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ACSA, *Racial Equity Statement* [Online]. Available at: https://www.acsa-arch.org/acsa-board-of-directors-racial-equity-statement/ [Accessed 8 December 2021]

In 1996, the architecture historian Diane Ghirardo published *Architecture After Modernism.* This well-known research was key to the identification of those morphological aspects that characterised buildings approaching the end of the twentieth century. What is peculiar in this small book, considering the author's declared intentions of writing about a ***global*** phenomenon, is the embarrassing amount of historiographical attention dedicated to any architectural reality out of North America and Europe. In the hundreds of projects presented in the text, very few are located in Australia, India, or continents as large as South America. This narration was fully in line with the academic standards of Ghirardo's peers and founded confidence in Western concepts such as Frampton's killer syntagma ***critical regionalism***, which implies not so subtly that there is an inside and outside in the orthodox way for canonical architecture, and whatever is outside is mostly considered charming and ever surprising. Ghirardo's text is only one of the several histories where architecture is depicted as a predominantly White enterprise, and what is most worrying is the total lack of awareness, almost guilty ignorance, that the Western academical body has proven so far when treating such complex matters as global histories.

That being said, this contribution aims to better understand two very different efforts, lately published, around the awareness-rising topic of racial equity: the *Racial Equity Statement* published by ACSA (Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture) on their web page on 21 April 2021, and the monographic issue n.1771 of "The Architectural Review", published in May 2017, entitled *Africa.*

The first is a brief statement published by the international association of architecture schools that brings together the vast majority of universities from Canada and the US (with a few other institutes around the globe) and was written in the light of the "Black Lives Matter" protests that arose in North America and several countries in 2020.

The second effort, of entirely different nature, is the issue "Africa" of May 2017 and is again produced by a Western (British) cultural institution. Its foundation dates back to 1896, when the British Kingdom was the largest empire in the World and the Commonwealth network was the most efficient system of colonisation of distant lands.

The chosen issue of the magazine is described through some of the articles and featured architectures, trying to understand the layers of narration around a portion of the world as large as the African continent.

The ACSA *Racial Equity Statement* is of relevance today to our Western academical community, firstly because it is published by a North American association, where racial tensions are so explicit and representative of a broader systemic inequality; secondly because they call for a shift on a pedagogical level by promoting equity in the understanding, in the narration and, more fundamentally, in the teaching of architecture. "For ACSA this includes advocating for changes in architecture and architectural education to remedy the systemic embrace of historically White and Eurocentric theories, design aesthetics, and processes as the best or only bases in our discipline." And moreover ACSA states in the *Call To Action To Seek A More Equitable Future,* "We understand that architectural education has for too long accepted white privilege as the norm, limiting diverse voices and marginalizing the discipline's impact on society" (https://www.acsa-arch.org/acsa-statement-addressing-racial-injustice/). As the African-born architect David Adjaye called it, "the most closed, middle-class, middle-aged, trust

fund profession you could ever be in" (Adjaye, 2017:36). The statement by ACSA may appear like a fragile step when opposed to decades of solid White narrations and crystallised view points, nevertheless needed to be taken. The commitment to making education more inclusive and equitable is surely important, but considering the number of schools the association brings together, the effort would resonate much louder if ACSA defined current architectural history as a partial narration of a predominantly White narrator. Open-calls to new and less filtered writings from complex realities would tremendously enrich any architectural school program, especially in America and in Europe (since they have the most limited knowledge).

The *Africa* issue mentioned above opens with this very assumption: we know nothing (or very little) of realities such as Africa. What emerges with relevance while reading the magazine – and it may be a sign of success – is an uneasy feeling of how ignorant we are about Africa in all its multifaceted realities. The narrative all Westerners, including academics, share around this continent is here shattered in between the lines of certain articles. Sufficient smack in the face can be the very first reference in the first article, where, at page 8, Lesley Lokko opens her essay quoting the Kenyan author Wainana Binyavanga and his *How To Write About Africa* ("Granta", n. 92, 2005). Reading this, the uneasiness of ignorance becomes almost shame to our White indifference: "In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular" (Binyavanga, 2005). With cutting sarcasm, the text provides all the ingredients for a successful description of Africa for romantic foreigners, and by doing so, it clearly ridicules the stories we tell each other (including the beloved *critical regionalism*).

Among these, the language of the buildings in the African scenario, mostly depicted in rural settlements, with "bamboo scaffolding left in place; corrugated tin sheeting in lieu of steel; adobe in exchange for concrete" (Lokko: 12) associate in western mind a large continent of fifty-four countries to the image of Francis Kéré's little tribe in Burkina Faso.

The issue features a mix of architectural projects in the African continent, research works, theoretical essays, biographical reviews, all striving to convey the richness and diversity of such a vast portion of the world.

Imagine finding a scientific magazine entitled "Asia", pretendeding to somehow tackle the topic of the architectural language of the entire continent, from Japan to Kazakhstan, from Sri Lanka to Mongolia. We would probably smile at the naive attempt, like a professor would at a first-year student's project. Why does this not happen to us when we read the title "Africa"? Why are we comfortable with the notion of a uniform plot of land, generically similar and easily representable? The projects presented in the issue are very contrasting, the situations very distant and the people very different: some of the countries the articles focus on are Kenya, Zambia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, West Sahara, Djibouti, South Africa, Burkina Faso, Angola.

Probably the most in depth section of the issue is the article by Manuel Herz, *Permanent Is Not The Opposite Of Temporary,* in which the Swiss architect exhaustively depicts the history of the Sahrawis, population of the Western Sahara Region, south of Morocco. The emergency of a population that fled their country amid a foreign invasion and have lived the last 40 years in temporary refugee camps, provides a precise and non-allusive example of the diversity of the socio-cultural phenomena in the continent. Interesting for its anthropological history, the Sahrawis camps in West Algeria are here described not in a pitiful and condescending way, but as a propositive urban experience where all readers might learn from single architectural episodes. Herz describes how the new settlements in the Seventies were determined, since their beginning, to re-create an urban variety that went far beyond the mere survival-refugee-camp

type: "The strategy is not about establishing the minimum level of guarantee survival, but of providing the maximum possible, to allow a full life from the very beginning". This is carried out with extremely humble means and common sense, and is visibly translated in the morphologic distribution of single-use tents around a central courtyard typology. The lack of hidden moral layers in the text and a neat graphical layout, make of this essay a fine tool for understanding the complexity and richness of such peculiar realities.

Herz publishes a second article, *Nation Building* (pp. 55-61), this time presenting the topic of modernity in the African architectural language. Most of the African countries have obtained in the second part of the Twentieth century their political independence, and, after that, have looked at architecture as a nation-building instrument. The quest for national identity took several forms: the story of three different towers in Kenya, Zambia and Ivory Coast depicts not only different architectural attitudes, but also very different governmental aspirations. The process of decolonisation usually ends in a conflictual relation, says Herz, where the services of foreign architects, "even from the former colonial powers" (p.56) are called to design and build the style for the new independent nation – causing mostly a fracture between state interventions and real social fabric.

The issue could not avoid publishing two bio-pictures of the most renown African architects of today: David Adjaye (pp. 35-38) and Diebedo Francis Kéré (pp. 104-111). Where the first is somewhat more direct about his professional presence in the UK and the Western world, to which he belongs entirely, the second is closer to the tribal village narrative and makes of this his architecture *motif.* Winner of the Aga Khan Award for a primary school in a rural village in Burkina Faso, Kéré seems to be investigating since: all the possible permutations of the adobe bricks, the clay pots and the corrugated tin sheets with light metal trusses. The vastly published work, surely helps crystallize the language as a "continental" style in the mind of superficial readers.

If the publication of the Vredenburg Hospital project (pp. 18-25) is of little use for Western readers of the magazine, the project *City of Angels* by architect Urko Sanchez, presented in the article by Manon Mollard (pp. 66-75), can be of opposite importance. While the first is the design of a contemporary facility in an undescribed surrounding, the project of the "SOS Children's Village" in Djibouti can be of great pedagogical use for any designer. The brilliant complexity of the floor plan, referencing the intricacy of an Arab medina, is far from a morphological imposition of foreign languages and far from a pure interpretation of the always misleading concept of "local" architecture. Here the foreign designers manage to create through density, variety and diversity, a space composed by shapes and modest materials in a scale appropriate to the usage. The very different normative framework allows here a design of a settlement so coherent that a Western practitioner could only dream of.

What strongly emerges while reading the Issue is the complexity of a portion of the world that was considered for too long and too blindly as a homogeneous land. The piece by David Adjaye *Urban Africa* (pp. 86-87) depicts in a few lines the great geographical diversity of the terrains across the continent, and reminds lazy Westerners that the built environment is as diverse as the multiple climates and cultures from North to South, East to West. Moreover, he concludes that the architectural diversity is further enhanced by the lack of the "homogenizing effect" of advanced technology on the built environment, resulting in constructions which are "direct reflection of the physical and cultural conditions in these zones". This direct reflection to the land, with limited advanced technology, brings Adjaye to consider many, (but not all) African cities in their essence of "fundamentals of human settlement". This precious image, in its morphological honesty and simplicity, is a key take-away from episodes like the desert camps built by the Sahrawis.

In conclusion, we learn that the best way to understand complex and diverse realties is not through well-known history *oeuvres* nor all-explaining narratives, but maybe through smaller fragments of precisely written stories, like those of the Sahrawis, the Djibouti Children, the Kilamba residents in Angola and countless others.

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