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Equality Quality

Architectural planning for underprivileged groups

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Abstract

A successful architectural project will eventually encourage countless people to work for change. Hollmén Reuter Sandman Architects and Ukumbi NGO strives to use architecture as a tool to improve the living conditions of underprivileged communities. The impacts of a successful building project in a low-resource setting can be seen as twofold, consisting of on-site and off-site effects. The architect's ability to combine his or her expertise and experience with that of the locals is an important aspect for the success of the project. To employ local building traditions in the poorest countries of the world is not just a matter of justice, it is also a way to find different paths to our own future. It is usually not very difficult to introduce a new technology or new building developments; the challenging part is getting the new ideas to survive and take root in the long term.

Keywords: humane architecture, impact, locality, participation, developing countries

Activism from the front

The architects Saija Hollmén, Jenni Reuter and Helena Sandman began their work with humanitarian architecture almost twenty years ago. Since then, socially engaged architecture has moved from the margin towards the "front line", as suggested by the theme of this year's (2016) Venice Biennale, "Reporting from the Front", although it can hardly be called mainstream as yet. It is therefore remarkable that Alejandro Aravena, the curator of the exhibition, has elevated the humane aspects of architecture to international discussion and shifted it to the centre of our attention.

This discussion has also brought the work of Hollmén Reuter Sandman Architects into the on-going architectural debate. During the last decade, a growing interest has emerged in architectural discourse regarding the possibility of a social and humanitarian re-engagement of the discipline. The issue faded from the debate after the 1970s but seems to now be back on the scene.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

In an article for *El Croquis* 187, Alejandro Zaera-Polo discusses how he has been inspired by Charles Jencks's famous diagram that appeared in *Architecture 2000* to present a synchronic political map of contemporary emerging architectural practices. In the *Global Architecture Political Compass* (Figure 1), 181 emerging practices are ranked in categories named after such movements as Techno-critical, Technocratic, Cosmopolitical, Austerity-chic, Constitutionnalists, Historicists, Revisionists, Skeptics and Populists. Hollmén Reuter Sandman Architects finds itself in the category of Activists, close to the border of Material Fundamentalists. When being placed at the far Activist edge you can find practices such as BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group) on the opposite Populist side. The compass indeed shows how the world sees the work.

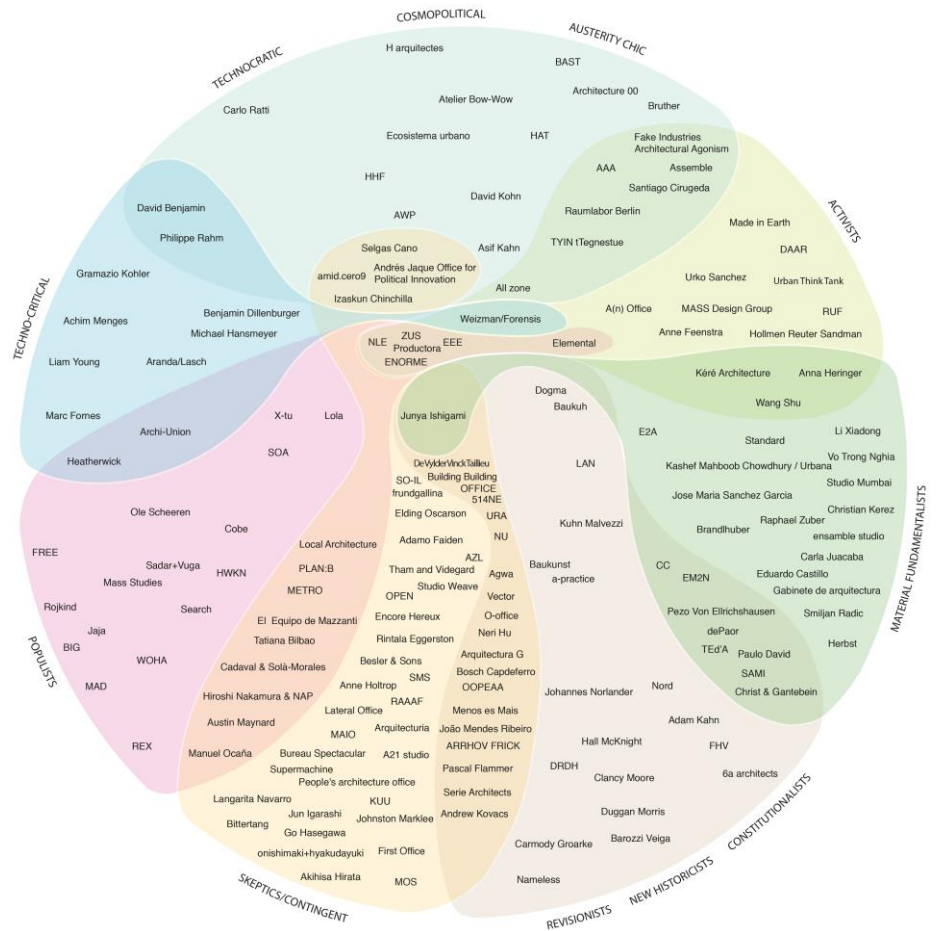


Figure 1. The Global Architecture Political Compass.
 Made by Alejandro Zaera-Polo and Guillermo Fernandez-Abascal and published in *El Croquis* 187.

In the explanation of the compass, the activists were described as follows:

There are now quite a few practices where the rejection of the customary processes of architectural procurement is driving a return to development, self-building, or community-building as an act of resistance against the rote commodification of architecture. Drawing resources sometimes from arts grants, academic research, community funding, and, on occasion, entrepreneurial devices, some of these practices have become engaged with direct-action practices formerly associated with political agitation, while occupying a space between social activism, art installation, and architecture. These practices bypass traditional forms of commissioning buildings through direct engagement with the community and the construction process, as collective acts of resistance to the reduction of architecture to “rentable” commodity. On the other hand, there are also groups who operate largely within the academic environment, where political engagement occurs on a more theoretical

level through competitions, publications, exhibitions, and lectures. For these practices, the discipline itself becomes the crucial tool for resistance. (Zaera-Polo 2016, 252–288)

The explanation seems quite relevant, particularly as it contains several familiar components, such as the fundraising and grant aspect, as well as the connection to academic research. It is intriguing to see the work of Hollmén Reuter Sandman in this broader context.



Figure 2. The Women's Centre in Rufisque, Senegal.
Executed in 2001.
Photo Helena Sandman.

Realistic idealism

After the first executed project, the Women's Centre in Rufisque, Senegal (Figure 2), Hollmén Reuter Sandman founded a non-governmental organization named Ukumbi in 2007. In the course of the first project, Hollmén Reuter Sandman had realized that culturally knowledgeable and skilfully designed architecture is a tool that can be used to improve the living conditions of communities, strengthen gender equality and mitigate poverty. The women's centre attracted a great deal of attention and became a model for similar projects around the world.

Saija Hollmén, Jenni Reuter and Helena Sandman had known each other since they were students at the architecture department in Helsinki University of Technology (nowadays Aalto University) and shared the ambition to do something more with their expertise, rather than just work for those with the most resources. They had grown up with the interest in and engagement with Africa, both through their families and because of the long-standing Scandinavian commitment to foreign aid and development work.

Engagement with what some still call the Third World was a global extension of the welfare state they enjoyed at home. Among the countries that had stayed out of colonial politics there existed a strong sense of solidarity with countries that had paid for our prosperity with their own poverty. Many Scandinavians observed, with justifiable outrage, the continuation through post-colonial structures of what they regarded as violation of developing countries by the West.

The theme is complex. Quoting the Irish architect Kilian Doherty, who has been working with projects in Rwanda:

How can Western practice outrun the ghosts of the postcolonial and come closer to a modern African architecture? As interests between local (African) government, international NGOs and architects are inextricably linked, is that contemporary mode of practice simply the newest face of neo-colonialism? (Lokko 2014, 14–15)

This concern has led many Scandinavian architectural programs to place strong emphasis on the world outside of Europe. In some cases, their commitment has also resulted in executed buildings, cases in point including a leprosy hospital in India designed by architects Jensen & Skodvin from Norway in 1983–85 or a few projects in Guinea designed by the well-established Finnish firm of Heikkinen & Komonen, all of which have received international recognition. However, the Women's Centre in Rufisque achieved a unique position: the architects didn't just design the building, but as a response to local grassroots needs, they also took the initiative for getting the project underway and even did the fundraising themselves. The project began with a course at the Helsinki University of Technology but was executed entirely independent of the school.

After their first executed building, the architects returned to their alma mater to teach. This provided an opportunity to put their experiences working abroad to even broader use. They inspired the younger generation and established Ukumbi as a non-commercial platform. Its non-profit status made fundraising easier but also helped define the contours of their work. The more firms joined the organization, the greater the need became to distinguish between the time and money spent on for-profit and not-for-profit activities. There are other, much larger organizations that also have a mission to help people improve their own circumstances through building construction. Ukumbi distinguishes itself through its focus on architectural quality – for Ukumbi, the human need for self-affirmation through the built environment is a fundamental aspect of human nature, not merely a privilege for the affluent. Ukumbi's mission is to offer architectural planning and design to underprivileged groups. Often such groups include women, children or young people whose opportunities for participation in society are limited.

The goal of Ukumbi is to ensure that the buildings designed by Finnish architects in the world's impoverished countries are adapted to the local conditions so well that they continue to function as designed long after the architects have gone home. Ukumbi's network serves as a kind of quality control mechanism, gathering experiences from each project to benefit the next. At the same time, the need for sharing knowledge extends far beyond Helsinki. For many years, the core members of Ukumbi have been sharing their extensive experience through exhibitions, workshops and lectures. Today several groups of architects work through Ukumbi with projects throughout the global south.

Ukumbi is a Swahili word. It can mean a meeting place, a living room, a hall or a forum. In other words, there is in the dominant language of sub-Saharan Africa a specific term for that part of a house where private life and public life come together. The existence of the term also suggests that, for someone who comes from outside and tries to introduce new qualities to the many building cultures of Africa, it is very important to be able to distinguish the essential from the extraneous. Although it seems obvious that the purpose of introducing alternative technologies and expertise is to improve people's chances for development, the risk of making culture-blinded mistakes has to be a significant concern. It is usually not very difficult to introduce a new technology or new building developments; the challenging part is getting the new ideas to survive and take root in the long term.



Figure 3. The KWIECO Shelter House, Moshi, Tanzania.
Executed in 2016.
Photo Juha Ilonen.

Ukumbi's projects to date could only be completed through trial and error. Conditions may differ from Cambodia to Egypt (Figure 4), from Tanzania (Figure 3) to Senegal, but the attitude of the dedicated architect remains the same. When one's work, as well as its means, aim to promote people's sense of self, even an architect flown in to assist must be humble. That humility must be founded on secure confidence in one's own competence. There is a great deal of professional expertise to be gained from Ukumbi's experiences but more importantly a valuable perspective as well.

Whether or not a project is robust enough to be built and to provide lasting benefits depends, to a great extent, on realistic idealism. For example, efforts to help women and children are among those that have a profound effect in any culture. Ukumbi's practice requires a heavy commitment to working locally, which means that a great deal of the design must be done on site. Otherwise, there is no way to achieve the degree of participatory planning that is critical to giving a building a long and fruitful life.

A building can be an island of stability in a turbulent world. The buildings that Ukumbi designs are intended to fulfil that need. The need for stability influences their siting, their structural demands, their functionality and their appearance.

Impact

Ukumbi's architecture is usually low-tech, inexpensive and custom-made on site. Regardless of whether the project is located in Asia or Africa, the architects' experiences are often the same. When problems like water, sanitation, foundation or ventilation need to be solved with manual technologies, the solutions tend to share many similar principles. As in any meticulously designed work of architecture, it is a matter of making the most effective use possible of available resources. When resources are scarce, restraint is a necessity; as the budget expands, thrift is only possible with practiced discipline. In this regard, vernacular architecture, which is usually overlooked by the media, has proven to be an outstanding source of knowledge. The ability to shift one's perspective and to discover and employ local architecture in the poorest countries of the world is not just a matter of justice, it is also a way to find different paths to our own future.

A building can be an island of stability in a turbulent world. The buildings that Ukumbi designs are intended to fulfil that need. The need for stability influences their siting, their structural demands, their functionality and their appearance.

The impacts of a successful building project in a low-resource setting can be seen as twofold, consisting of on-site and off-site effects. On site, the building can make a difference in social, technological, economic and cultural terms. Its impact also differs from one phase of the project to the next. A successful planning process involves the local community. In so doing, it influences a small but important group that may include politicians, chiefs, users, planners or builders. The process of planning, design, and participation is most likely new to the community in question. The architect's ability to combine his or her expertise and experience with that of the locals is an important aspect of the project. This aspect of the process can be successful even when the project is not ultimately constructed. In the planning phase of an orphanage in Tanzania that was never realized, Hollmén Reuter Sandman introduced a sustainable perspective on construction and maintenance that the local architect would use in his other projects as well. The planning process can also affect on-site property management.

The building's next impact arises from the construction process. By building with locals rather than for them, the construction process can be an education in sustainable technologies. Building construction in the developing world is not a matter of assembly but of turning recycled or recyclable materials into structural elements. This part of the process involves many more people than the planning, and it creates a number of new jobs. In Senegal, ultimately hundreds of people were involved. So many husbands and sons were employed in the construction that their shifts had to be shared. The work began with vocational training, which had effects on the local building culture in general. The large number of people involved in the construction gave a considerable boost to the use of local materials.

Small projects actually have the greatest potential for producing change. It is the small projects that usually engage the locals most deeply. The greatest impact is in the actual construction process, where the number affected can be in the thousands. The activities taking place at the Red House in Senegal, and the income they produce, would not exist without the building: the building is used for the production of food items prepared in traditional, nearly forgotten ways with local cereals. The house also serves as a place of childcare.

The broadest but least tangible effects of the building are off-site. A successful project will eventually encourage countless people to work for change. The house in Senegal had a profound impact on the entire genre of "aid buildings". However, global attention awakened by success can also have an impact among the locals. A building rooted in local culture creates a sense of pride that extends beyond the local community. The architects got some indication of this from some Senegalese street vendors they met in Florence, Italy, who spoke with great pride of their Red House back home.

While it is important for architects to present their work to colleagues and even more important to present it to laymen such as public aid administrators, one must remember that change can only be measured locally. For Hollmén Reuter Sandman, this is crucial: they do not believe in a global architecture. The ultimate objective is to enhance the self-esteem of the end user. For the designer, a self-serving approach can be counter-productive.

This article is based on the keynote lecture by Jenni Reuter at the 8th Annual Symposium of Architectural Research 2016, Architecture and Experience Now, October 27 in Tampere.

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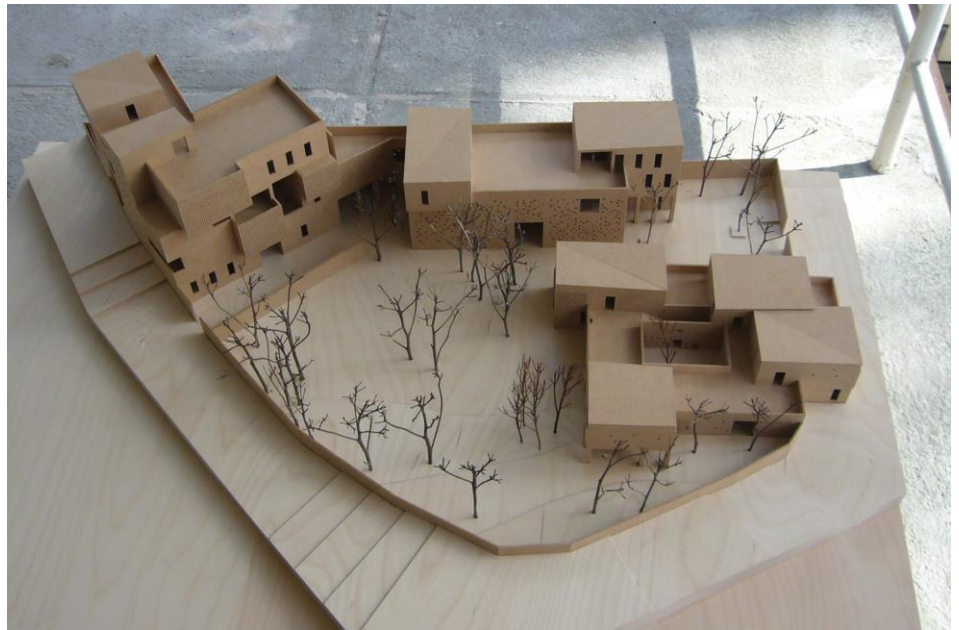


Figure 4. A model of the APE Learning Centre in Cairo, Egypt.
Photo Helena Sandman.

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