HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE

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Overview From ancient shelters to contemporary displays, African architecture has expressed the continent's whole people, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, more fully than any other art. Given an inventive people, a landmass three times that of the United States, and widely varying topographical conditions, it is no wonder that Africa has had to be rich In solutions to the problems of architecture. From the Bushman's thatched hut or the clay granary on the Jos plateau, Africans have figured out many comfortable and often stylish ways to shelter their lives.

Ancient

The ancient Egyptians were, for three millennia B.C.E. masters of massive granite creations; those pyramids which served as heavenly burial chambers for the Pharaohs. Nor were they the only pyramid builders in Africa, for their southern neighbors, in Meroe and Nubia, continued long into our era to construct vast cities of Pyramids for their deceased and deified rulers. Quite outside the Egyptian tradition, however, lie many traces of massive ancient African construction: the Nubian city of Kerma (2400 B.C.E.), a vast desert complex carved from stone; stone monoliths in what is now the Cross River State of Nigeria; unanalyzable stone circles in Senegambia: many further traces, like Tichitt Walata, 2000 B.C.E., which was a massive Saharan settlement redolent of advanced urban planning skills.

Mediaeval

For sake of a sharper term, 'mediaeval' may do to cover the marvelous growth period of high African architectural achievements which embraces such cultural work as the great Malian mosques of Djenne, Mopti, and Timbuktu--all brought to peak form and use in the l3th century C.E.--the earlier Great Mosque of Kairouan (7^{th}-9^{th} centuries C.E.), and the complex of Great Zimbabwe, whose first occupation dates back to the 2^{nd} century C.E., and whose peak stage of continuous development dates to the l5th century C.E. While mediaeval, in the Western European sense, means the 'middle age,' which lies between the Greco-Roman classical and the Renaissance, the same term demands a much more complex definition in Africa. The great mosques of Mali, and the rich Dogon caves culture nearby, represent a lofty set of cultural-structural achievements unique in Africa. (Djenne, the largest clay edifice In the world, lofty and prickly with its spines of exposed structure, is as mind-blowing as the Cathedral of Chartres, or Notre Dame de Paris.) On the other hand the structures of Great Zimbabwe, which were in process of expansion for centuries, which followed their curvilinear forms up hill down dale along the plumb line of 36 foot walls, represent a bewilderingly rich living complex. When we learn that there were some 300 such complexes scattered across the present country of Zimbabwe, we shake our heads at the audacity of mediaeval African architecture.

Early Modern

The great palace of the Oba of Benin was initially founded in the thirteenth century, but grew in power and royal accoutrements, with the great power of the Oba of Benin, who seemed to European visitors of the l8th century to be the ultimate in dark majesty. (The increasing circulation of rumors, concerning the human sacrifices carried out here, only added to the growing 'western' sense of the evil of the place.) There was no question, though, about the extraordinary girth of the palace walls. In the words of an admiring visitor, 'they extend for some 16,000 kilometres in all, in a mosaic of more than 500 interconnected settlement boundaries. They cover 6500 square kilometres and were all dug by the Edo people. In all, they are four times longer than the Great Wall of China, and consumed a hundred times more material than the Great Pyramid of Cheops. They took an estimated 150 million hours of digging to construct, and are perhaps the largest single archaeological phenomenon on the planet.' The annihilation of this palatial wonder, in 1897, was the response of British troops to what they took to be unacceptable barbarism; to which they then added their own by destroying a great number of the splendid bronzes which still today strike us with awe at the achievement of Benin.

19th century: modesty and style

To speak of the modest here is to target the self sheltering work of the little guy, who, like the Mexican peasant hanging scarlet peppers to adorn his humble cot, refuses to ban the aesthetic from his life. Frank Willet, in his *African Art,* illustration 104, captures a scene in action from contemporary Jos. A farmer is constructing a granary, onto which the thatched lid is being lifted. There is a drying hole in the side of the granary, and around the hold a decorative motif. The storage unit is conical, well aerated off the ground, and, odd to say, as beautifully simple as an ancient Greek vase. Such natural taste for the shapely is sharply marked onto certain African domestic structures which have found their ways into Willett's illustrations: in the late l9th century house exteriors began to be painted, leaving to art history the extraordinary vigor of the kind of daring ochre-walled Muslim domestic façade (Illustration 108) into which are embedded 'prestige motifs' like a bicycle and a motor car; while, in Illustration 118, we look at small mud mosque, in which as often in Africa, the plastic (or weavable or rammable or vertical of simple available building materials is exploited with ravishing taste.

The contemporary

A Nigerian friend (in Iowa) fastens to his fridge door a poster with urban profiles of all the major African capitals: skylines, we might say, that might as well be Chicago, London, Buenos Aires or Nanjing: brilliantly lit, topped with fearless towers, all that is glitzy in capital's richest hangouts; yes Africa is an architecturally modern continent and has been scoped out as such for some time. By mid twentieth, the colonial power was on many fronts busy building or remodeling University buildings for the major cities of the continent; urban conscious architects like Le Corbusier had been busy, in the twenties and thirties, with sketches for new living complexes in North Africa; cities like Abidjan, in Cote d'Ivoire, were plugged directly into French capital investment; and generated fresh and well planned urban lifescapes; the Italian Futurist movement had laid plans for the remaking of the Libyan city of Tripoli. And so on. And so on, of course, into the question whether these innovations link to African tradition, and into the answer that *yes*, the African is always the dominant flavor because it is strong, but that the portals are open for Africa's own architectural visions which will match the sculptural brilliance Ben Enwonwu devoted to the doors of the Chapels of the Apostolic Legation in Lagos ,in l965.

Reading

Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine, *The History of African Cities south of the Sahara from the Origins to Colonization*, Markus Wiener Pub, 2005.

Davidson, Basil, *The Lost Cities of Africa*, Boston, l959.

Fage, J.D.; Oliver, Roland, *The Cambridge History of Africa,* Cambridge, 1978.

Hull, Richard, *African Cities and Towns before the European Conquest*, New York, l976.

Tracy, James D., *City Walls: The Urban Enceinte in Global Perspective*, Cambridge, 2000.

Willett, Frank, Afr*ican Art: An Introduction*, New York, l993.

Discussion questions

Does the Egyptian tradition In architecture persist into anything you see in Sub-Saharan architecture? In its visual self-presentation does the vast architecture of Egypt reflect onto the work of the African continent?

It is said that African builders have traditionally excelled at using whatever is at hand, for construction process: from withes to granite blocks, they have made do with it. Does this opinion seem accurate?

Does Mali of the fourteenth century seem to you to have been the site of an architectural Renaissance? What did the architecture of Timbuktu contribute to that Renaissance?

Are there identifiably great Individual architects behind the major achievements of African architecture? Was architecture itself considered to be a separate skill, like mask making or painting?

What efforts are being made, in Africa, to preserve endangered monuments of architectural significance? Have Africans themselves an interest in preserving their own past? Or is that matter left to the rest of the world?

A city like Lagos, Nigeria, currently one of the largest and fastest growing cities in the world--150 new residents per hour--is almost devoid of architectural charm. Why? Would it help to import some Mexican *campesinos*, with their strings of pepper?