


PARADISE IN PROGRESS

SITUATED ON AN ISLAND OFF THE KENYAN COAST, CLAUDIO MODOLA'S BEACH HOUSE IS A TRIUMPHANT EXPERIMENT IN SUSTAINABLE LIVING. BUILT USING LOCAL NATURALLY AVAILABLE MATERIALS, IT SHOWS THAT ORGANIC NEEDN'T TRUMP DESIGN OR LIFESTYLE. BUT, AS THE DESIGNER EXPLAINS, MAINTAINING A SEMI-STABLE STRUCTURE IN THIS CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT REQUIRES COMMITMENT

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS TIM BEDDOW

The photograph captures the interior of a rustic beach house. The structure is built with dark, weathered wooden poles and a thick thatched roof made of palm leaves. In the foreground, a bed with white linens and a textured, woven blanket is visible. To the right, several large, white, downy pillows are piled up. In the middle ground, a dark wooden dining table is set with a few items, and a wooden chair is tucked under it. A large potted plant with broad green leaves sits on the table. The background shows a view of the ocean through an open doorway. The lighting is warm and natural, highlighting the textures of the wood and thatch.

Designer Claudio Modola's organic beach residence - constructed out of mangrove poles, palm leaves and rope - overlooks Lamu Channel. Whilst a palette of creams and woods ties in perfectly with the sand and rock of the beach

Builder and designer Claudio Modola is frank about the risks of living in his organic Manda Island beach residence, located in the Lamu Archipelago off the coast of Kenya. 'The place is still pretty wild,' he admits, 'with a healthy snake and insect population. It's quite common to come across a writhing form in the semi-dark on nocturnal trips. Nothing nasty, but always somewhat alarming.'

For many years, Manda Island has been Lamu's ugly duckling. Separated from Lamu Island by a stretch of strong tidal water, its focal point is the stretch of beach directly opposite the village of Shela and the twinkling lights of Peponi Hotel's bar. But until recently an infamous sandfly problem and lack of fresh water ensured that the island remained pristine and more or less free of any development. 'Except,' says Modola, 'for a few residents truly brave enough to handle the extreme situation with the necessary esprit.' Modola was one of these originals way back in 1989, when he set up a camp on the island that was to last for three years. At that time, the only other die-hards (aside from local tribespeople) were the Allen family at Ras Kitau, who ran a crumbling hotel in constant financial trouble.

Modola's youngest son, Sean, grew up on the beach, while his eldest, Siegfried, 'was a sort of contemporary Mowgli, living in a baobab tree and always with the Somali shepherds deep in the island,' he says. In due course, their father decided to use Manda as his base for an expedition from the Indian Ocean to Lake Victoria with his brother Stefano. Part of this entailed training 18 camels on the beach with a group of tough handlers from the Orma tribe. After three months and 1 300 kilometres, the rigours of living rough on his travels may have been a factor in Modola's decision to buy a house in the more comfortable surroundings of Shela village on Lamu Island. It was a prudent, if lucky, move. Ten years on, property prices began to spiral. So many visitors fall in love with the island and want to buy there. Building plots appear to be very limited, yet there is somehow always just one left. Securing the 'last' plot can become a mysterious cloak-and-dagger exercise.

Some years later, Modola sold well and moved back to Manda. One senses it was a relief for him to be away from the shenanigans of Shela, despite

having residential building projects on the go there. 'I had exceptional memories (of Manda) and was not concerned about the extreme environmental conditions on the island, having lived in remote camps in Uganda, Congo and Somalia,' he says.

'Inspired by the fact that organic materials are available locally, I decided it was time to build a beach house that would be in touch with nature,' Modola continues. But many elements must be considered prior to construction, when it comes to designing a semi-stable structure such as this beach house. Wind, humidity, insects, energy and waste are just some of the important factors. 'Most importantly,' he explains, 'to build organic means to know and understand the materials you will use. Mangrove (the preferred local wood) is exceptional: strong, flexible, resistant to salt water and aesthetically attractive. But it can only last up to three years in 60cm of soil. Termites and other insects will inevitably locate it and cannibalise the base of a house like a mine.'

The floor mats have to be changed every five months or so. Ropes need replacing and drainage routes must also be maintained. Any suggestion that an organic structure is cheap and maintenance free is, according to Modola, 'completely baseless'. 'To feel safe in an attractive shelter assembled from a few wooden poles and palm leaves – with nothing else as protection – is a rare experience these days and one that gives him a sense of freedom.

Many others have now followed Modola across the channel. Mysteriously, the sandflies seem to have retreated somewhat in the face of the foreign invasion. 'Anyway,' says Modola, 'we are in some ways grateful to these irritating insects as they have weeded out the serious from the silly.' The fresh-water problem has also been resolved by a desalination plant on the island. Inevitably, Manda Island beachfront property has skyrocketed in value. Those seeking a bargain African hideaway must now look farther afield.

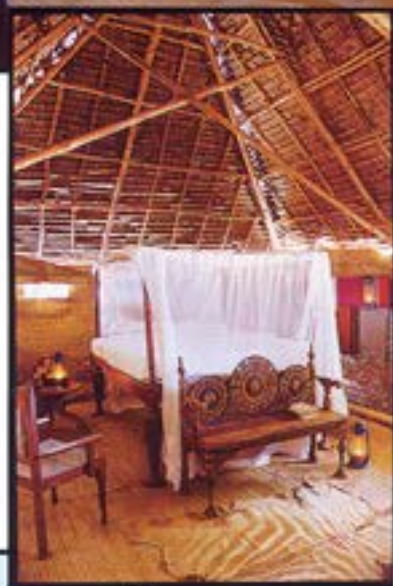
For Modola, it is the perfect location. But the dynamics are changing. Although his projects extend over the entire archipelago, 'In reality,' he says, 'there is limited space for new ventures, so I am becoming significantly involved in the Middle East and Gulf regions. As always, for me the emphasis will be on organic or semi-organic environmentally sustainable buildings.'

Claudio Modola @ www.claudiodmodola.com

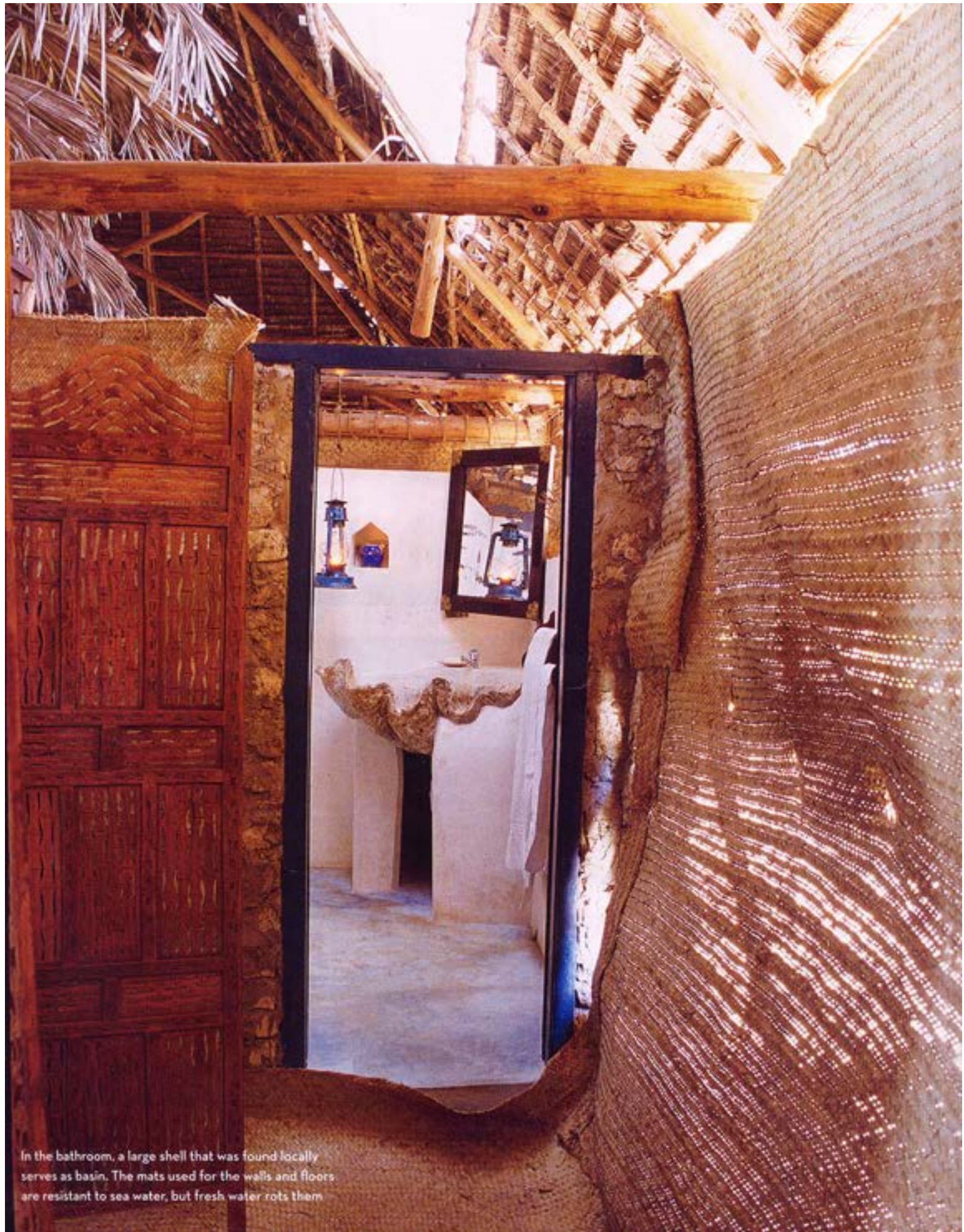
ANY SUGGESTION THAT AN ORGANIC STRUCTURE IS CHEAP AND MAINTENANCE FREE IS 'COMPLETELY BASELESS'



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Claudio Modola; the double spare bedroom is in an adjacent structure; in this dining area off the main verandah, panels divide the rooms. The mats come from the nearby village of Matandoni, while the armchair is a traditional Swahili piece



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A small sailboat, or johazi, sails by the encampment; Modola's bedroom is at the back, the darkest and coolest part of the house. The bed and bench are from Lamu, while the other furniture comes from Rajasthan; outside lounging area



In the bathroom, a large shell that was found locally serves as basin. The mats used for the walls and floors are resistant to sea water, but fresh water rots them.