identity.

Who needs us? Construction and materials suppliers, export and investment agencies: if one of the outcomes of this conference is to bring the construction and materials industries to the table, it will have been worth it.

3. Architecture contains ideas about the physical/spatial aspects of our culture and can as such become a cornerstone of our identity.

Architecture as a subject could be resourced by other sectors if its protagonists play a positive role in the above economic positions, as well as being “the designers of the individual building on the individual plot”. The other debates we are having, about tradition and modernity, about technology, about research and education are relatively meaningless (remain “academic”), unless they are directly in dialogue with these wider concerns and sectors.

From the question of the city to the individual construction component, architects can lead, innovate, inspire. The language with which they do this is the language of Architecture. Where will we learn this language, what will it be like?

The reproduction of traditional African buildings and culture has its place, akin to for example the clogs, windmills and tulips of Holland. I notice that the tourist shops of London have the London Taxi, the Double-Decker bus, the Union Jack and Tower Bridge, as most prominent in their stock rather than traditional pre-industrial English culture. They derive as much or more from the urban myths which accompanied the era of industrialization and modernization as from the pre-industrial past.

“We do not take our own art and culture seriously – that is why Ghanaian and African artists are not encouraged by our own people. We must place our art and culture in a more modern perspective. People must be made aware of these values – because it is from them that we can rediscover ourselves and draw our inspiration to face our national responsibilities”³.

Look to Ghana’s new music, clothes, lifestyles – none of which could exist without tribal traditions but all of which are more than one step removed from them. Let us also accept that the present day cultures in Africa are as hybridized as anywhere else. The European forts and colonial period buildings are part of Ghana’s history. The emphasis on the uniqueness of traditional, pre-modern legacy can institutionalize backwardness, just as an emphasis on informal housing poverty without seeing the routes out of it into middle and higher income housing, can institutionalize poverty. These are necessary parts of a

³ The late Saka Acquaye, Ghana’s ‘great artist polymath’ quoted in preface to “Independence in Dependence” April 2007 Exhibition at Artists Alliance Gallery, La- Accra, by Odile Agyare.

picture which must be balanced with the many other things that are going on in African Architecture.

4. In Conclusion

African Architecture needs friends and it needs substantial investment. It needs to re-connect with the problematic of the city, to be daring and innovative and attractive. It needs to do so in partnership with the movers and shakers in emerging African countries and economies.