The Cultural Hub in Doula

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Location: Douala, Cameroon
Year: 2021
Photography: Francis Tiemeni Ongong, Dione Roach

In our view, access to education and the development of creativity represents one of the major drivers to improve the quality of life in a community, from both the social and the environmental points of view. For this reason, we have accepted the proposal from the NGO COE (which has been involved in social initiatives in Africa for almost 50 years) to design and build the Cultural Hub of Douala in Cameroon. At that time, we were already collaborating with them with our African Fabbers School sessions, implementing a laboratory for self-construction and digital manufacturing for community-oriented projects in the context of the CAMon! project supported by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development (AICS).



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The opportunity arrived after more than 10 years of successful projects and applied research investigating the relations between indigenous African technologies and advanced design approaches towards synthetic vernacular architectures. With this premise, as designers, educators and activists, we have conceived the architectural project as a creative open platform, an urban infrastructure able to provide spaces of production for both educational activities and community-oriented projects. Therefore, as directors of the African Fabbers School, we have strategically decided from the very beginning, to develop the project through a collaborative process involving a group of local students and artisans.



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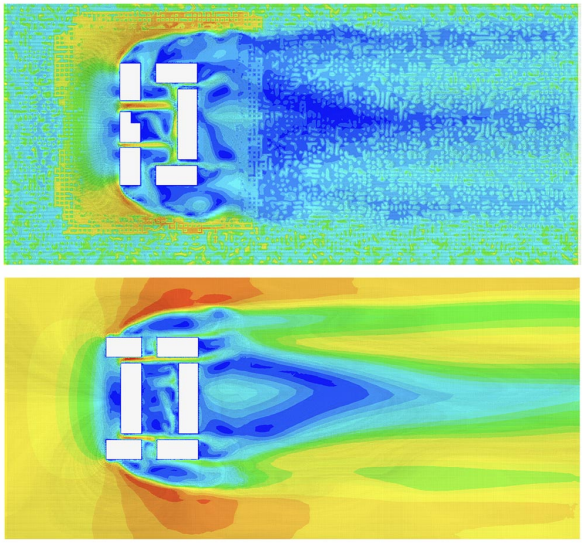


The continuous dialogue that was established with the local community and with our client has generated a very challenging and articulated design brief that bridges the new building with the structure of an existing refurbished one. The aim was to generate a system of ventilated and diversified courtyards, connecting a series of spaces open to the neighborhood, such as the digital manufacturing labs, an exhibition gallery, a co-working area and a cafeteria. The Hub is also home to a school of fine arts (Laba-Douala) and a guest-house, while the outdoor area is organized as a relational space with playgrounds and productive gardens. The programmatic response and the architectural agenda of the project make this building unique in Africa and beyond.





The design strategy of the building was informed by a series of environmental analyses and simulations in order to respond to the very extreme climate conditions (hot-humid) in Douala. The aim was to reduce the energy consumption while providing thermal comfort to both the outdoor and indoor spaces and maximizing the passive cooling ventilation. Therefore, taking inspiration from the local informal and vernacular architectures, the central courtyard is conceived as an open-air, shaded room reducing the surfaces exposed to direct sunlight during the hottest hours of the day.

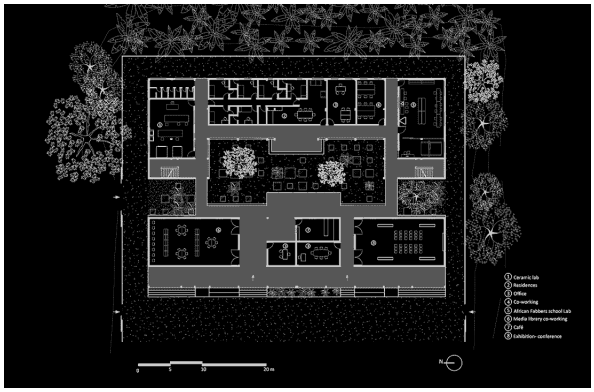


The issues of affordability and the circular economy have driven our strategy on materials and construction systems, connecting the concrete primary structure with the local wood secondary structures. The wooden ventilated façade made from local padouk wood was realized with our local students, experimenting with new

same time, the roof is taking inspiration from the informal metal sheet dwellings with the aim of improving the environmental performance in terms of cross-ventilation and rainwater collection. As we consider the question of self-sufficiency in architecture crucial, especially in Africa, we have also integrated a photovoltaic system into the roof in order to reduce the dependency on the unreliable energy grid.



The final result of the whole design-to-build process is an “open work” that could potentially be evolved and upgraded directly by the users who have collaborated during the construction process. Beyond any humanitarian rhetoric, we strongly believe that a decolonization of architectural knowledge is necessary to reconsider the social role of designers towards climate-sensitive and community-oriented architectures.



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