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Architecture is an essential part of Mali's heritage. Its forms are very diverse, corresponding to the varied needs of those who build and use the structures, but essentially there are three building traditions: earthen, stone, and nomadic architecture.

Widespread in Africa, earthen architecture is a construction technique that encloses spaces with walls. Besides adobe brick, construction also makes use of wood and some other plant material. Such architecture can be found in cities as well as in rural areas. Urban examples include Djenné's famous mosque and decorated houses, as well as the mausoleums and medieval mosques of Timbuktu (Tombouctou). Rural architecture is also remarkable for its impressive earthen constructions: the *saho* (youth houses) of the interior Niger Delta, for example, are made from clay soil mixed with straw and feature façades with rich decorative elements. Traditional houses typical of the south of the country are also made from clay and straw.

Stonemasonry is currently practiced in Dogon country. Before the arrival of the Dogon in the 15th century, the pre-Tellem (3rd–2nd century B.C.E.) and Tellem (11th century C.E.) peoples developed an exceptional clay architecture for their cliffside storage buildings. At the heart of Dogon architecture, the home (*gin'na*) is the most imposing structure. In certain areas,



residential compounds are laid out in a form that symbolizes the human body. The façades of houses are hollowed out with rows of small niches. Storage buildings, their roofs covered by removable straw lids, are built in an exterior court in front of the house. Totemic sanctuaries (*binu*) are composed of small units with a façade that is flanked by small towers or conical protrusions, which serve as altars. The men's lodges (*toguna*) are built according to completely different principles: carved wooden or stone pillars are placed in a square arrangement. They support a bed of tree trunks, on which millet stalks are stacked in alternately perpendicular levels.

Nomadic architecture, used in the Sahara and Sahel by groups of herders that move seasonally to new pastures (such as the Fulani [Peul], Tuareg, and Moors [Maures]) and by fishing groups along the length of major waterways, is based on the construction of frameworks. The round house and tent are its characteristic forms. Round houses made from branches are constructed from a wooden framework and are covered with

straw mats, or even plastic sheeting. The tent, made either from skins or fabric, is also stretched across a wooden armature whose contours give it its shape.

Housing varies according to region, environment, and ethnic group, but overall one sees the sub-Saharan, Sudanic, Dogon, and colonial styles based on older mud architecture represented in Mali. Modern housing in cities and the countryside bears the stamp of these different architectural traditions.

(Above) The Djenné mosque, the largest earthen building in the world, in the midst of remudding. Photo © Allison Mackey

(Below left) A *toguna*, or men's lodge, in a Dogon community. Photo © Baba Alpha Cissé

(Below center) A Tuareg woman and her child in front of their tent. Photo © Baba Alpha Cissé

(Below right) A former colonial building in Ségou whose style is based on vernacular mud architecture. Photo © Barbara Frank

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