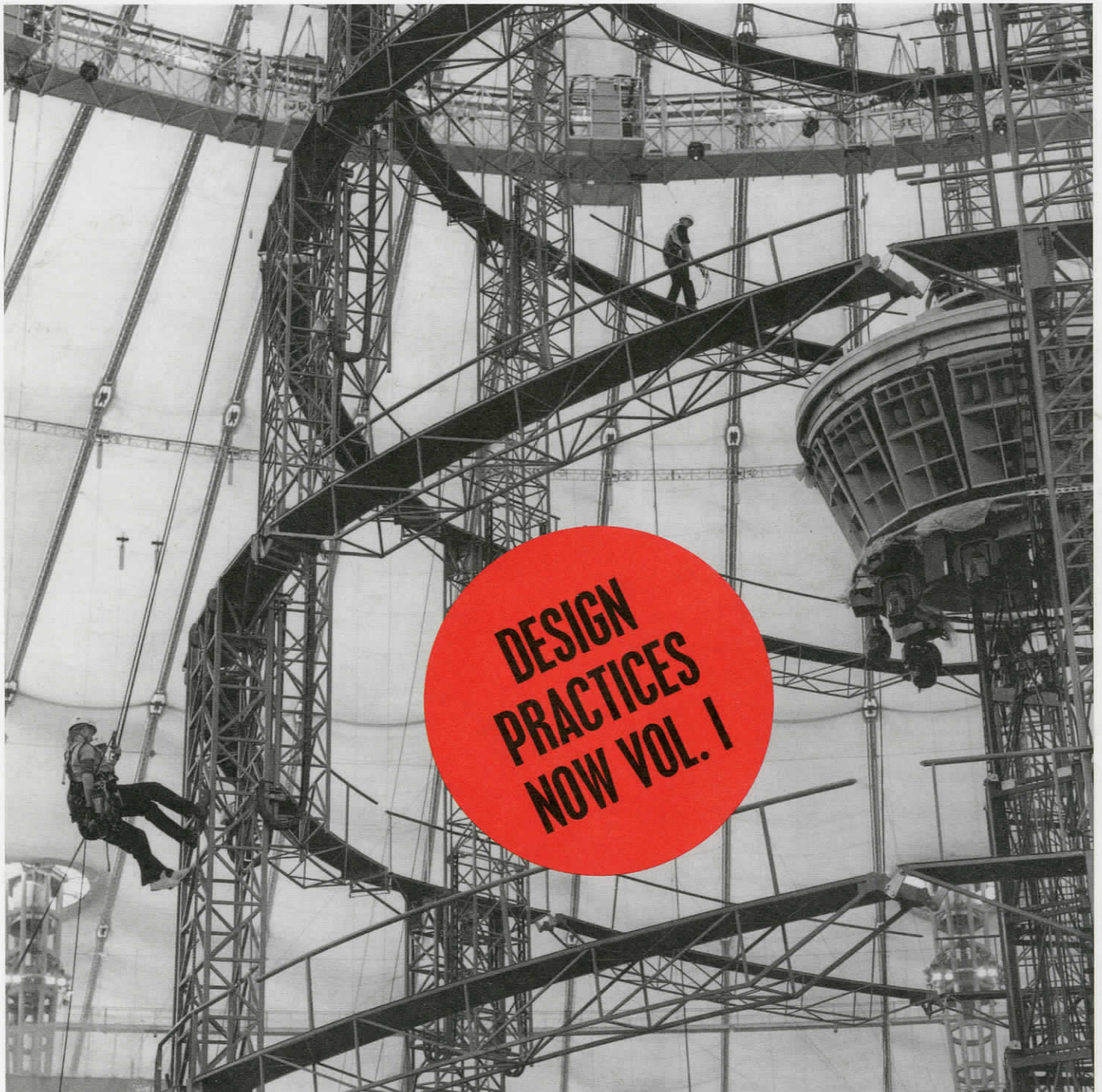


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During the early 1960s to mid-1980s, architectural practice in the Ivory Coast was quite well organized, but in the late '80s, things began to change, becoming less organized and going off in many different directions. Architects were responsible: We abandoned the rules of the profession and started doing things informally. The relationships between architect, client, and contractor became murky.

Our office formalizes those relationships through contracts, but this is difficult to impose on contractors and clients who want more flexibility. Most clients go directly to a contractor who will design and build without any regard for rules and codes. Anyone can build, and the typical quality of construction has become much poorer than it was before the mid-'80s. Most clients feel the power to overlook architectural intent, even on the building site. Those clients who want to work with architects do so for the aesthetic sophistication they can offer. It has taken our office almost fifteen years of insisting on our authority, establishing a reputation, and building trust, as we shifted to bigger projects to obtain control over design and building. Most of our clients now have an idea of the way we work and know we don't simply take orders.

When the Ivory Coast became independent in the 1960s, there were government-set education quotas to create different trades—architecture, engineering, medicine, and so on. Many students who were recruited recruited to study architecture lacked a deep passion for it—it was just a way of earning an income. And so a generation of professionals stopped fighting for design quality, which really almost killed the profession.

Our office is trying to educate the public about the added value of using architects, and more buildings are now being done with architects. Ironically, architect-led projects are usually less costly because architects maintain tighter control on materials and methods. Fifteen years ago, when I started to work, there were very few architects around; in the past few years, we have been hiring lots of interns, even some who have not yet gone to architecture school. Enthusiasm for the field is growing.



Our office has shied away from contracts with the government; we feel we don't speak the same language. Most of our clients are companies and private individuals and institutions. It has been very rewarding for us to work in other countries—Senegal, Maui, Ethiopia, Benin, and now in central

Koffi-Diabaté Architects, *Villa Saturn*, pool detail, Cotonou, Benin, 2008.
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outside their home city. We have encountered a South African firm but never another West African firm doing what we do. Most firms here are composed of one person; we have thirty people now.

Our work was thought too modern here at first, but we are not pure Modernists—we work with locally available materials and look to traditional vernacular architecture for ways of addressing responses to our hot, dry climate. We don't promote an ethnic or African *stylistic* identity, although some criticize us for not doing so. Our culture determines our designs in *functional* ways. For instance, we build smaller houses because people are working longer hours and don't need as much space at home; we build servants' quarters—every house has them; and we take advantage of natural lighting with our abundant sunshine.

We have found that we can get quality construction when we have long-term, friendly relationships with our contractors—when we share an understanding of what must be done. This means working with smaller building firms. Since labor is cheap in Africa, buildings can more often have labor-intensive features like masonry. We collaborate with engineers, of course, but usually we have to go abroad to find good ones, particularly when we have specialized projects. Ironically, despite our abundant sunshine, sustainability is more expensive for us: In Europe, by contrast, government subsidies lower costs.

The rest of the architectural world still has much to learn from African vernacular building. When I work elsewhere in Africa I learn new things about climate-responsive design that I can incorporate into my glass and concrete designs.

Africa is very undersupplied with well-educated professional architects; communications with the wider world are still meager. We have few architectural schools: a weak one in Togo; one in South Africa, and none in the Ivory Coast. Although our cities are exploding, our leaders usually have rural bases and loyalties, so they neglect urban problems, including needs for infrastructure and housing.

Africa, Gabon and Congo. We learn more from clients with differing cultural backgrounds; we have become more flexible and agile. With bigger commissions, we have drawn more attention to architecture as a continental rather than a national phenomenon. Yet there still are very few firms