

WHY HAVE WE ABANDONED THE MUD HUT?

By Joe Osae Addo

Gladys Ayoma, like all educated Moshi women are, quite opinionated and love to drink with their men. When I first met her she was arguing with the head of BNI (our equivalent of CIA), head of cultural affairs, head accountant and another gentleman at the local 'drinking spot' next to the police grounds, Tamale. It was the week before Ghana's 50th Anniversary, and all were in a rather reflective mood about where we are as a nation. Clearly she was a highly regarded member of this drinking clique, and I was really impressed with her quiet strength. Her slow speech pattern belies her utter conviction on subjects ranging from politics, highly charged in Tamale in particular, ethnicity and women's issues. It was very difficult to determine who her partner was amongst the group, she exhibited unique flirtation skills that made each of the men feel important but with a clear sense of established and understood boundaries. This was the environment in which, I, a total stranger to the group, found myself that afternoon. My mission was to meet Mr. Ayamgba, head of the cultural center, about the upcoming film festival that we were organizing.

I was enthralled and fascinated by Gladys' passion for her work as a teacher. On learning of my role in the beautification of the city, and as described my Mr. BNI as being a 'big man' (important) in Tamale working with the mayor and city officials in that capacity, she challenged me to come and visit her school. 'You will not believe that as we spend billions of cedis on celebrating independence, my pupils are sitting in wooden shacks with dirt as a floor in the middle of Tamale. Mr. Joe, this is really shocking and you must get your important friends to come and see this', she said, in the most seductive angry tone I have ever heard. Suddenly I was hooked. I needed to know more. Could this really be true? She was convincing and I promised her that indeed I would visit the school early the next day before I left for Accra.

Politics in Tamale is a special blend of family ties, ethnicity and party affiliation, practiced as combat sport. It permeates all aspects of their lives but you get the distinct feeling that you dare not take sides, since ultimately it's 'all in the family'. Gladys, typically, held her party affiliation cards, close to her chest. She tore into the ruling party with equal venom as she did the opposition. She defied categorization. She was modern, yet conservative on issues relating to family values, she lambasted men for their lack of responsibility towards their families but yearned to be married, she criticized the local politicians for not 'fixing Tamale' especially school infrastructure, but she won't leave for Accra. She had a mission to make her school better, improve the lives of children which she has clearly demonstrated by adopting Bob, to add to her own.

"Mr. Joe, we need accommodation in Tamale', she quips. 'The government is building all these hostels for the CAF games (African Soccer Championships) next year, and they are all apartments. We cannot live in apartments, it will never work!' This was emphatic and it got me thinking about my own positions on high density housing for Ghana. She may be on to something I thought. 'Look, none of the banks or private developers is thinking about us here. Could you imagine if housing was developed

affordably for people like me? There is a huge demand for something simple and low maintenance based around how we traditionally live here. It will work if people can afford it!

This comment elicited the first unified position on any subject, from the men. The blame game then begun in earnest with developers and politicians taking the biggest hit. Architects were dismissed outright as not relevant in this discussion since they had shirked their responsibility to be innovative and provide product for the masses. I was not going to be drawn into defending anything or anyone. I was ambushed but really felt at peace. The inevitable happened. "Mr. Joe, why don't you do something about this in Tamale?" Gladys' big eyes appeared larger with a glint of mischief in them. I suddenly felt betrayed and my defensive mechanism was about to be deployed when Mr. Ayamgba chimed in about buying another round.

This interlude gave me enough time to reflect and decide to take on this challenge in collaboration with my partners from cooper union, New York. Bob, Caitlin and I had discussed at length how to translate our shared interests in traditional building materials and techniques in the northern and upper regions of Ghana into a project.

Gladys described her needs and program for the house simply as 'a place where I can afford, add to as her income increased, low maintenance, with good natural ventilation and cooling properties that evoke the way she lived as a child. I had met my 'architectural soul mate in Tamale of all places' and I promised to show her a sketch on my return from Princeton University. Her parting words were 'Mr. Joe, why have we abandoned the mud hut?'

...the iconic mudhut to me is a metaphor for how we need to live. It represents the vernacular and the functional and certainly all the good principles of contextual sustainable architecture. It does not try too hard and is quite proud of its pedigree, the DNA of a tropical structure which has not evolved for centuries. Why have we not re-interpreted it organically over time? Do we not see ourselves in this quest by us to disown what is rightfully ours? The erasure of the mud hut in contemporary architectural discourse exemplifies what is so wrong about Africa's development. As with all narratives, new meanings have to be derived based on new context. This requires a lot of hard work and research and coming to terms with who we are and what our aspirations are.

For me personally that journey has begun and to understand the mud hut is to de-construct it and examine its parts and then hopefully re-construct. It needs to be holistic and thorough. This can only be achieved through research and then implementation. The mud hut has been abandoned but not forgotten. There are institutions and individuals who have redefined and improved on, traditional technologies such as mud locally but are never celebrated. As design professionals it is critical to be also involved in product development to enable us realize a contextual contemporary architecture. One informs the other.

Formal gatherings such as this, offers great opportunities to dialogue and share but should not end here. What are we going to do when out there in the real world is critical. Talk shops are good but it needs to translate into action. Our search for our 'Africaness' should evolve out of a basic understanding of who we are. To me this topic is completely 'overplayed'. We are in difficult position of being defined by others and not by ourselves. We have been quite lazy intellectually or have not shared with the world who we are through our contemporary architecture. All the ingredients are around us to develop innovative solutions. There will and should be many strands of this contemporary contextual African architecture because our DNA's are different and so is the context. We should not destroy ourselves in this search but rather share and innovate.

There need to be that collective passion to support one another and promote what is relevant and developed by us. I stress on the word 'collective', because with our limited resources we need to embrace how we were, surviving through communal effort and dedication.

Where are the think tanks and research institutions?

Why are we not establishing and supporting their endeavors?

Why are we not moving from talk shops to workshops that develop product?

Why are we not selecting talent and sharing ideas through competitions?

I want to share what I am doing now, in my own small way, to contribute to change and put my money where my mouth is. My journey begun 3½ years ago, when I was introduced to Pozzolana cement developed by BRI in Kumasi. Pozzolana, a volcanic material, it's not new and has been part of empire building since the Romans. The dedicated hard working Scientists at BRRI, have developed their own version out of local clays and palm kernel shells and have been producing it locally in Kumasi for a few years. When I was told what all the attributes are of, cost saving on cement, all local ingredients and environmentally friendly, I was stunned why it still had not been commercialized. Like the big dreamer I am, I promised the Scientists that I would find investors to commercialize this product, the people's cement.

To cut a long story short, 3½ years later my company Constructs llc with PMC Global Inc. of Los-Angeles has just acquired the Rights to commercialize Pozzolana. Mud is great but for it to meet the needs of a contemporary Africa it needs to be massively produced into cement. The ingredients of the mud hut are now available for the commercial market and the mud-hut has been reborn through Pozzoghana Limited and BRRI's hard work for its success has just begun and will be dependent on all of us believing in our home-grown industries, there should be no excuses, Pozzoghana was developed by us and should be used by us. It is the people's cement.

MIR PROJECT – NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans must be revived. My recent visit re-inforced this need. This is truly a unique place in the Americas, influenced by many cultures be it Cuban, Native American, Spanish, French and most importantly African American descendants of slaves and have created a unique Culture and experience which has established itself as an important part of Americana. We all view issues through the prisms of our interest and/ or our profession and as an African who has lived in America, worked in Louisiana and currently practicing in Ghana, West Africa, my initial response to the Project, amongst others, is about the 'African Diaspora'. Displaced people of African descent (yet again, after the initial traumatic experiences of Slavery) in New Orleans reconnecting to their roots in Africa and Louisiana via an architecture that is responsive and 'inno-nativetm'.

To that end the scheme consists of a 'linguist wall' of adobe or alluvial earth from the 'floods', which will be both a functional service wall and an arts wall created by the family, as done by the Ndebele of South Africa and the Sirigu women of Northern Ghana. These connections are important to emphasize because sustainability is not only about high-tech and sophisticated manufactured interventions; e.g. solar and recyclable materials, but also nature and how ordinary people can harness it 'inno-natively' to better their lives. It must connect to one's soul and that is what truly makes it SUSTAINABLE. Disasters such as that which has occurred in New Orleans offers great opportunities to dig deep and reach out to Africa in particular for inspiration and guidance, as it pertains to re-building of the human 'spirit'. That is the aspect of this whole exercise that interested my firm, as African architects and social engineers. What could we contribute that is uniquely New-Orleans and certainly African?

The architectural diversity of the towns within the Delta Region is staggering. In many cases they reflect Spanish, French, British, German, African and early American influences; often having survived floods and wars, and having escaped urban renewal. The Lower Delta's architectural heritage evokes a sense of the past defined by scale, materials, and layout. An important element of its culture and architecture are the many styles of folk buildings throughout, including dog trot, shotgun, Creole cottage, raised cottage, I-house, center passage house, and undercut galleries, plus barns and gins. It is here that direct connections can be made with Lower Delta and African architecture. For instances the typical shotgun houses of New Orleans, (houses consisting of usually one room wide and several rooms long with a gable roof facing the main street) has been noted for its roots in Yoruba, West Africa.

New Orleans is considered the center of the shotgun housing development in the United States and the connection between the two is made via towns in southern Haiti. Where houses were also one room wide and one story high with their gables facing the main road. All the nonessential details that are associated with the shotgun in Haiti are also associated with the shotgun in Louisiana, although not always to the same degree. Historians have linked the occurrence of the shotgun houses in Haiti and Louisiana to the trade links and immigration between the two.

During the first days of slavery the Yoruba and Yoruba related peoples were brought to Haiti in sufficient numbers to preserve many traits of their African

culture. The basic Yoruba house form consists of a two-room linear building with a gable roof, the first room being a parlor/kitchen and the second a bedroom.

The above floor plans detail the transition of the shotgun house from West Africa, to the Caribbean, and into New Orleans. The Yoruba House had the shotgun structure without the porches. During the slave trade, West Africans were brought to the Caribbean for sugar cane production in 1503. The Tainos, the original inhabitants of Haiti, lived in simple houses made of thatched walls and roofs. When the Africans arrived in Haiti they combined the house of the Tainos with their own. These houses, called cailles, were made of mud, straw, wood, and thatch. The caille was usually a thin, narrow building with a gabled entrance, with plastered, stucco walls, a thatched roof, and shuttered windows. Houses such as these may still be found in rural Haiti, where villages without monetary resources are limited to using only natural materials. But more commonly one will find shotgun houses made of wood the next logical transformation.

..... We do have a unique opportunity and position not to come up with interventions but rather be design socio-economists. These new homes are not just houses to be lived in but 'spiritual cathedrals' where memories and forgotten cultures are rediscovered and celebrated through an 'inno-native' response to site and place, through architecture. Our design and development approach is to let the residents have a hand in imbuing their spiritual 'imprint' not only on the home but the environment as a whole. Our contribution is not about edifice but environmental. We need to engender that communal spirit by encouraging ownership of 'real estate' beyond their physical boundaries of ownership. Residents will take over their sidewalks as canvasses for outdoor art and street signs will bear imprints of their culture and traditions. Landscape will drive the response because the 'healing' process needs to be done collectively and within nature. The interstitial spaces and outdoor spaces will take on added significance and will be all about flora and light. These will need to permeate the indoor spaces, seamlessly. This may be a wonderful opportunity to introduce other trees and plants from the African Diaspora into the local mix which not only soothes the senses of sight but the palettes of taste - the edible landscape. Plants that can provide sustenance, and have homeopathic attributes. In our approach, certainly the architecture matters, but more importantly will it and its environs nourish the soul? We know it will, the spirit of New Orleans, that extraordinary blend of African and other, will ensure that.

Our concept is about interstitial green spaces (courtyard) that shape an architecture that requires no air-conditioning. It is all about different outdoor space experiences weaving seamlessly through the home establishing clear indoor/outdoor relationships. This courtyard scheme is contextual both environmentally and culturally. It acknowledges traditional building layout principles which takes into consideration climate, culture and heritage. Basically, our Project responds to contemporary lifestyle via an 'inno-nativetm' design solution and is referential to contextual house typologies without being literal. We want residents to embrace designs as their own. To that end, we would have preferred a process that was more collaborative with local craftsmen, artisans and residents. Solution is about creating a 'chassis' onto which residents' 'imprint' can be added. We are merely suggesting intuitively what residents may respond to.

As design professionals we need to earn our relevance in society. The Gladys Ayoma's of this world have to be convinced that we care, and are agents of change. I will end with my usual clarion call

- Are we part of the resolution or passive by-standers reduced to complaining?
- Are we going to take our rightful position in society?
- Are we going to take back what is rightfully ours?
- Are we going to be part of the solution and not the problem?
- Are we going to be self critical and raise the level of the discourse?
- Are we going to be political and become social activists?
- Are we going to collaborate and share ideas to raise the level of the game?
- Are we going to assist and reclaim our cities and towns for our people?

If we do not do all of the above and more metaphorically we are extinct. Africa yearns for Environmental and Social change and that change should be led by Architects and those in related professions.

No more excuses, let us lead by example.