

**Zeitschrift:** gta papers  
**Herausgeber:** gta Verlag  
**Band:** 4 (2020)

**Artikel:** "Rome is no longer in Rome, Rome is at Yamoussoukro"  
**Autor:** Hub, Berthold  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-880879>

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## "Rome is No Longer in Rome, Rome is at Yamoussoukro" Berthold Hub

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In 1983, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the first president of Côte d'Ivoire, decided to move the capital to his birthplace of Yamoussoukro, at that time a small town of only 15,000 inhabitants in the interior of the country. Although Yamoussoukro is still the nominal capital of Côte d'Ivoire, the parliament, the ministries and the president's seat are to this day located in Abidjan, a metropolis of millions on the coast 200 kilometers away. The few representative buildings erected for the capital are in poor condition or dilapidated, the boulevards are empty and potholed.

The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace at Yamoussoukro is not the only copy or replica of Saint Peter's in Rome. <sup>fig.1</sup> It was preceded by Marie-Reine-du-Monde de Montréal, Canada, and Saint Agatha and Barbara in Oudenbosch, Netherlands (combined with the façade after San Giovanni in Laterano) in the late nineteenth century, and the Basilica dell'Incoronata Maria del Buon Consiglio in Naples, Italy, initiated in 1920 but completed only in 1960. But while these three buildings are copies considerably reduced in scale, the basilica in Yamoussoukro is larger than St. Peter's in Rome.

The basilica was sharply criticized in the media worldwide. Some called it an obscene gesture of waste in a country suffering from poverty. <sup>fig.2</sup> Moreover, the project was carried

**fig.1** Aerial view of Yamoussoukro's basilica, Côte d'Ivoire.  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Yamoussoukro\\_±±basilique.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Yamoussoukro_±±basilique.jpg) (accessed Aug. 20, 2020).



out at a time when the country was in its worst economic recession since independence. After growing for many years on a thriving wave of cocoa and coffee exports, the Ivorian economy collapsed in the 1980s with the breakdown of cocoa and coffee prices on the international market, leading to a severe



recession with high unemployment. While the basilica is equipped with high-tech systems for the best acoustics, lighting and climate, only a minority of the houses in Yamoussoukro have running water. Another

point of criticism was the fact that the largest building in Côte d'Ivoire was built for a minority: Only about a quarter of the country's twelve million inhabitants were Roman Catholics. But many Catholics of the country are proud of "their" church. They argue that St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, now admired and celebrated by all, was also built while poverty prevailed among the population.

### Félix Houphouët-Boigny

Félix Houphouët-Boigny came from a Baoulé family of chieftains rich in cocoa and coffee plantations. The Baoulé tribe is the largest single ethnic group in the country, with a little over two million people, and formed the core of Houphouët-Boigny's support in Côte d'Ivoire. Originally Houphouët-Boigny was called Oufouet Dia. He took the first name Félix when he converted to Catholicism at the age of eleven. After studying medicine in Dakar, the capital of what was then French West Africa, he returned to Côte d'Ivoire in 1925 and began working as a resident doctor in the central hospital of Abidjan. At the same time, he was involved in the family's successful plantation business. Having become one of the richest men in the country through his own profits and numerous legacies, he embarked on a political career in 1940. In 1945, his compatriots elected him the first Ivorian member of the French parliament, where he proved to be a talented mediator between the colonial power and its "overseas territories." Shortly before, he had changed his name from Oufouet to Houphouët and associated it with the Baoulé word "Boigny" ("ram"). In 1956, he was appointed Minister of Health in the French government. Although he had spoken out against the imminent independence of African states shortly before, at the beginning of 1960 he was elected with 98 percent of the vote as the first president of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, which he presided over until his death in 1993. During his thirty-three years of rule, he maintained close relations with France, and Côte d'Ivoire was considered relatively prosperous and politically stable. Until 1990, Côte d'Ivoire

fig.2 Yamoussoukro and the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yamoussoukro.jpg> (accessed Aug. 20, 2020).

1 For more on Houphouët-Boigny, see the monumental biography, Frédéric Grah Mel, *Félix Houphouët-Boigny: Biographie*, 3 vols. (Abidjan: CERAP, 2003–2010). For his ascent to power, see Pierre Cheynier, *Yamoussoukro, Cœur de la Côte d'Ivoire* (Abidjan: Traternit-Hebdomadaire, 1978); Nnamdi Elleh, *Architecture and Power in Africa* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 62–68.

only had one political party. It was not until the 1980s that his reign was confronted with growing economic problems.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this, Houphouët-Boigny decided in 1983 to turn his birthplace Yamoussoukro into the country's new capital. The idea for this step may have come to him in the 1970s in talks with Habib Bourguiba, president of the Republic of Tunisia from 1957 to 1987, who had previously had his native Monastir equipped with new streets, an airport, numerous hotels, a football stadium, a mosque and a gigantic mausoleum for the president. In any case, Houphouët-Boigny took over from the Tunisian President his court architect, the French architect of Tunisian origin Olivier-Clément Cacoub, who had been trained in Paris, Rome and Athens, and who claimed, "I do architecture like I do gestures."<sup>2</sup> According to Cacoub's design, an airport with a 3-kilometer-long runway for Concorde was built, a network of wide boulevards stretching up to six lanes was constructed, artificial lakes were dug out, and the Presidential Palace, the congress center (which also houses the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Foundation for Peace Research<sup>3</sup>), and the five-star Hôtel Président with its panoramic restaurant and golf course were built.

But when Houphouët-Boigny died in 1993, Yamoussoukro was still a capital that existed only on paper. None of the institutions had moved from Abidjan to the new capital. Yet Yamoussoukro remains the official capital of Côte d'Ivoire. The country had experienced its heyday under Houphouët-Boigny and the first president, usually respectfully called *le vieux* (the old man), enjoyed and apparently still enjoys so much prestige that nobody will officially end the project.

## La Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix

The foundation stone for the construction of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, blessed by Pope John Paul II on August 10, 1985, was laid on February 2, 1986. The construction was completed in early 1989 after less than three years but could only be consecrated by Pope John Paul II on September 10, 1990.

President Houphouët-Boigny commissioned the Lebanese architect Pierre Fakhoury, who was born in Côte d'Ivoire in 1943 and, after attending a Catholic school in Lebanon, completed his training as an architect in 1971 at the Institut Supérieur d'Architecture St.-Luc de Tournai, Belgium. He had previously built several hospitals, hotels and residential buildings in and around Abidjan.<sup>5</sup> Besides Fakhoury, the Frenchman Antoine Cesareo, whom the president had appointed head of the Direction et Contrôle des Grands



<sup>2</sup> "Je fais de l'architecture comme je fais des gestes." François Soudan, "Olivier Clément Cacoub, l'architecte du soleil," *Jeune Afrique*, May 4, 2008, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/222922/archives-thematique/olivier-cl-ment-cacoub-l-architecte-du-soleil> (accessed Feb. 27, 2020). See also Olivier-Clément Cacoub, *Architecture de soleil* (Tunis: Demeter, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fondation-fhb.org> (accessed Mar. 20, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> The church is technically not a cathedral. The seat of the bishop of the diocese of Yamoussoukro is still the Cathédrale Saint-Augustin. However, the Pope did award the new building the honorary title of "Basilica Minor."

**fig. 3** Félix Houphouët-Boigny and Pope John Paul II. Source: Pierre Fakhoury, *La Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, Yamoussoukro*, foreword François Mathey, photos Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Fernand Quino (Liège: Mardaga, 1990), 5.

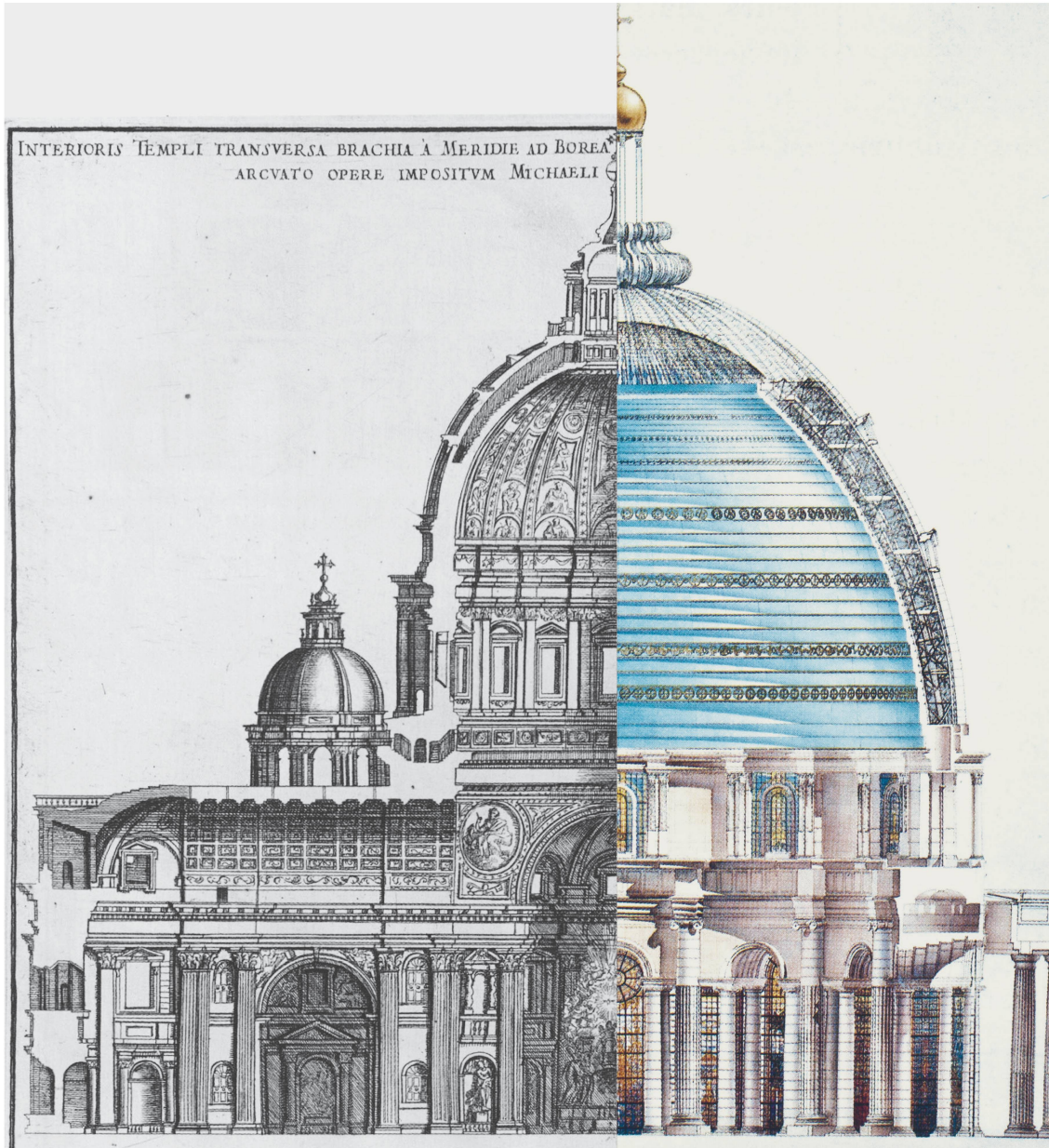
<sup>5</sup> Apart from a few interviews and Internet entries, little can be found about Pierre Fakhoury, although a street that lies in the extension of the central esplanade has been named after him, "Yamoussoukro: Le Boulevard de la Basilique et l'avenue Pierre Fakhoury inaugurés," *Abidjan.net*, April 9, 2017, <https://news.abidjan.net/h/612966.html> (accessed Aug. 11, 2020). In any case, he is still working for the government of Côte d'Ivoire. See "Côte d'Ivoire: Les grands travaux de Pierre Fakhoury," *Jeune Afrique*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/838863/politique/cote-divoire-les-grands-travaux-de-pierre-fakhoury> (accessed Mar. 20, 2020).

Travaux back in 1977, was responsible for implementing the project. <sup>6</sup>

With a total height of 158 meters, the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace surpasses the dome of St. Peter's by 26 meters. <sup>7</sup> Although the apex of the dome is just below that of Saint Peter's, the high lantern and the monumental cross means the basilica of Yamoussoukro clearly outdoes Michelangelo's model. The dome has a span of 90 meters, which is more than twice as wide as the dome of St. Peter's. The greater span is made possible by the greater height, but above all by a much lower base

<sup>6</sup> Michel Galy, "Les avatars de la DCGTX en Côte d'Ivoire," *Politique Africaine* 52 (1993), 135–39.

<sup>7</sup> In what follows, indications of size and quantity have been obtained from Alexandre Pietrzyk, Béata Kulsza, and Joseette Bassigny, *The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace: Guide; History – Art – Faith* (Yamoussoukro: International Foundation of Our Lady of Peace, 1990), 125–26.



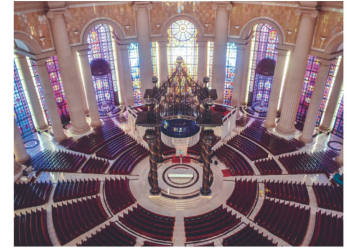
**fig. 4** Section of the Basilica of St Peter, Rome (Giovanni Colin after Francesco Antonio Bufalini, 1683) and section of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, Yamoussoukro. A similar graphics is displayed in the exhibition hall of the church and reproduced in the official guide. Sources: Angelamaria Acefo, "Rare Drawings for Prints by Francesco Antonio Bufalini," *Print Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 2014), 167–74, here 173; Pierre Fakhoury, *La Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, Yamoussoukro*, foreword François Mathey, photos Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Fernand Quino (Liège: Mardaga, 1990), 14.

of the dome foot. The tambour of the dome rests directly on the truss of the crown of columns. <sup>fig. 4</sup> The cruciform, outer outline of the complex, which is overly clearly reminiscent of St. Peter's, is set off from this round center and consists of open porticoes. Thus, the actual sanctuary under the dome is smaller than the one in Rome and only offers space for 18,000 people,

compared to 20,000 for St. Peter. <sup>fig.5</sup> But with a total building area of 30,000 square meters, compared to 15,000 square meters in the case of St. Peter's, the church takes a surface that is twice as big. The greatest triumph, however, is the construction time: unlike St. Peter's, which took over one hundred years to build, the basilica of Yamoussoukro is an "instant" high-tech product made of steel, concrete, marble, granite and colored glass, built in less than three years by around 1,500 mostly Ivorian shift workers.

Like St. Peter's in Rome, two long colonnade arms enclose an oval, three-hectare forecourt paved with granite and marble. However, unlike Gian Lorenzo Bernini's crescent-shaped colonnades on the Piazza San Pietro in Rome, the Fakhoury Colonnade in Yamoussoukro consists only of two semicircular arms, which are set off from the actual basilica and punctuated by four octagonal, domed pavilions that house chapels dedicated to the four evangelists. Above the apex of the dome rises a lantern made of golden aluminum, and above a final crown of columns and a globe finally a monumental cross. The design of the tambour and dome – apart from the double height and span – shows several differences to Michelangelo's dome of St. Peter's (window shapes, transition between tambour and dome shell, shape of the lantern, etc.), but the paired Corinthian columns, the ribs of the dome shell in axial alignment with the columns of the tambour, as well as the curvature of the dome leave no doubt that St. Peter's in Rome was the godfather here.

The dome of the basilica can be seen from everywhere in Yamoussoukro, but the true dimensions of the construction, the real gigantomania of the project, can be felt only when one climbs the steps to the portico and finds oneself at eye level with the curved torus at the base of a column. Over polished Italian marble, one walks through the wide space of the portico towards the cylindrical sanctuary, which is enclosed by a succession of twelve Serlian windows, completely filled with stained glass. In the center of each of the twelve straight beams of the inner Serliana is an Ionic column over 30 meters high. In four of these huge Ionic columns there are elevators that people can use to ascend to the gallery inside the tambour. <sup>fig.6</sup> In the sanctuary, the altar itself is framed by a monumental, 28-meter-high baldachin, an unmistakable reference to Bernini's *baldacchino* in St. Peter's in Rome. To the south of the basilica there are two symmetrically arranged buildings. The southwestern building serves as accommodation and offices for the rectory. This is where the missionary priests of the Polish Order of the Pallottines,



**fig.5** Basilica of Our Lady of Peace. View from the inner gallery down into the sanctuary. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coeur\\_de\\_la\\_Basilique\\_Notre-Dame\\_de\\_la\\_Paix\\_de\\_Yamoussoukro.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coeur_de_la_Basilique_Notre-Dame_de_la_Paix_de_Yamoussoukro.jpg) (accessed Aug. 20, 2020).

sent by the pope, live and work. The southeastern building serves as a private papal villa with sixty rooms and a swimming pool, which was used only once, by Pope John Paul II, one night before the consecration of the basilica in September 1990.

We do not know how a cost comparison with St. Peter's would turn out. Like the Renaissance popes, Houphouët-Boigny successfully avoided giving any information about the cost of the basilica. Estimates put the total cost at between USD 300 and 400 million. The 130 hectares for the church's grounds came from the president's own property, who donated just over a third of his local coconut plantations. The president always claimed that he had paid for the basilica from his own family fortune and declared it a "personal gift" to the pope and the Church of Rome. In order to save the basilica from the economic failure of the capital, a year before his death Houphouët-Boigny concluded a concordat between the Vatican and the Côte d'Ivoire<sup>8</sup> that transferred the entire site and the basilica to a foundation, thus guaranteeing its legal autonomy, as well as a tax exemption. The Fondation Internationale Notre-Dame de la Paix de Yamoussoukro has its administrative headquarters in one of the satellite buildings to the south of the basilica, but its legal headquarters are in the Vatican, so it sits nominally outside Côte d'Ivoire's jurisdiction.

Unlike St. Peter's, where followers of the papacy have produced numerous texts justifying the construction of the edifice, there are only two monographic publications on the Basilica of Our



Lady of Peace: one is a book of photographs with short, preceding texts by the architect Pierre Fakhoury and the former conservator-in-chief of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs de Paris, François Mathey.<sup>9</sup> The other was produced by the church and published by the Our Lady of Peace International Foundation.<sup>10</sup> Both monographs were published in 1990, the year of the basilica's consecration. Neither text tells us much about the president's or the architect's intentions. With regard to the architecture they offer little more than platitudes and bro-

mides, for example: "The immense curved colonnade marks the boundaries of the central area which covers three hectares and

<sup>8</sup> "Convention entre le Saint-Siège et la République de Côte d'Ivoire concernant la 'Fondation Internationale Notre-Dame de la Paix de Yamoussoukro'," (Agreement concerning the International Foundation, Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro), Abidjan, May 20, 1992, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/archivio/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_19920520\\_santa-sede-costa-avorio\\_fr.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/archivio/documents/rc_seg-st_19920520_santa-sede-costa-avorio_fr.html) (accessed Aug. 11, 2020). The foundation does not have a website.

**fig. 6** Basilica of Our Lady of Peace. One of the four Ionic columns with elevator, which give access to the inner gallery and the outside terraces. Source: Pierre Fakhoury, *La Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, Yamoussoukro*, foreword François Mathey, photos Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Fernand Quino (Liège: Mardaga, 1990), 55.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Fakhoury, *La Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, Yamoussoukro*, foreword François Mathey, photos Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Fernand Quino (Liège: Mardaga 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Pietrzyk, *The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace* (see note 7), 13.

symbolizes the maternal grandeur of the Catholic Church embracing all populations in her love.”<sup>11</sup>

With regard to the basilica’s relationship to St. Peter’s in Rome, neither text gives a clear answer. Fakhoury’s very short text reacts to the media’s criticism of the building as a copy. The architect insists that his building is a modernist building in its own right. In a later newspaper interview, Fakhoury underscored his point, insisting that “Our Lady of Peace is NOT St. Peter’s.” However, in the 1990 monograph, François Mathey contradicted his co-author to enthusiastically proclaim that “Rome is no longer in Rome, Rome is at Yamoussoukro.” Fakhoury, for his part, repeatedly stresses that the president chose a “Greco-Roman style” for the basilica’s architecture: “[the] Catholic Church is Roman, and I had to design an architecture which expresses the Roman architecture. ... [This] Roman architecture ... [or] Greco-Roman style is a faithful translation of the ideological values of the President.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Fakhoury, *La Basilique* (see note 9), 15.

The guide published by the Our Lady of Peace Foundation tries to bring out the “African” elements of the basilica, but this contradicts what one sees. The 7,400 square meters of stained glass include no Africans: all figures represented on the stained glasses are Europeans, except for the single figure who looks very much like the president, kneeling before Christ, among the saints, as Christ rides to Jerusalem. The iconography of the basilica is not aimed at the people of Côte d’Ivoire but is a product of a campaign directed at a conservative international elite, whose recognition the president repeatedly sought. In 1989 the aging president staged a UNESCO-sponsored international peace congress and shortly afterwards persuaded UNESCO to inaugurate a new peace prize named after himself. At the same time, the president was nominated by some 300 French parliamentarians (led by the leader of the right wing Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen) for the Nobel Peace Prize, which in the end he did not get, for in 1970 government troops had put down a revolt with a considerable death toll.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Jeanne Maddox Toungara, “The Apotheosis of Côte d’Ivoire’s Nana Houphouët-Boigny,” *Modern African Studies* 28, no. 1 (1990), 23–54; Elleh, *Architecture and Power* (see note 1), 65.