

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

The architectural heritage of Côte d'Ivoire is extremely diverse. Among its many examples are those that provide proof or bear testimony to the interaction of the pre-colonial history and the complete colonisation of the country by France during the second half of the 19th century.

Traces of European influence are most prevalent in the Southern region, and along the coast. This influence is most visible in the form of buildings that are now more or less dilapidated – but reflect the synthesis of prefabricated metal from overseas, small brick walls, thick wooden shutters, window frames built in cement, curved picture-windows and concrete lintels. Zinc sheets and tiled roofs continue to signify the genius, the pride and the willing persistence of Europeans to conquer and to subjugate a land that they knew was nevertheless hopelessly rebellious.

Grand-Bassam (first Capital of Côte d'Ivoire)

Although the first contact between Ivoirians and Europe goes as far back as the 19th century (since the arrival of the Portuguese in Santa Andrea or Sassandra, which at that time was called 'Male Coast'), French colonial architecture remains the most pronounced and significant foreign building-type in the Ivorian architectural heritage. Some examples include:

The Governor's Palace

This building is of a particular interest because it was the headquarters of the first Government of the new colony. Totally prefabricated in France, the building was completed in 1893.

The High Court

Since the transfer of judiciary services to Abidjan (which became the capital in 1934) this building was evacuated and left in ruins. It was built in 1911, and from that time was the main administration centre for judicial matters of the colony. It was originally the largest building in Grand-Bassam.

The Varlet House

Representative of commercial architecture in the colonies, the Varlet House is associated with other buildings in the suburb to make up the former Bata and other vending shops, which were built one on top of the other to create a 'shopping-centre' type of structure.

The Ganamet House

This building is classified as civil architecture (cf. Bernard Colette, UNESCO, 1978). The Ganamet House was ranked among the group of picturesque structures belonging to rich merchants whose

architectural inspiration was drawn from local techniques of construction.

Old Northern Mosques

In contrast, in the north, bordering countries such as Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso, a different scenario is visible: the relics of the Arabian Berbers are mostly manifested in examples of Islamic culture, particularly the old mosques of Sudanese or Sudano-Saharan type. These religious buildings are characterised by mud walls mixed with straw, cow dung and plant extracts, by terrace roofs supported from the inside by many forked wooden-columns and by mud walls fortified by wood and surmounted by minarets.

The Nambira Mosque

This Sudano-Saharan type mosque was built in the 18th century and lies on the outskirts of the village of Nambira. The mosque was created by Sekou Traore, who was the first Imam, and is well taken care of and restored by the faithful in the community. It covers a surface area 9 x 9 metres.

The Tengrela Mosque

In the same style of construction as the Nambira Mosque, the Tengrela Mosque dates back to the 15th century. Built by Famissa Cisse, also the first Imam, the structure covers a surface area of 8 x 8 metres, with very little support.

Conclusion

The census, conservation, restoration and development of these types of old monuments – should the case arise – make up one of the major political factors in decisions relating to the conservation of the architecture of Côte d'Ivoire.

By their very topography the echoes of these long past civilisations fit into a nostalgic past that is little altered. This landscape is strewn with buildings of variable geometry (rounded, rectangular and conical in shape), and with walls of concrete or mud. Among other tasks, the Minister of Culture has the duty of studying these various structures and their architectural techniques before finally restoring them.

In this context, the Ministers of Culture and Tourism also seek to promote architecture, in a mixture of both the old and the new. There is support from some developers who uphold sympathetic ideals in the construction of public works. In combination, it is hoped that traditional buildings and architectural techniques will lend to today's architecture.

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