

The African house today : observations from Burkina and Tanzania

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1 introduction

Traveling through Africa left me with an impression of endless rows of small houses with tin roofs. In the rural, a ribbon along the motorway [fig 1.1]; in the city, rank after rank [fig 1.2]. A sea of square and dull houses, interspersed with alien circular structures or houses with thatched roofs standing proof of a soon to disappear medieval past.



Fig 1.1 Mtinko Village Tanzania



Fig 1.2 Dar es Salaam suburb Tanzania

How much this picture differs from the arcadia images from books that I cherished whilst studying traditional or vernacular African architecture [fig 1.3]. This traditional African house, whether situated in the forest, in the savannah, in the rural or in the city was organic and cosmogonic. It was a living organism sculptured out of the local earth or weaved from locally grown thatch and wood. An organism arranged to accommodate the time cycle of generations, the tasks and positions of the members of the *cour*.¹ The *cour* was the locus and the home of the extended family, transforming over time by adding and removing cells, the cabins, the *cases*, belonging to the individual, to cook, to store food or house animals, to sleep or to procreate.

The *cour* would stay alive as long as there were children born to erect their own *cases*, once grown to adulthood, to assume their responsibility in the cycle of birth, life and death.

The Burkinabé *cour* was arranged often in circle, in a loose composition of *cases* around an open centre, or courtyard. The *cases* were as rule interconnected with walls which denominated the perimeter of the *cour*. The *cour* was the center and the name of the group or family belonging to the compound.

Modernity is changing the African house drastically and fast, to such an extend that it seems that nothing of the traditional African *cour* is surviving.

This paper unravels this transition from the angles of urbanism, technology, furnishing and decoration. From this rather superficial analysis, partly gathered by professional experience as an architect in the field and partly through theoretic sources, a task emerges for the researcher, but even more so, for the practicing architect sincerely willing to contribute to the improvement of the housing situation in Africa by lending his ear to the profane.

¹ Cour (Fr) the double meaning of courtyard and court, the court not belonging to a high ranking person, but being the extended family.

The paper may at times refer to 'African' thus generalizing broadly, yet with information that was drawn from specific countries (in particular Burkina Faso and Tanzania) and superficially compared through visits to books and places located elsewhere on the continent.

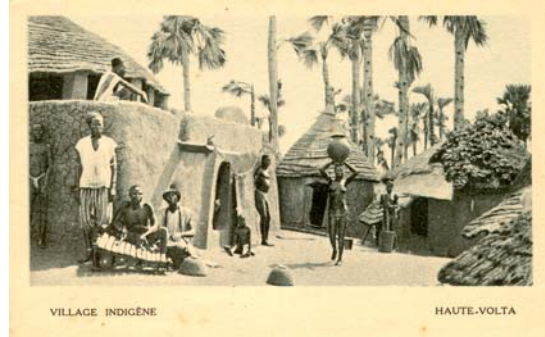


Fig 1.3 traditional village in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso)

2 The house in the modern African city

The African city of today pretends to be a modern city following modernist rules². The city centers of major African towns do not differ much of their counterparts in other regions of the world. The ideal dwelling of the modern African citizen, at a first glance, looks like a middle class American or European home. It is the freestanding house in the center of an individualized plot.

However, the incredible growth of the African cities is not following the global pattern. Only a small percentage of the African city population lives in the ideal situation of a freestanding house with a garden around. Most people do live in a transitory situation, commencing in the so-called uncontrolled, spontaneous or illegal extensions to these cities. Unfortunately the city is thus split into a formal, modern city and an informal transitional city [figs 2.1].

The informal city is often ignored by city planners and administrations and are subject to replacement by clean, formal modern tissue as soon as the conditions allow. Yet the formalization of the spontaneous city can by no means keep pace with the growth of the informal city.



Fig 2.1 Larlé area Ouagadougou in 1978



Fig 2.2 Larlé formal meets Larlé informal

In Ouagadougou, most *cours* within the spontaneous settlements more or less anticipate modernization [fig 2.2] and thus depart from organic tissue to approach orthogonal layouts. Pre-modern layouts are relatively rare and mostly reserved for the *cours* of traditional chiefs [figs 2.3; 2.4].

Once a spontaneous settlement is due for formalization, the area is mapped and invariably laid out according to an orthogonal grid with rational blocks consisting of a number of rectangular plots laid out in parallel back-to-back rows. The rectangular plot within a rectangular block fitted in the orthogonal grid is the basis of the African city, as it is for many a city in the world.

² Of traditional African cities little has survived, the notion of the existence of pre-modern African cities has even been questioned. To rectify this negation is not within the scope of this paper, but it might here be quoted that the urbanization level of Nigeria in the 19th century was higher than in France, that Raphta, Quiloa and Timboubou were cities that made antique and medieval travelers gasp. An important reason for the disappearance of the traditional African city lies hidden in the fact that the African city seldom aspired to be frozen in hard materials, or to erect perennial monuments. There was no reason for such, as the *cours* within the cities remained autonomous organisms rather than block segments.

The plots are comparatively small and uniform. They leave little room for the variety of the *cours*, let alone for expansion or contraction of the *cour*. It is clear that the loose and organic traditional arrangement is impossible within the new plot boundaries.

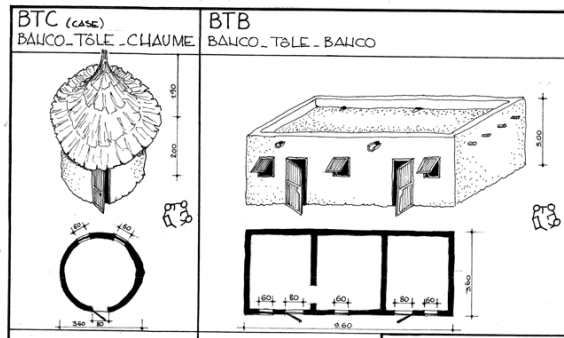


Fig 2.3 traditional cour components Ouagadougou



Fig 2.4 the cour of the Larlé Naba

In the early development of the *cour* within the modern urban context a direct translation is made by arranging the *cases* along the perimeter of the plot, as to allow the largest place possible to remain as physically open center. Circular *cases* disappear to make room for square or rectangular *cases* [fig 2.5]. These move together to form small clusters of, for instance male and female quarters.

However, plots do only have a single side facing an open public area, or exceptionally two sides if being a corner plot. The other sides face the neighbors directly, thus creating back to back structures that are within the urban context not always ideal as they block ventilation and create unwanted sound leaks between the *cours*. In modern city regulations set backs are often compulsory.

The consequence of moving away from the borders to the neighbors – generally regulations stipulate at least 1.5 metres – is that the *cases* move inwards, leaving yet lesser space for the *cour*.

The *cases* facing the public space now become areas of economic activities, run by either the *cour* inhabitants or rented out to third parties [figs 2.6; 2.7].

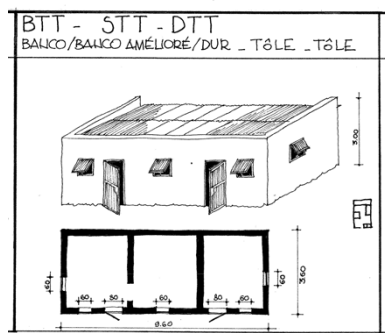


Fig 2.5 transitional case Ouagadougou

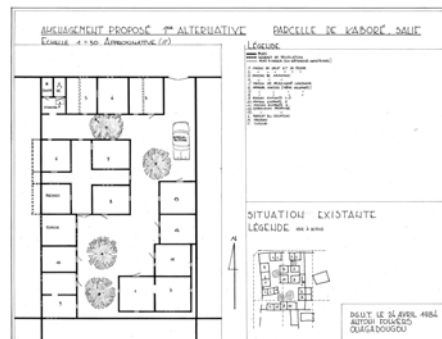


Fig 2.6 cour of the Kaboré family



Fig 2.7 cour of the Kaboré family in 1984

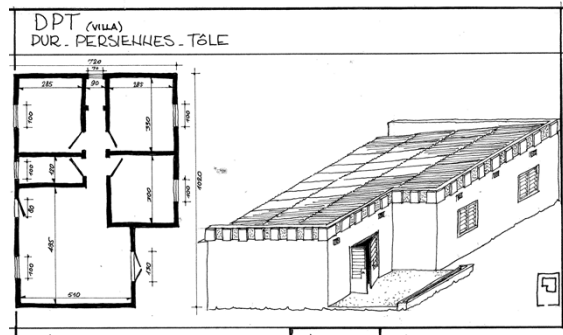


Fig 2.8 3rd stage development of the cour in Ouagadougou

The ultimate step in the adaptation of the *cour* to the modern city context is to join the cases together to form a freestanding house – a villa – in the centre of the plot [figs 2.8; 2.9]. The perimeter is free of cases, but remains walled around the *cour*. The *cour* as a courtyard with buildings around has made room for a *cour* consisting of a fluid open space – the garden - with a building in the centre. With this last step the inversion of the traditional *cour* is complete.

The floor plans of some of these mansions do raise questions by their layout, irrational to our western trained eyes [fig 2.10]. They clearly divert from the European villa. Analysis of the modern floor plan of middle class African houses, including the open spaces around, could cast some light on the question whether arrangements and compositions are influenced by the traditional *cour*. The analysis of houses designed and built by local craftsmen should be carried out parallel to the research on the use by African households of houses with floor plans to western pattern.

One of these studies is currently being undertaken by the African House Project by ArchiAfrika/STAND on the experiences and ideas of Ghanaian households in diaspora. They reflect on their past, present and future housing situation whilst living in the Amsterdam modernist context of the Bijlmermeer, a CIAM suburb par excellence [trailer shown at conference].



Fig 2.9 Temeke area in 1990 Tanzania



Fig 2.10 Kumasi suburb in 2007

3 Modern building technology in Africa

In the condensed context of the city it is hard to come by the traditional building materials. Thatch, palm leaves, cane, mud and wicker have to be transported over increasing distances and thus become costly. The sculptural way of building in mud [figs 3.1; 3.2], weaving thatch and split cane have made room for modern building methods with modern building materials : the *parpaing* and the *tôle*³, as soon as the city dweller can afford these⁴. Costs are certainly not the only driver to desert traditional building technology.



Fig 3.1 cour in Tiébélé Burkina Faso



Fig3.2 cour in Ouahigouya Burkina Faso

The alternative, so-called appropriate technology approaches that were launched in the 80ties of last century to stem the tide of uninspired *parpaing-tôle* technology and to give back pride and content to the African house proved not to be successful.

The field office for the pilot project for the formalization of the Larlé-Extension quarter in Ouagadougou [fig 3.3] was erected as an example in a dome and vault adobe architecture, derived through ADAUA from Hassan Fathy and promoted as logical and modern continuation of Burkinabé building technology. However this example was not followed in any but middle class fashionable housing. For the majority of people, designing and building their own dwelling, this was complicated technology not reflecting their idea of progress in life and wealth.



Fig 3.3 Bureau DGUT Ouagadougou 1984



Fig 3.4 roofscape Gounghin Ouagadougou

³ *parpaing* = building block made of cement and sand; *tôle* = corrugated iron sheet

⁴ In certain areas (in particular in South Africa) the first home in the city is a makeshift structure made of recycled or even reject and unconventional materials, hence the *bidonville* – the city made of old flattened oil cans. In the projects analyzed for this paper, the spontaneous settlements are erected in conventional materials and technology as described.

The all-time winners are thus the *parpaing*⁵, the *tôle* and sawn timber to support the *tôles* and to manufacture doors and windows [fig 3.4]. Materials that are produced and stocked in the city and comparatively cheap to transport. The success of these three building materials and the technology thereto belonging over almost the entire African continent is immense. Notwithstanding the costs, the departure of tradition, the lousy behavior of these materials in tropical climate, notwithstanding the poor sound insulation, notwithstanding the dull appearance.

In particular the *tôle* is the symbol of the success of modern building technology in Africa. The *tôle* is lightweight, durable, affordable, reusable and saves on the timber needed for the roof structure. Traditional thatch or palm leave roofs were to be at a minimum of 45 degrees slope to ensure water tightness and ventilation, a *tôle* roof can be laid a less than 15 degrees slope.

When the house needs to be demolished, the *tôle* can be dismantled, rolled and tied together on the back of a bicycle and transported to new site. The nail holes can be easily welded and the building component is ready for reuse.

These building elements define a modular building system. A cement block is 10, 15 or 23 centimeters thick (4", 6" or 9") by approximately 23 (9") and 45 (18") centimeters. A roof sheet is 90 by 240 or 300 centimeters (3' x 8' or 10') and the timbers are sawn to suit.

It goes without saying that this system denounces organic form and matches the orthogonal grid. A round *case* could still be built in *parpaings*, though clumsily, but to cover a conical roof with *tôles* is virtually impossible⁶.

The resulting houses built with this modular system can be easily guessed, and the endless ocean of monopitch, saddleback or hipped roofs to some 15 degrees pitch define the landscape of any young African city, rural town or suburb. The single story houses along major traffic arteries further grow spontaneously and organically in multifunctional and multistoried city buildings, interesting structures, unchecked, creative and sometimes very dangerous [fig 3.5].



Fig 3.5 main street development in Tanzania



Fig 3.6 residence in Arusha Tanzania

Are the *tôles* and *parpaings* symbols of progress, the precast Italianate banister is the sign of ultimate achievement. The houses of the wealthy, to be found in the

⁵ The *parpaing* is not yet affordable for all, and for the time being the mud block or adobe, and increasingly, burnt brick are used as alternative

⁶ With this it is not said that traditional African cases were of circular plan as a rule. This might have been predominantly the case in the Sahel regions, in the well-watered forest regions house plans were generally rectangular with steep thatched saddle back roofs.

suburbs of Dar es Salaam, Arusha and Zanzibar but also in Accra or Addis Ababa show an astonishing similarity in quoting of Mediterranean, Modern, Imperial or Arabesque styles, lavishly applying smoked glass in aluminum frames, Greek orders, tiles, strong colours, friezes, and banisters, banisters, banisters [figs 3.6; 3.7; 3.8; 3.9; 3.10].



Fig 3.7 residence in Dar es Salaam



Fig 3.8 apartment building in Zanzibar



Fig 3.9 villa in Zanzibar



Fig 3.10 detail of fig 3.9



Fig 4.1 interior of Cape Town dwelling (from Shack Chic)



Fig 4.2 interior of Nananke dwelling (fm Bourdier)

4 Furniture

Comes with the modern culture the confection furniture. Industrial furniture as a rule departs from the organic, and thus also plays a role in the conversion of the traditional house. 'Cubic' furniture fits not well in a round case.

African houses in the city are increasingly furnished with the standard components found elsewhere in the world. Cupboards, kitchen tops, beds, tables, chairs, household appliances, settees etcetera replace the pots, baskets, stools and mud benches all made of organic materials and often being part and parcel of the sculptured house [figs 4.1; 4.2].

5 Decoration and lifestyle

The modern African streetscape and house interiors, at a first glance, have little in common with forms, colors, textures and decorations of the traditional *cours*. The main decoration appears to be the application, ad infinitum, of western consumerist effigies [fig 5.1]. In South Africa the people living in the spontaneous settlements use refuse package material of foodstuffs, drinks or other commodities as wall covering, in East Africa painter artisans skillfully copy tobacco, beer and soft drink advertisement and apply them to the walls of the *duka's*⁷. After all, a house on a main street is always a shop or atelier.



Fig 5.1 Manzese streetscape Dar es Salaam

⁷ *duka* = shop (East Africa)

The South African decorated dwellings have been promoted to a true style: *shack chic*. This name bears the bitterness of the contradiction. Within the poorest context the well-swept and colorful dwellings are shown in movies, magazines, exhibitions and books as examples of a life worth living. People portrayed in this environment invariably smile, they smile just like people in the colonial postcards depicting the traditional African Arcadia setting [figs 5.1; 5.2].



Fig 5.1 Shack Chic



Fig 5.2 Congolese family ca 1920

It is tempting to believe this smile and think that this is a sign of emerging identity, or the renaissance of African culture, the *Afrenaissance* as prophesized by Ali Mazrui, which contains the creative African answer to globalization. However there might be a danger that these heavily decorated and colorful dwellings will be read as shouts in the desert for identity and a blanket to cover sheer poverty, sadness and suffering.

Far it thus seems away from the balanced and meaningful decorative programs of the traditional African *cours*. These contained a multi-layered story as the anthropologists have taught us. A story about past, present and future of the community, of the twin-phenomena of male and female, day and night, death and life, of to be and not yet been, of the place in the cosmos and the spirits of the forest. It needs to be researched whether these meanings have all been swept aside to make room for a new start in the modern world to modern principles or that they are, under the surface perhaps creating a *métissage* of African and globalist modern spirits.

6 Conclusions

In 1994 the parting founder and director of the Netherlands Architectural Institute Adri Duivesteijn called for a worldwide interest under professionals in architecture and urban planning and design for what he called '*the hidden assignment*' [fig 6.1]. He argued that the tools and approach of the modernists had failed to cope with the challenge of the urbanization of the third world. Low cost housing projects in Africa had been but a drop on a hot stone, worse, had eventually turned out as housing complexes for the well-to-do. Infrastructure and city planning had not been able to keep pace with the growth of the cities. The conclusion of the professionals had been that society, in the end, cannot be planned and built following the modernist dreams, and with that excuse, Diuvesteijn argued, the cleft between the formal and the informal city became fact.

The informal city was left to itself, until a new generation of architectural observers appeared on stage. Philosophers like Abdoumalig Simone, architects like Rem

Koolhaas and anthropologists like Filip de Boeck [fig 6.2] brought the hidden assignment back on the agenda of the formal architectural debate. It is through them that a global interest is awaking for the hidden assignment. A challenge that accounts for as much as 80% -or more- of the building stock in Africa.

As outlined above, there are many fields that require research, and not only from an academic distance, but on the locus. Because every place and every human again is unique. We, that is the architectural theoreticians and reflexive practitioners, need to help the people to find their identity, be it original, modern or métisse. An exploration into the fate of the *cour* could be a thread helping finding this identity, as it was such a strong binder in African society in the past.

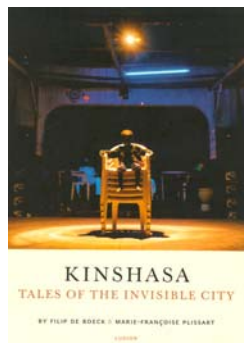


Fig 6.1 Kinshasa



Fig 6.2 the hidden assignment

However we have to be aware that we do not remain in observation, in watching, listening and analyzing in learned philosophical discourses. Next to this important theoretical exercise we have to roll up our sleeves and go into the field to work. To work with the people, to assist them with our technical knowledge in their ventures, to learn them to selfbuilt better, and not to take the work out of their hands because they cannot afford paying us.

The reality and challenge of the *parpaing* and the *tôle*: what can we make out of these? To enhance the creativity of the people to mould these winner materials and to develop them into material, technology and structure that becomes adapted to the locus again.

The urban reality, why not accepting the organically grown patterns of the spontaneous African cities, rather than stubbornly turning the whole world in a checkerboard? After all, sewage lines will not arrive in the coming years, whether straight or crooked. Better bank on the autarkic solutions and develop those than try to stick to the impossible heavy centralized infrastructure that no African city can afford for many years to come. Think of the enormous success of the cellular phone in Africa: it is advanced technology that brought the solution for communication. No the wires.

Why not building the African suburb accepting an African sprawl of very large cours, not 200 sqm but 500 sqm at least, allowing the households to continue informal business income and autonomy within their own borders.

And, in the end, assists in creating from the 'worthless' modern house a meaningful *cour* that transpires true hope and identity.