

Shaping Concrete on Social Media in Dakar

Pierre Wenzel

Dakar is a city undergoing rapid construction, typical of many fast-growing urban areas where concrete is ubiquitous in building, rebuilding, transforming and developing the cityscape. Concrete is often praised for enabling rapid, tall and cost-effective construction (Forty 2016; Jappe 2020; Choplin 2023). In contemporary practice, alongside floorplans and traditional tools like shovels and buckets, smartphones are widely utilized on construction sites, allowing workers to remain connected and browse the internet – a phenomenon referred to by Haider and Sundin (2019: 2) as the “searchification” of everyday life. Drawing on twelve months of fieldwork, this article analyzes the interplay between social media, concrete and construction practices facilitated by smartphone usage.

In Dakar, over 90 percent of construction projects employ concrete (Kostreva 2014), including reinforced concrete structures, concrete blocks, floors and roofing. Welcome to the concrete jungle!



According to Jean-Charles Tall, a Senegalese architect, [less than 10 percent of new buildings in Dakar are completed with the involvement of an architect](#). Due to budget constraints, people often avoid hiring an architect and may circumvent construction and urban planning regulations in order to build more affordably. In this context, the proliferation of construction-related content and information on social media platforms plays a significant role in the construction sector and in shaping the city. Our focus here is this phenomenon as realized through the private, small- to mid-scale construction sites that abound in the city. It poses the question: how does social media serve as a place to envision the city and future constructions? More specifically, how does social media, with its vast array of data and content accessible worldwide, contribute to shaping concrete – a tangible mixture of cement, gravel, sand and water?

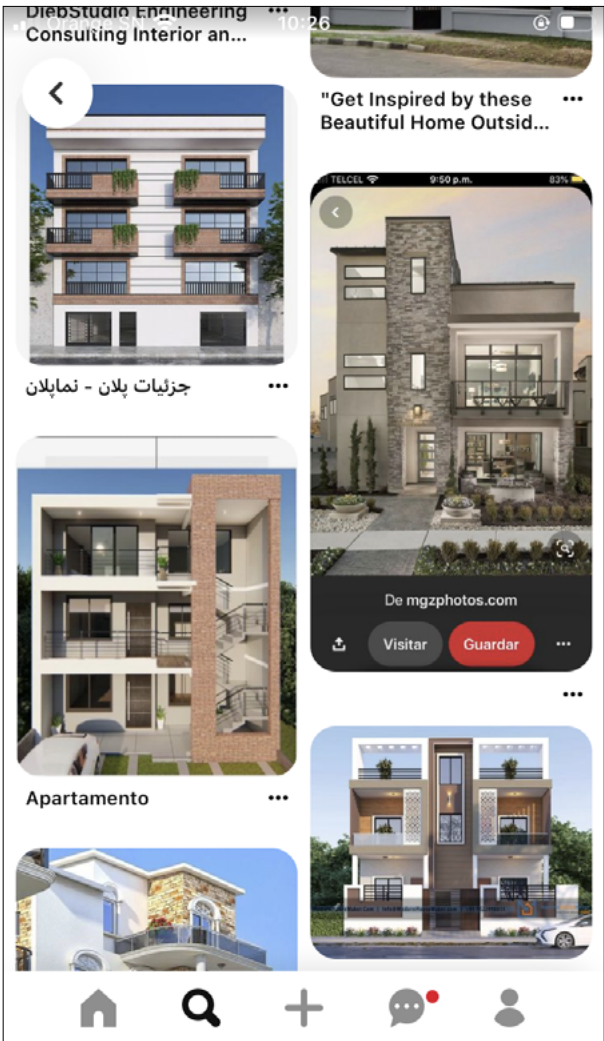
Concrete jungle in Yoff, Dakar, Senegal.

Photo: Pierre Wenzel, 2023.

Internet technologies are very accessible in Senegal (Kemp 2023), but the reciprocal relationship between smartphones, social media and construction sites has often been overlooked in terms of its impact on the widespread use of concrete in urban contexts like Dakar (Perera et al. 2015). By tracing the journey of concrete on social media and the chronological progression of architectural projects that rely on this material, we can see the ways in which concrete is visually, aesthetically and socially embedded in global imaginaries disseminated through social media and translated into localized construction projects in Dakar. Furthermore, delving into the micro-scale dynamics of construction sites reveals that social media is part of a broader system of specific values and construction knowledge negotiated on-site, influencing perceptions and implementations of concrete as a building material.

Global Concrete Aesthetics

On 15 March 2023, I sat with two young civil engineering technicians in Parcelles Assainies, a northern district of Dakar. Focusing on their computers, their smartphones were lying across the table. They worked diligently on the plans for a two-storey building, utilizing a pirated version of ArchiCAD, a renowned architecture software package. Completing the task swiftly, within a couple of hours they had turned their attention to designing the main façade. One technician reached for her phone and started to scroll on Pinterest with the search query “Façade; Inspiration; Dakar.” A plethora of computer-generated images showcasing concrete facades adorned with tiles and various types of render flooded the screen. At first glance, these images appeared strikingly similar: geometric motifs encircling balconies and windows, modular elements defining the façade, grey, brown and white as the dominant colors, and plenty of plants for decoration. Upon closer inspection, however, it became apparent that these images might derive from diverse locales, as various languages were used in their titles, including Arabic, Spanish and English.



Examples of façades on Pinterest.
Screenshot, 28 May 2023.

Scrolling further, she remarked “I want to create something extraordinary (*quelque chose d’extraordinaire*, in French) for my client,” adding that “some districts in Dakar resemble Paris now!” Other interlocutors would also refer to Manhattan or Dubai in order to reflect representations of the desirable city. This dual pursuit of “extraordinary” and desirable spaces echoes the concept of “good urbanism” (Gastrow 2017: 225) alongside processes of globalization. Such images on social media platforms are instrumental in locating desires elsewhere (Watson 2014), eroding certain cultural specificities in a process of acculturation (Wen 2020). Here, concrete emerges as the driving force behind particular aesthetics and architectural solutions in rapidly expanding urban landscapes which adhere to international standards and global visions of modernity.

Following that afternoon with the civil engineers, I began searching for such content via my own personal social media accounts. Soon, my feeds on Pinterest and Instagram were inundated with similar representations. The algorithms quickly discerned my preferences, saturating my digital space with construction-related content – from developers’ and architects’ pages to online tutorials and myriad façade designs. “[S]ocial media’s algorithms ‘learn’ ... for the collective and future searches in general. Vice-versa social practices, including, of course, human actors, are (re)constituted through search technology” (Haider and Sundin 2019: 71). The power of the algorithm (Cardon 2018) made the field of construction available on my phone. Echoing Ghertner (2011), we can see how aesthetics plays a pivotal role in shaping urban environments; the images available seem to fuel imaginaries and desires for very neat, somehow impersonal houses, which function as a marker for prosperity and social status. The digital serves as a platform for establishing trust, by allowing easy visual comparison of the quality and value of construction projects (Watson 2020), thereby working as a possible launchpad for other construction projects and the further spread of concrete in the city.



Global aesthetic of concrete in Dakar, Senegal.

Photo: Pierre Wenzel, 2023.

Construction in Practice

Despite the global influence of social media, construction remains a grounded practice, attributing concrete particular significance and value in a city such as Dakar. In 2016, SOCOCIM, Senegal's main cement plant, released a YouTube advertisement recreating a well-known but almost extinct construction practice in Dakar in "[The Song of the Masons](#)." The Sereer featured in the video are one of the main ethnic groups in the country. The Sereer masons used to sing rhythmically while shoveling concrete mix in sync, proceeding in an almost choreographed fashion as they created each new slab – an intensely physical task. Although this practice has largely faded with the wide spread of load-lifts in the 2000s, this exemplifies the distinctive entanglements between construction practices in Dakar, masons' bodies and concrete itself. I was often told about how this Sereer song served as a source of courage and how it praises workers' strength. While reappropriating this practice for commercial purposes, the video nevertheless revives memories and imaginaries on social media, and conveys a narrative about the resilient, determined construction workers who elevate their craft to an art form, with concrete at its core.

Building on Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall's (2004) invitation to understand African metropolises through the figure of the worker, Senegalese masons anchor concrete in practices unique to Dakar through their gestures, languages and stories. The interrelation of rhythm and work (Hänsch 2019) illustrated in the video is still connected to imaginaries and identities surrounding concrete and construction methods in the city, where workers often rely on physical labor to compensate for the lack of certain equipment, such as concrete mixers. It might appear, meanwhile, that social media articulates global trends, reflecting worldwide aesthetics and processes of globalization that seem disconnected from Dakar and local concrete materialities. Yet the figure of the mason serves as a bridge between international standards and the sociocultural realities of construction projects in Senegal. Here, labor, strength and endurance are shared and remembered on social media, infusing the qualities and perceptions of concrete in Dakar.

Expertise Exchange Online

Completing the perspective offered by SOCOCIM's video spot, the YouTube channel "[Maçons du Sénégal](#)" managed by Dieye, a mason-influencer, shows actual construction sites. Dieye provides firsthand insights from these construction sites, demonstrating and explaining the intricacies of building a house in concrete while promoting his business. Here, social media is also used as an arena for knowledge and information dissemination accessible to all – planners, workers and residents alike. In addition, Facebook also serves as a platform facilitating transactions around essential construction materials such as gravel, cement and sand. During construction site visits, WhatsApp was often used as a tool for supervision and archiving, with entrepreneurs, masons and landlords exchanging videos of construction advancements. Smartphones and social media support informal economies and activities (Diallo et al. 2020; ANSD 2022). They participate in shaping roles and networks on construction sites, sometimes blurring the boundaries between various areas of expertise related to the built environment (Di Nunzio 2019). Indeed, as knowledge seems to become more accessible, concrete

expertise is sometimes redistributed – where a mason may claim knowledge of an architect, an entrepreneur may present themselves as a technician, and a landlord may adopt the role of a developer.

Concrete is embedded in a global aesthetic fostered on and by social media, promoting tacit construction norms and *concretification* of the urban. If the cityscape takes shape at the crossroads of labor, sweat and concrete, social media becomes a place to document, learn, inspire and ultimately create with concrete. Online sharing is part of the network shaping concrete's materiality, reflecting the desires and aspirations of Dakar's residents for the city's future. The two realities of social media and construction sites are thus inseparable and mutually influential.

Streetscape in Dakar and recent concrete buildings.
Photo: Pierre Wenzel, 2023.



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Pierre Wenzel is PhD Candidate in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna, Austria, and is part of the research team Sedimented Visions, led by Professor Manuela Ciotti. His research investigates the entanglements between cementification and urbanization in Dakar, Senegal. Focusing on the interrelations between materials, humans, and the city, he looks at daily practices revolving around construction sites and their materialities, coupled with extensive archival research. He graduated in the field of Urban Studies, focusing on African cities. He has also worked as a consultant for UNESCO at the regional office for West Africa-Sahel in Dakar.

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