

APALAZZOGALLERY

IBRAHIM MAHAMA

IF THESE ARE THE THINGS

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What if...

Text by Eva Brioschi

Space syntax is a set of methodological theories that analyses how architectural environments influence human action and thought. A combination of psychology, sociology and architecture, it aims to 'scientifically' predict how people will use a given place, and how it will influence their brain activity.

Ibrahim Mahama became interested in architecture when he realised he could overcome the limitations and static nature of painting and sculpture through a practice characterised by a holistic approach, capable of encompassing places and environments through changeable and participatory approaches, positively inspiring the imagination of whole new generations. The observation of space began with an in-depth investigation of those buildings erected in Ghana immediately after independence in 1957, during the period of Kwame Nkrumah's enlightened presidency, like the silos, designed for the storage of seeds – such as cocoa and maize – in an attempt to organise a complete production chain stretching across the territory.

This dream of self-determination and economic growth floundered with Nkrumah's ousting. Much of this architecture has remained unused and inaccessible, yet silently present and rooted in the territory from south to north Ghana, like ghosts guarding a mythical but hazy and abandoned past. Mahama therefore questioned how these simulacra could once again become active elements of a shared landscape, and found a practical answer with his installations of frayed and worn jute sacks, stitched together to make up huge patchworks with which he covered abandoned and unused buildings in Ghana, before moving on to work with public buildings on almost every continent. The aim is to heighten people's distracted gaze once more, and through artistic creation, to breathe new life and new potential for development where people's usual resigned outlook only focuses on failure and decay. He later also rescued some of these structures from abandonment, purchasing them and transforming them into places where exhibitions and educational and recreational events could be held.

In Ibrahim Mahama's practice, there is no difference between architecture and art. Art is thus made with everything, mainly salvaged objects and materials, to be reinserted into the production cycle, paradoxically catapulting them from the level of waste to that of luxury goods, as art is conventionally classified. Architecture, on the other hand, becomes an infrastructure that allows for a new and more conscious perception of the context; a catalyst of forces, energies and possibilities that arise precisely through matter recovered from destruction and oblivion. Mahama's studio, Red Clay (in Tamale, northern Ghana), has now become a cultural centre, where study rooms, experimentation workshops, auditoriums, artists' studios, exhibition spaces, archives, a library and

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artists' residences are housed in this compound of red brick buildings, as well as in disused aeroplanes salvaged from disintegration, and more recently in old train carriages that have been lying abandoned for decades.

Trains, the national railway network – the Gold Coast Railway founded by the British, later to become the Ghana Railway after independence – as well as the workshops where British-made carriages and locomotives were repaired and tracks and sleepers were produced, have become a source of inspiration for the artist as well as raw material with which to design installations, not to mention new architectural environments designed to destabilise, intrigue and open up new outlooks. Old seats removed from abandoned train carriages were used for the first *Parliament of Ghosts*, created in Manchester in 2019, which provided the inspiration for the subsequent creation of the space of the same name built at Red Clay, and conceived as a sort of arena surrounded with brickwork stalls, hosting events of various kinds: concerts, lectures, exhibitions, video screenings and theatrical performances. The ghosts are the historical failures that have taken place in Ghana over the past century, but also a metaphor for the inefficiency of most parliaments in the world, incapable of legislating in the real interest of the people who elect them. They are the spectres of neo-colonialism, defined precisely by Nkrumah as “the last stage of Imperialism,” exercised through neo-liberal economic policies that have allowed the West to continue to practice control, oppression and exploitation, and to generate inequality, poverty and dependency.

And it is to remedy these very abuses and the general lack of infrastructures capable of generating virtuous development processes in Ghanaian society (but more generally across the African continent) that Mahama invests the money he earns from the sale of his works – as well as from the prizes he receives from institutions such as the Prince Claus Award and the brand new Dia Art Foundation Sam Gilliam Award – to develop the Red Clay structure and unleash its disruptive potential on the new generations. Last year he was finally able to negotiate a purchase agreement with the Railway Development Ministry and thus transport a number of obsolete national railway carriages to Tamale, which – as has already happened with old planes permanently used as classrooms – will become places of study, meeting spaces, environments designed to broaden the geographical and cultural horizons of young students, who will practise coding or learn to use drones and computers inside them. These object-environments act as space-time devices, like *voli-ni*: the Dagbani word for emerging from a physical and temporal hole to make a journey along the same coordinates, but projected towards a future of industrious creativity. Being creative means no longer looking for answers and starting to produce thought from questions, from unresolved knots, from accumulated failures. To be creative, one must abandon any safe harbour, any comfort zone, and one must stop being afraid of the unknown and set oneself free; no longer defining oneself on the basis of external gazes, inherited categories and socio-political boundaries.

What Mahama seeks to do is initiate reasoning that remains suspended in the fullness of undefined potential. Instead of exploiting the utilitarian patterns typical of consumer societies, he seems to be seeking that ‘magic’ (the art of invention) that Novalis opposed to sterile and limited rationalism: What if...instead of producing ‘new’ works of art, we used old materials and salvaged objects to build not only assemblages with a certain formal and aesthetic coherence, but environments, platforms and devices capable of challenging our systems of knowledge and opening us up to the complexity of reality? The ideological, cultural and social implications of this artistic practice, understood as collective and participatory, may probably be seen to unfold over the coming decades, like concentric circles rippling outwards from Red Clay, Jenakpeng, Tamale.

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The works made from the remains of Ghanaian trains and railways, such as wooden beams and leather strips woven together, combine the decay of forms, spaces and materials into a new creative grammar. Mahama's drawings multiply over collages composed of dozens of trade notes, tax documents and geomorphological maps which he found in abandoned workshops and offices, active during the days of railway building. Together with recent photographs, these drawings depict men united in a human chain, carrying heavy rails and, like titans, seeming to bear the weight of the past and its momentum towards the future. Other smaller figures, united in a compact mass, caught up in a tangle of ropes, seem poised between an attempt at liberation from these constraints and the desire to participate in shared progress. The major installation, the heart of the exhibition, serves as a threshold, a portal to be crossed in the manner of a ritual 'shadow line'.

The artist's path of personal maturation is accompanied by the development of his entire community. Like a propulsive force, his example has driven an entire generation of artists and practitioners – as in the case of the Kumasi collective blaxTARLINES – to interpret the teachings of professor and mentor Kɔrɔ'kɔchɔ Seid'ou in a personal and free manner: an invitation to break free from the constraints of cognitive and interpretative bias, opening up to experimentation with materials, tools and processes. Art is everywhere and can happen anywhere. Each recovered object is like a three-dimensional photograph, a still image of a frozen moment from the past, which through wounds and lacerations tells of lives, journeys and dreams. The tracks no longer just lie on the ground, but rise in a trajectory whose horizon becomes the vaults of heaven. The real journey, imbued with weight and history, is dematerialised, becoming a quest beyond tangible boundaries, a human and collective, imaginative and creative journey, and one where anything is possible.

What if... each one of us started thinking of every failure as a crucible of potential; if each one of us decided to do something with our personal and social defeats, using them as springboards for unpredictable creative leaps?

Eva Brioschi, art historian and author, she is curator of Collezione La Gaia di Busca and the collection of della Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare di Bolzano. She is on the board of directors of Carico Massimo in Livorno. Recent exhibitions and publishing projects include *Under the Spell of Duchamp*, Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, Italy (2024-2025); *Atelier dell'Errore: Die Werkstatt*, Richard Saltoun Gallery, Rome, Italy (2024); *David Lamelas. I have to think about it*, Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, Italy (2023); *Ibrahim Mahama. Voli-ni, E.art.h.*, Verona, Italy, (Lenz Press, 2022); *Things/Thoughts*, Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, Italy (2021); *Henri Chopin. Body Sound Space*, Quartz Studio, Turin, Italy (2020) and *Opera Aperta, Courtesy Emilia Romagna*, Arte Fiera, Bologna, Italy (2020).