Bunateka Libraries

Various locations, Kosovo

The majority of schools in rural Kosovo share one feature in common: they are without libraries. This project aspires to help build knowledge in a new generation by providing reading resources in an environment that children would find both enjoyable and stimulating. The design concept, though simple, takes many issues into consideration. Bunatekas are freestanding, so they do not take up space in existing structures. The materials used are standard and widely available. Construction can take as little as three weeks. Louvers allow for natural ventilation and, where possible, the buildings are sited under trees for shade. Removed in this way from the confines of the classroom, the world of books becomes ensconced in the place of adventure and play.

Each virtually identical structure is a 4 m × 6 m × 3 m box of timber and glass on a concrete foundation, with interior furniture and shelving made from wood. The style is contemporary, while reminiscent of the majlis (sitting rooms) of traditional houses in the region. So far eight Bunatekas have been built. The project is partly funded by the Swiss and the Norwegian embassies in Prishtina. Bujar Nrecaj, the architect who developed the concept, grew up in rural Kosovo – then a province of a disintegrating Yugoslavia – before moving to Switzerland at the age of 12.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bunatekas have become neighbourhood hubs for more than schoolchildren. Books are donated by community members to enhance the school’s offerings. The thoughtful design of these one-room libraries enables fluid perceptual movement from exterior yards to inviting interiors, fostering connections between the greenery outside, the people inside, and the imaginary spaces within books and minds.

The architectural value of this project lies in its conceptual simplicity. Beyond their role as spaces of learning, Bunatekas are also infrastructural devices that can enhance both the spatial and the educational quality of schools across the country.
Bunateka Libraries, various locations, Kosovo

Locations
Lutoglëvë, Sferkë, Bajgorë, Mohlan, Drenoc, Celinë, Bostan, Lubinjë e Epërme

Clients
Royal Embassy of Norway, Prishtina, Kosovo:
Sverre Johan Kvale, ambassador

Swiss Embassy, Prishtina, Kosovo:

Architect
bnarchitects, Prizren, Kosovo:
Bujar Nrecaj, principal

Concept Development
Naser Morina, University of Zürich, Switzerland

Contractor
Jetoj Sh.P.K., Prizren, Kosovo

Local Partners
Directorates of Education in Kosovo: Prizren, Klina, Mitrovica, Suharekë, Deçan, Rahovec, Novoberde

Project Data
Built area: 24 m² per library
Total cost: 226,200 USD
Cost per library: 28,200 USD
Design: November 2007–May 2008
Construction: May 2009–April 2012
Completion: 2012

Bujar Nrecaj
Bujar Nrecaj is an architect who believes that the quality of the built environment is a crucial component of people's lives and that it is enhanced by architecture derived from a very specific context – a 'place architecture.' In the early 1990s he left his home village, Lutoglavë in the municipality of Prizren, to emigrate to Switzerland, where he grew up, completed his architectural studies and worked for different architectural offices on projects such as the Novartis Campus laboratory building by Eduardo Souto de Moura. Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 inspired him to return to Kosovo with a cause – to give rural children greater access to books. He founded his own architectural office, bnarchitects, to practise an architecture that is derived from a very specific context and for specific people – with the goal of creating a meaningful built environment. Concurrently with the Bunateka libraries, he has also built the very unique multi-ethnic Hotel Graçanica near Prishtina, a Swiss investment with Roma partners. At the moment Bujar Nrecaj is living in Switzerland again and working on an idea to expand the Bunatekas around the world to places where young people do not have proper access to books.

Website
www.bnarchitects.com

Sverre Johan Kvale, ambassador

Swiss Embassy, Prishtina, Kosovo:

Architect
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Website
www.bnarchitects.com
New Power Station

Baku, Azerbaijan

The two connected buildings of the New Power Station sit near their inspiration, one of the oldest power stations in Baku. The original brief included the demolition of the original late-nineteenth century limestone structures, but the architect advocated their preservation, arguing for their historical and aesthetic importance. Together, the structures create a transformed space in which the new is in dialogue with the existing, helping to preserve the collective memory of the industrial legacy of the site.

The New Power Station functions as an important component in the city's cultural revitalisation efforts. The larger building of the two offers a flexible event space and restaurant, the smaller one is a vibrant youth-centred jazz club. Jazz has deep roots in Azerbaijan, where traditional musical forms are characterised by improvisation. Local jazz bands were performing in Baku in the early 1900s and it remained popular even when banned by the Soviet regime. The club is imagined as a space where jazz music can be played and cultivated, making an important contribution to the local and national music scene.

The buildings are located on the Bay of Baku, a natural harbour once lined by shipyards and warehouses. They are part of a larger site, the National Flag Square, within the city's expanding waterfront green zone. The courtyard forms an open space between the new and old power stations, connecting the former industrial site with its surroundings and offering a flexible space that the architect imagines could be used as an open-air market.

An enclosed bridge links the two simple, geometric structures. Their form mimics that of the older power station, while their facades, clad in laminated timber and zinc, are distinctly contemporary in design. The architecture of the New Power Station pays homage, both formally and materially, to an older tradition of industrial buildings without sharing their functional use.
Client
Pasha Construction, Baku, Azerbaijan
Jalal Pashayev, managing director
Javad Marandi, managing partner

Architects
Erginoğlu & Çalışlar Architects, Istanbul, Turkey:
Hasan Çalışlar, Kerem Erginoğlu, principals
Fatih Karşıtaş, Zeynep ŞenKayanoğlu, Serhat Özkan, Sezen Bilga, İdil Yücel, Füsun Sezer Karşıtaş, project team

Pasha Construction, Baku, Azerbaijan:
Dünya Filiz, senior project manager
Didem Deniz Karasu, site and project manager
Ceyda Aş Turan Kahveci, site manager team
Murat İlşık, senior MEP manager
Muharrem Uysal, lead MEP engineer
Kanıcı Huseyin, construction engineer
Ceyda Aş, site architect
Vasif Yagubov, mechanical engineer
Zaur Huseyin, electric engineer
Agil Rahimov, survey engineer
Halil Yagız, site supervisor
Rashad Ashrafov, project procurement specialist
Bahruz Mahmudov, site administrator

Reinforced Concrete
Neftyoltikintitamir ASC, Baku, Azerbaijan

Steel Structure
Samqayit Polad Konstruksiya-Qurastırma ASC, Baku, Azerbaijan

Water Insulation
Xansaray MMC, Baku, Azerbaijan

Envelope Works
Sinerji İnşaat Mimarlık Mühendislik ve Ticaret San ve Tic AŞ, Istanbul, Turkey

Mechanical and Electrical Engineering
Çağlı Group, Istanbul, Turkey
D&T, Istanbul, Turkey

Fibre Concrete Works Contractor
Silkway Fibrobeton, Baku, Azerbaijan

Masonry
Jamaleddin Abdullkerimov, Baku, Azerbaijan

Structural Project
Ural Mühendislik Engineering, Ankara, Turkey

Lighting Consultant
Lighting Design Collective, Madrid, Spain

Interior Design
Blue Sky Hospitality (Jazz Club), London, England
Erginoğlu & Çalışlar (Events Hall), Istanbul, Turkey

Acoustic Consultant

Project Data
Site area: 10,000 m²
Built area: 8,500 m²
Ground floor area: 2,208 m²
Cost: 24,000,000 USD
Commission: September 2011
Design: September 2011–March 2012
Construction: March 2012–November 2013
Occupancy: January 2014

Erginoğlu & Çalışlar Architects
Erginoğlu & Çalışlar Architects is an Istanbul-based, independent studio of architects founded in 1993 by Hasan Çalışlar and Kerem Erginoğlu. The E&C Team specializes in urban planning, architecture and interior design projects, together with providing assistance for planning applications.

The ethos of the company is to view each project within its individual context and contribute to it through innovative architectural solutions. It has evolved to adopt a circumstantial architectural approach with careful consideration to social impact and participatory design. The studio has vast experience gained through successful completion of a wide variety of both national and international projects on a range of scales.

Erginoğlu & Çalışlar Architects have won many prizes and awards for their innovative projects. These include: the Building Award for the Tarsus Sev Elementary School Campus project in the National Architecture Awards of 2016; the New & Old Award for the Salt Repository-Medina Turgul DDB Headquarters at the World Architecture Festival 2010; the Building Award for the Turkcell Teknoloji Research and Development Building and the Preservation-Revitalisation Award for the Salt Repository–Medina Turgul DDB in the National Architecture Awards of 2010; first prize in the invited competition for Tarsus Sev Elementary School Campus in 2009; fourth prize in the international competition for the Turkish Embassy in Berlin in 2007; an AMV Young Architects Award in 2004; and the Building Award for the Military School Swimming Pool Complex in the National Architecture Awards of 2000.

In addition to architecture and design services, the partners also lecture and organise architectural workshops in universities across Turkey.

Website
www.ecarch.com
Every 20 years the United Nations convenes a summit to examine the state of the urban world. The agenda of Habitat III, held in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016, makes it clear that great challenges lie ahead. Over the next two decades the processes of urbanisation will continue to pick up pace, especially in Asia and Africa, resulting in a massive expansion of both intermediate urban centres and metropolitan areas – in short, defining Earth as an urban planet. Yet the physical environments that are being created to shelter these hundreds of millions of new city-dwellers are shaped by industrial and commercial enterprises more concerned with volume and quantity than with space and quality. The outcome? Conglomerates of concrete and steel, inhuman places, prone to social degradation and violence.

If we look to history, to the postwar period, we can see this has happened before. In regions such as Western and Eastern Europe and the Americas, strong processes of urban migration – different from the current ones in scale, but not in speed – prompted the creation of immense urban peripheries. Only in a few cases, and only with the full passage of time, did these become something like liveable spaces. In many other parts of the world, endless slums are the default living environments for the urbanised masses.

While we are still struggling to cope with the urbanisation processes that dominated the second part of the twentieth century, the developments that we are witnessing now will have a far greater impact still, affecting the lives of billions of people. If today’s urban population is estimated at 54 per cent of the total, that figure will reach 70 per cent by the middle of the century. By then, it is projected that some 2.3 billion people will be living in urban areas in the developing world. Metropolitan conurbations are multiplying: within 15 years, there will be 41 cities with a population of more than 10 million. The fastest growth, however, will be in medium-sized towns and cities of 500,000 to 1 million inhabitants, mostly located in Africa and Asia. The Islamic world, then, will be placed at the centre of this tectonic shift.

How can these processes be humanised? Government plans are mainly concerned with primary needs. At most, they provide the basic infrastructures for transport, water and sanitation, as we can see in the burgeoning metropolises of Asia, Africa, Latin America. Little thought is given to the only factor that can make a difference: culture.

Making a place for culture means understanding the shapes and needs of communities, respecting people’s identities and expressions, protecting
their physical environments. Humanised, liveable cities – that is what culture, heritage and architecture can offer to the urbanising planet.

A culture-based approach to urban sustainability needs above all to value what comes from the people. No top-down, centralised urban planning system has ever been able to understand the needs of communities or to integrate the cultural dimension of projects into the development of the city as a whole. If governments wish to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of their investments in the city, they need to privilege dialogue and interaction with local communities, and adapt schemes and plans to local needs. This is the issue highlighted by the preparatory work for the Habitat III conference, and perhaps the main message to come out of this collective reflection on the future of the urban planet.

Listening to the people means understanding and valuing their culture – the intangible heritage that infuses their everyday life. A working partnership based on these principles can help to shape people-centred, affordable, sustainable environments.

The richness and the potential of traditional architectural knowledge is part of the culture of communities that must be valued and protected. Earthen and wooden architecture, for instance, constitutes a fundamental resource for the creation of sustainable and harmonious physical environments. Traditional knowledge has also contributed towards making urban areas more resilient in the face of natural disasters – an issue of increasing relevance to the future of our cities.

The urban heritage may only make up a small part of the physical environment of a modern city, yet it can still represent its core and its soul. Historic environments are invaluable, not only as places where people find their identity, but also as guides for modern planners, offering models for the design of structures and places that are able to withstand the test of time and, through this, be embraced as part of the heritage of a people, even as one culture succeeds another, in the flow of history.

Nowhere is the importance of a heritage-based approach more evident than in the design of public spaces, where cultures meet and the identities of communities coalesce. Public spaces also provide a means of connecting culture and nature, in places where ecosystems and human uses interact.
Thread Cultural Centre

Sinthian, Senegal

Thread is a cultural centre and artists’ residency in a remote village in south-east Senegal. Located next to a health centre, its entire operations speak of a notion of ‘culture’ that goes beyond the arts to encompass the whole life of the community, supporting physical well-being, education, agriculture and entrepreneurship.

Built with local materials and limited resources, the centre provides for a multiplicity of uses. A 1000 m² rainwater-harvesting roof defines a large flexible space – with both open and closed areas – and two residences for visiting artists from both Senegal and abroad. Four bungalows set apart from the main building accommodate Thread’s permanent staff.

The load-bearing masonry construction consists of concrete columns and beams infilled with compressed earth blocks. All vertical surfaces are plastered and painted white. The perforated ventilation walls, with their strong, textural bas-relief, add a further aesthetic dimension – as does the beautifully articulated floor, which embeds broken shards of tiles (cast-offs from a local factory) in a cement screed. The roof consists of a primary structure of metal with secondary wooden rafters and bamboo purlins supporting the thatch.

The sinuous, undulating roof is designed as a ‘parametric transformation’ of the traditional pitched roofs of the impluvium houses in the Casamance region of southwest Senegal. Its curving geometry inscribes two elliptical courtyards where rainwater is collected and channelled into two ditches, each leading to a 570 m³ reservoir. This water is used to irrigate vegetable crops, supplementing the villagers’ largely rice-based diet.

With its intrinsic potential to operate as an open platform, the space under the roof does not specify modes of use but allows for experimentation, doubling – amongst other guises – as an extension of the health centre, as a setting for workshops in gardening and farming techniques, as a space to study in the afternoon, as a stage for performance and for artistic expression. This is culture, not as a luxury for a few, but as a universal right for all.
Thread Cultural Centre, Sinthian, Senegal

COMMUNITY
Toshiko Mori Architect has worked on a broad range of programmes including urban, civic, institutional, cultural, residential, museum and exhibition design. Recent work includes New York City theatre, library and museum projects, the Hudson Yards Park and Boulevard, and a park visitor centre in the Bronx. Mori designed institutional projects for Brown University and Syracuse University, and is included on the design team for New York University’s strategic master plan. The firm was selected twice for the New York City’s Department of Design and Construction’s Design and Construction Excellence programme, and won four competitions for the programme’s public and urban infrastructure projects. TMA was also recently selected as the architect of a laboratory building for Novartis’ extended Cambridge campus.

Toshiko Mori Architect continues to engage in an architecture of material exploration, technological invention and theoretical provocation.

Website
www.tmarch.com
www.thread-senegal.org
Bind. *Noun.*

*A problematical situation, eg 'He is in a political bind over the trade issue.'*

*Synonyms:* predicament, awkward situation, quandary, dilemma, plight, cleft stick, mess, quagmire.

In 2005 the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina published a controversial essay, ‘How To Write About Africa’. It remains the most forwarded article in the history of *Granta* magazine. With an uneasy combination of laugh-out-loud satire and biting sarcasm, Wainaina offers a number of tips for would-be writers: ‘always use the word “Africa” or “Darkness” or “Safari” in your title. Subtitles may include the words “Zanzibar”, “Congo”, “Big”, “Sky”, “Shadow”, “Drum”, “Sun” or “Bygone”. After celebrity activists and aid-workers, conservationists are Africa’s most important people. Do not offend them.’

The essay grew out of a ‘long – truly long – rambling email’ Wainaina wrote to the magazine’s editor in a ‘fit of anger, maybe even low blood sugar – it runs in the family’. Frustrated by the narrow bandwidth of tropes that define the African literary landscape, he turned each cliché on its head – and established himself in the process as one of the continent’s sharpest and most critical voices.

To most, Wainaina’s essay might seem an odd starting place for a discussion about architecture, both in general and across Africa specifically. African projects account for only 12 per cent of all projects submitted for the 13th Award Cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Forty-two entries were put forward from East, Central, South and West Africa (North Africa has been excluded from this argument, owing to its obvious cultural relationship with the Islamic world). Africa – as a whole – contributes roughly 30 per cent of the world’s Muslim population, which is more than South Asia or the Arabian Peninsula, whose projects make up 9.5 per cent and 14 per cent of the total project list respectively. Yet only four of the submissions were designed or commissioned by African architects and/or clients. The vast majority fall into the aid-development category, generally relying on NGO patronage for design expertise, technical know-how and funding. This is not to say that the projects submitted aren’t worthy, *per se*; it’s simply that they are remarkably similar in brief, execution and scope. But why does this matter? Should it?

Yes, it does matter – and yes, it should. In some senses, literature and architecture make for strange bedfellows. One: mobile, fleet-of-foot, relatively immediate and cheap to produce; the other: expensive, labour-intensive and time-consuming to make. Yet the two disciplines share a
number of fundamentals in common. Churchill’s famous maxim, ‘we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us’, applies as much to language as it does to architecture: we shape the world through the means by which we describe it, both to ourselves and to others. One might also say architecture is a form of language, if not the form of language. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues, ‘language can [also] be seen as a prominent architectural concern. Architects approach certain forms, shapes and configurations as the design elements of architecture in the same way they approach word choice, or grammar, or sentence structure.’ Infra-structure, dwelling and mythmaking aside, both language and architecture are powerful shapers and vessels of culture – and of cultural identity in particular. This relationship presents a particular dilemma for African architects, most especially for those living and working in Africa. In no specific order, the four official languages of the African Union are Arabic, English, French and Portuguese, none of which are indigenous to the continent’s 54 countries. For better or for worse, the colonial encounter between Europe and Africa left more than blood and style and its wake: it fundamentally altered the way Africans express themselves, both in spoken and written language and in the built environment. Aside from the obvious linguistic challenges of communicating in a language other than one’s mother tongue, at a much deeper level it has permanently compromised, even wounded, the uniquely intimate and intertwined relationship between people and place – the life-force of cultural production in its broadest sense. The implications for African cultural identities are immense. The insistence on ‘official’ language (a public language, one might call it) at the expense of an indigenous or ‘private’ (read: domestic) language has brought about its own peculiar pathology, on which every prominent post-colonial or critical theorist from Fanon to Foucault has written. For the most part, contemporary Africans live in an uneasy truce between tradition and modernity, suspended somewhere between aspiration and alienation. It’s fair to say that alienation in varying degrees from one’s tongue or place is the nature of the vast majority of cultural production across Africa at present.

Of course this is not unique to Africa. All artists (in the widest sense of the word) must struggle through what the poet Pablo Neruda calls the ‘labyrinths of his/her chosen medium of expression that is an essential condition of being’. As the South African Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer writes, ‘I doubt if any artist ever finds himself in the ideal condition of Hegel’s ‘individual consciousness in wholly harmonious’ relationship to the external power of society’. But there can be few parallels in history where the fundamental balance between people and place has been altered as intensely or violently as it has on the African continent. Sartre sums it up well: ‘The exploited experience exploitation as their reality.’ For the African artist, confronting his or her reality in order to move beyond it, is key.

It is against this backdrop that the 42 African projects submitted to this cycle should be read. If ‘development’ is contemporary Africa’s paradigm – Africa’s present-day reality – the ratio of 4:42, which translates to less than two per cent of all projects undertaken or designed by Africans themselves, is the norm: the ‘official’ architecture of the continent, similar to its ‘official’ languages, perpetually narrated by outsiders, architecture that is funded and finessed ‘on behalf of’, seldom ‘by’. It is hard – perhaps even impossible – to think of any other context in which such a distorted para-digm might exist. The mere idea of 98 per cent of all American or European projects being done by African or Asian architects is absurd. Yet such is the power of the ‘developed/developing’ narrative shaping so much of contemporary African architecture that it appears … well, normal. Ninety per cent of the African projects contain the word ‘community’ or ‘development’ in their title. There are two restoration projects, no adaptive reuse schemes; no urban masterplans or private residences; a handful of primary schools; no commercial facilities or libraries or museums; and no civic buildings of note. This is emphatically not to say that the projects that have been submitted are in themselves wrongfully conceived or executed. There are some extremely well-designed projects on the long list to which one might affix words such as ‘iconic’, ‘meaningful’, ‘powerful’, ‘moving’, etc. Two such projects are on the shortlist of 19: Japanese–US-based architect Toshiko Mori’s Thread Cultural Centre in Senegal and Nigerian architect Kunlé Adeyemi’s Makoko Floating School, which has been the subject of much critical acclaim and debate since its construction and subsequent demise. Both projects are remarkable for different reasons: both were photographed by the now-legendary Dutch photographer, Iwan Baan, and both have had their fair share of global renown, and rightly so. It is worth noting, however, both projects required substantial input in the form of funding and design/construction expertise from outside the continent. Whilst this model of design delivery is entirely out of the hands of individual architects, it does point to a growing gap between local and international practitioners. The question of how African architects can be empowered to carry out significant projects in Africa remains both urgent and unresolved.

In her provocative anthology, Playing in the Dark (1992), the African-American writer Toni Morrison speaks of ‘extending the study of American
literature into a wider landscape’, arguing for the need to ‘draw a map of a critical geography and to use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World – without the mandate for conquest’. It is a compelling thought: to similarly extend the study, scope and praxis of African architecture into a wider landscape than that of charitable works focused almost exclusively on social gain. A *Time* magazine article dated 4 March 1957, two days before independence in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), is revealing:

Architect Harry Weese was in trouble. He had just arrived in Accra, the palm-fringed capital of West Africa’s Gold Coast and what had seemed like a minor problem back in his Chicago office suddenly began growing like a tropical weed. Young, function-minded architect Weese had been commissioned by the State Department on a low budget of 300,000 USD to design an embassy and staff residences in hot, humid Accra with the stipulation that his design must harmonise with the indigenous architectural tradition. But apart from thatch or corrugated iron and mud, he found that there was no indigenous architecture, let alone any tradition, to harmonise with. About the only buildings that could qualify as architecture were some modern boxy structures put up by Europeans. But they were Mediterranean in style, not equatorial. Telling himself that, ‘If there is no native architectural tradition, you have to start one’, he set about solving his problem. Stone-and-steel man Weese went native.10

In the 1950s and 1960s, as the winds of change swept across Africa and Asia, signalling the end of empire, the modern movement’s preoccupation with the social forces surrounding architecture, specifically ‘progress’ and ‘development’, dovetailed neatly with the emerging discourses of independence. At the same time, in European and American capitals, an approach that came to be known as ‘tropical architecture’ was beginning to take root, established as a *bona fide* term through its representation in avant-garde publications and the establishment of an approved curriculum at an elite school (Architectural Association). This architecture was in the International Style – clean, functional and non-site-specific. With its emphasis on health and sanitation and the appeal of belonging to a cosmopolitan world ‘club’, it was taken up enthusiastically by many of the newly independent African leaders, including Kwame Nkrumah. With hindsight, the ambitions and aspirations seem obvious, even touching. In the decade following independence in Ghana in the 1960s, Nkrumah embarked on what is now seen as the most ambitious building programme

in West African history, focusing primarily on educational buildings, which, as the historian Udo Kultermann has noted, ‘was no accident. The most significant architectural achievements in Africa are to be found among educational buildings. It ranks before all economic, political and military considerations.’71

Nearly 60 years later, that ambition seems to have run its course. There are few, if any, educational buildings that could reasonably be construed as ‘significant’ outside the paradigm of pressing, sometimes desperate need. Indeed, educational infrastructure can no longer be said to rank before all other considerations. It is in this context that the ‘development bind’ is most readily apparent. By limiting the vocabulary and language of architecture to a single context, we limit the scope of future African (and outsider) voices. Since its inception, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has consistently encouraged entrants, jurors and critics alike to demonstrate their trust in pluralism and in the values and benefits of diverse and multiple approaches. The invitation to think across boundaries – whether of culture, class or caste – extends to the way we think about architectural language, programme and form. Africa is not one country, to paraphrase Wainsaina. Neither is it one tongue, one voice, one vision or one type. Now, perhaps more than ever, the cultural pluralism that the Award celebrates should be pushed to Africa’s fore.

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