

An aerial photograph of the African continent and the surrounding Middle East, showing the Sahara Desert, the Nile River, and the Mediterranean Sea. The image is used as a background for the book cover.

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Atlas

Architectures of the 21st Century

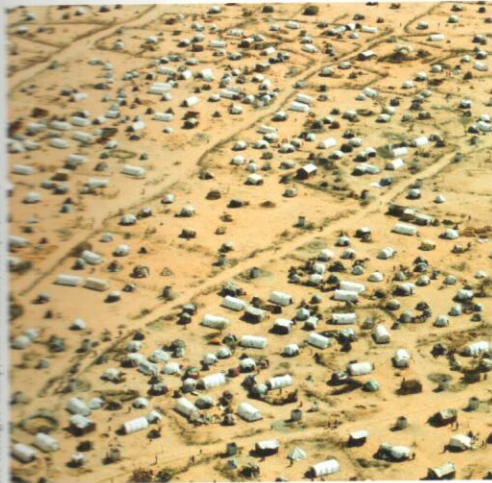
Africa and Middle East

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Aspirations and Inspirations

Central and Eastern Africa, Precarious and Booming



While in Central Africa architecture is near anonymous, in Eastern Africa a generation born into a precarious building boom is on the rise.

ALTHOUGH CENTRAL and Eastern Africa are two geographically and ethnically distinct regions, they are presented together in this article. We will start out with the continental center (comprising Angola, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and São Tomé and Príncipe) and go on to take stock of the architecture currently being produced in the eastern zone (Burundi, Comoros, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Djibouti and Zambia.)

Middle Africa seems to altogether be a blank spot on the architectural world map. The center of Africa is covered with impenetrable forests. It is the heart of Africa, the heart of the dark continent, the 'heart of darkness', as Joseph Conrad called it. It is also the African region that has been most plagued by war and diseases in the course of the last century. This darkness and suffering was epitomized by Jean-Bédél Bokassa, who dreamt of a great Central African empire built upon tremendous riches, terror and probably cannibalism. When in 1991 I stayed in Bangui, the capital of the former Central African Empire, the ruins of Bokassa's palace were still standing, looted and burnt, with the emperor's golden winged throne dragged out in the open and left to rot. Nobody would come close or touch these remains that are gradually being overtaken by the greedy forest.

This jet-black portrait of Central Africa is of course one-sided. Middle Africa can as well be seen as the origin and birthplace of the most intense contemporary art and architecture to be found on the whole continent, in particular in and around the region's central metropolis of Kinshasa. The ambiguity of Kinshasa has recently been beautifully portrayed by Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart in *Kinshasa:*

Tales of the Invisible City, as well as by Johan Lage and Luce Beeckmans in the 'Afropolis' exhibition that was held in Cologne, Germany. Kinshasa is a forlorn city that was abused by Mobutu Sese Seko, yet another central African emperor who terrorized the Congo after the tragic Belgian colonial adventure. Kinshasa lacks most of the institutions and regulations that organize our modern cities, and yet it provides shelter for many millions of extremely poor citizens. This megalopolis, at first glance lost to the world, proves to be a most fertile ground for dreams and innovation that make up another Kinshasa, hidden behind the physical Kinshasa. In his portrait of Kinshasa, De Boeck describes the identity of this 'other city' which can be called the 'informal city', the 'shadow city' or the 'invisible world'. Kinshasa, popularly called 'Kin', appears to be a mirrored duality, similar to Italo Calvino's imaginary city of Valdrada. The reflections can refer to physical spaces and places, such as churchyards or theaters, but also to the human body, language or music. These, according to Filip de Boeck, are the heterotopias, the actually faked utopias.

One of Kinshasa's many brilliant spatial dreamers, Bodys Isek Kingelez, has already been mentioned before as a possible godfather of African hyper-modernist architecture. His colleague artists Pume Bylex and Méga Mingiedi provide us with similar utopian sneak previews of a new African spatial order to be. In the meantime, as also mentioned previously, construction works have started to build Kinshasa afresh, located on the other side of the river, in Cité du Fleuve (City of the River). Access to this new city will certainly be restricted, reserved for affluent global citizens of the kind who are able to turn their backs on the old city and live, play and work in a generic Dubai clone: a utopia or a dystopia?

Another Central African city that harbors an artist community working on the forefront of African architectural thought is Douala

The Central African region can be described as an architectural blank spot, one of extreme material and cultural precariousness, despite the vibrant artistic creativity of Kinshasa or Douala or the growth of Luanda.

Covered by exuberant nature and bogged down by the turbulences of political problems and by endemic hunger, the Central African region has no consolidated modern architecture to show for, and it is characterized

by vast informal cities formed by masses of refugees. Coexisting with these settlements are megalopolises like Kinshasa, Douala or Luanda, risen from chaotic but nevertheless creative means.



Town in Karamoja region, Uganda

in Cameroon. Doual'art is an artists' group founded by Princess Marilyn Douala Bell, granddaughter of King Rudolf Douala Manga Bell, the great resistance leader tried and hanged by the Germans, who then added the Cameroons to their colonial empire in the early years of the 20th century. Doual'art was established in the backyard of King Bell's palace, nicknamed the Pagode, one of the rare surviving examples of modern independent African architecture of the early 20th century. Contrary to Kinshasa's megalomaniac utopias, the Douala artists start from the humble and the small and actually carry out acupunctural interventions

within the city: a bridge, the scrap statue of the 'new liberty' by Joseph Sumegne, and a drinking water fountain by Danièle Diwouta-Kotto. The ideas of the artists and thinkers of Doual'art are being internationally challenged on a bi-annual basis at the Salon Urbain de Douala.

In *Suites architecturales – Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar*, a recent book by Danièle Diwouta-Kotto and Sandrine Dole, Diwouta states that contemporary African cities are permanent building sites. This, naturally, can be said of any city in the world, with the difference that in Africa the sites often take a very long time to be completed and are often

abandoned halfway, for whatever reason, to be continued at a much later moment. She calls these half-deserted sites the *greniers*, the storerooms of African cities, in a parallel to the traditional village. Building sites are storerooms for slowly or quickly accumulated wealth and are signs for the beholder to say "I built, hence I am".

For most middle African cities, scarcity of means has been at the base of the overall preservation of its built heritage to date: why demolish a building that can still perform duties? In Douala there is no demolition, no improvement, but whatever minimal work there is gets carried out according to basic



Mugunga I, Mugunga II and Bulengo Camps of Internally Displaced Persons, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (2008)



Danièle Diwouta-Kotto, the Pagode of Douala, Cameroon

Amid the general architectural penury of Central Africa, the only thing that stands out is the precarious building boom that is taking place under the wing of foreign currency obtained through the exportation

of raw materials. Still more widespread, nevertheless, is the self-built architecture that in the case of Eastern Africa adopts the form of a scant, baroque and informal reinterpretation of Swahili culture.

needs. This preservation through poverty is not something to last. Diwouta confronts the reader with the question of how these cities – in which legislation on built heritage is minimal or absent – can develop with the inclusion of built heritage through a number of exemplary projects by various architects. The freedom and respect that transpires from these projects is refreshing if compared to the stifling situation in Europe. There are monuments that need to be revered, such as the Pagode of Douala, but there are also buildings that are fine in structure but definitely better off with a new facade, or existing facades that deserve a new interior. The facade of the Siège IPRES in Dakar by Oscar Afrique is unrecognizable, but its underlying structure and rhythm survives in a new rhapsody of color, movement and heterogeneous materials. The facades of the Siège CA-SCB in Douala by Diwouta are fully restored, but a complete new interior with a free plan and skylights is inserted.

The situation in Luanda is opposite that of Douala. Angola's rich sediments of oil and precious stones are attracting massive investment and the capital of Angola is changing fast. Its joyous modernist heritage, comparable to Maputo's, is being challenged in a serious way by booming developments. Generic Dubai-style office towers emerge at a great pace within the city center, preferably near Luanda Bay, as Daniela Castelbranco observes.

The new rich escape from the crowded city and resettle in gated communities on the outskirts, whereas the urban poor are being moved by the government from development areas to new and distant 'townships' that are often developed by Chinese companies like Panguila in Cacuaco district, Zango in Viana district, and Golfe in Kilamba Kiaxi district. This development is reminiscent of the low-cost housing schemes of the 1960s as well as the endless stretches of houses raised by the Reconstruction and Development

Programme (RDP) in South Africa. Whether this is an improvement on the often precarious housing conditions of Luanda's poor now living in informal settlements, is to be questioned.

As in East Africa, as we will see, only a few of the 20th-century modernist stars have set foot on Central African ground. However, the two great names that have been active in the area have left a couple of inspiring works, and sparked not minimal controversy in the contemporary architectural debate. Candilis designed an urban renewal project for Chad's capital, Fort Lamy – now N'Djamena –, in 1962. This design can be seen as one of the clean-slate projects that were tested in Africa before being implemented in the western world. Africa was a true architectural laboratory during the 20th century, a playground for European modernist architects who here were not hindered or curbed by cultural context, historical awareness or legislation, as they were in Europe. Candilis's project for Fort Lamy was not executed but the intricate urban patterns and housing models proposed in it can be recognized in his designs for the Berlin Free University project and the Toulouse Le Mirail New Town.

The other great modernist architect who left an important story in Central Africa was Jean Prouvé. He designed a prefabricated barrack for the French colonial administration, of which three were eventually shipped and erected in the early 1950s. Two of these Maisons Tropicales ended up in Brazzaville, capital of the then French Congo colony. The house was found to be impractical and the Congo-Brazzaville bush vegetation quickly invaded the building. In 2004 the houses were rediscovered, purchased, dismantled and shipped back to France, where they were carefully restored according to the prevailing criteria and sold to world museums. This action has been criticized as neo-colonial robbery of Africa's cultural heritage.



Danièle Diwouta-Kotto, Fountain, Douala, Cameroon