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Jigeen yi mbooloo - Women Together
Women's Centre, Rufisque, Senegal

The general African way of women organising themselves in organisations, with the number of members ranging from tens to hundreds, also occurs in Senegal. An active and strong women's group attempts to ease its members' everyday life amidst poverty and strives to guarantee them a reasonable 'social security'. Their activities have an organised structure, which means a step forward from the traditional social network created by family and friends.

The women's centre, built in a suburb of Rufisque, offers facilities for the activities of the various organisations formed by the women. The idea and the spatial programme of the centre were born in cooperation with local women's groups. The building was carried out as an NGO project through 'Tekniska Förening i Finland', and was financed by the Finnish Foreign Ministry, the Senegalese-Finnish Association ARC, as well as by scholarships received from various foundations. The plot was donated by the city of Rufisque and donations were also given by locals.

According to the West African custom, the building is grouped around an internal courtyard; the line between private and public is clear albeit flexible. The simplicity of the street facades adapts the building to its surroundings; the corner facing a road crossing forms a small public square where the facilities reserved for commerce are located. The building's red colour gives the house its own identity amidst the grey tone of the city block structure.

The building frame is a column and beam structure cast on site, with the walls made from concrete blocks cast in a mould and dried on site. The roof is corrugated metal sheeting supported by a steel beam system, with thick woven straw matting forming an insulating ceiling structure; the spacing between is ventilated, which guarantees that the indoor air is kept pleasantly cool. Localness and recycling is emphasised in the material choices; the use of wood is limited to minimum, old car wheel rims have been used as ventilation holes and the bottoms of old glass bottles for windows. The reinforcement irons in the concrete have been made from recycled iron.

The centre was completed in October 2001 and has been in active use ever since.

Saija Hollmén, Jenni Reuter and Helena Sandman:
The City of Rufisque

The city of Rufisque is situated on the main highway of Senegal about 30 km east of the capital Dakar. With a current population of about 200,000, the city saw its heyday during the French colonial period, when it boasted the most important port in West Africa. In time, however, the port in Dakar proved superior, and trade in Rufisque declined. Of the production plants established by the French, only the pharmaceutical maker Valdafrique and the cement factory Sococim are still in commission, both owned by the French. Former industrial premises and trading houses stand empty and decaying for lack of maintenance. The city's inhabitants suffer from high unemployment, and faced with massive internal migration the authorities are floundering for lack of resources. Although Senegal is one of the most stable countries in Africa, political struggles for power have been quite intense recently, bringing public officials to an even greater standstill.

We might say that Rufisque has its share of the worst problems of developing nations, including population explosion, a high unemployment rate and an inadequate infrastructure. Typically, in a city that lies barely one metre above sea level, sewage is collected in open canals that are, in theory, supposed to move the waste into the sea. The health risks caused by the lack of proper amenities are glaring, as attested to by the grim statistics for malaria in Rufisque, for example.

Social structures – the position of men and women in Senegalese society

The Senegalese society is very much divided by gender. The man's role is that of a provider, traditionally a hunter, perhaps, who returns home at night either with a catch or not. The woman carries the responsibility for the family and the children alone, regardless of whether the husband brings home any money or not. A woman cannot expect the husband to contribute to household expenses, not even when he has a steady income. The man wields absolute authority in the family, whether he is able to provide for them or not. The woman's role is to tend the home without questioning her husband's actions.

In a city like Rufisque, where most of the men are unemployed and cannot contribute to their family's livelihood, the women's position has become considerably harder. Owing to his position the husband will not accept just any job, so most men spend their time doing nothing. Mostly they take refuge in polygamy to share the burden among several women, or they alternatively take to the road. It is left to the women to look after the home and the children, to secure food for the table and see to the children's school attendance. Most of the women in Rufisque have some small business of their own, such as selling vegetables in the marketplace, and using the income to buy food.

Both men and women keep up the outward signs of this male dominance, although below the surface it is impossible to think that the situation would not gradually change the gendered structure of power. Yet this kind of segregation remains an absolute and unquestioned norm.

Women's groups

The women's strategy for survival in this difficult situation is also based on tradition. In the old tribal communities, the women used to do their daily chores together, often divided into age groups. The notion of family was extensive, covering all social, material and spiritual needs. In the younger urban communities, this tight supporting ring of family and friends has disintegrated or is in danger of disintegrating, which means there is a need for alternative
structures. Against this background, it is easy to understand why women especially in urban communities organise themselves in groups. For instance, there are very many women's groups in Rufisque, only a few of which are officially registered.

One important activity of the women's groups is *tontine*, a form of collective saving. Once a week the women have a meeting where everyone donates a small sum to the fund. The capital thus accumulated is given to a member of the group according to a system of rotation established in advance. The sum can be used to establish a small business, for example. Some of the money is put aside in a benevolent fund. The women can borrow from the fund for unexpected expenses, such as medication or a funeral. In addition to *tontine*, the women also engage in other forms of economic, social and spiritual activity.

For most women, membership in a women's group like this is the only way of providing even a modest security for the family. Apart from material survival, many women feel that the group's support is also vital for psychological survival.

The new women's centre

In the spring of 1996 a group of students from the Department of Architecture at the Helsinki University of Technology travelled to Senegal under the supervision of architects Hennu Kjisik and Veikko Vasko to study a local problem of architecture in the spirit of true cultural exchange. The *Centre ARC*, a centre of Senegalese-Nordic cultural exchange established in the city of Rufisque, provided the students with accommodation and an opportunity for local contacts. Through the director of the centre, the sociologist Anne Rosenlew, we were introduced to the activities of a women’s group, and upon the initiative of the group we decided to design as an exercise a centre for the women’s associations of their city quarter. The purpose of the women’s group is to ease the everyday lives of its members amidst poverty and to ensure that they have a basic level of social security. The women improve their level of education through voluntary literacy courses; they augment their income by selling home cooking and crafts; and they help other women moving into the city from the countryside to adapt. These activities are ordered and internally organized, signifying progress from the traditional social network of relatives and friends. A centre of one’s own was felt to provide necessary facilities for the various associations and to permit the further development of work. The idea was left to mature, and a complex process of several years’ duration came under way, during which the project changed form on several occasions.

Information and discussions from the very beginning

When the project had received support from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and after the city of Rufisque had donated a site for the women’s centre, we could begin the planning and design work from the basis of an actual framework. The final target group was not defined until the site was donated, and the representatives of women’s groups active in the area were pleased upon hearing of the project. The centre would be the first public building in the whole section of Gouye Aldiana, where the infrastructure was relatively primitive in other respects. It was no doubt a problem at women’s meetings when the fence of the hostess would collapse from the sheer numbers of participants. And the very idea of a centre of their own seemed to raise the feeling of solidarity and self-esteem among women. We followed the activities of the groups in joint meetings and get-togethers, and through questions and discussions we tried to establish the women’s real needs for space. At times it was difficult to focus attention on the order of realizing the project: someone would be concerned that the centre would definitely have a Moulinex blender, while another wanted forks, and yet a third wanted to have small toilet seats for children. Of course everyone nodded with understanding when we explained once again that the most important thing would be to build the house first, and how in the initial stages we would need information on their activities and their dreams of what activities they would like to pursue in their own centre. Our budget was not exceedingly large, and we had to underline repeatedly the importance of shared responsibility and the collection of funds.
It was also important to inform other civic organizations in the area of the women’s’ centre project from the very beginning. We had to answer questions such as: "Why a women’s centre, why not a sports club, crafts workshop, kindergarten, or workshop for young people?" or "Couldn’t you arrange visits to Finland, or perhaps mobile phones?". We could only answer that we have to start somewhere. We had the support of Papa Samba Mbengue, the mayor of the section of the city, and the Senegalese architect Mbacke Niang, who served as consultant and supervisor throughout the project. By providing information from an early stage and by avoiding all manner of administrative links we sought to prevent the politicization of the project and a situation where the completed building would no longer be in the use of the women’s groups.

Core issues and problems of design

The main problem of the city of Rufisque is the sea. Over the past four decades it has eroded the port and shoreline boulevard of the city as well as the traditional housing areas of the local fishermen. The only section still resisting the onslaught of the sea is the colonial centre, while a varied array of housing is rapidly emerging to the north of the city. Gouye Aldiana is in the northern part of Rufisque, where town planning has not proceeded at the same pace as the growth of population. There are serious failings of municipal technology; sewage and rain water are collected in wide, open canals, which in theory are supposed to move the waste into the sea. This entails obvious health risks, and we were happy to be donated a site in an area where there is a definite need for development.

Once the accommodation of rooms and space was established, the actual design initially required a great deal of footwork in order to internalize the scale of the fabric of the surrounding city blocks. We also studied the granularity of the area with satellite maps, and whenever possible we visiting the homes of the inhabitants. The custom of placing the various buildings of the home around a central courtyard appeared to follow the patterns of traditional rural architecture. Behind the kitchens and auxiliary buildings there were always small courtyards shielded from view. The distinct borderline between public and private space was also to be noted. We did not want to underline the public nature of the new women’s centre but rather to build it in the manner of a Rufisque house.

Our objective was above all to create for its users a functioning building that is easy to approach. The surrounding building stock is densely developed and low, and we felt it was important to accommodate the women’s centre in the fabric of the surrounding blocks in a manner that would avoid the fate of similar projects that we had seen where the buildings stand half-empty in the middle of their open sites, with no use for the yard area. Accordingly, we designed a solid outer wall for the centre, with the various structures grouped around the inner courtyard. The boundary of the private and public spheres was thus distinct, yet still flexible. We wanted to have simple façades facing the street in order to provide a better fit with the surroundings. We opened a corner at the crossing of two streets to create a small piazza, with the space reserved for sales and trading opening onto it. The red colour of the house was the result of various experiments, but it appears to be a successful solution, as the strong iron-oxide hue gives the house its own identity amidst the greyish fabric of the surrounding blocks. Upon completion the building was immediately given the name Kër Xonq – the Red House.

After preparing the plans and designs for the building permit application, we made a wooden scale model (1:50) of the house. When we were finally able to present the project to the women with the aid of the designs and the scale model, the reaction was one of immense enthusiasm. It provided much-needed confidence in the success of the project.

Nor was it quite simple to assemble a competent collaborating team for the project. We knew a few qualified building engineers, but cooperation foundered when the engineer did not want to be paid because of the public utility nature of the projects. Accordingly, the work remained undone. We finally hired Galaey Niang, a competent and professionally skilled engineer to prepare the structural calculations, and we were happy to note that we had made a good choice. Not only a skilled engineer, Galaye Niang also has a sharp eye for noting and perceive things,
and he was often the first of the team to understand our intentions, which he explained to the others. Consultant architect Mbacke Niang and building contractor Abdourahmane Mbaye did good work, but did not receive enough praise from us. Only afterwards did we realize how difficult it is for men in Senegalese culture to receive instructions from females, especially young women. We can only express our respect for their ability to work flexibly in an exceptional project. We, in turn, found it difficult to understand why it could not be admitted that a technical detail was not understood. Also keeping to the budget seemed to be an overwhelming task.

Local materials and labour

We wanted to apply ecological and local solutions in the construction work, and for a long while we studied, among other features, opportunities to use stabilized mud bricks. But there was no suitable type of clay for this purpose in the nearby region, and since Sococim, the largest cement factory of Western Africa is in the outskirts of the city, cement is accordingly a local material. This issue was ultimately solved by the fact that Sococim donated all the necessary cement for the project. The skeleton of the building was made of concrete as a column-and-beam structure that was cast on site. The walls were made of cement blocks cast in moulds and dried on site. The bars of the reinforced concrete were made of recycled metal, which also donated, by the Sosetra factory of Rufisque. Wood was used only where no other material could be used in its stead. Recycled wheel rims from cars were used for vents, and "glass bricks for fenestration were made from old bottles which were split and whose bottom parts were joined together. We felt this was good and amusing way of recycling, but it so happened that the best green bottles were beer bottles, which caused our building contractor Abdourahmane Mbaye extra worries. A good practising Muslim does not drink beer, and he did not particularly relish even collecting and transporting the empty bottles in his car – although after the house was finished even he would laugh at the whole matter.

Following our own aesthetic concept of recycling, we wanted to leave the metal wheel rims, lamps and shutters unpainted, as also the sand plastering of the whole building in keeping with its surroundings, but the local partners took an adamant position. Leaving the centre unpainted would be a sign of a lack of resources. In Senegal, recycling is often dictated by force of circumstances and it is associated with different values than in Finland. We thus sought to make even recycled items things of beauty and finish in order to express the right message. The roof of the women’s centre is of corrugated metal on steel beams, with thick woven straw matting as an insulating ceiling layer. The intervening space is ventilated, which keeps the air inside the building pleasantly cool. The ventilated and insulated ceiling structure was a technical solution that we wanted to keep, even though it was an unknown idea locally and required a great deal of effort in its realization. Finally, after explaining the principles and the details of the joints several times, the result broadly corresponded to our expectations. The weaving of straw matting is a local custom that is no longer seen very often. We were happy to note that Abdourahmane Mbaye also had an excellent team for this task. On the other hand, straw is a seasonal product, and the work on the roof and ceiling took place out of season, which raised the price and made it difficult to obtain materials. The site donated to the women’s centre is on the north side of the city in a location that is a runoff area during the rainy season. This was one reason why the lot was still empty. It was necessary to cast a relatively solid pillar foundation in the clayey soil of the site, for which the necessary structural designs and calculations of strength had to be made. We naturally wanted to apply and demonstrate an exemplary method of construction in an area where houses are often assembled as best one can for want of skill and information. The contractor assembled his crew mostly from among local residents, which provided jobs, trained people, and created an atmosphere of shared responsibility – although some envy as well: "Why is so-and-so’s son working at the site and not mine?” or “Why is so-and-so’s wife allowed to provide food for the builders and not my wife?” Amidst such conflicts, Mbacke Niang, in particular, demonstrating his excellent diplomatic skills. The young men who worked in the project were for the most part the sons of the women of our target group, a point that we felt was important.
The centre was completed in October 2001. It was realized as a civic organization project via the Tekniska Föreningen i Finland association, and was funded by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Fenno-Senegalese Association ARC, with the sociologist Anne Rosenlew as its leading figure. As mentioned above, the site for the centre was donated by the city of Rufisque and local businesses supported the project with donations of materials. Moreover, the Finnish Cultural Foundation and several other Finnish funds and foundations provided grants for the purpose. The opening of the Red House drew hundreds of people and the mood of the event was joyous and relaxed. We had travelled between Finland and Senegal for five years, and despite several attacks of fever and gastric disorders we had avoided malaria, and learned a valuable lesson about humanity and our profession. We returned home aware of having been allowed as architects to realize a project of real significance with considerable influence on the lives of many people.
A view from the street

A view to the main entrance

The entrance court
The atelier

The courtyard

The backyard
The atelier

The guardians room

A view from the entrance

Kitchen wing
The hall

The atelier

The women participated to the design from the very beginning
Recycled car rims were used as ventilation openings

Photographs: Juha Ilonen
The authors:


Hollmén-Reuter-Sandman Architects has won a number of Finnish and international awards for the Women’s Centre project. The Women’s Centre was featured in the Finnish Aalto pavilion at the 8th Architectural Biennial in Venice, 8 September -3 November 2002, where it formed part of an exhibition produced by the Museum of Finnish Architecture. The team will also be featured at the Snowshow exhibition at the Venice Art Biennial 2003, and The Snow Show Art and Architecture Exhibition in 2004 in Rovaniemi, Finland.