MDJ Allada is a project for an orphanage in Benin designed by VERSO in collaboration with the beninoise NGO “La Maison de la Joie” and the hosted children. Despite the reduced economic capacity of the house, the NGO is still trying to give a worthy life and a cozy home to all the orphans.

The beninoise NGO’ structure is currently in use in Ouidah in an existed private house donated by a gentle, illuminated local woman and precisely for this reason it is no longer sustainable to give a right hospitality to all the children brought by the local police of by social services. Moreover, the house cannot guarantee access to those who have serious difficulties in moving because of the architecture of the structure; certainly, this is a big obstacle to welcoming whoever needs hospitality.

For this reason, the NGO started considering the idea of a new building able to guarantee adapted and focused spaces for all the orphans in order to give the best for their growth and education.

VERSO accepted the challenge since the beginning of the project. We started studying the contest and the local necessity, talking with the volunteers and doing inspections during last summer. The project wants to involve local professionals and artisans and will be built with local materials according to sustainable principles, with attention to the context and traditional building techniques. In a long term prospective, MDJ ALLADA house will be also a wide site where young professionals will be trained with the goal to be economically independent and self-sufficient.
VERSO is a collective of Italian architects linked to students, universities, professionals, companies, and volunteers in order to share the project, raise donations, and create a partners network.

The whole design process has been run in collaboration with local professionals, neighbors, and the children themselves in order to define specific needs and personal expectations.

The workshops with children, in particular, have been studied in collaboration with an Italian social scientist and pedagogist in order to guarantee a totally free space of expression focused on what they imagine as their “ideal space.”

With the children of the house, we decided the functional program, the building distribution, and the rules that should be applied for each space.

The 5-days-workshop was divided into three different moments to alternate individual interviews with collective design laboratories and to collect different qualitative feedbacks. Each moment has been studied to fit specific needs and capabilities according to the different ages of participants.

In that way, it has been possible to make the community stronger and make the project, a project of ALL and for ALL.
Since the beginning of the project, it has been taken into account the effort and the difficulties in working and designing in Global South contexts, understanding also all the possible social consequences. In Benin lots of orphans aren’t actually orphans but abandoned children. This is the main reason why we decided to adopt a discrete aesthetic approach in stand of an exhibition of shapes and materials, as sometimes happens. The project should evoke a nice and cozy place of course, but it also have the responsibility not to encourage the abandonment of children in the local community.

Finally, the masterplan. The NGO can rely only on 4 or 5 people to manage nearly 60 children of different age and sex, so the masterplan follows a clock based concept related to the use of spaces during the day. Inner space is divided by functions, collective and intimate spaces also according to different needs and expectations of the children.
The children's block is studied in order to guarantee high standards of adaptability, according to the age and the percentage of males/females hosted.

**Adaptability**

- Female
- Male

**Materials**

The project will be realized with local materials, such as rammed earth, in collaboration with local artisans in order to incentivize traditional building systems. The goal of the project team VERSO is to make volunteers and local builders work together to share both specific local knowledge and technical innovation.

- Use of rammed earth
- Realization of blocks with earth and cement
- Construction of the wall

**Timeline**

The project is articulated in three steps according to the NGO possibilities and the priorities of volunteers during discussions with local professionals.

- **STEP I**
  1. Fence
  2. Water well
  3. Porter’s lodge

- **STEP II**
  1. Orphanage

- **STEP III**
  1. Volunteers’ block

**Sustainability**

The project takes in big consideration the base principles of sustainability, taking advantage from natural forces: WIND, SUN, RAIN.

**BE LOCAL**

Another important goal of MDJ ALLADA project is the responsible and appropriate use of sustainability technology and local products.

As we already said, it has been important, during the idea development of the orphanage, to think about the most efficient and sustainable structure that can be realized by associating local natural materials (rammed earth) with recycled ones.

In Benin in fact, unfortunately, along streets and sea’s coasts, it is common to find a great amount of plastic and glass trash. We want the throwaway materials to be recycled and be the prime element of our construction.

This kind of approach, not common at all neither in Benin nor in the nearest countries, can be adapted, hopefully in a near future, by local artisans in building their own houses.