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ISBN 978-887794844-1 / 28,00 EURO

Africa



BIG CHANGE

BIG CHANGE

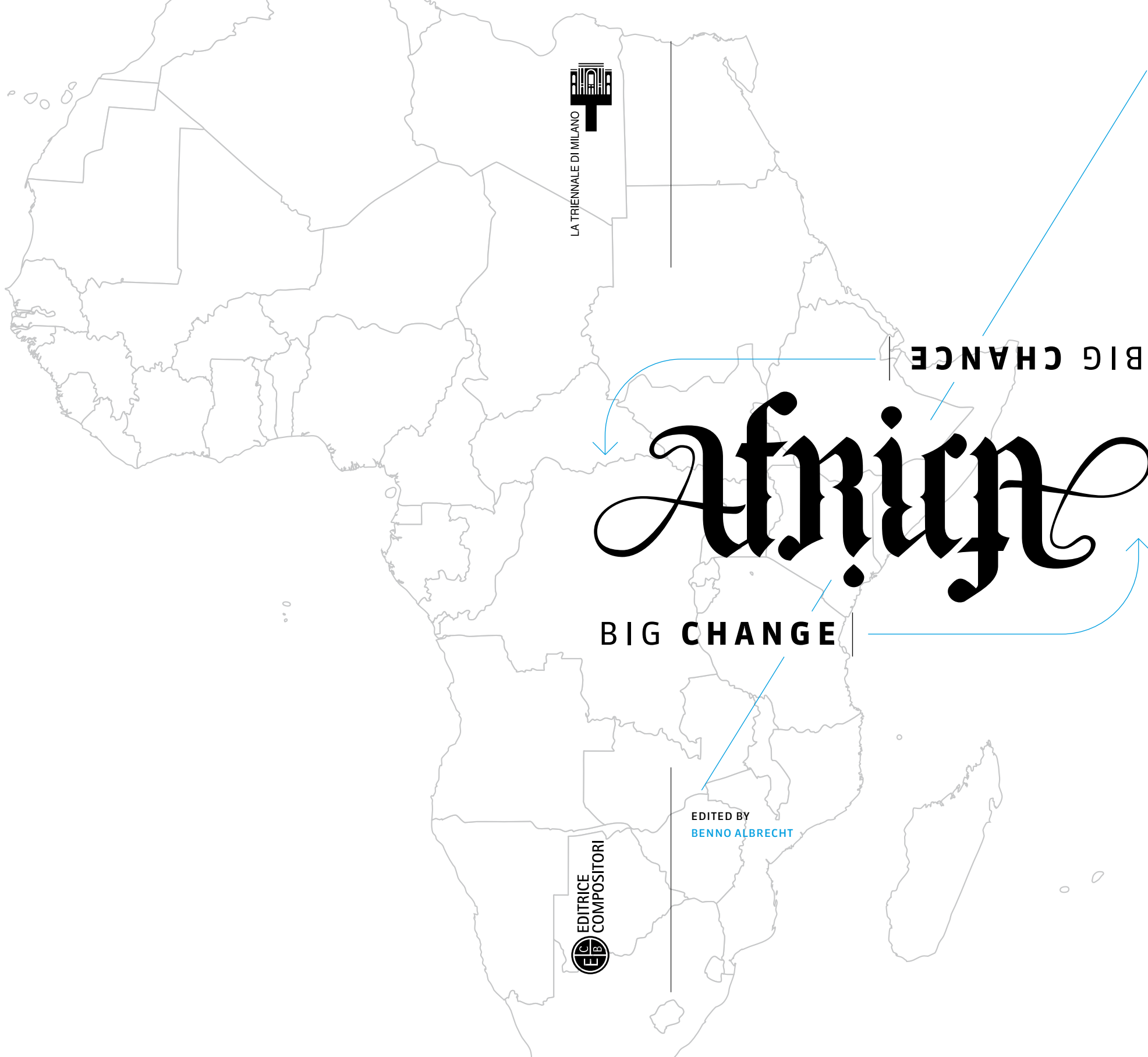


**AFRICA BIG CHANGE BIG CHANGE IS AN EXHIBITION OF AFRICA'S ARCHITECTURE AND THE TRANSFORMATIONS TAKING PLACE ON THE CONTINENT.** Changes involve the control of large numbers and show huge shifts of people, pressures brought to bear by urbanization, the inappropriate use of natural resources and territories. The transformation – the Big Change – and the opportunity – the Big Chance – reflect the order of prospects available today for a better and sustainable future in Africa.

The continent will be the theatre of a new modernity, where a different global and cosmopolitan culture may be developed. The huge change in Africa's physical environment shows the traces – some problematic – of new infrastructure, the impact of large dams, and solar and wind power plants. There are also the tangible signs of major projects for reforestation (needed to stop the desert), in the lead up to the conquest of new areas.

The Africa of villages is becoming the Africa of cities. The African urban model is hard to read and classify. Western thought processes and conceptual strategies are ineffective. It may well be possible that the city of globality – the African megalopolis – will serve as a workshop for seeking alternatives to Western and Asian contemporary city. The spotlight turns to the figures involved in design fielding remedies for extreme situations, and which show the technical horizons of architecture related to passive environmental control. The exceptional nature of these experiments suggests that Africa was – and is – a training ground for a challenging concept of modernity.





LA TRIENNALE DI MILANO

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# Africa

BIG CHANGE

BIG CHANGE

EDITED BY  
BENNO ALBRECHT

It was no military march but JOSEPH KABASELE TSHAMALA GRAND KALLE's *Indépendance Cha Cha* served as the theme music for the Congo's struggle for independence, led by PATRICE LUMUMBA.

We wait, with trepidation, and dedicate the exhibition **AFRICA BIG CHA-NGE BIG CHA-NCE** to that proud spirit of joyful Freedom.

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FONDAZIONE LA TRIENNALE DI MILANO  
VIALE ALEMAGNA 6, 20121 MILANO  
TEL. 02 724341  
WWW.TRIENNALE.ORG

EDITRICE COMPOSITORI IS A TRADEMARK OF  
COMPOSITORI COMUNICAZIONE  
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VIA STALINGRADO 97/2 — 40128 BOLOGNA  
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One of the main tasks of La Triennale is to reflect not simply on its own country and its own city but rather to look at the changes affecting the world.

With the great universal expos of the past and, in particular, the XVII Triennale di Milano, *World Cities and the Future of the Metropolis* and, more recently, with *USE Uncertain States of Europe and Architecture of the World*, our institution has entered the great debate on metropolitan and other areas, and on how they are changing and will change in the future.

The *Africa: Big Change Big Chance* exhibition takes up this line of research pursued by La Triennale, focusing its investigation on the urban and architectural transformations and huge changes sweeping through Africa. It reflects on the character of the continent and on the great problems and on the opportunities that it offers the world.

With regard to Africa, there is a general feeling of guilt about colonialism, and about the wars and exploitation of nations and peoples, especially by the countries of the northern hemisphere. We do however believe that these feelings should also be accompanied by serious analysis of, and reflections on, the changes currently under way. These include rapid population growth,

## NEW AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE

### Fifty years of New Architecture in Africa

— ANTONI FOLKERS

Udo Kultermann wrote his book *New Architecture in Africa* in 1963, followed by *New Directions in African Architecture* in 1969. The first book was a proud exposé of the achievement of architectural modernism for the new African nations, the fresh start for a new world embodied. The second book stated “architecture” as new to the continent, and *African Architecture* an ambition that would have to be achieved through the import of European and American thought in the first place.

The architects featured in Kultermann’s books were, without exception from firm modernist stock, all trained in the western modernist context. Their purist and pristine buildings, displayed in sharp black and white print, conveyed the new world in the making. Together they confirmed the great narrative of modernism, providing the beholder with an image of a well organized and ideal world.

Africa provided fertile ground for the visions of these architects. Within the European context there was a lot of resistance against the modernist ideas, whereas in Africa, their ideas for a new world created on a clean slate, were embraced by the leaders of the newly independent nations. Hence, these architects were able to build their dreams in Africa that they could often not realize in their home country. Such a effectively realised utopia in an alien context can be called a *heterotopia*: the creation of real space that is other.

This western-dominated romantic vision on the development of African architecture continued well after the demise of modernism in the late 1970ies. The technocratic dream of the modernists made room for the back-to-the-roots movement ignited by the oil-crisis and subsequently broadcasted doom scenarios on the future of the Earth. And again, as with the preceding modernist

vision, the proposed solutions to better the world, this time through the application of Appropriate Technology, was welcomed in Africa. In Europe, Appropriate Technology would however remain province of a marginal underground scene, whereas in Africa projects were being realised making use of reused glass bottles, sand bags, bamboo, straw bales and, first and foremost, mud. Mud befitted the image of African Arcadia, the romantic image of the African village that proofs to be incredibly persistent and still clouds the retinas of many in Europe and the rest of the world.

The dream of the Appropriate Technology movement, a mission now forgotten, but replaced by the mission of Sustainability, is still influencing architectural education directed to the African continent in Europe and America. Mud, reused glass bottles, sand bags, bamboo and straw bales are again being promoted as the technological solution for Africa. Pretty projects, such as community centres, schools and homes are being designed and built by European and American university students and their teachers, with the ever so welcoming African hands. Pet-projects that often collect a lot of press attention and even international architectural prizes, as they are both aesthetically pleasing and socially correct.

It is not that these experimental building techniques have no value in themselves, but they will not pose the answer to the huge architectural challenge met on the African continent. Providing decent shelter for the exploding urban population is the obvious challenge in the field of architecture and urbanism.

This explosion of the African city – some cities expand by over 5% a year – feeds the other western-centred vision of the continent. A pessimistic vision this time, in which Africa is the lost continent, unable to free itself from a continuous visitation by plagues, hunger and wars. In the much acclaimed book *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davies depicts the future of the African city as a slum without end. Such has been and still is by and large the western perception of Africa, a paradise lost and a dystopia to be. This mantra has provided fertile ground to acquire the much needed help to the continent.

However, it is to be questioned whether Africa really cannot stand on its own legs and or its future is truly that grim. The African citizens have been able to make the shift from the rural to the urban, and this shift indeed is taking place at an incredible speed, as we speak, but to state that the African cities are seas of slums is wrong. Even worse, it is a vision that is does not pay the due respect to the efforts and achievements of the people. Over the past fifty years, African citizens have been able to adopt modern building technology and adapt it to their modest means in building decent and clever dwellings. Of course there are also places and suburbs of great poverty and squalor, but they are not representative for the larger part of the African city of today.



The main reason for this distorted and western-romanticized vision of the state of Africa is a very simple one: the Africans have scarcely been writing and the description of the continent was always in the hands of western authors – as this piece is again, for the records. It as the African saying goes: “Tant que les lions n’auront pas leurs propres historiens, les histoires de chasse continueront de glorifier le chasseur”. Or, as the Ghanaian architect Joe Addo puts it: “We are in a difficult position of being defined by others and not by ourselves. We have been quite lazy intellectually or have not shared with the world who we are through our contemporary architecture.”

Yet, intellectual initiatives to redefine Africa in the contemporary context were not absent during the last fifty years. Statesmen like Nyerere of Tanzania, Senghor of Senegal and Nkrumah of Ghana developed African rooted philosophies in the 1960ies, but it was not until the 1990ies that African thinking touched firmer ground through the work of Ali Mazrui of Kenya, Kwame Anthony Appiah of Ghana and Thabo Mbeki of South Africa with the creation of the *Afrenaissance*, advocating a new era in African history, kick started in 1994 with South Africa’s departure from Apartheid and the simultaneous recovery of economic growth the continent all over.

The economic growth of African countries has taken momentum over the first decade of the 21st century, and did not slow down over the past five years crisis that hit the western world. This development caused an increase in self confidence of the African continent and this confidence translates itself in the creation of new cities. All over Africa, new cities are being planned, telling the story of African success and confidence. These cities start from a clean slate, negating the existing city. The *Cité du Fleuve* in Congo, as an example, is an entirely new city for the new elite, turning its back to the existing city of Kinshasa. Like the work of the modernists in the post-war years, these new cities embody the belief in a shining new future, a fresh start sweeping away the deteriorated past. This is as much a ‘great narrative’ as the modernist one, but this time by African initiative. The start of this great narrative can be established with the introduction of Bodys Isek Kingelez’ work at the 1993 *Home and the World* exhibition at the Museum of African Art in New York. Kingelez builds models of the imaginary African city, the *ville fantôme*, or the city as dreamt up but not yet realised. These models have become popular at art exhibitions, but more importantly so, they are being built now.

It can be argued that a conscious search for a new African architectural identity by architect is nonsense. Heinrich Wolff quotes Barnett Newman in “an idea of what cultural identity should be, should have as much relevance to the architect as ornithology has to the birds” to support his view that ascribing cultural identity to architecture is a retrospective act by theoreticians and thus irrelevant to the creation of architectural work as such. For the architect to consciously design a building starting from the notion of cultural identity



\* | Pancho Guedes, Leão Que Ri, Maputo, Mozambique, 1958.



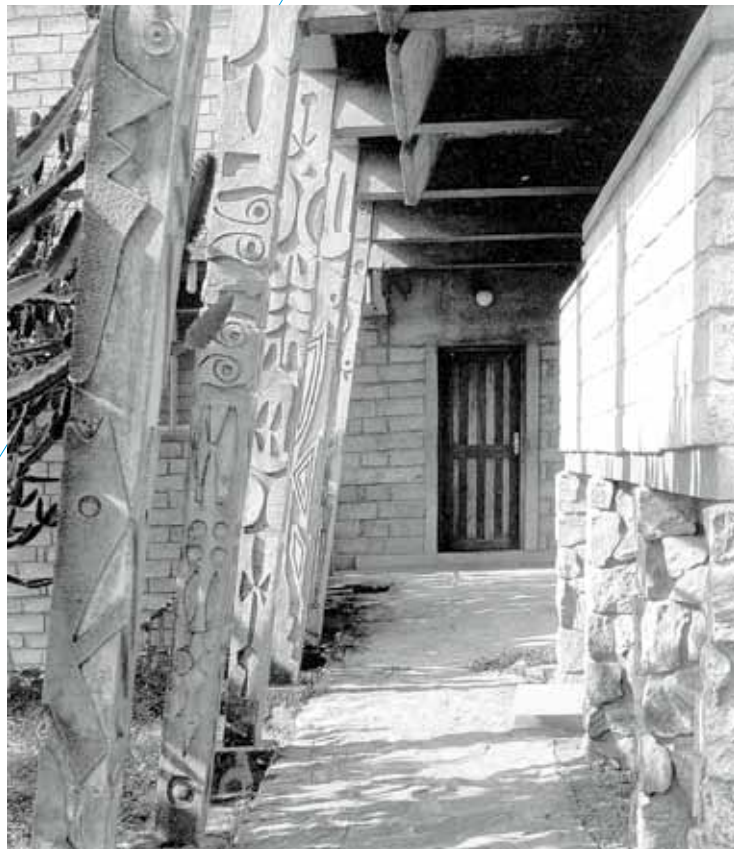
\* | Pancho Guedes, Prédio Abreu Santos e Rocha, Maputo, Mozambique, 1954-56.



\* | Anthony Almeida, Joint Christian Chapel, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 1975.



\* | Demas Nwoko, Miss Pearce Chapel, Isele-Uku, Nigeria, 1986.



\* | Demas Nwoko, New Culture Design Centre, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1965.

would mean that this cultural identity has to be created beforehand by the architect himself.

Besides, what is African architecture as a distinct architectural style, methodology or typology? What makes the architecture of a continent of over fifty countries distinctly different from the rest of the world? Do, for instance, North American or European architecture exist in this sense?

The world of today is shared by all now, and there is no such thing as, for instance, conscious Dutch architecture anymore, if ever it existed. Yet there are Dutch elements that survive in a globalised architecture. Similarly there are typical Swahili elements that can be discerned in contemporary East African architecture, Dogon anthropomorphic spatial patterns in Malian architecture, Akan symbols in Ghanaian architecture and so forth.

It can thus be positioned that African architecture as a cultural identity is non-existent. However, as was concluded at the second ArchiAfrika conference in Kumasi in 2007, *African Architecture Today*, African Architectures, as a distinct family, may exist.

There are a couple of binding factors that make such an African family of architectures credible. The first and most important binding factor is the homogeneity of the continent in terms of political and economical position in time and place. Most African countries were colonized within the brief period between 1875 and 1890, gained independence in, again, a short time span between 1957 and 1975 and are also undergoing the current economic boom simultaneously.

The second binding factor is following Wolff's position, of retrospectively ascribing cultural identity by outsiders which ricochets onto the African artists themselves. The foreign perception of African culture is rooted in a position of ignorance of the richness of African culture and history. Who knows, for an example, the difference between cultures of Ghana and Tanzania, or, of South Africa and Congo?

Responding to this ignorance, the African arts and craft market has created a homogeneous offer of art products, which, in turn may have triggered a continental cultural chauvinism, or a *cultural continentalism*. Traditional textiles from the Kuba of Congo, Ndebele puppets from South Africa, Fang masks from Gabon, Dogon doors from Mali and Ashante cloth from Ghana can be purchased at almost any art market or airport on the continent. The fact that they are representing a culture specific to areas that are thousands of kilometres apart is of little relevance, neither for the tourist, nor for the seller, possibly even not for the maker who might just be a local craftsman belonging, traditionally, to an entirely different culture. Such continentalism is something the European Union might look upon in envy.

Within this context of responding to foreign perception and to feed self confidence due to growing economic strength, the search or desire for a new African architecture is undeniably present on the continent. And it seems that Kingelez' *ville fantôme* of the middle 1990ies is one of the strongest inspirations in this search. Almost simultaneously to the appearance of Kingelez' first works, buildings from the *ville fantôme* were popping up in Senegal, Mali and Togo, designed by the Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby Atépa and his colleagues. Goudiaby's bank buildings are erected in materials and with technology that are used in any contemporary bank elsewhere in the world, but the exuberant mix of tinted glass, shining metal and colourfully plastered concrete, make them at the same time distinctly different from the generic international bank building, and are clearly applying the same language as Kingelez in his art work. It is this language that now has become paramount in the design and building of the new cities in Africa, as well as in the study work of a new generation of students at the African schools of architecture.

This architectural style, baptized *surmodernité* by Danièle Diwouta, is the surrealist quantum leap into Kingelez' future that, for instance in the Cité du Fleuve, juxtaposes the new African image next to the crumbling skyline of old Kinshasa. It is noteworthy that this language is so strongly embraced by African clients and their architects all over the continent. Kingelez apparently struck the right string.

The *architecture surmoderne* is not the style that the international academic architectural scene will easily embrace. Though full of strong symbolic architectural expression, and thus transpiring aspirations, it is singular and rather shallow in its statement. It is architecture that often lacks the layering that make up a good building. Response to climatic context, communication with urban life and physical context, optimal functionality, economic construction and reference to local culture have more often than not been sacrificed to make place for the strong symbolic message.

It looks like that, recently, *architecture surmoderne* in Africa has been remodelled to Asian modernist templates, finished with a slight African vernacular touch. After Europe and America, Dubai seems now to be the new example for African aspirations. Ammar Osman described the new *surmoderne* Burj Alfateh building in Khartoum as "the Arabic essence (that) blends with the African rhythms were they synchronize at the European creativity resulting in a gorgeous piece of art of the international architectural orchestra".

Joe Addo's complaint about African intellectual laziness comes back to the mind in the above analysis of *architecture surmoderne*, but there is another side to it. Africa has been welcoming foreign cultures for many centuries, and been very successful in observing, adopting and adapting these influences into their own culture. This open and cosmopolitan attitude created, amongst others, the ancient and rich Swahili culture of the African East Coast, which was

\* | Pierre Goudiaby Atépa, Banque centrale des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, Bamako, Mali, 1994.



\* | Bodys Isek Kingelez, Ville Phantome, 1996.





\* | Ora Joubert, Architect's House, Pretoria, South Africa, 2009.



\* | Wolff Architects, Inkwenkwezi Secondary School, Dunoon, South Africa, 2006.

blended from African, Persian, Chinese, Indian and Arabic cultures. As Abdul Sheriff beautifully said about Zanzibar that it 'was not merely an odd mixture of diverse peoples and cultures, each maintaining its distinctness. It is the fashioning of a new amalgam that incorporates different elements while transforming them to weave a new social tapestry. This has become the hallmark of Zanzibar, whether one looks at the rainbow of colours in the faces of its inhabitants flowing through its narrow streets, the clothes that they wear, the food they share, or the music and dance they relish in, or indeed the language they speak'. Nnamdi Elleh speaks in this context of the tripartite heritage of African architecture, formed by Animist African, Islamic Arabian and Christian European influences, accommodating, adapting and appropriating these in a slow, ruminating manner. Elleh sees this process repeated in the work of some acclaimed work of contemporary architects in Africa. Francis Kéré, in his school at Gando and Laurent Séchaud in his market at Koudougou, both in Burkina Faso, but also Peter Rich in his South African Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre, Dick van Gameren in his Netherlands Embassy in Addis Ababa and Kunle Adejemi in his floating school in the Lagos lagoon, create a localized modernity in an attempt to combine European-inspired conceptions of space with traditional vernacular sensibilities. These architects have not at all been intellectually lazy. They studied the traditional vernacular, accepted the reality of contemporary technology and materials, but dared to add a new interpretation of the local culture and context to their creations.

Similarly, but searching inspiration from the contemporary instead of the traditional vernacular, accepting if not celebrating popular architecture of tin sheets and cement blocks commonly so much ignored by the architectural scene, Joe Noero and Heinrich Wolff created their school at Khayelitsha (Cape Town), 'Ora Joubert her own house in Pretoria and Koji Tsutsui his Annular Orphanage at Rakai in Uganda. These architects are not afraid to embrace this banal architecture and technology in works that are translating typical African space arrangements into a new and complex form.

New African Architecture is of course not limited to the works that embody a strong component of search into cultural context, whether by conscious intention by the architect or retrospectively attributed by the theoreticians. Many fine and innovative buildings have been erected over the past decade that did not deal with such components, through still responding to the local context in a respectful way.

Architecture of high standard, designed by more than competent architects, is being built over the continent, from Martin Kruger in Cape Town to Abderrahim Kassou in Casablanca, from Danièle Diwouta-Kotto in Douala to in Nadir Therani in Dar es Salaam and from Joe Osae-Addo in Accra to Zelele Balay in Addis Ababa. These are works that fit smoothly in a late modernist picture of intelligent, well conceived and detailed architecture, which can easily

compete with buildings elsewhere in the world. To conclude this search into new African architecture of today, it is befitting to pay homage to three old African heroes, still alive and active: Anthony Almeida (b.1921, Tanzania), Pancho Guedes (b.1925, Portugal), and Demas Nwoko (n.1935, Nigeria). These three architects stand proof of African intellectual diligence, they tirelessly sought for a new African architecture within the context of global modernity, local restrictions and cultural riches. Almeida and Guedes already prominently featured in Kultermann's books in the 1960ies; Nwoko, the younger of the three, was not yet discovered by Kultermann, but is possibly one of the few African architects that so far managed to escape from the strict bonds of modernism to create a completely new and meaningful African architectural language.

Guedes' remark, towards the end of Kultermann's New Directions in African Architecture of 1969, has lost nothing of its relevance: "Yet our hunger for buildings as symbols, messages, memorials, chambers of ideas and feelings is so strong that even if their faded medicine has lost the original potency of sign and idea, our need constantly recharges them."

\* | Dick Van Gameren, Dutch Embassy, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2005.



\* | Laurent Séchaud, Koudougou Central Market, Koudougou, Burkina Faso, 2005.

