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THE MENA

by Julia Mauser, Girum Solomon & Minasie Terefe (Konso)

Architect | Ethiopia --- Architect | Germany --- Architect | Ethiopia

HONORABLE MENTION

Inspired by the Konso people of Ethiopia



CONCEPT

Africans possess the unique and abundant examples of living together with cultural richness, responsiveness to climate and environment in ways full of life and history. Africans are social beings, breathing and beating in unison.

Mena, named after the maternity housing typology in Konso, reflects an urban imitation of this belief, taking inspiration from the UNESCO recognized values and practices of the Konso people of Southern Ethiopia. It marries rural forms and concepts with the urban need and environment. It creates a place to live, a space to work, and a community to grow in by preserving the ideas of treasured cultural spaces and giving them new and exciting contemporary interpretations. It is more than just a residential unit; it is a contemporary urban homestead (tigalia).

This proposal consists of a series of centers, shared by different age groups, ethnicities and religions, carefully placed so that each individual has personal space to lead everyday life, yet concurrently share a larger common space, an infrastructure built for the multiple that is meant to stage the embodiment of all shared experiences. The contemporary African residence is, in opposition to many western examples, never a single house, but consists of multiple dwellings that are strongly linked by colorful social values and family traditions and courtyards.

WHY KONSO?

The people of Konso have developed a unique and incredibly sophisticated way of living together in a very remote area of Ethiopia. They have lived in isolation for a long time, which has made them experts in response to their environment, their use of natural resources and their social living form – all expressed in their architectural forms. There is an abundance of traditional elements to learn from, but this proposal will focus on three components, the most crucial elements for a prototypical homestead in the urban context.

- Terracing as means of optimizing space: Their architectural integration into their surroundings has made them strategic in living in confined spaces – an important asset for the ever-stretching African cities built today
- Duality and Symbols: each surface and building element has more than one function – live and work spaces, storage and stairways, landscaping and feeding the human and the animal
- Sustainability: the people of Konso have developed unique responses to their environment, in particular their irrigation system – water – a crucial survival aspect in the modern African city. How can we make use of scarce resources in the urban context?

TERRACING

Konso farmers are threatened by continuous erosion from their fields and have perfected the art of stone terracing, which is unrivaled anywhere in Africa. Its function is to maximize water retention and infiltration. At the same time, it is very effective in preventing soil erosion. This proposal takes the concept and makes use of an urban garden on the building's surface, under the windows, on top of the lower terraces and even higher up making sure there is space for plants to grow – some naturally, some intentionally planted to cool the surface of the building. The raised platform provides space for the main family house and other functions related to it. The homestead is always divided into an upper level (oida) and a lower level (orchata). The raised platform is used to celebrate the coffee ceremony in the interior, a cultural heritage for the entire country of Ethiopia. Also, a mezzanine floor is introduced that provides a more intimate space for prayers and can be used as a guest room.

Exterior terraces have a structural purpose. They are made out of local stones and can act as rainwater retention elements, flower pots and seating areas. Additionally, they are an integrated landscape feature for the outdoor activities like washing and drying clothes, outdoor cooking and much more.

DUALITY AND SYMBOLS

The Konso people use different natural products (fruits, eggs, etc.) on their roofs and walls to decorate and tell a story, with elements that are rich in content. Different crafts made for the home, like pots on the top of the house, can show you who is living in that hut. At the same time they have a series of shared spaces; e.g. two to three families share a kitchen hut to provide a social interaction space while preparing food.

With the same principle of aesthetics and functionality, herbs and vegetables are used to create a unique design on the walls while at the same time provide numerous by-products for household uses, taking a big leap forward in sustainability.

Careful attention is made to propose important and solely African programs. Programs like the coffee ceremonies, the outdoor kitchen for larger celebrations, and the shared and common spaces are all important communal and traditional spaces, often lost in the city. Accordingly, this design layout best accentuates these communal spaces and draws attention to the core from which every other program radiates out.

Additionally, there is adjustable furniture to allow the space to breathe and change. When entering the house, there is a sideboard that can work as a windscreen, a space for putting coats and dirty shoes. From the opposite side, there is a mechanism that can pull out the dining table to sit about six to eight people. Above all, this is another approach to shared spaces – a true identity of Africa.

SUSTAINABILITY

Apart from the water recycling systems, there was a conscious effort made to choose a material first, and then develop the form according to material properties. Though Konso is known for its engineering ingenuities, timber was not the right choice of material, especially considering the mass falling of trees in the area today. Consequently, earth is used in order to model the entire house with the same material (the foundation is a stone with minimal mortar where needed). The upper walls, roof and vaults are sun-dried earth blocks only. They are modular and portable which makes them easy to recreate and build with local laborers.

Further, earth is ideal for controlled natural ventilation and air-conditioning -- cooling during hot summer days, and retaining warmth during the night. The curving nature of the building also aids the collection of rainwater in the tanks below and simultaneously supports internal natural air flow.

Finally, the materials and shapes chosen are to minimize cost for the maximum space. Clay is easy to get in many parts of the country so it is cheap and the bricks can be made with a brick mold machine that can be borrowed or bought for the construction process.

