Urbafrique

It is really quite remarkable that people should speak of 'typical' town planning at the continental level. And yet they do. European towns are often conceived as concentric conurbations that have grown up around an organic walled or moated medieval core. When people talk about the American city, they invariably think of the typical street pattern, a centripetal grid that combines a maximum of structure with a maximum of freedom in filling in that structure. Both continents evidently have their own typical urban characteristics based on a particular physical form of a spatial organization. The question we address here is whether it is possible to talk of the African city in the same way. Does this part of the world display a certain consistency in its application of a universal design model? And if it does, or indeed if it does not, is there anything we can learn from it?
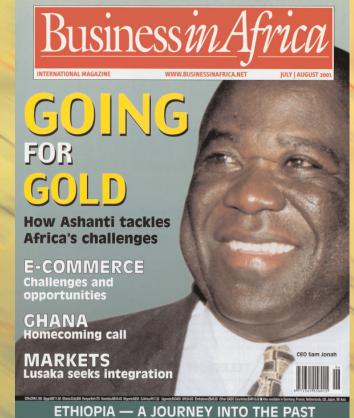
At first sight the question seems too ridiculous for words. Could this continent, this patchwork of cultures, races, religions, tribes and clans, ever develop a system of urban design that transcends these individual differences? Is it capable of producing an integrated urban development that disregards the boundaries of local, Western-style enclaves for the elite? The obvious answer is of course in the negative. There is no homogeneous African soul that feels the need to express itself in spatial organization on an urban level (as did the Europeans in their beleaguered medieval cities or the Americans, with their preconceptions of a territory infinitely extensible to the West and their idea of the individual 'claim'); but, even more important, there is neither the money nor the right climate to justify investment on this scale. So 'the African city' is non-existent.

Unless... Unless we are prepared to define the city not per se in material terms but as a network of relationships. In a web of mutually dependent cultures, people are hardly aware of the Western notion of a neutral public setting for individual behaviour, let alone the idea that this setting takes shape in an abstract public domain. There is certainly no 'real' notion of or theoretical justification for form. But this highly intensive social web, this chain of communities, religious rituals, memories, families, bureaucratic hobbyhorses, deals and local Mafia also has its spatial implications. Summarized in this way, it is possible to speak of a continental pattern; Africa, with its social and spatial fragmentation, is also experiencing the effects of the changeover from colonialism to globalization. Patterns of old tribal conflicts are becoming involved with hypermodern developments in global commerce. The resulting, constantly changing interplay of urban parameters, is simply not amenable to spatial organization, or to materialization in any institutional design practice. There is no professional discipline, no authority, no compelling, durable ideology, nor indeed any memory powerful enough to produce urban design. But nonetheless cities are growing all the time.

Anyone looking at Africa in the light of existing disciplines or views on the nature of the city, sees nothing but chaos and crisis. But the complete separation of urban life from any underlying spatial matrix could well provide an important lesson for the world in a century in which urbanization has exceeded every design parameter. Perhaps we should not be looking at how urban life establishes itself or can establish itself in a built environment, but the precise way in which that environment, the housing and the infrastructure, is constantly adjusting itself to urban life. As for example in Lagos (see elsewhere in this issue), where instead of traffic moving between two population groups, population groups themselves move along the city's arterial roads. The movement is from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular, but millions of people spend a significant part of their lives in such movements. As the sociologist AbduMaliq Simone put it: 'If urban life is characterized by intensifying segregation and fragmentation, it may be important to chart the flows of complicity, cooperation, interpenetration, and affiliation which come and go across the city and its neighbourhoods. In what ways are segregation, disjunction and fragmentation also something else – punctuation in the operations of networks that deploy coherent effects but may not appear continuous or traceable.' (from: Hilton Judin (ed.), *Blank: Architecture, Apartheid and After*, p. 186). Urban Africa is a stage on which events are taking place that on further consideration are now or will soon be taking place everywhere: a network society which perceives urban design as a nuisance rather than an amenity. *Archis* investigates this city: as intellectual reference, as bogeyman, as the cause or conversely the goal, of migration, as a concept of globalization.

America
Consumption is a sign of our indomitability.