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When power stepped off its pedestal ... the design of the Pan-African Parliament

Adam, Mohammed

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Chapter 1

The African Union: top-down elitist or bottom-up revolutionaries?

This chapter explores the African Union from an organizational and opinion driven perspective. Using opinions of African leaders, the press and ordinary citizens it will attempt to understand how this organization is perceived from different viewpoints.

This will be used as a tool to assess whether the perceptions of the AU as an elitist 'top down' institution are valid.The thesis will then explore the AU buildings, using this to read the nature of the organization.

The intention of this chapter is to analyze the built fabric in order to assess these political claims, citing the writings of Lawrence J Vale and Charles T Goodsell. Both these authors have looked at political architecture as an expression of political ideas and ideals that conceived them.

"Thrones may be out of fashion, and pageantry too, but political authority still requires a cultural frame in which to define itself and advance its claims"
(Clifford Geertz in Goodsell, 1988:01)

What is the African Union?
The South African department of foreign affairs website defines the AU as "Africa's premier institution and principal organization for the promotion of socio-economic integration of the continent" (www.dfa.org.za ;Cited 09 March 2007)

This continental organization has replaced the Organization of African Unity (OAU), a 39-year-old 53-nation body created for the purposes of promoting African unity and eradication of all forms of colonialism on the continent. (Rubin 2001:63)
On the 09-09-1999 at a heads of states meeting of the OAU in Sirte, Libya, a debate took place over the role of the OAU since Africa had defeated all forms direct colonialism and apartheid on the continent.The Sirte Declaration was passed calling for the establishment of a union and 3 years later in Durban, South Africa the AU was launched, marked by the first Assembly of the Heads of State of the African Union.
(www.dfa.org.za ;Cited 09 March 2007)





African Union flag &emblem
(www.africa-union.org,cited 30 May 2007)

1 AU?
2 ELITIST
3 PAP
4 BRIEF
5 DESIGN METHODOLOGY
6 SITE
7 URBAN DESIGN
8 DESIGN



How does the African Union work?

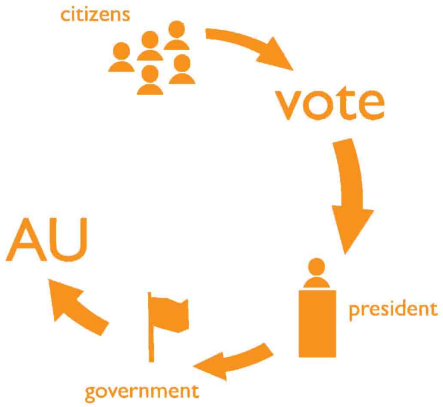
Africa is divided into many sovereign nations, represented together they form the African Union. This brief explanation explains the democratic process of a typical member state and illustrates how that state fits into the AU.

The diagram on the top right illustrates a simplified understanding of the democratic process leading up to the AU. The citizens of a country vote for a candidate who will represent them at national government level. The winning candidate becomes the president and chooses ministers and other internal structures. This forms the government of the country.This government is represented by it's president and it's ministers at AU level

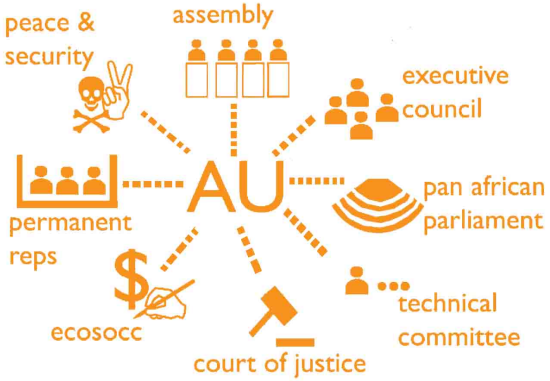
The AU inturn is made up of specific organs represented by the diagram bottom right, each with its own mandate. These are:

- The Assembly
- The Executive council
- The Commission
- The Permanent Representatives Council
- Peace and Security Council
- Pan African Parliament
- The Economic, Social and Cultural Council
- The Court of Justice
- The Specialized Technical Committees

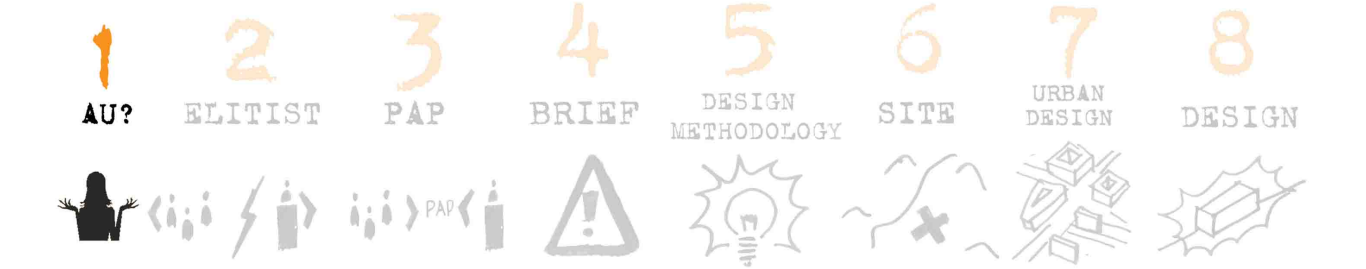
(www.africa-union.org, cited 21 April 2007)



Top:simplified diagram of democratic process



Top:simplified diagram of AU structures



How is the African Union Viewed?

The purpose of presenting various opinions on the AU is to recognize the different perspectives that exist both from within the organization and outside of it. This will inform the analysis of the AU buildings in order to assess whether the opinion of the AU as a top down institution is just.

Three sources of opinions will be looked at here. Firstly, through the words of its leaders, analyzing the opinion the AU has of itself. Secondly we will look at the opinion of the press to gain a deeper understanding and critique of the AU.

Thirdly, we will look at the opinions of everyday people to understand how the political structure is perceived from the outside.This will be done by the use of a survey, complemented by an analysis of responses to press writings of the AU, by ordinary citizens.

Using this three-point perspective of opinions is not only crucial to understanding the dynamics of perceptions related to the organization but it holds a particular meaning to architecture.

In his book 'Architecture ,Power and National Identity', Lawrence J Vale (1992:7) states that political buildings appear to serve several symbolic purposes:

- It reflects the politicians and architects opinions
- It chooses to either reinforce or counter existing social readings of architecture , an example of this is the manipulation of scale to emphasize power
- It is an embodiment of the search for clarity,order and predictability in a threatening world

Thus by analyzing the opinions of these three groupings, we can look to read political architecture objectively. This idea will be further explored when we look at the AU buildings.



Meeting of the A.U executive council
(www.africa-union.com,Cited 12 May 2007)

What is the A.U's opinion of itself?

If we are to analyze the various press releases and speeches made by AU leaders we see a reoccurrence of certain themes. One of these themes is the *African Renaissance*.

In 1998, Thabo Mbeki, the deputy president of South Africa at that time, gave a speech to a gathering of South African and Japanese businessmen entitled: The African Renaissance, South Africa and the world. In order to elaborate on the idea of an African Renaissance Mr. Mbeki asked the following:

"How dare we speak of an African Renaissance? After all in the context of the evolution of the European peoples when we speak of the renaissance, we speak of advances in science and technology, voyages of discovery across the oceans, spread, development and flowering of knowledge and a blossoming of the arts…How do we (Africans) – who in a millennium only managed to advance from cannibalism to a 'blood-dimmed tide' of savages who still slaughter countless innocents with machetes-how do we hope to emulate the great human achievements of the earlier renaissance of the Europe of the 15th and16th centuries?"

(www.unu.edu/unupress/mbeki.html , cited 24 May 2007)

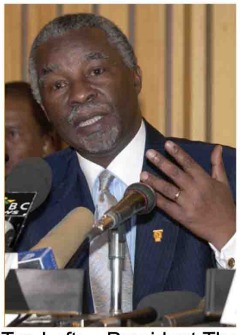
In his response to this the core of Mbeki's African Renaissance is revealed:

"When we speak of the African Renaissance, we project both into the past and future."

(www.unu.edu/unupress/mbeki.html , cited 24 May 2007).

The rest of the speech went on to ighlight the achievements of African civilizations prior to and during the European renaissance period and an account of the liberation struggle of the continent against colonialism during the 20th century.

Our interest however is neither in the content of the African Renaissance nor the account of these histories. The relevance of this to our discussion lies in the concept of projection into the past and future, of the African Renaissance.





Top Left: President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa (www.dfa.org.za , cited 12 April 2007)

Top Right: President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique (www.africa-union.org ,cited 24 May 2007)

This is not isolated to the words of Mr. Mbeki alone as we see this in the words of many an AU public figure. Thabo Mbeki headed the AU during the 2002-2003 post inception term handing over the reigns to Mozambiquan president Joaquim Chissano. (www.africa-union.org , cited 20 May 2007)
In Mr. Chissano's inaugural address at the AU Assembly (Maputo, 10 July 2003) we see the dual projection coming through again.

"In hosting in our national territory the second ordinary session of the Assembly of the AU we wanted to play tribute to the pioneers of the liberation process of our continent…how can we forget the countries that hosted external or provisional headquarters of the liberation movements…the country that is your host today was once the battleground of a fierce struggle for independence and dignity…finally the dream for which whole generations of combatants fought against colonialism and oppression became a reality. This realization reinforces our resolve to contribute to the design and implementation of the new strategic framework of action of the African Union."
(www.africa-union.org/speeches.html , cited 20 May 2007)

A third example of this dual projection is seen once more in the recent comments of the South African foreign affairs minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma at the African Union-Caribbean Diaspora conference (24 April 2007).

"Africans against all odds have always scored victories; they have turned always life into a playground of possibilities. The African rebirth will thus be moral, peaceful and lead to a better world"

(www.mg.co za/articleslist/breaking_news_africa/ 24April2007_3-28.html ,cited 29 May 2007)

One would ask why is the dual projection embodied in the idea of the African Renaissance important to the AU public figures?, as seen in the reoccurrence of this theme in the many press releases and speeches.
Returning to the speech of Mr. Chissano. The main point of the words quoted were the commitment to the design and implementation of the new strategic framework of action of the African Union.
Yet before this point was made a lengthy tribute to the liberation struggle was made. Would it have not been sufficient to state the point? Perhaps, but the inclusion of the struggle narrative gave this point gravitas, tying it in to the efforts of 'whole generations of combatants who fought against colonialism and oppression.'

This link seems to legitimize his point as if to say: 'because we are so closely linked to this historic shared struggle that has been successful our purpose for meeting here is valid, legitimate and honorary'.

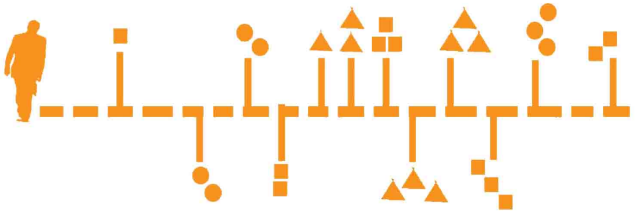


This reminds us of an introductory lecture to the advanced history of architecture and urbanism course, addressed to architectural honors students at Wits University. In this lecture, the difference between 'the past' and 'history' was discussed.While the past is in another time and place, history is a reconstruction of the past. As such, the reasons as to why a history is compiled and who compiles the history are of extreme importance. (Lecture: Silverman 8 February 2006)
The World Book Encyclopedia reinforces this point: "Experts try to be as unbiased as possible, but their own beliefs and prejudices influence their interpretations…this in-turn influences what historians accept as reasonable testimony or likely sequence of events" (1992:vol9, 223)

This has been represented on the diagrams on the right. The top diagram shows the difference between the past and present. The dotted line represents the chain of events that link the past to the present.
The middle diagram shows us this chain of events with each fact/event being represented by a symbol .The man on the side is the historian who looks at the chain of facts/events. The bottom diagram shows the history according to the man who in his extraction of history has been influenced by his own beliefs/prejudices. As such his account of history would be different from another historian looking at the same line of facts/thoughts for different reasons ,criteria or methodologies.



Top:simplified diagram of past and present



Top: simplified diagram of a person considering history



Top: simplified diagram of the derived history

As such we see the reference to the past struggles and achievements used as an attempt to portray the present efforts of the AU as legitimate exercises.

To discover our next theme let us return to the speeches of Mr. Mbeki and Mrs. Dlamini-Zuma.If we continue to read through Mr. Mbeki's speech of 1998 we come across another important quote related to the African Renaissance.

"What we are arguing therefore is that in the political sphere the African Renaissance has begun. Our history demands that we do everything in our power to defend the gains that have been already achieved to encourage all countries to move in the same direction, according to which the people shall govern, and to enhance the capacity of the OAU to act as an effective instrument for peace and the promotion of human and peoples rights, to which it is committed"

(www.unu.edu/unupress/mbeki.html , cited 24 May2007)

Here we derive two important points. The first being that the African Renaissance has begun in the political sphere and the second is that 'by learning from the history of the continent we need to ensure that all countries on the continent are moving in the same direction under the guidelines and guidance of the OAU.'

We thus see the second important theme of our discussion emerging namely the primary importance of the political sphere. By Mr. Mbeki's statement of the African Renaissance having begun in the political sphere the implication we read is that the African political renaissance is and will be leading the renaissance of the continent in all other spheres.

If we look to Mrs. Dlamini-Zuma's comments, 9years later, in 2007 we see the same theme adopting a more subtle wording. According to the SAPA reporter

""Dlamini-Zuma declared the 21st century as the African century, and said that it was clear that all people on the continent and the Diaspora had to be mobilized to wage a "titanic battle" of ideas against poverty and underdevelopment for the emancipation of woman and empowerment of the youth."

(www.mg.co.za/articleslist/breaking_news_africa/ 24April2007_3-28.html ,cited 29 May 2007)

If we analyze this the core idea is that 'the people of the continent and Diaspora had to be mobilized.' The words "had to be" are of extreme importance because it implies that the mobilization effort is not arising out of the peoples own will ,i.e. that they are not mobilizing themselves. If we view this in the context of Mr. Mbeki's idea political primacy in terms of the African Renaissance, we conclude that the mobilization is under the leadership of the political sphere.



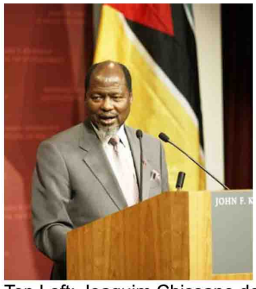
Here we see that people are not acting out of their own will but are being directed to act.This theme exposes the idea of the political sphere/system as the directors/motivators and the public sphere and the directed/motivated.

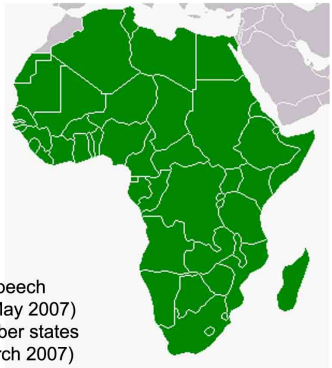
The third theme we identify is the moving of countries in the same direction under the guidance of the OAU, as derived from Mr. Mbeki's speech. Remembering that the AU was launched in 2002 let us replace the acronym OAU by AU in our identification of the third theme.The third theme identified now reads as:' the moving of countries in the same direction under the guidance of the AU.

To assess whether this replacement of acronyms is just let us look to two sources. The first being the definition of the AU as recorded in the introduction of this chapter and the second being another Joaquim Chissano speech, this time at the celebration of Africa day on the 25 May 2003.

The earlier definition of the AU was:
"Africa's premier institution and principal organization for the promotion of accelerated socio-economic integration of the continent which will lead to greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples." (www.dfa.org.za , cited 09 March 2007)

Considering this statement in isolation, the replacement of acronyms is a non-issue however we still need to contextualize this within our second source being Mr. Chissano's Africa Day speech.
In this speech, he discusses the role of the OAU in the continent, the legacy of the OAU to be fulfilled by the AU and the identified method is which his is being carried out. Important to our discussion is the changeover from the OAU to the AU, thus we will quote these aspects of Mr. Chissano's speech and analyze it within the context of our discussion.





Top Left: Joaquim Chissano delivering a speech
(www.ksg.harvard.edu ,cited 31 May 2007)
Top Right: Map of Africa showing Au member states
(www.answers.com, cited 2 March 2007)

"The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has made achievements of great political transcendence throughout its existence that has changed forever the fate of the African continent…Acknowledging the victories of the continent of which I highlight three:

- First, having fulfilled the noble role of politically liberating the continent and giving back dignity to the African people.
- Second, having known how to survive with the tenacious and determination the vicissitudes of the cold war, including attempts at dividing the continent.
- Third, having the capacity and the know-how to change, to be up to face the challenge of the new era.

Indeed after liberating the continent from the colonial domination, African leaders understood that ,in a period dominated by globalization, The OAU could no longer keep up, with the required effectiveness, the evolution of the world, thus fueling the urgent need to change.

This 'genetic mutation' of our Organization aims at equipping it with efficient tools to speed up political, economic, social and cultural progress of the continent, because without those advances, the every-day life of our people would be of continued poverty, hunger and misery"
(www.africa-union.org/speeches.html , cited 20 May 2007)

From this we realize the varying nature of these two bodies.

The function of the OAU was to liberate the continent from colonialism.The function of the AU is to aid in speeding up political, economic, social and cultural progress in the age of globalization.In terms of this it seems unjust to equate the OAU with the AU in terms of our identification of our third theme.

From this we deduce the third theme to be:
'the moving of countries in the same direction as previously guided by the OAU and now under the AU for a different yet equaly important purpose.'

What is the AU's opinion of itself?
In our discussion, we looked at various speeches and statements and identified
reoccurring themes that were:

- The idea of an African Renaissance, which projects into the past and future to imagine a regeneration of the continent.
- By projecting into history, and re-reading/ re-writing histories, ground the work of the AU in terms of a 'legitimate' struggle and thus promote the African Renaissance
- The primacy of the political sphere in leading all other spheres in the vision of achieving a renaissance
- The moving of countries in the same direction as previously achieved under the OAU, under the AU for a different yet equally important purpose.



If we consider these together we gain an understanding of the AU of itself ,which from our discussion could be summarized as the following:

The African Union is Africa's premier institution and primary organization for the promotion of accelerated growth on the continent. It is a legitimate body being based on the efforts of the OAU and the struggles of the African people in liberating the continent from colonialism. It accepts the responsibility from the OAU and the peoples of Africa in leading the renaissance of the continent, which is much needed in the age of globalization. By continual alignment of the efforts of African countries in the same direction under the AU it will initiate the renaissance of the continent through political rejuvenation. This effort will filter through to all spheres of life of the African people and people of the Diaspora.

By understanding this, we realize that **although the AU encourages participation of civil society,it believes that the renaissance of the continent starts in the political sphere, as such we conclude that the AU views itself as a top-down institution.**
Considering this, we now have the tools to analyze the architectural implications, in terms of the OAU and AU buildings, from the perspective of the political entity of itself and the image it wishes to project through its architecture.

