
A workshop on an unwritten history: decolonising architectural education in Africa

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As a discipline, architecture is just starting to face critical post-colonial discourses in its treatment of its own history as well as in current challenges of material, ecological and social practices on global and local scales.

These challenges pervaded African schools of architecture in the 1950s to 1980s, as they were often founded for the sake of political decolonisation, and they continue to influence built environments, architectural knowledge and schooling. With their goals of decolonising architecture and urban planning through economic independence, cultural diversity and local, unsuppressed knowledge, these schools are ripe for research. The Munich workshop, hosted by the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis: connect (gd:c) and the Architekturmuseum of the Technical University of Munich, sought to catalyse such research, focussing on the decolonial effects of the schools from their inceptions to the present.

The workshop took place in the Pavillon 333 – an exhibition space in the centre of Munich built by students to showcase art and design.¹ The structure itself challenges established manners of architectural knowledge production and classical hierarchies in universities, and its designers sought to develop architecture as a tool for dealing with (de)colonisation.² Therefore, the location and the workshop were in dialogue with each other.

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- 1 'About 333', Department of Architecture | TUM School of Engineering and Design, accessed 16 May 2025, <https://www.pavillon333.de/en/ueber-333/>.
 - 2 'DesignBuild at TUM', Department of Architecture | TUM School of Engineering and Design, accessed May 16 2025, <https://www.arc.ed.tum.de/lek/designbuild/concept/>.

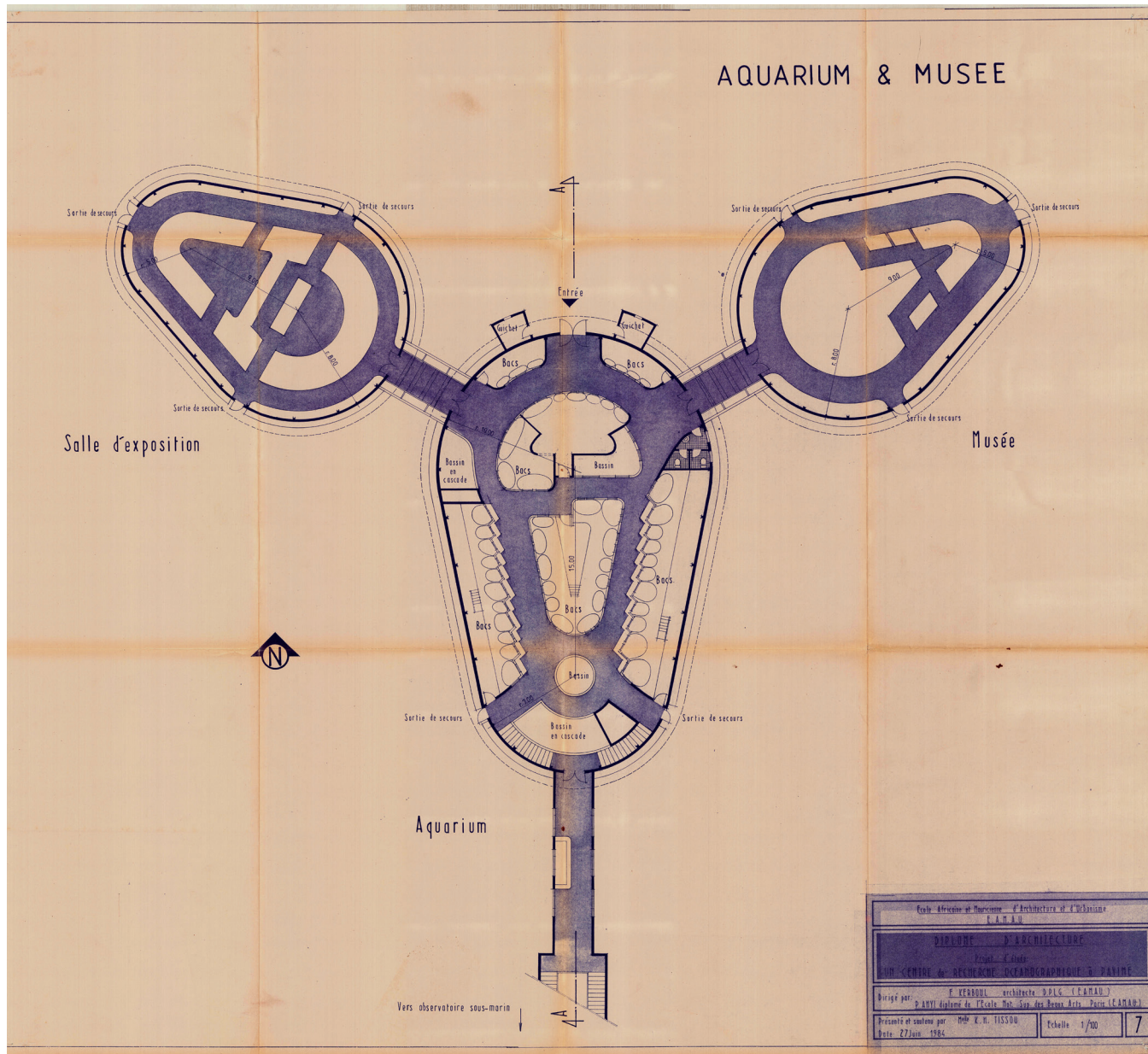


Fig. 1
Excerpt from the thesis of K.H. Tissou,
the first female architecture student
at EAMAU Lomé, 1984. Image: EAMAU.

After being welcomed by Christopher Balme and Andres Lepik, the participants heard Nikolai Brandes's opening address, where he emphasised the crucial role of African faculty in architectural history and the ethical need to overcome marginalisation in the canon. The workshop was deliberately conceived to counter such marginalisation through discourse and learning.

The first paper by Abdé Batchati from the Technical University of Berlin treated *Power, Pedagogy, and the Myth of Neutrality in Architectural Education. A Decolonising Critique and Imagining Futures for Architectural and Spatial Education*. Batchati showed how the Western canon predominates in global architecture education and how this affects hierarchies of knowledge in a (post)colonial context. Consistent with the overarching theme of how to learn and teach about space fairly beyond the university, Batchati was attempting to reinvent a less hierarchical pedagogy, invoking the research of Sara Ahmed, Grada Kilomba and

the Matri-Architecture Project.³ Further, Batchati shared her experiences with these issues in her own curation and research in the context of Matri-Architecture.

Nikolai Brandes followed Batchati with a talk on *Schools of Architecture in Africa. Mapping a Field of Research*. Brandes outlined the history African schools of architecture and the emergence of independent national schools with reference to the schools in Lomé, Togo, and Maputo, Mozambique, founded in the 1970s and 1980s. They engage in several of the same topics, such as training local students, ambivalence towards the rediscovery of African traditions, searching for African identities and decolonising the urban to take a more central position. Nikolai discussed these issues vividly, especially the role of the rural in localising African architecture.

Elio Trusiani from the University of Camerino closed the initial panel with a paper on *The Historical Experience of the Faculty of Architecture in Maputo*. Trusiani traced the history of Italian engagement in Maputo using the example of the Faculdade de Arquitectura e Planeamento Físico, which was founded in 1986. Since Trusiani spent several years there, he reported from first-hand experience how Italian and Mozambican students and teachers developed new forms of architectural education together.

Nancy Demerdash from Detroit's College for Creative Studies opened the second panel with her thoughts on *La Formation de L'Architecte. American Interventionism, Interdisciplinary, and Development in Postcolonial Tunisian Architecture Curricula*. She described the tension between traditional indigenous approaches and modern-Western teaching methods in 1950s French Tunisia and how architecture served as an instrument of French socialisation and politicisation, especially in the early years of the American Architecture Schools in Tunisia. Further, she traced the growing recognition of indigenous knowledge and a more social and technical focus, which led to a more inclusive idea of architecture during the American intervention.

Lund University's Erik Sigge presented a paper on *Negotiating Epistemological Grounds for Architecture Education. The Ethio-Swedish Institute of Building Technology in Addis Ababa, 1954-1973*. Sigge understands the history of architectural education in the institute, which grew into the School of Addis Abba, in the broader frame of Swedish intervention in Ethiopia. Here Western knowledge is transferred to Ethiopia, and local knowledge is reframed in Western categories. But in the case of the institute, he also diagnosed a special method of synthesising traditional local techniques and Western-modern ideas through an ethos of open

3 'matri-archi(tecture)', matri-archi(tecture), accessed 16 May 2026, <https://www.matri-archi.ch/>.

expertise. Contemporary bamboo architecture is but one example. In this case, architectural education serves as a foundation for greater self-sufficiency.

Mark Olweny of Auburn University and the Uganda Martyrs University discussed *Africanisation of Architectural Education. Postcolonial Opportunities, Trajectories, and Missteps* in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. Starting with the Mulungushi Club as decolonisation thinktank, he described how the club's manifestos led to massive changes in architectural knowledge production to include female and indigenous architects in Uganda. A focus on engineering and a lack of humanities along with a mainly male faculty and student body diverted attention from social perspectives and underrepresented discourses on postcolonialism and equality. The discussion highlighted the lack of such knowledge in publications and archives.

The panel closed with a visit to the *Trees, Time, Architecture!* exhibition curated by Kristina Pujkilovic in the Architekturmuseum of the Technical University of Munich. The exhibition rendered the entanglement of architecture, globalisation and climate crises in of (post)colonial discourse obvious.

That evening, Brian Valente-Quinn of the University of Colorado Boulder and gd:c introduced Nzinga Mboup as the keynote speaker with her talk on *Bioclimatic Design in Senegal. Lessons from the École d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme de Dakar and the Work of Worofila*.

Mboup reflected on her past and how it led her to research, teach and practice architecture in Senegal. Taking Worofila Street in Dakar as an example, she pointed out the importance of traditional architecture and the collective interest in it. The African climate serves as starting point for Senegalese architecture, as it meets local needs with natural materials and passive designs. Unlike Western architectural ideas, such techniques yield effective and sustainable buildings of earth, clay and sand as traditional natural resources. Their cooling properties are ideal for the African heat, and they can help democratise architectural knowledge. But publishing such knowledge remains crucial for its development and propagation.

Panel 3 dealt with *Transforming Institutions*, starting with Kuukuwa Manful from the University of Michigan discussing *The Formalisation and Unformalisation of Architectural Training in the Gold Coast and Ghana*. He opened with a 1706 print of Elmina Castle, which, as a fortress of the British colonisers, represented political and economic power and repression in Ghana. Further, she described the history of architectural education in Ghana not as linear development but as diverse processes of 'unformalisation' in reaction to the Western formalisation focused on a formal engineering approach. 'Unformalisation' means

returning to traditional knowledge, methods and architectural training.

Lisa André, a member of the chair of unlearning in Munich, continued the theme with *Learning to Unlearn Architecture. The Chair of Unlearning as a Critical Student Practice*. First, she pointed out the discriminatory potential of architecture as a built manifestation of society and the urgent need to face this problem. André's main question is: who do we design architecture for? The chair of unlearning searches for answers. As an educational and activist programme, it challenges knowledge, hierarchies, universalised standards and privileges in architecture training. Unlearning colonial suppression and discrimination are how the chair teaches anti-colonial theory.

The final discussion reinforced that the history of African architectural education remains to be written. So, the workshop shed light on the African architecture schools' history and served also as an experiment probing relations between history and the present. The workshop seems therefore like a starting point for further research and engagement digging deeper in the still marginalized subject.

Bibliography

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