



— SPATIAL SOVEREIGNTY & CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

# The Architecture of Encounter

*How a building of Compressed Earth Block in Dakar quietly rewrites the grammar of German cultural diplomacy — from soft power to mutual learning.*

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# The Architecture of Encounter: Spatial Sovereignty and Cultural Diplomacy in Dakar.

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Photo: New Goethe-Institut in Dakar

Credits: The author

When I was a child, my mom often took me to the then-called “Centre Culturel Français”, now *Institut Français du Sénégal à Dakar*. It was usually on Wednesday afternoons, as we didn’t have school, and I could borrow books or take part in storytelling circles where either Tonton Massamba or Tonton Babacar Mbaye Ndack told us “Léeboon, Lippoön” stories, which is how I referred to Senegalese folktales. Back then, if my memory serves me correctly, because it was a while ago, there was a big baobab or flamboyant tree under which we would sit. As a child, this was just a place where I would meet with other children from different nationalities. I knew this place was “French” because of its name; I obviously never questioned what its purpose was.

Now, as an adult, I still go to the French institute, though for different purposes. With a deeper understanding of world affairs, I have, for a long time, perceived these cultural centers as instruments of diplomacy. Therefore, while working on this project on colonial continuities and the symbols of Europe’s colonial past, I constructed the mental framework that, just like embassies, cultural centers serve as vehicles of cultural diplomacy. After visiting the new Goethe-Institut in Dakar and conducting an interview with its director, I must admit that my understanding of cultural diplomacy has completely shifted—or rather, my understanding of German cultural diplomacy—and this for various reasons.

Chief among these reasons is how the institute has chosen to physically ground itself in our urban reality. Instead of imposing an imported, concrete monument, it has offered a tangible response to the existential crisis gripping our city.

## The Urban Paradox and the Concrete Crisis

Walking around Dakar, I almost feel like I can count new buildings sprouting on a weekly basis. The city is running out of space, and climate change is not helping. In the heat and exhaust of this West African capital, a city that is doing its best to architecturally and economically catch up with its cousins in Abidjan and its new friends of Nairobi, among others, Dakar today confronts the urgent question of what a liveable, sustainable African metropolis looks like. In the heat and congestion of the capital, imagining a sustainable future feels paradoxically like wanting to build

an architecture that is respectful of the environment, reminiscent of the ancestral thermal wisdom of mud construction, while still being completely attuned to the needs and aesthetics of modern urban life.

*Stepping off the bustling street and into the new Goethe-Institut building offers precisely this dizzying, beautiful paradox. It feels simultaneously like stepping back in time and walking straight into a tangible future.*



This spatial sanctuary arrives at an important geopolitical juncture. While the states of Senegal and Germany are working on the politics and logistics of the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), this building bypasses the abstract, policy-driven narrative of what a just transition looks like in theory. It appears as a radical, physical manifestation of what is architecturally possible. Designed by Francis Kéré using locally sourced compressed earth blocks (BTC), the structure is a vivid manifestation of how the urban landscape of Dakar can be transformed. It stands not as an exceptional diplomatic enclave, but as a replicable blueprint: proof that adapting construction to the specific climate and environment of the country is not an idealistic dream, but a sophisticated, sovereign reality within arm's reach and ready to be scaled.

## Deconstructing Soft Power

The first question I asked Dr. Stefanie Peter as she welcomed me into her office—a space that felt simultaneously outdoors and indoors, as she shared a glass of thyme iced tea with me—was how she viewed cultural diplomacy, and specifically its place in the cooperation between Germany and Senegal.

In classical international relations theory, cultural diplomacy is almost exclusively understood through the lens of state instrumentalization. It operates as the primary vehicle for what theorist Joseph Nye famously coined «soft power diplomacy»—a state’s ability to influence others through co-optation and attraction rather than coercion. Theoretically, it is a unidirectional, state-driven apparatus designed to export a curated national image.

Dr. Peter’s response was at once refreshingly candid and conceptually disruptive. «Cultural diplomacy, for me, is a very tricky concept,» she admitted, acknowledging the friction between culture and statecraft. She explained that «culture, in my opinion, is something which should be free of any kind of instrumentalization through nation states». She pointed out that the term carries a heavy, undeniable subtext: «you want to use culture as a vehicle to achieve our diplomatic or our political... goals». Ultimately, she noted, «one has to be honest about where cultural diplomacy is, just another word for soft power».

Yet, this physical space attempts to subvert that very dynamic. Rather than a top-down projection, Dr. Peter defined true exchange as a «mutual learning process» between distinct histories. For the first time in its history, the Goethe-Institut built a space from scratch on the African continent, making a deliberate choice to collaborate closely with local architectural knowledge and Sudano-Sahelian heritage. It represents a stark departure from the unilateral projection of a foreign nation’s ready-made image.

## **Anchoring the Encounter: Historical Literacy in Architecture**

This shift from an extraterritorial enclave to a space of true encounter is most visible in how the structure yields to its environment. Dr. Peter pointed out how the architecture honors local *savoir-vivre* by physically integrating a central Baobab tree into the fabric of the building. «I recently learned from a professor of African Languages here in Dakar, a baobab tree is also a building,» she remarked. «You don’t need to create a house... if you have a baobab, you have a building already». Indeed, in our context, the baobab is far more than mere flora. It is the original *arbre à palabres*—a living institution of democratic discourse, intergenerational storytelling, and community anchoring. To construct a space *around* this tree, rather than uprooting it to lay a concrete foundation, is a profound acknowledgement that the ground was already occupied by an ancient, sovereign architecture.

This architectural humility extends to the neighborhood itself. Nestled in close proximity to the Léopold Sédar Senghor Museum, the institute does not impose its presence; rather, it enters into a silent dialogue with the historical weight of the space. To authentically anchor itself, the institute actively organizes neighborhood tours in collaboration with local urbanists, paying tribute to the legacies of figures such as Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop, Aimé Césaire, Leon Gontran Damas, and others. In the postcolony, spatial sovereignty requires this kind of historical literacy. It is a material manifestation of Senghor’s *le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir*.

## Activating the Commons

Yet an architecture of encounter is only as powerful as the public it serves. When asked about how the ground floor would be activated, the vision laid out by Dr. Peter was one of



a decentralized commons. Rather than dictating a «one-man show» from a foreign entity, the space acts as an infrastructure offered to local curators and cultural partners, enabling them to host their own communities and events.

Most profoundly, this shift is reflected in the library itself. To combat historical epistemic injustices, the space explicitly centers the oral traditions that define our local culture. By incorporating oral literature and housing a studio for Wolof podcasts that narrate Senegalese history, the institute shifts away from merely institutionalizing imported text to amplifying sovereign local voices. This is already exemplified by the Wolof history podcast, "Xam sa démb, Xam sa tey", narrated by Dr. Massamba Gueye, which the institute features as a cornerstone of its oral archive.

## A Programmatic Blueprint for the Future

As our conversation drew to a close, we returned to the broader political implications. Can this earth-brick, solar-powered structure truly influence the macro-level negotiations of our energy transition? Dr. Peter noted that while the building

undoubtedly serves as a «best practice example», it also demands a resource often lacking in our rapid political cycles: patience. Building sustainably requires years of deliberate investment and waiting.

Yet, its very existence is an active, physical argument. As she perfectly encapsulated the ethos of the space: «The building is very programmatic already... it's not about entertaining people all the time».

Indeed, as I left the cool earthen walls and stepped back out into the bustling heat of Dakar, I realized that reclaiming our urban landscapes doesn't just require new policies or bilateral agreements. It requires the architectural courage to build our modern future from the very soil beneath our feet.

