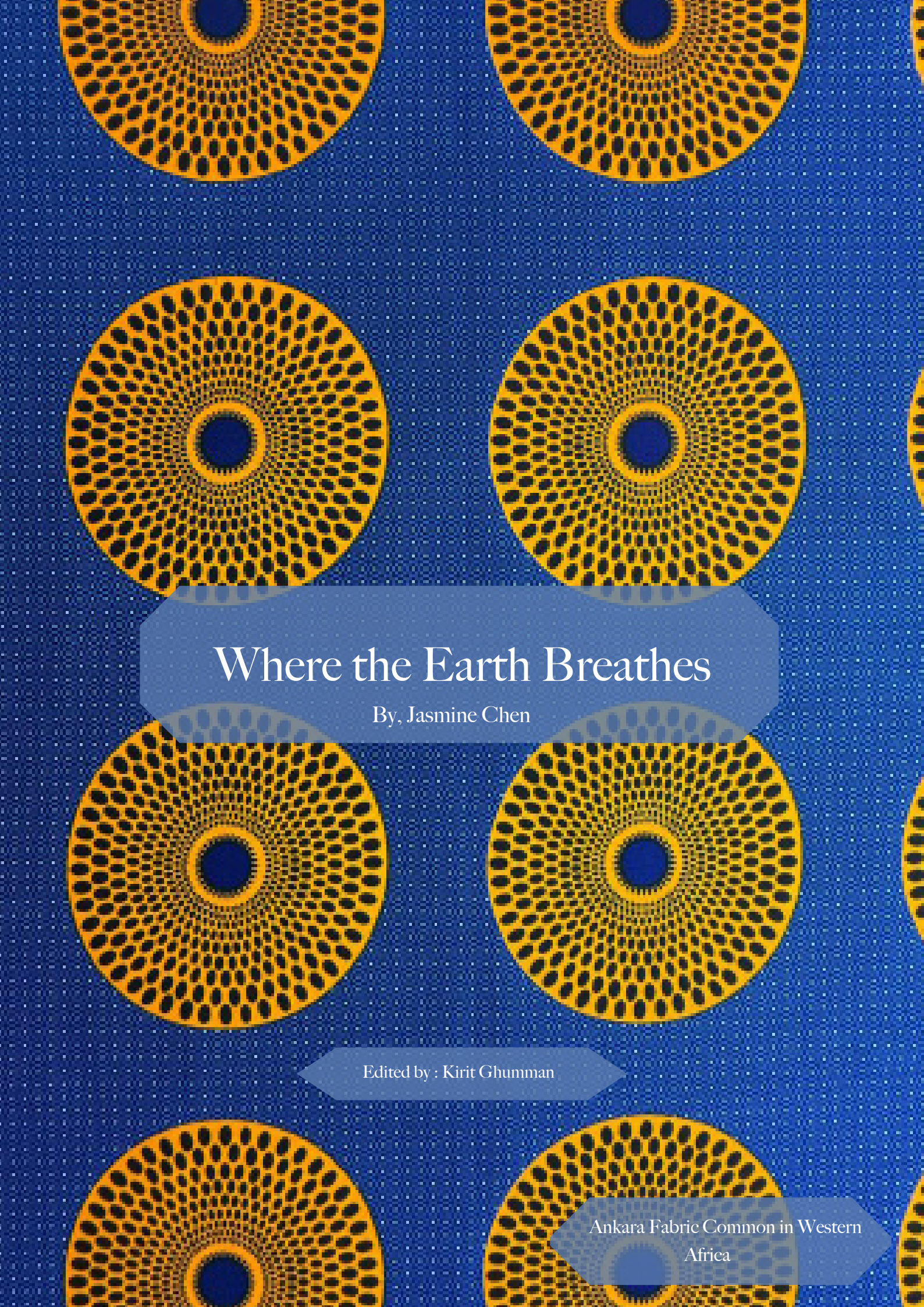
Where the Earth Breathes
By, Jasmine Chen
Edited by : Kirit Ghumman
Ankara Fabric Common in Western Africa

Abstract

This is a creative personal essay inspired by the lectures and readings from ARCH 355: Architectural History 4, taught by Professor Alan Avorgbedor, and the discussions led by TA Mehwish Abid, exploring vernacular African architecture. These are more than structures; these are memories moulded into clay, resilience etched in stone, and the cosmology of culture marked in space. While this story may not be based on a real experience, this essay envisions the cultural, spiritual, and communal significance of mud dwellings. I draw on the themes of resilience, creativity and harmony with nature which are central to Prof. Avorgbedor's class. This piece contributes to African studies by reimagining vernacular architecture as a reflection of cultural memory and resilience, emphasizing the deep relationship between built forms and community values. It highlights how African architectural tradition shapes spatial identities and preserves heritage.

When I first walked into a Northern Ghanaian village, I was shocked to see so many mud houses gathered together. They were so complex, yet looked simple. These structures which were created from the very earth beneath my feet seemed to emerge organically from the ground. As if they had always been there. I remember running my hand along the textured walls and feeling the cool, damp clay against my palm. It was at that moment that I understood that these structures, often viewed by outsiders as primitive or backwards, are much more than simple shelters. Much more than houses made of mud. They are homes.

To me, they became a symbol of resilience. They serve as a reminder that architecture is not just about grand designs or imported, standardized materials. Rather, it is about creating spaces which reflect the everyday values, beliefs, and practices of the people who inhabit them. As I spent more time in the village, I began to see the adobe homes as an expression of the relationship between the people and the earth that sustains them.

I remember watching a group of people mixing clay and straw together. Everyone's hands moved with ease as they prepared the material for a new home. The process was communal. Everyone in the village had a part to play in some way. For example, I saw men shaping the walls, children gathering the earth,

and elders offering them guidance. This was a ritual and a celebration of community and tradition.

As I helped mix the clay, I developed a profound connection with the land and the people around me. The earth, I learned, was not just a resource but it was a living entity, a source of fertility and life. It was to build with mud that in some ways I was engaging in a dialogue with the earth while honoring its gis and its spirit.

As I explored the village, something that stood out to me were the circular homes and their captivating shape. I was told that the circle represents unity, wholeness, and the cycle of life which I thought seemed like a simple and beautiful truth. But as I sat there, reflecting on it, a thought came to me. I began to think about how a circle, with the same exact perimeter as a square, actually offers a larger area. Less material for more space. I sat back, amazed.

As I continued to explore the beautiful village, I was mesmerized by the vibrant and intricate symbols that transformed the homes' walls into living works of art. I was told that these designs were more than mere decoration but that each pattern actually carried deep meanings. The Kassena people used these symbols as a way to express their values, showcase their beliefs and connect with their history. Each motif represented different values. Among them are Adinkra symbols like Aya which represents endurance and resilience; and Sankofa San (return), Ko (go), Fa (look, seek, take) which highlights the importance of learning from the past to move forward (Avorgbedor, personal communication). All these symbols were painted on the earth walls making each home a sacred space that honored tradition and wisdom.

I also realized that the arrangement of spaces in the village was quite different from what I was used to seeing in Montreal. As a matter of fact, each space was designated for specific roles and particular needs of a family. For example, some dwellings were designated for lovers, offering a space for intimacy and privacy, while others were set aside for pregnant women or those with newborns, providing comfort and safety during a significant time in life.

Unlike the grid-like, structured cities I was familiar with in Eurocentric urban planning, their village design was much more intuitive and fluid. In fact, the homes were clustered together, around a central space of a courtyard, a tree, or an assembly

point. This illustrated the communal nature of African societies, where the individual is always part of the collective. At first glance, the layout might seem disorganized, even chaotic, but it was, in fact, aligned with the concept of fractal patterns. Nature itself operates via fractals which are self-organizing systems that repeat at different scales. Thus, the Kassena village was a reflection of nature, where every element is connected and interdependent.

The village's organic layout, shaped by natural patterns, stood in sharp contrast to the structured, rational designs of colonial and modernist architecture. As I stood there, I couldn't help but notice the difference between the indigenous homes and the modern structures I had seen in tropical cities. Tropical modernism, as done by architects like Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, sought to solve the problems of living in hot, humid climates. Open, airy spaces, large windows for ventilation, and the use of local materials. But the more

I thought about it, I realized that tropical modernism was attempting to fix something that it had created.
Tropical modernism aimed to address the discomforts caused by traditional European building methods in tropical climates. However, the introduction of Western architectural ideals, with their focus on strict grids, rigid structures, and often non-local materials, disrupted the natural, organic flow of indigenous architecture.

The homes I observed were already perfectly attuned to their environment, open, flexible, and fluid, all designed to work with the land and climate, not against it. In fact, the thatched roof provided shelter from the sun and rain while the thick adobe walls kept the interior cool during the day and warm at night. Yet, the influence of tropical modernism, with its imported aesthetics, led to buildings that lacked the cultural and spiritual nuances embedded in the original homes.

As I left the village, I carried with me a newfound deep appreciation for African vernacular architecture and the culture it represents. The homes I visited were definitely anything but simple. They are a testament to the ingenuity and resilience of people who have learned to thrive in harmony with their environment.

In a world that often values the new over the old, these traditional homes stand as a quiet rebuke, challenging the Western notion that progress and innovation must always come in the form of new, standardized designs.

They remind us that beauty and meaning can be found in the simplest of forms. Today, these principles offer a timely reminder of the importance of sustainability and the need for spaces that foster connection to both people and place.

And in that, it is a story worth telling.

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