

# THE ARCH OF MEMORY

## URBAN SIGNAGE DESIGN FOR DOUALA HISTORICAL SITES

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**Original art initiatives are taking place in Douala, the Cameroonian economic capital. Doual'art, an urban development non-governmental organisation specialising in contemporary art, is taking the lead in these programmes.**



Left: Signage playing with perspective on each side  
(Photo: Sandrine Dole, DESIGN in situ)

In 2005, Doual'art initiated the project 'City of Art and History', with the aim of highlighting Douala's past by marking historical sites. This initiative is targeted to both inhabitants of Douala as well as visitors to the city. Doual'art was dealing with complex information and emotions, both pain and silence, but also pride, in an environment that ignores itself. There is a committed and ambitious stance.

As a French product designer, my professional background is from the Western industry. Yet, I have been applying design to sustainable development since 1999, since I have come to know and live in Africa, with an initiation that took place in Cameroon. Designing a urban signage for 'City of Art and History' project was a good opportunity for Doual'art and I to work together with common values.

### Significant Support

Long before the 'City of Art and History' project, authorities were abandoning Douala and business sponsorship was neglecting social and cultural development. Collective life was left to civil society and the informal sector. Yet, such alternatives cannot carry a substantial action without support.

Legally, the settling of signage required authorisation from the Urban Community of Douala, (CUD). In practice, street sellers and residents were grabbing public space everywhere and anywhere, as long as the CUD permitted it. Without expecting a local authority to initiate or finance such a project, one was hoping the project would not get strangled. After a long negotiation, the administration's approval came as a relief. Financially, 'City of Art and History' was supported by two German entities. Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED), a development organisation, was interested by the pedagogical approach. The German Embassy in Cameroon was seduced by the cultural asset. Germany was once an occupying power in Cameroon and supporting the project was an attempt at building bridges. Both entities praised the pleading for the preservation of Douala's heritage.



Left: Signage twisting like a unique 3D sculpture  
(Photo: Sandrine Dole, DESIGN in situ)

### Harsh Constraints

The most delicate constraint of ‘City of Art and History’, in both aim and means, was social. What could be achieved in the context of crazy traffic, anarchic squatters and visual cacophony? The urban furniture required for the project needed to be settled, seen and visited without causing additional disordering to the already chaotic city. Massive interest in the work was expected but excessive appropriation and deliberate damage were feared from this urban jungle and its surviving practice. The climate was also disadvantageous: heat, humidity and tropical rain causing extreme degradation to common materials and offered little possibilities for outdoor interventions.

The signage production promised to be perilous as well. A modest budget and systematic customs difficulties restricted options to local resources or standard import. Local craft is basic, with limited methodology and tools. Embryonic industry is unreachable out of its common production. Thirty pieces of furniture to produce were a lot for craft and too little for industry. However, ‘City of Art and History’ required high quality, for security and sustainability reasons, and for distinction with makeshift surrounding.

Finally, the project lifespan of ten years added spices to the challenge!

### Content Meeting Form

Doual’art had a strong message to share and communicate to the public. Historians and intellectuals were to write it down, the media had to enhance it, but despite this, its importance was not perceived at first. This was where my work lay, physically underlining the intellectual claim of/in the project. I explored the potential of the

environment through various concepts in order to choose together with Doual’art, which physical support was suiting best their approach. The following initiatives were explored:

- “Une page d’histoire” (A page of history) proposed a public book, using the habits of passers-by to read newspapers headlines;
- “Directions” reinterpreted common signage pole by multiplying directions and reflecting the richness of Douala history;
- “Le Tourniquet” (Turnstile) explored interactivity between the chosen sites and passers-by;
- “Fragments” featured a broken stone gathered after excavation, each piece giving specific information of the sites;
- “L’Étendard” (Flag) underlined the political scale of the project, both in past and present, with an ever flying flag;
- “Ouverture” (Gap), similar to a big scale photo frame, played with sites by isolating them from surroundings;
- “L’Arche” (The Arch) referred to a traditional local signage, a vegetable arch.

Three proposals were short-listed and their costs evaluated. One concept was selected unanimously: “L’Arche du temps” (The Arch of memory). This concept played on a traditional code, the short-lived vegetable arch, made of weaved palm tree branches and used to signpost to an event. These arches were slowly disappearing in Douala as urbanism offered little raw material and space. The code was chosen here to make the use of the furniture intuitive.

### Unexpected Production

The keystone of the arch is its structure to be produced as a standard in series. To widen the vision and deepen the study, I put up a full-scale model. This quick and temporary construction was done with PCV pipes and plywood. Embedded on the ground, it helped refine volumes and sizes, define floor area and users’ circulation, and identify raw materials, prefabricated pieces and potential construction techniques. The

Right: Guided tours through a city of art and history  
(Photo: Cécile Démessine)

model led from design to production, with prototyping in between. An unexpected collaboration took place then with Cométal, a producer of truck vehicles, based in Douala. Old divisions faded amazingly, Cométal accepted a cultural innovative project in a very pragmatic industrial arena as well as a French female designer among two hundred Cameroonian workmen. Thanks to my practical training I was on a familiar territory but the team I worked with tested me first. Slowly, the workers tolerated me by their side and saw me as a professional like them. Drudges turned to experts, the initial model became a prototype, which itself turned to series with thirty arches being produced. Each arch cost 600€ in design, realisation and settling (excluding the cost for historical research and writing).

### Meaningful Shape

The design made the traditional code of the palm-tree arch evolve. Volume is emphasised, turning the flat vegetable element to a three-dimensional sculpture. Connection with space is stressed, visibility increased and urban materials used. In the sky of Douala, rings sparkle. Each ring is connected to a line that stretches out, twists and creates an arch, like a parenthesis within urban chaos. By entering this space, passers-by enter time. In front of them, a unique site. On their left, an information panel that reveals history with an old days illustration and a French and English text. The structure, sealed on the ground, is made of zinc-coated steel. The panel information is in translucent Plexiglas, partly isolating surroundings without breaking the line fluidity. Three-dimensional, the arch looks different from every angle, sometimes subtle and floating, other times spread and unbreakable. Sober but strong, it seems to come from urban signage. Will the signage become a symbol?

### Revealed History

To reveal history from the end of the 16th century to Cameroon's Independence in 1960, with all its facets and trials, 'City of art and history' points out various sites and events: political turmoil, as well as economic growth, urban and sanitary infrastructures



development, cultural influences, religious orientations, etc. History is recounted through key figures, events and building: a tree where two Cameroonian opponents to colonial regime were hung; a water factory which helped urbanise the village into a city; the first hospital where black patients could be treated; the King Bell palace with its great architecture, and so on.

### Promising Unveiling

Several celebrations unveiled the project on site: from the less formal one with workmen who at last realised proudly what they had been working for, to a more official one with partners and journalists. A new director had just been nominated for the Urban Community of Douala (CUD). He was opening a real era of mutation of the city. One was expected this evolution to be sustainable, practical but also spiritual. The German ambassador called not only to show architectural heritage but also to preserve it. Some spectators highlighted that other Cameroonian cities were also full of art and history. Others discussed what urban design could bring to everyday life, especially in neglected and populous areas: water pumps; street lamps; bus shelters; benches; bins. Until now, the urban lighting of some 'City of Art and History' sites which was promised by the CUD is still lacking. More generally speaking, urban design interventions such as "The Arch" remain an exception.

### Intuitive Discovery

The first series was settled in 2006, so feedback from the project is known. Beneficiaries understand Doual'art's message in a very intuitive manner, whether the discovery is



Right: From traditional palm tree arch  
to urban signage  
(Photo: Sandrine Dole, DESIGN in situ)

spontaneous or guided. If car drivers do not notice the initiative, passers-by become numerous and diverse sudden readers: moto-taxi drivers, street sellers, civil servants and so on. The Westerners in the city, either residents or tourists, easily join the crowd. To spread and share the information and results, a team of guides was trained on Doual'art's initiative. Six hundred school children from the town followed these guided tours and adults also benefited from the initiatives. A tourist, artistic and historic city map, also produced by Doual'art, highlights 'City of art and history' initiative.

### Serene Use

Several reactions and consequences are stand out from the work. Doual'art had involved and sensitised dwellers and street sellers, thus the project was easily introduced. When sites required redevelopment, even to a modest amount, the arrival of the arches helped embellish and improve the comfort of surroundings. Due to visitors' affluence, local people felt concerned and valued, and neighbourhoods also became safer. Some people even took care of the street furniture. Surprisingly, neither stealing nor spoiling occurred over the period during or following the initiative. Light and friendly popular reuse, for example the drying of laundry, shows how the street furniture has entered everyday life. The most important assimilation is of Douala History. From time to time, strangers meet underneath "The Arch". They share, for a minute, either their pride of each other or their tolerance for one another, and finally their willingness to face the present together.

### The Next Steps

While such a cultural urban project may seem obvious in a Western context, in Douala, 'City of Art and History' aim and means were not far from revolutionary. Necessity was deeper and difficulty higher. This Cameroonian context, both harsh and smooth, violent and dull, outrageous and washed-out, precisely gave its meaning to this story. Design, supposedly born from industrialisation in developed countries, had a major role here too, maybe more than anywhere else?

