The Bénin Studio - A Tale of Two Cities

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In May 2015 the United Nations released a report suggesting that 10 million more people are added to the urban population of Sub-Saharan Africa each year, over two-thirds (7 million) live in informal settlements and only 2 million can expect ever to move out from them.

Urban planning and governance have not adapted fast enough to the extraordinary situation of rapid urban changes in Africa.

A new process of urbanization has been unleashed by the masses of low income migrants who have flocked to the cities since independence, and who are seeking to solve the problems of accommodation and employment on their own informal terms.

Current research and practice suggest that the path to urban peace and sustainability in urban Africa lies in building more inclusive and socially equitable cities where everyone, regardless of their economic means, gender, age, ethnic origin or religion are enabled and empowered to participate productively in the social, economic and political opportunities that cities offer.

A view that acknowledges the reality of slums, and at the same time the dynamism of slum inhabitants to resolve their very problems could go a long way in helping cities cope with rapid urbanization.

In the case of Benin this dynamism is magnified by the diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious make-up of the people and their capacities to live together in peace.

The focus of the 2017 fall Benin Studio was the tale of two cities, the formal and informal. We listened and responded to the historic and contemporary stories of two very different places separated by less than 12 kilometers of water.

We focused our energies on the settlements of Ganvie, a city formed by refugees from the slave trade, and the other Akpakpa-Dodomey, a settlement formed by contemporary economic refugees from Benin, Togo, Ghana, Burkina-Faso, Niger, and Nigeria.

As you will see in the accompanying projects the students skillfully developed design methods and projects, together with local community member, based on initial discoveries made during a 10-day visit to Bénin early in the semester.

The studio required students cultivate a particular point of view towards architecture and to define its role in the making of a better world.

The Bénin Studio 2017 was supported by L'Atelier Des Griots, with many thanks for their dedicated support throughout the semester and beyond.

Professor John Stephen Ellis, AIA and his colleague Beninese architect Habib Meme are co-founders of l'Atelier Des Griots, a non-profit international studio devoted to the study and implementation of low-tech ecological urban architecture and planning.

L'Atelier des Griots is also dedicated to the West African tradition of the griot – telling the many stories of the community through the medium of art, architecture and urbanism.

The founding of L'Atelier Des Griots in January 2017 is the first step in establishing a the first Design Build School in West Africa.

The Benin Studio

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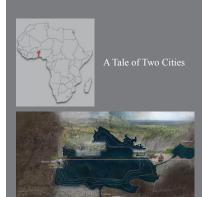
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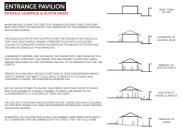
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"THIS EXPERIENCE WAS MORE THAN JUST CROSSING SOMETHING OFF MY BUCKET LIST. I REALLY JUST WANT TO THANK ALL THE AMAZING PEOPLE WE MET FOR AN UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE. THEY ALL WELCOMED US AND SHARED THEIR STORIES AND LIVES WITH US. DESPITE THE SHORT STAY, WE GAINED A FOREVER FAMILY."
– MYKAELA SCARPCE

"TO ALL MY FRIENDS IN BENIN WHO EMBRACED MYSELF AND THE GROUP I TRAVELED WITH... THANK YOU! I'LL NEVER FORGET YOUR OVERWHELMING FRIENDLINESS AND GRATUITY."
– AUSTIN DRAKE

ENTRANCE PAVILION
MYKAELA SCARPACE & AUSTIN DRAKE

WHEN WALKING DOWN THE STREETS OF AKPAKPA-DODOMEY, ONE'S EYES DART BACK AND FORTH, DISTRACTED BY THE COMMOTION OF THE SEEMINGLY INFINITE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

THE ROAD SCULPTED BY THE FOOTPRINTS AND TIRE TRACKS OF MOTORCYCLES THAT HAVE ONCE PASSED, FRAMES A PERIPHERY FILLED WITH A STAGGERED COLLAGE OF CORRUGATED ROOFS, ACCENTED BY THE WEIGHT OF STONES AND THE WEIGHTLESSNESS OF PALM BRANCHES.

A RAINBOW OF BROWN, GREY AND BEIGE THAT BLEND WITH ONE'S SHOES AS YOU KICK UP DIRT, CONTRASTS THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY COLORS THAT DRESS FRIENDS AND FAMILY AS THEY CONVERSE AND SELL IN THE MARKETS THAT LINE THE STREETS

FRIENDS TALK AND WALK WITHOUT DIRECTION AS THEIR CONVERSATION BRINGS THEM TO WHERE THEY WANT TO GO, WHILE OTHERS SIT IN THE SHADE AND CONVERSE TO ESCAPE THE PENETRATING AFRICAN SUN

BUT AS THE DAY COMES TO AN END, THE STREETS STAY LIVELY, SOON TO GROW WITH THE SCREAMS OF PLAYING CHILDREN, FLOWING LIKE WATER OUT OF CLASSROOMS INTO A COURTYARD OF TREES AND SAND

THE KIDS EXIT THEIR HEAVY WOOD DOORS HELD BY COARSE AND HEAVY COLUMNS OF CONCRETE, BEGINS THE LONG AND SEEMINGLY ENDLESS WALL WHICH DEFINES THE SCHOOL BEYOND.

DEPARTING, THE CHILDREN RUN ALONG THIS BARRIER, THREE TIMES THEIR HEIGHT, AS IT DISAPPEARS THEY ARE EMBRACED BY THE STREET THAT THEY CALL HOME

BASIC FORM OF SITE

EXTENSION OF EXISTING ROOF

REMOVAL OF EXISTING WALLS

ADDITION OF SPATIAL ELEMENTS

CREATION OF STAIRS

PEOPLE GATHERING   ZINSOU FOUNDATION

ROOF CREATES WATER COLLECTION IN WELL

SHADE PROVIDES REASON FOR GATHERING

EXTENDING EXISTING ROOF UNITES THE SPACE

REMOVAL OF CLASSROOM PROVIDES NEW ENTRY

STOOP EXTENDS INTO STREET

STAIRS CONNECT DIFFERENT LEVELS

"THIS WAS A VERY ENLIGHTENING AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE THAT I AM VERY GRATEFUL FOR. I HAVE LEARNED A LOT FROM EVERYONE THAT I MET AND IT HAS TRULY BEEN AN EXPERIENCE THAT I WILL CHERISH."
– SACHIA CHIN LOY

"WORDS CAN'T DO THIS EXPERIENCE JUSTICE, LIFE-CHANGING FOR SURE."
– LAMIA ALMUHANNA

Ganvie Women's Center
Sachia Chin Loy & Lamia AlMuhanna

THE BOAT SLOWS AS IT PULLS INTO THE FIRST CLUSTER OF HOMES. THE ENGINE LULLS, THE VILLAGE IS QUIET, SAVE FOR THE CHILDREN IN THE DISTANCE SWIMMING AND PLAYING IN THE WATER, AND SOME WOMEN SHOUTING THE PRAISES OF THEIR PRODUCTS. THE BOAT MANEUVERS ITS WAY THROUGH THE HOMES, PASSING BY CHILDREN STICKING THEIR HEADS OUT OF WINDOWS AND DOORWAYS, WOMEN OUTSIDE ON THEIR PORCHES WASHING CLOTHES, AS THE BOAT MOVES FURTHER INTO THE VILLAGE, A FEW MARKET BOATS PASS BY, SHARING GLANCES AND EXCHANGES. THE BOAT SOON REACHES IT'S FINAL DESTINATION, THE HEART OF THE VILLAGE.

THE VIEW FROM THE BOAT SHOWS THE WOMEN, GATHERING TOGETHER AT THE CENTRAL HUB TO SELL AT THE MARKET, WHILE ALSO GETTING TOGETHER AND FINDING THEMSELVES AMONGST FRIENDS. THE CHILDREN PLAY AMONGST THEMSELVES, RUNNING ALONG THE DOCK AND SWIMMING IN THE POOL. THE MARKET RADIATES LIGHT AND COLOR FROM THE ROOF WITH THE FABRIC LETTING IN THE BREEZE WITHOUT THE HARSH SUNLIGHT. VOICES OF THE WOMEN, MARKETING THEIR GOODS FILL THE SPACE, REMINDING THEM THAT THIS IS VILLE DES FEMMES, THE CITY OF WOMEN.

SINCE THE MEN ARE GONE FISHING DURING THIS DRY SEASON, AND MOST OF THE CHILDREN ARE IN SCHOOL, THE WOMEN HAVE CONQUERED THE CITY FOR THEMSELVES, MAKING THEIR WAY PAST HOMES ON A MISSION IN THE MOVING MARKET. AFTER GOING THROUGH, THE WOMEN HEAD TO THE FAVORITE SPOTS TO SELL IN THE MARKET, SITTING NEXT TO THEIR FRIENDS, SHARING STORIES, ADVICE AND TIPS TO HELP EACH OTHER. THE YOUNG CHILDREN THAT ARE WITH SOME OF THE WOMEN RUN OFF TO PLAY WITH THEIR FRIENDS WHILE THEIR MOTHERS ARE DOCKED. THE CHILDREN ARE WITHIN EARSHOT, SO THE WOMEN HAVE NO CONCERN ABOUT HOW FAR THE CHILDREN GO.

LE VILLE DE FEMMES IS THE CYCLE OF GANVIE. THE WOMEN KEEP THE VILLAGE AFLOAT, BEING THE BACKBONE, SUPPORTING EACH OTHER, THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR NEIGHBORS IN THIS COMMUNITY THAT HAS BRIDGED LAND AND WATER.

Existing Markets Conditions

Ganvie is a lakeside village in the Republic of Benin. The so-called Venice of Africa is characterized by irregularly placed stilt-supported structures, with waterways being the only efficient mode of transportation. In Ganvie, the division of labor between men and women as well as factors such as the changing environment, the lack of electricity, the nature of the economy have strongly influenced the everyday life of its people. The site is thus a product of external forces as rising sea levels have forced people to sell out of their canoes.

In Ganvie, shoppers paddle travel from seller to seller, providing an easy way to buy and transport goods. As the main market, its 80 canoes (on average) are stocked mainly with necessities such as food and firewood, along with a few random items, and thus is not a place where people go in their leasure time. Additionally, at Ganvie's Great Market, which operates daily from sunrise to sunset, accoidation is uncommon; very little interaction (aside from what is necessary to effectuate a sale) takes place, which further serves to emphasize its very utilitarian purpose.

Construction Methods

A key factor in the project is the effort to invent and uncover new methods and opportunities in utilizing both found and local materials, as well as realizing the role of the community in the construction process. This idea of working with resilient materials that surround the site and integrating the community in the construction process is a first step to bring the women of Ganvie together

Design Narrative

Lands

Climate change and natural disasters have made waterways the most convenient mode of transportation in Ganvie.

Houses

The architecture in Ganvie is characterized by irregularly placed structures (mostly rectangle) of varying size.

Public Spaces

The Great Market, two churches and a school are some of the very few places that are considered public in Ganvie.

Activity Clusters

The activity clusters happen mostly within houses (ex: family gatherings) and sometimes on the canoes (ex: markets, church celebrations).

Movement

The irregularly placed structures contributes to a very organic, non-linear movement, as it responds to the physical demands of the space.

Combined

Combining all the site forces and understanding the layers of information was a key to selecting a site for the proposed design

Pool belongs to land, market belongs to water.

The house sits on the edge, connecting both sides.

The structure is rotated, creating a connection with the existing market.

The house and pool are rotated, opening up the space to the public.

In a place like Ganvie that is marked by the diverse ethnic, cultural and religious make-up of the people, the need of flexibility in spaces is magnified. The design solution for this particular challenge was to incorporate moveable fabric panels that can be positioned to create meeting spaces and rooms where members of the Ganvie community can congregate for various activities beyond commerce