

# Architecture and Social Change in the Development Era

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# Introduction

In his essay titled "The Economy of Architecture", Norman Foster reflects with great lucidity that modernism's "pioneering social agenda was one of its most important motivations, and perhaps its most enduring legacy" (2002: 26). Indeed, scholars have long argued that modernism's predisposition toward socially responsible architecture able to "raise the living conditions of the masses" (Henket, 2002: 10) has been a defining characteristic.

Within this broader landscape of socially motivated architecture exists the particular situation of the development project, which is largely a post-war and post-colonial phenomenon. This is not to suggest that projects aimed at helping the poor did not exist prior to the second world war, but rather that the "era of development" (Esteva, 1992: 6), in the truest sense, did not begin until the late 1940s. It was within this framework that the "perception of one's own [developed] self, and of the [underdeveloped] other, was suddenly created" (ibid.). While Esteva is identifying a position which is essentially economic, this issue also has a strong cultural dimension which was so eloquently articulated by the late Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978). Ultimately Esteva and Said are identify the same issue: the marginalization of those to whom we refer as "other" - in both economic and cultural terms.

After hundreds of years of colonialism, this "underdeveloped other" has become the target of fifty years (and counting) of "development" - the results of which have not been encouraging. The predominant model in the "development era" has been one in which a group of [developed] experts - usually technocratic professionals such as architects and engineers - has been charged with the delivery of a project aimed at an [underdeveloped] target population (Smillie, 1991: 3-19). The vast majority of development projects, including those in which architectural design was a principal component, have failed; and though this paradigm has been under fire for quite some time, it has been slow to change in any fundamental terms (Esteva, 1992: 6-20).

Architects, for the large part, have been intimately involved in this process playing the role of "expert" on development projects both at home and abroad. Equipped with a humanitarian social agenda and professional designation to serve the public interest, many architects participated in the "development decades" that followed the founding of the United Nations, only to find that being well-trained and well-intentioned were not enough.

In the years that followed the development decades of the 1960s and 1970s there been no shortage of research and debate as to why development projects fail. Ian Smillie, one of Canada's leading writers on the development industry, points out that we have not been quick to learn from our mistakes (1991: 3-62). It was not until the 1990s that the tide began to change in significant terms, signalled by a shift away from government to government funding and toward more partnership-based and government to NGO funding. The significance of this has two primary characteristics: the first is a realization that working with smaller organizations is more efficient and far more effective - an issue first raised by E. F. Schumacher in 1973; and the second is that communities and the organizations that

they participate in must be a part of the process in order for any project to have the ability to improve people's lives.

In architectural discourse we are predisposed to evaluating the relative success or failure of a built work solely on its formal, spatial, or aesthetic qualities: that is to say, the purely architectural. Herman Hertzberger, however, reminds us that "too often the relationship between the building and the story behind it (...) is missing" (1999: 7). Generally speaking, the story behind a work of architecture is interesting, but not necessarily essential. In the context of humanitarian architecture - particularly that within development projects - this issue is of paramount importance. By story we mean the process: the ways in which an architect or design team work with the intended inhabitants or users of a given project.

Over the course of fifty odd years it has become clear that development projects "are most successful when they are low-cost and small in scale, when they respond to the needs of of a specific target group and involve the beneficiaries themselves in the planning and implementation process" (Smillie, 1991: 114). In short: architecture alone cannot solve people's problems - no matter how well intentioned nor sensitively designed. If architecture is to successfully address the needs of those on the margins it must address what we will refer to as the organizational dimension.

The current investigation takes the position that humanitarian architecture can only be successful - by which we mean ecologically, economically and culturally sustainable - if the process is participatory and involves community organization. The present discussion seeks to examine this proposition by looking at two projects separated by time and place. Both projects were facilitated by African architects with the intention of improving the conditions of people in rural villages: the first by Hassan Fathy at the very inception of the "development era"; the second by Diebedo Francis Kere, initiated in 1999 and at present ongoing. In exploring these two cases emphasis will be placed on the degree to which the organizational dimension has been addressed, which, it will be argued, has informed economic and cultural sustainability.

The organizational dimension, in general terms, can be defined as one of people and politics: that is, the participation of community members in the planning and implementation, at a scale and cost which are appropriate to their needs and resources. The very act of involving community members in the process is organizational in nature, and an act of social organization is political in its nature. The use of the term organizational is, however, also loaded in the sense that it alludes to a wider conclusion regarding the participatory design processes: it suggests that the active involvement of community members in projects has the power to be transformative beyond the life of the initial project. It proposes that when community participation is facilitated as sensitively as a delightful work of architecture, it has the ability to become a catalyst for further growth and improvement far beyond the initial scope of a design project. This transformative potential of projects is an issue which will be addressed along with theoretical implications following the case studies. Ultimately, the proposed investigation seeks to highlight the stories behind the buildings in the context of two development projects by African architects. It is believed that in doing so we may be able to identify the critical factors informing the cultural and economic sustainability of such endeavours.

# Hassan Fathy: New Gournas, 1945-48

Hassan Fathy, who trained as an architect in Egypt and France, was approached by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities in the early 1940s to design a new village in Upper Egypt. The village was intended to resettle the inhabitants of Gournas, a small community sited on top of the Royal Necropolis at Luxor, whose livelihood had come from excavating pharaonic antiquities and selling them on the black market.

Fathy had established himself as Egypt's preeminent architect on the basis of a culturally resonant architecture that addressed climatic conditions in an elegant and sophisticated manner. The commission to design New Gournas was as timely as it was prestigious, as it offered Fathy the opportunity to put in practice the ideas enshrined in *Architecture for the Poor* (1973), which he wrote as a reflection in the years that followed.

Rather than design the village using a limited number of prototypical dwelling units, Fathy insisted on designing each home separately, believing that people should be appreciated as individuals - and as such should have homes which reflected their individuality:

"In Nature, no two men are alike. Even if they are twins and physically identical, they will differ in their dreams. The architecture of the house emerges from the dream; this is why in villages built by their inhabitants we will find no two houses identical. This variety grew naturally as men designed and built their many thousands of dwellings through the millennia. But when the architect is faced with the job of designing a thousand houses at one time, rather than dream for the thousand whom he must shelter, he designs one house and puts three zeros to its right, denying creativity to himself and humanity to man. As if he were a portraitist with a thousand commissions and painted only one picture and made nine hundred and ninety nine photocopies. But the architect has at his command the prosaic stuff of dreams. He can consider the family size, the wealth, the social status, the profession, the climate, and at last, the hopes and aspirations of those he shall house. As he cannot hold a thousand individuals in his mind at one time, let him begin with the comprehensible, with a handful of people or a natural group of families which will bring the design within his power. Once he is dealing with a manageable group of say twenty or thirty families, then the desired variety will naturally and logically follow in the housing." (Fathy, 1973)

In his sensitive design for this community, Fathy involved the participation of community members in both the planning and construction of the homes. The Gournas, however, were not willing to leave their lucrative livelihood atop the necropolis, and as such sabotaged the effort to build the new community. Ultimately, the inhabitants returned to old Gournas and only a portion of the new village was completed.

The example of New Gournas has been cited as both a triumph and a failure in that it was at once designed with great clarity and skill, and at the same time so poorly received by those for whom it was intended. There can be no question that in the final analysis it failed to address the economic and political realities of context, in the sense that the inhabitants themselves had no interest in relocating. Although the process was participatory in the sense that it involved the Gournas, it was not success-

ful in addressing the organizational dimension in terms of the fundamental goals of the project. The Gournis themselves were never behind the project in an organized or political manner, and therefore lacked support for the fundamental premiss on which the project was based.

Ultimately, the cultural and economic sustainability of New Gournia was dependent upon the Gournis buying-in to the project - and because they did not, the project was doomed from the onset. Although the design of the village may have been culturally, economically, and even environmentally sensitive - which many architectural scholars have argued they were - fundamentally there was a lack of the Gournis' agency attached to the project. That is, the Gournis did not choose New Gournia, and as such it was a failure.

Politically, had there been support from within the community, there may very well have existed an organizational dimension strong enough to support the project. Without this support, however, the project could not succeed. Architecture alone, it would seem, is not enough.

## Diebedo Francis Kere: School in Gando, 2001

The primary school in Gando is the realization of one man's vision to improve the quality of life in his village. Francis Kere was the first person from the village of Gando in Burkina Faso to study abroad. As a student of architecture on scholarship in Germany, Kere started a fundraising campaign called School Bricks for Gando. Instead of buying a second cup of coffee, students at the school were encouraged to buy a ceremonial brick with which Kere intended to build a primary school.

By 1999 Kere, believing that education was the key to his village's future, had raised enough money to begin the project. Kere also obtained funding from LOCOMAT, a government agency in Burkina Faso, to train local bricklayers in working with compressed, stabilized earth. Construction began in October of 2000, with the participation of the village's men, women, and children. The school was completed in 2001.

The impetus for building the school came from fellow villagers in Gando who informed Kere of the dire situation of the existing government school. The school was in danger of collapse, and the villagers asked Kere for his help. School Bricks for Gando was established as a fundraising organization prior to the designing of the school itself, and the project was planned and implemented with the participation and solidarity of community members.

The building's form and materials were determined primarily from local climatic considerations. The building parti is that of three indoor classrooms separated by covered outdoor spaces. The structure uses load-bearing walls made with stabilized and compressed earth bricks, with concrete beams spanning the width of the ceiling. Steel bars run across these to support an earth brick ceiling. The ceilings, covered outdoor spaces, and facade are shaded by a corrugated metal roof on locally made steel trusses. The roof is raised above the walls, allowing air to flow between the roof and ceiling, which along with the insulating qualities of the earth bricks acts to moderate the temperature of the classrooms.

Because of the difficulty of transporting and lifting large elements into place, the trusses and roof were made using common construction steel bars, for which locals need only handsaws and small welding machines. All of the people involved in the management of the project were native to Gando, and the skills that they have learned can and have been applied to other local initiatives. The way in which Gando organized itself for this project has also served to inspire two other nearby communities to build their own schools as a cooperative effort.

Kere's school for Gando was awarded the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2004, for which the jury cited elegant architectonic clarity achieved with the humblest of means. The jury also commented on the project's transformative value, and commended it for its grace, sophistication, and sympathy with the local culture and climate.

Since the completion of this project, School Bricks for Gando has gone on to design and build teacher's housing and a school extension - both using stabilized earth bricks and participatory management and construction methods. Currently, School Bricks for Gando is planning and implementing new projects including a women's center, women's cooperative, community center, housing, latrines, high-efficiency clay ovens, and afforestation program. All of these projects are being developed in partnership with the community, and serve to further underline the primary school's transformative quality.

School Bricks for Gando is still young, but it is a vibrant organization with strong community support and a powerful vision of what the future may bring. The scale of the project, compared to that at New Gouna, is small: first a primary school, then a follow-up project to attract teachers, and step by step the community has identified a set of attainable goals. The project is rooted in principles of ecologically sustainable design, using locally made materials with a low embodied energy. The technology is low-tech and the construction is low-cost, using passive strategies for climatic comfort. The building design is sensitive to the cultural context, while at the same time critical in the sense that it aims to build upon indigenous technology and materials in a formally modernist language.

The primary school in Gando, though modest in scope, is successful because it addresses the organizational dimension in such a thorough manner. The social and political organization of people in both Germany and the village of Gando provided a foundation of support for the project before ground had even been broken. It was through this organization of people that participation in the planning and implementation of the project took place - from which flowed a series of informed and appropriate design decisions. The result is an elegant building, but as Hertzberger would no doubt agree, the real story is the elegant process. The school, in a sense, is just a small part of a larger story, which is about people taking responsibility for their future.

# theoretical implications

In *Small Is Beautiful*, Schumacher states that “development does not start with goods [a category which includes buildings]; it starts with people and their education, organisation, and discipline” (1973: 140). This stance is one that directly addresses the organizational dimension to which we are referring. Indeed, the position Schumacher puts forth, though over thirty years old, rings as true today as the day in which it was written. Nearly all of the ingredients that inform a project’s sustainability can be found in his essay: the importance of people’s participation; the need for real partnership between the local organization and those supporting the project from outside; and - most importantly, intermediate technology at an appropriate scale.

This organizational dimension, however, has not figured prominently in the dominant paradigm of modern architectural discourse. For reasons that are unclear, long hours are spent evaluating the architectural merits of projects, but seldom do we focus on the role of community organization and the way in which engaging them may or may not support a project. While the ability to mobilize communities and embark in participatory design processes may not have traditionally been one of the most honed skills in the architect’s quiver, designers working for humanitarian goals can ill-afford to underestimate this dimension:

“Good development, sustainable development, cutting-edge projects are all important. But they are not as important as the creation of strong local institutions that can help people make decisions about what to do for themselves” (Smillie, 1995: 238).

Ultimately, the position that Schumacher takes and that Smillie reiterates nearly two decades later is one that seems almost diametrically opposed to what is commonly held as truth in contemporary architectural discourse: namely that architecture has an inherent capacity for social change. It is perhaps this apparent contradiction which has served to work against the effective planning and desired sustainability of architecture for the poor.

In architectural schools and professional circles, the commonly held view remains, as LeCorbusier argued, that architecture has the ability to inform societal change (Leach, 1996: 8). It is this transformative quality, so well articulated by the modest primary school in Gando, that LeCorbusier and other utopian modernists such as Moise Ginzburg so passionately sought. And while it may seem severe to suggest in conclusive terms that they (and we, as architects) were wrong, but that is the essence of Foucault’s panopticon-inspired argument when he states that “architectural form cannot in itself resolve social problems” (Leach, 1996: 10).

This position, however, may appear overstated as Foucault does concede that architecture “can and does produce positive effects when the liberating intentions of the architects coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom (ibid.). It is this qualification which brings us back to New Gourna and Gando, and which compels us to restate the critical importance of the organizational dimension in humanitarian design processes. In New Gourna, Fathy’s failure resided in the inability to align the human agency (freedom) of the Gournis with the socio-political agenda of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities. In the case of Gando it was precisely the same issue of alignment which

proved so successful: Kere and his fellow villagers shared the same vision for their community, and as such organized themselves to engage in the process together. It was therefore the organizational dimension, more than any design strategy or level of architectural skill, that ultimately informed the cultural and economic sustainability of the project.

The theoretical position this supports is not as severe as Foucault may have initially suggested. In the final analysis, we need not abandon our faith in architecture's ability to bring about positive social change, as long as we add the qualifier that any such endeavour must address the organizational dimension if it is to be sustainable.

## conclusion

One implication of this position is that rather than being focused on a particular project or building, architects engaged in humanitarian architecture should perhaps be more goal-oriented. An example of this approach can be found in Leon, Nicaragua, where groups of architecture students and practitioners from the U.S. have been working with the community to achieve the larger goal of community development. In working with community-based NGOs, the designers have learned to engage the organizational dimension, thereby allowing community members themselves to identify problems (Markiewicz, 2003: 43-45). Through this process, designers are better equipped to enter into dialogue and explore design solutions in a participatory fashion. This process will have a far greater ability to reflect people's actual needs and generate more meaningful projects with a greater level of community stewardship. When practiced in a sensitive manner, such an approach will produce an architecture which is sustainable in both cultural and economic terms.

Within the framework of architecture like Francis Kere's which addresses the organizational dimension in a successful way, it may be worthwhile to return to Esteva's 1992 article on "development". In the section entitled "New Commons", the author challenges those on the margin to "disengage" from the formal (economic) sector (1992: 20). While the rationale behind this argument is not lost on us almost fifteen years later, we may choose to propose an amendment to this approach given the example of School Bricks for Gando. Resistance, we might add, can take many forms - including those taking place within a the formal economy and within a framework of "development". This is not to suggest that we abandon our suspicions regarding neo-liberal market forces, nor that we shelf the valuable contributions made to Wolfgang Sachs Development Dictionary. To the contrary we would not be in any position to generate meaningful responses to the current poverty crisis were it not for those sensitively articulated arguments. What we propose, rather, is that we open the circle of those opposed to "business as usual", to include those who have chosen to function within the margins or the formal sector who are helping those on the margins of the formal sector.

In this light, the New Commons could be understood as a forum of like-minded individuals, as well as a place outside of the confines of market-oriented society. This proposition may seem less radical than one which envisions an entirely new way of social and economic interaction, but it might allow us to take a more evolutionary route toward social and economic justice that is more in line with Schum-

acher's thoughts on development. "Organization", Schumacher argues, "does not 'jump'; it must gradually evolve to fit changing circumstances" (1973: 141). In this light, Fathy's failure becomes an intimate component of Kere's success - they are both part of larger evolutionary process in which the lessons of the previous generation inform the approach of the present one. In resisting a dichotomized view of the world (i.e. those who participate versus those who resist), we resist the temptation toward "self" and "other", and focus instead on our common values and needs. By choosing to function within the system, Francis Kere has employed his own agency to make the system work for him - fundraising in Germany for his community in Burkina Faso - two separate yet local contexts which address the organizational dimension at an appropriate scale.

By working within the system on his own terms, Kere has shown us that architecture can be both sensually engaging and socially transformative - able to realize the vision that proved so elusive to the LeCorbusier and Ginzburg.

"We no longer share the optimism of the early modernists who thought that new would automatically mean better (...) back from utopia, We nevertheless have to continue the struggle that initiated the desire for it in the first place" (Heynen, 2002: 398).

Architecture alone cannot change society, only people can. By taking Hertzberger's advice we can explore the story behind the architecture and in so doing arrive at a better processes that engage the organizational deminsion to delivery meaningful projects to those living on society's margins.

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