

# AFRICAN REALITIES

The lecture series C4C6 revolved around Africa this year. Remco Rolvink, urban designer at VE-R and a board member of Dasuda, and Pierre Maas, partner at Rothuizen Architects, moderated the series. They discuss the continent's modernist heritage, local building techniques and walled-off new towns.

Text REMCO ROLVINK AND PIERRE MAAS

Aerial view of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.



BBM Explorer



Africa is a huge continent with 54 independent countries. It's often in the news and therefore sometimes close by, but in our experience just as often far away.

All of Africa's countries have rich histories and great diversities of cultures, climates and landscapes. Some countries are huge. Algeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, are almost four times the size of France. In a country like Mali alone, more than 30 different languages are spoken, sometimes as different as, for example, Dutch and Finnish. Rainforests, steppes and deserts are interspersed with vastly expanding urban agglomerations. Similarities also occur: the urban areas are booming with enormous demographic growth in metropolises, cities, towns and villages. Within one generation, the continent's population will double. The developments are faster and larger than the world has ever faced. At the end of this century the three largest metropolises will be in Africa. Lagos, Kinshasa and Dar es Salaam will house a dazzling 80 to 100 million inhabitants each. Despite the continent's position in a global economic boom at the macro level, the quality of life, work, education, recreation and travel lags far behind. In addition, the continent has now also become the focus of a number of great powers. In particular, the influence of China is very much present and complex, but at the same time direct trade relations with China and India open possibilities that generations before never had.

All these developments have a major influence on landscape, urban planning and architecture. This was reason enough for the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture to focus this year's C4C6 lecture series on the African continent, under the title *African Realities*. The intention was to go broad and deep at the same time, in order to have many perspectives on what is going on, by offering a wide variety of speakers. To set the stage, Wouter van Beek, anthropologist and researcher at the African Studies Centre at the University of Leiden, offered a bird's-eye view of the earliest existence of the continent, the introduction of humanity and the forming of cultures, the forced introduction of nation-states that still lingers as a poisonous legacy of colonial times, its consequences for today's political leadership, the meaning of family and church and the position of women in many cultures. The documentary *Tanzania Transit* by Jeroen van Velsen offered a section through some daily life examples of how these long lines of history are still visible today and sometimes clash with new realities.

#### LEARNING FROM LOAM

Africa has a rich history of urban and architectural heritage. Architects Pierre Maas and Antoni Folkers took us to the loam architecture of Djenné in Mali and the richly ornamented architecture of Stone Town in Zanzibar. Materials both guide and restrict the way that people can build. Jurriaan van Stigt, Belinda van Buiten, Robert van Kats and Pierre Maas discussed the quality of old techniques and revived techniques with old materials. They showed a handcrafts tool for the production of compressed earth bricks, for use in rural areas with limited access to new building materials. They argued that this building technique often results in a better building climate than many newer ones, by avoiding concrete block structures that produce hot buildings, while earth blocks or loam buildings flatten out cold nights and hot days. They also made a case for materials that are widely available but at present hardly used. Bamboo is currently little explored, while the opportunities for replacing diminishing and therefore expensive timber and imported steel are there.

Ola Uduku, born in Nigeria and a teacher at the Manchester School of Architecture, is an expert in modernist architecture on the continent and its influence on contemporary architecture, design and fashion. Modern architects came to Africa in the early twentieth century, in colonial times, but Ola showed that a hybrid form emerged in which vernacular architectural expressions were incorporated in some of the designs by modernists. Local architects somehow developed a new idiom. Generally speaking, however, the architectural vocabulary is limited in most African cities and more interventions may be necessary to develop a stronger language. Architect Luyanda Mpahlwa from Cape Town, South Africa, showed a way forward with his social housing built out of sand bags. It delivers an architectural design that stands out and might be typecast as a

local style, if only it would be used more often. For this to happen, it would need to address the actual needs of people even more, in an unavoidable way. Robert van Kats wants to make architecture that can be best described as spatial energy design, drawing on natural ventilation principles that can be found both in ancient vernacular architecture and modernist buildings designed by foreign architects over half a century ago. Combinations of materials, details and shapes prevent a building from heating up, cooling it without expensive and energy-consuming air conditioners.

#### CRUEL REALITY

The cruel reality is that in today's challenging city environments, many inhabitants won't get past survival mode. At the broad base of the social pyramid, the lack of basic needs and the ensuing daily struggle result in vast informal urban settlements and a kind of cat-and-mouse game of top-down control and bottom-up combat. Michael Uwemedimo spends much time among such communities in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. While filming demolition and threats to livelihood, he developed a social programme delivering pride to the community by giving its members a voice, literally via the establishment of a local radio station. By doing so, new forms of architecture and urbanism developed over time. Rachel Keeton talked about the principles that can be deducted from studying new town developments. This is relevant because they are not only tied to the age of modernism. Nowadays, the competition between political leaders that are eager to show their power and control by disseminating shiny pictures of huge developments results in a parade of satellite towns that turn their backs on all the challenges, failure and chaos in the existing cities.

Oana Baloi, consultant for the Global Green Growth Institute, introduced the fast-growing urban challenges of Kigali, Rwanda. Via a livestream connection, she showed flooded streets, waste dumps in every abandoned corner and informal housing without any services. This is a reality not to be ignored, but at the same time Kigali's story is about the implementation of green infrastructure, urban agriculture, rainwater collection programmes, plastic bag and bottle bans and the introduction of electric motorcycles serving as taxis. Ties van der Hoeven, innovative hydrologist, presented a perspective that didn't even try to restore old values or balance the current situation in order to survive, but guided us towards a whole new way of thinking in which the entire Sinai desert could become the green lungs of East Africa. This kind of landscape architecture at a regional scale could influence the climate in large parts of the world. Just as optimistic, but more focussed on the resilience of citizens today, is the Msimbazi River Basin project that Remco Rolvink presented. In the middle of Dar es Salaam the rapidly growing population claims its deadly toll by inhabiting the lower valley river basin space, deforesting the upstream areas in the hills, resulting in a mud stream flowing down in flash floods during peak rainfall, killing many people every year. By opening up the river and using the sediment to build terraces that demarcate wetland parks and form a new dense urban plan, many can be housed safely.

#### ARCHETYPICAL AFRICAN CITY

The archetypical African city doesn't exist, but in sub-Saharan Africa one can easily discern a street life that is comparable in cities like Nairobi, Kampala, Accra or Lagos. Society is on the street and the street is part of society. The street is increasingly fought for, in terms of what it can be used for. Amanda Ngabirano, planner and teacher at the Makerere University in Kampala, took us to the streets of her town and explained that we need to understand that a pavement is not only for pedestrians, just because it is raised and paved differently. The *bodas* (motor taxis) will use it too if the rest of the road is full and blocked. She showed a visionary future by advocating the first car-free routes through these car-congested streets. She doesn't ignore the challenges, but offers glimpses of hope and successful interventions that are simply stronger.

Likewise, when Koen van Baekel, Benan Berhan and Daan Roggeveen discussed the economy of the African city, characterized by low incomes, traditional male and female roles, and financial investments that never reach the local economy, the resulting

mood wasn't one of despair. Van Baekel and Berhan (both consultants at Rebel Group) and Roggeveen (an architect who researched the relation between China and African states) slowly fired up an attractive perspective: much is not cast in stone. The circular economy and the enormous demands of the local food market will trigger people to open up new ways. René van Veenhuizen of RUAF talked about the culturally embedded subsistence farming in many countries. The aversion of the young generation to follow their parents' and grandparents' travails will lead to new farming techniques and growing middle-income groups with a demand for quality food and knowledge of a nutritious diet. Caroline Warmerdam, spatial planner and agriculture expert, even sees projects that raise the value chain for food. They might result in both an agro-economic revolution and a stable food security guaranteed by largely self-producing countries, breaking the increasing trend of bulk food import to feed the growing cities.

These plans may all still balance on the knife's edge of success. Sometimes, the situation seems chaotic and hopeless. But in his opening lecture, Wouter van Beek argued that taking the long view offers a different perspective: the cultures that sprang from the firm base of land, soil and climate are actually in a very dynamic state right now. We should look at them differently, because they will evolve into something new, unlike anything we've ever seen. Olalekan Jeyfous, a Nigerian architect and artist, took his viewers on a visual journey through his work that showed what these future urban realities might look like. They may occur sooner than you think, because the incredibly young population is relentlessly looking for new opportunities in the urban environment, while at the same time staying firmly embedded in its cultural background.

# Amsterdam Academy of Architecture

## Lecture series C4C6 — African Realities

<p>06 02</p> <p><i>There are no Cities in Africa</i> Remco Rolvink, Pierre Maas, Wouter van Beek</p>	<p>13 02</p> <p><i>Monuments of Cultures</i> Antoni Folkers, Pierre Maas</p>	<p>20 02</p> <p><i>Resilient Systems</i> Oana Baloi, Ties van der Hoeven, Remco Rolvink</p>
<p>27 02</p> <p><i>Economy of Scales</i> Daan Roggeveen, Koen van Baekel, Officers of Embassies of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa</p>	<p>06 03</p> <p><i>Modernism in Africa</i> Ola Uduku</p>	<p>13 03</p> <p><i>African New Town</i> Rachel Keeton, Michelle Provoost</p>
<p>20 03</p> <p><i>Materials</i> Jurriaan van Stigt, Robert van Kats, Belinda van Buiten, Pierre Maas</p>	<p>03 04</p> <p><i>African Streetscape</i> Amanda Ngabirano</p>	<p>10 04</p> <p><i>Agro Revolution</i> René van Veenhuizen, Caroline Warmerdam</p>
<p>24 04</p> <p><i>African architect in the world</i> Luyanda Mpahlwa</p>	<p>01 05</p> <p><i>Housing for millions</i> Michael Uwemedimo *</p>	<p>08 05</p> <p><i>Urbanism's New Future</i> Olalekan Jeyifous *</p>
<p>15 05</p> <p><i>Dutch Architect in Africa</i> Robert van Kats</p>	<p>22 05</p> <p><i>Studying Built Environment in Africa</i> various students and graduates</p>	<p>wednesday 19h30</p> <p>at Amsterdam Academy of Architecture (except 01/05 and 08/05)</p> <p>* Location: Pakhuis de Zwijger (open for public)</p>