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Introduction to the Special Issue

Nmadili Okwumabua
CPDI Africa

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Madams Suites, Livingroom Graves, and the Building of Africa in Her Own Image

by Nmadili Okwumabua

Have you ever imagined what the architecture of Africa would look like today, if the great civilizations of Egypt, Timbuktu, Mali, the Dogon, Zulu, Yoruba, and thousands of other African cultures had continued to develop and evolve in their own unique identity? Imagine the transformation of the African landscape into sprawling metropolises filled with architectural masterpieces celebrating new interpretations of traditional design elements, portrayed with all the comfort of modern innovations and technology. Amazing structures celebrating African aesthetics, in abstract and organic form, from technologically advanced materials that paid homage to architectural elements steeply rooted in Africa's plethora of cultures. Now imagine once again that you have been given the opportunity to create that new architectural language for Africa...drawing inspiration from her glorious past, reflecting elements of her present identity, and then deliver architecture so dynamic and innovative it would define her emerging future! You, the creator and custodian of Africa's newly built environment, advancing design language in the new millennium – the architectural language of a new Africa. *Given the opportunity to develop Africa's built environment in her own identity, what Africa would you build?* This account begins with my first recollection of receiving this call to action, and how my response evolved over several adventurous decades, as I sought to understand where Africa had been, why she stood where she did, and exactly where she just might be going once she took her giant step forward.

As a little girl, growing up in Nigeria, I had always been intrigued by spaces in which we live and call home. I often visited my friends, and marveled at the uniqueness of each of their homes, the arrangement of spaces, simple dwellings, grand palaces, artsy aesthetics and gaudy interior furnishings. It was when I started high school, in my American home town of Memphis Tennessee that I learned the profession I had a natural love for, was called architecture. Naturally, it was my chosen course of study when I entered the university.

As a design major, I learned all about Egyptian and Greek architecture, classical design, colonial, modern, and I wondered what Africa south of the Sahara had contributed to the discourse of world architecture. I yearned to reflect some of the design elements I could remember growing up in Nigeria, into my studio projects, but upon doing my research at the local library and book shops, all I found on African architecture were endless books on romantic, thatched roofed, 'mud huts', in rural towns and villages.

I realized a pilgrimage to Nigeria was crucial if I were going to first identify, then deconstruct whatever evidence I could find on contemporary African design, in order to incorporate those unique elements into my school projects and one day professional practice. I spent the first five weeks living in my ancestral family home, where I remember witnessing my Grandfather being buried in the living room, and later learning Great Granddad was buried in the dining room. I pondered on the ever so important connection between the spirit realm and the physical world, and how for my culture, the place we called 'home' was in every way truly the place where generations of my family would call home. The photographs that now fill my private collection are the results of my journeys across the Nigerian countryside, in search of a distinctly discernible architectural

language. The images represent homes I found in the land of the Edo, Yoruba and Ika-Ibo people of Nigeria. To start, I singled out buildings that visually celebrated unique characteristics, textures, contours, abstract forms, symbolic motifs, obvious spiritual influence... that could only be found, I guessed, in Africa. These buildings would lay the foundation for my research.

But first, let us, like I did, articulate a definition for what one would term 'African architecture', as it was important that I understand what constituted traditional African design, so I could successfully identify its contemporary translation when I came across it. Leading African architects and scholars Nnamdi Elleh, David Hughes and Demas Nwoko, define true African architecture (paraphrased) as the collaborative efforts between the artist and the architect, in their sincere desire to create comfortable, affordable dwellings that reflect the history, culture, aesthetics of the African continent, and utilize its appropriate local building materials. Traditionally, I knew African master builders had achieved the theories posed by the scholars, but how well had contemporary architects succeeded in achieving the stated definition. My findings proved that architects responsible for the buildings I had documented, had successfully articulated a visual identity that was indeed African, but had they achieved all the elements of design required to make it 'truly African' or truly comfortable for its inhabitants? How did the people's culture, and lifestyle influence the homes? Let's take for instance polygamy, as the basic family structure. A traditional husband with multiple wives would obviously require special bedroom space planning, in order for him to have easy, non-confrontational access to his wives' chambers! The 'Masters' bedroom in this case would belong to the husband, while Madams bedrooms would be designed for his wives. Naturally it will be important to design exclusive quarters separating the numerous female children from male children. In contemporary times, polygamous families often choose to keep things simple by building completely separate homes for each wife and her children, in different parts of town!

What about aesthetics, and how were they typically reflected in residential design? Traditionally, patterns and motifs were often applied on building facades. These aesthetics would be loaded with spiritual symbolism, or sometimes purely decorative in nature. In more recent times, a technique called bronzing is used, which requires an artist to sculpt patterns on the final coat of wall plastering. Once the plaster is dry, the area is painted black and gold to achieve a bronzed effect. The building itself takes on the form on an abstract or sculptural monument, nestled in a manicured bed of tropical gardens and vegetation.

What about the impact of climate, environment, local building materials? Traditionally, homes and other ceremonious buildings would be built from laterite, local to the very site of the building. Being the perfect thermal material that it is, the building would be kept cool from the intense heat of the day. Today, the practice of using cement blocks with corrugated iron roofing sheets is not the best in communities practically sitting atop the equator! Houses feel like ovens, achieving an extremely low score on the test for comfort. The tradition of building with cement blocks goes back to the bygone era of colonization, when design and materials were dictated by foreign interests. Today, builders and homeowners continue to agonize over the cost associated with the impact of this forgone legacy, the challenge of cooling their buildings, using expensive diesel fueled generators and other private power plants. These examples just go to show, the development of a modern laterite 'mud' brick with the perfect thermal characteristics for building throughout Africa is long overdue.

My research evolved with the passing years, and eventually, I joined the pioneers who had mentored and guided my journey. I had become committed to what I believed was a higher calling, to contribute in my small way, to the development of architectural languages that bore true identity, and direct evolutionary linkages, to Africa's rich and diverse architectural legacy. In 1999, I created *Southern Sahara*, an Atlanta-based, international research consultancy service, whose mission was to research and document this exciting discourse on architecture south of the Sahara. In 2007, the company's affiliate, Southern Sahara Nigeria Ltd,

was incorporated in Abuja Nigeria, to offer unparalleled residential design, facility management and property brokerage to clients there. The fruits of these efforts gave birth in 2013 to the *Community Planning & Design Initiative, Africa (CPDI Africa)*, a research-based, culture-inspired initiative created to develop this new architectural language for Africa, using design competitions as its platform. Believing that the redevelopment of Africa's built environment should be as it has always been, built as a collaborative effort between the community members and designated master builders, CPDI Africa is built to engage participation from the design community in Africa and the Diaspora at large, for the accomplishment of its vision.

Year 2015 was phenomenal, witnessing the inaugural CPDI-Africa modern African architecture competition, as we received 58 stellar submissions from 29 countries around the world! A spectacular 25 winning designs were selected by a renowned, interdisciplinary Jury of built environment professionals, with the top three designs coming from Vietnam, Puerto Rico and The Republic of Benin. Honorable mentions were awarded to masterpieces submitted from the Nigeria, the Ukraine, Ethiopia, Uganda, Japan to name a few. Special recognition goes to our winning designers, Ms. My Dao Le Hong, Mr. Eduardo Soto, and Mr. Seni Dara, who were inspired by the architecture of Mali, Nigeria and Benin respectively. They have made a special place in history for themselves as the inaugural winners of the CPDI Africa design challenge!

It was during my appointment as a lecturer of African and African Diaspora Studies, at Kennesaw State University (KSU), that I met Dr. Jesse Benjamin, renowned scholar and activist at KSU, and founder of the Global South Research Consortium (GSRC). We immediately began to collaborate on this special edition of ATL featuring the CPDI Africa 2015 design competition. Our collaboration on the project was perfect, coinciding with the *CPDI Africa - Art of African Architecture Travelling Exhibition*, a celebration of the 25 Winning Designers. With Aajay Murphy managing production and graphic design for the project, a dynamic exhibition and journal publication was developed.

Our current plans are to travel the Exhibition throughout the United States, with our Sponsors & Partners such as the American Institute of Architects Georgia Association, before traveling the Exhibition to Nigeria and then Ethiopia. The exhibition will provide the opportunity to showcase these special international designers and their African architecture masterpieces, generating interest in their skills and talents for consultancies and further design development of these new architectural ideologies in brick and mortar. The CPDI Africa vision is to ultimately develop affordable communities in Africa that are culturally and environmentally sustainable.

In 2017, the 2nd CPDI Africa Modern African Architecture Design Competition will launch, to a wider audience, with specific focus on Africa's six geographical regions. The prized opportunity for participants and partners of the CPDI Africa project will be Design-Build projects of the winning prototypes! Our Cash Prize and Winners Packages will remain stellar.

In my most sincere efforts to recognize the amazing support and contribution for this ground breaking initiative, I cannot give enough thanks to Nadine Levy, Akin Afolayan, Emmanuel Odai and Nony Mbaezue, without whose their companionship and support on this long and winding journey, CPDI Africa could not have been born. To Dele Fadahunsi, Chidi and Roli Ukwu I give thanks for your contributions and belief in the dream and making it a reality. Chuks Okoye, Boye Akinola, Dennis Harold, Karla Dennis, DeShaun Jenkins, Jesse Benjamin, Kayode Babalola, Kwagga Eliphelet, Joe Osa-Addo I thank you wholeheartedly for your listening ears, your words of encouragement, your support! To Nuru Akinyemi, Lynn Robinson, Adebayo Akanmu, Obi and Glory Okezie, Omar Pela, Samson Atureta, Manny Anyebunam, Kathryn Bedette, I thank you for opening doors and ushering in this pioneering effort. Thank you to Chike Oguamanam, without whom this project would not have become an international household name! And to Asabe Mamza, Kopji Golit, Kido Chukwuedo, Amina Manko Ibrahim, Xin Wang, Terso Akuto for being the best research and design

team ever.

Special recognition goes to my mentors, I am ever indebted to them, Demas Nwoko, Nnamdi Elleh, David Hughes, Jack Travis, Carolyn Armenta-Davis, and my amazing design professor, Robert French. Of course, my love and deepest appreciation to the entire Okwumabua Family, for being the solid foundation upon which I stand, and to the Creator, who blessed me with my loving family and, this special calling.

In closure, this innovative research holds the answers to many of the exciting challenges Africa's emerging built environment professionals will tackle in the fast approaching future. CPDI Africa provides more than just a platform for African inspired creativity. We support the development of African architecture course curricula, R & D for African centered building and zoning codes, the elimination of huge affordable housing deficits, and the provision of design services and building contracts for talented built environment professionals! Thank you for your participation, and we welcome your inquisitive spirit as you enjoy this special edition of ATL, exploring the Art of African Architecture!

NMADILI OKWUMABUA is an urban planner and African architecture historian. Her passion for design is rooted in a vision where homes and communities in modern Africa are developed with a new architectural language that celebrates the aesthetics and culture of her people today. In 1999, she founded Southern Sahara USA, a design consultancy service specializing in the research and development of this new architecture, which she promotes through exhibitions and lectures.

Nmadili Okwumabua attended the University of Tennessee and Georgia State University, where she pursued her undergraduate studies in architecture and urban planning. She is a licensed Realtor in the state of Georgia and Certified Property Manager with Broll CBRE South Africa. She holds a master's degree in African Studies from Clark Atlanta University, where her research centered on the evolution of modern vernacular architecture, by Nigeria's premiere designer and master builder, Demas Nwoko. The fruits of these efforts gave birth in 2013 to the Community Planning & Design Initiative, Africa, (CPDI Africa), a research-based, culture-inspired initiative created to develop this new architectural language for Africa through design competition.

Believing that the redevelopment of Africa's built environment should be as it has always been, built as a collaborative effort between the community members and designated master builders, CDPI Africa engages participation from the design community in Africa and the Diaspora at large, for the accomplishment of its vision. Ms. Okwumabua lives in Atlanta Georgia and Abuja Nigeria, where she offers international consultancy services in urban design and real estate asset management, and shares her vision with the futures shapers of Africa built environment.

**Providing Africa with Modern Residential Architecture That is
Both Culturally and Environmentally Sustainable**