

Keynote Panel Debate – Wednesday 6th August 2014

The African Condition – A Conversation Among Friends: How is Our Africa?

Hosted by Joe Osae-Addo

This UIA 2014 Keynote Panel was conceptualized as a series of vignette conversations about the contemporary African condition with Key African and Diaspora Voices on the African Built and Cultural space. These conversations were inspired by the need to highlight the role of creativity in Africa's development agenda. The conversations evolved around the themes of

Governance | Education and productivity | Economy | Design with a big D

The intention was also to consider other creative fields and how they may influence the profession. The session aimed to shed misconceptions about Africa and the African condition as well as achieving a balance between past and present and attaining the harmony created by African space.

Panelist:

Panel 1

Francis Kere
Luyanda Mphahlwa
Mpho Matsipa
Annete Fisher

Panel 2

Mokena Makeka
Nii teiko Evans-Anfom
Lynette Ntuli
Robert van Katz

Otherwhere – the theme of the UIA 2014 Congress held at the International Convention Centre in Durban, South Africa is an appropriate theme, considering the accelerated re-awakening of the African people, a realisation of our values and a desire to grow past our colonial – and postcolonial – identity into an 'other' identity, one where we are appreciative of our culture and our practices, utilising this knowledge and empowerment to ensure the positive shaping of our future.

ArchiAfrika, represented by architect and Chairman **Joe Osae-Addo**, facilitated a panel discussion at this year's UIA Congress, focussing on the need for architects and members of the built environment community to engage in a different manner, for us to reach beyond the built form into the world for whom the form is built.



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Eight individuals, architects and non-architects, sat as panellists in two well attended and intimate discussions, examining the role of architects in Africa's development agenda and touching on contemporary African issues through their individual perspectives as professionals and citizens.

“It is the human dimension of courage, ingenuity and innovation which drives our communities – in spite of government.”, said Joe Addo at the opening of the audience-driven discussion which was the first in a series moderated by ArchiAfrika this year – Durban to Cape Town to Lagos in November 2014 – challenging African creatives to step outside the comfort of our professions and become a part of the broader discourse on the African condition; to engage in the African conversations around economy, education, governance, technology and more, to return to a space of collaborative growth.

At the centre of this discourse is culture. How are we to shift the current mentality that causes us to look West for guidance and East for investment? How are we to reclaim our cultural identity in a manner that ensures growth, yes – but also breaks that which impedes opportunity for interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue, and as Rahul Mehrotra put it, blurs binary?

Education fast became the focus of this discourse and rightly so. It is estimated that youth make up close to 80% of the African population. By 2020, three quarters of the African population will be 20 years old. It is safe then to say that it is for this reason that **Luyanda Mphalwa**, South African architect and anti-apartheid activist, believes that our focus should be on the youth. To be educated is to be empowered, and to be empowered is to be liberated. The liberation of the young African mind is an important step that must be taken, as the liberated mind is free to embrace its culture, freeing the latent potential that resides behind our emulated Western-ness.

In order to achieve this, **Mpho Matsipa**, architect, lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and Director of the UC Berkeley Studio X Johannesburg branch, believes there is a need to reform education in architecture. Students need to be exposed to much more than the evolution of architecture in the West. The implied statement that African architecture has not evolved past the pre-colonial era needs to be rescinded through the introduction of more African material to study programmes. A thorough intergenerational dialogue around traditional and current methodologies and typologies, and their societal, economical and environmental implications should be encouraged and covered extensively with emphasis laid on *local* solutions for *local* issues.

In consonance with this line of thought, **William Nii Teiko Evans-Anfom**, architect, lecturer and founding member of the Ghana Green Building Council, calls for new pedagogies in African schools of Architecture that allow for dialogue between allied fields.

There is much to be shared and learned through engaging with other motivators for sustainable development with a clear understanding of the urban condition, such as entrepreneur **Lynette Ntuli**, founding director and CEO of Durban-based Innate Investment Solutions, a professional services and advisory group with a focus on, amongst other things, the built environment.

We cannot, however, limit our dialogue to lecture halls and professional spaces – even when an interdisciplinary dialogue is established. **Annette Fisher**, architect and the first black woman to be elected to the RIBA council, believes we should be engaging beyond our discipline. Failure to do so would be to carelessly omit the input of the majority, the people for whom we build and who, through grassroots initiatives, will pull us out of an era of exploitation by leaders on and off the continent.



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In the greater context of society, our role becomes one of facilitation. We create spaces in which people can achieve their full potential; we create spaces – physical *and* virtual - in which people can explore their needs and aspirations, offering access to insights and information that would normally remain in the exclusive circles of academia. By creating shared spaces, *blurring binary*, we reintegrate ourselves as citizens into the public realm, affording ourselves the opportunity to offer our input on matters of public interest and encouraging an honest dialogue between the built environment community and those outside it. The facilitation of dialogue in itself becomes its own discourse, bringing to light the need for collaborative growth.

This is not a new concept.

No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe and *Xala* by Ousmane Sembene spoke of the African man's struggle to find a working equilibrium between the ingrained traditional and the imposed modern. Through their music, Philly Lutaaya and Oliver Mtukudzi became champion advocates for the fight against AIDS, transcending stigma by encouraging dialogue. Their works have become a part of the African dialogue as a whole, allowing for an informal engagement with the issues in question and creating reference for the dialogues to come.

The power of a dialogue without bounds can be seen in **Francis Kere's** works in his village of Gando in Burkina Faso. Rather than take the authoritarian approach, Berlin-based Kere chose to present his first idea to the community – a much needed school for the children of Gando built from compressed earth blocks – thus allowing community involvement from the outset. A dialogue around it ensued and the result was a school that is the pride of the village, built by the people, empowering them. The building is a beacon for the successful integration of western technologies with local methodologies and typologies for a prosperous merging of the cultures.

Works such as these prove that our inability to perfectly recreate western urban environments is far from a sign of incompetence. We cannot and *should not* aspire to meet foreign paradigms with respect to methodology and outcome. It is more productive then, to engage in the active dialogue that surrounds us, moving to create reactionary spaces – again, physical *and* virtual – *with* as opposed to *for* the primary informant, the citizen. Only through the implementation of local practices and forms of engagement - in architecture and otherwise - will we be able to recover our identity; only then can we hope to assert our identity in the global context.

So how are we to recover our identity?

We find ourselves back at the core of the discourse – culture. We must re-cultivate a culture of sharing – the free exchange of information and resources across generations, professions, classes, and borders; we must cultivate a culture of alternative thinking - one not confined to imposed or archaic influence; we must cultivate a sensitivity to more than our profession, breaking the mould of expected engagements. It is an imperative that we reach beyond structure in order for us to be able to make a lasting contribution to the African growth.

To quote **Mokena Makeka**, architecture possesses the power to transform. It is on the architect, then, to ensure that this power is shared.

Joe Osae-Addo
ArchiAfrika



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