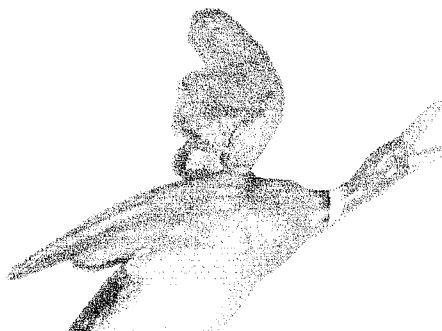


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Cambridge Architecture Journal



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The Editors would like to thank all of this year's contributors who have given their time and work freely. Thanks are also due to:

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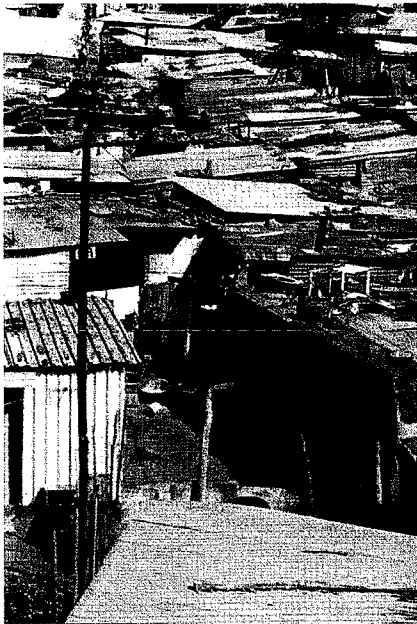
ISSN: 0966-1026

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Printed by Piggott Printers Ltd.

Architectes sans Frontières Cambridge



South African poor shelter.

Architectes sans Frontières Cambridge was established in 2002 by students of architecture, in co-operation with Shelterproject, CURBE (Cambridge University Centre for Risk in the Built Environment) and *Arquitectos sin Fronteras España*. The ASF groups form an international network of Non-Governmental Organisations, comprising volunteers in the building trades, including architects, anthropologists, planners, engineers, designers, builders and instructors. Members seek to articulate innovative and socially committed concepts and practices of architecture and urban design, in development, relief, sustainability and aid, both in the *Fourth World* and in Developing Countries, in order to promote intercultural learning and support practical and theoretical projects. ASF-Cambridge owes its heritage to the continental tradition of ...*sans Frontières* organisations and as such combines:

1. Compensatory or remedial work on behalf of those abandoned by current forms of provision.
2. The widespread and thorough critique of those imperfections in our global socio-economic system accessible to amelioration.
3. The identification of mechanisms for providing such ameliorations, giving people more say over their built environment than the broader socio-political environment necessarily implies.

Along these lines ASF-Cambridge adopts an overall ethical approach to development which includes self-sustainable strategies for communities to acquire resources. Towards this end, ASF collaborates with the And Albert Foundation, which forms long term 'ethical trading' relationships with tribes and village communities in Ghana, Cambodia and Thailand. This helps them to preserve their traditional crafts and construction methods in ways which allow their development through the application of their skills. ASF-Cam members are travelling to Ghana to maintain the 'ethical trade' contacts and to learn how the tribes' environment can be preserved and developed, building from their own cultural roots. The And Albert foundation, with the contribution of ASF-Cam, is setting up educational 'global villages' in the UK, where children can interact and learn from these crafts and diverse, reproduced buildings. The objects made can be purchased, contributing to an ongoing preservation and constructive use of traditional craftsmanship from which we can all learn.

Our member Katy Marks spent a year in Soweto, South Africa working with an organisation called IMAGO, which has informed modes of practice that ASF Cambridge supports. What follows is an account of that experience.

Listening to our feelings

Many of the problems that we identify in economically poorer countries are symptomatic of the politically and ecologically exploitative lifestyles of the wealthy West. Therefore, dealing with development is an opportunity for us to learn about how we ourselves live, as well as to teach and to co-create. ASF-Cambridge recognises the reciprocity of design as a process engaging 'experts' and local communities in dialogue. The ethos is that in helping other people, we are helping ourselves. AWB is about locating and exploring the links between architectural and urban issues in our own societies and those in 'developing world' contexts, so that when we do begin to apply ourselves to practical work, this work is done with an understanding that goes beyond a desire to help or provide a technical 'fix'. Instead, our work will orient itself within a wider global context as it remains mindful of the role that we as practitioners play in the evolution of both problems and solutions in our own societies and around the world.



International Women's day, Soweto, South Africa, 2002.

Anyone who has ever worked in a developing world context will know, deep down, that there is something in addition to the urge to 'help' that is driving them. Something deeply personal is involved in the often highly emotional, physical and intellectual

challenges that can be experienced in this type of work. And yet this is hard to admit. It is not fashionable and in many ways it just looks erroneous. In some cases altruism is actually mistaken. It seems exploitative, self-centred, almost residually colonial to do things for our own reasons. And it would be wrong if these motivations far outweigh anything else. Yet it is normal to experience these contrasting feelings. However, all too often we do not openly admit our motivations to ourselves and to others, preventing us from reflecting on how this self-interest may be related to or be balanced by the real needs of others.

And yet we dive in naively, genuinely wanting to be helpful, but often not knowing how to help or what is needed, just knowing that we want to feel we are helping and, perhaps, thinking we have good ideas to contribute. In reality, the most profound change may be the change in our attitude. If we could only admit this to ourselves and to our colleagues, but most importantly to the people whom we work for and with, we would begin to realise the limits of our own capability and understanding. That is where the design begins; that is where co-creation starts to happen and when a group of people together start to have the confidence to express and to realise their own ideas.

Supporting IMAGO's project in Soweto, South Africa

In September 2002, 40,000 delegates from all over the world descended on Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Down the road in the township of Soweto an alternative scene - or barren 'mountain' - presented itself. This was a wasteland, a no-go area ingrained in the community memory as a place steeped in the history of the 'struggle' against apartheid, but more recently scarred by the violence of social deprivation. Rape, muggings and murder were all commonplace. For the community in Soweto, this urban sore also represented a space that they wanted to reclaim as a communal gathering place.

Meanwhile, I had just finished my Part I architectural studies and was working with a small, multi-disciplinary group of friends. Our group is called IMAGO... a kind of think (and do) tank of 'social entrepreneurs'. We had worked together in the past on a number of projects and were invited by various U.N. affiliated groups and NGO's to contribute to the summit process in whatever way we saw as appropriate. We saw the problem of 'summit' as an event, the inevitable mad-dash compromise of values and contradictions of location. Delegates held in militarised Hilton hotels, with NGO's and government starkly separated, not only from each other, but also from the reality of the human and ecological communities outside. We rapidly became far more interested in creating a space in which ordinary people could engage with the issues being discussed at the summit, on their own terms and on their own turf.

Few people in Soweto had any concept of what 'sustainable development' could mean. It also became clear that the identity of whoever was deciding what sustainable development *should* mean for them, was confused. To be honest, we were all bewildered by this jargon, but it seemed clear that the people who really should have been deciding had no voice. In February 2001, with breathtaking irony, the national parks authority had just cut down the few remaining trees in the Tshiawelo area of Soweto because they were seen as a security risk! This coincided with our first visit to South Africa and, after long discussions between February and August 2001, we agreed to join this community on their barren 'mountain' and with them, embarked on a profound practical and ideological redefinition of 'Summit'. This 'real summit' became work in progress; a process of active exploration and redefinition of 'words misunderstood'; words like 'sustainability', 'progress', 'community' and 'space'. It became clear early on



Celebration around the transformed water tank, Soweto.



Dmozo Workshop.

that the only way our work could leave a lasting legacy would be for 'sustainability' to be redefined and nurtured by the process itself.

As an architecture student on my year out, I saw this 'mountain' as an opportunity to question my own ideas of what the purpose of architecture is and the nature of its process. I was working with a community who were sick of being systematically degraded; tired of being the guinea pigs for 'white liberals' who came to 'help', with a long list of what often seemed to them like patronising and self-indulgent ideas. During my first few months in South Africa, I spent time visiting various small 'community' projects to see how they worked. These projects had been initiated by philanthropic organizations and individuals, NGO's and government institutions, often with what seemed like very sound ideas to do with low cost housing, renewable energy and local exchange trading systems.



Art Workshop wall hangings. Soweto.

Everywhere I went, I took members of the Soweto community with me and asked them to comment on why they thought these ideas did not seem to catch on in the community at large. They always laughed and said: "Where's the community? This is just an office!" It became clear that our project had to be about redefining our concept of 'community' and that all practical ideas and solutions proposed had to stem from this source. In this context, the process of ideas generation was as important, if not more so, than the final solution itself in terms of its long-term success.

We began with about five people brainstorming in the back yard of a charismatic community initiator, Mandla Mntoo, who was the real brain behind the project. We chose a name - SOMOHO - short for SOWeto-reMOHO meaning *Soweto together* in Sesotho. Gradually, as more people heard about what we were doing, and as we managed to raise more money (about £80,000 in total), discussion and activities crystallized around six groupings; performing arts (live music and mixing decks, dance, poetry and drama), crafts (papier-mâché sculpture, traditional beadwork, batik and paper making), cookery (baking and traditional meals), environment (gardening and building) and communication (recording the process using digital audio, film and photographic techniques). It was important to all of us that activities, discussions and eventual solutions should grow from what people were already interested in and the skills that they had or wanted to develop.

Principally my work involved facilitating the organisation of these activity groups. The pool of talent was immense, but still it took several months for each group to find a common purpose. During this time I ran a process of design workshops with each of the groups, exploring how they might inhabit the mountain site as the forum for their activities. For example, with the cookery group, I brought clay and asked the group to model their ideal cooking and eating space. All the spaces were round and none with a radius longer than an arms length, because everyone ate communally and shared the same food bowls. With the art group, I asked questions such as 'do you like to work alone or in a group, or a combination?', 'describe your working day'. I asked them to express their answers in the form of painted diagrams, which we then discussed. With the performing arts group, we used sound, discussion, role play and drawing, whilst in the land group, I ran practical workshops to test various materials, techniques and forms.



Catering Workshop, locals design their ideal tables.

By the time of the World Summit, we had managed to secure a nine and a half year lease for the land, built an experimental earth bag structure and had renovated the water tower on site. I designed the steel staircase and suggested the creation of safety shutters in each facet of the tower. The rest came from everyone else. We ran a competition in local schools for children to come up with design proposals for the shutters and then construction was carried out by members of the community using old bits of bicycle. As a result of the design process, we also began to build the first

phase of a community centre - a large round meeting hall built of rammed earth tyres and earth bags.

It was hard to get planning permission for all this. Earth was seen as a new and 'alternative' material, and when combined with car tyres, it fell outside restrictions. But it happened...eventually. Most importantly, our building methods were not expressed as some sort of solution to a wider problem. This was a research project that we had all agreed to take part in and that others could learn from. We systematically tested rammed earth tyres, papercrete, earth bag technology, earth and cow dung combinations, bottles, plastics and recycled metals. These methods were then to be assessed by the builders and users before they would recommend them as appropriate or not for any other context within the community. Equally importantly, this process was bringing people together in a culturally and educationally rich environment. During the summit, thousands of delegates came to the site to visit including the Prime Minister of Canada, Scotland's First Minister, Kofi Annan and the director of the World Health Organization.

Now that the circus has gone, work continues. The art group sells their work; the performing arts group runs music workshops in local schools and is paid to perform at private and public functions all over South Africa. The media group is making 'fly-on-the-wall' type documentaries for local TV and the land group is being paid to rehabilitate wastelands all over Soweto... When I left, I found a South African architect to continue my work.

It was hard. It was emotionally, physically, intellectually and morally exhausting. In realising the limits of my own capability and understanding; admitting to myself and everyone around me that I was there to learn as much as to give, I began to relax into my role. That was where the design began, where the co-creation started and when people really developed the confidence to express, and to realise their own ideas. It felt like architecture.

This article is compiled from contributions by Katy Marks and Jaime Royo-Olid with the help of Sam Clark and Dr Ilan Kelman, all active members of *Architectes sans Frontières* Cambridge.