Suites Architecturales: Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar

A heavily illustrated book that recounts the fate of colonial architecture in three cities of central-west Africa. A book review by Iolanda Pensa

Suites Architecturales: Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar.


Suites Architecturales: Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar is a book that recounts the fate of colonial architecture in three African cities. Author Diwouta-Kotto, an architect from Douala who has worked for 25 years, and over this period has traveled globally to research and discuss the project with colleagues. The African city has recently been the focus of numerous recent projects, whether exploring traditional building techniques or studying the rhythm of urban life sociologically and anthropologically. At the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2006, Kinshasa as portrayed by Filip de Boeck and photographed by Marie-Françoise Plissart were exhibited in the Belgian pavilion, former administrator of the city. At the 2009 Biennale, African megacities also exemplified the parade of exploding urban realms set to dominate this century. The Harvard Project on the City led by Rem Koolhaas published a taste of this as the book Mutations as early as 2000. But now there are others, such as Voices of the Transition, Brakin and Douala in Translation, and the African Cities Reader. African systems and connections are the subjects of exhibits and research by scholars such as Achille Mbembe, Abdoumaliq Simone, Arjun Appadurai, Michel Agier, Edgar Pieterse and
Suites Architecturales is conceived as the first volume in the D'architectures & d'Afrique series ("On Architectures and Africa") after seven years of work, and further differs from all these research and publishing precedents. It is not an academic research project or an exhibition or a general publication. It is the voice of an architect directly involved in building these urban environments; Diwouta-Kotto places these three cities pass squarely in front of our eyes. Kinshasa is the capital of Democratic Republic of the Congo, site of the historic boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in 1974 and the much less sporting one between Mobuto Sese Seko and Laurent-Désiré Kabila in 1997. Douala is Cameroon's largest city and main port, which Louis-Ferdinand Céline depicts unflatteringly in Journey to the End of the Night. Dakar is the Senegalese capital known mostly through its persona in novels, films and plays. While Diwouta-Kotto recounts the major political events—colonization, war, oil, economic crisis and population explosion—quickly, she goes on to involve us in another story. With a simple and personal style, she guides us to notice buildings, the structure of urban agglomerations, the different ways of building in urban contexts dominated by tin roofs. The major issues that shape the architecture of the central city emerge: functionality, availability of low-cost materials, expropriation, plans, clients, climate conditions. Architecture as a way to observe space and condition design practice is the real star of this book.
The choice of the title, *Suites Architecturales* ["Architectural Followers"], refers to the attention that Diwouta-Kotto dedicates not just to what has happened, but what *could* happen, in Africa. The starting point is the colonial-era buildings, remnants of the past bent to new conditions which incorporate the snarl and the difficult social and economic conditions of the cities. Once again, in a different way from other publications, the choice seems to summon responsibility, "Fierté de s'assumer et de s'accepter tel qu'on est,"—"pride in taking on and accepting responsibility for what one is," as the author exclaims at one point.

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Through analysis and parallel images of buildings in Kinshasa, Douala and Dakar by Sandrine Dole, whose photographs and layouts crop, juxtapose and flank each other, an environment crowded with electrical wires, air conditioners, traffic, banners, signs, sheds, markets and merchants emerges. What you can observe of these city images is so often outweighed by what you know you cannot—but you are aware of their important presence, which is just what Diwouta-Kotto means to say about the history and architecture in the African cities.

*Iolanda Pensa*
An interior spread from Suites Architecturales: Kinshasa, Douala, Dakar.

Iolanda Pensa
Dak'Art 2010: Perspective and Retrospective—

2010 was a year of taking stock for the Dakar Biennial of Contemporary Art which celebrated its tenth edition and its twentieth anniversary. An art report from Dakar by Iolanda Pensa

The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture—

Pier Vittorio Aureli's book is an effort to redefine architectural form amid the current debates around its social and cultural power. A book review by Andreas Rumpfhuber
Shanghai New Towns—

The challenge in designing the Chinese future city lies less in urban planning and resource allocation than community building. A book review by Francesca Valsecchi