

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** Good afternoon. Good evening. I don't know where you are, but I know that there's more and more of you who've been attending, participating, asking questions, wondering about our TRUE Africa University and MIT Africa webinar series. Sustainable development in Africa is what we're focused on. And I have a friend in Uganda who said, well, you really shouldn't be talking about that because that's an expression that's really used by NGO people and UN people. The people who don't really understand Africa.

And so this whole series is looking to unpack a lot of that, what the sustainable development actually means. And that's why we started with discussions around climate change. We've had discussions around creative industries. We've had discussions around macroeconomic trends, around entrepreneurship. And me, I'm Claude Grunitzky. I'm an entrepreneur. I'm a media entrepreneur turned education entrepreneur, or edupreneur, as we say now. And I'm the founder of TRUE Africa University.

And it's wonderful to be speaking with various changemakers every week. This week, the topic is how can architecture change people's lives? Now it sounds like a very grand topic, and it reminds me of a conversation I had with my dad when I was 10 years old when he asked me, well, but what do you want to be when you grow up? And I said, I want to be an architect. 'Cause I used to play with my LEGOs and I like building things with my LEGOs.

And he said, well, don't do that because you'll just be unemployed like most architects. Most architects never actually get any work. And so I remembered that conversation, and I ended up becoming a publisher and media entrepreneur instead. But this architect that we're speaking to today, Kofi Bio, he is definitely not unemployed. He is very much employed in Ghana. He's the Associate Principal of Adjaye Associates. Their Accra studio is overseeing [? all ?] projects in Africa.

Kofi has worked alongside [? Starchitect-- ?] we'll call him David Adjaye-- for almost a decade. And in 2017, those of us in Togo, we were watching from afar, from the neighboring country, how Kofi, together with David, led the opening of the Accra studio to drive the realization of key projects in Ghana, such as a National Cathedral of Ghana. Another project is the Marine Drive Master Plan development and the Ghana Trade Fair redevelopment.

Since the Accra studio for Adjaye Associates opened three years ago, Kofi has overseen the studio's growth with an emphasis on sustainable development-- here we go again-- and cutting-edge technologies with what he calls vernacular design into the wider African markets. Now, I know that you're probably wondering what this all means, but we will be discussing this in great detail over the next hour. And they have secured major projects all over Africa, from East Africa to Southern Africa to, obviously, West Africa.

So this series is a weekly series that I created as part of the TRUE Africa University launch because I'm looking to really help to find ways to nurture the next generation of African talent. You know, how do we do that? And we're going to do that through education. And our partners for this launch are the MIT Center for International Studies. CIS, as we call it. And I'm a research affiliate at CIS.

We aim to support and promote international research and education at MIT. We produce research that creatively addresses global issues while helping to educate the next generation of global citizens. The website is [cis.mit.edu](http://cis.mit.edu). And our other partner is the MIT Africa Program, which is based at the MIT Center for International Studies, CIS.

And MIT Africa empowers MIT students and faculty to advance knowledge and solve some of the world's greatest challenges by connecting them with leading researchers, companies, and other partners in African countries. So if you want to hear more about MIT Africa, the website is [misti.mit.edu](http://misti.mit.edu). That's [misti.mit.edu](http://misti.mit.edu). And again, as I was saying just now, I created TRUE Africa University because the ambition is to grow into a Pan-African learning community that will accelerate Africa Sustainable Development by mobilizing a global network of academic, industrial, and institutional partners.

Our website is [trueafricauniversity.com](http://trueafricauniversity.com). You can go there to watch some of the previous webinars and even to download some of the educational materials that we've uploaded on [trueafricauniversity.com](http://trueafricauniversity.com). Again, please spread the word on TRUE Africa University, what we're doing with MIT. And again, it's my great, great pleasure to welcome the non-unemployed and very much employed architect Kofi Bio of Adjaye Associates. Kofi is speaking to us from Accra in Ghana. Welcome, Kofi.

**KOFI BIO:** Thank you, Claude. Good morning, good afternoon, good evening to everyone. I like the introduction. Definitely employed. I like that. Thank you.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** Well, you are. I mean, one of the things that I heard about your firm is you guys have so many projects all over Africa and all over the world that sometimes it's difficult for you to juggle all these multiple demands from all these multiple clients. Whether they're state clients, government clients, institutional clients, corporate clients, you guys are very busy. And so yeah, we can't wait to watch these beautiful slides and to hear your story.

**KOFI BIO:** Thank you. Very, very kind. Very, very kind. I guess you want me to kick off. Let's see. I will share my screen so you can-- OK. I guess I'll answer the very first question, which is sustainable development, which seems to be the topic or the question on everybody's mind. Here at Adjaye's, when we talk about sustainable development, it's not just a sense of tugging on renewables. You know, where does the list start? From solar cells and really cool different materials.

But really, for us here at Adjaye, it's in the architecture. And that's really important in every project that we have done, every project that we're doing, and hopefully in the future, any project that we work on, but specifically to talk about the African continent and sustainable development on the continent. The continent has a rich history of civilization-- architecture, arts, and culture-- for centuries that predates colonialism.

And of course, we all know through colonialism, we've had quite a lot of that sort of wiped off the continent. And so essentially, where Africa finds itself today, it's really about trying to really reinvent the continent and make sure that some of this rich history and culture isn't lost or doesn't disappear with the elderly and folklore and folktale. So what we're doing here at Adjaye is just to make sure that we use our projects to really hold some of these really important pieces of our history, because that's sort of very relevant and important for the future, for our children and for our children's children.

And I put this quote by David on there because it's really important. 'Cause we don't believe in just creating objects or just icons, but really, we're looking at creating architecture that changes how people live, how people interact with each other, and how people sort of use spaces and navigate the cities in which they find themselves. I'll talk through a few slides on some of these key projects that we believe are very important in helping shape this narrative that we always try and push in our projects.

The first one is in National Cathedral Ghana, which we started working on in 2017. And this is a really important project because it's essentially the missing link in Ghana's monumental core. And what we're really trying to do here is to create a typology that speaks to a specific architecture, which is about contemporary religious African buildings.

We're using the sort of traditional symbols. The [NON-ENGLISH], which literally translates to the gathering of people, which is really key in religious spaces and some of the primary religious space of the Tabernacle, which has been expanded upon and intertwined with the Ghanaian concept of people gathering [? in ?] the ceremonial canopy, which essentially informed the canopy-like design of the roof that you see, which essentially references kingship.

And the notion of the stool is sort of explored through the landscape gardens. We're going to have Africa's first Biblical museum, with art galleries, multi-use spaces. But essentially, the cathedral in itself holds within it the concept of the stool, which essentially embodies the nation's seat of power, as a space in which the city can gather through the notions of community, belief, ancestral history, and a modern democracy that provides an image for future generations. And that, we see as a very important narrative in really what is African Christianity today. And that's really important for our time and also for future generations.

The next project, which, again, is another really important [? and that ?] really captures the whole idea about knowledge and education and history on the continent, is the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library, which we're currently working on in Johannesburg in South Africa. And essentially, the library is a space of excellence, learning, research, discourse, and cultural exchange which is predicated on the African perspective.

The way the space works within here, it works to critically situate African knowledge on the African soil-- the past with the future-- through recycling of ancient techniques, such as the granary storage, into a new form of knowledge storage. We're trying to essentially use the role of memory and the power of collective memory to essentially create this space in becoming a hub for the African perspective.

But [? not only ?] we're looking at this [? space document ?] in President Mbeki's life-- pre-president, [? during ?] president, and post-president-- but also as well as other historically significant African figures which should be preserved for future generations. And that's really important for the continent, and also worldwide for one to understand ancient and contemporary African history outside of the perspective of the Western world.

And this comes to the point about using architecture to create sustainable development for the future. And essentially, what we're trying to do is use architecture as a tool to reimagine stories and sustenance into the form. And the granary stores guide the overall building concept. So the acylindrical granary-style shapes that you see on your screen are made contemporary through the topping of the domes, with apertures that take into consideration the [? solar ?] orientation of light within the site to create a distinct atmosphere for each of the programs within.

The knowledge of the African past recycling into, essentially, future generations, as well as the architecture harnessing itself to landscape into recycling of resources and really utilizing elements, as I said earlier on, such as solar orientation, natural light penetration, geothermal heatings. Then this is where you start to see some of the renewables that I alluded to.

But what's really important here is that this knowledge center has all the multiplicity of functions, going from the research center to the museum and exhibition spaces, the reading rooms, women in [INAUDIBLE] center, seminar rooms, office spaces, archives center. So it's really sort of doing both, which is really being the source of knowledge that begins to create that connectivity between rich African history, the present, and the future.

The next project is a Edo Museum of West African Art, which is actually in Benin City in Nigeria. And EMOWAA really is about transcending national boundaries drawn through colonial era, and instead aims to almost emphasize the [? connections ?] between ancient kingdoms in West Africa. So you have this museum that have artifacts, which are essentially sacred objects which contain the ability to restore the forgotten histories of the ancient kingdoms and renew ancient knowledge systems.

Fragments of reconstructed historic compounds-- as you can see in your image-- allows the object themselves to be arranged in context and offers visitors the opportunity to better understand the true significance of these artifacts within their traditions, the political economy, the rituals enshrined within the culture of Benin City. And what's really important here is that the African continent pre-colonial times actually had very well-advanced and established systems-- economies, seats of power-- which really allowed the various clans and kingdoms to function in a very civilized way.

And all of that has obviously been lost through the colonial times. So using some of these buildings and architecture is really important in rewriting that history which has been lost. The museum is one that's really going to help to understand Benin as one of the epicenters. I mean, you can essentially compare it to Athens, to [? Rome's. ?] But most importantly, we see this project to be about preservation and reconstruction.

Preservation through the city's geographic earthworks and relics, [INAUDIBLE], moats, and the heritage sites, which essentially will help to determine how to weave the contemporary whilst giving reverence to the ancient history. The art forms, which you see in the spaces, will be closely linked to culture, where mediums for the expression of their beliefs-- such as the belief in life after death, for instance, and the unique place of the monarchy in people's lives.

And more or less, the artworks are essential [? to perform ?] to utilitarian and decorative functions. And these are really important to show this in some of these spaces. So essentially, what you realize here is that it's not just about creating a building, but also creating spaces and rearranging some of these pieces and some of these artifacts in their context to allow Africans and the world, really, to understand what ancient African civilization was about.

The final project is an interesting one because it's really about rebuilding a city. And Accra-- I'm not sure if most of you are aware or not-- is probably one of the very few, if not the only city on the continent, which turns its back onto the ocean. So the Marine Drive development in Accra, which we're working on, is significant because essentially, we're looking at redefining sustainability through the interconnectivity and dynamic web where architecture essentially works with community and environment.

And we feel that this is really important, and the core intent of this project is really to revitalize the waterfront, and also reinforce the link between the tourism industry and other sectors of culture and economy and making sure [? they'll ?] work together. So you have industries such as agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, construction, and all these pieces are really important in the development of an African city today.

So what this project really does is fulfills a much needed role as an urban spine that creates a central connecting feature in its placemaking strategy. And placemaking is really important here because what we're creating here is not about land values and developments for developers, but really, it's about allowing the public, first of all, the access to the waterfront, but also about people really understanding the [? important ?] of history, culture, and civic.

And we've done that in this project by actually creating a really important link. History being the [? Osu ?] Castle and its grounds, which is to the west of the site, the National Concert Hall to the east of the promenade, but most importantly, [? you have ?] the centerpiece of the project, which is the Independence Square of Ghana, as a centerpiece public park, which essentially honors the founding forefathers of Ghana's independence.

So with all these projects, just to try and sort of summarize, really, what we're trying to do-- we acknowledge that the history of the African continent pre-colonialism is important. It's a time that is relevant in the history of the continent. Colonialism is also very important in the history of the continent. And when you go from a city such as Dakar to Accra to Lagos, through to Libreville, Kigali, you can see, obviously, the remnants of the colonial influences.

And what we're trying to do with these projects is by using architecture to create a place that people can connect to, they can relate to, and they can feel proud to actually be in these spaces and understand the significance of these interventions that we are creating all across the continent, which is really important in telling the history of the people, but also in creating architecture that is relevant to the context.

So we're not just responding to typologies and sites and orientation, but also in the locations of these projects, we're also using local materials and challenging local artisans and local craftsmanship to really use local and traditional materials, transform and use them using modern methods of architecture. And that's really important to what we do here. Really important to David and what we do here at [? Adjaye's, ?] and making sure that we create architecture which is not just about buildings, but also about placemaking.

So for us, the next 10 years is actually very, very exciting because we believe that it's the opportunity for us to change the narrative, but also to create interventions in the city that our children and our children's children can look back on our time and actually understand some of the reasons and the rationales and the intentions of what we did. So next 10 years is really important. And that's all I wanted to share with you this afternoon. Thank you.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Well, thank you so much, Kofi, for this. I have so much that I want to discuss with you, but I'm going to start with one of the things you said about the power of collective memory, and also looking at it outside of the perspective of the Western world. And and you're one of those people that I would call a repat, right? You were educated in the UK, and you decided to go back home to Ghana to be able to do this thing that is important for the future of our culture. And ultimately, you're trying to change society through architecture.

Now, my question is, why did you decide to return to Accra? What was the opportunity that you saw, personally, that made you make that decision to be a repat and to resettle in your ancestral land, I'll just call it?

**KOFI BIO:** Well, thank you. There's two parts to my answer to that question. And the first part is growing up in the UK, it was very important, and my parents always made sure, that there was always the connection to Ghana, to home. And being here every year on holiday, and my father, the numerous books in his study, making sure that I was-- and there's always a distinction between schooling and education. But sort of schooling in the United Kingdom, but also having a very clear understanding through education about the relevance of my African heritage.

And of course, having worked for David for almost a decade now, it's always been very clear about what David wants, his vision, for the continent-- and obviously, David has also returned home-- but his vision for the continent and, really, the importance of using architecture to really change the perception of the continent to the world. So to me, those are the really two important things-- my upbringing, my heritage, but also having the opportunity to be part of this incredible opportunity to work with one of Africa's sons to really help change the story and tell the story differently. Rewrite history, essentially.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** Rewriting history. Absolutely. Rewriting history and reinventing the continent. And so there's something that you said that really got me thinking, and it was a phrase around situating African knowledge on the African soil. And when I was growing up in Lome-- Lome is right up on the border of Ghana, so I could have been Ghanaian, but I'm Togolese-- I didn't hear anything about African culture, Togolese culture, at school, really.

Because if textbooks were imported, a lot of the history [? what ?] we learn was obviously colonial history, post-colonial history, Western history. And I guess my whole life, I've been trying to find out more than what my grandmother would tell me, than what my aunts would tell me, about the African heritage, to use your vernacular. And so I guess in your architecture and the way that you build these public spaces, there's always room for research, there's always room for tracing it back to the actual archives and what you call the rituals.

But in trying to tell the history of the people, what are the hurdles in actually assembling real documents? Because a lot of these documents don't exist, or they were burnt or they were not well kept. And a lot of it is [? all ?] history. So what are some of the hurdles that you might have encountered in trying to reconstitute this history that you actually need in your process in building these important public [? works? ?]

**KOFI BIO:** We have a very deep importance that we associate to research in the work that we do here at [? Adjaye's. ?] And to that effect, we actually have a global team. And what that allows us and the reason why we use global, because a lot of this culture [? and a lot of this ?] history and documents do still exist. You just have to know the right place to look. And while this is a challenge, what we try and do is that we explore all sources that is available to us, whether that's local in the context of where we're designing or where we're actually creating this architecture. But also, you'll be amazed that a lot of this history actually exists in the Western world.

And so whilst you might be looking locally-- and to your point, a lot of the education-- this is the difference between schooling and education. Because we're schooled, but to be educated, you have to actually understand the context and the relevance of who one is as an individual. So yes, there are a lot of hurdles and challenges, but also, I think what the modern world allows us to do is this sense of interconnectivity that allows one to be able to sort of tap into information, or the collection of information, globally.

And that, I'm afraid, is something that we do and we have to do all the time to ensure that we grasp or we understand the sense of the history or the content of the architecture that we create.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Well, on that note, as somebody who's been a long-time follower of Adjaye Associates-- I followed most of the projects that your [? film ?] has produced in Europe, in America, in the Middle East, in Africa-- there's one project that I'm particularly excited about-- and this is my West African pride coming in-- and it's really the Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin City that you mentioned earlier.

And the way that you're looking to highlight the importance of these ancient kingdoms in West Africa and what you called forgotten histories-- and I really was interested in what you said about these ancient African civilizations, when you try to compare them, in a way, to Athens or Rome. Everybody knows the history of Athens. Everybody knows the history of Rome. Well, all the educated or schooled people know those histories. But hardly anyone knows the importance of Benin City and some of our West African kingdoms.

Now, for those of us who were born there and who are native sons and daughters, this is very important history. Now, can you tell us a little bit more about how you approach something that it means so much to so many people? Because if you get it wrong, there's going to be a pretty big backlash coming from people like me.

**KOFI BIO:**

Yeah. No. And I think this is actually quite a good lead on from the earlier question because this is where research and collaboration is really important. Because the history of Benin in itself and the importance of the Benin Kingdom is not just limited to its context. It's across the continent and also globally. So you understand about the punitive expedition. But Benin really was a kingdom in its own right for over 700 years.

And so how we've approached it, again, has initially been to really understanding the context, which is actually getting a physical understanding of what is there. The moat, the walls, the [? Obas ?] Palace, some of the shrines which still exist. And also then actually then going out into places across Europe which actually have some of these artifacts and really understanding, obviously, where it is today, in terms of Benin. Where the artifacts that were taken, where they are today. But also then really telling that story using the space and using the architecture, using the exhibition, to really begin to bring that together as a collective.

Because essentially, you go to the likes of the British Museum now, and you're looking at objects. But actually, these objects were never an abstraction. They were forms. They were part of displays. And really, what this museum is going to do is to tell that history and really show to the African, and then teach them about that part of their history. Which you're right. Nobody teaches that in African schools. Certainly not in the Western world.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Well, we hope to change that with TRUE African University, but that's the planning for the future. I want to maybe shift gears a little bit and talk about the Marine Drive project. And I was interested in you telling us maybe a little bit more about how you plan to integrate agriculture, fisheries, and even a public park into that. Because again, going back to Lome, we never had a public park in Lome. There's not a single public park in the capital of Togo.

And so that's a problem, 'cause if you're young and you want to go and meet people and you want to just relax and take a book or hang out, you just don't have that. And that's been a problem in Togo, and I've always complained about that. And hopefully the government will do something about it. But in planning the Marine Drive, what is the role of the architect in providing space and time for the actual citizen so that the citizen doesn't feel intimidated by this grand building?

So that you can make it a welcoming place where they can just go, whether they're illiterate, whether they're completely shut out of the economy. If you can find a way to make it a place that is a public square for everybody, I think you will have achieved something quite interesting. So tell us about the strategies that you're using to make it a center of gravity for everyone.

**KOFI BIO:**

That was the core of the design, or the architectural response, to what we did. Essentially, we wanted to create a public promenade that allows the ability for the ordinary citizen to be able to have direct access to the waterfront. The development will always happen in the background, but what we did was create a three-kilometer boardwalk that spans the entire length of the site and links the three public infrastructure pieces that I talked about earlier on, which was the Osu Castle, the concert hall, and also the Independence Square and public [? part ?] in the center.

That was really important because we wanted to create this public asset which wasn't just about developers making money, but it was also about creating a destination for the average Ghanaian, for the average African, for the average European to actually be able to come to Ghana, come to Accra, a city that has turned its back onto the ocean for decades, and really to say we are reinventing that narrative.

Accra is turning its front to the ocean, and then allowing people to be able to go to the oceanfront and have the infrastructure to be able to interact, be able to enjoy the space, read a book, as you talked about, without necessarily worrying too much about the development [? behind. ?] But also, an important thing is the site currently has the Center for National Culture, which is the arts and crafts. And it's quite a touristy part of the current location.

And what we did as part of the redesign is really to allow the arts and crafts to actually be able to occupy a really important part of this promenade so that people actually-- and this is the thing about when I talked about agriculture and the industry and tourism-- it's really not to create a development that drives away local artisanship and local craftsmen and local skills, but actually an architecture which is a response to actually integrating some of these users.

Because what's the point in building a development which is just going to be enjoyed by the office goers or the people living in apartments and penthouses? So part of the development, or part of the response, allows the local fishermen to actually be able to catch early catch of the day and bring it on to a restaurant along the promenade. So there is always that connectivity between local artisanship, between, obviously, continuing to promote the local economy whilst creating a new central business district.

**CLAUDE  
GRUNITZKY:**

Well, I guess that's what we could call sustainable development, to illustrate that in a really concrete way. That is a great segue into the Q&A because there's a lot of really interesting questions. I'm looking at 18 right now. I'm going to try to get to some of them. Adelia Ferguson actually wanted more explanation on why Accra was built to turn its back to the ocean. But was it deliberate or unplanned, she asked. And I could have asked the same question too. So can you tell us a little bit about that?

**KOFI BIO:** I think that has a historic reverence to it, or meaning to it. And that goes back to the colonial times where most of the city would see their brothers and sisters go to the ocean, disappear, and never come back. So there's a kind of deep-- so it's just been a natural evolution of the city, rather than a deliberate attempt to build the city that way. Because you just drive along the ocean. You've got the castles and the forts. But essentially, all the people-- [? other than ?] the fishermen, who go out to fish. But they come back and they come into the community. So it's a combination of obviously the historic aspects [INAUDIBLE], but also how the city then evolved from that point.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** That's interesting. Jacqueline [? Vaidu ?] is asking how do you balance championing the historical architecture and other cultural values of the cities you build when the methods may not have been preserved? Again, the issue of preservation always comes up. And they may not have been preserved, and you're filling in structural gaps with learnings from Western architecture that have been well documented. So I guess it's alchemy. So can you tell us a little bit about how you manage that? 'Cause it's a very difficult process.

**KOFI BIO:** Well, there's several facets. Some of it exists. Of course, some of it has been destroyed. But if we just kind of go to Europe for a second, you go to Rome, and what you see is not what was there originally. It's just a reconstruction of what existed. So if it exists, it will be preserved. But essentially what we're doing is reconstructing that narrative, for one to be able to understand what existed and be able to create that stamp in time for future generations. So I think there's a clear distinction between preservation and reconstruction. And that's really important in doing this.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** But when you look to the future-- and this is why Tim [? Whitesell's ?] question is really interesting, I find. He says, I feel sad that the architectural dreams of Africans working in coastal cities may be sadly disappointed because of the impact of climate change. And then his question really is, have you taken into account in cities like Lome, Accra, Lagos, Abidjan, the rise in sea levels and how that might threaten some of these coastal cities? Which usually always happen to be the capital cities, right? Well, Abidjan and Lagos may not be, but they are the economic centers of their country. So how do you mitigate for this major climate change risk when you're building for the future, as you said.

**KOFI BIO:** So I'll use Marine Drive as an example, which is right on the waterfront, a. It's a substantial part of the waterfront. And the response to that, obviously using engineering, has ensured that we're dealing with rising sea levels and we can actually protect this important part of the city for the next 500 years. And this is where, again, you go into actual sustainability measures. We're using modern methods of construction to ensure that whilst creating this asset within the city, you're actually also protecting the asset to last generations.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** Wonderful. And then Joseph [? Okiere ?] is asking a question, but the preamble is-- and I'm reading-- quote, "I have been fascinated by the rounded forms that many African vernacular architecture share in common. Seeing the design for the Thabo Mbeki Foundation building got me thinking that this could be the great opportunity for reinvention of this form using modern technology." What is your view on that?

**KOFI BIO:** Absolutely. The forms exist from our history. And as I pointed out earlier on, what is really important is not to literally translate that into what we have today. So essentially, we've got fragments of our history. And what is really important for David is really about learning from those fragments and actually then using that in the architecture that we produce, or the architecture that we use in our cities, or the interventions that we create in our city.

And that's really important, is really about learning from those fragments. We can't piece all the fragments together because they represent different timestamps in our civilization. But it's really about learning from that and recreating, for the present and also for the future.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** Well, that leads me to one of the many questions I'm seeing in the chat about society and stratification and these hierarchies that exist implicitly in a lot of our African cultures. We'll be starting with the kingdoms that you mentioned earlier. This has always been a central part of the way that we view society. And Africa has been known to be very stratified.

And so that leads me, in the [? grand ?] kind of Democratic ambition that we're all in, and it leads me to a question by Gordon Knox, who is actually a friend. And he's somebody who has run museums and he knows this world very well. He said, brilliant presentation of how intelligent architecture can reframe history and the power of ancient cultures.

This leads me to the question of how this scale of intervention can reanimate and reempower the underlying system of social organization. The values and the social presence that were central parts of the fluid human power of the Great West African Kingdoms. I know it sounds like a complicated question, but I understand what he means. 'Cause you have a role in helping to redefine the social organization going back to what happened before.

**KOFI BIO:** Very good question. I mean, essentially, in placemaking-- and this is really important here, what we do at Adjaye's. It's about placemaking. And we worked on projects where we've literally negotiated with clients in super high exclusive developments to allow the public [? forum ?] component, then to allow your everyday user. Because at that point, the sudden spaces that exist within the cities, where it doesn't matter which class of society that you're in, you go to this space and we are all one as a people.

So it's not about you-- again, we've got to be really careful about architecture isn't there to sort all of society's problems, but it's really there to create these interventions and these visual cues within the city to allow one to relate better with one's environments and with the city, with the spaces that one finds itself in. So for us, it's really about this placemaking. Creating public infrastructure that allows everyone within society to be able to utilize and enjoy these spaces for various reasons.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** All right. Well, Kofi, one of the things I love about these forums that we're having in the webinar format is the dissent that usually comes in from a lot of our students and a lot of our participants. And Giovanni [? Melandri ?] is commending you for these wonderful initiatives to highlight and integrate African knowledge on African soil. That's where he starts. But then this is where the dissent comes in. He's like, for large projects like this, the choice of materials and methods are absolutely crucial. And you know he's going to be talking about sustainable architecture and sustainable development.

How do you get away with using large quantities of concrete and steel, two of the most damaging materials to the environment, when used on an architectural scale? That's his question. I think it's a very relevant one.

**KOFI BIO:** So two of the projects-- I think it's a very important question. What is really key for what we do here is to use local materials which are then re-engineered using modern methods of construction. So the Thabo Mbeki Presidential Library and EMOWAA are actually being built out of rammed earth, which is a local laterite that we find in the locality. So it's the red earth that you find in most African cities. And that's the starting point. And these are traditional materials that are being used for construction for many, many, many centuries pre-colonial times.

And so essentially, what we're doing is really re-engineering these materials to actually be able to deal with some of the [? large spans ?] that we work with or the heights that we work with or the thermal performance of buildings. And so you can't cut out concrete and steel completely, but essentially, it's about just making sure that you're using local or regional stone or marble or granite, and everything is not being imported from the Western world. And that's really key. So essentially, what we do here is really looking at our reach as the continent.

And we talk about regional and continental in the projects that we work on 'cause it's really important in terms of sourcing the materials so that we're actually A, reducing the footprint of the project, but also utilizing the materials within the context in the spaces that we create architecture.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** On that note, Ebony Walsh actually asked a follow-up question on this whole environmental threat with the rising sea levels. And she's asking specifically what technology and systems have you put in place for the rising sea levels.

**KOFI BIO:** So on Marine Drive, we're working with some of the world's best engineers to actually-- so the boardwalk, which was on the image that I showed earlier on, has actually been engineered to form two functions. Obviously, the promenade and the boardwalk to allow people to move from one part of the site. But also the sea defense strategy is within that wall. So it allows the low tide for you to come down onto the ocean and use the beach area, and then the high tide, you then recede onto almost this Juliet balcony looking out onto the ocean.

So that's how we used the design and also modern methods of sea defense to create the space without it just being the usual stuff that you see all the time. So there's been a little bit of design coordination and engineering on that to allow that to happen.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:** Right. And I guess the terminology is really important. And [? Tunji ?] Gilliam is asking a question. But before that, she says, I'm struck by the terminology "vernacular design." And the question is, how do you understand the concept outside of traditional understandings of vernacular? Meaning domestic architecture.

**KOFI BIO:** Again, you have to look at the context within which that you're operating. And so we have to be very careful not to fall into this notion that Africa is one big city. [? It isn't, though. ?] It's one big country. There are various traditions, cultures, but essentially, that they're all linked in different ways. So it's really about having-- and this is where research is very important in what we do, 'cause one needs to have a clear understanding of the context in which you're creating this architectural response, or creating this narrative. And that then helps to inform the vernacular, or the response, to the issues that one is dealing with.

Whether that is rising sea level, whether that is creating spaces for African religion, or whether that's creating containers of knowledge. And that, for us, is really important. So you're not, just because you're in one environment and this is the typology that you're used to in terms of buildings, you're just literally repeating. Because what my work in Dubai certainly doesn't work on the continent. And Claude, you'll be witness to this. In most of the African cities today, we have lots of glass boxes with air conditioning, which is just not right for our climate.

And so that's where the whole idea about sustainability also comes into it, because it's the form in itself is actually a sustainable response to the context or to our climate.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:**

And this is why dissent does come in. And I'll just call Sergey [? Akasikov's ?] question, which will be the last question before we move to the last five minutes of this webinar. He says, oh, that the red material you're using in most of your project, how is it related to local traditional construction techniques?

And again, this is the dissent. He says, and how is the last project-- I guess he's talking about Marine-- how is that connected with local identity? To me, it just looks like all the faceless glass megalopolises all over the world. So he's thinking, oh OK, how is this Accra metropolis going to be different from what he sees everywhere? So please give us a short answer on that.

**KOFI BIO:**

That's all right. That's a very good question. So the imagery-- and this is where we're always very careful to show these things-- the imagery you see is exactly what it is. What you see, the glass towers, they're nothing. They're not planned or designed. What is really important is the response to the public promenade that we've created. But also what is really key in some of these large projects we're working on is really creating design principles which will be enforced in all development.

So that is [? the set back, ?] the amount of glazing you can use, the orientation, the amount of greenery you need to have within the development. And these are very key. And this is something the client is even championing, to ensure that we have sustainable developments within these cities, rather than just having glass boxes.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:**

We're back to sustainable development, aren't we? Kofi, I want to ask you this question, which we always wrap up with. And it's a recommendation. What are three books that you would recommend to this audience? It doesn't even have to be related to architecture. So we would love some recommendations. And we're going to add this to the slides that we will share on the [trueafricauniversity.com](http://trueafricauniversity.com) website.

**KOFI BIO:**

OK. Wow. Three. So one, I would say *Adjaye, Africa, Architecture*, which is a book that documents David's travel across the continent over an 11-year period to every single African city. That is one.

**CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:**

I have that one. I actually have that in my library, that one. Yeah.

**KOFI BIO:**

The second one I will say will be *Precolonial Black Africa* by Cheikh Anta Diop, which essentially-- I mean, I think he was a scientist, but of course, he was an anthropologist and politician. And essentially, what that does is really documents in a scientific way the narrative of precolonial African systems and cities. And I think that's a really good one to read. And this one, it's a favorite one from my childhood which my father made sure myself and my siblings read, is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

**CLAUDE**

Yeah, many consider that to be the best African novel ever written, right? So it's with great pleasure that I will add that to the chat now. Yeah, this has been wonderful. Thank you so much. Kofi, this has been a wonderful discussion, and I really want to thank you for your time. We have two minutes left to wrap up, which is really difficult 'cause there's so many questions I wanted to ask you about the city versus agriculture, rural versus urban. Why should we be focusing so much on cities?

**GRUNITZKY:**

But anyway, this is the end. And I want to thank the MIT Center for International Studies. Again, CIS aims to support and promote international research and education at MIT. You produce research that creatively addresses global issues while helping to educate the next generation of global citizens. [cis.mit.edu](http://cis.mit.edu) is the website. The MIT Africa Program, which is based at CIS, empowers MIT students and faculty to advance knowledge and solve the world's greatest challenges by connecting them with leading researchers, companies, and other partners in African countries.

I created TRUE Africa University because we're looking at a Pan-African learning community, and we're going to be accelerating sustainable development in Africa. Next week, April 15, at noon sharp, we have Leonard Wantchekon, who is a professor at Princeton University, and he will be telling us about what are the new solutions for education and improved governance in Africa. Thank you so much for tuning in. Thank you, Kofi, for this wonderful presentation. And we look forward to seeing many of you next week. Please share the word on TRUE Africa University MIT webinars. Bye.

**KOFI BIO:**

Thank you.