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**What is an African architecture?**

If we try to answer this apparently simple question using a quantitative yardstick we may, unavoidably, come to the conclusion that it is a built universe mostly put together out of recycled materials, covered with rusting corrugated iron sheets on top of unpainted concrete blocks or wattle and daub walls, and set within impossible high density slums where there is no running water, sanitation, electricity or refuse collection.

This description fits at least 75% of the African architecture and urban environments to be found from the Sahel to Capetown.

Other characterisations can identically be made to fit different segments of the African society and its built environment.

One of them is the cosmopolitan image of the Johannesburg or Nairobi's CBDs, with its shining skyscrapers or the shopping malls of Durban or Harare.

Yet another could be the traditional village setting with its cane and reed huts or the adobe walls and flat roofs of the dry regions, expressing quickly disappearing ways of living of the reluctant peasant, anxious to leave for the city or, at least for the city's dreamed advantages.

This is the one image taken as the true expression of the African architecture.

Finally, and to complete this caricature, we must consider another image, the one sold as the "true" and desirable expression of the African architectural spirit: the tourist safari camp with its, often imported, manicured thatch on polished knotty wooden poles and reed blinds, preferably photographed with an impeccably starchy white dressed waiter carrying the obligatory tray with tinkling glasses, the whisky and ice bucket.

This is the acquired cherished image of the "true" African spirit of "traditional" architecture, sold by countless tourist agents and assumed by the new African elite as their connection with the ancestral values, preferably enriched with fake baroque furniture, to lend a touch of royalty to our right to be as grand and, if possible, even more important and powerful than the masters of colonial times.

Within those choices what is the true and chosen image of the African architecture?

If expressed by the number of people, the extension of its spread and the speed of its reproduction, then the first image, the slum, is the true one.

As desired by the new entrepreneurial classes of the modern urban African corporate businessman, for his daily working environment, then the second image is the convenient one.

When considered by the tourists or by the anthropologists, by the social scientists or the worshipers of the romantic image of the simple African as a research subject, then the third image is the elected and preferred expression of the African architecture.

But for all of the interested parties the last one is the dreamed one, the one that nobody disputes as representing the true and real African ethos.

That is an image being constructed for a long time, and throughout the world, with films like “My Africa” and the “African Queen”, “King’s Solomon Mines” and dozens of others sold, at exorbitant prices each night, to thousands of tourists much more interested in animals than in people. This is an image that has acquired a new and fresh nobility with the supposed ecological sustainability that it seems to promote.

We live in reluctant cities, that we should call mega villages, and we can’t convince our politicians and our governments that the change from village to town is as much a cultural one as it is a change in geography.

African traditional architecture, like any other architecture, is the product of processes that reflect the ways of living and working of the communities it serves and represents.

With the changing of those ways of living and producing, with new cultural acquisitions and the access to a wider world of knowledge possible by the new means of information, with the acquisition of durable goods, the breakdown of the social bonds and of the hierarchical structure of the society the topology of the residential space becomes progressively less adapted to the new forms of living and habitation.

The sub Saharan African city, where the new African architecture is defined, was created as the locus of the colonial system and responded to the colonial society’s ways of living and social organisation.

Social hierarchy, security needs, segregation by class and race, cultural values and technical capacities, mobility and mechanical transportation need different categories of social space, urban infrastructure and services, technological performance of the materials used in building construction and tighter time limits for the erection and a longer useful life of the buildings.

Traditional African architecture will not answer the urban needs of a new society so different in its values and needs.

The rupture with the old ways of building was almost instantaneous.

Defence needs and cultural demands, the complexity of a society with a neat separation between the laic and the religious, the skilled and the unskilled, the rich and the poor, imposed a stratified urban structure with nothing in common with the way the traditional African life was structured, even within the largest of the traditional settlements.

The rupture with tradition was operated with such brutality, and lack of recognition for the ways of living of the African society, that only a blind and total self-involvement could explain and justify.

However a curiosity for the different, or the ethnic, was always present and it became interesting to the intellectuals, the social scientists and the artists looking for new and deeper roots for their creative production, that could link them to the African land and its indigenous culture.

Without the cultural, the social and the technical substratum of the African culture, the transposition of traditional plastic and graphic symbolic elements to function as a new decorative grammar becomes nothing but a fashion. This is aggravated, in many instances, as it becomes a sort of cultural “affirmative action” to ingratiate commercial architects to the new decision makers, themselves too eager to find some lost roots for their uprooted way of living.

Two ideas come to mind when considering this subject:  
The first is why is an African architecture so important?  
The second is:  
What should it be?

The first one is more complex as it has to do with a stage in the development of the continent when the collective personality of the African is a subject of intense philosophical debate. This debate is emotionally loaded because of the tangible consequences of the issues it raises for the new educated and political classes, not yet fully secure of their intellectual authority and that must make the most of the comparative advantage of their negritude. The fact is that the politics of “affirmative action”, as a strategy for black preferential opportunity and promotion, become much more intellectually palatable if supported by an aesthetic theory that validates the intangible dimensions of “ubuntu” or other subjective elements of the pretended generalized ethos of the African culture. In this sense the need for an architectural set of “African” dimensions or principles is understandable, specially if linked to the idea that those principles or dimensions are better understood and manipulated by the black African intellectual and architect.

This concept is, if possible, even more arcane at present times when the whole world is becoming more uniform not only in the ways of the everyday life, the economy, the technological ways and means, the religious philosophies but also, and specially, as common objectives for human society.

This said the problem remains: is there a reason for the definition of an African architecture? And, if so, how should it be defined?

Architecture is always site specific.  
Can it be continent specific?  
Are we speaking of an architecture from the African continent or of an architecture for the African continent?

This distinction is of fundamental importance for the present discussion. It is undeniably important that Africa should produce architecture and that this architecture should be known and respected as an important cultural contribution to the cultural patrimony of the humanity. The importance of this contribution lies primarily in the need for the objective benefices that good architecture brings to society and, with no less importance, to satisfy the necessity for the self respect that African architects crave, as boosted by the international recognition of their quality as thinkers in this field. In this sense African architecture has been systematically marginalised as either non-existent or uninteresting and too remote to deserve attention. I am convinced that there is, in Africa, a great wealth of architectural work, at all scales of intervention, that can merit much greater attention as seminal and innovative examples of creative contributions for the enrichment of our profession.

The other perspective is: one architecture for Africa.

What validity in this concept?

This is an indispensable concept to understand and to discuss.

Like for all other continents or regions of the world, Africa needs its own architecture, adapted to its climate and to the physical conditions of the site, to the economic parameters, to its technological capacity and to the rhythms and life style of the people.

It must be an architecture that celebrates, dignifies and facilitates the human activities that it shelters; it must be conceived for maximum use of local resources, durable, economical and beautiful.

This architecture must be what architecture must be in any other part of the world. But with a difference: it must be for all Africans... as it was, traditionally, for many centuries. In that difference we may find the key for its difference from all other parts of the world.

Is it possible?

The answer to this question belongs to society itself, to the African societies and their representatives in general.

If architecture is to assume the value of the spatial and the built expression of a culture it must express the most profound dimensions of that culture.

We speak of the fascist and of revolutionary architectures and we think of the Greek city as the expression of the democratic system of the city-states of the Mediterranean basin; we observed the reprocessing of the early soviet masters to construct the expression of a brutal autocracy that would last for more than half a century; we dreamed of rationalism not as a style but as the way and means to achieve a balanced built environment for a more just society.

The struggle, amongst our politicians and our professionals, for a more just society and for the construction of its habitat is the only one that can structure and construct a new and true image of an African architecture.

How can we professionals, with the tools and the limits of our profession, contribute to the construction of that image?

This is the question that should guide our choice be it on the social relevancy of our work or on the technical performance of our solutions.

The problem is that most of the choices, within our profession, are made from the purely commercial success that they may bring to the business of producing projects based on aesthetical parti pris or formal biases, unchecked on their validity for the circumstances of the African social, cultural, and natural environments.

Those are the wrong formulae as they are either ethically irresponsible or intellectually irrelevant.

Within the limited time that took our continent to begin the process of urbanization, which is far from being complete or even structured in any positive ways, there has been little chance of finding an effective and operational model for our cities, which would be the only firm basis for a tested and valid architecture.

The sub-Saharan city in any of its expressions, and wherever it was formed and developed, is not an acceptable model for the new African society. No African city has resolved the need for a balanced urban environment, healthy, safe, socially and culturally enriching and economically viable.

From the great West Africa urban concentrations to the new southern Africa conurbations there is not one single city that can be taken as model for the future of the African city.

Against many of the medium and large cities in Europe and North, Central and South America, Asia and the Pacific rim that have reached a high degree of success as places where the quality of urban life is minimally assured for the entire population, Africa can not present a single example of the same achievement.

No city, from Cairo to Cape Town, can claim that it reached an acceptable quality of urban services for the majority of its population.

The first objective of an African architecture should this one: to contribute decisively to the improvement of urban life and habitation.

This should be seen, primarily, in terms of the solution of the spatial segregation's problems and attitudes and the rejection of imported formulae.

The new African city must be designed for its specific social dimensions of space, structured from a new vision that takes into consideration, for instance, the importance of agricultural production within the city's territory, the spatial integration of all city's functions and the reduced interest of a CBD concept, taken from the irrelevant paradigms of the American or European city.

It can be argued that here we are in a field that is far from architecture and deep into planning and urban design issues.

That may be true but can we design the part without understanding the whole?

