

The sustainable cities made from mud

Resumé

Djenné, dans le centre du Mali, abrite la plus grande construction en terre du monde, la Grande Mosquée. Chaque année, les habitants se réunissent pour reclouer et réparer la mosquée, faisant ainsi revivre une ancienne tradition d'architecture en terre. Cette pratique de construction durable inspire des architectes modernes comme Dragana Kojii et Anna Heringer à utiliser des matériaux naturels tels que la boue et le bambou pour la construction.

Article

Reviving an ancient tradition

The city of Djenné lies in the Niger delta region of central Mali. Founded in 800 AD, it became an important meeting place for traders travelling from the Sahara and Sudan. Djenné is known for its magnificent earthen architecture, especially its Great Mosque which is the largest mud building in the world, standing almost 20m (66ft) tall and built on a 91m-long (300ft) platform.

Every year the residents of Djenné gather together to repair and reclay the mosque, supervised by a guild of senior masons. These master builders are revered for their expertise and artistry in Malian society, says Trevor Marchand, emeritus professor of social anthropology at London's School of Oriental and African Studies and author of The Masons of Djenné.

"Master builders are recognised for their supernatural powers to bring protective elements to the buildings and people who live there," says Marchand.

The re-claying is an important symbol of social cohesion, says Marchand. "Everyone takes part. Boys and girls mix the mud, women bring the water and masons direct the activity.

Djenné's mud architecture is constantly changing as residents re-clay, repair and rebuild their homes.

"There is a dynamism to it," says Marchand. "Mud is very malleable and it responds to the changing demographics of a home." If the family grows, buildings can easily be added to the home and if it shrinks, buildings are left to decompose and turn back into soil.

Sustainable construction

The ancient building practice is inspiring modern-day architects, such as Serbian Dragana Kojičić, who specialises in raw-earth construction.

"Our ancestors were really clever and really practical – they used what they had around them," says Kojičić. "The earth was everywhere and it could be used for everything: walls, floors, ceilings, stoves and even roofs."

Kojičić, who completed her training at the Centre for the Research and Application of Earth Architecture, restores and builds earthen houses across Serbia, reviving ancient building methods.

"Mud is contagious – it is love at first touch," she says. You don't need to wear any protective gear when handling the material, she adds. "With earth, you can just play."

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Anna Heringer, an Austrian architect who creates buildings using natural materials such as mud and bamboo, agrees. "It is a wonderful feeling to touch the earth," she says. "You don't need any tools to build with it, you just use your hands."