

The Building of a New Library in Timbuktu

By Andre Spies



Although I only first traveled to Timbuktu in November 2005, I am part of a larger architectural and building team that is planning and building a new library in Timbuktu to house the old Ahmed Baba Centre collection of manuscripts. This project is only part of the greater South African-Mali Presidential Project, which aims at the preservation and promotion of the rich and ancient legacy of African scholarship in this famous city. The team made their first visit to Timbuktu in March 2004 and there have been numerous visits and meetings with local role players thereafter. We have been working closely with our Malian counterparts, especially with the architect Baba Cissé, who has visited Cape Town twice to work with the South African team.

City planning

During my travels in November 2005, I experienced what Timbuktu has to offer. A brief comparison with Bamako, the capital city of Mali, would further highlight the positive characteristics of this unique settlement.

In Timbuktu the lively streets are filled with people, young and old. Traffic congestion is a combination of pedestrians and donkeys and the odd car meanders through this intense, relatively slow moving network.

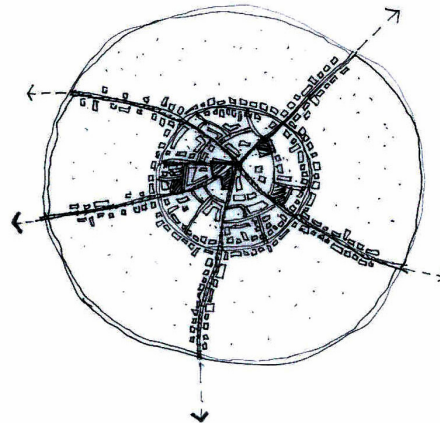
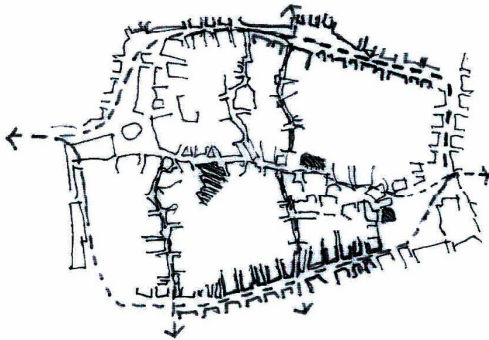
The city faces poverty with a working population of only 20%, yet there is an enhanced atmosphere of serenity and communal equality that is particularly apparent in the integrate network of streets.

By contrast, the streets of Bamako are vehicle dominated, which, like powerful asphalted veins, cut through the city with no mercy. The extremity of urban life has polluted and scarred this city on the Niger, which could potentially have been a “Paris on the Seine”. With a much greater population than Timbuktu, the unmanageability and chaos is heightened by urban sprawl, a burden that most South Africans cities also face.

This sprawl is a result of modern planning ideals, where lengthy highways connect remote zones. The car becomes the most important mode of transport which, in turn, annihilates any pedestrian movement that cannot compete with the fast and distant pattern of movement that has been set up. The results of such planning principles are fallow pieces of useless land that segregate the city. This segregation also suited planning methods adopted by Apartheid South Africa.

In contrast to this scenario, Timbuktu almost represents the European ‘ring road’ model, where the car is largely restricted to the outer and inner ring and only permeates the pedestrian realm at certain points.

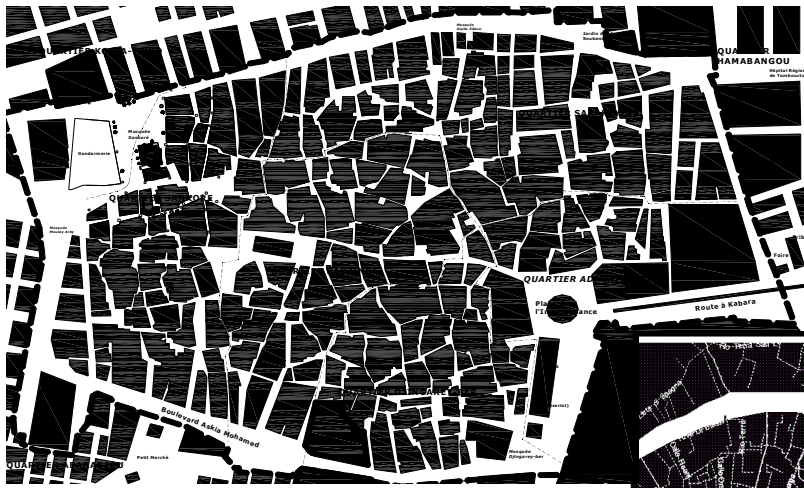
Timbuktu
Peripheral main
road with
central
pedestrian
realm



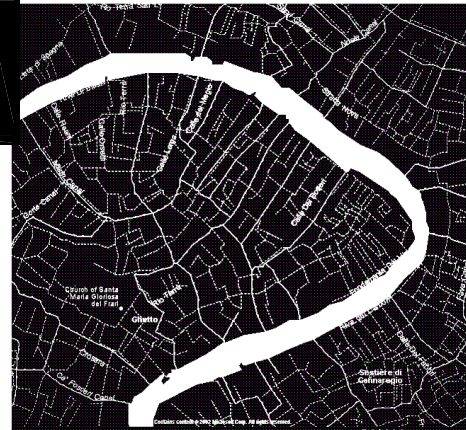
European
Peripheral
Ring road
with central
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core.

In fact, the cityscape is reminiscent of Venice’s city planning, where pedestrians with their donkeys on sandy roads replace the water and boats of Venice.

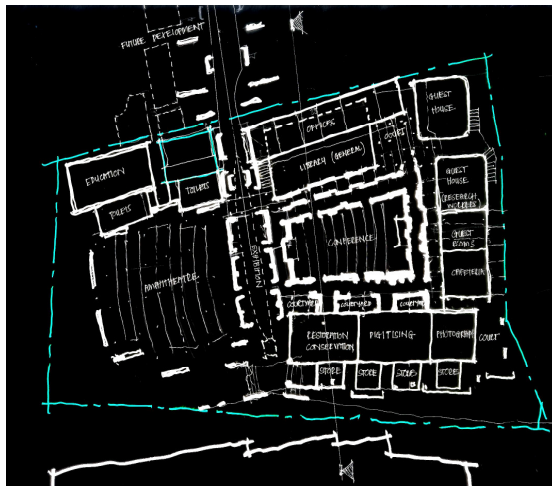
This complexity of Timbuktu’s urban pattern was borne out of the way in which people moved through the city and thus became paramount to us in the conceptualisation of this unique project. The new Ahmed Baba Centre allows the pedestrian to move freely into a microcosm of the greater Timbuktu. This amazing experiential route ties the main auditorium and outdoor amphitheatre to the library, restoration spaces and guest rooms, to form an interactive educational centre.



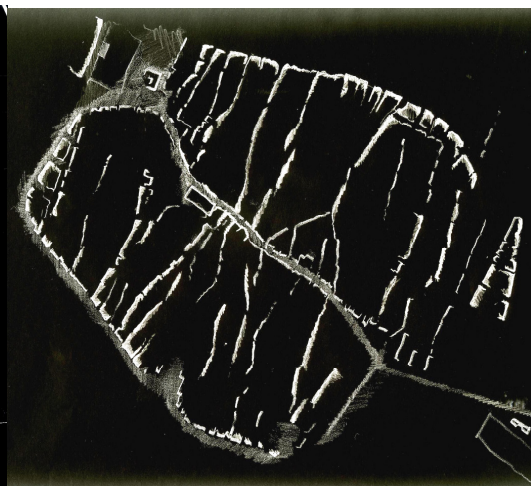
Timbuktu



Venice



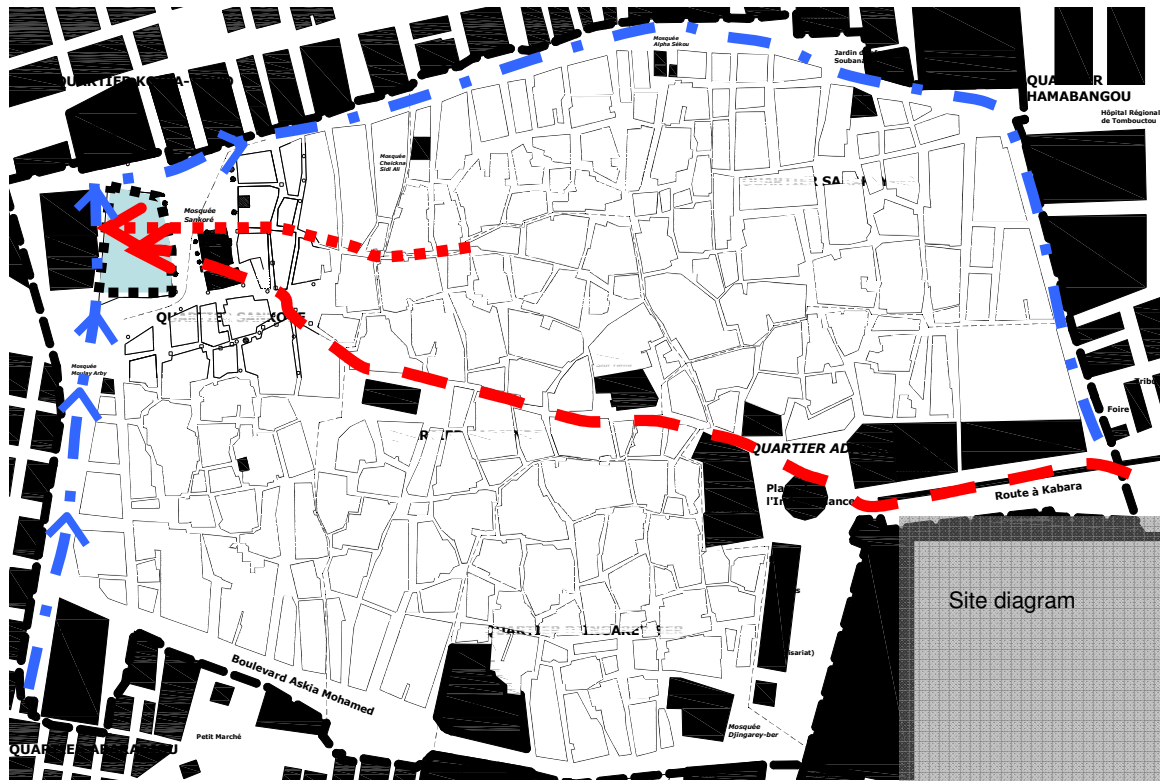
The microcosm



Integrate patterns of Timbuktu's Urban fabric

Site specific

The site is at the top end of the old city, in-between the “old “and the “new” city, next to the famous Sankore Mosque which marks a pivotal point in the metropolis. Three main arterial roads lead to the site. The two outer roads surround the old city whilst the middle one splits it in half, which in turn connects the site directly to the airport.



The Building

The architecture relates to this interstitial zone directly in that it is a combination of sun-baked mud bricks reminiscent of the “old” city, and off-shutter concrete reminiscent of “new” city. These two substances form the main structural materials and are tectonically separated with glass. Together they create quite a contrast between older techniques of building and modern construction methods, which in turn relate directly to the site.

The African Islamic influence of the manuscripts is directly represented in the aesthetics of the building. Large hand crafted panels (about 2m x 1,5m) decorated with mosaics are affixed to the Southern side of the centre. These panels provide extra sun protection as well as relating to the public square in a celebratory fashion. The main entrance also frames a corridor of vision to the Minbar of the Mosque as if kneeling in respect.



View of the new Ahmed Baba Centre from the South West with the Sankore Mosque on the right hand side of the picture

Africa

Working on this project has given me an introduction to the enormous wealth of history and the practicality embedded in African settlements. For this I urge everyone, including myself, to travel our continent more extensively before rushing to Europe for answers.

Quotes:

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