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HENRI CHOMETTE: AFRICA AS A TERRAIN OF ARCHITECTURAL FREEDOM

Léo Noyer-Duplaix

We noticed that we were not condemned to live trapped behind shutters, whether swiveling or not, it was not impossible to import panes of glass; we were not condemned to produce cities with leprous façades after each rainy season. Architects proved it was possible with materials from the African soil, to create excellent matter that defies time. Modern Africa could build walls with assembled stone, bricks from its ground, creating paneling with the gravel of its rivers, to use its wood for carpentry constructed on site. The craftsmen learned the lessons and experiences and the most modern methods could be implemented.¹

Henri Chomette

Henri Chomette, active throughout the postwar boom in twenty-three countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, had a considerable influence on contemporary African architecture. Whether it was infrastructure projects, government buildings, collective housing or hotels, Chomette worked on all types of programs. His work, which Senegal's first President Léopold Sédar Senghor hailed as "the fruitful ideas to awaken African architecture,"² is nonetheless still little known. Apart from a doctoral thesis written by Diala Touré³ (later published as a book),⁴ the career and work of the architect are hardly discussed. Yet his oeuvre represents a first-class architectural legacy that warrants being remembered and preserved.

FROM THE ÉCOLE NATIONALE SUPÉRIEURE DES BEAUX-ARTS TO THE DEPARTURE TO AFRICA

Born in 1921 in Saint-Etienne near Lyon, Henri Chomette showed a talent for sketching early on and in his studies subsequently devoted himself to architecture. Following a preparation period he was admitted to the studio of Tony Garnier (1869–1948) at the École Régionale d'Architecture de Lyon in 1939. He eventually joined the Studio of Alphonse Defrasse, which was led at that time by Othello Zavaroni (1910–1991), at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris from which he graduated in 1946. Starting his career in the era of postwar reconstruction he initially worked in the cities of Douai and Mons-en-Baroeul in northern France until an international competition provided him with the opportunity to work in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1948 the International Union of Architects organized its first competition with the theme "Imperial Palace in Ethiopia" for the residence of Haile Selassie (1892–1975), the last Emperor of Ethiopia. Chomette won the competition with a proposal for a building on pilotis which included a large hypostyle hall. Even though the project was never built, it marked the beginning of the architect's relationship with Africa and triggered what he called his "escape."⁵ For Chomette this "escape" to Africa was synonymous with architectural freedom. Chomette was frustrated by the conditions of the practice of his profession during the era of reconstruction and by new regulations that were introduced in France in 1950. As well he was exasperated by the many commissions of every kind, by the cumbersome bureaucracy and by the

“gigantism” of the decision-making structures. In contrast Chomette perceived the African continent as a place of true creative freedom.

Indeed Africa did prove to be a field of possibilities and Chomette was able to fully develop his architecture there from 1948 to 1980. Registered with the architects’ associations of Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Benin, in 1953 Chomette was additionally appointed planning consultant and chief architect of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. He was also the author of the first master plan of Abidjan, initiator of new urban centers for Cotonou in Benin and Yaoundé in Cameroon as well as master planner and architect consultant of Upper Volta (today: Burkina Faso). Through establishing his architecture firm Bureaux d’Études Henri Chomette BEHC in twenty-three Sub-Saharan countries Chomette worked on projects throughout Africa (particularly in West Africa) from the postwar period to the time of the oil crisis. BEHC brought together private firms as a network of professionals (architects, artisans, master masons, laborers, artists, etc.), which Touré describes as a truly “harmonic chain.”⁶ For each project a local office was set up with a project manager who oversaw the operation from design to delivery. This ensured rooting in local culture, and BEHC experienced varying country-specific periods of activity and duration ranging from five years in Benin to thirty-two years in Côte d’Ivoire. Their work was also affected by specific local, social, economic and political contexts, for example, the coup d’états in Ethiopia, Benin and Equatorial Guinea.

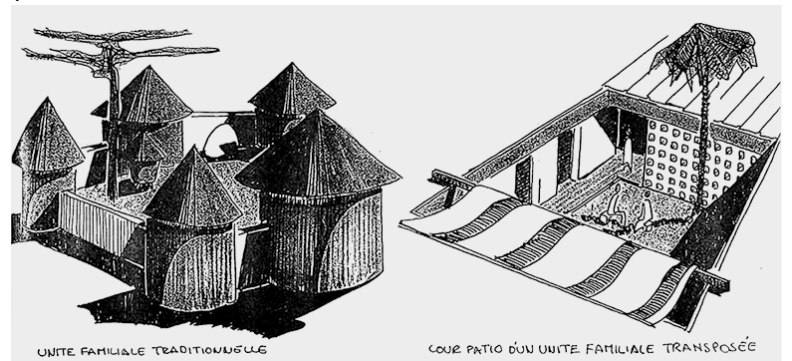
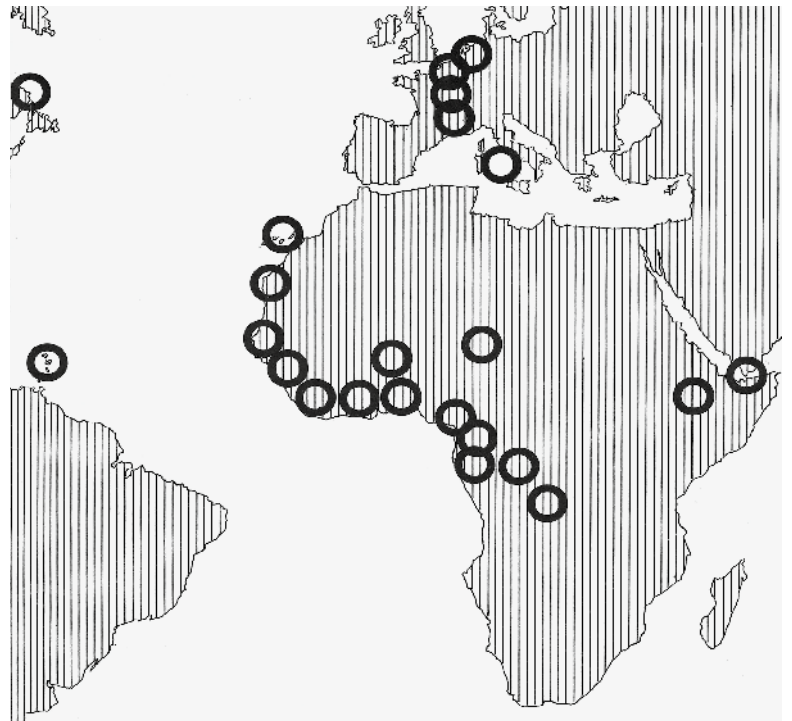
Several heads of state, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Félix Houphouët-Boigny and Henri Konan Bédié of Côte d’Ivoire, Hubert Maga of Benin and Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, remarked that Chomette’s achievements, especially those buildings built in the wake of independence, had come to constitute an architectural heritage that was and remains a symbol of unity for each of these countries. Thereby several of the architect’s buildings have been selected to appear on postage stamps or banknotes, notably in Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia.⁷ Having always refused, however, to consider building large national monuments as they are merely the caprice of Presidents, Chomette claims, “[One] does not build the unity of a country around an empty center.”⁸

FROM THE PÉRIODE AVION TO ARCHITECTURE MODERNE

We shall thus call African architecture that which translates the aspirations of those who “live” Africa; the architecture that knows how to adapt itself to the ground, to the climates, and to the means of production.⁹

Henri Chomette

Sketching out a history of African architecture Chomette defined four distinct eras: traditional architecture, the *période bateau* [period of the boat], the *période avion* [period of the airplane] and *architecture moderne* [Modern architecture]. The *période bateau* was that of the first settlers. This period saw an “architecture thought and lived by men who were cut off from their country of origin for many months. They were African by circumstance and often



- 1 Henri Chomette, active throughout the postwar boom in twenty-three countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as elsewhere
- 2 Sketch by Chomette: traditional housing and its translation into Modern architecture
- 3 Henri Chomette (right) at the inauguration of an office building with the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie (left) in 1965
- 4 Members of the Zaire office gathered around Henri Chomette, 1973

by heart and understood the problems in terms of resources and local needs.”¹⁰ Called *période avion*, his next phase was not a favorable one for the architect, during which Parisian committees made decisions for the colonies: a phase of administrative complexity, prototypes and one “that had wasted abundant ingenuity searching for architectural sedatives rather than solutions to problems.”¹¹ For Chomette, prefabrication was emblematic of these “sedatives:”

Look, for example, how so many specialists and so much capital have been spent on the study of the pre-manufactured house: skilled labor is scarce, hence one should produce houses in European factories that will be shipped in boxes to Africa together with a fitter or service technician.¹²

Although finding this reasoning “attractive,” first of all the architect pointed out its non-viability economically, unless production were to happen in large quantities. But above all he stressed the ignorance of African geography and especially its climate revealed by such an approach:

We must provide protection from the cold in Ethiopia and Kenya, we must provide protection from moisture in Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon, we must provide protection from dry heat and dust in Upper Volta and Niger, and—due to their maritime settings—from oxidation in Togo and Somalia.¹³

Faced with this disregard of the territory, Chomette asked: How is it possible, if not through pure ignorance of local conditions, that one considers Africa as a single market capable of absorbing the industrial production of a single type of home? How could one have hoped to manufacture one type of home that would solve all these different problems?¹⁴

Chomette therefore arrived at a harsh assessment of the *période avion* saying it constituted a “road paved with good intentions” that “led nowhere.”¹⁵ The epoch of *architecture moderne* in which the architect inscribed his own work was seen in contrast with the previous *période avion*. It was no longer about designing and exporting architectural models from Europe but about living Africa, adapting to Africa, to its soil, climate and means of production.

GEOGRAPHICAL ARCHITECTURE

Rather than any kind of folklorism Chomette proposed first and foremost a geographical architecture systematically linked to a site and created specifically for it. Thus preliminary studies of the topography, climate and social habits methodically preceded each project. No project was born *ex nihilo* and no building could be implanted indifferently in Addis Ababa, Dakar or Yaounde.

The first concern of the architect was to take into account the local way of life, thereby excluding transplanted housing typologies developed for Western lifestyles. This presented a challenge because he was working at a time when African societies were transforming fundamentally, undergoing major urban-rural migration associated with an unprecedented development of the urban realm. For example, the population of Abidjan, which surpassed 50,000 in the late 1940s had grown to 350,000 by the mid-1960s. Therefore architecture and urban planning in Africa at this time not only entailed taking into account the different ways of life but also the

transformation from traditional and rural to modern and urban. Chomette answered this challenge not only by responsively meeting different programs in different contexts but also by integrating the traditional with the modern and the rural with the urban. For example, in his collective housing projects he created specific “day zones” inside the apartments which corresponded to the inner courtyards of traditional African houses; or when attempting to recreate the atmosphere of a village within urban districts he adapted a whole system of rural references including aspects of circulation, location, heights, open spaces, etc.

Chomette also believed that for the architect the “life” of Africa lies in the desire to ensure both technical and symbolic continuity. On the technical level this means using local resources and materials without precluding importing certain materials such as glass. Shells, wood, stone, brick, grit and washed gravel were used depending on the programs and their implementation. This use of local resources enabled the training of craftspersons and the creation of genuine craft sectors, which thus improved and modernized traditional techniques. One example of such an approach was putting ovens built by the missionaries back in service to ensure sufficient production of bricks during the construction of the French Embassy in Ouagadougou in 1966. In this respect BEHC served as the platform and catalyst for local, intense collaboration involving both people and their techniques:

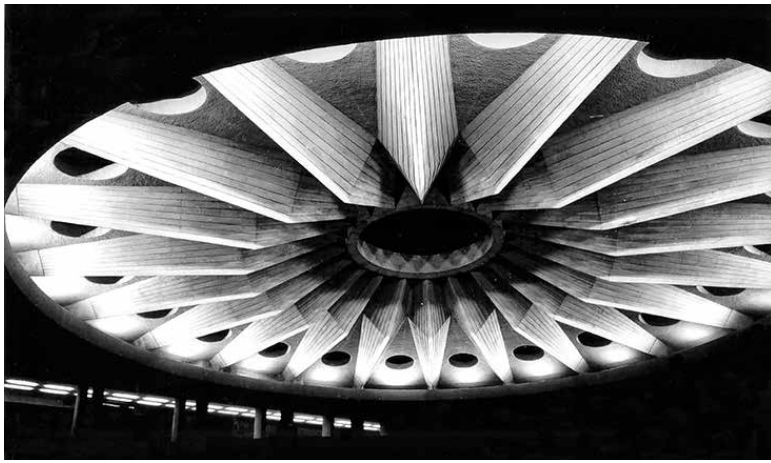
Refusing to be the paper pushers of buildings, they were fabricating the formworks with the carpenters, laying brickwork, mixing aggregate for concrete, assembling mosaics, casting bronze with smelters and staking out the footprints of their urban planning schemes.

Their production shows that by reviving the tradition of the builders they escaped the sclerosis of speculation, and the ‘yeast’ of the architecture was well mixed with the ‘dough’ of the building. As Chomette says: ‘Comment la vie vient aux murs.’ [Roughly translated: It represents a difficult way, but a living wall cannot be born in an ivory tower.]¹⁶

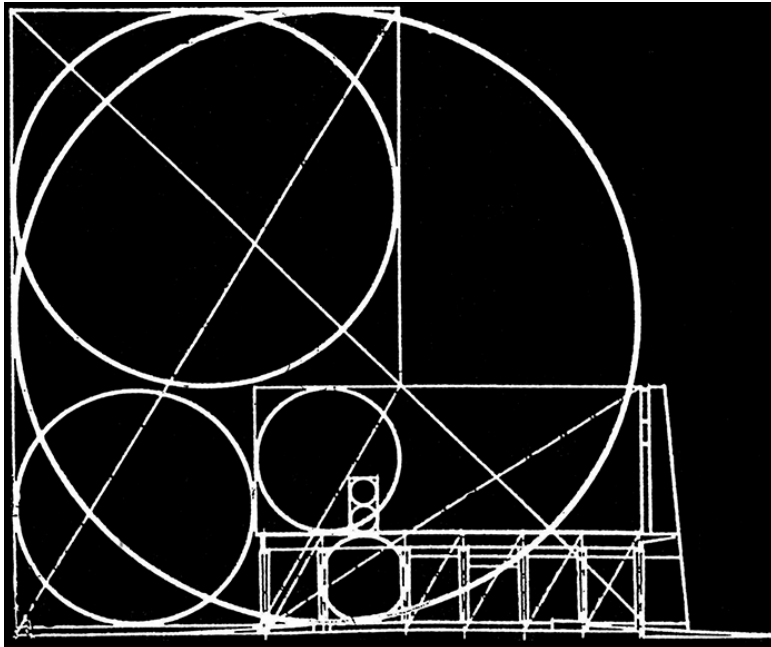
As Chomette points out, the use of local materials makes it possible to take into account local lifestyles, to maintain or create jobs, establish local structures and also ensure cost-effectiveness:

With the local workforce, after ten years we are building as well, and sometimes better in Côte d’Ivoire than in France; with granite, brick, exposed concrete, wood, and metal. ... Through their requirements and their profession, local architects there caused a healthy rivalry between construction companies. They agreed to this competition and to play the game. They shaped local labor, thereby producing true development.¹⁷

However, this continuity of techniques cannot be equated to pastiche or imitation but rather with a Modernist interpretation of vernacular architecture. A further constant in all his projects is Chomette’s systematic use of harmonious proportion and the golden section; for example, according to a layout derived from the golden ratio washed gravel and rough concrete were particularly used at the National Palace of Benin as were bricks at the French Embassy in Ouagadougou.

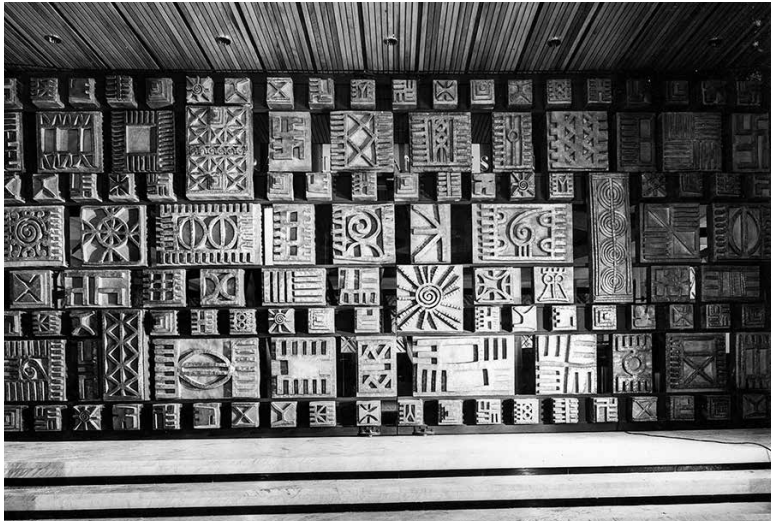


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- 5 Skylight of the banking hall of the Société Générale in Abidjan
- 6 Volumetric composition of Hôtel du District of Abidjan and its relationship to the golden section
- 7 Entrance gate to the Société Générale
- 8 Hôtel du District in its park-like setting
- 9 Site plan
- 10 Public plaza around the building
- 11 Building during construction
- 12 Different methods of sunshading are employed on the building's façade

Beyond technical aspects the embedding of local references within Chomette's work is symbolic. Constantly appealing to artists and artisans with the desire to pursue a common and unified work, the architect refused the pitfalls of global references and drew on local and cultural sources. For example, the headquarters of the Société Générale of Côte d'Ivoire in Abidjan (completed in 1965) includes a large cupola whose beams refer to small boats used in the area called pirogues; the mezzanine balustrade features reproductions of palm leaves; and the entrance mural depicts motifs of the Baoulé, one of the largest groups of Akan people living nearby. Another example is the Grand Staircase of the National Palace of Benin (1963) in Cotonou, which represents an interpretation of the coat of arms of the kings of Abomey. As a last example, the inner roof of the restaurant of the École Nationale d'Administration (1976) in Dakar features a surface made of straw in the Senegalese artistic tradition. Hence for Chomette continuity through embedding in the local was a way to anchor his buildings, similar to the function of stylistic and symbolic references. Houphouët-Boigny welcomed the architect's approach, saying he was "one of those men who brought the greatest gift of civilization to the African people: the consciousness of its dignity."¹⁸

EXEMPLARY PROJECTS

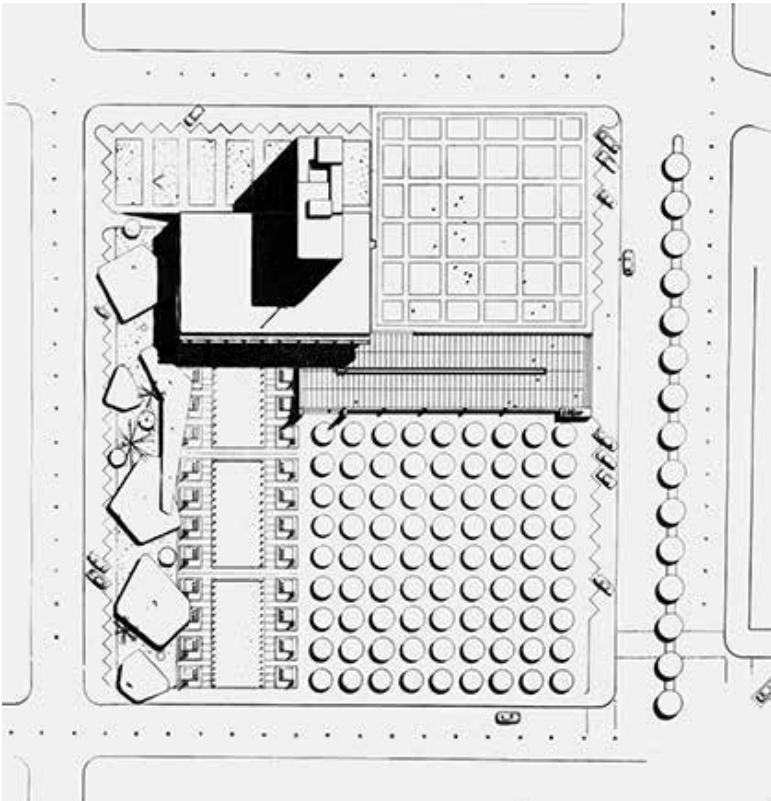
HÔTEL DU DISTRICT ABIDJAN, CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Construction of the Hôtel du District (formerly Hôtel de Ville) [City Hall] in Abidjan began in 1954 and was completed in 1956. It was the first Modernist building in Le Plateau, the central district of the city which includes most of the administrative and commercial activities of the city Abidjan. Radically changing the urbanscape and rapidly achieving symbolic representative status, the building with its monumental plaza served as the site for Houphouët-Boigny to declare Côte d'Ivoire's independence in 1960.

Hôtel du District consists of two volumes. The first is horizontal and contains reception rooms as well as the mayor's offices, while the second, a vertical volume, accommodates the municipal administration. The façade of the latter is inscribed into a "golden rectangle" with a height of approximately thirty-six meters and the general layout of the entire building is also based on the golden section. The use of bush-hammered concrete is softened by the presence of a veneer of quartz pebbles and ocher from the Abidjan area. It should be noted, however, that the appearance of the building has been changed over time. Indeed when completed in 1956 the façades were equipped with wood panels that could be rotated to provide natural ventilation and regulate sunlight. In the 1970s air conditioning was installed, and the wood panels were replaced with anodized aluminum frames with double-glazing and window blinds.



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SOCIÉTÉ IVOIRIENNE DES BANQUES SIB
ABIDJAN, CÔTE D'IVOIRE

The Alpha 2000 complex (commonly called SIB, the name of the organization it houses) was designed in 1973 and built 1974–1976 in the Le Plateau district in Abidjan as the headquarters for the Société Ivoirienne des Banques SIB. The concept for the complex can be grasped by understanding the respective building regulations that essentially shaped the development. In effect the regulations required a setback of five meters starting at the first floor as well as the creation of a gallery surrounding the building at the ground floor. To comply with these regulations the architect incorporated a shopping arcade on three levels, which opens onto the street all around the building through a series of arcades or arches, and opted for an inclined façade. This ensemble constitutes the lower volume or base of the building, and its central hall includes a vast cupola that provides overhead lighting while shielding the space from direct sunlight. The tallest volume houses a twenty-two-story tower. The entire façade is given rhythm by balustrades of glazed Côte d'Ivoire stoneware that contain the ducts and also function as sunscreens. Cabochons are arranged at regular intervals along the balustrades and provide ventilation for the air conditioning system. The entire complex, including its ornamental elements, is laid out on a plan based on the golden section.

BEHC developed the project with extensive use of local materials, both for the main construction and for its finishes, such as the balustrades of stoneware, wood, granite floors, etc. Becoming an icon of the company the Société Ivoirienne des Banques subsequently erected its other branches following the same architectural principles including using the same colors and materials.

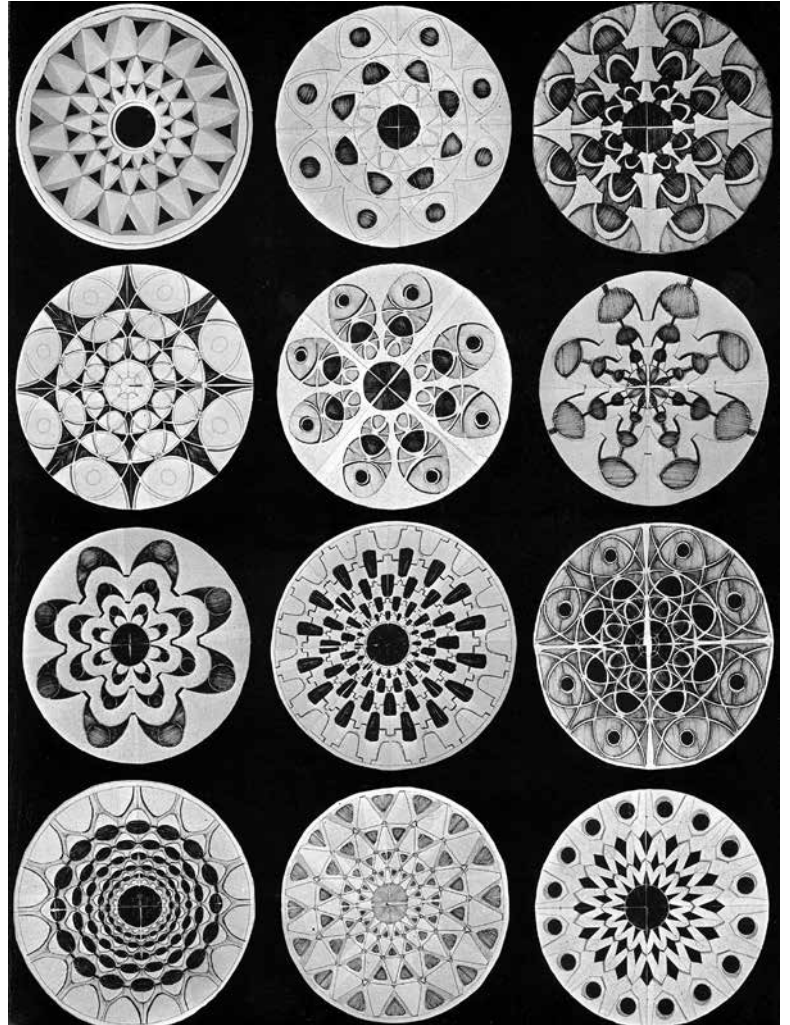


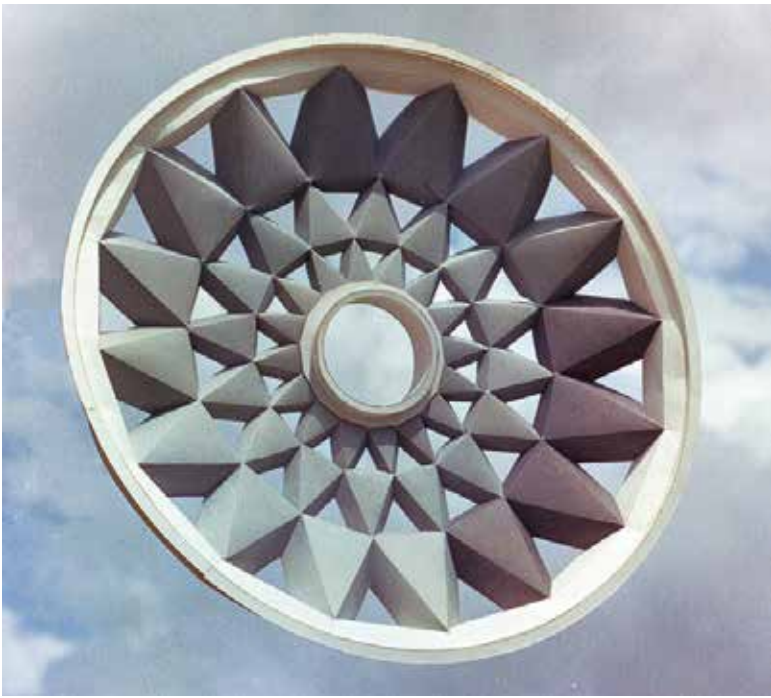
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- 13 Architectural model
- 14 Main banking hall skylight
- 15 16 Study of different skylights for central banking hall
- 17 Aerial view
- 18 Banking hall interior

NATIONAL PALACE OF BENIN,
COTONOU, BENIN
(FORMERLY REPUBLIC OF DAHOMEY)

Commissioned in 1961 and completed in 1963 the National Palace of Benin is at the heart of an extensive urban renewal project and formation of a presidential neighborhood in Cotonou. The National Palace, which dominates the overall ensemble, is designed according to the golden section. It opens onto the ocean and houses offices, reception spaces and a hall for festivities. The president's residence comprises three floors: the first two are reserved for VIPs and the top floor contains the head of state's quarters. Coffered ceilings made of concrete and surfaces of gravel and hammered concrete embellish the building. A large number of decorative elements draw on local references: lights in the shape of coiled snakes, bronze masks spitting water into basins and mosaic floors depicting the symbols of the kings of Abomey, among several others. Touré notes as well that "the simplicity of the materials and the handcrafted motifs of decoration... reinforce the symbolic image of the building whose value of use has hardly altered."¹⁹



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- 19 20 25 26 Hall for festivities and reception space
- 21-24 Colonnade walkway adjacent to water ponds employing rich decoration with mosaic tiling, washed concrete surfaces and bronze sculptures



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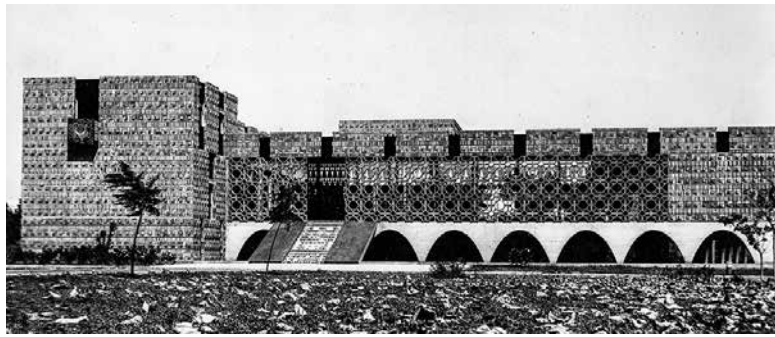
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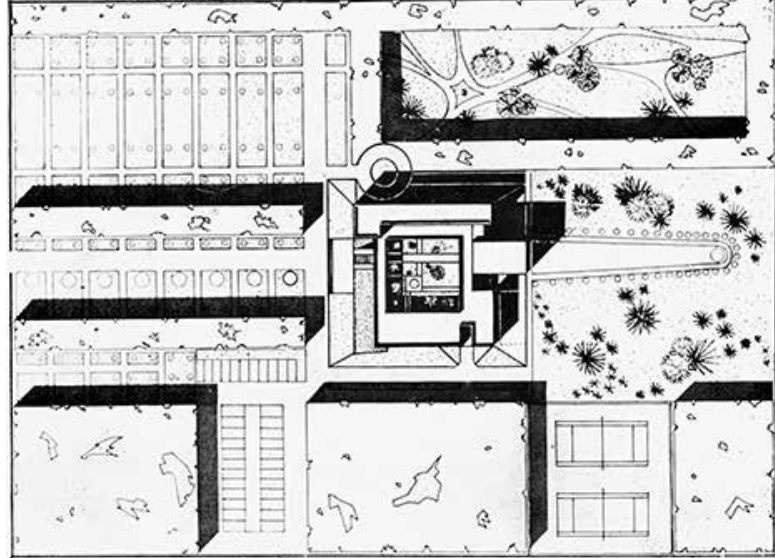




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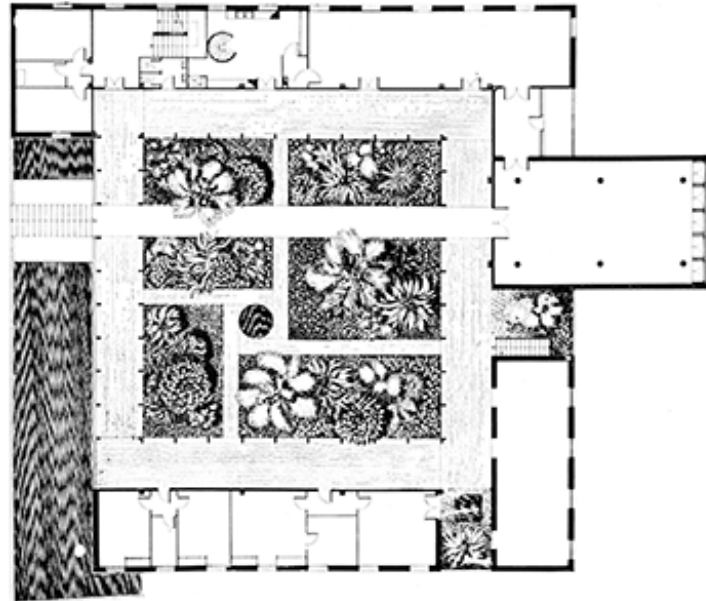


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FRENCH EMBASSY IN OUAGADOUGOU, BURKINA FASO (FORMERLY UPPER VOLTA)

Built on the flat desert terrain of a former racecourse, the French Embassy was commissioned in 1964 and built 1965–1966. Consisting of four volumes organized around a patio, the building is elevated to provide protection from the dust. The complex not only houses the reception halls and spaces for official ceremonies but also the ambassador’s private residence. At the heart of its architectural strategy is consideration of the local climate, the “theme of the composition” being “the traditional architecture of the Sahel... It consists of the contrast between the green character of the large interior court and the defensive character of the building’s exterior envelope underscoring the heat and aridity of the setting.”²⁰ This envelope is made of a double brick wall, its construction reactivating the old brickyards that had fallen into disuse. In a thoughtful way the entire building contains many references to traditional art such as the equipment of the masonry screen walls, mosaics on the floor of the circulation spaces that lead to the large living room and motifs of the main entrance door. The fact that this building takes the climate, topography and culture of the site into account by incorporating vernacular art elements and reviving and improving local means of production, make it representative of the kind of geographic architecture that Henri Chomette developed.

27 Exterior view of the French Embassy
28 Interior courtyard
29 30 Various masonry patterns and brick lattice of the building
31 Site plan
32 Ground floor plan

- 1 Henri Chomette, “L’évolution de l’architecture africaine,” in *Africa*, no. 33 (1964).
- 2 Guestbook of the Bureaux d’Études Henri Chomette BEHC, note by Léopold Sédar Senghor (5 April 1975). Archives of the office of Pierre Chomette.
- 3 Diala Touré, “L’activité des Bureaux d’Études Henri Chomette en Afrique de l’Ouest depuis 1948” (Ph. diss., Panthéon-Sorbonne University, 1998).
- 4 Diala Touré, *Créations architecturales et artistiques en Afrique sub-saharienne 1948-1995. Bureaux d’études Henri Chomette* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 2002).
- 5 Henri Chomette, *Les Vieux Cons*. Unpublished manuscript. Archives of the office of Pierre Chomette.
- 6 Touré (2002), *op. cit.*, 173.
- 7 Stamps and bills collection in the archives of the office of Pierre Chomette.
- 8 H. Chomette, as cited by Olivier Christin and Armelle Filliat, “Destin des villes de pouvoir, l’urbanisme dans les anciens territoires de l’AEF,” in *Architectures françaises Outre-Mer*, Maurice Culot and J.-M. Thiveaud (eds.) (Liège: Mardaga, 1992), 270.
- 9 Chomette (1964), *op. cit.*
- 10–15 *Ibid.*
- 16 H. Chomette, as cited in “Comment la vie vient aux murs,” in *Le Mur Vivant*, no. 16 (1970).
- 17 H. Chomette, as cited by Touré, *op. cit.*, 168.
- 18 Guestbook of the Bureaux d’Études Henri Chomette, note by Félix Houphouët-Boigny [undated]. Archives of the office of Pierre Chomette.
- 19 Touré (2002), *op. cit.*, 213.
- 20 Document “Réalizations Françaises en Haute-Volta.” Archives of the office of Pierre Chomette.