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BOOK REVIEW: DESIGN FOR GOOD: A NEW ERA OF ARCHITECTURE FOR EVERYONE

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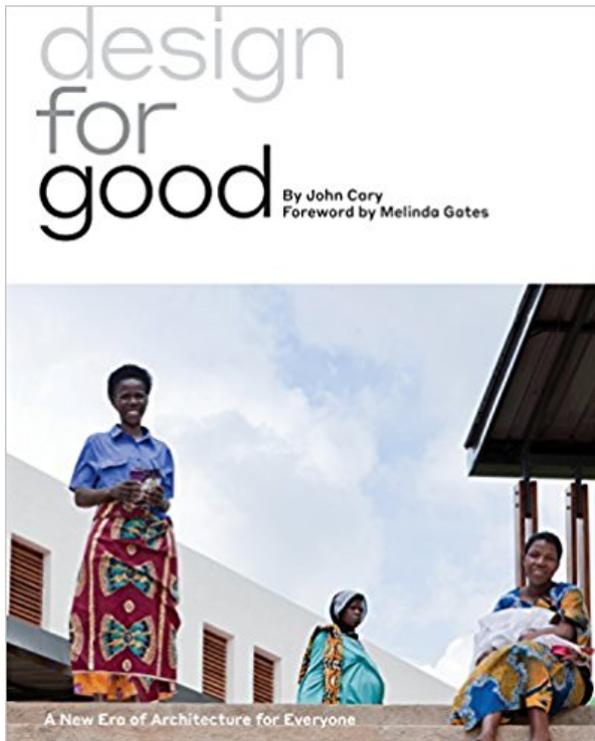
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Abstract

'Design for Good: A New Era of Architecture for Everyone' written by John Cary deals with the general topic of social justice in the built environment with a focus on architectural interventions in marginalised communities. The book argues for public interest design and its main message is important and clear: architects can and should serve the public interest, and not only the interest of a privileged few. Everyone deserves good design. In the last fifteen years the proliferation of the social responsibilities of architects and designers is witnessed in the establishment of several important organisations and design firms emphasising social impact as central to their work. Despite following a positive trend, in the global scheme of things, this practice remains rare and is worthy of bringing to the attention of the wider design community and the general population. The book achieves several important objectives: It highlights new ways in which good design can have an impact on the lives of people, especially within deprived communities. It also makes an urgent appeal to designers and community organisations to embrace the principles of public interest design. Simultaneously, it emphasises the long way forward before the wealth of designers worldwide can be successfully tapped for the public good, and articulates a range of challenges for the future.

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‘Design for Good: A New Era of Architecture for Everyone’ written by John Cary deals with the general topic of social justice in the built environment with a focus on architectural interventions in marginalised communities. The book argues for public interest design and revolves around the premise that everyone deserves good design.

Instead of a luxury for a fraction of society that *can* afford it, design should have the good of the public at heart, in particular of those that *cannot* afford it. There are several definitions and terminologies in currency; some call it architectural activism, social impact, public interest, human centered or even humanitarian design. In the last fifteen years the proliferation of the social responsibilities of architects and designers is witnessed in the establishment of several important organisations and design firms emphasising social impact as central to their work. Despite following a positive trend, in

the global scheme of things, this practice remains rare and is worthy of bringing to the attention of the wider design community and the general population.

Socially conscious design has been around, often hidden from the public eye, but rose to prominence in the 1980s with the formation of Architects Without Borders (Architecture Sans Frontières), the first network that connects non-profit designers and organisations to communities that would otherwise have no access to their services. But the movement slowly gained momentum in the early 2000s with the launch of several organisations and networking platforms for designers, some of them in connection with academic institutions, the most well-known of which is probably ‘Architecture for Humanity’, which surprisingly filed for bankruptcy in 2015. Their manifesto ‘Design like you give a damn’ in 2006 was possibly the first time a book collected and showcased a vast amount of humanitarian design projects around the world, and which appealed to designers and non-designers alike with practical design solutions to a wide range of issues. In 2010 Cary released ‘The Power of Pro Bono’ that brings the stories of architects and clients from projects designed on a pro-bono basis, where designers reduce or renounce their fees for clients that cannot afford them. In this respect, several notable exceptions, for instance ‘Expanding Architecture’ edited by Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford (2008) or ‘Small Scale, Big Change’ by Andres Lepik (2010), this book is a welcome addition to a still emerging literary field.

The book starts with a commanding foreword by philanthropist Melinda Gates, in which she highlights why she believes socially conscious design is crucial for a sustainable and equitable future. This is followed by an introduction by Cary in which he clarifies the main argument and his convictions that enabled the compilation of this book. Central to his thinking about and position on design is what he calls “dignity”; ‘the state or quality of being worthy of honour or respect’ (p. 20). It forms the moral foundation of modern human rights, and he equates its central role in design with the role of justice in the discipline of law, or health in the discipline of medicine. His main argument is a powerful one, namely that



everyone - especially the disadvantaged - has a right to a well-designed environment, a setting for everyday life that engenders *dignity* in its use.

The author convincingly demonstrates this argument through a range of projects recently completed in places around the world, realised in partnerships between visionary designers, ambitious facilitators and industrious local communities. The main body of the book is divided into six chapters that highlight different spheres of life in which design has an opportunity and responsibility to serve the public and improve people's lives; from residential projects or humanitarian responses to educational institutions and civic spaces. The author tells the story of each of these interventions in a way that exposes and emphasises the process, the people and the relationships that allowed the project to go beyond the basics of decent design and increase the impact on the users and community. The stories are reinforced by stunning photographs that capture the spirit of the projects and their impact on the communities. In essence, the range of diversity in the projects is broad; they span almost all continents, many different topics and types of clients. A small grasp of the wealth of projects and topics: How architecture can help with emancipation and empowerment of disadvantaged social groups is illustrated by the Women's Opportunity Centre in Rwanda by Sharon Davis Design. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, the design of the unusual but stunning Bait Ur Rouf Mosque, designed by Marina Tabassum, portrays how civic life can profit from good design. A project that exemplifies how design for dignity and respect can help combat disaster and save lives is the cholera treatment centre for GHESKIO in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti by MASS Design. In residential projects, design can instil pride and generate stability in the underprivileged, for instance in the Cottages housing project designed by bcWORKSHOP for some of the most chronically homeless in Dallas, Texas. The author concludes with several lessons for designers to increase the impact of design, and a range of universal needs directed at society at large to facilitate the process and to encourage collaboration between designers, communities and organisations.

Despite laying out some important lessons and future needs, the way forward is not entirely clear. Cary remains somewhat on the surface and stops short of well-defined guidelines, concrete strategies to adopt, or policies to champion. This seems to downplay to some extent the additional complexities introduced by adopting participatory and public centred approaches to design, sensitivities when negotiating between local communities and governments or the challenges regarding finding suitable and willing partners, or funding. It would have been beneficial to the public as well as to the design community if more emphasis had been placed in the conclusions on the crucial role and support that local organisations or well-established NGOs offer in the negotiations and moderation of such complexities.

The book addresses everyone interested in good design and is especially instructive for those engaged in development; the topic of architectural interventions is most likely to appeal to architects, but the targeted audience is explicitly broader. To this end, the book does not focus so much on the buildings themselves, but rather reports on the act of building, the impact of the process on the communities and actors involved, and does so in a comprehensive and accessible journalistic style that embraces the perspectives of all parties. In an effort not to glorify the buildings or architects, as some of the literature seems to do, the images do not focus on details of the buildings and no plans or diagrams are included in the book. However, because of the complexity of some projects, it is the view of this reviewer that this sometimes compromises the intelligibility of the interventions in their particular spatialities and materialities, in their methods of construction and in their contexts, of their tangible and intangible contributions to the local environment. The accessibility of this format



is appropriate to reach a broader audience, but the inclusion of diagrams and plans would not have harmed the cause.

There are two interrelated issues I believe deserve some examination, namely the disproportionate amount of Western based design firms operating in non-Western contexts among the choice of projects, and the unequal power relations embedded in this phenomenon and the ethical consequences for the future. The first issue does not entirely leave the author at fault, but he might have explicitly recognised this in the introduction. Unfortunately, well-known examples are too few where locally born and trained architects cooperate with communities and local governments in order to develop their communities. An explanation can be found in the insufficient availability, access and quality of higher education in many countries, and the lack of opportunities for architects or designers, which often results in a “brain-drain” towards the wealthier countries. Cary does recognise in the concluding section the need to allocate resources and infrastructure to develop more locally trained designers, an urgent need persuasively argued for the African context by Christian Benimana (2017) in his inspiring TED talk ‘The next generation of African architects and designers.’

This leads to the second issue, namely the persisting, if often latent, unequal power relations between the West and non-West, and by extension between architect and user. The central argument in post-colonial critique is that most of written history (including academic work) is recorded from a Eurocentric point of view, which automatically distorts the story of communities all over the world and undermines their agency. The act of building itself is deeply political, and in many countries substantial parts of the built environment and urban fabric are of colonial legacy. A decidedly self-critical and humble attitude is therefore imperative when Western design firms operate in such a sensitive context. The humility, compassion and solidarity of the designers is expressed in their commitment to inclusion, education and training of local communities as a way forward to empowerment and emancipation. However, I would have liked to see an expanded explicit articulation of the delicate subject of power relations between West and non-West, and between architect and community, coupled with highlighting how their effects were considered and moderated. The author makes a valued attempt to include everyone’s side of the story, but it is hard to completely escape a patronising image of Western offices coming in to save and develop the disadvantaged communities of the world.

In conclusion, I would highly recommend this book to every architect and designer and anyone concerned with the built environment. Its main message is important and clear: architects can and should serve the public interest, and not only the interest of a privileged few. Everyone deserves good design. The book achieves several important objectives: It highlights new ways in which good design can have an impact on the lives of people, especially within deprived communities. It also makes an urgent appeal to designers and community organisations to embrace the principles of public interest design. Simultaneously, it emphasises the long way forward before the wealth of designers worldwide can be successfully tapped for the public good, and articulates a range of challenges for the future. The only regret is perhaps that the book touches on certain important ethical issues but seems to stop short of directly engaging with them, and that it ultimately shies away from delivering concrete strategies or procedures that may guide the inexperienced professional towards public interest design. Perhaps suggestions for a welcome sequel.

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