**Akon just unveiled his $6 billion ‘futuristic’ city in Senegal. The reviews are mixed.**

Akon unveils plans for $6 billion city in Senegal

R&B singer Akon unveiled plans Aug. 31 to move forward with construction of a 'futuristic' city in Senegal, named after himself. (Alexa Juliana Ard/The Washington Post)

By

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DAKAR, Senegal — The twisting metallic skyscrapers planned for Akon City look like they could sprout on Mars in the distant future — blueprints that scream: Bring your hoverboard.

But Akon, the R&B singer who split his youth between this West African country and New Jersey, said his $6 billion eponymous development project will transform a Senegalese farming village by the decade’s end.

“I want the buildings to look like real African sculptures that they make in the villages,” Akon, 47, told a masked crowd Monday in the seaside capital, Dakar.

The Senegalese-American artist, whose full name is Aliaune Damala Badara Akon Thiam, was in town to lay the first stone in a corn field on 2,000 acres of coastal land given to him by the Senegalese government.

Construction, he said, is set to begin early next year.

The high-profile visit capped months of increasingly lofty announcements: Akon City will run on cryptocurrency called Akoin, the performer said. It will be self-powered and environmentally friendly.

It will feature luxury condos, a beachfront resort, office parks, a university and a hospital — all of which, he [told TMZ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juJxypB4rwk) in August, “may be an hour flight, two-hour flight from anywhere in Africa.” (A typical flight from Nairobi to Dakar takes more than 10 hours.)

His website [calls it](https://akoncity.com/about/) “futuristic.”

Senegalese officials applauded Akon’s vision at a time when the [coronavirus](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/02/28/what-you-need-know-about-coronavirus/?itid=lk_inline_manual_14) pandemic has throttled the nation’s economy, stalling investment and crushing jobs.

Tourism was hit especially hard in the country of nearly 16 million, which strives to leverage its glittering Atlantic shorelines. A four-month airport closure — followed by border restrictions that now allow mostly citizens and residents to enter — has cast adrift many workers here, whose average wages are about $189 a month.

“We can show to the rest of the world that Senegal is a destination despite the impact of covid-19,” Tourism Minister Alioune Sarr said Monday as he sat beside Akon. “That Africa is a land of opportunity.”

Akon cited the experiences of Black Americans as his inspiration. He wanted to create an upscale refuge for them, he said — a home that could help connect people with African ancestry to their roots.

Ghana harnessed a similar message after the killing of George Floyd in May roused protests worldwide.

“The system back home treats them unfairly in so many different ways that you can never imagine,” Akon said. “And they only go through it because they feel that there is no other way.”

His city planners aim to hire locally and source materials from West Africa. The result will be “very, very African,” the singer said.

Yet some people took issue with the lack of Senegalese names attached to the project. The firm set to build Akon City is American. The architect who sketched the first renderings, Hussein Bakri, is based in Abu Dhabi.

“These shapes could be anywhere: Phoenix, Dubai,” said Senegalese architect Nzinga Mboup, who saw the blueprints online. “Why can’t we define our own modernity?”

Some described the tubular structures as phallic. Social media [erupted in snark](https://twitter.com/Akon/status/1299760887113437186).

“It’s pure marketing to attract sun, sea and sex enthusiasts,” said Abdou Khadre Sanoko, a sociologist in the city of Thies.

Others questioned how the buildings — to be constructed with concrete, glass, copper and steel — matched Senegal’s warm, dry climate. Huge windows tend to invite uncomfortable heat.

“People are going to have to have the air conditioning on all day long,” said Mamy Tall, another local architect who runs the Instagram page DakarLives, which has 297,000 followers.

“The images he is publishing — there is no consideration for anything related to Senegal, to our climate, to our materials, to our needs,” Tall said. “I really hope it’s a big joke.”

At first, Akon said, he wanted to hire an architect from the region.

“But honestly, I wanted to not overthink my project,” he told the packed conference room at one of Dakar’s glitziest hotels. “In my research, as far as what I needed in the time that I needed, I could not find one fast enough.”

He sought the guidance of Pierre Goudiaby Atepa, an architectural adviser to presidents here who designed the African Renaissance Monument — a copper statue of a man, woman and child that looms 160 feet over Dakar.

“This plan will now change because of his advice,” Akon said without elaborating.

The singer, who rose to hip-hop and R&B prominence with his 2004 album “Trouble,” has pivoted in recent years to philanthropy on the continent.

His solar energy company, Akon Lighting Africa, provides electricity to rural villages in 14 countries.

Akon City is meant to create a lot of jobs — and make serious money, said Derek William, director of engineering and project management at KE International, the American firm in charge of construction.

“It made a tremendous amount of business sense,” he said. “In general, when you go into less developed areas, a dollar goes so much further.”

Funding came quickly. Akon City has raised $4 billion of its $6 billion goal. (Akon said he could not name other business partners, who signed nondisclosure agreements.)

The bigger challenge is winning the community’s support, said William, whose company last built a mall and hospital in western Kenya as part of a $2 billion development on 5,000 acres.

“A lot of these projects get mired in court cases and lawsuits, and they stall for decades,” he said. “We really want to make sure that we have all the stakeholders buying in when we go in.”

Over the weekend, Akon stopped by Mbodienne, the rural future home of his city. Officials told local reporters that they welcomed the change.

Farming land would be lost, but better jobs would arrive, Akon told the crowd in Dakar. Workers would receive job training, he said, and he would pay them “as much as I can.”

Serigne Mansour Madzoo Fall, a graffiti artist in the capital who goes by Mad Zoo, liked the sound of that but had some doubts.

“Maybe this sends a message to young people — they could do it, too,” he said. “But when he is finished, who is going to profit from this? Celebrities? Rich people?”

The renderings make Akon City look like a utopia for the wealthy, he said. The illustrations online — as well as in a booklet handed out to reporters — feature people who resemble European tourists.

“I want the Senegalese people to be prioritized,” he said.