

GEOGRAPHY AND ARCHITECTURE

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This was my first experience with the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and I was impressed by the way in which the Jury discussion was organised. In these situations the emphasis is often on visual questions, but here we were provided with an in-depth analysis of each project. Based on people going into the field and interviewing stakeholders, users and members of the community, the On-Site Review gave a full technical breakdown of the building's strengths and innovations, and any areas where it might be less viable. This was really illuminating as it shifted our understanding to the question of how the projects contributed to the local community – with the imagery playing a supportive role, rather than dominating the discussion. As the Awards are for buildings that engage with the Muslim *umma*, they can have widely different functions and sizes, and be located almost anywhere in the world. The On-Site Reviews therefore played an important role in ensuring that we understood the terms of reference for each project.

The notion that architecture has the capacity to make sensitive contributions to a wide range of situations around the globe is one I have been increasingly drawn to. I have always been fascinated by the global mutations of modern architecture and this is the type of work that I am constantly being drawn back to. Whether in Japan, South America or India, modernism evolved in surprising ways as it encountered different cultural and climatic conditions from those in which it had first developed. The creative moment between a general model and a set of highly specific conditions is an opportunity for innovation, for questioning established scenarios and developing new models. This oscillation between a universal idea and a condition on the ground means that the work itself never becomes decoupled and self-contained: in the process of adapting to the location, it remains part of a wider discourse.

The connection between geography and architecture was one of the things I looked at in my book on the capital cities of Africa.¹ I decided to make the study because I felt that Africa was often seen as an exotic place that had become disconnected from the rest of the world, a troubled continent that had little to offer. Having been brought up there, I saw it rather differently, as a place where every possible variant had been produced and every relationship had been contested. Colonialism, for instance, is often assumed to have had similar consequences in different cities, which was neither the case at the time nor now – as they continue to develop. By immersing myself in the experience of the cities, I began to notice tendencies and patterns. Some examples seemed quite bizarre but, as I looked more closely, I could see how

they responded to the conditions in different climatic zones. This was the basis for classifying all the cities according to their position in one of six “geographic zones”, a term that is intended to suggest the interaction between a set of general conditions and a specific location.

In each city I photographed representative building types and made a record of what I saw in the streets and open spaces. The overview in the book is based on combining these images in a loose order, and can be understood in two different ways. As I collected the material in a relatively short period, it provides a record of the cities at a particular time and can, therefore, be used as a reference point for studying their future development. Showing buildings of different generations coming up to the present, and examples of recent informal developments, it also illustrates patterns of development that are likely to extend into the future. As the rate of urbanisation in Africa continues to rise, tracking these patterns will be an essential tool in developing strategies for the future of these cities.

The introductions to each of the geographic zones provide basic climatic data: temperature range, seasonal rainfall, and their effects on the vegetation and landscape. But once in the cities, I was more concerned with recording the human response to these conditions, whether in the formal architecture, vernacular buildings or the way in which external spaces were used. Rather than making a physical analysis, I wanted to understand the impact of climate on the lifestyle of the people, how they used place and occupied space in response to the prevalent conditions. My reading is that the way of life in these places is a precise response to the climate, and has as much architectural potential as any environmental technology. With the increasing use of air conditioning, it is worth remembering that many people will continue to live in an environment that was developed on a different basis. One of the strengths of the Salam Centre for Cardiac Surgery in Khartoum is the way that it acknowledges this reality.

Much of the vernacular building in Africa is a direct response to climate. In the traditional compound house, which now has descendants on many suburban plots, most domestic activities took place in the protected courtyard. The mud-brick houses of the Sahel have thick walls and small openings to protect the interior from the strength of the sun, and the houses in the forest zone have deep verandas for shade, and to shelter the external wall from torrential rain so that it can still be used for ventilation. More recently, the introduction of “tropical modernism” has seen a proliferation of larger buildings in which solar shading devices dominate the exterior at the expense of conventional doors and windows. In my photographs of these examples, I was interested in recording how they often succeeded in modifying the harsh light, sometimes in combination with landscape elements. The atmosphere they create is the first thing one experiences, and that is something I am very conscious of in the development of my own work.

The cultural phenomenon that most directly reflects my initial perception of the continent, as a place of many intersecting histories, is that of hybridisation. The main ethnic groups originally occupied fairly distinct areas but during the last millennium many of them migrated and interacted more frequently with other groups. This process has been accelerated by more recent contact with the outside world through slavery, colonialism and international developments in the post-colonial era. The effects of these movements in terms of hybridisation are widely reflected in the urban environment: cities with distinct quarters whose organisation stems from the culture of their original inhabitants; areas that have been abandoned by one population and reoccupied by another; eclectic combinations of buildings with different cultural sources; and buildings that mix indigenous and international motifs. Two of my favourite instances are the people of Asmara enjoying the *passeggiata* in the arcaded streets built by Italian colonisers, and the multi-faith skyline of Kampala, with the grand mosque, a Sikh *gurdwara*, and at least two cathedrals standing on separate hilltops.

I am interested in hybridisation as an indicator of cultural change, and in the possibility of including such elements in my own work to make it accessible to a wider audience. The design of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, which we are currently building in Washington DC, involves the introduction of a hybrid form, a crown-like superstructure, which is based on a Yoruba sculpture from Nigeria. Although it might appear to be an intrusion, it is intended to complement the existing buildings. As it happens, the motif of my building is already represented in the Washington Monument but, standing on its own, the Monument appears to be the exception to everything around it. By contextualising the Monument, we hope to show how the system represented by the other buildings on the Mall is not as autonomous as it first appears, and how it connects with other systems.

From the outside, Africa may look like a *tabula rasa*, the site of a long line of experiments that have little to do with each other, but closer acquaintance confirms that it is contested ground where the local conditions have been transformed by outside forces. This, too, has echoes in the wider world, where the effects of globalisation have undermined the identity of familiar places. In most of the situations I look at as an architect, many histories overlap and I try to avoid the temptation to draw out one of them at the expense of the others. Rather than responding to physical traces, I prefer to extrapolate the emotive conditions suggested by earlier narratives. These may involve creating a sense of denial, opportunity, reflection, aloofness or conviviality, which contributes to the atmosphere of the building – the device that first communicates what a building has to offer.

My desire to understand the attributes of African cities by classifying them in groups does not entirely recognise the nature of some of their differences.

Many of the capitals had strong international links earlier in their history, which have remained equally or more significant since independence. In the case of Accra, for instance, Nkrumah began to restructure the city in response to its new status as the capital of a republic that would play a significant role within Africa and on the world stage. The double orientation, inwards to the country and outwards to the rest of the globe, is a feature of many capital cities but is particularly legible in Africa, where the distances between the cities are so great. The orientation of the African examples, and the strength of their external connections, can make a significant difference to the identities of cities in the same geographic terrain. We are currently working in several African cities and most of our projects are intended to have a profile that will be meaningful when read from different distances. This fits with my concern that architecture should both address the nature of everyday experience and contribute to a wider discourse on the nature of habitation.

I am interested in moving away from a position where architecture is judged in terms of a single criterion of progress to one in which several scenarios can be considered at once. In this connection, I appreciated the way in which the On-Site Reviews, provided to the Award Jury, ensured the widest possible discussion of the shortlisted projects. Although it focuses on buildings that contribute to the Muslim experience, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture engages with the diffuse nature of contemporary practice, from the Rehabilitation of Tabriz Bazaar to the hybridity of a modernist Islamic Cemetery in Vorarlberg. This is why the concerns of the Award are relevant to all of us.

1 David Adjaye, *African Metropolitan Architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 2011, also published as *Adjaye Africa Architecture*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2011.