

BEYOND THE WEST



New Global
Architecture

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how everyday needs are better met when approached from a place of authenticity—one that serves the requirements of a specific place at a particular time.

Architecture must respond closely to its environment to resonate with the landscape around it and the people who use it. It benefits humans when attention is paid to local surroundings—to weather patterns, economic restrictions, and cultural traditions. That is not to say that Western ideas have no place outside of their borders. Our featured projects and architects do not work in blind isolation; they understand the benefits of a globally integrated world and utilize knowledge gleaned in other parts of the globe. We also recognize and applaud the many projects in the West that adhere to principles of regionality, sustainability, and respect for context and environment. We have chosen, however, to place our focus outside the West, uncovering projects with a sensitivity to local strictures in countries such as Brazil, Burkina Faso, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

A deep consideration for the local climate, resources, and cultures can initiate tremendous advances in the built environment. The projects featured here—from a low-impact mountainside bungalow modeled on Sri Lankan watch huts to an isolated Namibian desert retreat inspired by the nest of a local bird—are examples of a careful, research-driven, and localized approach. In many cases, tradition and intuition are the driving forces behind the overall concept. Working with available materials and in harmony with the surrounding terrain, architects find inspiration in traditional knowledge and skills. Bricks, stones, or bamboo from the surrounding landscapes are made or cut by local hands, creating local employment, and instilling local pride. These are appropriate responses when challenges include transport logistics,



restricted budgets, technological limitations, and the availability of materials.

Many of the practices producing these trailblazing projects model new ways of thinking and working by their very make up. They often have younger and more gender-balanced workforces, and they employ open-ended, democratic decision-making processes with a distinctly contemporary and thoughtful working culture. This facilitates innovative and original problem-solving, and may, in time, contribute to a shift in mindset within the discipline as a whole.

Diversity and attentiveness to new voices are crucial for the development of contemporary architectural practices, just as localism and consideration for the environment are for individual projects. This book does not present a comprehensive list of localized architecture; instead, it offers an intriguing glimpse into this design category beyond Western borders, and we hope that it becomes a starting point for further exploration of these regions and the individual architects affecting change. Our goal is for the book to spark curiosity and encourage readers to explore the immense opportunities that arise when we cast our vision beyond the architectural cultures of Europe and North America.

The featured projects offer solutions to some of the challenges faced by the inhabitants of our planet, and together they represent the possibility of a better future. The architects showcased here, often working in response to rapid urban growth, climate change, and political and economic instability, have doggedly drawn on their training, the knowledge of their peers, and their own intuition to develop unique local solutions. This grounded, curious approach should inspire other members of the profession. It is a local call to arms for an international industry.

West African Architecture: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

With new economic prosperity, this vast and varied region is giving way to rapid urban development at a megacity scale. Still, a cluster of contemporary architects are approaching vernacular heritage from a modern lens—and turning heads internationally.



01

The West African region lies between latitudes 4° N and 28° N of the equator and between 15° E and 16° W of the Greenwich Meridian. It has an estimated population of 362,201,579 people, inhabiting an area of about 2,000,000 square miles (5,119,976 square kilometers). The region consists of 16 mainland countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo; and the offshore islands of St. Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha. Geographically, the region consists mainly of the Sahel region in the north, along the Sahara Desert, and its tropical south,

60

along the Gulf of Guinea, which is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean.

West Africa is one of the continent's most vibrant regions, with diverse cultures, climate, geology, and vegetation. The area is home to several ethnic groups, who live across national boundaries. For instance, populations of Fulani, one of the largest ethnic groups, live in nearly every mainland country in West Africa, while the Yoruba live in southern Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone. There are hundreds of smaller ethnic groups living across the region, some of whom existed as independent tribal states in the precolonial era.

A Brief History of West African Architecture

The various ethnic groups living across West Africa have never had a homogenous indigenous architecture; instead, their architectural styles are as varied as the influences that inspired them. Each traditional tribal state in precolonial West Africa had a unique architecture morphology, iconography, and construction methodology influenced

- 01 The Larabanga Mosque in Ghana, built in the Sudanese style, is one of the oldest in West Africa.
- 02 Depiction of a Portuguese man on one of the "Benin Bronzes" that would have originally decorated the Royal Palace in Benin City, present day Nigeria.
- 03 Traditional thatch buildings in Taneka Beri village in the Atakora region of Northern Benin.



02

and shaped by its historical and sociocultural narratives. For instance, Sudano-Sahelian architecture was the dominant style in the Sahel region, which cuts across northern Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, and Mauritania. This architectural style consists chiefly of Sun-baked earthen bricks, typically rendered in mud plaster. Flat roofs generally characterized the buildings, and in some instances, large structures like mosques and palaces had logs protruding from the walls and turrets, serving as scaffolds for periodic maintenance. Examples of these buildings include the Great Mosque of Djenné and the Sankore Madrasah in Timbuktu (one of the oldest universities in the region). Variants or substyles of this form of architecture include the Tubali, which is defined by tall adobe walls adorned with intricate relief ornamentation, sometimes rendered in vibrant colors. This style is specific to the Hausa people, and it is commonplace across northern Nigeria, Niger, and other areas inhabited by people of Hausa ethnicity. The Ancient Kano City Walls (Kofar Na'isa) and the Palace of the Emir of Zazzau in the ancient city of Zaria are examples of buildings built in this style.

The architecture in the Bight of Benin was altogether different from that of the Sahel region. Though there were several ethnic groups in the Bight of Benin, their architectural styles had similarities, such as the use of adobe walls and thatch roofs; yet, there still existed a few distinguishing features, specific to each ethnic group. The

architecture highlighted the individuality of these tribes but also mirrored their social structures, cultural heritage, local customs, and ethno-religious values.

The city of Benin in mid-western Nigeria was once the capital of arguably one of the most advanced tribal states in West Africa—the Great Benin Empire. The influence of the Benin Empire is believed to have almost covered the area from present-day southern Nigeria to Ghana. The architecture in the Benin Kingdom typically consisted of red earthen walls with roofs of palm leaves. The palaces had large open courtyards, and the roofs rested on massive earthen or wooden columns, sometimes covered with brass carvings. The exterior walls had deep horizontal ridges running the breadth of the buildings. Unlike other settlements of the time, the city was planned and designed with precision, exhibiting urban fractal patterns uncommon for an African city. A 1691 eye witness account attributed to a Portuguese ship captain, Lourenco Pinto, describes it as follows: "The great



03

Benin where the king resides is larger than Lisbon; all the streets run straight and as far as the eye can see. The houses are large, especially that of the king, which is richly decorated and has fine columns. The city is wealthy and industrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown, and the people live in such security that they have no doors in their houses."

The arrival of Europeans in West Africa permanently altered the course of indigenous architecture across the region through slavery and

61



Architect Ramos Castellano Arquitectos
Project Terra Lodge
Location Mindelo / Cape Verde

Simplicity Defines an Island Hotel

Terra Lodge on Cape Verde's island of São Vicente was an old colonial house on the edge of the island's historic center. Mindelo-based Ramos Castellano Arquitectos transformed it into a hotel with 12 bedrooms and a suite, linked to the rooftop of the original house by a bridge, creating a space to enjoy al fresco breakfasts and beautiful sunsets.

Separate volumes were designed to fit in with the style of the surrounding buildings, and they are set into the terrain at different heights to avoid creating a single imposing form. "Each block has a different view of the city and the bay," explain studio directors Moreno Castellano and Eloisa Ramos, who designed the verandas to reduce the impact of direct sunlight. "Partially enclosed gridded timber frames provide protection while allowing guests to enjoy the views," they say. They also needed to block out the strong winds that sweep in from the Sahara Desert. Cross-ventilation provides passive air-conditioning, and the lime-plastered white walls offer solid protection from the Sun, wind, and sea spray.

The lack of resources on the island led to simple and yet innovative solutions. Rain only falls in August, so water is recycled for irrigation, and photovoltaic panels take advantage of the sunny climate to generate electricity. The construction materials are untreated, conforming with the simple aesthetic predominant on the island, and almost every element has been handcrafted by island residents, ensuring a circular economy. Natural timber, walls built using stone sourced from the site, and gates constructed from old oil barrels demonstrate the eco-conscious concept behind Terra Lodge, securing what Castellano references as "the equilibrium between human intervention and nature."



The lime-green walls of the original colonial building make for a standout feature on a hillside that is otherwise a jumble of ochre and terra-cotta-hued volumes.





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The individual units in the hotel complex, with their crate-like verandas, are set against a framework of local mountain stone, rooting them firmly in the hillside. The vibrant green of the original colonial building is offset by the more earthy tones of the woodwork and stone; it also serves as a fitting backdrop for the vegetation.