

# STRUCTURE AND MEANING IN HUMAN SETTLEMENTS



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Mexcaltitan Village, Nayarit, Mexico, is located in a lagoon on the Pacific coast northwest of Guadalajara. The cross made by the intersection of the four main streets represents the division of the heavens into the "four corners of the world."

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# RAZING THE ROOF

## THE IMPERATIVE OF BUILDING DESTRUCTION IN DANHOMÈ (DAHOMÉY)

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Architecture has often been identified as a paradigmatic creative art, but it is also, and equally importantly, an art of unique violence, as seen in terms not only of the processes of building construction, but also the variety of architectural forms and landscape features which must be razed in order for new buildings to be erected in their stead. Whether as a result of war, the planned leveling of earlier community edifices (and the displacement of associated peoples), or as structures built in “virgin” landscape, new architecture only emerges through the destruction of earlier forms—built or natural. Architectural vision and practice thus are poignantly contradictory phenomena that reveal *a priori* the inherent ambiguities of the individuals and cultures that construct and inhabit them. While architects and architectural historians have often paid close attention to the creative aspects of architecture and planning (as well as an array of larger social, economic, and symbolic concerns), relatively little scholarship has focused on the equally powerful forces of building destruction (or processes of “unbuilding”) which are a vital part of the larger architectural process.

This chapter examines aspects of architectural destruction in the kingdom of Danhomè (Danxome, Dahomey), situated in the modern Republic of Benin in West Africa. In other West African cultures, such as the rural Batammaliba, elements of architectural destruction also have clear-cut symbolic and religious roots, even though coming from quite different architectural traditions (Blier 1987). The Danhomè kingdom, founded in the 17th century, expanded rapidly over the course of time under a series of powerful (often bellicose) monarchs, and it drew both architectural prototypes and mythic features from the various cultures that came under its military control. Rather than identifying with a holistic creative myth—as did many African kingdoms, such as the Yoruba—the Danhomè kingdom defined itself through a narrative of political dominance replete with architectural signification.

### THE POST

The Danhomè account of dynastic origins speaks not of gods or human creation as such, but rather of the founding ruler Hwegbaja who, angered by a neighbor named Dan (and desirous of his land), took a pole (known locally as *kpatin*) and skewered it through Dan's stomach, killing him. The fledgling Danhomè ruler then built a new palace on the corpse of the unfortunate man. The name Danhomè, “in the stomach of Dan” (Dan, *xo*-stomach, *me*-in), derives from this horrible act, a story recounted in nearly every Danhomè history for this reason (Le Herissé 1911). Today this name appears prominently on the palace facade of Danhomè's





13.1 The palace of King Gbehanzin (1889–93).

early King, Akaba (1685–1705) because land originally identified with Dan was later integrated into Akaba's palace terrain. Dan's descendants still live today in a family compound nearby. The account of Dan's murder became a charter of sorts for the Danhomè monarchy, a justification for the expansionist drives of its early rulers, and a vivid exemplar of the punishment afforded those who did not submit to Danhomè desires. Poles, partly for this reason, feature prominently in palace altars. The royal mantra, "always make Danhomè bigger," is evinced in this story, an idiom that is a central component of the Danhomè palace complex as well. The palace complex was the work of ten monarchs, as each king built a new part of the complex adjacent to the palace of his predecessor. When the monarch died, he was commemorated in his own palace section.

The account of Danhomè origins cited above is clearly a very different narrative (and myth of building inception) than that of many other African cultures, reflecting the often violent dynastic history of Danhomè, a kingdom which came to power as a key participant in the tragic era of the international slave trade. Interestingly, the Danhomè god who is said to have taught humans architecture, is also the god of war, Gu. According to Mercier (1954), "Gu [iron god] brought down to earth by Mawu—he cut down trees and taught men how to build shelters and instructed them how to dig the ground" (223). The icon of this god is an iron machete, an image displayed prominently on the façades of several palaces. The kingdom's main myth of origin in turn features a leopard whose bloodthirstiness often is depicted in related wall paintings and bas reliefs.



13-2 Plan of palace.

The kpatin pole said to have been positioned in the body of Dan also figures centrally in everyday Danhomè architectural practice. Indeed, the primary act of building a house in this region historically has consisted of a rite in which a kpatin branch is planted in the earth—the first support for what will be a living fence (the base of a freshly cut kpatin branch will root) demarcating the boundary of the house land. In addition to this post Roberto Pazzi (1976) suggests, “To clear a new field, especially if one must take it from a forest, one must do a rite of propitiation which addresses the ancestors and the invisible forces that inhabit it. One raises a mound for them, where one makes offering as part of the harvest” (208). Like the kpatin fence, which defines the property boundaries of the new house, four kpatin trees also historically are secured in the earth to define the perimeters of a new tomb. The planting of the kpatin and subsequent trees of this species to create a fence serves in essence to reserve (and protect) the space. We can liken this to urban centers in the West, where the first real architectural act is generally the building of a fence around the building site to be followed by the razing of the previous structure and the removing of the debris and earth where one wants to build.

At the same time, the planting of the kpatin in the body of Dan functioned in part to guard the secret of the origins of the state in Hwegbaja’s appropriation of the property from its rightful owners, in this case the indigenous populations and rulers who had been living on the Abomey plateau long before this dynasty came to dominate here. The link between secrecy and fences is imbedded in local language as well. When one wishes to reveal a secret, one says *ede kpa*, “he removed the fence.”

13.3 The newly enthroned heir to the Gbehanzin family throne walking out through the freshly cut door of his "princely" palace compound during enthronement ceremonies.



Reflecting the architectural and iconic importance of the fence in the Danhomè account of dynastic origins, Danhomè palaces are noteworthy as much for their properties of walled enclosures as for the structures built inside. The English traveler Dalzel, who visited the nearby Danhomè town of Cana during the reign of the 18th century monarch Tegbesu, noted: "The king has several palaces, each occupying an air of terrain of nearly a square mile. The description of that of Calmina will serve for all the others. This palace . . . is surrounded by a great rampart of clay in square form, of a height of around 20 feet" (Pazzi 1976:xiii). The local Fongbe (Danhomè) term for palace, *xon*, *xonme*, is drawn from the word "door" (*bon*), the means of access (and denial of access) through a fence/wall (Pazzi 1976:193). Each king and queen mother creates his or her own door into the palace as part of the enthronement process. As such, the door refers not only to the mat or plank that historically closed the point of entry into the structure or space but also to the vital symbol of power and the authority of



13.4 Royal gong players, singing in front of the main entry to the palace of King Gbehanzin during annual ceremonies.

the person residing inside. In part for this reason, during the annual *Hwetanu* ceremonies, royal *kpaligan* (gong) players sing accolades to the deceased kingdom rulers in front of their palace doors.

The principal building form in the Danhomè area for both royal and non-royal residences is a structure of laterite rich bright red earth (today often mixed with or plastered with cement), of rectilinear design usually with a single door and one or perhaps two small square windows. Roofs, which in the past were thatched, are now of corrugated metal. Other structures appear to have been largely circular (though of the same red earth walls and roofs of thatch). Today round buildings figure prominently as royal temples, shrines, and tombs, in the royal precinct and elsewhere.

As with the prominence of the *kpatin* pole/tree in the Danhomè account of dynastic origin, the house in turn is generally accepted as a vital symbol of the state. The royal priest Mivede suggested to me that in the kingdom of Danhomè, the image of the house often serves as a political metaphor: "Abomey is the house; Danhomè is the house. Thus no harm will come

13.5 *Djexo* "spirit houses" dedicated to past Danhomè kings in the palace section of King Agaja.



to the house. Even if one puts fire to the house it will not burn. The enemies will not be able to take it away" (personal communication 1986). Local historian Nondichao explained to me similarly that "the kingdom is like a room" (personal communication 1986). Royal greetings reference houses. Whereas in Fongbe, the local language, one ordinarily greets people by saying *a fon gangia*, "did you awaken well?" to the king one says instead *n'kan hwegbio* "I have come to ask after the house." The king, in this sense, is the ultimate house owner and housekeeper of the nation. Like royal greetings, local language also offers insight into the role of the kpatin post in fencing the first Danhomè palace. The stomach (*xo*), that part of the body of Dan where the post was inserted, in turn is believed to be the seat of one's emotions. *Xomesin* ("the stomach is attached, tied up") is the local term for anger (see Blier 1995a:141). By suggesting that Hwegbaja built his palace in the stomach of Dan underscores not only the hostility of this act but also the wellspring of anger potentially still felt by Dan's family and other local residents through the act of being dispossessed.

There are other important architectural-anthropomorphic references in Danhomè building practice. As in many other parts of Africa, key features of these buildings are identified with the body. The roof (*xo-ta*) refers literally to the head of the house. The heads of defeated enemies were often positioned on the palace roof, where they were a visible reminder of war victims. The main courtyard of the family and palace compound in turn is called *agbonu* "mouth of the wall." The "stomach of the house" (*xofome*) refers to the house floor (Pazzi 1976:163, 191, 207, 235, 287). The placenta is buried behind the house, and it is here where the mother takes her bath. It also is behind the house where the toilet is located, the term being "one goes behind the house" (*e yi xo-gudo*). The house floor is where the fullness of the house—its inhabitants



and its wealth—is safeguarded. That the new Danhomè palace was said to have been built in the stomach of Dan in this way too makes reference to various ideas of loss.

## THE PYTHON

While the architectonic violence implicated in King Hwegbaja's act of killing Dan and marking his stomach with an upright pole is an image that is no worse than many of the gruesome ontological features of early European state-building contexts, for example in London or ancient Rome, the story of Dan after whom the Danhomè kingdom was named is far more complex and provocative than even the above-discussed features of this narrative suggest. The term "Danhomè" has another etymological source that is also rich in architectural meaning. In the Danhomè language, Dan (Dangbe) is also the word for the powerful local python god who is held to be responsible for ocean currents, the wind, wealth, and change more generally. Symbol of the ancestors, the python is a potent icon of life and regeneration. To utter the name of the kingdom, Danhomè, i.e., "in the stomach of Dan," is also to state that Danhomè inhabitants (and their monarchs) reside in the middle (within the encircling circle) of the powerful python god, Dan/Dangbe. Representations of this god are frequently seen in architecture (both palace and religious) and other forms.



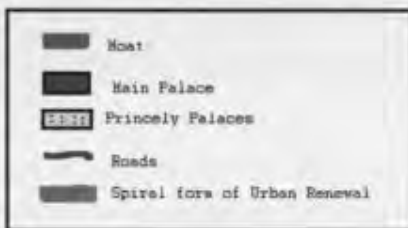
13.6 Royal bas-relief of Dangbe the python deity.

13.7 Bas-reliefs from the temple to Dangbe in Ouidah, showing the python deity in acts of violence.



The very center (middle, stomach) of the palace accordingly incorporates a ritual area named for this python, *Ayido Hwedo*, as the serpent Dan in rainbow form is called. Here historically important sacrifices were made, the wealth and moisture bringing properties of the ritual are particularly well appreciated. The moat and wall that surround the capital are similarly identified with this python deity (Blier 1998). Like the moat, the python god is said to surround the earth with its undulating body, propelling the ocean's strong currents, and other forms of movement. Shown biting its tail in many of its royal and religious portrayals, the python deity also alludes to the shared consumptive (destructive) and creative (life promoting) properties of the Danhomè kingdom and its powerful rulers and gods. Accordingly, in addition to bringing wealth, the python also is thought to bring death to its enemies (in nature by constricting then devouring its prey). Like the door (and palace), called *xon/bon* that plays the role of funnel or catch-basin of the kingdom's wealth, the city's dry moat served not only to safeguard the city from enemy attack but also to keep the vitality and wealth which was amassed in the center through war and trade from fleeing. In this way the dry moat and adjacent wall, which was designed by Hwegbaja's son King Agaja (1708–32), helped to protect the city (and its monarch) from internal theft. Here too its reference to the sacred python is apt.

13.8 Plan of royal capital, Abomey (Agbome), showing the spiral pattern of urban renewal.



The historic process of urban renewal in the Danhomè capital of Abomey (Agbome), beginning with the killing of Dan in the early years of the kingdom, subscribed to a similar serpentine spiral form. As each ruler came to power he not only increased the size of the central palace (the interior, the stomach, of the python), but he also built for himself—his family, ministers, priests, artists, and servants—a princely palace with sometimes vast parcels of adjacent land for his family, courtiers, servants, and ministers. This space was appropriated from the indigenous inhabitants, a process which forced local residents whose properties were being annexed to move farther and farther from the center. Appropriating and building on these earlier settlements in a counterclockwise spiral pattern, the striking visual (and conceptual) parallels between architectural change over time (and space) and the spiral form tail-consuming python god Dan is strikingly evidenced. A team of local ethno-historians (Houseman et al. 1986) first documented the spiral pattern of royal expansion, but during my 1985–86 fieldwork I was able to further document this pattern while also linking it specifically to the python god Dan. The prominent spiral form of the capital's spatial conception suggests that King Agaja and the city's early designers designated at the outset both a specific plan for the city and a certain pattern of change through urban renewal. Interestingly, the disposition of palace areas



13.9 Spiral placement of ritual "houses" dedicated to past family members set up during the memorial ceremonies for Daxo, Hwawe.

identified with Danhomè's many kings follows a similar spiral form in this case moving in a clockwise fashion as each king built a new entry or door. During the memorial rites for the ancient priest-king Daxo from the earlier adjacent kingdom at Hwawe (Blier 1995b), small ephemeral houses were set up in a similar spiral fashion in honor of deceased members of this important royal family.

In the preceding pages I have suggested two strikingly different and yet complementary meanings of the kingdom's name, Danhomè, each with vital architectonic significance. One version is focused on Hwegbaja's neighbor, Dan, who lived on land that the new king hoped to use for his own needs and whose death made sacred the new kingdom. The other version refers to the powerful python god, Dan, who brings moisture, wealth, and well-being to its worshipers as well as impoverishment and sometimes death to those who opposed its tenets.

It appears that it was the founding King Hwegbaja's grandson, King Agaja (1708–32), who designed the first plan for the fledgling capital in the early 18th century following his successful military campaign to the coastal area around Ouidah and what was then the Savi Kingdom. In honor of this military victory, and his early conquest of Allada which lies midway between the two, Agaja is said also to have introduced the first annual "custom" rites (*Xwetanu*). Court songs and local oral traditions that I collected reaffirm that Agaja's architectural vision for the new dynasty at Abomey entailed four key elements. The first three features were relatively



standard in urban planning around the globe: (1) the designation of a center; (2) establishing the principal avenues leading from and to this point; (3) marking the city's exterior border with a massive dry moat and adjacent interior rampart wall of earth. In reference to this latter feature, the new city was named or renamed Agbome (Abomey), i.e., "inside the moat." The fourth element in the Agbome city plan is more unusual and constitutes the creation of the spiral-form plan discussed above, which is the basis for royal and urban growth and renewal.

Each of these elements worked together to make the city what it would become. Before deciding on the dimensions of the dry moat that would give Abomey its name and form, King Agaja had to select a center for the plan, a point from which key measurements would be taken. Agaja's choice of a center was the small house next to his own palace that had belonged to his father, Hwegbaja, prior to appropriating the land of Dan. It was here where the four main roads leading into the capital along the cardinal directions would join together. Thus the notion of center had at once architectural, historical, and political significance. Directly opposite the house of Hwegbaja, a new market was founded, assuring the center would have economic vitality. One of the city's most sacred precincts was established diagonal to Hwegbaja's ancient home. In reference to the latter, Pazzi explains (1979): "For the Fon, this city represented the central point, the *vodun* (or blood) of the universe" (119). Abomey for this reason also was sometimes called Hun, a term referring to the hotter, sacrificial aspects of the Vodun worshiped by the religious forces in this area (Blier 1995a).

Significantly, the idea of a moat or walled city was not new in this part of Africa, the 13th–15th century CE capital of Ife in nearby Nigeria, or the coeval Togo site of Tado being among the most important examples. The coastal town of Savi whose ruler, Huffon, King Agaja had defeated is also said to have had a moat (Norman and Kelly 2004). These earlier moats, however, are generally circular. According to Skertchly (1974), during the reign of Agaja the city came under attack but after "being repulsed, [they] filled this ditch with their dead bodies." The plan created by King Agaja is roughly square. The reasons for this shape are not clear. Perhaps the role of the rectilinear *kpatin* fence enclosure in the kingdom's founding was a factor. There is also a vital cosmological association of this shape. Bernard Maupoil (1981) in his analysis of Danhomè geomancy traditions, suggests that "the square form of nearly all the houses in lower Danhomè responded to a desire to propitiate the four great Vodun resting at the cardinal points" (546). These included most importantly Mawu the sun god (in the east), Lisa the lunar deity (in the west), Sagbata and the earth gods (in the north), and Hu and Hevioso the water gods (in the south). Maupoil notes: "The square symbolizes the domain of that which is knowable, the earth." The circle, in contrast "represents the domain of the unknowable or the sky" (546). The local term for cosmos (*weke*) integrates the two. A circled square or cross-embedded circle is an important royal icon that appears prominently in thrones, drums, and other arts. Square shapes are also important in contexts of royal divination signs (Blier 1990, 1991a). That both rectilinear and circular buildings distinguish the palace precinct serves in this way to make visible the kingdom's control over both the knowable and unknowable worlds.

As the Danhomè monarchy expanded, the question of control became even more important. Hence at the same time as the resisting communities outside of Abomey were leveled by the invading Danhomè troops, key markers, ranging from boulders and saplings to religious structures and whole markets, were brought back and set up in the capital. With each new victory, Danhomè's capital became richer and more varied. Le Herissé (1911) notes

accordingly of King Ganyeheso that "he killed the king of Zakpo [and] brought back the fetish of their market. At the time of this transfer, Aho [Hwegbaja], son of Dako, planted the trees that still shade the market of Bohicon" (283). The importance of these foreign forms also figured into the sometimes strict local sumptuary rules. According to these rules, Forbes (1851) explains "no man [other than the king] must alter the construction of his house, sit upon a chair, be carried on a hammock" (34). That King Guezo (1818–58) designed his palace entry in the style of the two story houses of the wealthy Brazilian slave traders living on the coast is noteworthy. Local rules meant that other elites could not follow suit.

A closer look at the type of pole that was said to have been forced through Dan's stomach suggests a similar feature of demise and growth. As noted above, the particular tree species in question, the kpatin fence tree (*ceiba pentadra, bombaceae*) (Brand 1981:20) self-roots when it is planted. When one cuts a branch of the tree (hence killing it) and places it in the ground, it becomes a new living tree. Hence it carries key qualities of a tree of life, a symbolism underscored by the fact that even in extreme cases of drought on this often water-depleted plateau, the kpatin will survive where certain other trees will die.

## ARCHITECTURAL DEATH

Processes of architectural construction also reinforce this co-joined destruction-regeneration theme. The use of cord called *kan* is particularly important in this regard. Not only were lengths of cord used here when measuring land (Pazzi 1976), but because nails historically were not employed in this culture, key parts of building construction (roofs, fences, doors) were realized by tying together various parts with cords. Particularly when braided, cords serve as icons of family succession, that which ties one generation to another. Yet cords are also and equally importantly symbols of slavery (see Blier 1985). Indeed *kannumon* "thing in cords," is the Danhomè word for slave. Because Danhomè dynastic expansion dovetailed closely with the bloodshed of slavery raids, the associations with binding were particularly poignant.

The basic building measure, a bamboo pole, was similarly linked to military power. In the words of Le Herissé (1911): "After conquering the whole country, Agaja [the creator of Abomey's plan] wanted to know the dimensions of his kingdom towards the south. He commanded someone to measure the distance from the Danhomè palace to the beach of Ouidah—a distance of 23,502 bamboos. The bamboo that was used for this still existed when the French entered Abomey [in 1892]. It measured 4.5 to 5 m" (298). Because the creation of the new city plan followed directly on Agaja's extraordinary military victory over the coastal town of Savi (hence control of the port and affiliated Western trade), the means of measurement (control and building) seems to be linked closely with the history of his conquest as well.

King Agaja's extraordinary military success against the Savi kingdom of Huffon (particularly for a kingdom then of little renown) was marked architecturally in other ways as well. Here too, Le Herissé's (1911) history offers important examples. He writes: "During [Agaja's] reign, a king from near Porto Novo [a town on the coast], Ataki of Bozoume, pushed his warriors toward Abomey. He was conquered and taken prisoner. Our king [Agaja] put him in charge of sweeping the front of his palace each day" (298). One still calls this vast area where Ataki carried out his punishment, Ataki-ba-ya "Ataki looks for the earth." Seeing the defeated King Ataki hunched over each day sweeping this space, an act historically associated



13.10 The area in front of the palace entry of King Guezo known as Atakinbaya.

with women and children, would have been a sight that few forgot. This act of denigration is recalled still today in the name of the area in front of the main palace portal, which is referred to as Atakinbaya.

Like the defeated king, Ataki, sweeper of the palace front, many of the palace builders and laborers in Danhomè appear to have been slaves or prisoners of war. Adandojan, the palace engineer, was in charge of one of the largest prisons. It was he, as Skertchly (1874) explains, who had the “authority over the men who are employed in building and repairing the palace walls and sheds” (120). Not all the laborers were bound workers, however, for as Skertchly also noted: “The masons, carpenters, and other workmen who were engaged in building the Jegbe palace [the princely palace of Glele, 1858–89] were [paid] . . . cowries, cotton cloths, [and] oranges” (376). These men also presumably played an important role in constructing many of the auxiliary palaces that the Danhomè monarchs constructed in this broader region.

Architectural “decoration” also carried the weight of the creative-destructive ethos. King Agaja, for example, is said to have decorated his palace walls with long strands of cowrie shells that hung down from the upper timbers. Cowries represent traditional currency here, a reference in part to the influx of wealth into the capital that came with Agaja’s capture of the Atlantic coastal area around Savi and Ouidah, and even more importantly, the Euro-American markets which lay across the sea. But cowries also incorporate deeply imbedded associations with slavery, as one of the forms of capital that figured in the acquisition of slaves.

Other, more direct references to violence are found in Danhomè palace decoration, in particular enemy crania. According to a 1724 letter written by a British prisoner of King Agaja (Pazzi 1979) it is said that this king “has already paved the area of his two principal palaces with the skulls of those he beat in war” (274). His successor King Tegbesu, the British traveler Norris (1773) informs us, lived in “a simple room isolated from the court which surrounds it by a wall, high as the chest and whose summit is garnished with a row of human jaws. The small area around the room is paved with skulls, those of neighboring kings and other distinguished



persons who fell prisoner during the course of wars" (148). Tegbesu's grandson, the 18th century ruler Agonglo, after defeating a town "called Agonkpa [brought back] the head of this king . . . to ornament the walls of the [princely] palace at Bekon-Huegbo" (Le Herissé 1911:309–310).

The spirit houses called *djexo* associated with the souls of the late kings are similarly linked to violence. The earth out of which these walls were made are said to have been composed of a combination of sacrificial blood and imported alcohol. Their form enhances the deathly association of these buildings. So low are they, and their entries so small, that one necessarily rubs against the blood and earthen walls on entering and exiting, with vital properties of death rubbing off as one goes through the threshold.

It was well-established practice in turn that each king was to expand the territory beyond the limits he had inherited, so as to assure that his own name would not be forgotten or disappear. While this is a noble, indeed vital, goal in any individual or culture, in African civilizations such as Danhomè, architecture played a particularly central part in retaining the memory of past individuals. Demolishing an individual's ancestral homestead is seen to be a deeply troubling event. Interestingly, the term most frequently used in reference to military destruction is to "break" a town, i.e., to break [deny] it of its people, its goods, its future, and its past. This complements in striking ways the idea of planting a kpatin branch to establish a new house or kingdom.

The disappearance of identity implicit in the notion of breaking the house of another could be experienced at any level of society. Skertchly describes what happened to the once extensive compound of the de Souza family in coastal Ouidah during the reign of the late 19th century Danhomè King Glele. De Souza, a wealthy Brazilian slave trader, met his end, according to Skertchly (1874), by being "poisoned by the fetish people for giving information to a [British anti-slavery] man-of-war of the loading of a slave ship. As such an offence is high treason, the property of the aggressor [here de Souza] becomes confiscated to the [King]. The valuables are removed by a corps of soldiers, called the Donpwe, sort of state spies, and the house broken [destroyed]. It afterwards passed into the hands of the African company, but is now deserted and in ruins" (48).

It is noteworthy that the Donpwe royal spies whose task it was to break the houses of those found guilty of treason or other similar acts, are also responsible for carrying out key death rites during the funerals of residents throughout Danhomè. Death, impoverishment, and the decimation of individual and family identity are strikingly co-joined here.

Nowhere is this link between disempowerment and architectural death more clearly reflected than in the example of Danhomè's King Adandozan (1789–1818) who was forcibly removed from power by his brother, King Guezo, purportedly for pressing for an end to the slavery trade as a major source of state revenue. Not only was Adandozan's name removed from the royal histories, but his section of the main palace was reclaimed and renamed and his larger princely palace was left to fall into ruin. This contrasts in vital ways with the treatment of the palace of Daxo, the ancient monarch of adjacent Hwawe, who appears to have acquiesced to the emerging presence of Danhomè King Hwegbaja in the early 17th century (Blier 1995a). Daxo's palace is carefully maintained to this day, its once vast interior spaces and bright red lateritic though slowly crumbling walls are lovingly preserved and are a focus of key state rituals.





13.11 Offerings at the portal of the ancient palace of Daxo by the high priest Zonatchia. Hwawe.

The theme of capture and display is also evoked in striking ways in one of the most important and distinctive forms of Danhomè palace architecture, the *ajalala*. It was in this structure where the king sat in state during principal court sessions. It was here too where important foreigners came to meet with the monarch. Like many other historic Danhomè buildings, the *ajalala* reception hall displayed an array of militaristic themes, represented in this case through richly painted bas-reliefs—scenes of battle, various weapons, and the strong animals of kings, among other things. Additional *ajalala* bas-reliefs mocked the leaders of enemy states, in essence encouraging further military action, a key source of the kingdom's wealth. In one such image from the *ajalala* of King Guezo we see a monkey holding a piece of corn in one hand while trying to grasp another ear of corn with the other. Describing this image, Maurice Ahanhanzo Glélé (1974) notes: "This greedy and insatiable monkey represents the king of Oyo . . . against whom the King Adandozan repelled himself to disengage from the suzerainty of Oyo to whom Agbome payed annually an important tribute. Adandozan sent to the king of Oyo, instead of a tribute, a parasol on which was designed a monkey" (17). While military might and co-joined themes of demise and regeneration are amply demonstrated in the decorative program of the *ajalala*, other features of this building form convey the theme as well.

The very term for this building, *ajalala*, refers to a cage, trap, or fishnet (*aja*) (Le Herissé 1911:358). Like the name of the kingdom's founder Hwegbaja, whose name means "the fish escaped the cage (*aja*)," the *ajalala* building or "great cage" of the palace evokes the dual identities of traps with both promoting death and bringing beneficence. Perhaps nowhere is this idea more saliently revealed than in the extraordinary interest in new architectural form displayed each year during the dry season ceremonial period and Hwetanu. In conjunction with this rite, not only were older palace and city buildings such as residences and religious

13.12. *Adjalala* of King Glélé during annual ceremonies with ministers aligned in front.



buildings generally rethatched, repaired, and rebuilt, but key palace structures were wrapped for the occasion in richly colored applique cloths. Enormous applique tents also were set up in front of the palace on this occasion. Dozens of other new structures, both temporary and permanent, were built around the capital in conjunction with this celebration as well.

The polychrome cloth appliques which were applied to tents and major palace structures during these ceremonies have their own war-linked history, particularly as associated with espionage. Spies of the king in Danhomè are referred to as *agbajigbeto* ("hunter of the veranda"), a tradition of special saliency in light of the above discussed account of the Brazilian slave trader de Souza. According to Paul Hazoumé (1956:24), as one of the most important state officials, the *agbadjigbeto* had a role in keeping the state's enemies at bay by positioning ritually empowered protective objects both in foundation holes and in related buildings to hold the enemies back.

## PRESERVING THE ARCHITECTURAL PAST

There are implications in this tradition of architectural destruction and creation as well for local practices of renovation and preservation. Part of the ancient Danhomè palace complex in Abomey today comprises a museum, one of the earliest African architectural complexes placed on the UNESCO list of protected sites. In the 1970s and 1980s, the palace *adjalala* buildings of the 19th century Kings Guezò and Glele with their magnificent polychrome bas-reliefs were in dire need of financial support for basic repairs. The corrugated iron roofs added by the French decades earlier (Blier 1991b) had gaping holes, and the buildings' extraordinary bas-relief tableaux were being destroyed by rain as a result of the replacement of the buildings' low, steep slanting (and wall-protecting) thatch roof with a higher, shallow roof which left much of the wall area open to the elements. The buildings had been carefully studied and meticulously drawn. With Maurice Ahanhanzo Glélé, one of King Glélé's descendants, a key administrator



13.13 Appliqué tent erected in front of the palace during the annual *Iwetaaxu* ceremonies.

at UNESCO, lovers of architectural preservation had reason to be hopeful that the long needed repairs would be soon underway. The target date was 1989 when activities associated with the centennial of the death of King Glélé were to take place.

A very different story unfolded. In the year preceding the highly anticipated Glélé centennial, the main palace buildings to be restored, the bas-relief decorated earthen *adjalala* buildings of Kings Glélé and Guezo, were knocked to the ground to make way for “new” palace structures based on the historic exemplars. In the palace at this time was a still nameless German tourist who happened to be visiting the area. Using a bicycle chain and helped presumably by some of the palace employees, he was able to remove a few of the bas-reliefs before they were pulverized in the destructive mayhem of the renovation-rebuilding project. Most of the bas-reliefs were lost, and the few that remained were in very bad shape. The Getty Conservation Institute, which had just prior to the destruction, signed on to help with the palace preservation project, arrived to find a very different situation than they had anticipated (Piqué et al. 1999). The team of preservation experts moved the dislodged early bas-reliefs that could be preserved and secured them in a special structure within the palace museum after undertaking whatever restoration could be done on them. At the same time, one of the city’s best-known contemporary artists, Cyprien Tokundagba (a temple painter by early avocation who had risen to international fame in the recent Paris exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*) had been hired to replicate the original 19th century bas-relief tableaux in the new palace structures.

The replacement edifices were much smaller than the originals because the walls had been raised largely within the footprint of the original walls, rather than removing the piled earth that had amassed. This made the “replica” buildings somewhat impractical for display of some key museum objects as had been intended. There were rumors of possible corruption as well, since one of the Glélé family leaders owned the local cement factory and would have profited from the new building project. The destruction of these buildings is considered by African architectural historians and others to be an immense loss, on par with the loss of McKim

Mead and White's Pennsylvania Railroad Station in New York. In some ways the Danhomè palace destruction is even worse since there are so few such buildings extant in Africa that have survived periods of violence and colonial disinterest, and there is an ongoing lack of local and other funds for restoration. That this happened while the buildings were on UNESCO's watch was particularly sad.

But there is more to this tragedy than first meets the eye. This is a story not only about a lack of effective oversight. It is also an example of the complexities of cultural identity and preservation as seen through architecture, and the paradoxical factors of creativity and destruction—of loss as a critical part of building innovation and change. As noted at the outset, in constructing something new, other buildings, landscape features, and critical open spaces necessarily are destroyed. In the kingdom of Danhomè (and indeed in much of Africa) where innovation in art and architecture is highly privileged, the balance between preservation and creativity historically has tended to be strongly skewed toward the latter.

Indeed, if a royal centennial had occurred when the kingdom was still a powerful independent state, I believe that much the same thing would have happened, i.e., as part of the celebration honoring a past king, key ancient palace buildings associated with him (as well as probably those of his predecessors) would have been demolished and new modern structures would have been raised in their stead. The difference between then and now is that the new palace buildings, rather than being copies of earlier models as occurred in this case, would have been bold new forms in keeping with the most recent architectural practices both in Danhomè and in the larger (known) world. There is a long history of such architectural renovations in Danhomè, with buildings associated with earlier monarchs being rebuilt or redecorated in the course of celebrations that honor these kings in later eras. As Joseph Adande (1976–77) has suggested: "permitting artists to redo artistic origins [and] permanent historical reconstruction . . . in the Agbome [Abomey] kingdom has foundations which are cultural" (54). As he goes on to explain: "That which a son does, that which a descendant inaugurates, he always does it in the memory of his father, or on the path of this latter one." Ideas of old and new in this sense are integrally linked. "Even the early kings want to be up-to-date," it was suggested to me in one interview by the court historian Nondicao (personal communication 1986).

King Glélé accordingly named the entry to his new palace area *hwehundji*, "entry of mirrors," most likely after Versailles, the famous French palace which no doubt was known to him through travelers' descriptions. Key shrines and princely palace structures also were remodeled in conjunction with important rites such as the annual "Customs" (Hwetanu). As suggested below, many of the most strikingly modern buildings in West Africa are created in conjunction with death.

By way of conclusion, it is important to turn briefly to related traditions of contemporary architecture in this area. Bold, new residences of cement today often stand out in both the urban and rural landscape of southern Benin. Commissioned by wealthy individuals in the middle and late years of their lives as living memorials, these buildings serve as handsome spirit houses through which the memories of individuals will be evoked long after their deaths. That many such buildings are constructed in rural areas alongside rustic structures of earth and corrugated iron, make the unique appearance of these bold structures particularly striking. Thus, according to Le Herissé (1911), "the dominant idea of the social regime of the Danhomè [inhabitants] to perpetuate one's name is the unique preoccupation of the family chief, who



sees in this the assurance that after his death, he will not be forgotten. . . . All individuals who have built a house, create there [a new structure] . . . the memory of which is tied, always to his name. The conservation of one assures the perpetuity of the other. In consequence, successive generations will be responsible for keeping up the dwelling of the deceased and the rebuilding of it" (252–53).

Today some of these buildings are rented out for steep prices to wealthy visitors; in other cases these structures serve as family homesteads. Irrespective of use, such buildings speak to the primacy of death and regeneration in architectural practice. Like the kpatin fencepost linked both to death and the foundation of the kingdom, as well as the spiral python form of Abomey's urban renewal plan, these buildings reflect not only the competing productive and destructive idioms of human existence but also the vital imperative of death in various contexts of architectural innovation and creativity.

As with this tradition of architectural memorials, what should be emphasized in the end is that much of our experience of architecture and landscape in Danhomè—as is often the case elsewhere—involves processes of mourning, as both consciously and unconsciously the built environment conveys the deep loss witnessed as a result of ongoing architectural change. Our experience of architecture necessarily manifests subtle and not-so-subtle features of trauma that such loss necessarily entails. If there is any lesson for modern urban planners in Africa or elsewhere in the Danhomè traditions examined here, it is that these vital issues of loss and memory need to be recognized as a fundamental human need in every community, likened in many ways to sunlight, grocery stores, and parks. One's first encounter with many urban centers the world over is with the city's refuse heap, recycling centers, water reprocessing plants, and cemeteries. This is both appropriate and positive, for such signs of death and transformation are deeply potent if somewhat pungent references to the inherent links between demise, death, and architectural creativity.

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