

Ingenious Homes in Unexpected Places

Part 1

... Let's go now to Africa, to Nigeria, to a community called Makoko, a slum where 150,000 people live just meters above the Lagos Lagoon. While it may appear to be a completely chaotic place, when you see it from above, there seems to be a whole grid of waterways and canals connecting each and every home. From the main dock, people board long wooden canoes which carry them out to their various homes and shops located in the expansive area. When out on the water, it's clear that life has been completely adapted to this very specific way of living. Even the canoes become **variety stores**¹ where ladies paddle from house to house, selling anything from toothpaste to fresh fruits. Behind every window and door frame, you'll see a small child peering back at you, and while Makoko seems to be packed with people, what's more shocking is actually the amount of children pouring out of every building. The population growth in Nigeria, and especially in these areas like Makoko, are **painful reminders**² of how out of control things really are.

In Makoko, very few systems and infrastructures exist. Electricity is **rigged**³, and freshest water comes from self-built wells throughout the area. This entire economic model is designed to meet a specific way of living on the water, so fishing and boat making are common professions. . . .

On this particular evening, I came across this live band **dressed to the T**⁴ in their coordinating outfits. They were floating through the canals in a large canoe with a **fitted-out**⁵

generator for all of the community to enjoy. By nightfall, the area becomes almost **pitch black**⁶, save for a small lightbulb or a fire.

What originally brought me to Makoko was this project from a friend of mine, Kunlé Adeyemi, who recently finished building this three-story floating school for the kids in Makoko. With this entire village existing on the water, public space is very limited, so now that the school is finished, the ground floor is a playground for the kids, but when classes are out, the platform is just like a town square where the fishermen mend their nets and floating shopkeepers dock their boats. . . .

Part 2

From Makoko to **Zabbaleen**⁷, these communities have approached the tasks of planning, design, and management of their communities and neighborhoods in ways that respond specifically to their environment and circumstances. Created by these very people who live, work, and play in these particular spaces, these neighborhoods are **intuitively**⁸ designed to make the most of their circumstances.

In most of these places, the government is completely absent, leaving inhabitants with no choice but to reappropriate found materials, and while these communities are highly **disadvantaged**⁹, they do present examples of brilliant forms of ingenuity and prove that indeed we have the ability to adapt to all manner of circumstances. What makes places like the Torre David particularly remarkable is this sort of **skeleton**

¹ Note that Baan defines “variety store” in the sentences following his use of the word by giving examples. A “variety store” is a general store that sells various household items.

² A “painful reminder” is commonly used to talk about something that brings up something negative that we don’t want to think about.

³ A synonym for “rig” is “set up.” Baan is suggesting that there is no official electricity supply to Makoko, and so residents have found their own way to obtain it.

⁴ Someone who is “dressed to the T” is wearing a fashionable and stylish outfit.

⁵ To be “fitted out” or to “fit something out” means to put some kind of equipment, furniture, or possibly decoration in a place like a home, car, or in this case, boat.

⁶ The term “pitch black” describes a completely dark place at night where there are no lights.

⁷ The Zabbaleen are a community in Cairo who make their living by collecting and recycling household waste. For more information, see Baan’s full TED Talk at TED.com.

⁸ Something that is done “intuitively” is done instinctually or based on how you feel it should be done.

⁹ “disadvantaged” is used to generally describe groups of people or areas where people live that lack financial and social opportunities.

framework¹⁰ where people can have a foundation where they can tap into. Now imagine what these already ingenious communities could create themselves, and how highly particular their solutions would be if they were given the basic infrastructures that they could tap into.

Today, you see these large residential development projects which offer **cookie-cutter**¹¹ housing solutions to massive amounts of people. From China to Brazil, these projects attempt to provide as many houses as possible, but they're

completely generic and simply do not work as an answer to the individual needs of the people.

I would like to end with a quote from a friend of mine and a source of inspiration, Zita Cobb, the founder of the wonderful **Shorefast Foundation**¹² based out of Fogo Island, Newfoundland. She says that "there's this plague of sameness which is killing the human joy," and I couldn't agree with her more.

Thank you.

This is an edited version of Baan's 2013 TED Talk. To watch the full talk, visit TED.com.

¹⁰ Here, "skeleton framework" refers to the basic infrastructure that the Torre David office tower provided to the local people.

¹¹ Something that is described as "cookie-cutter" looks similar to or the same as other things around it. A cookie cutter is a tool used in baking to give cookies the same exact shape. Generally, the term is not used in a complimentary fashion.

¹² The Shorefast Foundation is a Canadian charity based out of Fogo Island, Newfoundland, that works to preserve the islanders' traditions and rejuvenate the island through arts and culture.