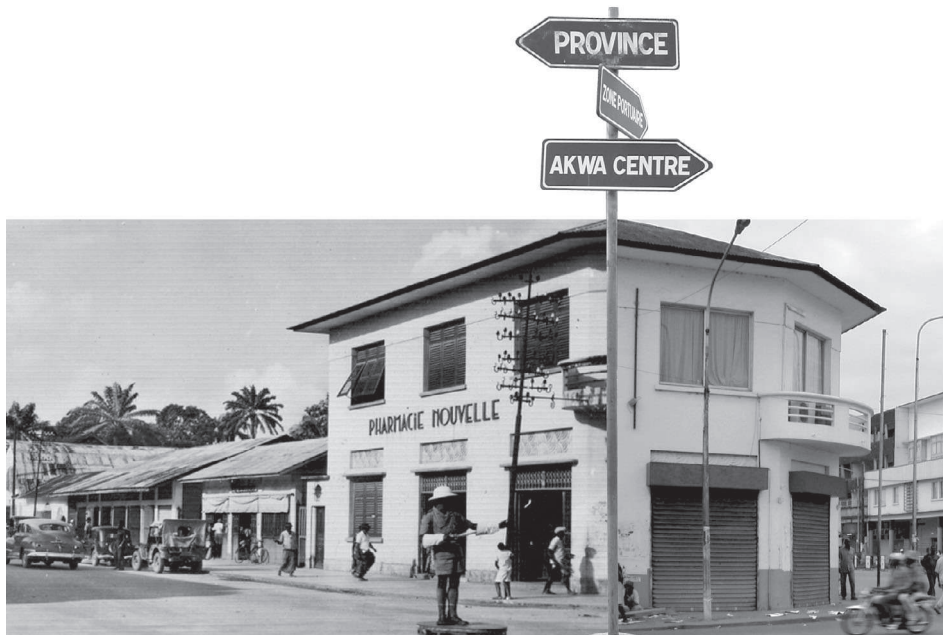


# SUITES ARCHITECTURALES

KINSHASA-DOUALA-DAKAR

Danièle Diwouta-Kotto

**This article renders a brief summary of the book under the same title published by the author in 2010. The book takes a look at the semi-chaotic growth and the resulting mixture of historic lines, business interests, state stillness and passivity and the resulting architectural equations in African urban settings.**



Left: Major intersection in Douala, in the fifties and nowadays (The collages by Sandrine Dole illustrating this chapter are taken from *Suites Architecturales*. Photos: Georges 1950/Sandrine Dole, DESIGN in situ)

## Capitals

### *Cities in writing - Cities described*

African cities have long inspired the imagination of writers in ordinary and extraordinary ways.

Dakar was one of those French speaking cities that evoked intense emotion. Its name itself imbued with poetic resonance. Numerous writings have used the Senegalese capital as their backdrop, in the manner of Abidjan, and are completely impregnated with its atmosphere. These writings, anchored in the real, offer identity codes through their descriptions. Douala, however, was mentioned with a certain disdain by Celine in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Voyage to the end of the night*) "In order to walk through this town of sorts, where really, there's only one thing that I really found likeable, the hospital." And Kinshasa, whose art is in its music, has always been more sung than written about.

The idyllic or rejected African metropolis has given way to a city that is accepted in its plurality. Long considered a place of violence, social injustice, ruptured from its surrounding countryside, the colonial and then the post-colonial African city could not shed this negative image for a very long time. In 1954 work of Mongo Beti, *Ville cruelle* (*Cruel city*), the evocative title was representative of this reality. Some years later, the shady adventures of Cheikh Hamidou Kane, which was placed on African high-school curricula, would greatly influence the youth mind-set of the time.

### *Historical context*

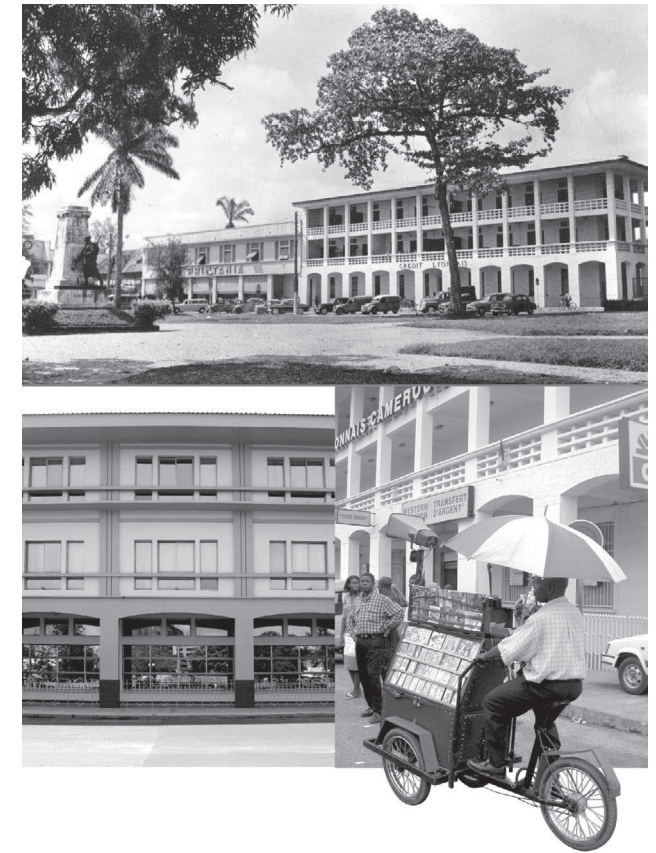
In most of the continent, and especially in the port areas, urban centers were closely linked to their colonial past. These cities were fashioned by the will of the government and deliberate pointed towards the colonial metropolis. The only traditional architectures retained in these centers were those aspects that the Europeans considered interesting from an ethnological perspective. These were received with enthusiasm at the various large exhibitions of the time, including at the International Colonial Exhibition held in Paris in 1931. Paradoxically, however, colonial cities were

Right: Building complex in Douala. Supermarket and hotel in the fifties; bank and office nowadays. Photos: Prunet 1955/Sandrine Dole, DESIGN in situ)

built solely on the basis of the type of occupation and ignored any existing structures. This theoretical architecture with colonial overtones gave way to the modern tropical styles as early as the 1930s which continued to flourish until the 1970s. Even though a variety of town plans were instituted, the existing historical buildings continued to organize the living spaces. This was followed by the construction of public and government building, services and housing, all with a view to building a new nation. Between 1970 and 1985, vertical structures were quickly erected on the remaining free lots and these express a certain aspiration for novelty. Then came the recession years. Offices, business, and to a somewhat lesser extent, lodging, began to coexist in a crowded urban space. African architecture changed radically because these changes happened at an astonishing speed. The same general thread can be found through most of the large cities of sub-Saharan Africa, even though each has some special aspect to it.

#### *Heritage and reappropriation*

Immediately upon gaining independence, some countries changed their names. Zaire became the Congo, Haute Volta became Burkina Faso... Capital cities were rebaptized with typical local names in order to differentiate them from the colonizers. So Leopoldville became Kinshasa. Fort Lamy became N'Djamena etc. This was followed by a renaming of the main streets. The present replaced the past. All these actions together would forge the reappropriation of the country and cities were taken back from the old symbols of power. The architectural heritage of the past consisted of imposing public buildings, smaller private edifices and monuments. While the former have retained an urban public function, though these functions may be different now, the latter have integrated into the local environment through a series of transformations. The monuments, however, generally statues, are looked upon as insignificant vestiges of colonial rule. In the cities of today, this central core has been preserved as is, often by default and the buildings have integrated into the environment through a series of unremarked changes. The evolution of the heritage buildings of Africa requires a typological classification of the more common building, in addition to an inventory of its notable architecture. Appropriation, recycling - these buildings have shown a remarkable capacity for



transformation. The works presented here, a blend of the past and the present, while only constituting one aspect of the architectural works, are important, because they represent a counter-current to the homogenization that threatens architecture.

#### **Transverse Views**

##### *Cities and lives lived in parallel*

Other walks through other African cities... Everywhere, the same feeling of incomplete town planning, limited to the main arteries and attempts at making various neighbourhoods viable. The absence of detailed town planning has left a vacuum filled by autonomous buildings that are inwardly focused with protected access roads that make no attempt to integrate into their surroundings. The ideal modern African single family home is just a dream. The reality is that modern life with its technological advances promotes a certain internationalization of architecture. The city which is meant to impose a certain order on and provide a certain reading of the society that lives within it has been overwhelmed by poverty. This order and disorder can be found in official activities and private sector, constantly pushing outwards, not moving inwards. Over the few years, building facades have been taken over by



Left: Contrasts between time, styles and scales in Douala  
(Photos: Sandrine Dole, DESIGN in situ)

corporate communication. The downtown identity has become an economic identity. The color is used to embellish and mask some of the penury. Paradoxically, while one could think that the city is still the dividing line between rural living and modern life, there are many different type of modern life that live side by side. There is no dividing line - rather juxtapositions, overlaps, spaces that live according to different rhythms in a multifaceted urban landscape.

#### *Construction site cities*

Apart from the historical and architectural atmosphere that is special to each of these cities, there is another prevailing ambiance throughout. The ambiance of a permanent construction site. Construction sites in waiting, which have become dilapidated over time. Newer, living construction sites and abandoned sites with no future at all. Each construction site has an important reason why it was halted. And then there are the ordinary construction sites. These are the most numerous and usually live through abnormally long construction times. They are indicative of a rash of construction intended for prosaic needs. They are a sort of attic where the people place their acquired riches. They acquire this irregular rhythm because they are financed with private means in fits and starts. These buildings, which are often build without architects, without codes and without any real implementation plans, simply evolve as time goes by. It almost seems as if the site is the destination and not the building itself. The act of building seems to confer a sort of social recognition "I build, therefore I am" and the "on-going" construction site generates a sort of honourable visibility for its owner. Lack of process expertise gives way to a no holds barred type of attitude. People start construction when they want and the construction is completed when it is.

#### *New identities*

History caused exchanges to occur among various continents. It is interesting, here, to draw a parallel with Addis Ababa, a city that was occupied but not colonized by the Italians for a short 5 years period (1936-1941). The city was built at the behest of Emperor Menelik in 1886, at practically the same time as the birth of other colonial African cities. From an architectural perspective, it symbolizes an opening towards the rest of the world and towards modernization. But the architectural evolution that took place thereafter is very similar to that which took place in other African cities. Colonial African cities and a city like Addis Ababa, now appear to have more similarities than differences, at least in the way look. This openness towards the rest of the world, this absorbing of foreign styles were thus the prerogative of cities and became permanent over time. The idea that architecture should reflect and nurture an urban African culture was never a winning argument. The African, whose culture has well defined outlines in other domains, never looked for this identity in contemporary architecture. With this attitude, it was been easy to transplant new architectural models based on what is perceived as being modern elsewhere. The transplants have only to correspond to a legitimized image, by that which was "seen" in Johannesburg, Shanghai or Dubai. The emergence of new countries has broadened this palette of references and allows the continent to achieve its dreamed-of modernity without necessarily having to pass through an obligatory stop in Europe. This is done while adapting to the local economic situation and compensating for the lack of urban planning. Since the governments do not provide sufficient thought to architecture. It gets its meaning from project developers who bring their own vision, choices and values to the table. The architect revisits his theories in this chaos and realizes that he has been given very little latitude to do his work. But he must win. His is the responsibility of providing an ethical approach that will maintain or recreate a cohesive entity. His is the task of designing contextual, useful and aesthetically pleasing building that make immediate sense to the public at large.

*"Suites architecturales - Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar" Danièle Diwouta-Kotto, photographies Sandrine Dole. Editions VAA, France, 2010.*