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Inside Dakar's Musée Dynamique:

Reflections on culture and the state in postcolonial Senegal

By

David Murphy & Cédric Vincent

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In November 2016, a conference was held in Dakar to mark the 50th anniversary of the First World Festival of Negro Arts which had been held in the city from 1-24 April 1966. The conference closed with the public reading of a declaration that the organizers would later publish in the Senegalese daily newspaper, *Le Soleil* ('Déclaration finale' 2016). One of its main demands was the restitution of the former Musée Dynamique to the Ministry for Culture. This was unsurprising, as the destiny of the museum had been a bone of contention between the government and key figures in the Senegalese cultural scene ever since the building was abruptly closed in December 1988 and handed over to the judiciary as the new home for Senegal's Supreme Court.

Senegalese President Léopold Senghor had envisaged the 1966 festival as a celebration of Negritude, his concept of an essentialised blackness centred on emotion, rhythm and spontaneity. The Musée Dynamique, specially constructed for the event, hosted the festival centrepiece, an exhibition, entitled *Negro Art*, which featured over 600 objects of 'traditional' African art, borrowed from major museum collections in Europe and North America, from private collectors, and also from traditional kingdoms across the African continent. The objects had been chosen on the basis of aesthetic criteria and were designed to illustrate the richness of Africa's cultural heritage. For two decades, the museum lived on as the most tangible legacy of the 1966 festival: after the museum's closure in 1988, however, it became the most visible symbol of the decline of President Senghor's cultural programme and the

apparent demise of his vision of culture as the motor of development at the heart of the African renaissance.¹

The November 2016 declaration in *Le Soleil* was not the first time that the re-opening of the museum had been the subject of public debate (see Sylla 2007). This time, however, those behind the declaration believed that they might finally be pushing at an open door, for the text directly addressed President Macky Sall, who had announced during his speech at the opening of the conference that the museum would soon be returned to the arts community. The President's announcement had been something of a surprise, though, as cultural debate in the preceding months had been dominated by a brand new museum, the Musée des Civilisations Noires (Museum of Black Civilizations), an imposing structure in downtown Dakar that then Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade had negotiated as a gift from the Chinese government. The new museum had originally been due to open at the end of 2016 but the grand opening had been postponed: during its planning and development, it had gained notoriety as a white elephant, a grandiose building without a collection to display. It was a rich irony to see the project to create a Museum of Black Civilizations finally come to its troubled fruition at the very moment that its long-lost predecessor, the Musée Dynamique, was returning to the forefront of the cultural scene. In another layer of irony, the Museum of Black Civilizations was a project originally conceived in the 1970s by Senghor and Jean Gabus, key figure in the design of the Musée Dynamique.

The present authors embarked on a research trip to Dakar in November 2016 to attend the 50th anniversary conference and to photograph the Musée Dynamique as it is today: the intention was, as far as possible, to create a visual project centred on a

¹ For an overview of the 1966 festival, see Murphy (2016). On the 'Negro Art' exhibition, see Vincent (2016).

rephotographing of the museum, contrasting the utopian vision of the festival organizers with its current status. In some instances this would, as far as practicable, involve a process of ‘repeat photography’, returning to the precise vantage point from which photographs of the museum had been taken in 1966, a process that, as Trudi Smith has argued (in a very different context), creates a fruitful site for the construction of ‘knowledge about place, environment and people’s relationship with it’ (Smith, 2007, 180). Photographs of the museum taken around the time of the festival frame the building as a monumental temple of culture (is this Athens or Dakar?), its elevated and isolated position on the promontory lending it a sense of imposing grandeur (figure 1). Researchers visiting Dakar and seeking to photograph the building after its transformation into the Supreme Court, however, were usually greeted, by gun-toting security guards indicating that, with the heightened terrorist threat in the region, no photographs were allowed: the building’s imposing, remote grandeur had been all too easily given a new and somewhat authoritarian dimension (figure 2).² As Smith argues, ‘repeat photography brings a distinct awareness to acts of vision and provides an active, interpretive understanding of space and place’ (180); ‘it is a multi-layered and complex way to make the past present and to present the past, which, through this intricate relationship, allows us to investigate historical and contemporary realities’ (185). In the case of the Musée Dynamique, it is not simply that the building’s function has changed; it is also the case that the very acts of both seeing and photographing it have changed in material ways over the past 50 years (ways that made an exact repeat photography approach very difficult; see figures 3 and 4).

² The authors would like to express their gratitude to Charles Becker and Abdoul Aziz Guissé for their kind assistance on the ground in Dakar.

It is within this framework that the photographs accompanying this essay seek to document two moments in the history of the building, in 1966 and 2016, by juxtaposing images that belong to very different registers: official press photographs taken at the time of the 1966 festival; amateur snaps taken at the same time by Roland Kaehr, one of the assistants who helped to install the *Negro Art* exhibition (figure 5); and photographs taken on the fly by the present authors during a brief tour of the building 50 years later.

The framework for our project also changed somewhat, following President Sall's announcement cited above: instead of exploring a museum that had now become a courthouse, were we exploring a building about to rediscover its original function? Our visual essay was thus obliged to examine more closely the nature, purpose and evolution of this museum building. What exactly is the nature of the building about to be returned to the arts community? To answer this question involves an examination of the 'biography' of the building, going beyond a standard architectural approach that considers a building as a fixed object:³ for, once a building has been erected, it is used, consumed, adapted.⁴ The use of the building must thus be considered a dynamic act that implies the creation and negotiation of meanings and values.

A new museum in town

'Here we are, in front of this Musée Dynamique which constitutes the real heart of the festival and which will, in future, act as the most significant witness to this event'. It was with these words that President Senghor began his speech opening the *Negro Art*

³ The notion of 'biography' is taken from the groundbreaking book, *The Social Life of Things* (1986), edited by the anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai.

⁴ This project is situated within the framework outlined by scholars such as historian Daniel Maudlin and architectural anthropologist Marcel Vellinga (2014).

exhibition on 31 March 1966. The construction of a vast museum space was seen as crucial to the success of the 1966 festival for a number of reasons: it would form a physical centrepiece for the event, and it would live on long after the festival to function as an illustration of the newly independent state's commitment to culture. Its construction also constituted a guarantee that the exhibition's aims would be achieved. For it was realised that, without a new museum, the artistic ambitions of *Negro Art* could not be fulfilled. At a purely practical level, for example, the guarantee it provided of an air-conditioned exhibition space meeting strict conservation and security requirements was an essential negotiating point in discussions with public and private lenders of art works. The contemporaneous IFAN museum (opened in 1961) could meet none of these requirements.⁵

Construction of the Musée Dynamique was financed by UNESCO and its design was overseen by Jean Gabus, the Swiss director of Neuchâtel's Musée d'ethnographie, and one of the main curators of the *Negro art* exhibition. The construction of the Musée Dynamique on the city's western corniche was the most visible illustration of the physical transformation of the city that occurred during the preparations for the festival.⁶ The project was managed by the Dakar-based architects Michel Chesneau and Jean Vérola. Their practice had been actively involved in the Senegalese capital's post-war urban development and the pair had previously designed a number of prestigious buildings in the city that included hotels (The N'Gor and La Croix du Sud), the French, Belgian and Italian embassies, as well as the Sorano Theatre (see Culotand Thiveaud 1992). The architects submitted their

⁵ On the equally tumultuous history of the IFAN museum, see de Suremain (2007).

⁶ In the early stages of planning, the organizers carried out an assessment of the infrastructural improvements required in order for Dakar to be in a position to successfully host a festival on this scale had identified the need both for new artistic spaces to be constructed and for the city's hotel capacity to be greatly increased. This led to major infrastructural. Shantytowns were cleared, brand new roads were carved through the city, a new terminal was built at the airport, complete with a mural (*The Sun Bird*) by Senegalese painter Iba N'diaye.

preliminary designs for the museum in 1964, and thereafter they remained in constant contact with the Swiss curator in order to adjust and refine the project as the need arose. For Gabus, the ‘museum is conceived as a stage set with all the possibilities that provides of changing the décor/backdrop’,⁷ although in practice the design and construction of the museum would become bound up with the many vagaries of the planning process. It was finally handed over to the curators in February 1966 after two years of building work. The building’s forty square columns supported the overall structure across three levels. The basement housed technical spaces, maintenance workshops and also machinery. The middle ground level was designated as an administrative space with a curator’s office and a photography laboratory. The ground floor and mezzanine constituted the exhibition space, with its total surface area of 1450m² designed as ‘the temporary museum for other museums’. **There was no provision made for housing a permanent collection; the dynamism of the space would be reflected in the revolving swirl of temporary exhibitions drawn from around the world.**

The ‘dynamic museum’ as a concept

The museum’s name had not been decided upon at the beginning of the process. In June 1964, Jean Gabus wrote to the architects: ‘One question keeps bothering me, just a detail: it’s the name of the building: “Galerie d’expositions” or “Musée dynamique?”’⁸ **As was indicated above, the** space was not designed to house a permanent exhibition or to store a reserve collection. Other documents again describe it as a ‘new museum for temporary exhibitions’. The aim, clearly, was to provide a

⁷ Jean Gabus, *Rapport Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel année 1966*, Archives du Musée d’ethnographie, Neuchâtel, p.140. All translations from the French are by the authors.

⁸ Letter from Jean Gabus to Michel Chesneau dated 1 June 1964. Archives du Musée d’ethnographie, Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, file 1422, ‘Musée dynamique: correspondance des architectes Michel Chesneau and Jean Verola’.

multi-use space that could accommodate all kinds of exhibitions. This most likely explains why Gabus finally opts, in the same letter, for ‘Musée dynamique’, a museum with no collection of its own but that ‘is in a constant state of readiness’.

‘Just a detail’? The name that was eventually chosen bears Gabus’s imprint and establishes a link with Neuchâtel’s Musée d’ethnographie. Gabus was not only the director of this institution, but had also been the prime mover behind the construction of a new section of the museum (built in 1954-55) envisaged as a ‘musée dynamique’ that would stand alongside the ‘static museum’ housing the permanent collection.⁹ This temporary exhibition building—known today as the Black Box—is recognizable for its distinctive closed structure. The plans for the Dakar exhibition space were modelled directly on the Neuchâtel wing, with a similar gallery-mezzanine arrangement creating huge wall spaces for display. It is also worth noting that Salif Diop, an architect by training and the Musée Dynamique’s first director, spent a period of time gaining practical experience in Neuchâtel.

The concept of a ‘dynamic museum’ may initially have been promoted by Gabus but was deployed by the Senegalese authorities in a somewhat different fashion to that intended by the Swiss. André Terrisse, President Senghor’s cultural advisor, laid out the regime’s vision of the museum in the Senegalese daily newspaper, *Dakar-Matin* on 2 July 1964:

‘Dynamic’ is the most judicious term one can use in relation to African art. In Africa more than elsewhere, art is a dynamic force. The traditional African work of art is considered incomplete if it does not serve a purpose. It loses much of its value if cut off from its functional role. [...] It is thus necessary to

⁹ In the 1970s, Gabus was invited to develop another Musée Dynamique, in Nouakchott (Mauritania), this time with a greater dialogue between the institution’s function as a ‘static’ and a ‘dynamic’ museum, but in the end the project did not proceed.

enhance the exhibition of each beautiful artwork in various ways: bringing it to life through a play of light and shadow, situating it in relation to other objects, photographs, or even songs and dancing, in order to draw out its deeper significance. This is exactly the aim of the Musée Dynamique. (Huchard, 2010, 336)

The importation of the term ‘musée dynamique’ into the African context saw it integrated into a wider national cultural politics in which its Swiss origins became lost from view. The museum’s final director, Ousmane Sow Huchard, confirms that the Senegalese state opted for the term ‘musée dynamique’

in order to break with the museum philosophy that was increasingly denounced in academic writing as based on a lazy and nostalgic contemplation of object-witnesses from the past; this would allow the creation of a contemporary museum practice that would engage in the interpretation of object-witnesses from the past and the present within the wider context of our national policies of development, our aspirations as a nation and the prime necessity of making African Unity become a reality. (Huchard 2010: 339-40)¹⁰

The Musée Dynamique would thus be situated within a broader category of museums seeking to break with the practice of those institutions dating from the colonial period whose collections presented a timeless Africa to the spectator. **Indeed**, it should also be noted that there has been some dispute regarding the originality of the Musée Dynamique in the African context. Following his visit to the 1966 festival, Frank

¹⁰ In passing, it should be noted that Huchard’s use of the term, ‘object-witness’ was introduced into museographical discourse by Gabus (1975).

McEwen claimed that the National Gallery in Harare (at the time Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia), of which he had served as director from its inception in 1957, **had a better claim to the status of Africa's first 'dynamic museum'** (McEwen 1967). He was referring to the multiple activities that he had initiated in the museum, from the Workshop school to the ICAC festival of 1962.

The tortuous evolution of a building

Beyond its immediate use in the 1966 festival, the Musée Dynamique was conceived as the first stage in the creation of a *Cité des arts*, a vast project that was designed to occupy the entire promontory overlooking Soumbédioune Bay (figure 6). For Senghor, the *Cité* constituted a logical next step following the festival and he announced that it would have 'a dual function as both a centre for the collection of traditional artistic practices and a research centre in which contemporary art would be developed. It [was] vital [...] not to be a prisoner of the past' ('Une cité' 1966). The *Cité* was envisaged as an establishment that would cover all of the major arts. There were plans for a fine arts building, a centre for dramatic arts and music, an administrative building and artists' residences. None of the plans for the construction of the *Cité des arts* beyond the construction of the Musée Dynamique were ever realized and, ironically, the area around the museum is today occupied by a fun fair (figure 7).¹¹ The symbolism almost seems too good to be true: the postcolonial state's dream of a national arts policy jettisoned in favour of a globalized commercial culture.

The Musée Dynamique would go on to play an important role in the development of the Senegalese arts scene, although it never really functioned as a

¹¹ The Magic Land fun fair occupies a site of over 12,500m² and was opened in 2004 by President Wade.

‘veritable museum, that is a public institution for artistic education, whose primary mission is the presentation and the celebration of the works of national artists and artisans’,¹² but rather as a prestigious art gallery. It was one of the few exhibition spaces in Africa able to mount major exhibitions of European artists: *Kandinsky and Miro* (1970); *Drawings by Leonardo da Vinci* (1970); *Chagall* (1971); *Picasso* (1972); and *Soulages* (1974), of whom Senghor was a great admirer. Amongst Senegalese artists, only Iba N’diaye was able to exhibit his work there, in 1977.

The museum had promised to be the site of a renaissance in the plastic arts in post-independence Senegal: during its first decade, however, it did not really deliver on this promise. It should be noted nonetheless that from 1973 onwards, the museum hosted the annual editions of the *Salon des Arts Plastiques Sénégalais* (1973-75) and it organized the famous travelling exhibition, *Contemporary Art of Senegal*, which would itself go on to be shown at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1974. President Senghor had effectively taken on the role of executive programmer for the museum and he sought to give it an international reputation. Senghor’s personal intervention in the running of the institution was made brutally visible in 1977 when he decided to suspend its activities as a museum and handed the building over to the Mudra-Afrique Dance School, founded that year by Germaine Acogny from Bénin and the Frenchman, Maurice Béjart. The museum space was subsequently dedicated to dance for five years before financial difficulties led to its closure in 1982.

By that point, Senghor had already left power (in 1980) and his successor, Abdou Diouf, decided to return the building to its original vocation as a museum. In 1984, Ousmane Sow Huchard became director of this new version Musée Dynamique and the exhibition, *Rencontres* [Encounters], marked its inauguration. The exhibition

¹² Decree on the creation and organisation of the Musée Dynamique, 19 February 1966, cited in Huchard, 2010, 739-41).

was a project piloted by the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs—its ‘diplomatic’ tour also took it to Abidjan and Bamako—and it gathered together various contemporary ‘global’ artists based in France, including Pierre Alechinsky, Roberto Matta and Zao Wou-ki. From 1984 to 1988, however, the museum would be dominated by the celebration of the Senegalese arts scene: from exhibitions devoted to individual artists to the relaunch of the national salons to the annual *Plekhanov* event conceived by members of the *Laboratoire Agit’art* arts collective. In 1987, an exhibition devoted to a member of this collective, El Hadj Sy, was made even more noteworthy, Huchard notes, by Senghor’s attendance at the opening, his first public appearance since he had left power.

In the course of these final four years, the building was transformed. In 1986, the mezzanine was reconfigured to welcome a permanent collection and a meeting room. The main exhibition space on the ground floor, which, according to Huchard, still bore traces of the Mudra-Afrique years, was renovated. A separate entrance hall was created while a partition wall further divided the ground floor space into a narrow corridor lined with offices. Needless to say, the main transformation to the building took place when it became the nation’s Supreme Court in 1988, a decision taken by President Abdou Diouf in person (figures 8 and 9). The official reason given was that the then Palais de Justice had been built on a geological fault line and it urgently required a new home.

One morning in May 1988, the museum’s director was led from the building by armed soldiers, despite protests from key figures in the cultural community.¹³ Over the summer, renovation work took place: a court room was installed while the mezzanine and the basement area—which previously held the museum’s reserve

¹³ The circumstances surrounding the closure of the museum are recounted in details by Huchard (2010: 458-79).

collection—were lined with offices. President Diouf’s decision marked the beginning of a standoff between the state and the Senegalese cultural sector, which felt it had been betrayed. A first appeal for the restitution of the museum was launched in 1992 at the Biennale internationale des arts de Dakar (now known primarily as Dak’art). On and off over the next two decades, vague government promises were made that the building would rediscover its original artistic purpose: for example, in 1996, Diouf’s government claimed that the building would once more become a museum, as soon as work on a new Palais de Justice had been completed.

If President Sall’s announcement in November 2016 does finally lead to the reopening of the museum,¹⁴ a new stage in its history will begin. It would thus be necessary for the reborn museum to find a way of accommodating the multiple traces of the successive layers of work that the building has undergone. Walking through the corridors of the current Supreme Court in November 2016, we encountered various remnants of previous eras: from the original air conditioning system in the basement designed to preserve the museum’s art works to glimpses of the museum’s permanent collection of paintings and tapestries some of which now hang somewhat randomly on wall spaces across the building (figure 10).¹⁵ It is as though the versatility of the museum space as originally conceived by Gabus has been subsumed into the very fabric of the building’s multiple guises over its 50-year history. The museum’s evolution also makes of the building a striking example of the arbitrariness of the political realm in postcolonial Africa, even in a seemingly successful, democratic state such as Senegal: the imposing museum on the promontory was all too readily re-imagined as an imposing judicial building, representative of the full legal force of the

¹⁴ At the time of writing (January 2018), there has still been no official confirmation regarding the museum’s return to its original arts vocation.

¹⁵ In April 2016, in a one-off event linked to the biennial Dak’art arts fair, the public was able to see 23 restored works (tapestries and paintings) from the collection exhibited in the main hall of the Supreme Court.

state. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that, in the past 2-3 decades, the arts scene in Africa learned to work in ways that did not require such state-sponsored infrastructure. Indeed, even if the Musée Dynamique does reopen as promised by President Sall, might the Senegalese cultural scene discover that the time for such buildings on the continent has passed and it is left with another white elephant on its hands? For the moment though, many cultural actors in Senegal, older generations in particular, hark back to the creation of the Musée Dynamique as symbolic of an exhilarating postcolonial moment when the Senegalese state appeared to place culture at the heart of the process of decolonization.¹⁶ In this vision, the museum represents an imagined golden age and its return to the cultural community would constitute the first step on the road back towards the values of that glorious past (figure 11).

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