

Chronicles of a living pact

2070| A story told by the Elders of the Centre for the Transmission of Knowledge

Prologue

In the year 2070, we tell the story of a town that, by reconnecting with its territory, its land and its inhabitants, has been able to transform its trajectory and reinvent itself. The town is Dembéni, on the eastern coast of Mayotte. A land that was once threatened, where the mangroves are breathing again. Where water, land and people have learned to live together, nited by an unspoken pact of mutual respect and care.



It all began in the 2020s, during what came to be known as "The Great Transition¹". The seas were rising, the ground was sinking, and villages were spreading out without any reference points. At a time of doubt and upheaval, a new way of living emerged. Dembéni was transformed without betraying itself. It has relearned to live in its three founding languages : repairing, cohabitationing and anchoring. From this polyphony arose a living

¹ The Great Transition marks a pivotal era in human history, defined by a profound global awakening to the urgent need for collective action against climate disruption. This awareness began in 1985 with the discovery of the ozone hole, and intensified between 2019 and 2040 during what became known as the 'climate collapse' period. Through immense effort and cooperation, global warming was successfully capped at +2°C—an achievement that allowed for the stabilization of many vulnerable regions, especially island territories like Mayotte.

city, resilient and archipelagic of habitats and environments, designed for anti-fragility but built with the living in mind.

At the time, a number of initiatives were already taking shape in the area, including the development of the Mro Oua Dembéni park, the Tsararano-Dembéni urban development zone and a number of public amenities projects. But these initiatives, while promising, were moving forward without any real dialogue between them, driven by parallel logics. Our project is part of this in-between process : not to add another layer, but to create links. It proposed a common framework, flexible and fertile, where these intentions could intersect, feed off each other and orientate themselves. A collective grammar for the territory, open and rooted, which is still today the cement of a shared narrative. And it was from this desire to create connections that the idea emerged: to envision the city as a living ecosystem – shaped more by continuities than by boundaries. This is how the *Charter for Resilient Commitment* came to be with a territorial pact imagined through many voices, where institutions, builders, associations, and residents came together to bet on a shared path forward.

First language – The wisdom of reparation

Dembéni is a multi-layered territory, whose first heart, central in both space and use, was still beating, albeit in a weakened state. Shattered by the main trunk road, the institutional heart resisted in spite of everything. And in its beating, a message : " Fix me, I'm still alive ".

Heeding this call, the Architectes of Risks, builders at the crossroads of architecture and the forces of nature, chose to repair the cogs of a fragile but vibrant urban mechanism. A city marked by slope erosion, uncontrolled run-off and fragmented urban development. A city that was suffocating.

The response was organic. Dembény was criss-crossed by landscaped valleys, veritable veins of retention and gentle circulation, which transformed water management into a development asset. Clogged areas, such as the stadium, were lightened, while arteries that received too little water, such as the university district, were reconnected. In this way, the flow of water became a flow of life.

Driven by this new course, a cascade of micro-interventions was born : a staircase inhabited by a shared orchard, a tree-lined plot in a hollow tooth, a shared veranda between two families. In Dembény, habits and lifestyles were transformed forever.

Soft mobility gradually became a way of life, as the main artery was transformed and speed bumps began to flourish, dressed up as micro-reservoirs of biodiversity. Everyday life was transformed : as the main artery calmed down, planted speed bumps became biodiversity reservoirs. Fear of the elements gave way to a relationship of trust and adaptation.

We learned about vernacular construction : light but solidly anchored roofs, deep cantilevers and cross-ventilation. This discreet know-how, passed down through the cyclones, served as the foundation for new, robust, shared and protective collective housing.

Over time, this center grew, and new collective infrastructures began to emerge—stronger, more resilient, and able to protect families from the forces of nature. They were built between the two hills that border Dembény. Inspired by turtle shells, these biomimetic structures served

as shared refuges, carefully woven into the urban fabric. Even today, this cultural-center is the setting for Dembény's festivals, stories and rituals.

The great footbridge was built in 2040, just as the first results of the renaturation were making themselves felt. It embodied a new pact between humans and mangroves, linking the areas of intervention and the shared narratives surrounding this transformation. This footbridge symbolised the reconnection of these two worlds, that of the institutional heart and that of the new district, driven by everyday life. A landmark, a link, an act of reparation that has become an act of culture.



Second language – The benevolence of cohabitation

It was in the north, where the mangrove swamps and the town had clashed for decades, that Dembény's second heart beat. This heart of vegetation, thought to be wild and indomitable, had been inhabited by the most vulnerable. For want of alternatives, families had set up their bangas on the loose, flood-prone soil, which was alive but dangerously exposed. The precarious buildings, erected with a little wood and a lot of courage, bore the full brunt of the rising waters. The sea was no longer receding. With it came tides, floods, insalubrity, disease and the slow but certain disappearance of biodiversity. And yet the mangroves, like the families, held firm. Both,

rooted in this unstable soil, made the same plea :
" I am not your enemy. Choose me as your ally ".

Then began a slow reversal of vision. Where once we saw only a cumbersome swamp, a new awareness was born. The inhabitants began to recognise the mangrove as a precious ally. A natural shield against storms, a reservoir of biodiversity, a purifier of water and soil, the mangrove revealed a potential that had been ignored and abused for too long.

Under the guidance of the marine biology centre, the first steps were taken. A major clean-up campaign was launched, supported by gradual renaturation. Red and grey mangroves were replanted to combat erosion, *Barringtonia racemosa* to filter the water and *Scaevola taccada* to restore biodiversity. The local residents, who were involved at every stage, became the first protectors of this rediscovered environment. Because what we know and love, we choose to defend.

To make this alliance a lasting one, a scenic landscape was designed. Wooden footbridges snaked through the wetlands. They allowed residents to cross, understand and live with the mangrove without trampling it. Punctuated by wooden micro-infrastructures inspired by the aerial roots of the mangroves, they became places of transmission, contemplation, collective appropriation and gentle teaching, based on surveying. But as the mangroves began to grow again, another essential question arose: how could the families most at risk be guaranteed a dignified and sustainable future, sheltered from the coming tides?

A consultation process was launched. With families, builders, elected representatives and associations. Together, they identified the most vulnerable areas and the habitats most at risk. It was decided to relocate some of the residents to higher ground, where they would be better protected but not disconnected. The move was a

transition, not a break. Nothing was abandoned: neither the solidarity, nor the stories, nor the practices. The Architectes of Risks worked with the families to co-design new habitats, conceived and built with them, using locally available materials.

Compressed earth bricks in warm colours, tyres filled with earth to raise the foundations, wood and generous varangues... Each house was unique, but they all told the same story: a new, conscious, shared anchorage. On the heights, a new neighbourhood took root. A living neighbourhood, criss-crossed by food gardens, structured around open public spaces and linked to the lower town. Each site was a school : young and old built much more than walls – they passed on knowledge, learned and innovated. Solidarity became a method, not just a value.

From the heights, you can still see the sea. You can see the mangroves. You can see life. But you no longer endure it. You live it differently.



Third language – The power of anchoring

To create a new district, the earth first had to be sculpted. The fragile back of the South-East hill, which overlooks Dembéni and houses the town hall, carried with it the memory of landslides and mudslides. Its porous soil, its outcropping aquifers and its erosion scars were always threatening to give way. So, like the cascading rice fields of Yunnan, it was terraced : food crops, wet pastures, islands

of senescence and mangrove basins alternated in a patient composition. Each layer slowed down the water, held back the earth and nourished living things. This was the beginning of a dynamic slowdown, of soil that was no longer afraid of rain, and of an economy rooted in diversity.

These terraces became lands of opportunity. Local species were grown, chosen for their resistance to humidity and their ecological complementarity. Manioc, taro, sweet potato, ginger, medicinal plants... all ancient knowledge reactivated in an agrosystem designed to last. Each family rehoused in the heights is given a plot of land to cultivate, a token of a new start and a bulwark against precariousness. Far from an exile, it was a choice to put down roots.

The architecture that accompanied this migration reflected the landscape : flexible, collective and resilient. The houses were organised in bouquets, like ylang-ylang flowers that the wind touches but never breaks. Each group turned towards a common space, a large shared kitchen, a covered terrace, a place for sharing, where neighbourhood life was reinvented. The structure, for its part, combined safety and simplicity : an earthquake-resistant timber frame carried the roof, while compressed earth brick walls, separated by an 8 cm joint, ensured stability without rigidity. Ventilated double roofs, openwork BTC moucharabieh walls, orientation according to the prevailing winds: everything was designed to breathe, resist and last.

And when the violent winds picked up, the families found refuge in the low, solid refuge buildings, linked together by wooden footbridges winding through the restored mangrove swamp. This protective network, begun in the first language, came full circle here : a hand – sewn territory, ready to welcome uncertainty.

But for these gestures not to be isolated, for this metamorphosis to be repeated elsewhere,

it was necessary to pass on the knowledge. The " Lycée des Métiers du BTP " reinvented itself under the impetus of its visionary headmaster. Raw earth, bamboo, gully stone and tropical wood became the letters of a new building alphabet. A constellation of "local factories" came into being, including building schools, relay workshops and shared tools. The University of Mayotte and bio-marine research centres joined in, giving rise to a local " civic service for the territory ". A whole generation was trained in the challenges of resilience, and these young people became ambassadors for a different way of building.

Because what made Dembéni immortal was neither the height of its roofs nor the rigour of its plans. It was its ability to turn every act of construction into an act of culture – and every inhabitant into a builder of tomorrow.

Epilogue – Still breathing

Today, in 2070, when we look down on Dembéni from our replanted hills, we don't see a frozen city. We see a breath. A living pact between water, earth and the patient gestures of human beings. In its interstices and transitions, urban planning is still done with the soil, with water, with people and with patient knowledge like that of the founders of the island. The wise men of Dembéni understood an essential truth : to protect ourselves from tomorrow's storms, we have to start by giving today's living creatures their rightful place. This lesson, engraved in every brick of compressed earth, in every mangrove stilt, continues to guide us.

This is why, when the oceans calm down and the earth regains its balance, it is said that it was in Dembéni that it all began. For in Dembéni, they understood this:

" The greatest strength is not in resisting. It's knowing how to adapt. And to build with the world, not against it. "