

LIVING ON EARTH ACCORDING TO GOD'S PLAN: MOVING TOWARDS A DIALOGUE BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE, CULTURE AND CREATION TO IMPROVE HOUSING IN SUBURBAN AREAS.

World Assembly 2023 Conversatorio: Creation Care: Perspectives

CONTEXT: AFRICA AND URBANISM

Environmental questions have become an increasingly important topic of debate over recent years. Daring to venture into this subject without laying out a few caveats or defining your field of operation would, in my opinion, be very foolhardy. These questions are often asked within the scope of my work as an architect and thoughts about the topic can take different directions according to the needs of a given architectural project. Through these reflections, I hope to explore paths that will improve the comfort of housing by considering its ambient environment in order to make a small contribution to one of the biggest issues on the African continent: city management.

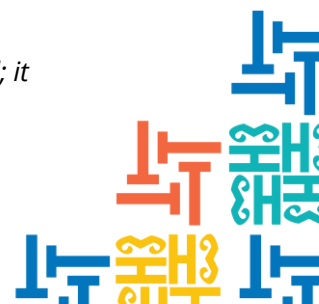
The 20th century, in particular the latter half, was marked by an unprecedented acceleration of urbanisation.¹ Africa is not untouched by this movement. After Europe, America, and Asia, it is now Africa's turn to undergo an urban revolution or transition. While still the most rural continent, it is nevertheless the one in which urban growth is the fastest and strongest. To give some context to the urban transition in Africa, let us turn to the suburban areas of the city of Beni in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. There we find the territorial reality of city blending into countryside – a fact that we need to accept and work with.

In light of this, we ask the following question: Could the reconciliation of mankind with creation, inspired by the *cultural mandate* (*Genesis 2.15*) help mankind in constructing its living spaces? By focusing our research on this question, could we open the door to deeper reflections on the topic of *Creation Care*? As part of this initiative, we need to offer pertinent ideas that take account of our Christian, African, and university context. How should we pursue this topic in future? What are the challenges? What might be the implications for mission?

CREATION AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Reading the first two chapters of Genesis often takes me back to the following conclusion: order existed within creation from the very beginning. At the top of the hierarchy sits an entity: God. This entity is described in several biblical stories as an eternal being, without beginning or end, the supreme order and creator of all things. I believe it is important to note that, at the beginning of all things, God, defined as 'the Creator whose beginning we do not know', already existed. What is the place of mankind in this biblical vision of hierarchy? Human beings represent the pinnacle of God's creative activity, and this position gives them not just the right, but the responsibility, to subdue the rest of creation.²

How do most African cultures regard creation? I defer to certain passages from Kapolyo's³ book that may enlighten us somewhat: "*African ontology is fundamentally anthropocentric: God only serves to explain the origin and means of subsistence of mankind; it*



is as if he only exists for mankind. The same applies to the environment, which is only there for mankind: for its enjoyment and well-being."

My forebears – the Nande – acknowledged the existence of Nyamuhanga: God, the supreme god of the Nande. The name comes from two words: *nya* 'the mother', *erihangika* 'to create'. He is therefore the mother of creation, the origin of creation.⁴ But he was so distant that, in both daily life and worship, they turned to spirits, to their ancestors, and to the guardians of the customs. And their relationship with their environment ranged from sacred to one of pleasure. When we look at how they occupied land, we notice a certain carelessness in its management, as if they thought that nature (the environment) was boundless. Did they believe, consciously or unconsciously, that it (nature, part of creation) did not need to be preserved outside the sacred quality that was given to specific places? Take, for example, the systematic cutting down of trees when the first occupants took possession of a place, a tradition that continues to this day – the verb *erikonda*: to cut down (a tree).⁵

As part of the Logos & Cosmos Initiative, I launched a project on my campus in the city of Beni. My approach was to install green anti-erosion systems on the campus and to popularise this strategy in the area around my university. The innovative aspect of this approach resided in three aspects of these green anti-erosion systems.

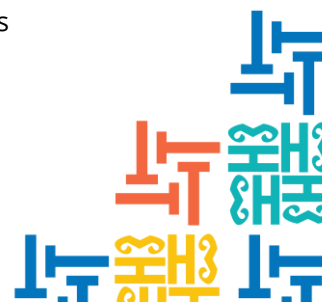
(1) A theological dimension with the cultural mandate encouraging participants to care for creation. Beyond the actual construction, we also wanted to promote a lifestyle that invited our neighbours to discover God through architecture and creation. Hence, a discourse constructed around creation – in which creation is part of God's plan and covenant – was put forward to reinforce our landscape argument (Romans 8: 20-21). Not only does the good news of the Gospel concern human beings, it also involves the whole of creation.⁶

(2) A scientific and practical dimension through bioclimatic architecture and anti-erosion construction techniques, associated with fast-growing vegetation that has an extensive root system.

(3) Finally, the entrepreneurial dimension linked to food security to combat poverty.

The initial idea was for these three aspects to evolve together as the beneficiaries perpetuated the project. Against all expectations, it was the third dimension that dominated the others, to the extent that the actual implementation of the project gives the impression that it is linked to food security and enterprise. Maybe the method of transmission did not work? Or did we get caught by the hard realities of life? A man whose main concern is to feed himself and survive cannot allow himself – consciously or otherwise – to adopt an attitude towards creation other than that of primary need. He is therefore unlikely to engage with questions linked to creation care and creation theology. Or could it be that our cultural reality means we do not actually have the Biblical perspective of creation?

The primary attitude of the project's beneficiaries towards creation could be to see it as a product that is needed, with everything else coming second. The basic premise of this project, which intends to create a dialogue between science and faith, actually becomes secondary. What is necessary to reverse this trend without compromising the



beneficiaries' real needs: food security and the entrepreneurship that can alleviate poverty?

WHAT IF ALL OUR PLACES WERE TO BECOME SACRED (AGAIN)?

This project has allowed us to deepen our reflections on how the landscape contributes to the design of human housing and bring new perspectives on how to care for creation by asking the following question: What would it mean to live on earth according to God's plan?

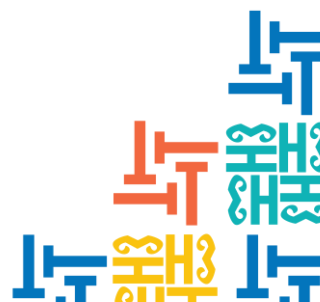
Answering this question would require us firstly to include the cultural dimension in our research. In our African context, spirituality is very present. However, the clash of cultures these days leads us to espouse a lifestyle that takes us further and further away from the practices of yesteryear, such as respecting the sacred forests which are today the best-preserved natural environments. What if all our places were to become sacred (again)? Would that help us care for creation? I am not advocating a radical return to the customs of old, but I believe that integrating a dialogue between culture and theology could help us guide our local communities in caring for their environment. Christianity must be at home in the cultures of the southern hemisphere and therefore needs to lose its foreign status.⁷ What Christian theology would allow these local communities to rediscover their cultural heritage? As they do this, it might encourage them to care for creation by adapting to current realities whilst helping them find appropriate solutions to their primary needs (food security, etc.).

The course to follow would be to add a scientific dimension that is appropriate to our context of a culture/theology tandem. One of the greatest problems of the African continent remains that of education. Over sixty years after various countries gained their independence, most African nations have been unable to dissociate themselves from a system of education rooted in colonisation. We need to conduct a full review of our education system that takes into account the current and future realities of the continent, and train women and men so they are useful for their respective communities. To paraphrase Solomon Andria⁸, I suggest that the current system produces consumers rather than creative men and women able to take responsibility for themselves. How can we use our scientific knowledge to have a social impact? How can a Christian community within a university deal with issues relating to creation care in the light of the Scriptures, but without losing any scientific rigour? Programs such as Logos & Cosmos Initiative would be, I believe, good ways to explore the answers to these questions.

ARCHITECTURE FOR RETHINKING MISSION?

In essence, architecture is the art of designing spaces and building structures. Does it have a role to play in creation care? Architecture is the most popular form of art, and we see it everywhere in our human conurbations. We find architecture in the biblical texts – writings that describe various kinds of buildings, some of which have a place in the human-divine relationship.

The story started in a garden and will end in a city! The garden is the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-10). The city is the City of God - the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21.2). In Revelation 22:1-4, the New Jerusalem appears as a city in a garden.⁹



From the perspective of the Divine, architecture is part of (his) creation. We cannot dissociate it from the other components of creation – especially not from humankind and nature. They must all interact to fulfil the purpose of creation by seeing all creatures living in perfect symbiosis, as the Creator deemed to be good.¹⁰ This leads to the following question: What would it look like to live on earth according to God's plan?

We find the beginnings of an answer in Genesis 2:15: *'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.'*

Nowadays, there are a plethora of theories concerning the sustainable development of our planet. When we read the Scriptures, we also see this idea of sustainability. Might the Creator have intended this lifestyle from the very beginning, living in harmony with nature?

What can we do to live on earth according to God's plan? Bioclimatic architecture could help us return to the fundamentals of God's cultural mission (Genesis 2:15): to tend and cultivate our garden, the earth. In the past, traditional housing was suited to its surrounding environment. Nowadays, the question does not even arise. Most so-called "modern" constructions are not adapted to their environment. Modern housing has created a real gap between humankind and its environment, and even contributes to the destruction of the latter. Today, certain trends, including bioclimatic architecture, want to reconcile humankind, its housing, and its environment to make buildings more comfortable for people. What housing will we find in heaven? I think it will be similar to bioclimatic architecture. Bioclimatic architecture could help inspire us to develop construction models inspired by the will of the Creator as it pertains to living on earth. As a science, this could also create a true dialogue that would unite cultures and theology with the aim of giving value to the ground, improving the quality of the space, and gradually instilling a culture of creation care in the collective consciousness.

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