

Expats' Expertise Benefits Senegal's Urban Landscape

By Severine Cirlande, IOM Dakar



▲ Marlène and Abdou Sene, architectural designers (Photo: © Didier Loire, 2008, MSN0001)

Dakar is experiencing a major building boom. It's obvious when you walk the streets of some of the up-and-coming suburbs, such as Le Plateau, Ouakam, Point E or les Mamelles. Whole neighbourhoods have turned into construction sites and buildings are mushrooming every week.

Yet, surprisingly, only six percent of all new constructions are designed by architects, a startling fact that did not escape Abdou Sene, a young and talented Dakar-born architect who studied and spent part of his working life abroad before returning to new opportunities at home.

After his baccalaureate, Abdou devoted all his time to music, hoping to make a name in this competitive industry but he soon found out he wouldn't make a living out of his passion. So he decided to return to university to study architecture, a "truly creative and multidisciplinary" profession.

At the age of 22, after having successfully passed a competitive entry examination at the Ecole d'Architecture de

Marseille-Luminy, Abdou left for Southern France with a heavy heart and the firm intention of coming back to Dakar the day after his graduation.

Leaving his family and wide circle of friends behind was particularly difficult. "When I arrived in Marseille, I said to myself: cheer up, you only have six years to go!"

But soon, things looked up as Abdou met Marlène Chaussé, a fellow student at the School of Architecture in Marseille, who was later to become his wife.

After three years in Marseille, the couple began to feel penned-in and started making enquiries about the possibilities of furthering their architectural studies in a "truly international city with abundant social and cultural life."

The couple finally settled for London, a city where, according to Abdou "only talent matters and where one's creativity can blossom in a truly multicultural environment."

After graduating from the South Bank University and the London Metropoli-



▲ Building site, La Corniche, Dakar (Photo: © IOM, 2008, MSN0002)



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▲ Building site, Ouakam, Dakar (Photo: © IOM, 2008, MSN0003)



▲ Architectural model by Senestudio: Keita House (Photo: © Didier Loire, 2008, MSN0004)

tan University, Abdou quickly found employment in two of the United Kingdom's leading architectural firms, Norman Foster and Partners and Wilkinson Eyre Architects. Here, he worked on projects which included the regeneration of Trafalgar Square, one of London's most famous landmarks.

Encouraged by their stimulating working environments and convinced that they could capitalize on their newly acquired experience, Abdou and Marlène decided to set up *Senestudio*, an international architecture and design practice based in London.

Success came quickly as their first project, a house built in a newly developed residential area of Dakar, was selected among 300 others in an international architectural contest and featured in the prestigious 2005 *Bauwelt* publication.

"Rather than imposing a foreign style, we designed the house around the way people live, using local construction methods to better manage the climate," says Abdou, adding that hospitality continues to play a significant part

in Senegalese culture. "The house was designed around the many and varied social events using cement blocks, cast and cured on site to control costs and perforated aluminium panels to provide privacy and maintain natural ventilation."

Abdou's wish to settle in his hometown and Marlène's desire to discover more of her husband's home country grew with the couple's regular visits to Dakar.

"Taking the decision to return to Senegal was not easy," says Abdou. "But Marlène and I thought it would be easier to do so before our workload in London became heavier than in Dakar." With the arrival of their first child, the couple also felt it would be difficult for them to find a balance between their professional and family life in London. "We saw many colleagues make enormous personal sacrifices we weren't ready to make."

In August 2007, the family settled in Dakar and a few weeks later, the *Senestudio* was relocated in Senegal's capital.

Abdou joined the 200 or so strong chamber of Senegalese architects to

support the re-opening of the school of architects in Dakar, which used to draw talents from all over West Africa but had to close its doors in 1989.

"The fact that Senegal no longer has a school of architecture partly explains why so many young and talented students decide to leave the continent to study abroad with many never returning because they feel they have fewer professional prospects at home."

Abdou feels his return and professional investment can usefully contribute to the renaissance of architecture in Senegal. "I want children to say: I want to be an architect when I grow up and I want young Senegalese to understand that they can find successful employment in this field of activity." The future of building design in West Africa looks promising. **M**