

Here are two typical examples of the protection of 'reservation' towns:

- The town of Telč, in ČSR, symbiosis of architecture and the environment,
- The town of Spisska' Sobota in SSR, the diversion of traffic from the centre has safeguarded its historic structure and favours the circulation of pedestrians.

A.D.C. H y l a n d (Ghana)

THE CONSERVATION OF SMALLER HISTORIC TOWNS IN AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

WITH CASE STUDIES OF TWO GHANAIAN EXAMPLES, ELMINA AND WA

The cause of building conservation is still new in Africa south of the Sahara, and little account is taken of it in formulating national development policies. But the need for bold and progressive policies of building conservation is tremendous throughout Africa, because the pace and scale of development has increased so enormously during the last ten to twenty years, in every recently independent country, that the very fabric of society is threatened. The population explosion, the inexhaustible influx of people from the rural areas into the towns, and the insatiable demands of the modern economy for better communications, larger production units, and more extensive public services, are placing intolerable strains on the existing infrastructure of new nations. These strains are not applied equally everywhere, of course: the pressures are most intense in the great metropolitan conurbations - Lagos, Accra, Kinshasa, for example - but they are felt in the distant provinces. Anthropologists and social scientists fear for the health of society, even in the remotest areas, if the traditional structure of society collapses, as well it may, in the absence of any tradition of building conservation.

Throughout the greater part of Sub-Saharan Africa before the imposition of colonial rule, and especially in the great tropical forest belts, which were much more extensive a hundred years ago than they are now, the traditional economy of the state did not place any particular value on the conservation of buildings as such. The depredations of the climate, and of the animal world, together with the abundance of known building materials, made 'conservation' of buildings superfluous. Objects (regalia, cult objects, relics of the dead) and sites were commonly venerated, but buildings apparently not. They were functional and utilitarian and indicated a man's status, like clothing: and like clothing, when they had served their purpose, they could be as easily shed.

Evidence for this assertion can be found in the bewildering variety of descriptions of the palace of the King of Ashanti in Kumasi, Ghana, in the 19th Century, from Bowditch, who first drew it in 1817, (i), to Baden-Powell, who finally sacked it in 1896, (ii): it was constantly changing - in appearance, condition of maintenance, form and extent. A similar lack of veneration for the building can be observed in the history of the palace of the Ya-Na at Yendi, in Northern Ghana: for three hundred years, until the beginning of this century, each successive ruler demolished the palace of his predecessor and built a new palace on a new site. (The old sites, however, remained sacred, because the former rulers were buried there).

More than adequately compensating for the lack of a tradition of building conservation, however, is the abundance of still flourishing traditional building techniques. The fitness and variety of these techniques can and will resist, if encouraged by the State, the depredations of the de-personalized and stereotyped building systems that are now being disseminated throughout Africa as pervasively as their counterparts have been throughout the developed world during the last hundred years. Nowhere is the quality and richness of these traditional building techniques more sympathetically documented than in René Gardi's survey of traditional building in West Africa, "Auch im Lehmhaus läßt sich's leben", (iii). In that book, Gardi makes a plea for the preservation of the traditional house forms, arguing convincingly (and scientific research confirms this) that the quality of the living environment in most of the examples quoted is far superior to anything that modern building techniques can produce at reasonable cost. In view of these factors, conservation policy throughout Sub-Saharan Africa must concentrate on the conservation and improvement of traditional building techniques, both in terms of the building materials and architectural forms used, and in terms of the social organization of the building team. Building research units throughout Africa are increasingly investigating the former aspect, (iv); government policy varies from country to country as to the importance given to the latter.

In emphasising the importance of conserving techniques, I do not wish to suggest that there is no need for the conservation of individual buildings, nor to suggest that credit should not be given for what has been achieved in this field already. Great achievements have been made - but they are few, and represent independent enthusiasms, not a coherent policy. Major archaeological sites have been preserved: for example, the rock-cut churches of Lalibela, in Ethiopia; the abandoned city of Kilwa, in Tanzania; the huge complex of stone buildings at Great Zimbabwe, in Rhodesia. Major historic monuments have been restored and their future assured: for example, the Castle of Fasilidas, at Gondar, in Ethiopia; Fort Jesus, at Mombasa, in Kenya; and the Great Mosque at Djenné, in Mali. And, in the special field of study of this symposium, some few, small, historic towns have been protected, though largely by chance, because of their isolation or economic stagnation, rather than by policy; for example, Djenné again, in Mali, surely the queen of the cities of the Niger (illustration 1); Lamu, on the coast of Kenya, (illustration 2);

Darki, a minor Hausa town in Northern Nigeria (illustration 3).

More recently, the economic potential of tourism has given a boost to the conservation of another type of small town, the picturesque location or 'l'ambiance folklorique', the most successful of which is probably the lake village, - now a town of some ten thousand people - of Ganvie, in Dahomey (v), illustration 4), the most picturesque, the Dogon cliff village of Bandiagara, in Mali (vi), (illustration 5).

But for every small town that has been successfully protected, there must be dozens that have lost utterly all trace of their historic character. In most cases, this has been the consequence of physical and economic growth, and the old towns have simply been overwhelmed by modern development: in a few cases, this has been the result of government policy, all traces of a 'primitive' or 'alien' past have been obliterated. In all cases, the loss has been due to a failure to appreciate the value of the historical link with the past, or the quality of the living environment contained within the fabric of the old town itself.

In many African countries today, the most important historic buildings are protected by law, and many are in the guardianship of the State. But though individual buildings and sites have been consciously conserved, old towns and historic quarters have been protected only in so far as they have been isolated by a 'cordon sanitaire' from modern development. The concept of 'conservation areas' has not yet any legislative backing, although conservators and planners are increasingly aware of the need to conserve whole neighbourhoods and quarters of towns as well as individual buildings.

Ghana, with its unique legacy of forts and castles, was one of the first countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to establish a historic building conservation programme. Her achievements in the field of building conservation, however, are by no means exceptional, and the strengths and weaknesses of the conservation movement in Ghana are not unrepresentative of Africa as a whole.

To illustrate current conservation practice in Ghana, case studies of two small, historic towns are presented. The two towns chosen for study - Elmina and Wa - are very different in appearance and character. Elmina, the oldest European trading settlement on the former Gold Coast, is a town with a distinctly European character, in terms of urban structure: Wa, on the other hand, the principal town of the North West, has at its centre a historic core entirely African in character.

Elmina was founded by the Portuguese in 1482, adjacent to an existing village at the mouth of a small river, where topographical conditions were exceptionally favourable for settlement - a rocky outcrop on a headland forming an ideal foundation for a castle, at the end of a long spit of land between the river and the sea, a large sheltered anchorage in the lee of the headland, a protected river mouth ideal for the loading and unloading of merchandise, and a hill close to the shore commanding an extensive

view over the surrounding countryside. The attractions of the situation are still apparent today; and the town of Elmina, spread out around the bay, with St. George's Castle on the headland, and Fort St. Jago on the hill, is one of the most picturesque in Ghana (illustration 6).

The history of the castle itself is sufficiently well documented (vii) not to need repeating here. The growth of the town, however, does need a little explanation. By 1486, the settlement had grown sufficiently to warrant being raised to the status of a city, and a wall was built across the spit of land to enclose the town. In 1637, the castle and the town fell to the Dutch, who made it the headquarters of their West African settlements; and so it remained for two and a half centuries, until the British acquired the Dutch West African possessions in 1872. The Dutch soon built a fort, Coenraadsburg, on top of St. Jago hill, to protect the castle; and early in the 18th century entered into an alliance with the newly founded Kingdom of Ashanti. By 1800, Elmina had reached the height of its prosperity; the castle had grown to its present size (illustration 7), and the town had spread across the river, with the building of substantial merchants' houses around the bay and at the foot of St. Jago hill, (illustration 8). The town continued to expand throughout the 19th century, but following the abolition of the slave trade in the early years of the century, and increasing British command of the seas following the Napoleonic Wars, Elmina's prosperity stagnated.

After 1872, the town fell into a decline: the British had little use for the castle, the largest in West Africa, with their own headquarters at Cape Coast Castle only ten miles away to the east; the old town, on the spit of land to the west of the castle, was razed to the ground by the British in 1873, in reprisal for Elminian support for Ashanti in the Anglo-Ashanti War; substantial houses fell into decay; and finally the port was closed. From having been a cosmopolitan port in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the town had sunk to the level of a sleepy backwater in the early 20th century. The present population of the town is about 14,000, (viii).

The virtual absence of development for almost a hundred years has resulted in the survival of a town of considerable architectural interest. Almost until the present, the principal threat to the town has been that of structural decay, and even today the main task of conservation in Elmina is to prevent buildings from falling down.

In 1952, the Monuments and Relics Commission of the Gold Coast established its headquarters at Elmina, at Fort St. Jago; and when the Commission was subsequently superseded by the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, the headquarters of the Monuments Division remained at Elmina. Not surprisingly, conservation work in Ghana began in Elmina, and the restoration of St. George's Castle and Fort St. Jago were the first major conservation achievements in Ghana.

During the last 15 years, the major achievements of the Monuments division have been elsewhere; but the work in Elmina has continued, with the periodic maintenance of the Castle and the Fort, the investigation and conservation of the outlying fortifications of the town, and more recently, with a grant from the Dutch Castles Association, the restoration of the Dutch Cemetery, with its monumental cenotaph dating from 1806 (illustration 9).

Since the Second World War, the Public Works Department has been responsible for the maintenance of Elmina Post Office, a substantial town house of 1825; and fortunately this public use has ensured that the building has been kept in a reasonably sound condition. But with the exception of a handful of other buildings - the mid 19th century Methodist Church, the Catholic Church and Mission House of 1890, two or three more recently built commercial buildings, and three lovingly cared-for Asafo Company houses (ix), (illustration 10) - all the remaining buildings in the centre of the town are privately owned, and in a poor state of repair. Many are dilapidated, a few are derelict, some are already nothing more than a few ruined walls or piles of stones (illustration 11).

The volume of conservation work remaining to be done in Elmina is enormous, with equally enormous obstacles in the way of implementing any comprehensive conservation policy. The most intractable problem is that of sorting out the complexity of multiple land and building ownership. The older a building, the greater the number of family members sharing the responsibility of ownership. Furthermore, many of the older houses in Elmina contain graves of deceased members of the family. With many of the Elmina houses 100-150 years old, and some even older, family approval of any important conservation proposal is almost impossible to obtain. On the other hand, the opportunities and potential value of a comprehensive policy are also enormous. Elmina is on the verge of a tourist boom: of all the towns in Ghana, it is, in proportion to its size, the town most visited by tourists. The Ghana Museum and Monuments Board has recently taken over occupation of the castle from the Ghana Police, and the Monuments Division is at present preparing plans for the conversion of the castle into a tourist hostel. Expert technical assistance in the design has been requested through ICOMOS, and is at present in process of negotiation. When implemented, the project will bring many more tourists into the town, and will severely overload the existing public services and commercial facilities. Unless the conservation of the town centre has been assured, the commercial development of tourism could rapidly erode the historic fabric of the town.

With a view to the adoption of a comprehensive conservation programme for Elmina, the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi has been engaged during the past few years in a Conservation Study of Elmina and Cape Coast, publication of which is expected later this year. Major recommendations include the designation of conservation areas, the rehabilitation and conversion to new uses of certain key buildings (illustration 12), and the reconstruction of two important, now ruined, buildings. Implementation of the

proposals will depend initially on financial assistance or investment from overseas, though it is envisaged that eventually the programme will become self-financing.

Wa, the principal town in the North West of Ghana, with a population of about 24,000 (x), is an important district administrative and commercial centre. Although the modern town is indistinguishable from many similar towns throughout the African savannah, sprawling and formless, it does contain an ancient core of historical importance and architectural value. Wa is one of the principal Moslem towns in Ghana, and the most important Islamic educational centre.

The modern Friday Mosque is not only the most prominent building in the centre of the town, it is the most impressive modern mosque in the country (illustration 13). The ancient mosques are equally distinctive, having the characteristic form of the Sudanese mosque, common throughout the Western Sudan. Its batteries of pinnacled buttresses projecting above the flat roof, and its projecting bush pole reinforcement, give the Sudanese mosque its characteristic prickly profile (illustration 14). Several survive in Wa, all small in scale, and of various dates, the oldest dating from the 17th century, the newest from this.

The Sudanese mosques of Thana, which are found only in the North West of the country, are relics of the Dyula, itinerant traders of Djenne and the middle Niger, who travelled widely throughout the Western Sudan during the Middle Ages, and as far south as the northern fringes of the forest belt, and who, after the fall of Djenne in 1473, increasingly settled along their established trade routes. Evidence of such settlement is common in the North West of Ghana, and most common in the Wa area.

The inhabitants of Wa are predominantly Wala, as are the ruling families of chiefs, a traditional horse-riding people who first penetrated the area of Wa in the sixteenth century from the NorthEast. Linguistic characteristics and traditions of origin indicate a close relationship with the Dagomba and Mamprussi, the principal tribes of NorthEastern Ghana. But whereas the Dagomba and Mamprussi build in the circular cell, thatched roof tradition, the Wala have widely adopted Dyula building traditions, using rectilinear plan forms, sun-dried brick walls, and flat mud roofs, more appropriate to the dryer hotter climate of the Dyula homelands on the Middle Niger than the woodland savannah climate of the Wa area. The intricate, close-meshed layout of housing, with narrow winding alleyways between blind walls, is characteristic of the ancient core of Wa, (illustration 15).

Dyula building traditions are most impressively revealed in the Palace of the Wa-Na, which is situated in the heart of the historic core of the town, (illustration 16). Founded in the 17th century, and periodically altered, extended and rebuilt since then, it contains evidence of building from all periods, (xi). The principal elevations are articulated with the batteries of pinnacled buttresses, so characteristic of the mosques, and

with an even more pronounced batter to the walls and buttresses; but whereas the mosques are basically straightforward rectangles on plan, with only a mihrab projecting on the east side, the plan of the palace is a veritable labyrinth of courtyards, of different sizes and purposes.

As a consequence of the British colonial policy of indirect rule in the former Northern Territories, the Wa-Na's Palace was the seat of the administration of the Wa district, and as such, the Public Works Department was responsible for the maintenance of its fabric. In view of the importance of the building - it is architecturally the most impressive of the Northern chiefs' compounds - the P.W.D. retained responsibility for its maintenance after the abolition of indirect rule. This responsibility is now shared with the Monuments Division of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, which opened an office in Wa and began operations in the North of Ghana in 1965.

From their office in Wa, the Monuments Division has been progressively extending the scope of its work in the field of traditional building conservation, and the old mosques of Wa and the surrounding area are being restored, (illustration 18). This conservation policy in the North of Ghana is proving fairly successful in persuading local communities not to abandon their traditional building techniques and architectural forms, and nowhere is this policy more successful than in Wa and the surrounding area.

The Development Plan for Wa, which makes provision for the wholesale clearance and redevelopment of the entire central core area (except for the palace, the mosques, and some modern public buildings), is presently being revised, with a view to making provision for rehabilitation of the existing housing and for infill development in the central core area. This revision represents the first indication in Ghana of conservation area planning being put into practice; and if implemented, should ensure that Wa retains its historic indigenous character.

I hope I have said sufficient to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the conservation movement in Ghana. Two particular weaknesses can be identified - the belief that conservation is solely the responsibility of the State, to be financed, planned and executed by Government agencies; and the failure to solve the complex problems of multiple land and building ownership. But the strengths of the movement should be recognized also - the willingness to forego opportunities of commercial advantage in favour of conservation, and the encouragement and revival of traditional building and craft techniques.

Footnotes

- i Bowditch, T.E. Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, London, 1819
- ii Baden-Powell, Robert, Lord. The Downfall of Prempeh, London, 1896
- iii Gardi, Rene. Auch im Lehmhaus lässt sich's leben, Bern, 1973 - published in English translation as: Indigenous African Architecture, New York, 1974

- iv Beck, Jann, for Department of Housing and Planning Research University of Science & Technology. Design and Construction of Modified Traditional Atakpame Houses, Kumasi, 1971
- Danby, Miles. 'Ganvie, Dahomey', in Oliver, Paul, ed. Shelter in Africa, London, 1971
- vi Van Eyck, Aldo. 'Architecture of the Dogon', in Architectural Forum, New York, sept 1962
- vii Lawrence, A.W. Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa, London, 1963
- viii The population of Elmina was 12,401 in the 1970 Census
- ix Rose-Innes, J. 'Asafu', in Architectural Review, London
- x The population of Wa was 21,350 in the 1970 Census
- xi Al-Hassan, A., for the Department of Restoration, Royal Academy School of Architecture The Wa-Na's Palace, Wa; a conservation Study, Copenhagen, 1975

Illustrations

- 1. Djenne, Mali: street scene
- 2. Lamu, Kenya: a group of houses
- 3. Darki, Nigeria: street scene
- 4. Ganvie, Dahomey: general view
- 5. Bandiagara, Mali: general view
- 6. Elmina, Ghana: view from the bay
- 7. " " St George's Castle
- 8. " " St Jago Hill, Fort St Jago, and merchants' houses
- 9. " " the Dutch Cemetery
- 10. " " an Asafu Company house
- 11. " " ruins of St George's Hotel
- 12. " " houses on Liverpool Street
- 13. Wa, Ghana: Friday Mosque
- 14. " " Dondoli Mosque
- 15. " " housing in the central core area
- 16. " " Palace of the Wa-Na
- 17. " " plan of the palace
- 18. " " restoration work in progress on a mosque