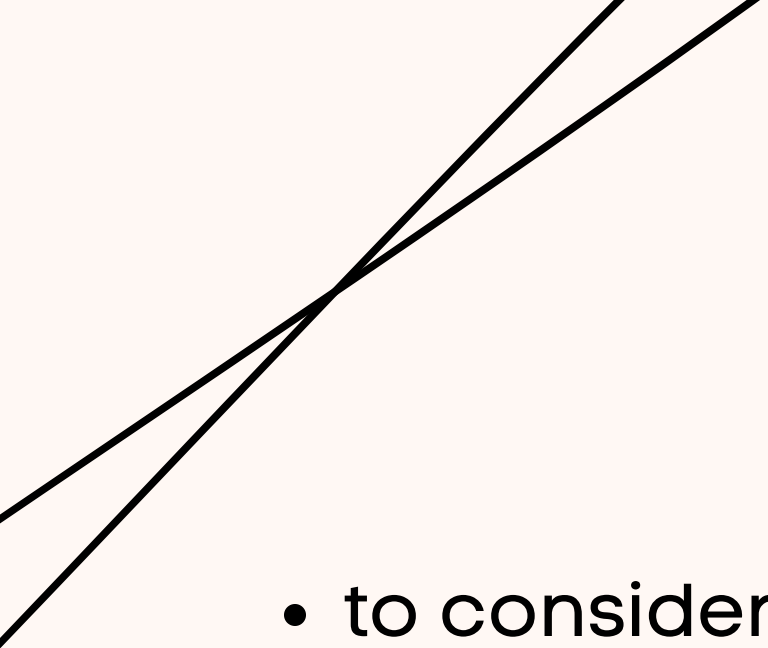




material humanisms and the aesthetic grammar of power

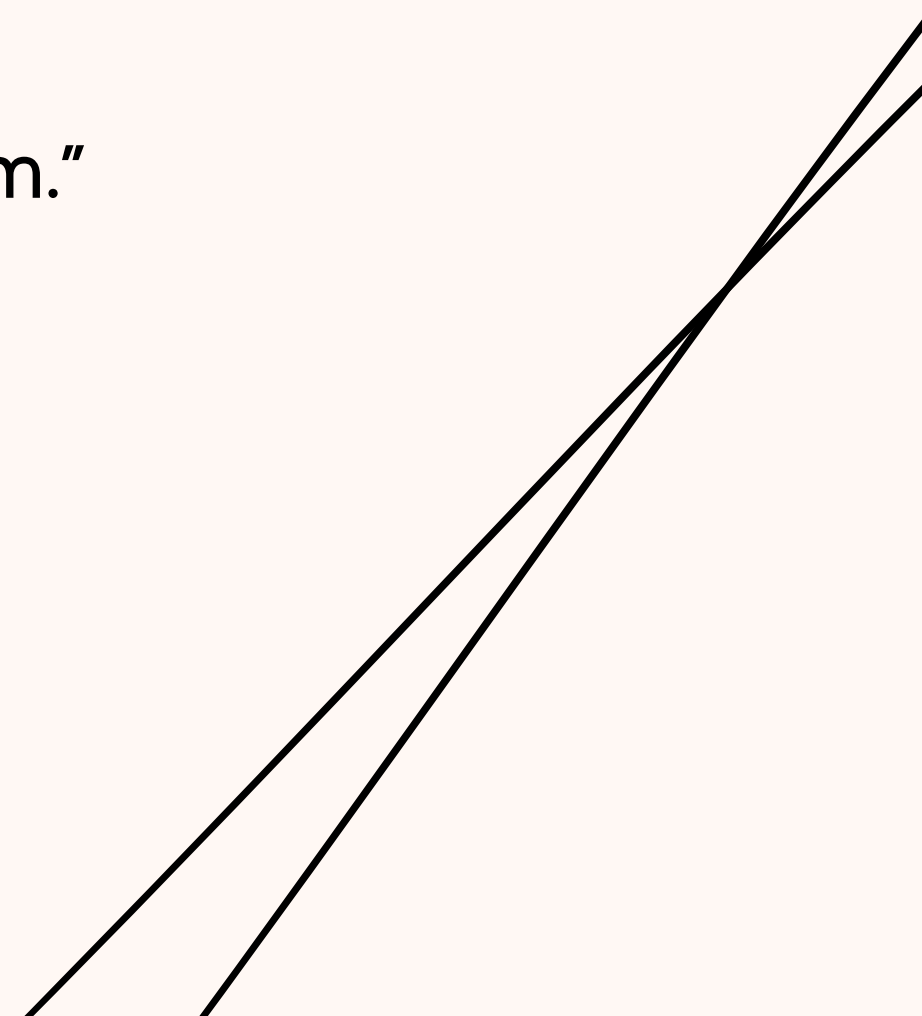
Dr. Sabine S. Hakam
African Humanities Project Workshop II
Form, Practice, Theory
December 8–10, 2025

- 
- to consider how architectural languages are not just styles but epistemic and political scripts that seek to define what it means to be modern, African, Islamic, postcolonial, etc.
 - to examine Neo-Sudanese and Neo-Moorish architecture as embodiments of the aesthetics of authority: how power, heritage, and identity are translated in built form
 - to look at how the above mentioned forms participate in 'rewriting the human' through material form as sites where alternative humanisms are inscribed, contested, and made visible.

african humanism: relational personhood

- Insofar as it informs our understanding of the built landscape, a core principle of pre-colonial African humanism is the relational understanding of personhood in which the individual becomes fully 'human' by prioritizing community, interdependence, and shared responsibility

"I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."
(Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 1969)

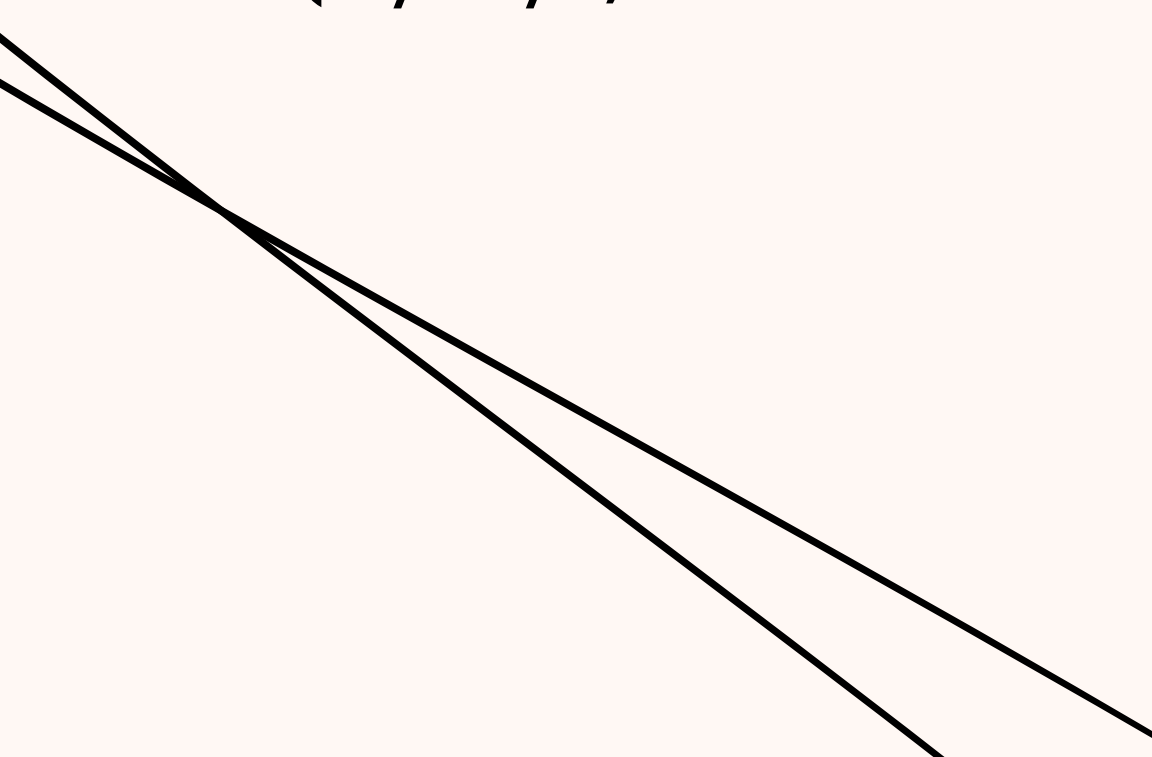


african humanism: ecological embeddedness

- Another important tenet of African humanism is the understanding that African thought has long conceptualized the human as embedded in nature – not dominating it.

“...the natural environment as an integral part of the community with which humans must coexist harmoniously.”

(Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience, 1997)



the spatial politics of african humanism

- The emphasis on community is reflected in a pre-colonial architecture and organization of space that was designed to sustain social life
- Across West, East, Central, Southern, and North Africa, settlement patterns prioritized: courtyards, compounds, and communal spaces
 - Examples include: courtyard houses of the Sahel (Mali, Niger, Senegal), Yoruba compounds (ilé) that organize families around shared life, Swahili stone towns with their barazas—benches built into house fronts for conversation
- Built form was adaptable and ecological, prioritizing materials that breathe (earth, thatch, timber), and climate-responsiveness (deep eaves, ventilation towers, shaded alleys)
 - Examples include: Sahelian mud architecture with passive cooling, Dogon cliff dwellings integrated into landscape, Nubian vault construction using no timber



adaptation and continuity

- African humanism is not a monolith - it is dynamic and has adapted to to new religious, political, and epistemic orders
 - For example, Islamic influence tended to reform and expand African humanism through literacy and law, often enhancing philosophical sophistication.
 - Spatial organization continued to be structured around the traditional penc (assembly area designated by a single tree), rather than the mosque, despite the centrality of Islam (Depret, 1983).
- That being said, European colonialism and the superimposition of European concepts of 'man' was a wholly disruptive force that labelled communal ethics as "primitive" or "backward," replacing them with western moral, political, and epistemic norms.

the colonial politics of humanism



- Rooted in Enlightenment rationale, the colonial policy of assimilation sought to turn 'backward' and 'primitive' African societies into an Enlightenment project through education, sanitation, commerce and paid labour (Demissie, 2013).
- This necessitated a complete subordination to the 'Metropolitan culture' and the abandonment of an African identity (Diouf, 1998)
- Similarly, the British invoked 'The White Man's Burden' (Kipling, 1899) to justify imperial expansion in Africa and Asia as a moral duty to 'civilize' supposedly 'less advanced' peoples.

neo-sudanese architecture

- Neo-Sudanese architecture is often read as a revivalist aesthetic linked to the Sahelian/Sudanic architectural lineage
- Colonial-era projects in the 1920s–30s blend vernacular visual languages with European construction logics
- Buildings often have
 - slightly sloped or battered walls that evoke the earthen forms of Sahelian mosques (e.g., Djenné, Timbuktu)
 - Vertical buttress-like projections along façades - a stylized reference to traditional Sudanic mud-brick structures.
 - Wooden beams or imitation beams protruding from the walls (traditionally serve maintenance functions but, in this case, purely decorative)
 - Ventilation openings
 - Smooth, uniform plaster mimicking mud-plastered façades but executed with modern materials (cement, lime, etc.).



L'Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire (IFAN)



Maternity Ward of L'hôpital Le Dantec

	Sudano-Sahelian	Colonial-adapted Neo-Sudanese
Origin	Designed and built by Sudanese craftsmen/architects	Designed or commissioned by colonial powers
Materials	Local mudbrick, plaster, timber	Often concrete or hybrid materials with decorative local motifs
Form & Structure	Sloped/buttressed walls, conical/pyramidal towers, functional design	Local forms applied superficially onto European building structures (symmetrical, monumental)
Functionality	Suited to climate and social needs (ventilation, insulation, courtyards)	Often ceremonial or administrative; functionality secondary to European requirements
Decoration	Integrated with structure, culturally meaningful motifs	Applied ornamentation; more symbolic than functional
Spatial logic	Organic layouts reflecting community use and topography	Axial, formal layouts reflecting European urban planning
Cultural grounding	Reflects local religious, social, and environmental practices	Visual nod to local culture, but primarily to project colonial authority

neo-moorish architecture

- North Africa was a laboratory for 'Islamic' architectural forms that were considered aesthetically compatible with French modernity.
- These motifs were transplanted into West African contexts, despite having no organic historical or cultural grounding there.
- Typical African Neo-Moorish characteristics:
 - Horseshoe or scalloped arches
 - Geometric and floral plaster decoration (moucharabieh)
 - Domes or small minarets
 - Symmetry in façades
 - Blending of colonial European structural forms with local Islamic and vernacular patterns



Place Kermel, Dakar

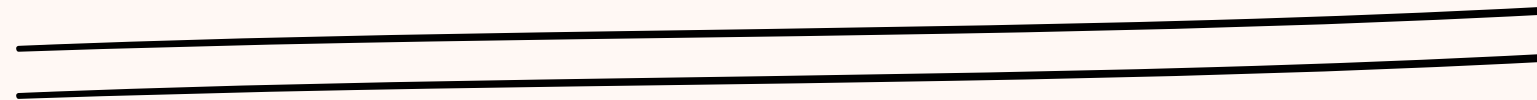


Central post office building, Casablanca

	Moorish/Neo-Moorish	Colonial-adapted Neo-Moorish
Origin	Emerged in North Africa, especially Morocco, Algeria; inspired by historic Moorish/Andalusian architecture	European colonial powers (mainly French, Spanish) applied Moorish motifs to public buildings in colonies
Materials	Local stone, brick, plaster, carved wood, zellige tiles	Often European construction materials (concrete, reinforced masonry) with applied Moorish motifs
Form & Structure	Horseshoe arches, riad-style courtyards, intricate domes, geometric ornamentation integrated with structure	Moorish arches, decorative tiles, and domes imposed on European-plan buildings (symmetrical façades, monumental scale)
Functionality	Built for local climate and lifestyle (courtyards for cooling, thick walls for insulation)	Function driven by colonial administrative or ceremonial needs; local climate response secondary
Decoration	Integral with building: tilework, carved plaster, mashrabiya screens	Often superficial: applied decorative arches or tile panels on otherwise European façades
Spatial logic	Organic, reflecting traditional urban patterns and social use	Axial and formal layouts imposed by colonial planning
Cultural grounding	Rooted in local Islamic, Andalusian, and Maghrebi heritage	Symbolic nod to local culture, mainly to project legitimacy and aesthetic continuity under colonial rule

architecture as governance

- Architecture and infrastructure were harnessed as fundamental elements of urban planning not only to direct the 'flow of human traffic' but also to structure the 'way people interact,' thereby acting as an effective mechanism of self-governance (Shaw, 2006).
- the deployment of French colonial urban forms that were intended to 'impress' the indigenous population who, based on patriarchal logic, would unquestioningly imitate the European way of life (Bigon & Katz, 2017)
- Architecture and built form are strategic objects of study because they are not 'static embodiments of culture' and should be analysed as mediums through which 'identity, power and society are produced and reproduced' (Avrami & Mason, 2000).





Palais du Gouverneur Général, Dakar



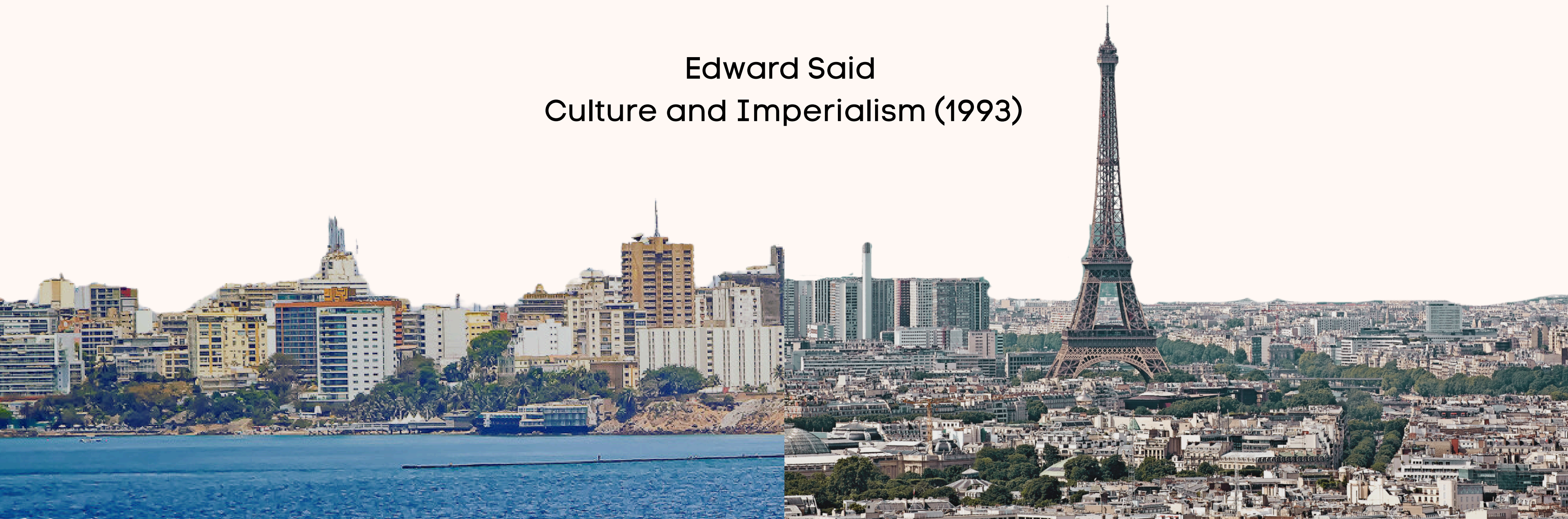
Hotel de Ville, Dakar

colony ↔ metropole

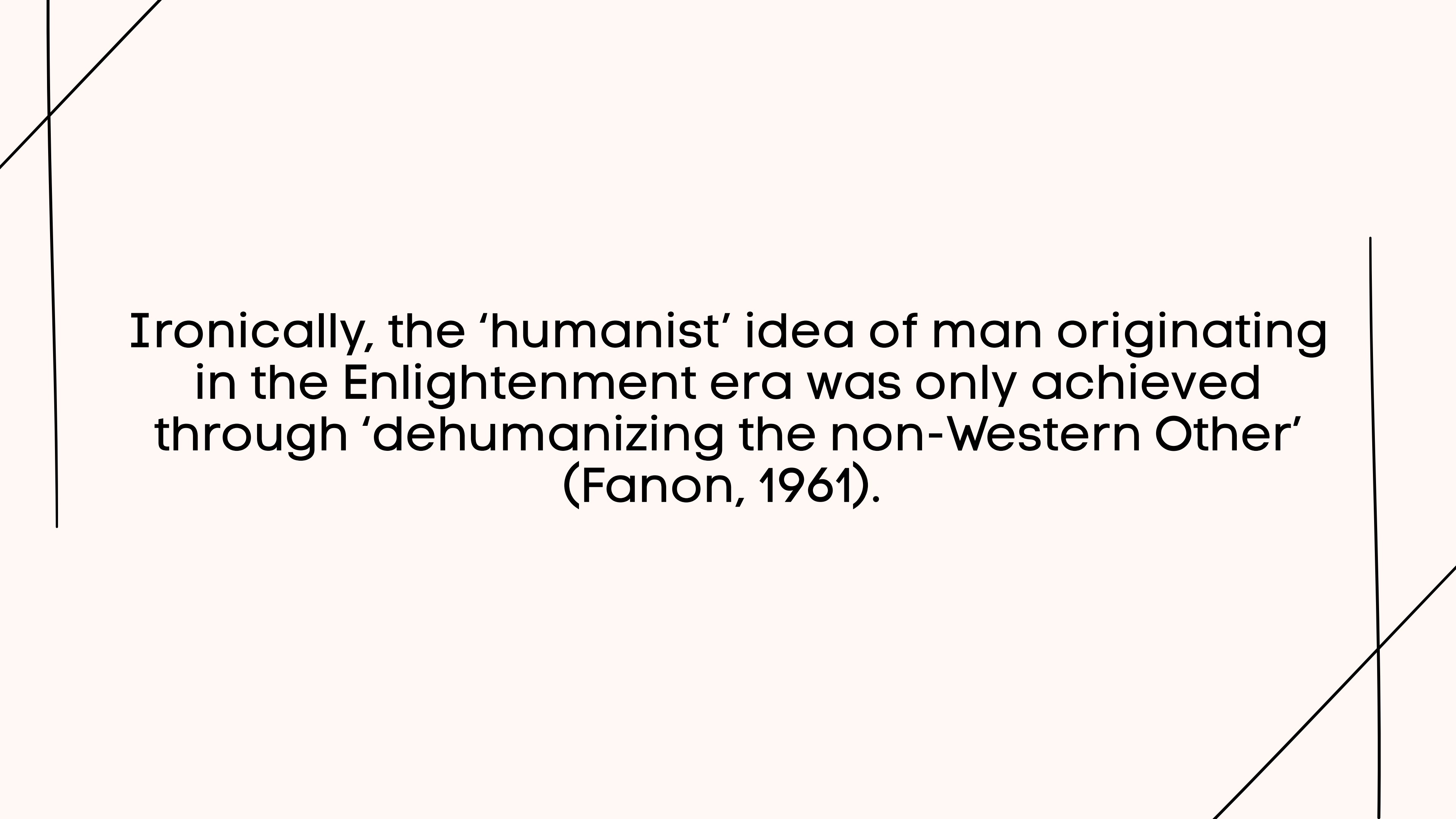
- Instead of thinking of the 'Orient' (colonized territories) as being gazed upon / represented by Europe (traditional Orientalism), the architecture and built grandeur of the European metropolises can itself be gazed upon by the histories of colonized places.
- Vergès and Henni show us how Parisian (or British) architecture isn't just aesthetically impressive — it's materially supported by colonial extraction.

“Who in India or Algeria today can confidently separate out British or French components of the past from present actualities, and who in Britain or France can draw a clear circle around London or Paris that would exclude the impact of India and Algeria upon those two imperial cities?”

Edward Said
Culture and Imperialism (1993)



- Architectural imperial grandeur is materially underwritten by colonial extraction
- The Legacies of British Slavery database compiled by UCL traces how compensation payments and plantation profits financed the expansion of elite metropolitan districts, universities, and civic buildings—literally embedding colonial wealth in the built environment.
 - Monumental structures in London, Bristol, and Liverpool were funded by fortunes accumulated through enslavement, sugar, and land exploitation, revealing the exploitative foundations of British modernity (operating under so-called ‘Enlightenment’ principles)

The image features a minimalist design with three thin black lines in the corners: a vertical line on the left, a vertical line on the right, and a diagonal line from the top-left to the bottom-right. The text is centered in the middle of the page.

Ironically, the 'humanist' idea of man originating
in the Enlightenment era was only achieved
through 'dehumanizing the non-Western Other'
(Fanon, 1961).

stylised africanness

- These representational logics survive in contemporary megaprojects.
- Diamniadio's designers claim inspiration from African culture, sculptural silhouettes, and natural forms—but the city is materially constructed in globalised modernity's palette: steel, glass, concrete.
- Yet, these postcolonial "African-inspired" cities reintroduce the colonial pattern:
 - Africa as aesthetic, not epistemology
- Other examples include: Abuja — Stylised Neo-Sahelian Government Districts, Nouakchott — Maghrebi/Andalusian Civic Complexes, etc.

**whose Africa is being materialised, and to
what ends?**

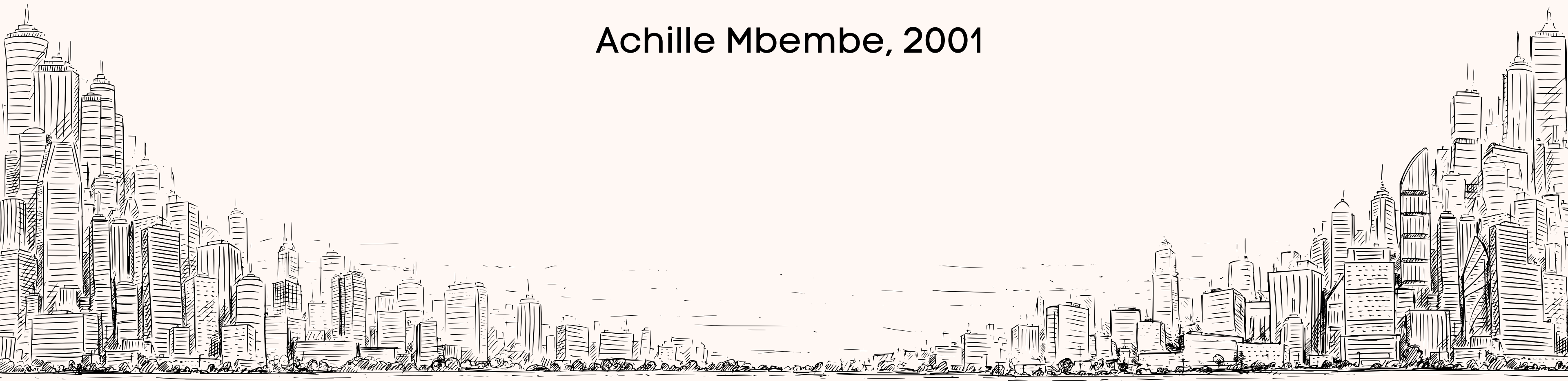


Diamniadio

african cities as laboratories of humanism?

“Africa’s cities are laboratories of a new humanism... spaces in which people invent forms of life that allow them to endure, create, and imagine futures beyond the constraints of the present.”

Achille Mbembe, 2001



the (re)emerging politics of space

- While colonial monuments tried to fix meaning and assert authority, urban dwellers continually reclaim and redefine these spaces through everyday use.
- Mobility, improvisation, and relationality are cornerstones of African urbanisation and perhaps reflect African humanist principles.
- The same sites we discussed are today the stages where new urbanities are invented in the 'amorphous urbanism' (McFarlane, 2017) that has typified the growth of cities across the continent
- The "future city" is not produced by state masterplans (e.g., Diamniadio), but by the subaltern who appropriate, inhabit, reinterpret, and re-humanise space.

urban humanism

- Across the continent, Africans continuously reinterpret, appropriate, and remake urban space according to relational ethics, survival creativity, and collective responsibility – forms of practice that amount to a new humanism.
 - Ubuntu urbanism (South Africa)
 - Àgbo-ilé compounds (Nigeria)
 - Sefer community planning (Ethiopia)
 - Kadogo micro-infrastructures (East Africa)
- Urban futures are co-produced by residents, not just planners or architects
- 'People as Infrastructure' - created through daily improvisation and social negotiation.
- Autogestion - a city managed collectively from below
- Space becomes socially produced, rather than just symbolically encoded





Whose heritage is being aestheticized, whose modernity is being imposed, and whose claim to the city is being legitimized or erased? In other words — whose Africa is it, anyway?

concluding remarks

- Architecture is not neutral and encodes or even translates theories of the human.
- African built environments historically expressed a relational humanism grounded in community, ecology, and reciprocity.
- Colonial architectures attempted to overwrite this with an extractive, hierarchical humanism grounded in mastery.
- But African cities continue to remake space through everyday improvisation and collective life—reasserting alternative visions of the human.
- Without reframing our understanding of African humanism to reflect the relational and improvisational practices shaping African cities, we fall back into the same logic as the colonial project: reshaping space according to external ideals rather than the lived realities of the people in it.



thank you.