ARCHITECTURE AND POWER IN AFRICA

Nnamdi Elleh

Greenwood
PUBLISHING GROUP

ARCHITECTURE AND POWER IN AFRICA

Nnamdi Elleh

With Forewords by
David Van Zanten
and
Jane I. Guyer

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Elleh, Nnamdi.
Architecture and power in Africa / Nnamdi Elleh.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-275-97679-3 (alk. paper)
1. Architecture—Africa. 2. Architecture and state—Africa. 3. Masjid al-Hasan al-Thānī (Casablanca, Morocco) 4. Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix (Yamoussoukro, Côte-d'Ivoire) I. Title.
NA1580.E443 2002
720'.96—dc21 2002028763

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2002028763
ISBN: 0-275-97679-3

First published in 2002

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881
An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Ann Bertler, Kadume Kiyogo Elleh, and the Ellehs

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Illustrations

Foreword

David Van Zanten
Professor of Architecture History,
Department of Art History, Northwestern University

In this text Nnamdi Elleh traces the theater and spectacle of the production of two immense religious buildings in West Africa in the very recent past: the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, Morocco, and the Our Lady of Peace Basilica at Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire.

Theirs is a complex, puzzling story, and he follows it across its many dimensions. There is something eerily impressive, to my North Atlantic mind, in the emergence of such structures quickly and almost unobserved at what once was the end of the earth. It inspires a number of reflections.

First, a worldly shrug: In our rapidly homogenizing world, why should not projects of the size of these be possible anywhere? Billion-dollar oil rigs, airports capable of receiving 747s, harbors equipped to fill guzzling supertankers, four-lane highways extending forever across the jungle or desert seem possible anywhere—isn't that what Bouygues, Bechtel, Halliburton are for? The desert sands are ground into concrete, then shaped. Why not into a mosque or a church, oil-rig scale? All that is needed is the command.

Second, nonetheless, surprise: Among all these constructions, these two are points of symbolism, and not ones of political or corporate power—palaces and office towers—but ones of religious force. Such monuments of passion and faith are little theorized in our new world industrial landscape. What might their meaning be? We have coined the word "postcolonial" well before we have had a firm meaning for it—are these buildings a hint?

Third, discomforture: Monumental, symbolic architecture has always been something made by hand, over a long period of years, with difficulty. We remember that "Rome was not built in a day"; that the quality in the medieval cathedrals we have been made to notice is the small differences in their details indicating construction in small increments over long periods; that Hitler and Speer imagined the monuments of the Third Reich as ruins to come; that Cecil B. DeMille imagined for us armies of slaves constructing the pyramids to the sonorous crack of Hollywood whips. How could architecture so expansive come into existence at Casablanca and Yamoussoukro so fast and quietly?

I write this in the aftermath of the tragic evaporation of the World Trade Center towers in New York. Architecture at the turn of the millennium in giving itself to spectacle seems to have taken on a reciprocal flimsiness. So, fourth, horror: because this is the environment in which humankind must live and find continuity, shelter, and safety. Is our built world providing such anymore? What happens when someone gets in the way of such architectural theater? Clearly it is possible in our market-controlled world that we throw the buildings away, but what happens to people?

At the end of World War I a German utopian designer, Bruno Taut, tried to balance his experience of man's ability to produce staggering technological works for destruction and his own sympathy for the fragility of human life, to fantasize in watercolors that, were a free humankind given the means to build hugely with steel, glass, and electricity—and had also the right to play—our earth might slowly burgeon into a vast sparkling colored flowerbed of imaginative lighted constructions, sparkling in the heavens when seen from other planets. Might such works as those at Casablanca and Yamoussoukro be glimmerings of such projections? As the tools of European domination are passed to the dominated, might they come to be manipulated to produce things not yet imagined? If so, what is fascinating to me is to wait and see what might follow.

Foreword

Jane I. Guyer
Professor of Anthropology,
Northwestern University

African monumental buildings are rare in both number and style. They dominate their surroundings by aesthetic difference as well as looming size. The pyramids, the slave castles, the rock churches of Ethiopia, Great Zimbabwe: They stand out not only in scale but also in form, in almost every way different from the buildings of the people who have turned to them in fear and admiration, or simply woven daily life in and out of their shadow. In Africa, permanence and power, their merging in ideology and artistic expression, and their penetration into the lived realities of ordinary people seem to have been plausible only very intermittently. The grandiosity and materiality of monumental representations flourished better in worlds where power thought of itself as categorical and eternal, and where it instilled exacting disciplines to achieve conformity of act and imagination in its subordinates. There, the expressive gradient from mundane to monument was long. The life of the lowly was more imprinted by the powers that controlled them. Specialist artisans worked for clients across a wide spectrum of wealth, playing back and forth across the great divides of social distinction, making small allusions to national icons in parochial places and writing into large public arenas elaborated versions of the small pragmatics of everyday life. The monument stood at the extreme end of a range of allusions to the permanence of power and value.

By contrast, in most of historic Africa, political and spiritual power on earth was not conceptualized as permanent, and the permanence of an imposing structure did not ensure its rulers continuing power over people's life and thought. Most African architecture-for-living was free to respond spontaneously and sensitively to life as lived. Like people's own houses, the palaces added and subtracted chambers and building complexes, cleared new spaces and filled them with functional structures, opened and closed pathways to the outside. The decorative arts were lavished on doors and wall paintings, veranda-posts and shrines, most of which were ultimately movable or replaceable. Indeed, there was a positive value to replacement. The magnificent goldwork of the Akan smiths was often melted down to make new articles as new political stars rose in the pantheon of state. The geographical centers of power could be shifted and communities refounded. Shrines rose and fell in popularity. Some of the greatest and longest-lasting powers over life and death, such as the Ibinukpabi oracle in eastern Nigeria, were not buildings at all but natural sites of wondrous qualities. Maintaining power in Africa has required persisting in action. A single act of construction has rarely offered any key to, or symbol of, persisting influence into the future. In brief, power over people was not obviously realizable or representable in monumental form.

So the new monumental buildings of independent Africa are a departure, an innovation, an invention. The question this deeply informed book asks is a classic one for social history: Where are the "people" in these new expressions and exercises of political power? The answers are fascinating because the creation of the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca and the Our Lady of Peace Basilica in Yamoussoukro is presented in such detail, as an unfolding process. The reader can trace out all the mediations and ruptures that would create, over time, a new gradient of aesthetic and political linkage between the monumental and the mundane, the political center and its constituencies. By recounting all the artistic, material, economic, and political steps in the realization of these massive projects, Elleh recapitulates the misgivings, oppositions, arguments, economies, and determinations that construct not just the physical monument but an architecture of commitment. He sees the buildings as now complete only in the physical sense. The story of their connection to the people is not yet written. The contentions and participations remain and ferment even now that the projects are completed. The varied sources of rejection—such as the fundamentalist rededication to their own mosques in Morocco and the passive nonattendance of the population, even on Christmas Eve, in Côte d'Ivoire—have not yet played out. And in the longer run, all monuments simply demand attention: not just

the gaze of awe but the sweep of the cleaner, the budget allocation of the accountant, and the devotion of the regular user. Elleh asks whether the artistic power of these monuments is sufficient to last beyond the waning of the personal political power that built them. As he points out, some attempts at monumentalism are simply eroded or destroyed when the popular or factional political will turns in other directions. Monuments everywhere are vulnerable to a neglect, which can escalate as the ravages of the elements rapidly reveal any tawdriness of materials or shortcuts and afterthoughts in the design.

Elleh himself is inclined to judge both the mosque and the basilica harshly by these standards. They are misplaced in their artistic and political environments. He sees them—particularly the basilica—as anomalies, outdated utopianisms indexing to a colonial era long gone, and therefore particularly vulnerable to neglect or outright rejection. By the time African leaders had the resources to devote to monumental architecture, their aesthetic visions had reverted to a prenationalist—or postclassic/traditional—repertoire. All the vigor of the populist modernism of the 1960s and 1970s was already considered vulgar or inapposite for greatness in a classic style. Elleh clearly regrets this, in the present work and in his study of the urban planning and architecture of Abuja. The new Nigerian capital city, conceived and built during the oil boom years, was intended not only as a monument but as a way of buffering politics from the teeming masses of popular life in Lagos. His work therefore stands as a plea for a larger artistic space for a nationalist imagination that already carries within it the links to popular life that these foreign structures have yet to create.

Elleh's agenda will be a struggle to achieve. But stating it so clearly and in such detail invites much greater attention to the everyday political and artistic response of modern African populations to their built environment, complete with its anomalies, posttraditionalisms, and legacies of colonialism and populist yearnings. The vision that created these two religious monuments also created many secular buildings that are equally anomalous: the huge lobbies of office buildings and hotels, complete with fountains and chandeliers; the "palace of culture" spaces from which crowds are excluded; the new markets, either far from the central urban beaten paths, or so densely modernist in spatial efficiency that there is insufficient light, storage space, refuse disposal, delivery access, and even room to move. How are they all actually used? maintained? referred to in daily speech and artistic performance? Perhaps people already look back at some selected parts of the real colonial architecture—the tree-shaded boulevards, open verandas, gardens of tropical trees and flowers (all labeled), thatch roofing to

soften the sound of rain—as a familiar and even comfortable architecture of public space, in spite of its reminder of history. Popular assimilation of all the various modern public architectures to life-as-lived—through commentary, allusion, and routine use—is the next step to explore, since people do create a modern public life

Here we may see the shrewdness of the builders of these particular monuments. Although Hassan also built palaces, his mosque went far beyond the architectural ambitions of, for example, Mobutu, whose personal palatial homes lie in ruins comparable to the fate of his power and reputation. Both Hassan and Houphouët-Boigny died within a few years of finishing their monuments, but both probably trusted that a devout people would eventually find *some* way of living with, or at least not desecrating, a sacred space. They invited popular participation even if their architectural styles may be alienating. As Elleh writes, popular use will be the proof of their prescience and their ambition.

The space Elleh opens up for study therefore offers many possibilities for new research devoted to the larger canvases and longer-term unfolding of modernity in Africa. This book takes a wholly original topic, treats it with classic punctiliousness, and therefore challenges new work to take the modern forms and expressions of power in Africa seriously as an ongoing, complex, and passionate engagement.

Preface

Architecture and Power in Africa was conceived nearly seven years ago during three separate incidents. I was completing the galley proof for my first book, *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation*, when the idea for this book began to evolve. I consulted my mentor, Professor Udo Kultermann, several times during the last stages of the premier work. In many of our conversations, he reminded me that *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation* is a preamble to the work that remains to be done. My next work, he emphasized, should focus primarily on how indigenous African architects, indigenous construction companies, and African urban policy makers and leaders are shaping the urbanscapes of the continent. Kultermann also reminded me that many African architects have been trained since independence, but their works have been overlooked in favor of the works of the more established European firms who have dominated the continent's building design and construction industry since the colonial times.

That fall, 1995, I began my graduate studies in the Department of Art History at Northwestern University. My first seminar, a class of eight graduate freshmen, was about the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and its impact on the arts of the then Soviet Union. The first slide on the board was the towering Boris Iofan design for the Palace of the Soviets. Otto Karl Werckmeister gave the pointing stick to each student around the table to stand up, go to the board, and speak

about the object. Whenever the pointer was handed to another student, he prompted the student to make new points that had not been said or to contradict what the previous student had said. By charging the class so polemically by means of the towering image of Lenin on top of the building that Iofan had proposed, Werckmeister focused the interest of the students on the Soviet revolution and its arts. Also, the first draft of the book on which he is still working, *Political Confrontations in the Arts: From the Great Depression to the Second World War 1929–1939*, was one of our primary readings in the class.

But there is another strand to the polemical stage that Werckmeister had created in our class. To the shock of my seven colleagues and me, he unilaterally promoted me to be the "expert" on "Art and Politics in Africa." From that moment, whenever he went around the class asking questions about the events surrounding the Bolshevik revolution and the arts that were produced during that era, he also required me to tell the class how art and politics have influenced the production of monumental objects on the African continent since the postindependence years. Thus, he got me thinking about art and architecture in a different framework. Also, my thoughts went to Ethiopia, the Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime, and the socialist moments that were produced in that era; to Alexandria, Egypt, where a new national library that promised many things to the Egyptian people had been completed; and to Abuja, the new federal capital of Nigeria, a project that I pursued for my dissertation and about which I released a monograph that explores where the city fits within the schema of twentieth-century architecture and urbanism.

Architecture and Power in Africa, a book that focuses on the basilica at Yamoussoukro and the mosque at Casablanca, represents one strand in the gamut of the discourse that took place in Werckmeister's class. I held independent sessions with Professor Werckmeister throughout the year to explore various aspects of art and politics in Africa. In addition, I was holding seminars with David Van Zanten, where our discourse focused on in-depth analyses of my thesis project on Abuja and the many politically-inspired capital cities and urban design projects in Africa. The socialist-inspired city of Dodoma, Tanzania, initiated by President Julius Nyerere; Lilongwe, Malawi; Nouakchott, Mauritania; Gaborone, Botswana; and Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire, were also on our list.

The third incident encapsulates the questions that I pursued in the book, but it came later. In 1997, I gave a presentation at the institute—the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University—on Abuja, Our Lady of Peace Basilica, and the Hassan II Mosque. Jane Guyer, the director of the institute,

asked: Where are the people in these projects? What is the people's share in the cost of these projects? Thus, the roles of the patrons, the architects, the people, and the monuments in the respective societies where the two religious urban design projects were built became my focus.

My inquiries into the relationships between the patrons, the architects, the people, and the monuments were further reinforced by the events of 11 September 2001. I arrived in Washington, D.C., on 2 September 2001 to complete the last year of my Samuel Ittleson Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA), National Gallery of Art. I was putting finishing touches on this manuscript when the incident happened. Following 11 September, I was forced to pull back and contemplate the unspeakable crime that was perpetrated upon the people of the United States of America when the buildings were attacked. Following the debates of pundits from all disciplines and the media closely, I realized that the terrorists chose the most sacred symbols of the United States for their targets.

The terrorists knew that buildings do not stand alone. Whether it is a home, a bank, a church, a mosque, an office building, a capitol building, or a memorial building, a building generally stands on the aspirations, beliefs, cultures, hopes, capabilities, and the achievements of the societies who built the edifice. Architecture and civil engineering are technical vehicles for weaving these beliefs into physical forms. Thus, when the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, they attacked the shrines that encapsulate some of the most sacred beliefs and achievements of the United States. However, before one can understand these sacred beliefs, one has to dig beyond the spheres of architecture into the cultural, economic, political, and technological contexts that brought the buildings into reality.

These factors have been explored on a broad spectrum as the fundamental instruments that define modern architecture in all its propriety. The styles of architecture engendered by these factors in the twentieth century can be seen as summaries of the ideological forces that shaped the architectural practices of the era. In this regard, exploring the Our Lady of Peace Basilica and the Hassan II Mosque in the sociopolitical context in which they were conceived, planned, and realized implies that we are dealing with one of the fundamental subjects of modern architecture, urbanism, and urbanization of the twentieth century. This is in light of the fact that the buildings were accomplished in architectural styles that are far from what we consider "modern architecture."

The study of modern architecture, urbanism, and urbanization in Africa has one dimension that cannot be ignored: the impact of late-nineteenth-century

and twentieth-century colonialism. When a pioneer like Udo Kultermann discussed *New Architecture in Africa* (1963) and *New Directions in African Architecture* (1969), he paved the way for the study of modern and traditional architecture in Africa on multiple levels. Kultermann's work has been followed by: Frantz Fanon (1963), Janet Abu-Lughod (1980), Susan Denyer (1970), Labelle Prussin (1969, 1986, and 1995), Gwendolyn Wright (1991), Zeynep Çelik (1997), Suzanne Preston Blier (1998), V. Y. Mudimbe (1994), and many others. *Architecture and Power in Africa* would have been impossible without the work of these pioneers of African art and architecture. Some of the works that focus on twentieth-century urbanism in Africa raised serious questions regarding colonial urban practices on the continent. And rightfully, they exposed how vile the colonialists were in their vicious architectural and urban design practices.

After nearly half a century since many African nations obtained their independence and began to reconstruct the cities of the continent from the oppressive and endemic psychic ruins of colonialism, *Architecture and Power in Africa* brings one major question to the table: Is it possible to evaluate the urban aspirations of Africa's postcolonial leaders employing the same paradigms and standards with which we evaluate the urban aspirations of the colonialist conquistadors? That is, can we take off the veil of "race" and see the leaders of postcolonial Africa simply through the results of their deeds just as we have explored the deeds of the European conquistadors? What remains when we take off the veil of race?

Perhaps, we will be left with humanity, a complex entity, whose behaviors can be selfishly motivated by economics and aspirations for sociopolitical actualization and self-survival. It does not matter whether you are European, Asian, African, Native American, or whatever you profess to be. Your deeds will speak for themselves whether or not, in the pursuit of the realization of your aspirations, you have considered the possible impacts of your efforts on the human beings around you. These are the questions I have pursued in *Architecture and Power in Africa* on multiple levels and in different scenarios: What was the nature of the relationship between President Houphouët-Boigny and King Hassan II with the populations that they were ruling when they were building the sacred objects for the worship of God? How did the architects translate the visions of the two leaders into physical realities? What do these two monuments mean for the populations in which they were realized?

The setting is a complete cycle of human experience and global confrontations in the twentieth century. The two projects originated in the 1960s, the era of independent moments in Africa and intense ideological conflicts between the

Soviet-led "Eastern Bloc" and the United States–led "Western Bloc." The two projects were realized in the 1990s, the era of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The end of the cold war was marked by intense poverty in Morocco and the Côte d'Ivoire, and the adverse economic conditions in both countries were exacerbated by the austerity measures that were imposed on them by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. That being the case, I explore why the two leaders were determined to celebrate their reigns of power by building the monuments in their respective countries regardless of the fact that many people in Morocco and the Côte d'Ivoire were facing severe economic hardship. This question should be addressed beyond the boarders of Morocco and the Côte d'Ivoire, particularly in light of post 11 September 2001. Hence, it is not out of reach to ask: Why did we celebrate so quickly that we have won the world war, when in reality, poverty and political disenfranchisement of the masses, the root causes of the ideological origins of the cold war, have not been defeated? In Morocco and in the Côte d'Ivoire, Our Lady of Peace Basilica and the Hassan II Mosque, two African "icons of crisis," are alarms crying out that, as long as there is abundant poverty (poverty of education, poverty of mutual respect, poverty of familiarity with the other, poverty of understanding) and political disenfranchisement, the spheres of political discourse will continuously be contested bitterly. Ironically, the builders of the icons of crisis did not envision that the edifices which they had built would function as contested public spheres.

I must confess: I am the first to be guilty of selfishness, one of the faults of which I am accusing the builders of Africa's most ambitious twentieth-century icons of crisis. During a train ride from Fez to Rabat, Morocco, I encountered a man with two young children. I'll call him Idriss. As the ride continued, we maintained eye contact. He was on a different seat. Later, I moved closer and greeted him. There was silence after we exchanged greetings, but I could tell that he wanted to say something to me. Finally, he broke his silence and asked: "What have you come to do here? You rich foreigners come here with your fancy bags and clothes, ride in luxury air-conditioned buses, which those of us standing on the outside could hardly see through. You have your fun, and you go back to your countries without caring about those of us who live here," he concluded.

"No, I am not here for fun. I am here to do research on the magnificent mosque which your country has realized in Casablanca." The expression on his face changed after my comment. He looked away, maintaining silence, but he was not disinterested. "I will speak to you about this mosque," he replied. "I have to make sure that you are not an agent." Looking around his shoulders, and cautiously,

he debated whether or not to talk about the mosque. Later, he did. "I was imprisoned for not contributing one hundred dollars for that mosque. It was a rich neighbor who paid for me. Truly, with five children and a wife, I did not have the money, and because of an accident, I can no longer work to earn money as I used to." Idriss cannot walk without the aid of crutches under his armpits. Even then, it was a serious struggle. Our long conversation touched me, but I reduced it to research material. I was a scholar looking for the stories about the mosque, and I had found one among many other stories. This selfish attitude came to a climax at Yamoussoukro as I walked from the bus station to the shrine.

At the terminus of the unpaved boulevard, the edge of the lake, as I looked forward and saw the primary object of my mission in the distance, with great enthusiasm I took the first photo of the object, trying to accommodate the foreground into my lens. When the camera snapped, the sound of the click made someone who was lying down, face up, to roll over, facing downward and hiding himself from being snapped (Fig. 14). But I was too enchanted by the view of my research mission to care about what I had seen. In fact, seeing the "figure" turning over so slowly, as if he was taking his last breath, and about to die, did not register at all in my consciousness at that moment. I was blinded by my own selfishness to research the basilica and write about it. I did not even ask: What is wrong with the man? Instead, I headed toward the object of my mission, overlooking the most important thing along the way, my fellow human being.

It was not until weeks had passed, and the slides had been returned from their processors, that I realized what I had seen. As I stared at the image, I realized that Yamoussoukro was only a moment and a place. It could have been Lagos or any other city on earth. Truly, at Lagos, underneath the endless maze of the overhead bridges, which acrobatically somersault and terminate in multiple directions, shelters where people live can be seen by passing vehicles throughout the year. The under-bridges are homes—which are made of cardboard, rejected plywood, and all sorts of aluminum panels and plastic papers. I also realized that by his turning around, the "figure" was not just a figure. He was a human being with a name, he had dignity, and he did not want to be seen in that condition. How many great moments of human need have I selfishly overlooked, maintained silence before, or removed myself from for one selfishly motivated reason or another?

This text cannot compensate for the moments by which I was tested, but in which I have failed woefully. However, I hope that it serves as a reminder that the built form is not just a thing; it is a sacred ground upon which we all write the stories of our everyday experiences and make meaning out of our existence, hopes, aspirations, and beliefs.