

The Center of the World is Everywhere:
On Humanitarian Architecture and the Western Gaze

By Allyn Gaestel

“The universe dissolves into a cloud of heat, it plummets helplessly into a maelstrom of entropy—but within this irreversible process there may appear zones of order, portions of the existent that tend toward a shape, privileged points from which one may discern a design, a perspective. The literary work is one of these tiny portions in which the existent crystallizes into a shape, acquires a meaning...” Italian novelist Italo Calvino wrote.

It is a stretch to call press releases, promotional material, and puff piece journalism on humanitarian architecture literature. However, such works are narratives; they are constructed and designed, crystallizing the existent into a shape, giving it meaning. As with all narratives, they contain an internal argument and a worldview. These formulaic stories go something like this: here is a space, primordial and impoverished. People are suffering. People don't have what we have—we the narrator and the presumed audience. So we are coming to help. We will build them something that looks good to us, something new in this place struggling to leave the past. The stories are simple. They are repetitive. They take place all around the world, but each time they are the same. They are, in the words of Lebanese novelist Rabih Alameddine, “comforting myths.”

The older, more obvious versions of these stories have begun to face critique in elite architecture circles. The era of “starchitecture” has been complicated by the dawn of the master-builder social architect. Structures are lauded not just for their beauty but for their consciousness and their positive impact on the world. When Alejandro Aravena won the Pritzker Prize in 2016, the announcement said that he “epitomizes the revival of a more socially engaged architect.” Terms like “local”, “sustainable”, “participatory”, “integrated”, “appropriately scaled”, and “vernacular” are buzzwords now. But on a more subtle level, sentence by sentence, image by image, these stories and projects still maintain their centers in the West. They engage with the rest of the world but frame “elsewhere” as an interesting, but still pejorative “other.”

The stories get all tangled in time. They take as a given the poverty of these spaces without probing the roots of global inequality, or acknowledging the fact that poverty here is intricately linked to the wealth of the Western outsider now traipsing into the space. MASS Design group is a highly intentional organization that asserts on its website: “Architecture is never neutral. It either heals or hurts. Our mission is to research, build, and advocate for

architecture that promotes justice and human dignity.” Yet a 2016 documentary about their work, “Design that Heals”, carries the typical narrative tropes. It opens with disaster, framing the story around the 2010 earthquake in Haiti with video images filtered to appear dark and grainy playing over a dramatic soundtrack. A drone shot contrasts the bright, geometric, state-of-the-art clinic designed by MASS from the surrounding slum. The new building shines like a beacon, a redemptive emblem emerging from its indistinct environment, which is reduced to a fuzzy backdrop.

The stories, and the projects the stories are about, are made to be comprehensible and palatable for the outsider. They rip places of their specificity and turn them into narrative symbols: the poor, dark, *before* image, contrasts with an intervention that promises change. The stories have a linear, physical, and reason-based framework for reality, all of which are optional, and could be replaced by other nonlinear, supra-rational, and esoteric frames. It is 2018, so while these stories are created for outsiders in the West, they are also seen by people in the places the stories are told on top of. Often, the narratives infuriate or embitter locals who do not recognize themselves. Local viewers look at a collection of photographs, videos and facts that are comprised of the physicality of a space they know intimately, and yet the the stories do not resonate; they are not true. The reality of their lives is not represented.

Embedded in the concept of “development” is the idea of a trajectory with an agreed upon destination. Development projects, with their imagined futures, promote ahistorical narratives in which the implied modernity of a new construction transforms a space construed as archaic. But everywhere exists at once. Each place has a history as deep as any other, a series of happenings over centuries that led, or lead, to the present moment. Yet Westerners often wander into villages and describe them as “ancient.” Nowness is associated with Western taste and technology; everywhere else is construed as behind.

This is empirically wrong, but it also misses the fact that time is experienced, allowed and narrated differently by different people. The rigid chronological framework for time is imposed on places (both in narrative and in project schedules) that may express or allow for more fluid concepts of temporality. At the most basic level, the Gregorian calendar was created by a pope in the 16th century and there are hundreds of other calendars in the world. More broadly, there are endless permutations of simultaneity, elasticity, layers, etc in the lived experience of time. Such truths are more than brushed over, they are never even considered in these narratives, which take as a given Western concepts of time and modernity.

In his essay on comforting myths, Alameddine was writing on “world literature” and authors who are allowed into the global literary glitterati. They are from the countries they are

identified with, but they are often based in the West and fluent in Western patterns of thought and ways of organizing the world. “We get to talk because we are seen as the nice tour guides. We can hold the hands of readers of the empire as we travel a short distance onto the bridge and get a glimpse of what’s across it, maybe even wave at the poor sods on the other side,” he wrote. These writers translate the rest of the world into something comprehensible, something expected and understandable to a Western audience. Poor translations flatten the world and skim over huge essential concepts that are difficult to squeeze into alternate frameworks. “There is more other, scarier other, translated other, untranslatable other, the utterly strange other, the other who can’t stand you. Those of us allowed to speak are the tip of the iceberg. We are the cute other. I use the term jokingly, but also deliberately. All of us on that world-literature list are basically safe, domesticated, just exotic enough to make our readers feel that they are liberal, not parochial or biased. That is, we are purveyors of comforting myths for a small segment of the dominant culture that would like to see itself as open-minded...” Humanitarian architectural projects often also toe this line. There’s enough of a splash of local color and culture to feel exotic – perhaps the building facade is inspired by local fabrics or constructed by local craftsmen – but there is no internal quaking, no disruption to the worldview, no shift in perspective. Outsiders enter spaces and leave again completely intact in their perceptions of themselves and their place in the world.

In architecture, the hope is that a singular intervention, a new construction, can catalyze change. “A transcendent idea is one that speaks to greater societal goals outside the building and seeks to affect systemic change to society at large,” MASS Design asserts, “A building influences systemic change by affecting policy, changing individual behavior for the better, and transforming its own typological category.” This is a beautiful, grandiose and idealistic frame for the field. Of course buildings impact the spaces in which they are built. But social change, or healing, is never instantaneous, nor is it prompted by the addition of one thing. Healing is holistic and transformative, it is systemic and requires deep reorientation. In the case of poverty, it requires reckoning with the current world order. The degree to which a single building can do this is questionable, particularly one financed through the logistics of Western philanthropy organizations and beholden to their underlying assumptions about the world. This is what Nigerian writer Teju Cole termed the “White Savior Industrial Complex” and it assumes superiority on the part of the heroic outsider and a flatness, an emptiness, a void space in the countries where they come to intervene.

It is a particularly agitating task for the physically-minded architect to understand that places hold whole layers and realms beyond what is materially given; complexities and norms that require unique sensitivities that cannot be trained, drawn, analyzed, or thought into being. “These cities are often invisible to the outside world,” Belgian anthropologist Filip de

Boeck wrote, because “they function in ways that we are not used to seeing and therefore go unnoticed.” Land is not just physical. Open space is not always empty.

Places all have their own internal coherence. A first problem of Western outsiders trying to help is that they don’t take the time to shift their center or their rhythm to the space they are working. Architects are in the space, they physically alter the space, but they keep their center of reference themselves: their own perspective, their own normal, their own Western framework for the world. It can be difficult to factor in perspectives, realities and experiences that are outside the realm of our mindscape. Even when the rhetoric of a project emphasizes local participation or involvement with a community, if the outsider is not pushing against the edges of their conceptions for reality, they are probably missing much of what is happening around them. “As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture,” British anthropologist Victor Turner wrote.

Architecture is a constructive field, but it is also, first, destructive, and always disruptive. It rearranges a space, it buries the soil beneath its foundations, it changes the light, the air, the energy of a place. It alters the skyline, the frame for the heavens, it changes the texture of the land we walk on. In post-colonial spaces particularly, in places with a history of imperialism, architects have long barged in and built things that make sense to them. Humanitarian architecture is often an attempt to formalize the informal. The whole idea of the informal is itself a problem—it is again a comparison to a presumed center, a presumed normal that is not actually at play in the spaces of people's lived experiences. The informal sphere is only informal to those who are outside of it, who don’t yet have the eyes for the invisible internal coherence of all its actions and traces and interactions.

The idea of a space as a blankness, as a blackness, as undefined, as invisible, is quickly followed by the idea of a place that awaits exploration, discovery, and in the case of architects, intervention. In a 2016 interview, Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas described Lagos of the late 1990s saying, “Nigeria was a blank on the map – there weren’t even any maps.” Kunle Adeyemi, a Nigerian architect who worked for Koolhaas for a decade, added, “another friend of mine says there are two types of people who come to Lagos: the intellectuals, who really want to understand it, really want to solve it; and the cowboys, the entrepreneurs, who want to make money. So it’s a place of opportunity for both intellectuals and cowboys, and I think that’s such a great idea.” In the cowboy metaphor, Nigeria is a Wild West where exploration can take place in a vacuum, without a gaze, without accountability. It is true that old colonial maps had vast swathes of blank space, and it is true that even today Makoko, where Adeyemi built a famous, failed humanitarian school project, is undefined on Google maps. The

neighborhood is depicted as a grey space. But, there are photographers living there documenting the place, locals mapping it on their own terms.

I wrote a lengthy article for *The Atavist Magazine* on the Makoko Floating School. It was an internationally lauded humanitarian project that seemed to do everything right. It was a novel, iconic, floating construction that was meant to provide a learning space for students in Makoko, a massive slum built on stilts on the Lagos lagoon. The architect hired local builders, and designed the building based on local materials and techniques. But despite its pristine international image there were issues with the project from the beginning. Then the building collapsed, just days after being awarded the Silver Lion at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale. The day of the collapse, Adeyemi called local leaders and told them to bar journalists from entering the space. I only managed to see it because I was with Afose Sulaymon, a friend and photographer who lives in Makoko and argued that he could go wherever he wanted in his neighborhood. This aggressive attempt to control the narrative felt like an offshoot of the idea of the blank on the map.

As a Nigerian working in Nigeria, Adeyemi was an architecture darling. He became a spokesperson for Makoko, for Nigeria, for Africa, despite coming from far across Nigeria's dense social fabric, and having centered himself in the West for years. He was eloquent, with grandiose intentions and said beautiful things in beautiful spaces to beautiful, comfortable people — things like “the most beautiful for the most needy,” at the Shaping Cities conference in Venice after the Biennale. He presented idealistic visions of social change in accessible language. He was a perfect go-between, a purveyor of comforting myths. But his story was challenged by locals, and by the evidence of the eventual collapse.

In a talk he gave on the project in Amsterdam in 2013, Adeyemi said, “When I visited the community for the first time I said ‘how can I help?’” I think this is the wrong question. It is one that maintains a hierarchical vision of the other; it is one that maintains a privileged view of the rest of the world as victimized and deprived. What if instead, he had walked in and said, “hello,” and allowed a conversation to unfold naturally from there. What if, as a discipline, we listened when local communities say, as Noah Shemedede the director of the school Adeyemi was trying to help, said, “Makoko is very fine. It just needs improvements.”

Despite a backlash of stories countering his glossy framing of the failed project, Adeyemi is still celebrated for his design. He recently constructed a third model of the school at a design event in Belgium. (The second two incarnations were built in Europe.) The concept, he wrote in an Instagram post on the project, is “learning from Makoko.” He wrote of the original school in the present tense, never mentioning its dramatic demise, and described the

newest model as “another positive step forward” following “7 years of profound commitment and integrity to our work and to people we serve, embracing challenges and prejudice...” The relentless spin on top of the tragic collapse and community frustration begs the question of who benefits? If the Makoko Floating School fell down and no longer exists in Makoko, but Adeyemi continues to earnestly defend it—talking over locals who complained about inutility—and is now building replicas abroad, who was this school for? For Adeyemi? For Europeans to enjoy at design events as they imagine a poor world 4,000 miles South? It is clear that the school is not, at present, for Makoko, since it does not exist there. Is the story worth repeating and celebrating if it did not meet the community’s needs? And what of the fear of failure? A more generative conversation might have been possible if instead of fighting over narratives about the school, Adeyemi publicly apologized for the collapse, and opened dialogue around how and why this particular incarnation was unsustainable. Failure could be a transformative learning experience were it not for the crippling shame that surrounds it.

Map making is about bringing what is considered outside into a perceived inside. It is about delineating and labeling the void, imposing “zones of order” onto the “maelstrom of entropy.” There’s nothing wrong with that so long as these previously undocumented places are understood to be as whole and real as the documented ones. And as documentation continues to expand, there must be space for the stories themselves, for forms of narration and documentation to be different. Expansion is not telling the whole world’s story in a single framework. It is exploding the center all together. It is learning to listen to the “untranslatable other.” It is embracing simultaneous modernities, multiple nows.

I was asked to write an essay on humanitarian architecture, and I am writing about myth making and frameworks for reality. This is because I think the fundamental problem with philanthropic building projects are the underlying assumptions of the field. “The world is moving outwards and can no longer be structured in terms of the center/periphery relation. It has to be defined in terms of a set of intersecting centers, which are both different from and related to one another,” Sudanese art historian Salah M. Hassan wrote. To impose our own definitions of justice, freedom, success, advancement, progress, etc is a subtle violence. To open ourselves to the endless permutations of reality, on the other hand, is liberating. It is also a pre-requisite for effective engagement in spaces where we are new. It is possible, that at the end of this conversation there will be no humanitarian architecture. Perhaps a truer hero narrative is one that is not charitable or transactional but rather is symbiotic and equalizing. It is likely a much more subtle interaction than the hierarchical imposition of a charitable gift, and it might be a surprising story, one that is difficult to package and showcase. But, the universe is largely uncontainable and mysterious. Change and growth are nonlinear, and perhaps we should expand our narratives to reflect that.