

African University of Creative Arts

African Spring

December 2013

Stallan-Brand

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Our practice has secured a commission in Africa for the design of a new university. The project called the African University of Creative Arts (AUCA), is no ordinary project for its ambition is unique.

Many of the world's leading economists, social scientists, philosophers and writers believe that Africa is on the cusp of changes that will see it alter the world as we know it. The United Nations reports on Africa's prospects and challenges are simply staggering. Take for example the fact that Africa's population is currently estimated at 1.033 billion with two thirds of this number under the age of 25. If current demographic trends persist, the population will increase to 1.4 billion in 2025 and 1.9 billion in 2050. In short one in every three children in the world will be born in Sub Saharan Africa.

Africa's fast-growing population boom is being seen as both a blessing and a curse. The hope is that this phenomenon is a decisive boost for economic growth and an opportunity for this enormous and tremulous continent to transform its fortunes to become an even more beautiful, harmonious, sustainable and prosperous place offering education and good health to a greater number of people.

Prior to my involvement with AUCA I had no deep understanding of the African psyche, its detailed histories and cultures. That said wherever I have worked I have always attempted to deeply understand the places and the motivations of the people I am working with. For me this is one of the most exciting and extraordinary parts of the design process which if given the opportunity can become for me obsessional. What I have learned working on the AUCA project has changed my understanding of the world.

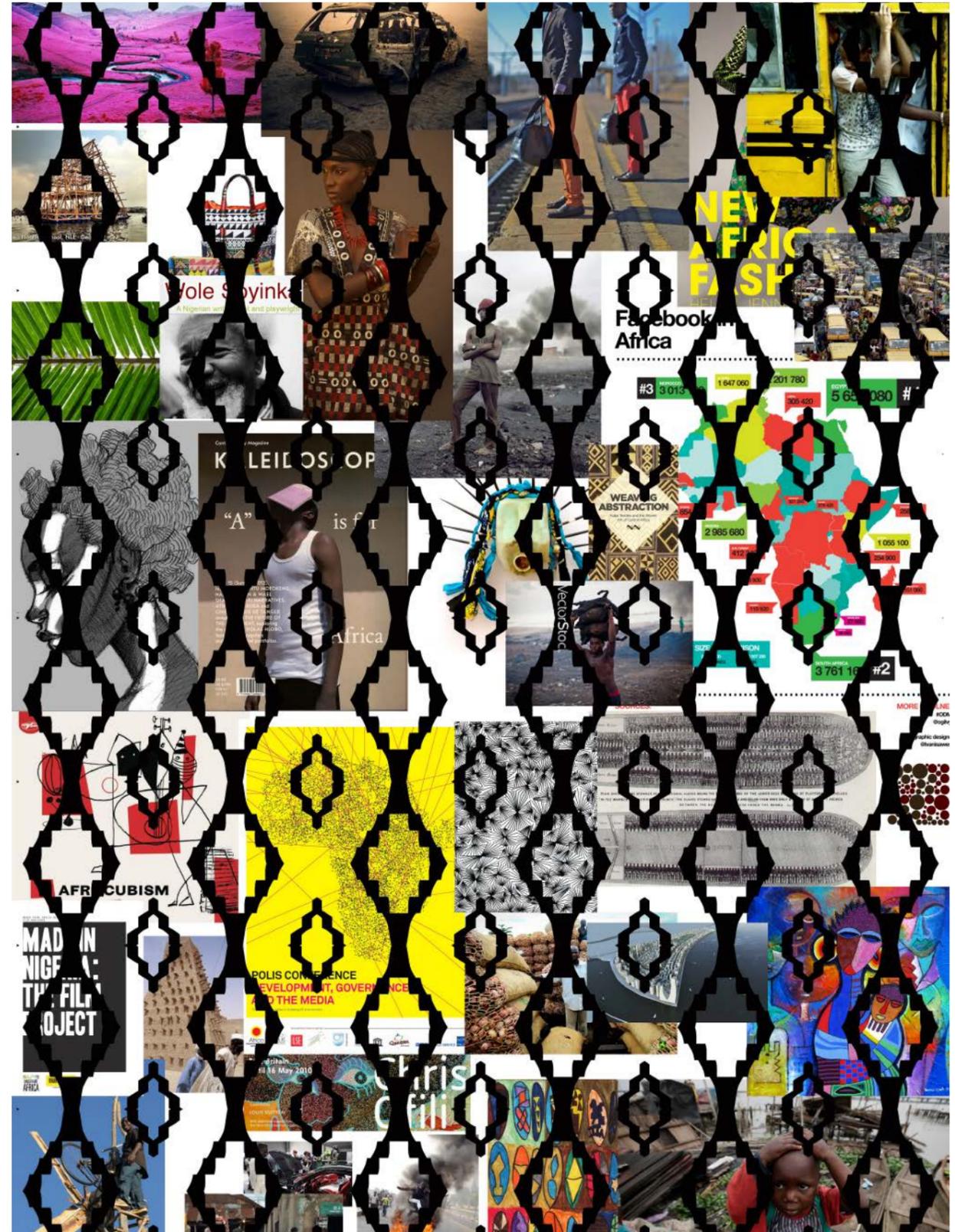
Our client and project champion is a remarkable woman called Ejemen Ojeabulu who has become a very good friend. Ej for short is the driving force behind the AUCA vision and is singularly committed.

The African University for Creative Arts primary aim is transform peoples lives by offering an opportunity to study art and African art within an academic environment that is world class. Simply put there is no education institution in the whole of Africa that presently offers the curriculum that AUCA is proposing.

The creative learning environment that we are considering with leading academics from across Africa and internationally has the potential and agenda to be as significant as the Bauhaus curriculum was for Europe and the U.S. when Walter Gropius established his School in Weimar in 1919.

With regards art and culture Africa has given so much to the world or rather the world has taken so much from Africa. It is inconceivable to imagine our contemporary world especially the arts without African reference.

From my own study as a student I was aware that many early 20th century painters and sculptors in the Europe plundered Africa for ideas on abstraction, figuration, surrealism whether Picasso, Gabo, Henry Moore, Boccioni, Giacometti or Paul Klee. Likewise modern music everywhere would similarly be unrecognisable without African rhythm and soul influences.



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Despite Africa's role in the development of contemporary creative culture the continent still has no renowned intellectual and academic centre of excellence of international repute. Whether in the North, South East or in West Africa there is no major arts and humanities learning institution to rival the likes of Stanford, Harvard, Princeton, London's Royal College or the Glasgow School of Art. Of the top 50 such ranked universities in the world none of them are in Africa. Presently there is no African arts and humanities university that is able to celebrate the continents legacy and its future. AUCA proposes to address this vacuum to positioning itself as world class location for study attracting students and academics from not just Africa but from across the world.

Right now many young Africans interested in an arts education leave Africa to progress their dream. Those who leave are a small percentage of the lucky ones whose parents are wealthy enough to afford the fees. For the vast majority there is limited opportunity. Even for families who can afford an arts education for their children the arts more often becomes a second choice. Most aspiring African parents who would rather support their children through a business or practical engineering course as they believe this is a more secure and rewarding route to employment and prosperity. A generational bias not limited to Africa of course.

Certainly in Nigeria the idea of a creative training being 'less useful' is not wholly accurate. Nigeria has a rapidly expanding creative economy. Nigeria for example has the world's third largest film industry called Nollywood ... after Bollywood and Hollywood! The film business in Nigeria is massive, in fact the Nigerian economy is massive set to overtake South Africa as Africa's largest in terms of its GDP. Many young Africans like young people the world over see the ideas as the currency of the future. The prospect of a much larger and more influential creative class in Africa is very real and exciting.

Working on African University of Creative Arts (AUCA) project we are in no doubt that we will learn much more compared to what we can contribute to this modern African renaissance. It is clear however that our skills are in demand. Our client involved us in this extraordinary project specifically because of our experience in education architecture and campus master planning in both the U.K. and internationally. We hope to offer more than just an insight into higher education by helping provide a unique insight into the whole education offer. Our team are presently working with schools, colleges and university clients. We can in effect demonstrate an understanding of the life long learning continuum with particular reference to curriculum innovation; i.e. from child to young adult and beyond. In this project our sense is that the focus will not just be higher education but arts education in its entirety.

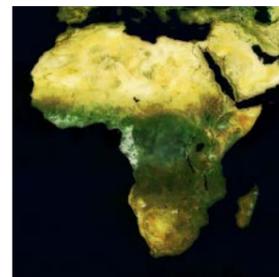
Although expert in education environments working in Africa, West Africa and specifically Nigeria was new to us. Much of our work to date has therefore involved considerable research and study; that said we found limited critical writing on precolonial sub Saharan African architecture. Unlike the vast texts and observations dedicated to African art the continents architecture is a poor relation in comparison. I read in one text that there was a lack of documents on historic African architecture simply because Africa's indigenous sub Saharan inhabitants were nomadic. There was no need for architecture and no requirement to build monuments for a state system that did not exist. Of course there are notable legacy and religious structures but on the whole the people of central and southern Africa lived with and on the land, they had a light touch. What therefore would be our inspiration for AUCA without reference to architectural precedent?



"Nothing can replace the immediacy of the past as transmitted by earthworks, cultured spaces, and life enhancing models that preserve ingenuity of the City of Man - the ultimate project of civilisation" Wole Soyinka _ African Spring



1. An simple outline of the African continent, one single landmass.



2. A satellite image of African showing it vast continuous landscape



3. A modern map of Africa partitioned into 55 different country states

I found relevance for the architecture of the African University of Creative Arts campus plans from Professor Soyinka's ideas of shared difference and people finding their way in life supported by more gentle and generous political and cultural systems. I have been prompted to imagine an education environment for AUCA where people can develop their knowledge in a gentle inclusive collaborative fashion. Much of what we have been developing in the context of new education architecture for interested clients revolves around these ideas.

The partitioning of education into knowledge silos where students are instructed (told) is giving way to more constructive learning that cross programmes different curriculums and learning styles. Our education architecture aims to develop learning environments that encourages student centred learning through the provision of spaces and places that can support learning cultures, where learners learn to learn.

I have become excited with sketch designs that explore how a new education architecture could promote a learning place for the African Creative Arts and in reflection also embrace Professor Wole's more existential ideas of African harmony. Philosophically I hope we are making progress with the campus master plan premise, however I was also massively interested in understanding the common qualities of African art and reviewing what relevance these might have on the architecture of project.

This is a profound statement but here goes ... my study of African art has changed my life and westernised view of the world. The more I read and learned of African art the more I thought that I had learned about the world in reverse. If I had started life studying the concepts embedded in African art before any other area in my education as an architect and artist I believe I would have had a better grasp of not only the world of art but also of human nature, sustainability, mathematics, in fact everything. African art is a reflection of world in its simplest most beautiful form. At a decorative surface level African might be reduced to being colourful, naturalistic, primitive, symbolic but what I have come to understand beyond a graphic appreciation is its intellectual origins and inspiration.

A primary feature of African art is mathematics. For me this was not entirely obvious if compared to Islamic art for example. Islamic art and architecture is pure mathematics with no figurative form. With Islamic art the mathematical grids that generate the tile work and great mosques are determined by grids of increasing decreasing scale and complexity. With African art however the increasing decreasing patterns and determinants are also grids but are fractal grids. When I said earlier that African art is a reflection of the world I meant quite literally it is a reflection of the world. When fractals were discovered by scientist in the 20th century they were described by some as God's finger prints.

From my reading traditional African art is a direct extension of nature. For example anthropologists and mathematicians have documented African settlements as being based on fractal geometries. One notable mathematician Ron Eglash has claimed that this settlement planning is unique to the indigenous tribes of Africa and not evident in other continents whether South America or Asia. This interest in scaling proportionate harmonious degrees is captured in everything from village settlement plans, weaving patterns, traditional games, music and dance.



student

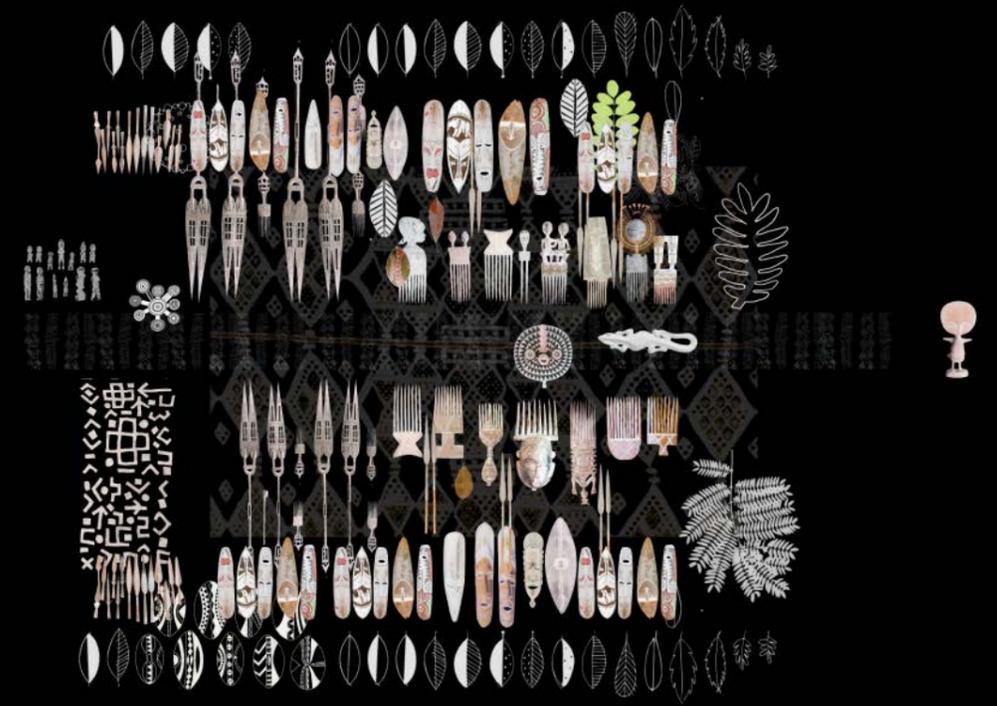
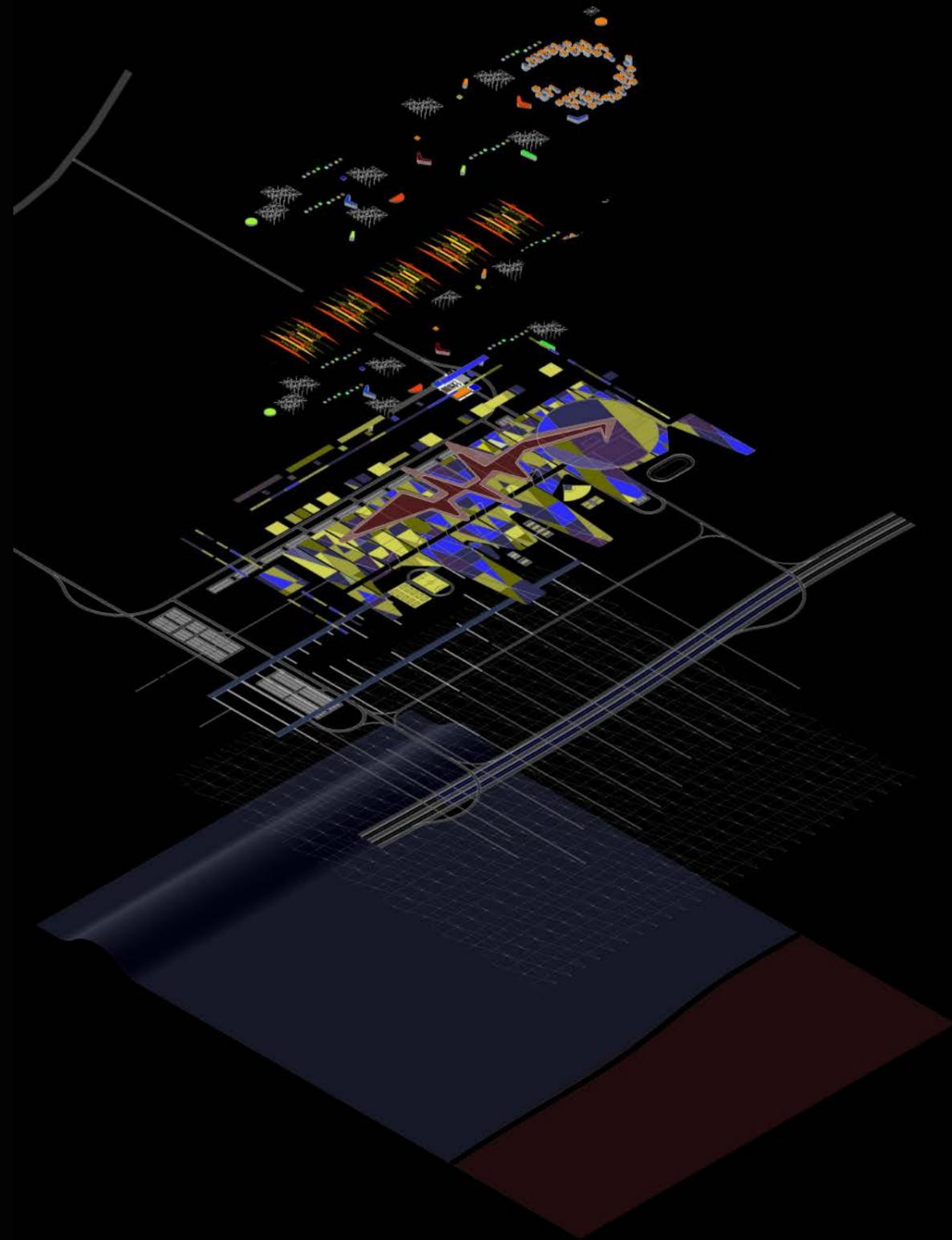
studio

department

faculty

campus

We want ideas of scaling, of harmony, of growth of infinity and inclusiveness to be the genesis of our project. We wanted architecture that was African in spirit at an intellectual level, a planning system that develops according to the AUCA's developing requirements, growing like a flower or a tree beautiful at every stage.



Even more wonderful the fractal grids that underlie African art are complimented by symbolic overlays. It is this graphic language that most people relate to when you mention the continents arts and crafts.

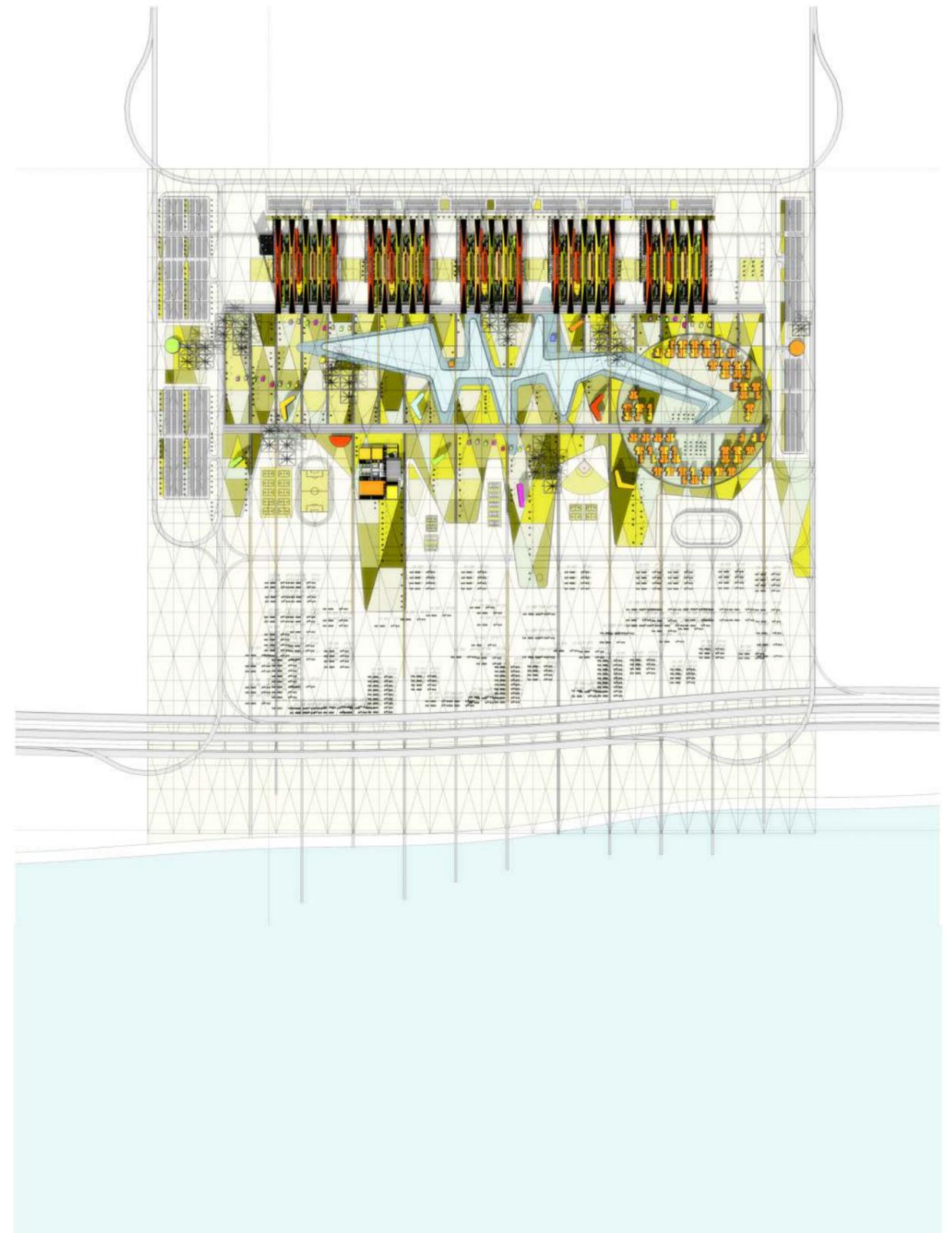
Architecturally I was interested in connecting what I understood were the determining principles of African art and incorporating them in our project. I wanted the ideas of scaling, of harmony, of growth of infinity and inclusiveness to be the genesis of our project. I wanted architecture that was African in spirit at an intellectual level, a planning system that develops according to the AUCA's developing requirements, growing like a flower or a tree beautiful at every stage.

What we proposed for the new University architecture was an approach that started with the student. From the learning environment of a single student, we scaled up to imagine a studio, from a studio we extended to department and from a department to a faculty, from a faculty to a campus, from a campus to a whole learning environment in the context of the city. The scaling approach has wonderful aesthetic synergies with African art but the social, cultural and political relevancies give it validity. Even economically the approach is attractive in presenting a campus architecture that can expand incrementally into a landscape dependant on the realities of time and money.

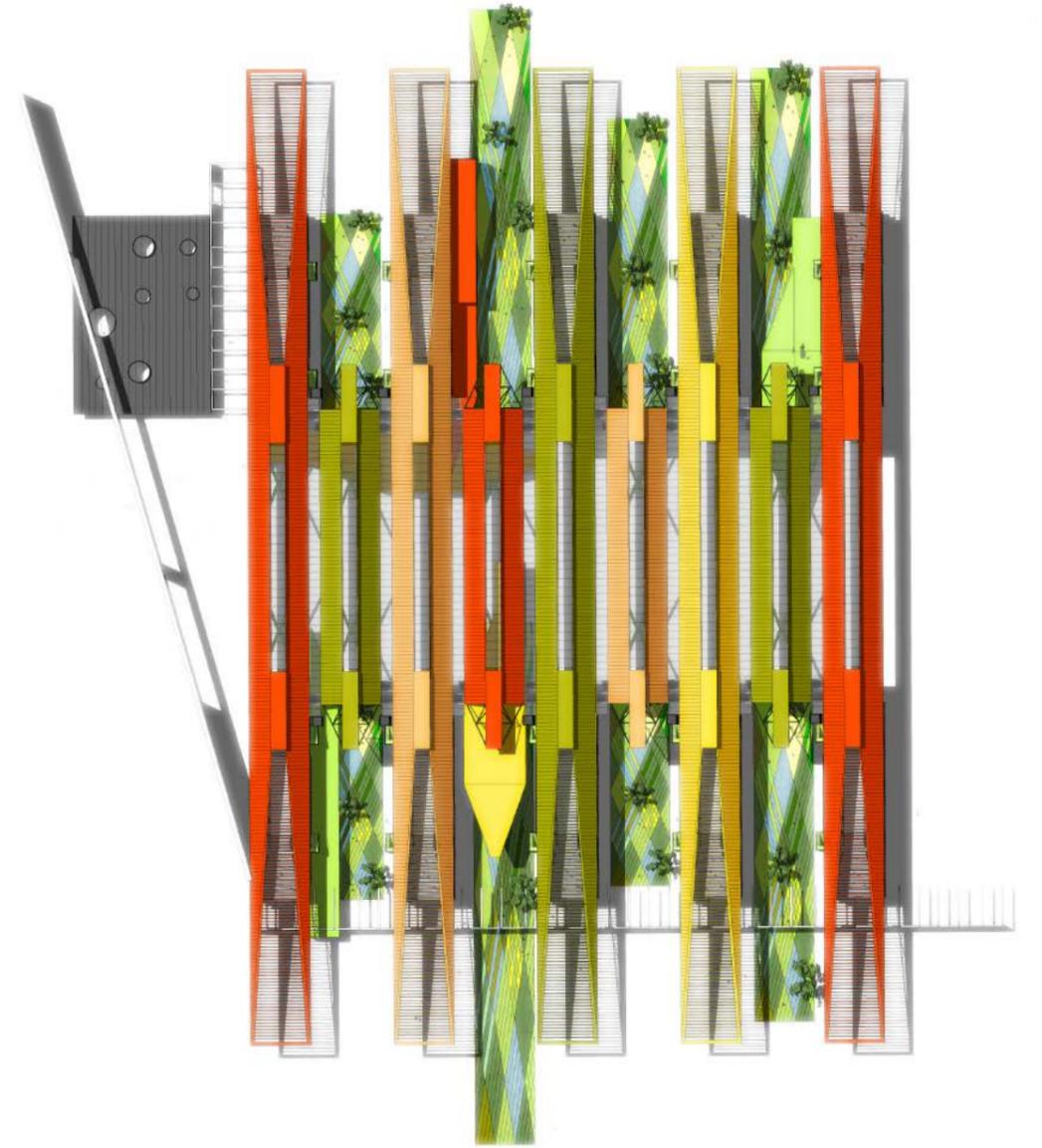
Even more wonderful the fractal grids that underlie African art are complimented by symbolic overlays. It is this graphic language that most people relate to when you mention the continents arts and crafts. Across Africa there are hundreds of different languages and tribal inflections that influence design. The sheer variety, depth and complexity is astonishing. Figuratively African art is rich in meaning. From leaves to lizards every shape, colour and line has a narrative and coded message. In Europe early 20th century art movements like post impressionism and DaDA referenced Africa primitive sculptures and forms as a refreshing juxtaposition to the Beaux Art excesses of the day. Much of African art and the new wave of African contemporary artists still have this ability to primevally scream.

Figuratively speaking (or rather painting) working on AUCA masterplan is like being a kid with a new box of toys, all my Glasgow toys, my ships, cranes, bridges, walls have been replaced by lions, tigers, lizards and leafs! No rain to deal with just sunshine. I was worried that if I spent to long in Nigeria that I would start wearing colourful clothes. Seriously thought the potential for a new African architectural vernacular is exciting. As parts of Africa become more prosperous and culturally confident I am sure we will see more young African architects making modernism theirs. Look at China's emergent avant garde artists and architects challenging the worlds preconceptions.

More architecture schools and learning environments like our proposed African University of Creative Arts will ensure that future Africans are empowered to access their heritage and take the art in Africa into their architecture. It is important because fundamentally we are all African, everything came from Africa, culture, literature, art, mathematics, philosophy, mankind. Africa's contribution to art worldwide is total.



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Our preliminary sketch proposals for the University faculty architecture responds to the sites coastal location, orientated to face and exploit the prevailing winds from the sea. The studio forms combine parallel to each other around captured landscapes offering shade and quiet. The structures are directed north south so that the sun that passes directly overhead provides for as much shading as possible. The buildings abstract forms determined by functional requirements but at the same time resemble the shapes of the local fishing boats, a seed pod, a leaf, an African comb.



Our generous and ambitious (... & glamorous) client Ejemen Ojeabulu on the site of the proposed African University of the Creative Arts; Lagos, Nigeria. Ej's vision is simple; to transform peoples lives by offering an opportunity to study art and African art within an academic environment that is world class ... and in Africa.

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