

Thieves & Mosquitoes

Climate and the sense of place – which includes the nature of the site, the prevailing culture and awareness of historical precedents – are some of the factors underlying the design of satisfying buildings.

In Dar es salaam, it is the additional requirement for security and the need to avoid the malarial mosquitoes that actually conditions large sections of buildings.

How many of us avoid basking in the moonlight or tracing the blinking constellations in order to avoid the mosquitoes?

And how many times have large windows framing the view of that tree been sacrificed at the thought of a *panga*?

The ideal abode for Dar would have a nominal structure, perhaps walls only for the bathroom and a roof to keep away the sun, in order to make it easier for that elusive breeze to manifest itself. The edges between the outside (the garden?) and the house proper would be blurred (say curtains or their bamboo equivalent) or non-existent – unless one borders street life, where screening is necessary for privacy. The climate suggests this desirable token structure.

(Alert readers will note the similarities with open air bars; this coincidence is probably located in their both being sites for pleasure).

It is one reason why houses in the tropics have always been minimal – the controlled outside acted as a sprawling living, working space. This can still be seen in rural areas and even in cities where loosely defined spaces are a necessity: for chickens, having your hair plaited or cut, cycle repairs, washing and hanging clothes, that shade under the neem tree where beer has to be drunk with friends on a Saturday afternoon. One ventures indoors only to sleep at night.

In such an open house or rather, hut, the moths, the praying mantis, the occasional wasps and that drone like bee can all be tolerated. Very unlikely to lead to death.

But mosquitoes are another matter. One bite can send you to the grave.

So we have to have mosquito netting over windows, and therefore a structure to hold these in place. Acceptable; that palm can still be visible through the blurry gauze.

Next, consider the need for security, for keeping your tv and mobile out of reach of those grasping hands.

That's when you need some serious stuff to keep the car jacks, and nowadays, guns, at bay. Only mass – steel and concrete – can keep out intruders. (Elsewhere, say Arusha or Iringa, a structure of substance also keeps the cold at bay). Lets not forget the boundary wall increasingly topped by electrified or barbed wire (even Muhimbili Hospital's wall adjacent to Msimbazi has razor wire).

To be really definite about keeping away intruders, one could resort to a container but that would border on the verge of paranoia (although in the USA, an artist, who used a container as a conceptual home, has now gone commercial – 200 square metres cost \$76,000 complete with stairs, windows, bathroom and a grassed roof). Though used as offices, they are not ideal homes for Dar.

On the other hand, it would be possible, say, to have a house with steel grilles and mosquito gauze only, somewhat like a cage. But China's hunger (250million tones+) has made steel even more expensive and it does not fare well in the salty, hot, humid climate. Bronze is beyond our reach and it requires more than the available paints to have a long lasting minimal maintenance solution. Concrete blockwork is still more affordable.

So we have walls and mosquito gauze and grilles. The latter were easier to manage when timber frames with glass louvers were the norm. The arrival of aluminium windows made the grilles more prominent; the only real choice is to fix them on the outside (to the wall) allowing sufficient space for cleaning the glass.

For architects, one of the design challenges is to ensure that a building does not resemble a prison because of the grillwork; and that the fenestration is sufficiently broken up into manageable portions for the fragile mosquito gauze, thereby introducing elements that break up the beloved (for architects at least) clean lines.

Our desire for large openings is subject to thieves and mosquitoes.

These are meanderings in pursuit of the ideal house. But our speculation should be tempered with the knowledge that a third of the world's urban population lives in slums. The pleasures of living in the open air are viewed in a different light when home is an open sewer pipe (though not yet in Dar).

For most residents of Dar es salaam, owning a room would be heavenly, a luxury they can hardly afford. But even here, the same determinants, the need for security and avoiding pests, come into play. To a certain extent, bandits and malaria are social levelers.

Offices are another matter. That need for being 'modern', often resulting in the replication or aping of structures unsuited to this climate, sometimes manifests itself in large expanses of glass exposed to the throbbing coastal sun. But even these fictions depend on the availability of security companies, alarm systems and in the final instance, of constant reliable power from Tanesco. That search for the 'modern' leads to a dependency of sorts – on electricity. In the final instance, even this is also subject to the largesse of thieves, who determine which transformer should be blown up by stealing the oil.

Of course we all remember when people slept on the roof or balconies, or on string beds in the yard during the hot season. If you were well off, then a hammock or a swing would cradle you to sleep with the scent of jasmine. Such nostalgic pleasures are now mostly reduced to reminiscences.

Or perhaps not. In the 50s, the French conceptual artist, Yves Klein, conceived a project where air currents, regulating temperature and offering protection from the elements, would form the enclosure for a community. Maybe he was inspired by a sojourn in a heavenly tropical night. In any case, the recent exhibition of his ideas on "Air Architecture" in Los Angeles (including a small prototype) will hopefully prompt affordable devices that will dispense with the need for mosquito nets or the thudding beat of the overhead fan.

Perhaps, as such explorations gain ground, the ideal house is still possible – if one gets rid of the car, the tv, the video, the mobile, and starts using a bank.

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