

African architecture tomorrow: a research approach

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Abstract

This paper will discuss what we can conceive of as African architecture, drawing on recent debates within the art world on African art, and proposes a research agenda as the basis for a coherent development programme for the relevant knowledge base. It also suggests one topic for such an agenda which can cut across African countries and cultures and is of significant importance in the current context of rapid urbanisation.

What is African art is a much debated subject – reacting to the categorisation of the ‘primitive’ and ‘traditional’, as well as the issues of African identity within the diaspora. Arguably many of these debates are relevant to a clearer positioning of architects in defining what they consider African architecture – from within and without the continent, as geographical boundaries are increasingly porous. Essentially what is African, whether defined endogenously or exogenously, has an element of self-definition. Similarly, the definition of what is ‘architecture’ has porous boundaries, overlapping not only with other ‘professions’ such as planning, surveying, construction and engineering, but also cultural studies, art and design – not to mention social studies and anthropology. Architecture is essentially a broad field of activity and within this different epistemologies can exist. Arguably what is needed is a proactive celebration of this disciplinary diversity and less professional gate-keeping.

A broad inclusive and largely self-defining approach to architectural knowledge could be seen as detrimental to development of the discipline, field and activity as it dissolves concepts – at least the edges of these. However the paper will argue that the core of African architecture should be discernable, if not exclusively definable, and proposes a networked approach to the building of a body of knowledge which celebrates this position. Knowledge is socially defined, and a proactive approach to focusing perceptions and practice of African architecture is possible though a level of coordination in institutional activity – academic and professional. Drawing on recent experience in such a proactive institutional approach to changing the perception and practice of architecture research in the UK the paper will raise questions for discussion of how iterative action-research in African architecture can build a stronger knowledge base for the future. One topic for such action-research – the link between ‘vernacular architecture’ and ‘popular architecture’ is proposed, and the paper outlines a possible cross-cultural, trans-national research programme to investigate this, argued to be of high relevance in the current context of rapid urbanisation across the continent.

Author notes:

Paul Jenkins is an architect by initial training, and has worked during the past 35 years with a wide range of central and local government, NGO, private sector, international aid and community-based organizations across architecture, construction, housing, urban development and planning in the fields of practice, policy, teaching/training and research. More than 20 years of this has been in Central and Southern Africa, where he has worked in Malawi, Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Angola. In the past years he has led an initiative to develop the architecture research base in Scotland (see <http://www.scotmark.eca.ac.uk/>), culminating in the UK national conference ‘Architecture Research Futures’ in December 2005 (see <http://www.archresearchconf.com/>).

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What is African architecture? Definitional issues

This paper starts from a discussion of how we can define African architecture, drawing from experience in defining African art. There has been an on-going debate on what is African art for some years now, reacting against the tendency for this to be exclusively categorized as 'traditional', 'indigenous' and 'primitive'. Most publications and exhibitions of African art prior to the late 1980s – predominantly those in the North - adopted this stance (e.g. Willet 1971).¹ This dominant conceptual position concerning African art was reinforced by the approach of European patronage to such art from the 1940s, which encouraged "projection of African art as isolated, untutored and expressionist rather than deeply intellectual, agitational and in dialogue" (Deliss 1997).² More recent exhibitions and publications have challenged this narrow definition including: *Africa Explores* (New York 1991), *Africa Now* (Groningen etc. 1991) and *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (London 1995).³ In discussing the latter, Deliss identified the following different approaches to curation, and hence implicit definition, of African art: that which is extinct, such as the sculpture of Benin; 'traditional' or 'tribal' art, arguably still the predominant conception; new functional art, including what is sometimes termed 'popular' or 'tourist' art; 'urban' genres of African art; and international African art – including art of the African diaspora.⁴ Deliss noted that increasingly there are cross-over styles making even this limited taxonomy temporary and spurious as a definitional tool.⁵

Enwezor and Oguibe reinforce this argument and highlight the role of globalisation and its associated production of a new diaspora as key factors leading to this accepted need to re-evaluate from within the art world (Oguibe & Enwezor 1999). They point out that since the 1990s many more artists from Africa are being integrated into the global art world circuits in their own right (and not as emblematic of the previous categorisation), that many African artists are also working in new

1 The *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in Paris in 1989 is seen as a turning point (Oguibe & Enwezor 1999) – see Martin 1989.

2 Although less focused on 'traditional' art forms, the post second world war teaching/training and exhibition activities in Africa of ex-patriates such as of Uli Beier, Pierre Romain-Desfosses and Frank McEwen had underlying similar approaches to understanding (Kasfir, 1999; Mudimbe 1999).

3 See: Magnin & Soullou 1996; Vogel et al 1991; Lampert, 1995.

4 Mudimbe's (1999) categorisation of three trends: tradition-inspired, modernist and popular is not dissimilar.

5 This is well illustrated in Kasfir 1999 and Mack, 2000).

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media which challenge the old assumptions, that specialised approaches have been applied to issues concerning African art as a subject – in curation, research and scholarship - and that new spaces and mechanisms for dissemination have also opened up. This is a two-sided internationalisation however, as it can dissolve the boundaries of African art itself as well as promote its global integration. What is advocated in their important text is the role of methodology in forming concepts, a theme paralleled to some extent in this paper.

Part of the definitional issue facing African art (and by inference African architecture) rests in the problem of categorizing what is 'art' and part in what is 'African'. The definition of art in the North essentially derives from the narrow London-Paris-New York nexus of the 'art world' and the categories this applies to different styles, trends and expressions. This is fluid and open to change, but usually by a relatively narrow elite, membership of which is controlled by the major galleries and art educational / research establishments such as museums and academia – as evidenced in the succession of exhibitions on, or including, African art. The art world adopted a specific tendency to view African art as essentially primitive and/or exotic as far back as the beginning of the 20th century when Picasso and his contemporaries were introduced to masks and other artefacts, and their incorporation of some of this imagery in their seminal modern art work entrenched this position – a situation, as argued above, only being contested in the past decade and a half. On the other hand what is 'African' is equally contentious in relation to artistic endeavour, with debates on whether African identity is exclusive to those who are born on the continent (and then possibly south of the Sahara), whether it is related to any form of racial or ethnic characteristic(s), and whether it can be applied or not to activities undertaken outside of the continent, such as by people of the African diaspora, historic or recent.

The main point that should be drawn out here, as an introduction to this paper, is that it is impossible to arrive at a definitive categorization/characterisation of what is, or can be, African art - or arts, as arguably there are many different complexly intertwined forms of artistic expression of potential relevance to adopt or be awarded such a title (Mudimbe, 1999). To a great extent African art is that which has claimed to be African art (i.e. the previous dominant definition), or alternatively that which currently claims to be African art (i.e. the more recent challenges to the previous hegemony), and *which is accepted as such by socio-cultural groups*. That not all socio-cultural groups may accept some of what is thus claimed does not in itself

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negate the identification, but may undermine (or reinforce) the wider acceptance of the appellation. The domination of certain socio-cultural groups over others – whether in a political, economic, social or cultural sense – also always underlies the definitional process and inevitably makes this unstable (Appiah 1999). African art is thus essentially constructed through both the mental models we create for ourselves and the organizational and institutional mechanisms we use to deal in such concepts in practice, all operating within existing contexts, themselves fluid and changing.

This is important for an understanding of what is – or can be – seen as African architecture, as some of the definitional issues are the same. Is African architecture that which is practiced on the continent, or by architects of African nationality, or some form of African heritage - or can it be practiced elsewhere and by others? What is the distinction between traditional, indigenous and/or primitive forms of architecture (usually studied as the 'vernacular') and more modern forms of architectural endeavour, and what about the enormous wealth of built form produced between these two extremes, such as popular forms of 'informal' architecture (usually not undertaken by 'architects') which now dominate urban (and also rural) areas. Is this just a debate about purism versus syncretism? It is notable that while there has been a strong tradition of studying the African vernacular in architecture (e.g. Biourdier & Minh-ha, 1985; Denyer, 1978; Gardi, 1973; Schwerdtfeger, 1982; Oliver, 1971) and a separately strong tradition of study of informal settlements, there is a much more limited tradition of celebrating the wider conceptualisation of African architecture (e.g. Elleh, 1997), much of this not contemporary. The timely nature of this conference perhaps permits both a more contemporary and forward-looking view, in line with the discussions on African art - focussing less on what African architecture is and more on what it can become and the socio-cultural impetus for this.

This paper basically suggests that African architecture will be what people (proactively) assert this to be, and others (reactively) accept this as so. This is essentially a socio-cultural process, involving both conceptual and institutional dimensions, which cannot be de-linked from the broader political economies which they take place within. Arguably in fact architecture is more closely tied to such political economies than art due to the cost of most built form and the nature of patronage. The concept of political economy, however, does not just apply to the national/local context in which buildings may be commissioned, designed, and built, but also the political economies which underlie social and cultural acceptance and

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hegemony – all the more difficult to deal with due to their deeply embedded and to some extent hidden nature.

That said, while what is and can be African architecture will be largely self-determined within the above mentioned contexts, this will not lead to complete relativism in valuation and identification. Historical experience shows that there is likely to be a core of socio-cultural agreement on a discernable architectural output which is, or becomes, widely accepted as falling within the loose boundaries of such a self-defined field, as is true of Africa art. For architecture these boundaries will, as with art, continue to be fluid, fuzzy and open to change, both proactive and reactive. What this paper is about is how such proactive change can be understood and channelled.

The definitional problems for African architecture do not stop at what is African about architecture – they are embedded within the problematic of defining what is 'architecture'. Pevsner's 1943 definition that architecture applies only to building deliberately designed with a view to aesthetic appeal may be understandable in the rather narrow socio-cultural context of Britain in the middle of the 20th century, but this is indefensible in today's Britain, let alone internationally. Architecture tends to be that which architects define as architecture and have this socially and culturally accepted as being such. There will always be porous edges to such a definition with the avant-garde pushing the boundaries and the establishment fighting a rear-guard action. This is even without contemplating how the profession of architecture has changed and is still changing – from the 'gentleman' (sic) architect of the 17th and 18th centuries to the articulated professional of the 19th and early 20th centuries and on to the university graduates of today. The professional boundaries throughout this whole period have also been fluid with demarcation disputes with engineers, surveyors, landscape architects and town planners to name a few – and increasingly with construction managers in more recent times. Not only is the self-defining nature of architecture arguably a feature of all disciplines, but all the more so when this is institutionalised within a profession, whose main role in return for such a protected mandate is to guarantee a certain level of service and knowledge.

The key in terms of definition of what is architecture is again partly in its cultural self-definition and wider social acceptance – which like art will inevitably display a relatively distinguishable core set of characteristics - but also in its generation,

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maintenance, dissemination and application of a core set of knowledges (the plural is used here deliberately). What distinguishes the architect from the engineer, planner, and indeed artist, is largely the identification of sets of knowledge, many of which overlap, but not all of these with any other core set. Architecture is particularly wide in its range of relevant form of knowledge, cutting across disciplinary domains such as (to use one definitional framework) technology, history/cultural context, communication, management and law, but also across core epistemologies as defined by the physical and social sciences, visual arts and humanities. All of these define relevant and valid knowledge in specific ways around which they create institutional structures. Little wonder architecture is a contested conceptual terrain as it straddles both disciplinary and epistemological conceptions and institutions (typically controlled within academia), but also practical and legal conceptions of applied knowledge (typically controlled within the profession with government oversight).

Such issues of what is architectural knowledge and how can this be promoted have been at the core of the initiatives developed by the research group ScotMARK for the past few years. Initially developed as an organisational mechanism to promote research in and across the schools of architecture and the built environment in Scotland, this has had a wider impact in examining conceptual issues of what is architecture research and knowledge. The activities of the group have led to discussion around many of the issues raised above, and especially the position that architecture knowledge will be self-defined but affirmed by wider society. In affirming this, ScotMARK has also pioneered proactive approaches to conceiving of, and organising around, the further development of architectural knowledge / research in academia, the profession and government policy. The aim here has not been to define a core 'Scottish' architecture, but to enable Scottish based architectural academics and practices to reflect on their practices – which may well lead to a sharpening of their self-definition in such national terms. In fact the impact of the small project has been significant and well beyond the borders of Scotland – and arguably of relevance in a more generic way to other parts of the world and as such discussed briefly here as a lead in to a African architecture research proposal.⁶

6 While ScotMARK began as a vehicle for conceptual discussion, coordinated dissemination and practical implementation of research across Scottish higher education institutions, its activities have become more organisational concentrated in the Edinburgh schools of architecture/built environment but scope of action has become more international – as evidenced by this paper.

Defining an area of knowledge: an institutionalist approach

ScotMARK essentially embodies a proactive institutionalist approach to promoting changes in the perception and practice of architectural research and knowledge based in Scotland but of wider relevance. It represents action-research in attempting to influence the perception of research in architecture as well as deepening an understanding of the institutional basis for research in practice. Research here is seen in a broad sense of relevant knowledge, and it is recognised from the beginning of the project that knowledge is defined by its social context and usually channelled by institutions and organisations, which in turn influence the nature of knowledge and its development. Hence there are different approaches to knowledge and definitions of “knowledges” of relevance in the profession and academy – a tension particularly felt in architecture (Jenkins & Forsyth 2005).

The ScotMARK initiative commenced with a nation-wide study of research across Scottish and then UK schools of architecture undertaken in 2004 by the School of Architecture at Edinburgh College of Art (Jenkins, Forsyth & Smith 2004).⁷ The results of this work argued that research across these schools in the UK is deepening to the detriment of breadth, and that this would affect the relevance of the profession to the built environment over time. The findings of this study were strongly supported by the schools involved and a National Reference Group for architecture research in the UK was formed from the institutions sampled, government and the profession, to follow-up some of the conclusions.

The follow up activities included the creation of the Scottish Matrix for Architectural Research and Knowledge, ScotMARK, as an organisation, funded for one year through a Strategic Research Development Grant from the Scottish Funding Council, which funds higher education. ScotMARK was established with three part-time employees and directed by a Steering Group predominantly drawn from the six institutions in Scotland offering prescribed programmes in architecture and architecture engineering. The main initial objective of ScotMARK was to undertake a feasibility study for an institutional structure to promote excellence in, and facilitate wider access to, research in architecture in Scotland, thus creating the basis for

⁷ Also accessible on the Royal Institute for British Architects research & development webpage: http://www.riba.org/go/RIBA/Member/Practice_4296.html.

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collaborative pooling and development of research capacity in key identified policy areas. In summary, this feasibility study focussed on an appropriate national institutional structure to: a) provide information on research in architecture to the wider community b) undertake strategic development of research related skills, and c) develop specific research projects.

ScotMARK started operations in May 2005, focusing on research collection and dissemination, as well as implementing research and putting together collaborative research proposals with members in the Steering Group. There have been three main outputs under the first objective of knowledge transfer:

- 1) The production of an overview of ongoing research in architecture in Scotland. This has been achieved in three ways: newsletters, a new website and a book/catalogue (ScotMARK 2005). The information presented in this book/catalogue is seen as a 'snapshot' of a wider information collection on architectural research that can be accessed through the ScotMARK website (www.ScotMARK.eca.ac.uk).
- 2) The organisation of a UK National Conference on 'Architecture Research Futures' (www.eca.ac.uk/archresearchconf/), which provided an opportunity to discuss key concepts in architectural research. A key objective of the conference was to bring together a wide group of 'peers' in architecture within academic, practice and professional/policy circles to discuss and reach some conclusions on how architectural research might develop in future in the UK. The conference conclusions and recommendations were published in Spring 2006 (ScotMARK 2006a).
- 3) Engagement in the conceptual debate about research in architecture through participation in seminars, conferences and publications. ScotMARK has presented to the RIBA Research and Development Committee outlining the approach being taken to the perception and practice of research in architecture. A subsequent paper published in *Architecture Research Quarterly* presents evidence on the importance of the institutional context of architecture education and how that has affected the way that research has been perceived and undertaken across the United Kingdom (Jenkins, Smith & Forsyth 2006).⁸ Work on conceptual bases for architectural research and how these differ between the profession and academia was also presented in a paper to the ARCC/EAAE

⁸ Jenkins, P, Smith H & Forsyth L (2006) "Research in UK architecture schools – an institutional perspective" *Architectural Research Quarterly* Vol 9/1

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Conference 2006 (Jenkins et al 2006), with a follow up paper examining the epistemological bases for architecture knowledge presented to the ARCC/EAAE Conference 2008 (Jenkins 2008).⁹

In response to the second ScotMARK objective a study of research training has been undertaken across the core members and a proposal to start these initiatives is still being developed. In relation to the third objective, ScotMARK has been commissioned to undertake research for the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) and Architecture + Design Scotland (A+DS) and been involved in research funded by the Architectural Policy Unit of the Scottish government.¹⁰ A further bid to the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council, led by ScotMARK, was funded in 2007 and has recently completed a scoping study of the status of 'Wider social participation in the architectural design process' across the UK.¹¹

In conclusion, ScotMARK is not an isolated research project, but represents a programmatic response to how the profession views its knowledge base and the mechanisms it uses to promote and develop this through research. Its outputs are not static but dynamic, and its activities are constantly evolving. As part of the outreach from this conference, ScotMARK publications have been distributed to schools of architecture worldwide, including Africa, and are available on the internet. The intention is not to increase the scope of ScotMARK as a network, but to permit it to become one node in a wider 'network of networks' or 'matrix' of institutions (academic, professional and policy bodies) in developing architecture research and knowledge in areas of mutual interest, such as, here, in African architecture.

9 ARCC – Architecture Research Centers Consortium (USA) and EAAE – European Association for Architectural Education.

10 The RIAS study investigated the perception and practice of research in the architectural profession across Scotland and highlighted that, although the way research is conceptualised in practice is relatively weak, there is clear agreement on the importance of development of the professional knowledge base (Jenkins, Smith & Garcia Ferrari, 2005) – see <http://www.scotmark.eca.ac.uk/reports/1.pdf>. The research undertaken for A+DS examines the products and processes in recently completed new secondary school building across Scotland – funded by Public Private Partnerships (PPP) - as a baseline for understanding how such large scale new architectural projects can ensure high quality architecture and building (Jenkins, Garcia Ferrari & Smith 2006). The Scottish Government funded research examined how private sector house developers working across Scotland conceive of, and integrate, design as part of the development process (Scottish Government 2008) – see <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/08110758/0>.

11 This study has been recently completed (May 2008) with information currently available on a web-based wiki facility, with proposed publication in book format. See http://wiki.eca.ac.uk/index.php/Wider_social_participation_in_the_architectural_design_process

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A proactive research approach for African architecture

Essentially what this paper advocates is a proactive approach to self-definition of a core conceptualisation of African architecture, to be confirmed through social and cultural acceptance, and taken forward across a wide self-reflective network. It suggests this requires some organisational activity and 'institutionalisation', which needs to include the existing institutional bodies which have influence of such issues in academia and the profession – and probably the creation of a specific institutional 'vehicle' to achieve future networking (hence the title of the paper: **African architecture tomorrow**). This would permit both the identification of at least a core (and probably a range of peripheral) African architecture(s) and proactively reinforce the self-reflective development of African architecture through knowledge collection, refinement and dissemination across a network, linked to other relevant networks.

One of the key activities to initiate such an activity will be a taking stock of what is self-defined as African architecture, and promote debate on this, with wider dissemination of the results. As noted above, there are very few widely published texts or other forms of media on African architecture – something that hopefully this conference can begin to overcome. However having occasional conferences, albeit inspirational, is not in itself enough, as has been the experience of ScotMARK, and some form of organisation is needed to take this type of initiative forward and continue to refine and disseminate the concepts and debates. This raises problems of choice and value and inevitably many initiatives fail at this point as there is no wider agreement on who is involved in such decisions and how these are taken. ScotMARK has also worked with these political issues, and because of scarce resources these remain issues of relevance which are continually reviewed within the organisation. The main mechanism that has been used to date is a fairly 'flat' small managerial network structure with a Steering Group of the most relevant academic, professional and policy-making bodies all free to participate, albeit the organisation is hosted in one of these. The resources needed for such an organisational structure are not great, although a basic core resource is essential.

Thus what is suggested here for developing the conceptual and organisational basis for an identifiable African architecture movement is a network structure which can incorporate the academics, practitioner and professional representatives and

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possibly some policy-making bodies of relevance. The initial task will be to collect information from those who wish to define what is African architecture – whether in practice, discipline or other. This will need some networked discussion to refine a core area which can then be disseminated widely as an input to further refinement and definition. Whereas in the past this would essentially have to be in rather static hard copy form (i.e. a ‘snap-shot’ at one particular time) – and this is still an essential medium – the internet can provide other more dynamic medium for on-going refinement and dissemination. To enable the network to function some key conceptual and organisational principles need to be worked out and then adhered to in order to permit stability, although these can be reviewed periodically. Core resources for such an approach could be provided partly from academia (through research grant applications), partly from practices and the profession (e.g. the Commonwealth Association of Architects and other already established bodies could be prevailed on to help national professional institutes here) and partly from other national or international policy-related bodies (perhaps UNESCO).

When we discuss African architecture, there is a danger that this becomes dominated by the past – either the more distant past or just the cataloguing of more contemporary built form (albeit a necessary activity). What this paper suggests is that there is an opportunity provided by the socio-cultural event that a conference represents to decide to also promote a platform for discussion and promotion of what African architecture can be in the future. The paper argues that this socio-cultural act of decision needs organisational follow-up as the basis for the necessary conceptual foundation and wider dissemination which would underpin the legitimacy and validity of the claims to represent the field. What can become conceived as African architecture in future requires a collective vision. Defining, collecting, discussing, exhibiting and disseminating are all key to creating this collectivity and are largely research activities, in the broad sense of research as building and managing knowledge. Tomorrow’s African architecture has the opportunity to develop as a strong socio-cultural statement through such a research approach, and ScotMARK is interested to be involved in some way in such an initiative as we increasingly link worldwide to other architecture research and knowledge networks and as the Coordinator has extensive experience in architecture and related areas in a range of countries in Africa.

A research proposal as example of collaborative knowledge development

As an example of how such an approach can be taken forward in developing content and concepts it is suggested that a research programme can be developed across a number of countries and cultures to examine the links between the indigenous or 'traditional' architectures of Africa, which tend to be rurally based, and so-called 'informal' building or 'popular' architecture that constitutes the main built form in urban areas across the region. This project ideally would be developed alongside reviews of more 'formal' architectural output, as undoubtedly this is also a major influence on the popular sector, but potentially could have a greater impact in terms of findings vis-à-vis improving the nature of popular architecture.

The macro-region of Sub-Saharan Africa is currently in a phase of extremely rapid urbanisation, with historically unprecedented levels of poverty (rural and urban) – thus creating challenges for production of the built environment of a quantitative and qualitative nature as yet not faced in other macro-regions and periods of rapid urban growth (Jenkins, Smith & Wang 2006). The physical manifestation of this is what are generally termed 'informal settlements' or 'slums' (the latter recently returning to an earlier and even more pejorative term), but - more proactively - 'popular architecture'. While the use of the term architecture here may be contested by architects, who rarely are involved in the production of this built form, it is defensible through the precedent of the relatively long-established study of 'vernacular architecture'¹², which also has limited involvement of architects, except in retrospective study. Paul Oliver (1971) and Amos Rapoport (1969), amongst others, pioneered the international study of vernacular architecture and Oliver in particular has consistently argued that this includes the 'popular' as well as the 'traditional' (e.g. Oliver, 2003 & 2006; see also various authors in Asquith & Vellinga, 2006). However, despite his epic efforts in editing the *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture* (Oliver 1997), with its multiple entries on all regions of the world including Africa, virtually nothing has been

¹² Vernacular architecture has been defined as widely as 'buildings of and by the people' (Oliver 2006: xxiii), although has a more qualified definition in the *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture* (Oliver 1997), where it is seen as comprising 'the dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources, they are customarily owner- or community-built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures which produce them' – a definition itself not without problems of finer definition of terms – e.g. 'traditional'.

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researched on the forms of such 'popular architecture' and its links with the more 'traditional' or 'indigenous' architectures – and indeed more modern architecture.¹³

It is thus proposed that what is needed to better guide the activities of governments, professionals (of all sorts involved in the built environment, not just architects), and importantly, the main actors in producing 'popular architecture', is a better understanding of the forms this takes, what tends to generate these, and how these could be adapted. 'Popular architecture' demonstrates both specific trends in different cultures and also generic tendencies. Do the former trends draw on traditional values in – for instance – space use, constructive technique, climate moderation, visual aspect, decoration etc. – and if so what are these? Concerning the latter, are the more generic forms emerging linked to any identifiable form of formal architectural activity, and if so what are these, and how relevant are they across a range of factors of importance in the built environment?

A study such as is briefly suggested above can have an important impact at a number of levels. It can permit those with more formal training in producing the built environment reflect on how they could be of relevance for such a field. This would probably be indirect due to the costs of professional work and typically (but not exclusively) low incomes of the majority – for instance in assisting educate the key providers of such form (often jobbing builders and sometimes draughts-people). In addition it could permit government to reflect on the standards that ultimately define what is 'formal' and 'informal' and which thus often relegate a significant part of the built environment to forms of illegality (albeit seen as largely legitimate by the majority), and thus help make government interventions (policy, regulation, financial support) more relevant to the majority. It can also – crucially – heighten awareness of the cultural, social and economic value of such architecture and change attitudes to what is 'good' and 'bad' – which underpins much of the activity of professionals and regulators mentioned above. This is of particular importance for the education of the architects of tomorrow, in that the dichotomy between the ideals of formal architecture and the social realities of the production of built form are in danger of drifting even further apart, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.

¹³ The exceptions are Oliver's writings on English suburban architecture and post-disaster reconstruction – see Oliver 2006. It needs to be said that Vellinga 2006 does begin to advocate this in a generic way, but with no specific proposal for implementation.

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To undertake such a project a network could be developed to deal with conceptual and organisational issues, ideally involving a range of interested and appropriately skilled practitioners and academics, to scope the nature of 'popular architecture' across the regions, refine concepts, undertake surveys and analysis and report in a coordinated way. This would all require resources (financial and intellectual such as library resources), and here North-South linkages can be beneficial. The author of this paper is available to become involved in such a project with interested researchers across Sub-Saharan Africa, most likely working with colleagues in the North from the African diaspora, as well as through personal involvement in such research in Luso-phone Africa where he has a long-term engagement.

Concluding remarks

Returning to the main theme of this paper, the above proposed programme is an example of how to both take forward knowledge of relevance to architecture at various levels in Africa, but also act as part of a wider proactive knowledge-building activity (both conceptually and organisationally) for African architecture. The concluding point is thus to reiterate that as a largely self-defining socio-cultural group who have an interest in African architecture, we have an opportunity to proactively shape the future of African architecture and not only reactively study it. The definition of African architecture thus hopefully will be one made predominantly proactively, and the experience of ScotMARK shows how forms of collective activity can be structured with relatively few resources. This is a very important period for the development of the built environment across the continent and the conference and the subsequent publication of the papers has represented a unique opportunity to reflect on **what can be the African architecture tomorrow.**

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