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TOWARDS A NEW ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY FOR FREETOWN:

SETTING UP THE FIRST FREE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE IN SIERRA LEONE

by
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In April 2014 London
Metropolitan University signed
an agreement with the University
of Sierra Leone and the Sierra
Leone Institute of Architects
to collaborate in founding
Sierra Leone's first School of
Architecture to be set up on the
university campus perched high
above the capital city of Freetown
overlooking the sea.



IMAGE: BOTANG

This new initiative has grown directly out of research sparked in 2007 by an individual's request for help to establish a primary school in Kaningo, a poor settlement on the edge of Freetown, whose population was made up of civil war refugees. This request led to the initiation of a research process which was designed to test resistances and make accommodations to locally encountered realities so that insights and new knowledge could emerge as the work progressed. This led to a collaborative partnership, which opened doors to a stimulating academic learning environment.

The first aim of the research, undertaken by The Architecture of Rapid Change and Scarce Resources (ARCSR), was to understand the local physical and cultural topography around the school site sufficient to ensure an appropriate fit for proposals.

In 2007, a local NGO, CESO, was registered. The first two field trips (2008-2010) reviewed the physical, cultural, social and economic conditions in Kaningo and its surroundings. This involved conducting interviews and documenting observations and construction processes through sketches and photographs. In addition a hands-on workshop experimented on-site with making cementitious walling blocks and ventilation grilles and compiled a construction manual. By September 2011 the modest school building was completed with incremental roof upgrading

and subsequent classroom furniture design and build. Since then, the school has operated successfully until the recent outbreak of Ebola when it was closed, pending the end of the epidemic, along with all other schools in the country.

The research in Kaningo made explicit the deep social problems encountered by poor Freetown residents. These included a sense of isolation from, and a lack of confidence in, democratic engagement with the city.

For this reason the second aim of the research was to raise awareness of the architectural history, culture, and potential of places in Kaningo, places were built at different times and under different conditions but nevertheless spatially adjacent and all part of the rich architectural culture of Freetown. Researchers carried out measured surveys of houses and their surrounding neighbourhoods. They assembled data from the literature and recorded oral histories to highlight the particular historical, cultural and environmental context of each settlement so as to facilitate comparison between them.

Some conditions were common to all three. These included: the steep riverain landscape hindering settlement access and requiring buildings to adapt to varying gradients; the accelerating loss of primary forest cover leading to increased rainwater erosion and flooding, and the change from

timber to reinforced concrete and cement block as the preferred primary construction materials. Yet, attitudes of occupants to the surrounding landscape differ widely. Spatial division in urban downtown is crisp and legible. Front and back, inside and out, public and private are clearly defined by the placing of the building in relation to the street. Conversely, the colonists area of Hill Station has always been a segregated enclave, a safe, shady, cool, quiet, breezy place to retire to after a day's work, where, in the past, views over the forest and the sea could evoke dreams of home in the UK. Kaningo, on the other hand, is still emerging from the steep rocky floor of the forest. The research has provided a more accessible narrative of the current changing city topography embedded deep within its culture and landscape.

The third aim was to give a sense of identity to the growing populations of newer neighbourhoods where the greatest social change is currently taking place. Exhibitions of the research and talks and seminars sponsored by the British Council in both Freetown and London have helped by generating a wide response from the Krio diaspora, the Government of Sierra Leone, students, professionals and the press but, more importantly, they have enabled the residents involved to witness representations of their neighbourhood included as a valuable contribution to city culture laying down the basis for



IMAGE: BO TANG



IMAGE: JOE DAVIS

a sense of shared spatial identity. The agreement to collaborate in the establishment of a new School of Architecture which rose from the debate surrounding these two exhibitions should help to promote this third aim.

In the academic year 2013/14 two 5th year students proposed portfolio schemes at the city scale incorporating ideas emerging from the Freetown research. Alex McClean worked on the expansion of the National Museum located in the centre of Freetown and Joe Davis began developing a scheme for the School of Architecture building itself based on the upgrading of an existing redundant hall of residence and a new timber studio shed.

This research is appropriate because it changes lives and adds value within an ethical framework extending beyond conventional research practice to include the associated environmental, social and cultural costs. This promulgates a way of thinking and practicing which by accommodating strife and minimising side effects and hidden costs can become strategic. Thus this 'bottom up' research is providing insights, which are



effectively being scaled up to contribute to city culture and policy.

On field trips, it was clear that the live projects and research carried out in Freetown have had an important impact on the lay, academic and professional communities in Sierra Leone. Everywhere I went people talked of how the research had dignified a forgotten architectural heritage and how this supported their aim to establish a local sustainable architectural culture capable of resisting the callous forces that have compromised other West African cities and which are now ravaged by the Ebola virus.

The ARCSR research area has achieved this impact through a rigorous methodology. It uses cultural and measured surveys not only as a way of recording a place but as a way of making friends and establishing a community of others implicated and committed to their cause. The trust this generates is often the precondition to building projects such as the sanitation projects in Agra or the schools in Mumbai and Freetown. The careful way they then draw the places they study is also important. These narrative architectural drawings capture the life of the areas studied and place the occupants they have met and their lives at the centre of the conversation.

The work of ARCSR also has important educational implications. Research and live projects in areas of rapid change and scarce resources connect students with important ethical and humanitarian issues giving them renewed focus and bravery. In February, 2014 the work in Sierra Leone was published in the book, *The Architecture of Three Freetown Neighbourhoods: documenting changing city topographies 2008-13*, which has been short listed for the 2014 RIBA prize for University based research.

Presently there are only 25 Sierra Leonean registered architects with an average age of 55, practicing in a rapidly changing, largely unregulated environment and where development is taking place that has little to do with Sierra Leone's history, climate, dramatic landscape, or substantial but untapped material and human resources. The new school will use ARCSR's research into Freetown's historic neighborhoods as the basis of its history curriculum and it will use the building methods and attitude to sustainable design pioneered by ARCSR as the basis of its design curriculum. During the first three years of the school students from Freetown and London will collaborate to construct a public room for the new school based on Joe Davis' 5th year scheme. ▽