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INCLUSIVE, CROSS-CULTURAL, AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN

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TOOLS FOR EMPOWERMENT

IN THE STUDIO AND ON SITE WITH **ACTIVE SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE** - KIGALI

Alice Tasca, Zeno Riondato, and Francesco Stassi are the principals of Kigali, Rwanda-based Active Social Architecture, an office that believes that good design should be a right for everyone—regardless of gender, income, location, or any other potentially limiting factor. ASA's projects engage local individuals and communities in the design and construction of their spaces, with project programs and methodologies that emphasize empowerment through capacity building. Because inclusion is fundamental to their practice, ASA's jobsites are typically staffed with 50% women, providing support for them to take on leadership roles. Their projects, which include health and education facilities, balance environmental impact and sustainability in relation to cost, but also consider the direct and indirect impacts for the individual and the community in both the short- and long-term.

WHAT TYPES OF ARCHITECTURAL PROJECTS AND APPROACHES HAS THE OFFICE BEEN ENGAGED WITH IN RWANDA?

ALICE: Overall, the majority of ASA's projects are small-scale designs that are replicated in different locations, such as sixty sanitation facilities located across Rwanda, that we designed for UNICEF. In that instance, we designed the prototype, which was adapted to fit the locality and implemented across sixty existing schools, as well as a series of Early Childhood Development Centers that we designed.

FRANCESCO: Similarly, we had a long-term agreement with Plan International where we began with a single design for the ECD Centers that we developed. After the first implementation, we learned what the weak points were, made alterations, and made it more cost-efficient overall, before finally providing the guidelines for a project that could be easily replicated around the country.

Presently, we've shifted to larger single-site projects, mainly for NGOs building various education and health facilities, as well as private clients for whom we are working on commercial and residential projects.

WHY DID YOU ELECT TO BE A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE?

ALICE: Being an unaffordable service is a problem in architecture. We think that it's important to be an example of how affordable and sustainable architecture can be done well. We are intentional in taking ASA in this direction but we have to make a lot of day-to-day compromises. Profit is very limited in this space.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DISADVANTAGES OF A

TRADITIONAL NONPROFIT MODEL IN THIS SPACE?

ALICE: When I initially arrived in Rwanda, I didn't know the difference between a nonprofit and a social enterprise. After working with several nonprofits, I realized that the idea of a 'nonprofit' doesn't really exist. It just involves profiting in a different way. Some of these agencies are big machines that have a lot of overheads and can only direct so much into their projects.

We prefer to have a client that wants to invest money in a project—not prioritizing a financial return, but a return for the future of this country. In contrast, smaller NGOs have less bureaucracy related to fundraising, internal management, and how they might select the community for which they want to design the project. That framework tends to lead to better outcomes.

ZENO: We were disappointed by the experiences that we had with various large-scale nonprofit organizations, where we could see a lot of waste. So in terms of structuring our business we decided to work as a conventional architecture firm so that we're not exploiting donations just for the sake of being here and living a good life—something that we've often seen.

In terms of construction we believe in investing, as the donation model has proven not to work. Often, communities don't engage with those buildings and put them to use. There wasn't enough research done beforehand to understand whether local residents were actually looking for a building of that kind, or were able to manage a building of that kind. Nonprofits often come into a country with a specific way of operating, and their methods can lead to these kinds of diminished results.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH THIS WORK DIFFERENTLY?





ZENO: We try to work more independently. We do adapt some of the same principles that nonprofit organizations use, but we want our focus to be on the projects themselves, rather than being involved in the larger bureaucracy that comes with a nonprofit.

ALICE: For us, it's a matter of involving the community in the design process, and then training them in construction. Our stakeholders also provide training in how to manage the space. So you have a direct empowerment of the community through the process of construction, but also in its long-term outcomes. For us, the process of developing the project is important and allows us to better understand how much impact we can have at a social level. How many people can learn trades, produce better quality bricks, or make buildings that are better ventilated or illuminated? Through participating in the construction of the project, they may gain the skills to improve their own homes as well.

ZENO: If we can engage the community in such a way that they contribute to the design and participate in its construction and management, at the end of the day they will feel connected to the building and take ownership of it, which is better in the long term.

WHAT KINDS OF FACTORS DETERMINE THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF A BUILDING?

ALICE: You can see the direct effect on the community within three to five years after the completion of a building. We have found some of them working well, with some of the projects even generating income because they have, for instance, a chicken farm inside a school and can now sell the eggs. Similarly, the compost from

our toilet facilities can be sold.

Unfortunately, projects that have been executed less successfully can be abandoned. At times the community was ready for the project, but was not given the tools to carry it out in the long term. More commonly, our impact assessments indicate that a project's failure can be a result of a lack of leadership among the community members.

Our partners who execute successful projects have developed programs to support the community in teaching them how to maintain and manage their new buildings. Others have only stayed for two weeks or two months, which can leave a lack of knowledge and skills behind.

How our partners work is very important to us. Our past experiences have taught us to be discerning when choosing them.

WHAT CONSTRUCTION METHODOLOGIES ARE YOU WORKING WITH IN RWANDA?

ZENO: We mostly work with bricks, and the main reason for this is availability. This is the material that is most readily available in rural areas, because there are informal kilns and small-scale, local producers. Alongside this, many local people know how to use them. The bricks are often of poor quality, and generally problematic from an environmental point of view because production typically can involve destroying large areas of forest to gather the wood needed to fire them. Because the production process is not standardized, we have to check if the bricks were properly fired when we receive them. To do this, we put them in water and see if they become clay again, before we start to work with them. But despite these problems, we still return to using bricks.

The social perception of materials also plays an important role in our design decisions. Bricks are among the materials









that are available, locally made, and accepted. Adobe is the most sustainable material and one that regulates indoor temperatures well, but unfortunately, we don't have much opportunity to use it because it is perceived as an indicator of low economic status and a material that lacks durability because it requires some maintenance. The bricks have some problems in their production process, but they are available locally and so we rank them in the middle. And then we have cement blocks, which are locally perceived as 'development'—a sign of wealth. So that's what most people want but it's not a local material and it's expensive. We try to avoid using them, unless we cannot convince the client otherwise.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH TRAINING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IN GAINING CONSTRUCTION SKILLS?

ALICE: The contractor typically has a Chief of Masons, Chief of Carpentry, Chief of Welding, and so on. They will hire community members, who are then trained by those managing the various trades. And then every week, or sometimes every day, our Clerk of Works checks what they're doing. From there we demolish and build, demolish and build, which is typically first at the level of a mock-up. We initially identify a portion of the project that can be built first as a reference for the whole. For instance, we focus on the foundation until it's properly built, and then we move forward with a clear example in place so that the team can see the quality of work to be replicated.

IN TERMS OF DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION, WHAT SHOULD BE EMPHASIZED IN THIS COUNTRY?

ZENO: There is a limited spectrum of things that the average person here can

experience and opportunities that they can access. I don't have a solution for that, but the lack of external influences is definitely something that should be addressed. Not because the influences are going to directly affect the production or the design of buildings; rather, it would allow for the development of increased understanding and critical thought around certain approaches. If people have a broad range of stimulation and references to select from, they can make more informed decisions.

YOU ARE PERFORMING DESIGN ASSESSMENTS ON SEVERAL OF YOUR BUILDINGS IN ORDER TO MEASURE SOCIAL IMPACT. HOW ARE YOU DOING THAT AND WHAT ARE YOU LEARNING IN THE PROCESS?

FRANCESCO: Yes, we have done assessments of our projects—mainly the ECD Centers. A team from ASA went to different sites to interview the people who work in the building and use it day-to-day, as well as the people who worked on the construction of the building, which in most cases means people from the community. We typically administer a questionnaire to help us understand how the center is perceived, and if or how individuals' lives have changed since the center was built. There were a few important outcomes: we found out that people who worked on the construction of the ECD Centers rated the project as having a very positive impact in their lives, because they acquired skills during the job that led to more opportunities on other construction sites. This factor was common for all the centers where we performed the impact assessment.

It was a bit more difficult with the education projects because we wanted to understand how the children who attended the pre-primary schools, that we designed,





ALL CONSTRUCTION IMAGES SHOW THE BUILDING OF ASA'S RUGERERO HEALTH CENTRE.

performed when compared to other children. So we went to talk to the primary school teachers to see whether they noticed any differences. We received very positive feedback—the teachers told us that most of the children are more stimulated, and they have increased social interaction with other children in our buildings.

These impact assessments mainly focus on the direct impact that the ECD Centers have on the local community, teachers and other Center employees and users etc. But there is also an important aspect of indirect impact that is extremely difficult to understand. For instance, the people from the community who worked to build the ECD Centers now have more job opportunities. How has their income changed, and what impact does this have on their families?

ALICE: Another example of indirect impact is how training women for construction roles can improve the general perception of women's roles and address gender equality issues. What we try to do is not only hire 50% women on site, but to also ensure that we train them to be masons in their own right, and not simply assistants. Our assessment revealed very positive outcomes, because all of the women who learned new skills felt empowered: they could earn their own wages and save money for their children. But indirectly, we anticipate that there is the outcome of women who feel stronger and are less dependent on men—in the long term, that's not easy to assess.

In general, it's difficult to collect adequate data, especially regarding long-term impact. The problem is that all these social impact assessments were done with our own resources, because none of our clients were interested to understand the actual outcome of the projects. We did them in order to learn how to improve our approach and improve future projects, to the extent

that our resources allow us to. Unfortunately, that's why it's limited to the ECD Centers for now. We hope to have more resources in the future.

HOW DOES CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AFFECT HOW YOU PRACTICE?

ALICE: At times we may see things differently to local people because we grew up in different countries, with different means, and different experiences. We have to try and understand how Rwandans relate to space, interpret proportions, consider materials and so on. We make compromises along the way because sometimes our ideas aren't accepted.

DO YOU SEE A DOWNSIDE TO GLOBALISATION IN RELATION TO ARCHITECTURAL PRODUCTION?

ALICE: Often the architectural centers of cities tend to be their historical centers, which were built at a time when outside influence would have been limited because the means to travel was not as it is now. Venice is totally different from Milan, from Turin, from Rome ... Locality means specificity of materials, culture, and so many other things that unfortunately, through globalization, are being lost.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR ARCHITECTS WHO ARE SEEKING TO BUILD IN EAST AFRICA?

ZENO: The influence of the Global North is so powerful. You can see its impact on students and designers throughout the region—skyscrapers are the same everywhere, for example. I think we should advocate for a new direction for architecture—not just copy-paste from elsewhere. The architect should aim to be less global and more local, and seek out a new architectural language for East Africa.