

## The Assimilation of Traditional Practices in Contemporary Architecture

*Roland Depret*

Dakar is a recent city, like all of the coastal cities of West Africa. Fifty-six years ago, it had only 40,000 inhabitants. Something on the order of 80 percent of the present population has been urbanized only for one or two generations, and individual and collective memory is fully aware of the traditional environment; the way of life is permeated by it.

In all sorts of activities linking it with the built-up part of the environment, the large majority of Dakar's population assimilates this traditional past into its contemporary environment. This point will be the essence of the problem with which we will deal.

This traditional-contemporary dynamic process is accentuated by other factors. First of all, let us recall that in Dakar there have always been Lebou village communities (Hann, Yoff, Ouakam, etc.), in which a very original type of juxtaposition of traditionalism and of modernism has developed. In addition, the relationships between the capital and inland areas are numerous and frequent in a Sahel marked by easy communications, particularly in a society characterized by great social mobility, family encounters are frequent and diversified. Finally, we must mention the important role of the secondary cities, which are intermediaries between the capital and the rural world.

Dakar has another specific characteristic. The division between the city and the outskirts, which is certainly evident geographically, is not very distinct. On one hand, this peripheral area is not comprised of predominantly recent immigrants; quite on the contrary, it owes its emergence to Dakar inhabitants who have either been evicted from their neighborhood, or have left in search of building sites, which are scarce and expensive in the central area. On the other hand, under-urbanization is not limited to the outskirts. The same situation is found in the development area known as *Parcelles assainies* (Improved Parcels of land).

### Dakar, An Islamic City?

Dakar has a large Moslem majority, on the order of a million people — but does that make it an “Islamic” city?

Islam is a basic fact in Senegal, and it is intensely felt by the population. Like all Africans in general, the Senegalese are deeply religious. To be sure, there are remnants of the traditional African religions, “weighted syntheses,” depending on the case, of animism, of totemism, of manism, of naturism, of fetishism and of paganism (according to the analysis of Thomas and Luneau), and these surviving remnants are also intensely felt, since they are strongly anchored in the African cosmogony. Yet is there a “Black Islam,” for all that? Hampaté Ba says: “There could not be a Black Islam, any more than there could be a Black Christianity or a Black Judaism. What there is, above all, is the Islamic principle, the only thing worthwhile studying. Naturally, as my master, Tyerno Bokar, the sage of Bandiagara, said to me, it can happen — and it will very frequently happen — that in Islamizing itself, a country adopts one of the various colors that the gigantic, triangular, Islamic prism can offer, when breaking up the divine white truth of which Islam spreads the light.”

In Senegal, Islam is essentially an Islam of brotherhoods, of “*tariqas*,” of which the two most important ones are the Tidjanes, centered around Tivaouane, and the Mourides, whose center is in Touba. The links of the faithful with their brotherhood are very close and constitute a very dense network of relationships throughout the country, and particularly between Dakar and the other parts of Senegal. These links are religious and links of solidarity, but also entail participation in development and a struggle for power. Among the highlights in the life of the population, we must note the great annual pilgrimages, especially that of Tivaouane, a city of a few thousand inhabitants that welcomes, for two days and two nights during the Maouloud, more than a million pilgrims

Dakar at that time is emptied of its population and of its public transportation system.

As we will see, this importance of Islam is expressed in the built-up environment, but with some specific aspects that are sometimes rather distant from those of other Moslem countries. This fact is due as much to African particularisms as to the very perceptible effects of colonization.

Like all other great cities, Dakar is an arena of struggle, a “contest area,” harboring numerous conflicts and internal contradictions: battles for civic power, for religious power, for profit. This aspect has already been analyzed during this seminar, particularly by Fatou Sow and Jacques Bugnicourt. Hence it will no longer be dwelt on here, but we must nevertheless not lose sight of it.

### Memory of Signs

The interactions of individuals or of groups with their built-up environment is conditioned, among other things, by the remembrances, more or less contemporary, that they have of their traditional environment, the set of signs, symbols and archetypes to which they can attach themselves in order to assert themselves more effectively in an urban environment that is much more vast, much less easy to grasp.

It is the home territory, to which the divinities (of the earth, of the forest, of water...) are closely linked. These divinities were present before the book religions, and co-exist with them in forms that have deteriorated to varying extents. They are rarely given spatial definition, or this occurs in very diffuse ways, but they often mark — by means of a set of rites — the configuration of the villages (taboo spaces or passages, for example).

It is religion, Islam to the greatest extent, marked by close links with the religious Community, the Imam, the Koranic school, more than by the physical presence of the Mosque. The latter is rarely the

central point of the village; it is generally a simple structure, vaguely inspired by North Africa and the Middle East (and never by the great African mosques of Mali or Niger). The design is most often that of the “Maraboutic” buildings, with a single dome, the symbol of mediation with the heavens.

It is the village community, with its organization that is always complex, but is understood by all and is accepted. Its visible sign is the *penc*, the assembly area, marked by a large tree, with one center or several, depending on the structure of the village

The spatial organization can be highly variable, depending on the ethnic groups and the regions (see Pelissier, *les Paysans du Sénégal*) The forms are rarely rigid (with the exception of the case of villages laid out by the government), but rather they are flexible, fluid, organic. The functional concept of movement patterns is replaced by that of “open spaces,” which are highly differentiated. Depending on the regions, the ethnic groups, and the form of village government, the spatial organization may be centralized (in general around the *penc*, more than around the Mosque) or be poly-centered. In contrast with the rather dense grouping of the Wolof villages, for example, one finds the nebulous nature of the Diolas villages.

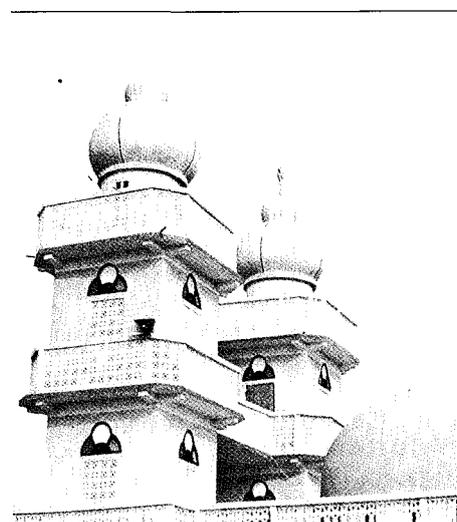
These are the essential elements of the built-up environment, as well, of course, as the scale, which will remain in peoples’ memory, and which they will try to find again or to reconstitute in urban areas stemming from planned sources.

But memory also retains such things as the expectation of rain, monetary indigence, lack of public facilities and insufficient government, the restrictive nature of the power structure. “Every young rural man dreams of the capital, and the converse is certainly not true” (Monteil)



*Supple forms of the traditional villages, differentiated spaces. But also, replacement of the traditional huts by living surroundings of the urban type (Yenne village)*

*Photo R. Depret*



*A mosque in Bargny, with its qualities of freshness and spontaneity*

*Photo R. Depret*

## The Signs of Power

Readings of the urban environment require long processes of decoding, and there are few people who can do it. The signs and symbols are numerous and intertwined, due, among other things:

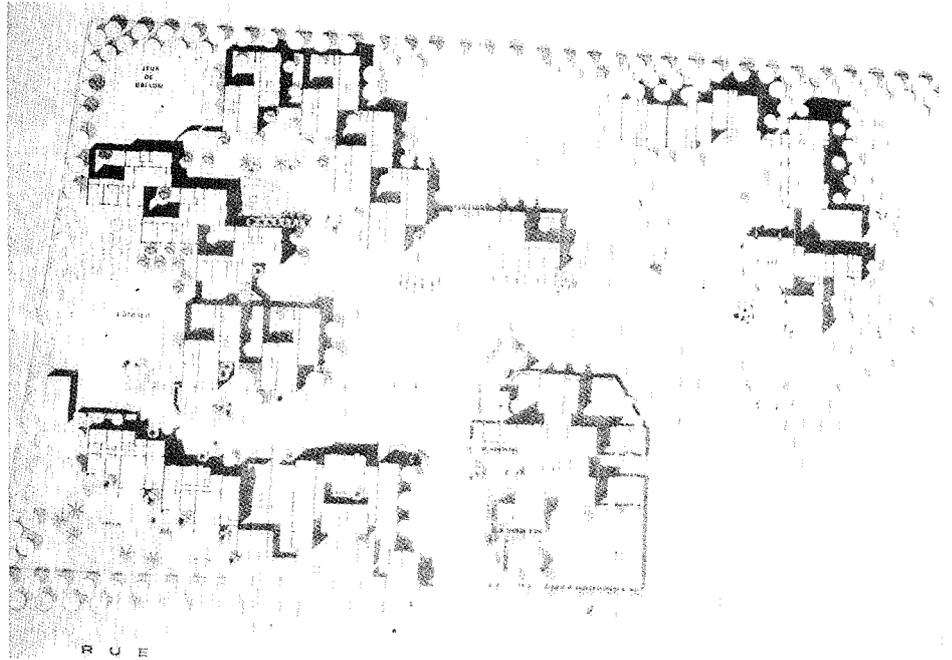
- to the existence of numerous, differing environments;
- to a complex culture, many aspects of which are still marked by domination,
- to a rapid pace of living and dynamics of change

One of the most important “chapters” in “reading” the city is *power*, whether it dates from before, or after, Independence. It constructs its symbols: monuments, large public buildings, squares, major arteries. It does not accommodate spon-

taneity well, nor the organic aspects, preferring order, alignment, straight lines and right angles, which have been a sign or urban culture since the city of Catal Hüyük. Power is a mark left by numerous urban civilizations, upon “successful” cities whether they be Roman, Greek, Moslem (the city of Samara, extensions of Ispahan), Chinese (map of Peking), Aztec, etc., not to mention present-day cities. It is probably the sign of a strong and centralizing power, but it is also the manifestation of far-sighted urban objectives (L.P. Senghor: “I want wide, straight streets that intersect at right angles”) One must make a distinction here between the large urban arteries and the connecting roads. As for wide arteries, they gain being simple, clear, and “adjustable” from generation to generation; in this respect, straight lines and right angles are among the best forms of organization. It is not the same thing for the neighborhood connecting roads, where one could have — either with the help of creative imagination, or by giving the population a certain freedom in its settlement patterns — more organic, more human routes for communication. The form of the Dakar Medina stems from the colonial and military powers who depended upon technicians lacking in imagination. But at present, we find the same practices. How many villages have been laid out and “divided up” by the agents of the Surveyor’s Office?

Power also means city planning: the urban environment leads to the existence of rules, and hence to a restriction of individual liberties for the benefit of the community. This, incidentally, was a normal thing in a traditional environment, and was respected. But in the urban milieu, especially more recently, the community becomes a diffuse, anonymous, imposed mass, and the rules are then perceived as constraints which are poorly understood, and hence poorly accepted. Rejection in one form or another often results from this.

The power structure, often in spite of declarations of good intentions, cannot



*SOS village of Dakar, BEHC Architects  
Fluidity of the inside spaces*

*Photo R. Depret*

permit itself, or is unable to integrate the people’s will into the framework of government voluntarism: the only choice is between the “regular city” and the “irregular city” as Fatou Sow has effectively demonstrated in conjunction with Pikine.

Power also expresses itself by its centrality. In Dakar, this central nature is symbolized by the governmental and administrative part of *le Plateau*, during the colonial period as well as today (presidency, administrative building, ministries, cathedrals, Independence Square, national theater, etc.). There has not been any effective decentralization, despite real efforts (including the axis of the Avenue du Général du Gaulle, between Independence Monument and the Great Mosque), but these efforts have never been pushed far enough to profit from the effect of concentration. Do the recently

urbanized Dakarais, or the Moslem Dakarais, identify themselves with this centrality, the symbols of which are still rooted in relationships of domination? We will come back to this question in conjunction with the Great Mosque.

### The Signs of Profit

The colonial period was characterized, among other things, by a rather close alliance between the colonial administration and business, between power and profit. Essentially, profit found its most characteristic expression in the commercial and business part of *le Plateau*, the Central Business District, close to or mingled with the governmental and administrative Plateau. It was found in the presence of the big banks, the office buildings, the residential buildings and the commercial



*The Plateau, or central business district of Dakar. Many traditional houses among the buildings still remain*

*Photo R. Depret*

areas, which pushed their tentacles toward the lower-class districts over distances of several kilometers. High-rise buildings, the *taï u kaw*, became a visible sign of wealth, from the top to the bottom of the economic ladder.

The Central Business District is the essential element of centrality in Dakar. How is it felt and experienced?

In its formal aspect, one is forced to note its European character, although strong qualifications must be attached to this: a substantial part of the Central Business District is occupied by traditional houses, single story with an interior courtyard: these are, the *lebou* "tounds lands."

One must also note that the Central Business District is in the hands, basically — even if it is recent — of the Senegalese from the highest level (bank directors, managers of government or private firms, owners of buildings and of businesses) to

the little retailer. One must also note that the Central Business District remains the "top model." But for all that, it is not felt as a symbol with which one identifies: it was built essentially by the former colonial powers, and it is not pleasant to put on (in the absence of others) the clothes left by one's predecessors (the same problems were experienced in Algiers, and much more strongly). But having said this, would a Central Business District built by Senegalese for Senegalese be very different, apart from a few formal details? What would be the specific nature of a Senegalese bank, hotel, office building, etc.?

The real problem seems to us to lie elsewhere: there is nothing in this center of Dakar that reminds us that, beyond the capital, there is a country, a Sahelian country, a rural country. One of the buildings that has been felt the most strongly in Abidjan as a symbol is the Caisse de Stabilisation (Stabilization

Fund). This is not due to its form — a concrete, steel and glass tower (though it does display modernity) — but rather due to its special function: it is the monument put up in honor of agricultural production, of planters, and this is all the more significant in that the liberation movement in the Ivory Coast was originally led by the Ivory Coast planters. There is nothing of all that in the Dakar Plateau. This is the image of the imbalance between the capital and the inland areas.

The perverse effects of profit are also signs. They include the urban land, relegated to the status of merchandise, and an expansion dominated by problematical factors and moves that have already been made, which often leave "official" city-planning disarmed and merely playing a catch-up role. Speculation on city land leads to segregation by economic classes, contrary to the traditional spirit and contrary to the spirit of Islam. In this domain, probably for different reasons, power and profit combine forces in extremely brutal acts of segregation (*Médina*), or with similar intentions, such as the Improved Parcels of land which have fortunately been given a new orientation. The high cost of urban land also leads to excessive densities. The high rents and the small size of the land plots lead to very high degrees of land use (sometimes more than 90 percent), as well as to the use of rooms by a number of people that may exceed 8. Here, again, there is a loss of identity: one can no longer organize the surroundings in accordance with traditions (many of which are based on the hadiths), nor even simply enjoy acceptable living conditions.

### Horizontality of the Town

Essentially, the city has excessive high densities on the ground. Outside the Central Business District, Dakar remains horizontal, a choice of urban development, the result of administrative and political decisions, and of pressure from a population originating in rural environments. The

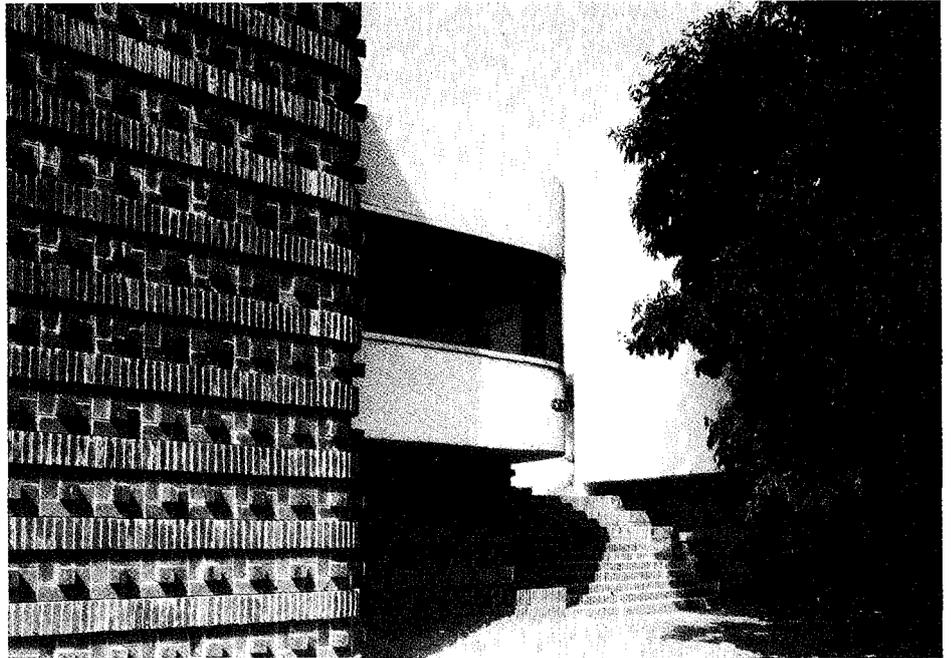
result gives an impression of immensity: whereas the village is perceived, is *read*, as a whole, here it will take a long period of decoding, and constant efforts, in order to interpret the cityscape. This difficulty of perception is accentuated by the fact that:

- there is a uniform character, although it is not all that coherent: juxtaposed districts, created at random, in the process of urban development;
- the sea surrounds the city on 3 sides, making it more difficult to orient oneself;
- the symbolic center, the Plateau, is very much off-center, in the lower tip of the triangle (One can compare Dakar to a funnel, in which the “heavy” parts pile up at the bottom, as if by gravity.) In this immense cityscape, a substantial part of living time will be spent in transportation. Incidentally, the major constraint is not time, but the cost, the uncomfotableness, the uncertainties. Trips do not have just negative aspects. Travel in “fast buses” favors better knowledge of other people, one adopts an itinerary, one discovers the city every day, by successive layers, like a cross-section, like an X-ray. In the labyrinth represented by the city, people will find their way round by means of veritable “initiation trips.”

### The House

In this immensity of the city, the habitat will constitute the first refuge, the first *appropriated space*. For the great majority of Dakar inhabitants, the house represents rather definite continuities between tradition and contemporary life:

- the majority are still ground-floor homes. This will probably not remain true on a long term basis, since the present tendency is toward vertical densification (ground floor + 1 to 4 rooms in general),
- the house is designed more like a successive addition of juxtaposed rooms than like a preconceived composition. We can note, simultaneously, the notion of making the rooms ordinary, especially the bedrooms, and a tendency of



Dakar University, BEHC Architects  
Bricks, shells, flexible volumes employed for architectural expression

Photo R. Depret

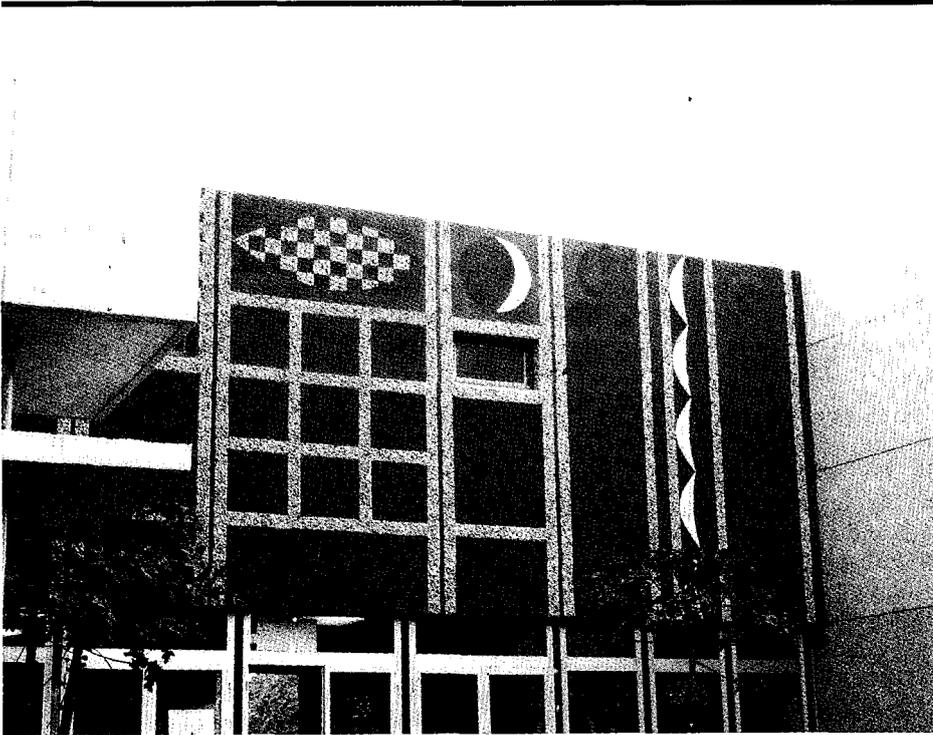
- following an evolutionary process;
- it is organized around a courtyard space (in wolof: *diggi-kër*) with multiple functions: religion, welcoming guests, family life, households tasks;
- the construction is simple: coated cement blocks (the materials known as “traditional” are almost totally lacking in Dakar), double-slope roofs or flat slab. They are most often built by jobbing workmen (and rarely by real self-help)

But this is where the continuity with traditional construction stops. While the Senegalese rural house varies substantially depending on the ethnic groups (see *L’habitat traditionnel au Sénégal*, published under the direction of P. Dujarric), in Dakar there is virtual uniformity of design. To be sure, this uniformity is due in the first place to the constraints: financial, technical, lack of information, form and dimensions of the land plots, city planning codes, etc

But in addition, the intention is above all to affirm the nature of a city, and not its rural origin, marked by specific ethnic characteristics. People say they are Dakarais, not Sarakolé or Diola. This distinction can sometimes be perceived in the internal organization of the land site, but, at least as far as we know, never in the facade. The house reflects a kind of dual behavior, introverted on the courtyard, extroverted toward the street, and it is the facade that expresses the urban quality.

European model remains alive, despite efforts on behalf of cultural decolonization, and a rise on the social ladder is most often reflected either by construction of an upper floor (apartments), or by giving up the courtyard house for a “villa”.

The same phenomena are experienced in the Maghreb (Casablanca, Fès, etc.). The complexes of the governmental housing companies (HLM, SICAP) are



Dakar University, BEHC Architects  
African and Islamic symbolic motifs

Photo R. Depret

very instructive

When the inhabitant is the owner, he will first add extra rooms in accordance with needs and means. This is not just a question of increasing the built-up surface, but also of restructuring a plan that is not considered as adapted to tradition.

In very many cases he will entirely restructure the facade (which, at the outset, is almost totally lacking in inspiration) in order to express his own language, and not that of an anonymous community. The signs emitted in this way are extremely variable, since they represent individual visions, desires, and fantasies. But in this respect, we must note two important points:

- first of all, these changes represent a considerable financial effort, since the cost of the remodeling can reach or exceed the cost of the original house. This effort reveals a real general drive,

and not, as is too often said, a simple whim for being different;

- these modifications should be the subject of further studies, since the conclusions might lead to an architectural research that opens the way to a consensus about the architect's language and that of the user.

In the absence of such a study, one cannot really draw up a "vocabulary." But what we can observe is the fact that the "words" used follow, after a year or two, the fashion observed in prestigious examples (public buildings, villas) taken from the large catalogue of facades of the city. Is there a drive for identification with these constructions because they represent entrance into a higher economic class, or because their present architecture is more "African"? We will come back to this subject later in this article.

### The Building Craftsman

In this spread of techniques and styles, the building craftsman, or *tâcheron*, plays a leading role. His social origins are often the same as those of his clientele, and he understands their motivations. He has often worked for big or medium-sized contractors, and he is up to date on the materials and techniques in fashion.

The local builder is responsible for one of the important transformations, both from the formal and from the building viewpoint, the reinforced concrete slab which is gradually replacing the double-pitched roof. This relinquishing of a traditional African form in favor of a Mediterranean form comes both from the example of the Lebano-Syrians, who are great builders and many of whom can be found in Dakar, and from "modern" styles imported from France since the 1950s.

The same craftsman is also responsible for the spread of certain formal aspects of what is called "Sudanese-Sahelian Architecture", of which we will speak below: the affirmation of verticality by means of panels placed on facades; abolition of the acroterions, ocher, sand, brown colors, African decorative motifs, etc.

This role of spreading certain practices is of basic importance, since it ensures a continuity between the type of habitation of the majority and private or public constructions of greater prestige.

To be sure, the local builder has a tendency to schematize, to keep only a few signs emptied of their constructive significance, to lessen the quality of materials and execution as he must adapt to his clientele's means. But above all, he has few means and little training, except what he has learned on the job. A gradual transition, coherent and well executed, from the traditional to the contemporary will entail the training, the supervision, the structuring of the craftsmen-builders. They must have the nobility of their trade restored to them, to become *maalems* (master-builders).

Many other problems could be touched on in speaking about houses. Let us note, among other things:

- the difficulties in the economic realm, which have received considerable attention during the seminar;
- the contradictions of the Senegalese urban society: people, divided between two ways of life, have difficulty in “programming,” and even in simply using their houses well. When Mr. Ben Embarek was responsible for city planning in Morocco, he described these same difficulties to us, with a population perpetually poised between the nuclear and the enlarged family, between modernity and tradition;
- if the traditional milieu has transmitted a certain way of living to the city, in return the city is transporting its models to an ever greater extent toward the rural environment, or, as was the case in Ivory Coast, it has simply imposed them.

### Spaces

The habitat also means the environment: the neighborhood links, the school, the market, the local mosque... and it also means the spaces, meeting spaces, play spaces, spaces for celebrations.

In what is called a “regular” city, in the systematic grid employed for land development, these spaces are almost non-existent, and a situation of conflict is created. The only free space, the street, sees cars competing with the pedestrians, children’s games, and animals. Religious or family festivities can occupy it completely and bar it to traffic. The *penc* will be reduced to a street corner, a tree, a road cut-off. On the Niari Taly, a divided street with a wide central strip containing trees, tens of *penc* are installed.

Only the government real estate companies have made some effort in this direction, but most often without real study of the needs and the motivations.

The “irregular” districts, the fruit of spontaneous building activity, probably display the characteristics of serious under development, but the spaces there have evolved in a way that is clearly better adapted and more appropriate. That is one of the factors — here as in numerous countries in the world, whether developed or not — that creates profound links between the population and its living environment even if it is a “slum.”

Green spaces are missing, except on certain indicated itineraries, where we note the survival of a colonial tradition of lawns and flowers, which are expensive to maintain and to water, and which must be fiercely protected from children and animals. The sign of green spaces in the Sahel is, above all, trees and their shade. That is what must be generalized.

### Religious Buildings

Dakar is a city with a large Islamic majority. What importance do the corresponding religious buildings have in the environment? Excluding the Great Mosque of Dakar, of which we will speak later, we can distinguish the neighborhood mosques, or *djaka*, and the Friday mosques, or *djuma*.

The *djaka* plays a capital role in the immediate environment. It is firmly inserted into the urban fabric, close to the faithful, and attracts many users. It is the sign of a particular realm, of belonging to a group, to a brotherhood; it is appropriate by people. Its architecture is of only secondary importance, and in the extreme cases, it may be a mere outline on the ground. It is the function that matters, and not its form. Construction is always the fruit of the efforts of a specific community.

The *djuma*, generally larger, may produce a different kind of feeling. It is visited on a weekly basis, and it is sometimes a substantial distance from homes of the faithful. It is a symbol of the gathering of the Islamic community.

The constitutive elements of these mosques are generally as follows

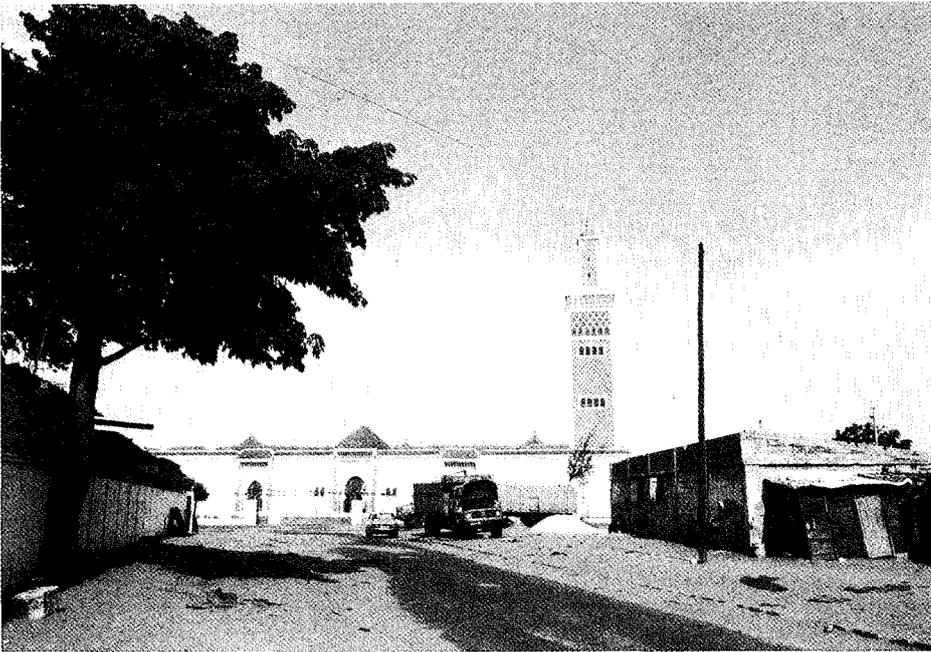
- square or rectangular plans, with central dome (reminder of the dome symbol, the celestial vault over the flat earth);
- prayer hall, with *mihrab* and often with a *mimbar*;
- minarets, often two of them flanking the main facade, most often with a square base, clearly of North African inspiration. The construction, except in very recent cases, was carried out without an architect, by *tâcherous* (local builders) supervised by the Imam or a religious official of the brotherhood.

The Mosque is also a monument, the center from which an attempt is made to project an image.

1) If Islam is an ancient phenomenon in Senegal (10th-11th centuries), it is relatively recent in Dakar, as is the city itself. But until very recent time, the power structure in Dakar was colonial, with a very marked mistrust of Islam, which therefore found it difficult to express itself through monuments. The result of the recent affirmation of religious power is the multiplication of mosques and their ever more monumental appearance.

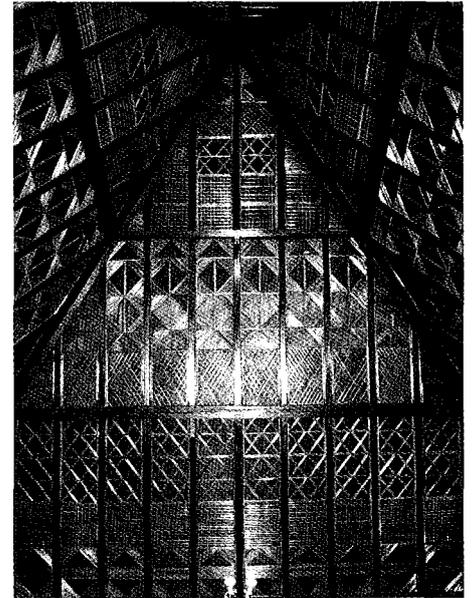
2) An expression is sought, not of an African Islam, but rather of an Islam coming from the Arab countries. The architectural inspiration and the vocabulary come essentially from Morocco and Saudi Arabia, the countries most visited by the Marabouts and the faithful (*talibé*). Although Mali and Niger are well known to them and offer some very fine architectural examples (Jenné, Mopti, etc.), no trace of them is found in Dakar. This is obviously due to a desire to express an Islam untouched by Africanism. As an extreme case, could one say that there is a continuation of a fetishistic attitude?

3) In the absence of architectural traditions, and of master-builders (*maalem*), the interpretation of the models is often imitative, and simplified. The symbolic proportions and the major controlling outlines are forgotten. This fundamental aspect of Islamic buildings, which unifies



*The Great Mosque of Dakar and its surroundings*

*Photo R Depiet*



*ENAM Center, BEHC Architects  
Contemporary translation of the Mourides'  
decorations*

*Photo R Depiet*

architectures as different as those of the Arab, Iranian or Turkish mosques and which has a continuity of proportion between the smallest and the largest constituent elements, is neglected here.

4) This "naive" nature must not allow us to forget a characteristic of freshness and of spontaneity, with a high degree of inventiveness, and, a point of basic importance, of suitability to the feelings of the population. And this remains in the direct line of African tradition.

The Great Mosque of Dakar is something else. It follows the image of a dual belonging, both introverted and extroverted. It is not the result of the efforts of a local community, it is a contribution from outside. It is a correct *pastiche* of a Moroccan architecture of the time of the French Protectorate, having no common roots with Black Africa.

The only thing kept of the Karawiyine is a formal style, but it has not the one essen-

tial thing, which is the environment: vacant lots, workshops, scant urbanization, a boulevard with no activity except cars.

It is located on the site of an ancient cemetery, which later became the location for high prayer. These burial areas are traditionally located outside the urban centers. Between the Plateau and the Medina, there is a no-man's land. The fact is that the colonial power structure excluded the idea of giving the Great Mosque a central location, since that location was reserved for the Cathedral. The dissensions between the different brotherhoods, and even within each brotherhood, made it impossible to suggest an alternative, such as a plot of land in the center of the Médina.

For all these reasons, the Great Mosque is not often felt as a symbol of Islam, whatever the monumental nature of the building may be, and this fact links up with Islamic tradition: the function, the sense of

identity with something, are more important than the form.

## Past and Present

The works of former travelers, Ibn Battūta and many others, used to begin discussion of a city by indicating "the number of its inhabitants and the magnificence of its monuments." Today, the monuments are always the visible signs of the city, the image that the inhabitants want to project of it. Hence they are a testimony, but testimony without complacency, to the past and to the present.

In Dakar, as a whole they testify to three periods:

### **The Colonial Period**

The dominant symbol is power. the "General Government" (now the President's office), the army (the general staff headquarters), the railroad station, symbol of penetration into the inland part of Senegal, the Chamber of Commerce, symbol of profit allied with the power structure.

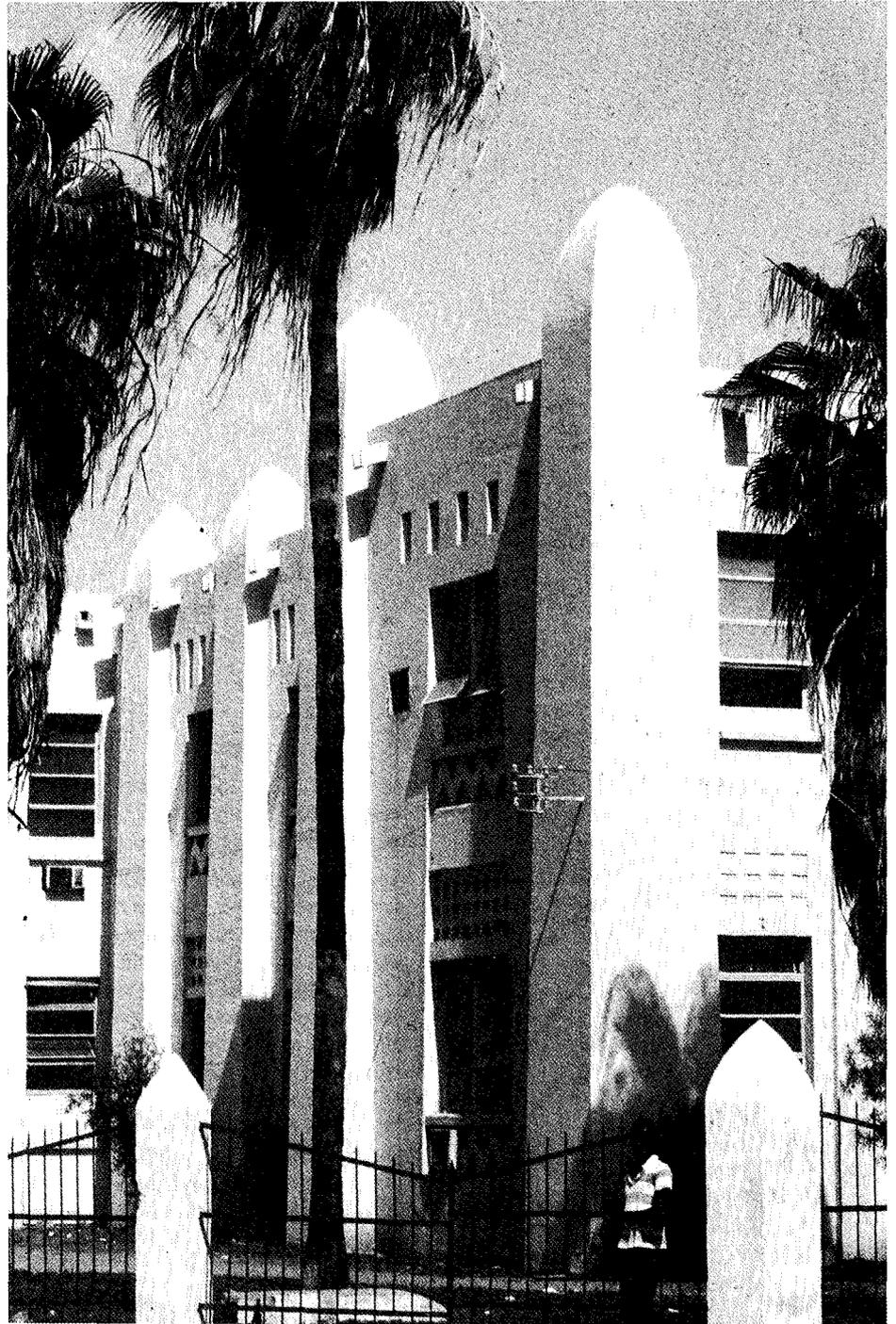
At that time, trips to and from France took a long time (it was what Henri Chomette calls the "shipping" period), so there was local autonomy, relatively speaking, and the colonisers were "Africans" by their situation

Dakar was then the center of attraction of French West Africa (AOF) The image of France was projected there, with all of the styles of the time, moved to the second degree: classical inspiration, "modern style," etc., as well as the "Colonial Exposition" inspiration toward the 1930s, symbolizing the colonial empire, with West African echoes in the Sandaga market and the Polyclinic, among other buildings.

Hence there was a definitely foreign characteristic there. But this was partly offset by the fact that this architecture was locally produced, with the inferences that this fact represents

It is, moreover, an "honest" architecture: The means available did not allow cheating, and there were none of the present artificial systems making it possible to redeem poor design (e.g., air-conditioning, etc.). The spaces and the volumes were often generous. The local means imposed an architecture without technical prowess, on a human scale; and it is often a functional success

The buildings of that time generally leave a good impression, and appear appropriate. Above all, the fact of being old confirms, here as elsewhere, the status of "monu-



*The Polyclinic Building in Dakar dates from the post-Colonial Exposition in Paris period of the 1930's*

*Photo R. Depiet*



*The Administrative Building of the Senegalese government which dates from the "Airplane" period of post-World War II*

*Photo R. Depret*

ment " But there is more involved, particularly a human aspect giving a feeling of security, all the more so in that one finds numerous models for them in inland areas. In addition, for a long time they inspired trends in the dwellings of ordinary people

### **The Time of Independence**

The period preceding and following Independence was more confused when it comes to political intentions.

In Europe after World War Two, people re-learned how to build, yet with poorly assimilated techniques and aesthetics, from which man was often left out. It was a transition period for architecture, and the same was true of Africa, at a further remove. It was the "airplane" period. The

designers were more often in Europe than on the spot, and certain ones never even came to Senegal. There was no more local production, but rather a severe break: radical importation of techniques, of formal aesthetics, and an ignorance of the local traditions, a rejection of popular imagination.

The result is buildings with no evocative power, without a message, even if sometimes the architecture is not without some quality. That period also influenced popular architecture, and one result is the innumerable facades, dry and sad, that fortunately are now beginning to take some color.

### **Today**

"Our eyes receive the light of dead stars " Any thought, any action is based on the past.

The present has its roots in a triple culture, Negro-African, Islamic, European. Cultural independence is the art of being able to take up this triple culture, while suppressing its links with previous forms of domination.

Senegal has been politically independent since 1960, and it is looking for the right path to various forms of independence: economic, cultural, and others.

It was natural, and necessary, for the search for cultural independence to lead to an immersion, initially, in a Negro-African past that had been denied, ignored, gagged, and in an affirmation of Islam that the dominant culture had tried to push aside.

The first manifestations of this renewal, under the strong stimulus of Léopold Sédar Senghor, were a new school for plastic arts, especially painting. The world festival of Negro-African arts in 1966 showed an extraordinary explosion of artists of works and the Senegalese: Ibou Diouf, Bocar Diong, and many others, but also some from other African countries, particularly my late friend, the great Ivory Coast sculptor Lattier.

As of the 1970s, first of all with young European architects who tried to understand Senegal, and then with the Senegalese architects, who became more and more numerous (there are now almost 60), architecture struck out in a new direction.

Some initial results, in the form of buildings, preceded the development of a position, known as the "School of Dakar " Its main objectives are:

- original creation, produced locally;
- the search for a real identity in the cultural field, these two points leading to a return to the Negro-African tradition;
- the refusal to restrict oneself to aesthetics, but rather the desire to think in terms of the environment, economy in construc-

tion, etc.

- and all this while maintaining a flexible framework (“formalism begins with definition” — Braque) Léopold Sédar Senghor defines the spirit of this “Sudanese-Sahelian” architecture with a poetic image, “asymmetrical parallelism,” a strong image, a very open image, leaving great freedom to the creative imagination.

At the same time, a School of Architecture and City Planning was established in Dakar. A considerable portion of its instruction is oriented toward traditional African architecture, and more particularly Senegalese architecture, under the inspiration of Patrick Dujarric

It is still too early to draw valid lessons from these new tendencies. At the most, and with great care, one could:

- make a rapid analysis of the architectural language;
- and draw up some initial conclusions.



*SOS village of Dakar, BEHC Architects  
Pyramidal roof is a reminder of the hut*

*Photo R Depiet*

## The Intentions of the Architectural Language

*Suitability to local needs.* a local architectural production, by Senegalese or related architects, must guarantee a better dialogue between architect and user, in order to attempt to find a common language.

*An evolutionary character,* one of the basic elements in traditional architecture, must prevail, as a link with tradition and to meet the construction problems of a developing country.

*The spaces* are also among the essential elements of the African built environment, on the one hand, and of the Islamic environment on the other hand. Both on the functional level (wind, sun, etc.) and on the cultural level, attempts are made to seek inside and outside spaces with different scales, which are interlocking, multi-purpose, adapted to the functions and to the people: enclosed or partly enclosed spaces, courtyards, patios, etc

*The forms:* It is probably in this domain that present-day architecture has asserted itself to the greatest extent. There is at least one clear intention setting oneself apart from classicism, from the strict use of straight lines and right angles. In this respect, the new Senegalese architecture resolutely separates itself from the “modern” and links up with the “post-modern.” If the results have often been good, or promising, it has also happened rather often that a desire to be original at any cost, so as to be “African,” have degenerated into anecdotal approaches or disorder. Among the orientations that, in our opinion, are of interest and may lead to some really original architecture, we may note:

- search for dynamic forms, many of which are based on the triangle, a very widespread African symbol,

- affirmation of a vertical characteristic (abolition of the cornices, vertical panels, etc.), which is also a search for dynamism, for impetus;
- flexible forms, inspired by certain architecture of earth construction (particularly Casamance in Senegal, but also Lobis, etc.);
- rhythms: African culture, first of all, is rhythm, music and dancing. An architecture that wants to base itself on tradition must also be rhythm and music. (One could make some similar studies on the architecture of Islam “in its initial period of grandeur”) Intuition can play a big role here, but there is certainly a lack of serious analyses for theorizing about such a trend
- formal inspirations through traditional vocabulary: pyramidal or conical roofs of huts, roofs with impluvium, domes of Fulah huts. We are dealing here essen-

tially with *metaphors*, which may extend to certain details such as porticoes in the form of pirogues, facades in the form of jewels — what one director of architecture wanted to express in asking: “Make a building for me in the form of a mask.” This metaphorical language, however dangerous it may be when excessive may also possess an extraordinarily evocative power, readable by all

*The materials* the language concerning the “local” materials goes a very long way back, and has caused almost as much ink as cement to flow. In urban architecture, one must not confuse “local” materials with “traditional” materials. If it is easy in a village to dig a hole to get the needed earth, and one finds palm leaves or thatch to cover the hut, it is not at all the same in the city. There are local materials (in addition to cement, which is a local product) that are usable, beautiful, practical, and which can be restored to noble uses while calling upon a traditional language. They are used more and more in the city facades: stone (in block form or crushed) laterite, basalt, limestone, brick, shells of shellfish (whole or crushed), sand of all colors, from white to red for coatings, etc. These materials are beautiful, and noble, and may be interpreted as having a continuity with tradition.

They also lead to a rebirth of decoration which had been forgotten. Here, the traditional African symbolism returns to the facades: the geometrical figures (triangles, squares, circles), but also the spirals and the organic forms (see particularly the Darakolés or Casamançais examples). A corollary of this nobility of materials, of this rebirth of decoration is the rehabilitation of the craftsman of the *maalem*, of whom we spoke earlier in this article

built for all, is read by all, and can be the pride of all. On the other hand, as we have seen, a fashionable trend once expressed spreads quickly as far as the habitations of the majority of people. It is too early to tell whether it is at present simply a matter of a fashion, or of a real identification. Let us say that the scale and the rapidity of this spreading process are an interesting indication

Anecdotal aspects? Any new tendency, as soon as it departs from the ‘middle road’ of honest search, may have two dangers:

- a desiccating formalism, the definition of a strict vocabulary;
- anecdotal effects, a free-and-easy approach, gratuitousness.

There is no reason for the new Senegalese architecture to completely escape these pitfalls. The sanction for it, here as elsewhere, will come with time.

A new link with an African tradition is the most positive aspect of the new school, which is still far from having exhausted this theme for research. A continuous process of going back and forth between contemporary architecture and traditional practices, between urban architecture and rural architecture (which is also evolving) will be the principle condition for success.

What about the Islamic tradition? In the field of the built environment, Islam, as an open religion, a religion of tolerance, has always been incorporated into local traditions, but it has also brought them the essential part of its own traditions. The seminar in Dakar comes at the right time for the Islamic tradition to insert itself now into the framework of an African tradition in architecture that has already been developed.

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## A Balance Sheet?

Is this architecture reserved for the powers-that-be and an elite? We do not think so. On one hand, a “monument” is