



Africa Centre Envisioning Forum Report **Friday 2nd March 2007**

Formal Opening by H.E. Dr Christopher Kolade, High Commissioner of Nigeria

The day started with a speech by H.E. Dr Christopher Kolade, the High Commissioner of Nigeria, in which he called on the stakeholders of the Africa Centre to be contributors as well as receivers of the Centre's services and activities. He addressed an audience with optimism and hope for the Centre's future and advised us to keep up a spirit of renewal based on constant communication with stakeholders.

Welcome & Introductions by the Chair of the Africa Centre

After His Excellency's motivational speech came an introduction by Oliver Tunde Andrews, the Chair of the Africa Centre, in which he stated the aim of the Forum: to envision the future of the Africa Centre. This introductory note was followed by two brief presentations: the first one delivered by Ahmed Akasha (Graphic Designer/237 Design) on the new website and branding proposals for the Centre; the second one by Jon Blasby (Project Managers/Malcolm Reading & Associates Ltd), who outlined the work that has been done for the African Centre since 2005 as well as explaining the next steps in the current development project.

New Website/Branding Proposals – Ahmed Akasha

Ahmed Akasha's presentation about the new logo and website for the Africa Centre stimulated the participants to think about the different aspects of branding of the 'new' Africa Centre. When discussing the logo, he explained how he chose to move away from the overused representation of the map of Africa in favour of something more contemporary and sophisticated -yet still representative of the Africa Centre. The aim was to create a logo that would be able to stand on equal grounds with those from other prominent cultural organizations. Not losing sight of the original message of the Africa Centre, Ahmed has created a strong and yet simple logo that denotes the ideas of Unity, Strength and Dynamism: A circle, which also reads ac (Africa Centre). The logo is bold and noticeable so that it can resonate and stay with us, as well as working well on different media. There was also discussion around the use of the word 'New' in front of 'Africa Centre' in this interim period. People's opinions differed, some in favour of keeping the Africa Centre name the same as before. Finally, a consensus was reached with the following suggestion: The word 'new' could be used temporarily, stressing the freshness of a new beginning but it would disappear eventually, reverting back to Africa Centre.

Development Project Managers –Jon Blasby

Jon Blasby then took us on a journey with his presentation; a journey which started in 2005, when the Africa Centre commissioned consultants to prepare a Development Appraisal Report that considered five different uses for the building and the value of each. These options helped to identify the potential opportunities that exist within the real estate that the Centre owns. The mix of uses identified included a restaurant, an exhibition space, a theatre, a book store, offices and even residential use –all of which could provide income to sustain the Centre's long-term future. Jon's most fundamental point was that the building must support the organisation. In recognising this, he also pointed to the consequent dilemma brought about by the conflict between providing facilities for the organisation versus the Africa Centre's income (capital or revenue) needs, which the building can offer. In this sense, the more facilities provided for the Africa Centre, the less commercial opportunity available – and vice-versa.

This presentation also introduced the new Africa Centre governance system which constitutes 5 subcommittees. These are: Development, Fundraising, Programming & Operations, Nominations and Administration & Finance. The participants were also introduced to Business of Culture, the organisers of the day's forum and contracted to manage the Africa Centre in this interim period. Business of Culture are now managing the current operations of the Centre and meeting ACE funding conditions. Alongside key members of the management Committee, BoC are also working towards raising the profile of the organisation, devising a good fundraising strategy and to appoint an appropriate design team. Finally, there is a strong emphasis on communication and consultation, since the Africa Centre needs to be able to communicate its plans, its potential and its future to its stakeholders.

After the presentations, the participants were then taken on a tour of the building by Isaac Tsvion, the caretaker, and Graeme Jennings in order to see the poor conditions of the premises. Once this was over, the participants split into two groups. Facilitated by Audrey Brown (BBC World Service) and William Tayleur (Business of Culture), each group undertook two panel discussions. The following are key points consolidating notes taken from both discussion groups:

1st Panel Discussion:

What is the Africa Centre for?

- The Africa Centre should exploit both its Virtual and Real spaces.
- Africa Centre as a multi-purpose building, equipped to carry out its many different functions: Theatre, live music, film, arts & exhibitions. This would achieve financial viability.
- The Africa Centre has been and should still be the custodian and promoter of African culture in London. The directive hub for National African Arts: the network of networks.
- Africa Centre should be part of an international network of African venues.
- The Africa Centre should be used to promote an African identity, especially amongst the Diaspora.
- Africa Centre as a voice for the African Diaspora within the U.K.
- A place to host visiting African artists: To give them a platform to show their talents.
- Live Music is important as a popular art form to draw in audiences. Nothing in the building prevents it from being used as a musical space.

Who is the Africa Centre for?

- The Africa Centre should be for everyone
- For African people and anyone interested in African culture.
- Use the internet to build on the Africa Centre's world-wide community/audience.

What range of activities/programmes/projects should it concentrate on?

- Is there anything that has not been done by the Centre? Look at what was successful in the past.
- A shop window for Africa without music would not be complete
- The Africa Centre could house an archive of culture, artists, education.
- Programming must arise from liaising with other 'like-minded' venues.
- Outreach work in schools and colleges in the area.
- A hub: Being a Centre rather than being the place where everything happens.
- There is an ever-growing international African Diaspora: The programming should pick up on that.
- Ongoing developmental processes in Africa are disconnected from the U.K. To engage with these organizations/processes.
- Exchange cultural programs with other organizations in the continent: To invite Africans to come to the Africa Centre and curate their exhibitions here.
- To produce a dynamic newsletter

What strategic partnerships should it make?

- Umbrella Approach –to build partnerships with other cultural organizations. A centering Arts Hub coordinating all of the African Cultural Policy in the U.K.
- To engage with civil society organisations and development organisations.

2nd Panel Discussion:

What should the identity of the Africa Centre be?

- A welcoming venue, a meeting place, a centre.
- The Africa Centre brand has been tarnished in the last few years. How do we resurrect using the same name? 'New' –emphasizing the freshness of this new venture/comeback.
- A brand is not a static thing: It must be a living thing: aim, vision and objectives to be dynamic.
- Brand of the Africa Centre: We need to have a strong brand. What the brand means, what it stands for. To seize the opportunity to start the new initiative as a brand. Is the Africa Centre a brand that can have world-wide recognition?

How should the Africa Centre present itself as a focus of African Programmes in Covent Garden?

- To push for the promotion of street arts –being in Covent Garden.
- Modern African Cuisine: Extraordinary opportunity given the location: Covent Garden is 'food city'.

What balance do you think should be struck between commercial/ income related space and cultural/ educational not for profit space?

- Renting/hiring/using the space for commercial ventures might make the Centre loose out in other parts of cultural programming. This is something to always keep in mind. The key lies in finding a balance between income needs and the Centre's mission.

What kind of operational size/turnover should the Africa Centre aim for?

- No answers

How can we complete the funding of the capital project AND the longer term operational revenues?

- Fundraising: To tap funding from a regional, national, and European perspective.
- The Africa Centre Brand could bring in revenue
- To look for appropriate corporate sponsorship.
- Culture can make money too: Culture is a business. We don't have to separate Culture from revenue.
- Membership, including corporate membership.
- Redevelopment Plan needs more funding and/or taking out a mortgage, which would be paid in the future. Oliver gave us some background information about the current state of affairs: a) The Africa Centre costs are an average of £25,000 per month. b) The total cost of refurbishment is £3.5 - £4 million. c) Currently, there are £1.6 million left from Arts Council Funding. It is important to note here that Arts Council Money is only for the redevelopment of the building, not for any other expenditure.

What advice from those present is there for delivering a large capital project?

- Vision is the key when taking on a large capital project: It is important to solidify your vision through consultation with interested parties and stakeholders.
- Targeted fundraising.
- Shop front has true market value: retail of food and drink.
- Commercial ventures & fundraising strategies to be kept up.

Is the location of the Africa Centre important?

- It's a great location!!

Other contributions:

Other valuable contributions were made by people who could not attend the Forum. The following are some relevant excerpts of these:

Dr. Alastair Niven's: Knowing the Centre's history (Director of the Africa Centre 1978-1984)

"It is difficult for an ex-Director General of the Africa Centre to comment, because in many ways one wants the Africa Centre to be as it was in one's own time (in my case 1978-84)... My hope is that when we re-open we can be a bit closer to how the Africa Centre was in the 1980s. We had over 100 lectures and cultural events a year, a thriving art gallery, excellent cuisine in the Calabash, seven or more adult education classes a week, several school groups a year, Foreign Office guests on familiarization visits, many room hirings, and so on. The Centre was the place where anyone who had something significant to say about Africa said

it. We never paid fees to speakers but nor did we have problems attracting them. Maybe I paint a golden age, but the Annual Reports of the period (and back in to the 1970s) will testify to this level of activity. There is so much goodwill still towards the place, but if it is to get back on its feet it will need to know its own history (...) The world is different now, but not so different that a good program of cultural events, social activities and current affairs discussions could not help it to gain its old reputation.

Carol Allsop & Tony Kaleda: Democratising the Africa Centre

1. The Africa Centre should maintain similar cultural and social objectives to those previously established.
2. Its entertainment and shop facilities (e.g. live music, restaurant, bar, bookshop and craft centre), which should be very profitable in view of the Centre's prime location should be used to fund other Africa-related cultural events.
3. The management of the Centre should be made transparent, democratic, accountable and efficient.
4. A membership system could be introduced for regular users of the Centre with opportunities to contribute opinions on its activities.

We are extremely keen to see the Africa Centre reopened and to see it running effectively. It would be good to see it refurbished to a decent but sensible and not excessive standard, and to see it returned to its formal glory as a cultural and social forum for Africans, British people, tourists and visitors to London.

Nigel Watt: Some comments about the future of the Africa Centre (Director of the Africa Centre 1984-91)

What is the Africa Centre for?

The three "missions" in the home page of the web site seem to sum it up:

- To present Africa positively and from an African point of view to London, the UK, the World.
- To provide support for the African Diaspora in the UK, especially in London and, I would add, to Africans visiting London.
- To support African development, especially in the arts.

Who is it for?

The Centre should be a welcoming place for Africans, whether they be students, refugees or High Commissioners; and also for friends of Africa and anyone who is willing to learn something about Africa. The tradition of the Centre has been that it should be a "popular" place where Africans from all over can meet each other and meet with British people or with international visitors to London. The Covent Garden location maximises the chance of a good international mixture. The Africa Centre has never aspired to be something like the Commonwealth Club, which has an equally useful but different function.

Programmes.

In the light of the above, and from personal experience of what worked and what did not my time as Director, I would recommend a few priorities:

Arts and culture.

- Regular monthly exhibitions of painting, sculpture, photography. These attracted visitors, especially to the openings and are also fundable by arts boards and, occasionally, by foundations.

- Cinema/TV. Now that most African films, TV programmes etc can be on DVD, a smallish room could be fitted out for projection and regular, even daily, programmes operated. (Our attempts with 16mm films and a noisy projector in the past did not present quite the image!)
- Talks, panels, book launches. It is good to have a regular weekly slot so that people get into the habit.
- Outreach. The recent literary tours seem excellent and should certainly continue.

Social and educational.

- The Centre needs to have a large, pleasant bar space with snacks (nyama choma, brochettes, kelewele etc) available, not too scruffy but not too expensive.
- Unless it seems vital from a financial point of view I would put a proper restaurant as a low priority, but any restaurant should, as the Calabash was supposed to, provide a wide range of good African dishes.
- Although we pioneered music in the 1980s, I recognise that the space is too small for live music ever to be viable. The Centre might give its support to visits by some performers but should not get into the business of music promotion.
- Information service/ reference room. There needs to be some kind of service but the scale of it depends very much on staffing and on the amount of space left in the Centre after redevelopment. The library was never large enough and I would not recommend starting this up again.
- Children's activities such as craft and music workshops were successful in the 1980s and can attract funding. Promoting Africa to mixed groups of kids is a way of curing them of the belief that Africa is just mud huts and wild animals – and they may come back to the place later in life.

Development

By networking with other organisations in the UK, Africa and other countries, the Centre could play a role e.g. sharing the hosting of conferences and seminars, facilitating exchanges of artists, writers, architects, exhibitions, ideas.

Strategic partnerships

Of course the Centre should have close links with Embassies, the Royal African Society, Royal Commonwealth Society, Commonwealth Institute and various London galleries and institutions, but it should make an effort to network with the many national associations in the UK and with some local authorities. Such networking involves staff time and depends on the centre's resources.

Budget, location etc.

Branding: the Africa Centre is already a very good brand name. The problem is that there have been so few activities in recent years that many people forgot the place existed even before it closed. I think it is sensible to try, even while the building is closed, to keep the membership going and to communicate with them and with the public. (I have received very little and some members I know have received nothing). Another, more open, meeting would be useful.

Location. Covent Garden has many advantages. We did on one occasion look into the possibility of moving but I think this would only be advisable if a larger site could be found at a very accessible location in a less expensive area. Larger premises would permit other activities such a music but regular income from rent might not be so good in another location.

Staff costs. We used to run a very full programme with only two programme staff, plus the Director. Including administrative staff, 7 would be a minimum total staffing.

Past Stakeholder Consultation

In 2001 there was a questionnaire survey completed by 42 respondents. The results of this survey are shown on the attached document. This makes interesting comparison with the Forum's outcomes.