Over the last decade ArchiAfrika has become a distinguished driving force in facilitating dialogue within and outside the African continent on planning and urban challenges faced in both worlds.

For our growing network of young and critical architects, students, scholars, thinkers, those involved in various facets of urban development or simply those with a keen interest on developments within the continent and the open cross-cultural dialogue held, the ArchiAfrika bi-monthly newsletter delivers valuable news and offers an insight on urbanist & architectural issues shaping the continent. Informing also on events and projects by ArchiAfrika and other organisations and institutes. Based on feedback from our readers and the witnessed growth of our mailing list from a few hundred to well over 2000 readers in Africa and beyond the newsletter is much appreciated.

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Located at river crossings and on lake and coastal shores, many cities in Africa share some sort of relation with water. The water feeds and transports. It also often traditionally has a mythical meaning for the people of these places. In spite of all this, many African cities have to deal with either the lack or abundance of rainwater. Both have a large impact on the use of space and planning of a city.

In Douala, the city’s relation with water has many attributes. Located on the shores of the Wouri river and centrally located in a large mangrove lagoon, it is also a city with one of the highest annual rainfall figures in the world. While the people of Douala have a strong mythical link with the river Wouri, there is no longer a spatial connection with the open water. Being the main port of Cameroon, the full coastline of the city is occupied by the harbour area. In the near future this might change due to the shift of the deep-water port to Kribi and Limbe on the coastline of Cameroon.

It is of no surprise, that Doual’art, the organisers of the Salon Urbain de Douala 2010 that took place between 3-10 December 2010, chose the theme: ‘The City of Douala and Water’ for the triennial gathering of local and international artists in Cameroon’s largest city. Doual’art is a centre for contemporary art in Douala and a laboratory for new urban practice(s) in African cities. For almost two decades they have given many artists the chance to develop acupunctural interventions in the urban setting. Since 2007 the activities of Doual’art are given a platform in the SUD, a week full of conferences, vernissages, site visits and other events.

Taking part in the SUD, I met Daniele Diwouta – Kotto, a successful architect in Douala. She recently launched the book ‘Suites Architecturales; Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar’, a beautiful book with a critical architectural view on three interesting African cities. This being a fitting reason to ask her to co-edit this issue of the ArchiAfrika newsletter. We are very happy that she accepted this challenge and produced an insightful overview of Douala for you, with a critical review of the structure of the city and its architecture. Lionel Manga, writer and cultural critic based in Douala, added to this edition with his contribution on the influence of advertising on the public realm.

We are happy also to present some work by Lard Buurman, a Dutch photographer developing a portrait of the use of public space in African cities. He visited SUD2010 and documented the artwork initiated by Doual’art over the last years in the public setting. His work will cumulate into an exhibition and publication at a later stage, including among others photos taken in Dar es Salaam, Johannesburg, Lagos, Dakar, Kinshasa, Casablanca.

We bring you also a brief report on the Salon Urbain de Douala 2010. Make sure you will not miss the next event, planned in 2013!
The Douala of my childhood as well as the Douala I paced and crossed up and down for over fifteen years, haunts me. I was born in the General Hospital built by the Germans, which is today the annex of Bonanjo’s General Police Station. I lived with my family for a short while in one of the “Hersan Buildings” located on the Avenue De Gaulle. At that time it was occupied by the French. My parents used to tell me about the incident where the tenants raised a petition against my Cameroonian father. It was in the light of the Independence...

It was also the Douala accommodated for pedestrians, where we could see a movie at the « Paradise» located behind « The Pagoda » and dance at « New Bell » at the Bamoun Cultural Center.

Later, while living in Yaoundé I used to walk down the hills every year to reach Douala with its flat and adamant urbanity, a city that impressed me so much as a teenager.

Douala and its Akwa’s straight boulevards, the walkways cluttered by a succession of hectic shops. Douala and its hotels, their outdated cinema sets, where we used to go as a family. “Beau-Séjour”, “Joss”, “Akwa Palace” all had panoramic terraces’ from where I used to watch the twinkling lights of the city, like the fireflies of urban life... I remember a city centre that portrayed a candid modernity and leisure facilities: The local swimming pool in Bassa, the beach in Deido landing on the shores of the river and movie theatres such as Paris, l’Etoile, the Wouri.

Douala, it had also this ”vibrant nightlife” where places – such as nightclubs and outdoor restaurants- renamed the district Mozart d’Akwa. A district where some of its gridded streets became known as La rue du Night Spot, La rue du Lido... and while nightclubs often closed down, their names still remain.

Overlooking the street were buildings that often concealed at their rear a family life and a different pace. I often went to visit my father’s family where they used to live in a colonial house. I would run directly to the back of the house, the living area, and there, on a terrace adjoining the kitchen, sitting on a small wooden bench, I would listen to my aunt and cousins. They were always busy “preparing” dishes, and everyone would parade, including tenants of other dwellings in the backyard, telling snippets of lives, fortunate or unfortunate, that we would end up laughing at. I loved to be witnessing these lives. So different and yet so close. All this made me unconsciously and naturally assimilate the various overlays that characterize Douala, a city so urban but where rural life is always in balance.

Much later, I moved back to Douala.

Buildings and roads had deteriorated. This degradation is now a permanent state that one “manages”. Taxis and the
A city with its invisible but yet palpable fights, fights that happen in a state of emergency without notice.

But fortunately, apart from the grief and the facilities everywhere, Douala remembers once a year at the Ngondo traditional festival who this city is and who owns it. This is an opportunity to meet people who are proud of this identity and bear it in their eyes, beyond the mere excitement of wearing the ceremonial dress.

And even if the city has lost much of its charm to me, I would still be attached to it because it defines partly who I am anyway...

All images provided by Danièle Diwouta-Kotto

http://www.ddiwouta-architect.com/

ubiquitous “Bensikin” have given the city a different pace, one that is overactive during daytime. Yesterday’s walkways are now squatted by crowded stalls and dealers, through which you must constantly “slalom”. Sidewalks are stormed by vehicles, as they seem to be the only available parking areas. The buildings of the past and those newer, poorly maintained, decay in a frozen city centre that except for some specific operations has failed to regenerate. Only the nightlife has retained its well deserved reputation.

Inhabitants have settled at the periphery, but even it has quickly been overtaken by the inevitable and ubiquitous rues “de la joie”, streets displaying a range of sidewalk cafés, which arise and multiply profusely everywhere. First, every street has its pub, its hair salon and its inevitable temporary stalls of vegetables and condiments.
A veil of uniformity has covered Douala. All districts end up resembling each other in its own precariousness.
The city’s historical landmarks

Four villages, located at the bottom of the estuary, were formed with the establishment of Douala families on the banks of the river. Bell (Bonandjo), Akwa and Deido (Bonabela) follow the course of the left bank and face Bonabéri on the other side of the river. These four villages have given birth to the largest neighbourhoods of Douala.

The people in Douala are water people. Each of these villages formed clans that were established along the river. That latter is considered a source of life and wealth, a place for trade and fishing. All villages were implanted right up to the shore.

Should 1884 be considered the birth of Douala, successive periods had an impact on the physiognomy of the city including the German colonization and the French:

It was at the request of European contractors and Cameroonian brokers that the country was placed under German protectorate. Economic reasons - or more specifically commercial - motivated the birth of Kamerun which later became Douala.

1884-1995: German colonial policy limited to trade protectionism and territory exploration without military occupation;

1896-1907: Military occupation, followed by large-scale plantations and concessions; heavy local government bureaucracy;

1907-1914: Reform of the colonial administration, Cameroon is taken by the Franco-British forces.

In 1914, the port of Douala Bonabéri located at the estuary of the river allows vessels to conduct their operations in a safe environment. This wharf of 100m length gives boats the right to dock at Bonabéri except at low-water level.

The management of Douala hardens, and in order to implement various urban plans the colonial administration puts in place brutal expropriation systems and enforces displacement of populations.

1914-1919: Douala under French mandate
1919-1945: Historical stability unit
1945-1960: Preparation of independence

The FIDES plans (Fonds d’investissement pour le développement économique et social) from (1947-52) and (1953-57) and their impact on the infrastructure:
By the end of 1959 and in comparison with 1938, foreign trade had increased its volume by four. More than 90% of the register tonnage of all vessels loaded and unloaded in Cameroon are going through Douala. Douala ranks among the major ports on the West African Atlantic coast. It is becoming urgent to modify and modernize the pre-war infrastructure that has been challenged by the after 1945 economic developments.

Plan 1 (1947 - 52): Focus on infrastructure, particularly the means of circulation and their renovation to facilitate product shipments. The main beneficiaries are the port, the two railway lines and the roads that are doubling. It is this plan that initiates the construction of the 1800m long Wouri bridge.

Plan 2 (1953 - 57): The infrastructure has been put in place. In this second phase, the focus is to increase the production and productivity of the agriculture sector as well as the industry’s.

These FIDES plans had significant impacts on the port activity but mainly from an economic point of view rather than on the land itself.
Figure 2. Wouri bridge, installation by Bili Bidjocka, Douala
Douala’s urban evolution post-independence / Wouri bridge:

- Elaborated in 1956 by an architect, the Dorian Plan provided Douala some basis for improvement. Designed for a city of 300,000 inhabitants, the plan primarily focused on the highway, the remodelling of some areas and the creation of new neighbourhoods to give the city breath and space. Concretely, the achieved projects are the establishment of a network of roads allowing intercommunication between districts, moving the railroad from the southern part, the creation of a major road east-west between Douala and Bonabéri, the clustering industries around the port, the creation of a second dock on the right bank of the Wouri (Bonabéri) and an industrial zone in Bonabéri.

- Today, Bonabéri represents the 4th district of the city and is believed to accommodate 200 to 400,000 inhabitants out of the three million that the city counts. The presence of an industrial zone with factories and warehouses constitutes an important source of employment for the city and its surroundings. In comparison to older parts of the city, Bonabéri offers a relatively poor urban infrastructure, forcing its residents to travel regularly on the opposite bank.

- The bridge allows the circulation of persons and goods between the river and the coastal provinces of the Southwest, West and Northwest. The Western Province and the Department of Mungo are considered the breadbasket of Douala city. The Southwest obtains fresh supplies from Douala and in return provides fuel and specific goods (tea, bananas, wood, rubber). The bridge extensive usage is becoming an obvious concern.

The Urban Community of Douala (CUD) planned a new Urban Master Plan for 2010 to enhance the management of the global infrastructure.

The Wouri bridge today

Before the construction of the bridge Wouri, Bonabéri was mostly considered as the “railway to the North”, a starting point for passengers and cargo passing across the river using ferries or pirogues. The Wouri bridge, a unique connection between the borough of Bonabéri and the rest of the city, is now part of the city and even symbolizes Douala.

Built between 1952 and 1954 (inauguration date) it was incontestably a significant technical achievement at this time. Every year in December, the Ngondo, traditional government of the Sawa people, organizes and holds events there.

Today, about half of the river on the other side, which constitutes the Deido side of Douala, has been clogged to make way for an industrial zone reserved for oil and oil services industries.

The much-needed rehabilitation of the bridge took place from December 2003 to March 2009 and became obsolete.

Sociocultural elements - the water and its symbolic

Douala is a city that contains original elements within its structure and history. Because the city is established on both sides of the river and is slightly raised, the urban space seems particularly enhanced. In the inside appears another landscape, the one of a “savannah”, product of the intensive clearing of the forest. Nevertheless, the perception of a coastal environment remains strong until the limits of the furthest neighbourhoods. It is because Douala is a bank that one cannot forget. At that point, the Wouri flows into a vast estuary wide open to the sea. If the ocean is hardly visible, yet the estuary gives us somewhat a picture: we know it is near. Urban space is therefore determined by this coast and this is also valid for the district Bonabéri located on the right bank.

The overall feature of the city is the contact with water. In that respect, the city finds its ‘psychological’ features also associated with water as well as exacerbated by a region with an equatorial climate and particularly the Douala micro-climate. The water is both a framework and an active element of the city. Understandably, it constitutes an important aspect of its inhabitants’ lives. Let’s not forget that Nyambe is the “God-Water-Energy”, that the “jengu” is mainly an aquatic rite and fishing is a traditional activity.

The port facilities however isolate the city from the Wouri river. The port, an opening onto the ocean, has denied in some ways access to the Wouri, the fishermen’s River. On the other hand, despite this separation the population is concentrated which gives the impression that the town is massed near the water around its port.

Nevertheless, it is not the initial centre, at the edge of the Wouri, that is most crowded: the bulk of the population is in the inside. Hence the image of a city dominated by water, an element from which the native population is yet separated from. Ultimately, the city has retained what has essentially always been its specificity in its spatial and temporal context: a stopover function that is translated in the landscape by the omnipresence of the seascape.

Nonetheless, a cut was made. A dam, pre-industrialization of the shoreline, was drawn and provided the water a mere quasi-economic value to the inhabitants. Wouri, the main element of this landscape, now only flirts with some coastal neighbourhoods: the tide, sensitive to the opening, no longer plays in terms of scope but only in height, leaving traces on the pillars of the docks.

All images provided by Danièle Diwouta-Kotto
Overview of Douala’s Traditional Art (Sawa)

By Danièle Diwouta-Kotto

• The Douala mask
Generally used for initiative purpose, made of wood, these masks represent bovids and are painted in style. They are used as totems for initiations and rites. There are not many models and the dominant type is the Ox mask.

• The canoe
The canoe, made of rotproof wood, is present in everyday life (fishing) and has its place during traditional festivals. It symbolizes a village. In December, Canoe races are highly anticipated cultural events during Ngondo’s celebration.

• The paddle
Accompanies the canoe. Most Douala people, when they don’t own a boat, have a paddle encrusted with their name, often pointedly exposed in their homes, and take it out at every possible opportunity.

• The bow of the canoe (Tange)
The openwork design of this wooden part of the vessel is a tangle of curvilinear forms inspired by the animal world (snakes, elephants, iguanas, birds...) and the human world. The whole work evokes a mechanical gear that would recall the fern of the plant world. Fixed at the head, carved into art or magic representation, it is supposed to represent the triumph of the vessel with its occult powers. These works are painted in bright colours.

• The seat (bebongo)
These large cube-shaped stools dugout to the plate and curved are the seats of the experts and leaders. Their use would evolve into sculptures highlighting the calligraphic names of those which they have been made for, the village or the Chief Officer which has ordered the work. The themes carved typically feature wildlife, they are limited to one or two topics per side.

• The double-bell
Present at every event and can be heard announcing the arrival of the various traditional authorities or the passage of processions during religious mourning ceremonies.

• The sacred tree
It is a mythical tree and each town owns one. These trees are used during rites and have in common their massive height and can be different. The large Baobab in Bonabéri, The Mangifera indica in Bali, the Bombacaceae in Deido. Even on earth, they are feared.

• Plants
Plants are strongly present in Douala’s urban environment. Invasive mangroves and water hyacinth occupy the urbanscape massively, vegetation grows everywhere even in the water. The lengthy rainy season (4 months) and the high humidity obviously have an impact. The indigenous dwellings were made of plants: the house walls made of plants were replaced by clapboards, topped by a roof structure and covered with palms. Woven mats were used to decorate the burial chamber of the dead that were either very old or initiated. The grounds are always geometric. However, woven palms marking temporary entries are of common use.

Fig 1. 1960 Independence Memorial Fabric
Intertwined Architectures
By Danièle Diwouta-Kotto

History of a functional urban planning

Historically, Douala developed itself utilising its own resources. By 1884, the strengthening of the city was a commercial concern for those involved in the administration. In 1919, an urban core was defined targeting the “plateau Joss”. This was initially detailed in 1896 by a master plan elaborated by the Germans. The chosen site was targeted for its location and height overlooking the shore. However, the plateau appeared to belong to the Bell lineage which exposed the German acquisition to difficult negotiations. In the end, the negotiations led to the compulsory purchase in 1912. In essence, the desired plateau Joss became the main element in the development plan (Gross Douala) from which the urban core was to radiate.

The geographically and socially restructured city included a security zone one kilometre wide which was considered “free” from construction and separated the German sector from the new district Neue Bell. That latter was meant to welcome displaced populations. The formerly named plateau Joss was renamed Bonanjo and became the administrative centre; the nearby neighbourhood, Akwa, became the commercial and residential hub. The separation was first subtly materialized with roads and railways. But the free area, clearly defined on the plan soon became haphazardly populated. If in Joss the main services and equipments were controlled by the colonists, other neighbourhoods such as Bell, Deido or Bonabéri were owned and governed by the locals.

Slowly, local villages were incorporated at their own pace into the more recently created city, around the track and water lines. This was being done without much “ambition” as Douala was not intended to be a showcase for colonialism. Above all, it was mainly a matter of mastering what characterizes Douala, the water. The port was enlarged. A dam, draining the swamps, was built between the administrative district, the plateau Joss and the future mall, Akwa.

When, at the end of the First World War, the Germans left the premises, Douala was a great colonial city made of ventilated neighbourhoods, drilled by long and wide avenues, straight and well protected from the sun. The different neighbourhoods were drawn with the same angles delimiting regular squares, quadrilateral.

It is not until 1932 that its urbanization was taken to a new level with the expansion and division into sectors. Each district was then divided into subdistricts corresponding to local families: Bonakouamang, Bonatéké, Akwa Bonadibong ... Ultimately, the district Akwa had to undergo a “mixed” segregation plan elaborated to erase all the “precarious” habitat along the avenues. Residents who own their property had to build using solid materials.

In 1956, a new urban master plan elaborated for 300 000...
inhabitants was presented. It was based on the existing city zone structure and redefined the port; it also influenced as well as addressed the project of the industrial zone of Bonabéri. Its application was not seen until 1959. At the time, the architect John Dorian codified the city by establishing a development program that is still “in use” today and based on principles of a basic simplicity. At the same period, the French administration was already on the move. It was useless to make lavish expenditures. If discrimination was clearly apparent in the occupation of space – European neighbourhoods on the one side and local districts on the other - in the actual realization, no special feature stood out.

Architectures of trade

At the time of the German protectorate, the site consisted of a succession of villages whose districts were arranged upright to the Wouri river, separated from each other by rows of palm trees. Bell, Akwa, Deido, Bonabéri: even more than a century later, these four villages will remain the base of the city districts.

The first decade of the German administration (1884-1895) was without actual occupancy of the territory. During that period, the primary focus was the port facility as well as the development of trade, whether on water or aboard sailboats. During the second decade (1896-1907), the objective changed. The administration had evolved and was more organized beginning to look at construction work in the city. After the first factories, religious edifices were being built. A clear supremacy of massive materials importation and local production techniques led to the introduction of the use of clay, in 1888. The most obvious symbol of this imported and locally assembled architecture were the ready-built buildings on stilts.

Bonanjo constitutes the first district built with the prospect of administrative control. It was then representative of the local government institutions, its technical services, residences, hospitals, customs, military facilities and a tiles factory. Until 1910 the Douala huts, made of vegetal materials and surrounded by their little fields, shoulder the Europeans buildings. This cohabitation mainly prevails in the port area.

Built in 1905, the House of King Augustus Manga Ndumbe baptised the “Pagoda”, is one of the most fascinating constructions of the German period. The “airy” and open style from the first architectural projects disappears from the landscape with the systematic use of clay more suited to the construction of basements and archways. If clay adds to the overall appearance of the building, it also allows a certain type of urban strengthening, paradoxically more in line with the work conducted in Europe at this time. The new hospital and the Residence David Mendessi Bell (famous merchant from Douala) are good examples of this.

From 1916 onwards, the port expansion stimulated the establishment of trading houses along the avenues and boulevards.

In the meantime, the administration carried out construction work in the field of health, justice, transport and systematically stretched its presence over the city centre.

More modern architectural forms were introduced, at the time easily traceable to the European mainstream. It was in the 1930s that buildings became predominantly characterized by a certain uniformity. The Chamber of Commerce, the new railway station, The hospital, the courthouse... all these buildings signal the disappearance of the four-sided typical roof as preference was given to a roof terrace although unsuitable to the local climatic conditions. These constructions were also designed in a neoclassical style according to symmetric planning. Some isolated buildings show originality such as a half-timbered house built with the Northern French style as inspiration.

In 1938, the French administration tried to displace the local population still living in Akwa to favour the expansion of a larger trade area. At this time, two-storey buildings (rarely higher) with alleyways began to emerge. Their architecture is less ostentatious than the one representing colonial authority. They are often of commercial purpose, located along the sidewalk at street corner level. A pediment, displaying the name of the owner - often a Greek merchant - overlooks the entrance. This is an architectural detail which constitutes the only frill granted to building. The ground floor is typically occupied by shops, whereas upper levels offer housing. The emergence of this new architectural trend coincides with a high population growth partly due to the increased volume of business and construction projects. In 1948, the residential area Bonapriso was born. Collective habitat is introduced in the suburbs. The city definitely takes a decisive step toward increased urban organization - the primary concern being the accommodation of the hot climate and ambient humidity.

The colonial built environment is a shared heritage, part of the Douala architectural history. However, the bond between the city and its colonial buildings is very paradoxical. Ultimately, it is a state of permanent denial. In Cameroon, policies around the preservation of the built heritage are short-lived and the State, generally slow to proceed with forced renovation works, pays little attention to their preservation.

In other words, this tolerated architecture is not maintained and considered to be part of the city general functioning. Not unusually, buildings located in the colonial area are patched similarly as temporary stalls. Preserving the architectural heritage appears irrelevant. Holes in mud brick wall constructions are sealed with breeze blocks, which are commonly used at national level: all modifications are possible because in Douala destroying as well as improving is not an option, tinkering following immediate needs is the preferred approach. Walls are not considered to have a history, but a function and as long as they stand they be will found useful! Colonial architecture has clearly failed to ennoble and its primarily functional role is predominant in the built environment.

This chunk of history has shaped Douala and the future of its architecture. Architectural projects are too functional and rapidly dominated by their surroundings, few maintain a strong identity or remain in good condition.

The majority of the newest buildings associated with the
French colonial period are still present. However, those that have benefited from real restoration work are rare, especially when remaining in the public arena. Alterations are minor and almost follow the same process each time: closing of the peripheral verandas or balconies – in attempt to gain space or isolate from the urban cacophony- suppression of screen walls that the colonial style used to allow air circulation, addition of air-conditioners to the facades, concealing of sloping roofs with metal or concrete linear band devices, tiles lined facades as noticeable on the former City Hall (now headquarters to CRTV National television). In any case, these adaptations are conducted out of necessity and their unusual outcomes cause moderate appreciation.

Once sold, buildings located in the administrative district are demolished as the costs of restoring them are higher than those included in the construction of the dull buildings that will replace them.

Precursory spaces are mostly workplaces where functionality and modernity coexist in a stimulating way. At this level, Douala demonstrates a creativity that perhaps overcomes its very conventional architectural environment. Multinationals bring development standards that local designers try to adapt to the environment. Thus, banks, insurance, telephone and oil companies display the same features as elsewhere, integrated in more specific constructions. The city digests these intrusions that mainly occur in the existing built environment. Changes follow a trend of environmental standardization.

**Alleged modernity**

Different layers of architectural styles are intertwined. Everywhere in Akwa and Bonanjo, the rigorous lines of the colonial buildings unveil without continuity alongside elements of modern architecture. All types of contrasts are represented in this city which while being deprived of urban regeneration policy, appears to be operating on a freewheel. The original architecture behind the creation of the city can only be guessed. Coexistence of different styles and eras creates discordant yet energetic contrasts, opposition of volumes, heights, materials... Douala lacks rules or rather fails to enforce them.

Buildings from the colonial period seem to disappear gradually from the landscape. Colonial and postcolonial buildings are restructured, overstretched and decorated indiscriminately. For the sake of modernity, facades of glass curtain-wall are mounted on old buildings. This seems like glimpsing the past through screen walls.

Ventilation systems against glass-roof air conditionings. In Douala, motorized air-conditioners that punctuate the facades are to be considered decorative as they seem inevitable. Rectangular masses, basic and convertible, topped with sloping roofs.

In 1962, Nsangu Akwa an architect based in Cameroon...
introduces new administrative buildings: concrete, functional and rational architectural projects.

In 1980, many ambitious public and private projects are executed. These are the first towers. Other major projects like the Bessengue station emerge. This demonstrates an urban architecture that takes place appropriately.

The African identity is expressed through metallic elements or enamel coatings, plated on the facades. Inside, the finest materials - stone, high quality wood, leather and bronze - are extensively used. Neutral shades - ivory, brown, ebony, bronze – that refer to colours present in the African nature are predominant. Beside headquarters, a more limited and modest architecture emerges through collective housing and small equipment programs. The colonial buildings, confined to the background, no longer indicate progress.

With the economic crisis, Douala gradually deteriorates. New retailers are adapting to the context and it seems like transforming the existing built is preferred and cheaper. Architectural constructions are modest. The preference goes for “economical” and “useful”. International architectural trends are rapidly abandoned and seem already estranged when the main concern is not the architectural style but the occupation of space.

And because it is still difficult to identify streets names wherever outside the main arteries, they are being given numbers that nobody recalls. To ask one’s way, one is better off indicating the name of a shop or a business than giving a specific address. The city is being shaped and structured around the establishment of representative buildings more or less recent or named after anecdotes.
Is it still possible to dream in Douala?

With the lack of renewed policies, everybody in Douala can build with a rather easily obtained dispensation. The city is under eternal construction whether at road level with the gutters and sidewalks or at any level pushing the construction to impossible gaps. If the buildings have aged, the satellite receivers that bloom out of the buildings windows, higher and higher, and the antennas are a reminder that the city is anchored in the XXI century. The reality behind the scenes however is undeniable. Behind all these buildings, symbols of apparent modernity, a maze of narrow dirt roads discretely picks up the trail of the villages - Bonamikengue, Boneleke, Bonejang, Bonebong – upon which Douala has grown.

Over the last years, the heart of the city -huddled up- has benefited from a peripheral opening of the port which has somewhat helped to relieve its internal congestion. In 1998, an urban diagnosis is performed to establish a strategic development plan for 2015. A major urban project on the initiative of the Urban Community of Douala (CUD) was commissioned in 2002. It was aimed to build an area called “Sawa Beach” at the river front of the city. This allowed the city extension with the recovery of non occupied floodplains. Very quickly however, financial and land constraints were proven insurmountable. This unlikely project had the merit to cause a debate surrounding the limits of Douala extramural evolution.

The 2005 Urban and Development Plan generated the rehabilitation and creation of structural channels and primary building drains. Douala urban problems yet identified continue to receive the same answers: focus on roads and drains. Douala is a city still lacking urban planning.

Here, as soon as the sun rises, people come out and monopolize the city centre. The whole space is occupied. Pedestrians and vehicles compete for the same roads in a chaotic manner. When not fully occupied, sidewalks are converted into commercial zones. Nowadays, each spot is stolen to build a provisional shelter or a stall.

The visual overlays of tangled cables and colourful banners across the main arteries constantly catch the eye. The rare streetlights are used to support flyers of the next concert, promote the last political rally or tradeshow as well as the cheapest airline ticket. The eye is constantly drawn to the visual overlays of tangled cables and colourful banners across the main arteries.

This new dynamic polychrome decoration which highlights or disguises building facades has replaced the past monochromatic environment. During the colonial period, the whitewashing technique of walls and tree trunks was systematically used for “big” occasions. The dominant colours were: white walls, gray roof tiles, green mangrove. To stand out among the dull and compact mass what can a more more infallible method than choosing a flashy colour? Thus the trademark colours of the major companies stand out voluntarily but give involuntarily the economic pulse of the city. Unfortunately, the rainy climate and the pollution prevent the conservation of the exterior paint work. Therefore, as seasons pass, the decrepit quickly becomes a colour and sometimes prevails. This encourages the use of “cheap” ceramic tiles. An inappropriate misuse of materials but abundantly available on the market.

Ironically, while not known for its architectural achievements Douala distinguishes itself with its eye-catching domestic buildings. Architecture is first acknowledged by passing outsiders before being lived from the inside by the residents. However, two trends still persist: the neoclassical style, an amazing reminiscence of the past, approved by the majority. It is mainly about stating presence and power through obvious codes: columns, capitals, pediments, archways, horizontal mouldings around the roofs and terraces bordering concrete balusters. The same architectural terminology is used to differentiate whether individual housings, collective housings or equipments. The massive fences are treated in the same spirit. Different levels are superimposed at the base to prevent losing surface. The architecture is both pragmatic and opulent, a new custom focused on social representation.

The other stream that could be baptized “neo-Cameroonian” is functional and spare. The same overlapping monolithic cubes, identical windows, completed perfectly with coatings of tiled facades. Unlike the aforementioned style, the conception of these buildings deliberately refrains from using architects. There is a total lack of sophistication. This “no-style” is the outcome of an industrial environment that offers very little choice in terms of affordable materials. It has become a reference and given the speed at which these cubes are growing, the city is once again reshaped. This time however without the slightest cultural hesitation, the power of the non-choice. You have to deal with the most urgent matters first, without considering a bigger picture. Often copying what is done elsewhere or nearby for convenience, even if the outcome is far from the original. Architecturally, Douala has become a disconcerting city. The expression of multiple identities through a heterogeneous architectural landscape, a hotchpotch of styles and non-styles. This neo-Cameroonian style prevails and every new project is based upon it. Other expressions are struggling against the proliferation of these sites that grow rapidly.

Some “different” types of architecture always isolated appear here and there but they do not create any real trend. The extreme individualization in the conception of the various buildings is prevalent. The work of architects, proportionally insufficient, has no impact on the general appearance of the city.

All images provided by Danièle Diwouta-Kotto

Book :
The post-war economic boom has boosted what has become the symbol of the western industrial society. A time where the average purchasing power was continuously improving, where production lines were running at full speed 24/7 to produce profusely (un)sustainable goods. Advertising campaigns stand in the heart of a modernity acknowledged by everyone living and evolving in an urban environment: the mass consumption. Over the years, learning from heartbreaking setbacks and striking successes, marketing has developed here and there some quite singular strategies, some tactics to divert the buyer’s attention, with such skills that one can almost speak about public space forfeiture.

Retinas under pressure

Douala is a glaring illustration of the remarkable and outrageous advertising pressure which has quietly sneak in the appallingly passive Cameroonian society. A society that has resigned to other natural disasters and urban stress, such as noisy beer bars or malaria. The large workforce of Cameroon financial capital is a huge pool of prospects all ready to yield to the call of their acquisitive instincts. Because in our consumerist times under the spell of capitalism, buying is definitely existing, even under this climate of insecurity and chronic scarcity. Suffice to say that advertising professionals do not skimp on ways to spear these potential buyers. Beside, competition is rather fierce on those oligopolistic markets where mobile operators top the ranking of advertisers. Agencies do not necessarily compete ingeniously on the creative level and make up for this glaring deficiency with a cancerous proliferation of opportunities to see (OTS), the public space being transformed into a vast advertising arena.

No matter where or in which direction, at almost every level, from every angle, the eye is inevitably and immediately overwhelmed by a horde of images and messages conveyed by various media formats. Between the 60 cm x 40 cm posters haphazardly plastered on walls, the pamphlets and leaflets distributed to all, the rows of disparate panels blocking the main arteries and all the other street banners, the retinas of the Douala inhabitants are under constant pressure. Sales companies have monopolized the public space as their peers once took over the Temple at the time of Jesus Christ. And between mangrove and macadam, nobody seems to contest the dispossession in full swing of a common good.

Disorder and urban beautification

Under formal governmental directives and with the help of competitive institutional resources, the urban community of Douala (CUD) conducts a program aimed at the beautification of Cameroonian cities. A special unit with the mission to erase urban disorder has been established in this framework. The concept of “urban disorder” primarily points out the anarchic occupation of the public domain through informal trade. The particularly fierce and beefy henchmen that form this brigade never cease to upset gleaners who try to “cope” and somehow manage to survive in the city. Muddles and gnashing of teeth are on the menu of their adversarial relationship. As if these men and women, humble and anonymous in this impecunious Cameroon, were inherently source of more “disorder” in the urban space than the multitude of intercepting light panels that disrupt the continuity of the visual field. Should the increase of advertising be recognized as an ordinary calamity? One shouldn’t forget that administrators clearly pay a substantial fee to the CUD, and the control of this advertising bonanza can lead to occult tussles ...

Objectively, they have become accomplice of an alienating culture of goods and, by the same way, step on the requirements of sustainable development. On the other hand, the increasing advertising continues to benefit from a social tolerance close to indifference and based on the simple fact that the average person has basic needs that are more urgent. That being said, since activism or lobbying is certainly not for tomorrow's Cameroon under Paul Biya’s flag, the beautification campaign would essentially need to end up putting a regulation in place against this escalation of commercial exposure, and authorities would probably one day or another try to face this obscene increase of advertising displays that seriously plagues the public space.
When ArchiAfrika began in 2001, its founders came together with the idea to launch a much-needed platform for studying and raising awareness about African design and architecture. Today, this grass-roots organization has grown into a network of design professionals, students, scholars, volunteers and partner institutions from all over the world focused on the documentation, promotion and scientific analysis of The African Space. Beyond this ArchiAfrika has progressed to become a well respected organization in steering critical dialogue on urbanist and architectural developments happening in and outside the continent in order to stimulate improvements through better understanding of design, planning and building issues in both worlds.

Through the dedication, hard work and volunteer service of various individuals within the community, ArchiAfrika has become both a meeting point and launching platform for critical projects, publications, research initiatives, conferences and workshops on the African Space.

The bi-monthly newsletter, initially orientated and focused on the organisations’ activities has essentially evolved into a digital magazine delivering valuable news and drawing insight on urbanist & architectural issues shaping the continent.

Now ten years after it’s founding, ArchiAfrika is ready to enter a new phase of growth and expansion on the African continent and across the globe. Over the next three years, ArchiAfrika looks to establish different branches in various African cities where design-led initiatives will be rooted and become part of local development Agenda. This phase has already begun with ArchiAfrika Ghana, whose agenda over the next six months include the production of an online archive on The African Space, a conference on sustainable design this July and a monthly discussion forum on creativity in Ghana’s development. We urge you to become part of ArchiAfrika and support the organisation’s activities and future developments in the form of financial contribution. By donating, you will directly support the continued publication of our online newsletter, contribute to the creativity discussions salons in West Africa and establish a global volunteer program in the African design industry.

Joe Osae – Addo, Chairman of the Board of ArchiAfrika

You can support by donating here: https://www.paypal.com/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_s-xclick&hosted_button_id=7TVSDRZGZUGKY or contact us for information on sponsoring ArchiAfrika - info@archiafrika.org
Fig 1. La Colonne Pascale by Pascale Marthine Tayou in New Bell (2010)

Fig 2. La Passerelle de Bessengue by Alioum Moussa (2005)

People, Art & Public Space: A photographic impression of SUD 2010 by Lard Buurman
Urban Africa is underexposed. We do not have an instant image of it, and when we do, it is often very limited. I want to give an impression of daily life in the African city. From the chaotic dusty centre of Kampala to traffic jams in Lagos, from shopping malls to slums, from a park in Nairobi to the business district of Johannesburg. In my work, I focus on the relationship between people and public space. In this project, I give an impression of urban Africa, aimed at the choreography of the street, the daily hustle. The final objective is a book and an exhibition, which will also travel through Africa.

For older work I would like to refer to my website [http://www.lardbuurman.com]
Doual’art plays an exceptional role in the city of Douala, by initiating and stimulating urban interventions by artists and public artwork at several locations at a variety of scales in the city. The non-governmental organisation, headed by Princess Marilyn Douala Bell, Didier Schaub and Paulin Tchuenbou, has influenced the image & identity of Douala through their projects undertaken in the last two decades.

Since 2007 the activities and events undertaken by the organisation are knitted together through triennial events. The second ‘Salon Urbaine de Douala’ (SUD2010), took place between 4 and 11 December 2010 and was related to the theme of Douala’s somehow troubled relationship with water.

The origin of the city of Douala is formed by a group of small settlements on the banks of the Wouri estuary, populated with fishermen. The Douala culture is hence strongly related to water, both in myths and customs.

Since the German settlers colonised Cameroon, the areas on the banks of the river were reserved for Europeans and later were fully used for harbour activities. For the people of Douala, direct access to the Wouri was nearly fully cut off, the city now seems to be positioned with its back turned to the river.

Douala is known as one of the places in the world with the highest amount of annual rain fall. The unplanned sprawl of the city has been frustrating the natural flow of the abundant seasonal streams of water, creating numerous problems in the densely inhabited city. Yearly floods result in destroyed housing, damaged private and public asset and in serious health threads to Douala’s inhabitants. Nonetheless, the abundant availability of water also creates chances.

In 2011, construction works start on a new deepwater port in Kribi. The idea is to shift part of the harbour activities of Douala to Kribi and Limbe, another town close to the ocean. In this way the continuous deepening of the Wouri to Douala for deepwater vessels can be avoided.

This results in both positive and threatening challenges for
the largest and economically most active city of Cameroon. The banks of the Wouri will become accessible for the people of Douala once again, hopefully in such a way that the relationship between the Wouri and the Douala inhabitants is not only present in myths and the yearly Ngondo ceremony, but on a firmer basis.

On the other hand, the harbour offers great direct and indirect economic drive for a large majority of the population of the Douala region. The shift of harbour activities will threaten the income positions of many families and stimulate them to follow the harbour bound companies. It remains to be seen, what impact this will have on the city. It seems obvious that any new plan for the gained harbour banks should include new economic developments to avoid an increase of poverty in the region.

While the above issues - amongst others - were discussed during ‘conferences’ at the Doual’art premises, SUD2010 also offered presentations of many artworks, vernissages and performances at other locations in the city.

Some of the work presented clearly held and developed a dialogue with the people of Douala, either at large or within specific areas.

At Bonamouti two projects were developed. Le Jardin Sonore by Lucas Grandin offers a vertical garden where the people of the neighbourhood can retreat and enjoy the sounds created by water drops dripping off the structure. Salifou Lindou, a painter and sculptor living in Bonamouti, created Face à l’Eau, an installation of five panels, offering privacy at a bathing site on the banks of the Wouri for the men of the area.

In New Bell, another neighbourhood of the city, one of the oldest areas with a high density, several artists created food for thought for the inhabitants. Hervé Yamguen developed Les Mots Écrits, a poetic approach for his home neighbourhood by involving 5 rappers into creating songs, of which certain lines were executed as wall sculptures at several spots of the area. The rap songs were performed during SUD2010 and recorded onto the CD Wash mes ways (to be downloaded via the SUD2010 website). Kamiel Verschuren explored a pragmatic approach with New Walk Ways New Bell, by developing timber covers for the open sewers of New Bell, once covered by concrete slabs but since long open. The execution of these covers, only at specific locations, created discussions amongst the inhabitants, that it would be good to also develop covers for the parts which are still open and continue to collect dirt and rubbish, thus blocking the stream and resulting in flooded streets with contaminated water.

The Dutch artist Ties ten Bosch settled for 2 months in Ndogpassi, a more recently developed neighbourhood. Many of the inhabitants of this area migrated from villages upcountry. The settlements have a more informal feel but by lack of authority are toughly managed by a chief and a committee of men. Via this communal organisational system, decisions on maintenance of public services are made, but also financial assistance for inhabitants who are in need of some help. Diving in deep by Ties ten Bosch is rather a
a story than an artwork in situ; he documented his stay in the area with video, bottles of water and images. Meanwhile he challenged his temporary neighbours by developing projects that created both a small and a large impact on the quality of liveability in the area. Projects included developing street names and signs for the main arteries of the neighbourhood, with consent from the local chief and the committee. Daily water samples were showcased as a diary of the stream through the area. The force majeure was the construction of a bridge between Ndogpassi and the neighbouring area on the other side of the stream. Shortly after SUD2010 Ten Bosch returned home. The impact of his work remains to be seen, but the bridge is sturdy enough to survive many years of neglect.

In the same area, at a beautiful location around and above a
Fig 6. Wall sculpture ‘Les Mots Écrits’ in New Bell by Hervé Yamguen

Fig 7. Ponte Source in Ndogpassi by Ties ten Bosch
local water source forming the heart of Ndogpassi, Philip Aguirre developed Source. The project, essentially the construction of an amphitheatre following the existing shapes of the landscape, will be executed in 2011. It was presented to the chief, the committee and the neighbourhood with a celebrative ceremony during SUD2010. This ceremony proved that the location forms an excellent locale for similar events.

The full impact of the above mentioned and other projects developed under the umbrella of Doual’art are still to be seen. The involvement of people and the positive, aesthetic but hands-on approach does make the work catching. It would be useful to return to Douala on a regular basis. It is to be hoped that many Salons Urbains de Douala will follow.

SUD2010 is organised by Doual’art and supported by ICU Art Projects.


More info on www.doualart.org

All photos by Berend van der Lans; except mentioned otherwise
REMINDER 5th African Perspectives - Call for Papers - Deadline for submission of entries (abstracts): 1 APRIL 2011

Hosted by L’Ecole Supérieure d’Architecture de Casablanca (EAC), the 5th African Perspectives Conference comprises three days of interdisciplinary lectures, debates, presentations, tours, exhibitions, shows and workshops on the heart of the African city. It will involve scholars, students, artists, policy makers, architects, city planners and others with related interests, from the African continent and beyond. We expect a large cross disciplinary audience from across Africa.

5th African Perspectives website:
http://www.african-perspectives.com
Invitation

Antoni Scholtens Folkers has the pleasure of inviting you to the defence of his doctoral thesis: Modern Architecture in Africa

The public defence of his thesis will take place on Friday March 18, 2011 at 10.00 a.m. in the Senaatszaal, De Aula, Delft University of Technology, Mekelweg 5, Delft.

Prior to the defence Antoni Folkers will give a short lecture on his thesis at 9.30 a.m. After the graduation ceremony there will be a reception. You are cordially invited to attend the ceremony.

Supervisor: Prof. ir. W. Patijn

Paranymphs: Gijs van Loef; 06 54384195 Karel Greven; 06 54285669