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Appropriating Aid and Its Multiple Histories

Hannah le Roux and Viviana d'Auria in Conversation

L'appropriation de l'aide : des récits multiples. Entretien entre Hannah le Roux et Viviana d'Auria

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Appropriating Aid and Its Multiple Histories
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Hannah le Roux
Architect and Curator, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Viviana d'Auria
Associate professor, KU Leuven, Belgium

This is a conversation between Hannah le Roux and Viviana d'Auria that started at the conference *Architecture/Foreign Aid: Architectural Training and Research in the Foreign Aid-Funded Knowledge Economy* in 2021, and which we elaborated upon further upon meeting in Brussels in 2023. Responding to Hannah le Roux's lecture, "Hacking Aid: Minimalism, Care and Appropriation as Architectural Strategies", Viviana d'Auria spoke from her experience in the architectural education of future experts. The resulting conversation circulated around four topics: (1) the nature of the development expert in the late 1950s to 1980s; (2) the way some experts pushed back against the payback implicit in development aid; (3) the educational initiatives that took place in relation to these formations; and (4) the architectural histories of development aid's growth and strategies to counteract the hegemonic narratives.

PART 1 — Development Experts and Aid Hackers

Viviana d'Auria: What stood out in your talk is the need to revise the vantage points from which architectural histories of development aid are written. One of the most interesting and also increasingly scrutinized points at the moment in architectural history writing is the formation and the consolidation of a certain kind of development expertise, particularly as the notion of development has, for several decades now, come under intense criticism. At the same time, the overarching—and pre-eminently dismissive—narrative we have seen consolidate around development also deserves to be nuanced. The notion of development itself, to begin with, shifted from its initial stance linked with economic growth to a more multi-dimensional and ever-changing notion that sought to integrate additional perspectives and various kinds and forms of expertise under its aegis. The "con-disciplinary" science of human

settlements, also known as Ekistics, is an example of a new expertise emerging from this context, one that was especially meaningful for architecture and urban planning.

But for many of the related fields, including the design disciplines, the reformulations of development also came with particular labels that covered the shifting terrain between operating contextually and tackling universal issues, a double posture which was at the core of developmentalism. How architects and urban planners became experts capable of "acting globally" therefore, is another process worth probing into to understand the forms of knowledge on which development is based. Anthropologist Richard Rottenburg has illustrated how such knowledge forms relate to representations within an organizational field that self-perpetuates the need for its existence *and* for more development.[1] During the decades that have come under scrutiny in the *Architecture/Foreign Aid* conference, mega-scale development projects such as dams and the like offered space for constructing many different labels concerning the knowledges required for their implementation. These included self-proclaimed experts as founders of new disciplines, sometimes adopting a language of "experimentation".

Thus, within the United Nations system, as Mónica Pacheco has recently underscored, influence was mainly exercised through the ways in which knowledge production was defined, including its systematization and global dissemination.[2] One of the well-known persons who started reflecting on the global trajectory of development practitioners, was a UN expert himself, namely Charles Abrams, who co-authored over 20 reports as a result of partaking in various technical missions. He started working with this idea of having a clear demarcation between what he called "experts" and "inperts". Already from his early missions to Turkey and Ghana in 1954, Abrams' emphasis on education was linked to that of forging a novel professional identity, which Pacheco has termed a "superhero" capable of combining multiple skills such as housing design, urban planning, and community development. We have witnessed important accounts of the emergence of this new professional profile, and how particular kinds of expertise entailed particular epistemic hierarchies.

Burak Erdim, for example, provides a compelling account of the contentious dynamic between "international experts" and "local inperts" used by Abrams

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1 Richard Rottenburg, *Far-Fetched Facts. A Parable of Development Aid,* Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2009 (Inside Technology).

2 Mónica Pacheco, "Rehearsing experts and 'inperts': crossing transnational housing narratives in West Africa," *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2022. DOI: 10.1080/02665433.2022.2108887

when referring to Turkish professionals and bureaucrats.[3] This would ultimately enable the formation of another type of expert that Erdim, in connection to the establishment of the Middle East Technical University (METU, Ankara) and Turkey's brand-new school of architecture and planning, calls "landed international". Ijlal Muzaffar, in turn, has discussed the "impossible local expert", not so much as a question of race, but rather as underscoring the necessity that United Nations Technical Assistance Administration (UNTAA) experts should not be associated with any particular national context, since such association allowed the expert's opinion to be perceived in a political light and diminished his authority related to belonging to an international sphere.[4] As such, the expert would lose "perspective and status" and the country would gain "only another civil servant".

To take these stories beyond the narratives of "failed inperts" and of a global and technical diplomacy, excavating knowledge formation can chart who may have chosen to operate otherwise and to negotiate their role within development aid—hunting the "aid hackers" as you called it in your talk, underlining the agency of singular trajectories as suggested in the work of, for instance, Łukasz Stanek. It becomes important to embrace more nuanced accounts where multi-directionality, multi-sitedness, plural perspectives, and collaborative practices might also be part of the picture. Such dimensions are worth further reflecting on when we start considering a critique of this way of framing expertise. How did appropriation and more ambivalent sites of practice come about? These other hi/stories about expertise can become much more "experience-based" and may recount how privileges were relinquished or how vicissitudes for keeping with a certain moral posture were endured.

Hannah le Roux: There was a biting but probably accurate picture of the development expert painted by Arundhati Roy where she talked about a generic consultant at a time in the 1990s when some 2.5 billion dollars were being earned on overseas contracts by UK consultants.[5] In relation to the EIA's—Environmental Impact Assessments—they wrote, she writes of the "development racket". In such reports—say for a big dam project—consultants were not allowed to say anything critical because otherwise they became what

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3 Burak Erdim, *Landed Internationals: Planning Cultures, the Academy, and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2020.

4 M. Ijlal Muzaffar, *The Periphery Within. Modern Architecture and the Making of the Third World*, PhD dissertation, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

5 Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living: The Greater Common Good and the End of the Imagination,* London: Flamingo, 1999.

she calls an "out-of-work consultant", an OOWC, jeopardizing their Range Rover, holidays in Tuscany, and the children's private boarding schools. She talked about the good money in poverty and coined the term "fascist maths" to describe how the development experts brought in to justify mega projects enumerated bodies served and discounted those displaced.

In trying to find a more positive history of the development aid period, we need to, on the one hand, see such figures as representative of a cynical class of development aid experts, but also to look for "counter experts" who distort that picture. What is the position of somebody who becomes an out-of-work consultant, who is willing to risk high-end perks in favor of something else? And what is that other work, and what is its impact? Those are the rarer stories that I've been collecting. Another question that comes up, of course, is whether any local experts were able to take this work instead. More often than not—to reaffirm Viviana's observation concerning inperts and experts—even if you were an inpert, you were not supposed to be an inpert in your own country so that your expertise would be deracinated from local interests or political affiliations. You might have been a global consultant *from* the Global South, but not at home, and therefore not party to corruption and agendas. Perhaps we could consider increases in corruption over time as a sort of tiny subquestion, but a very important one.

The role of local experts was different—they might have, for instance, knowledge of working with vernacular materials or which kind of programs might be emancipatory, whether farming, theatre, or printing. The work of such people was made marginal to that of the experts in development aid. However, I don't think that they were fully distant. They were central, for instance to translating and disseminating building materials and construction. An obvious example is earth construction, which is first documented from local aid workers, then codified in the form of block-making machines, or through protocols by designer builders like A.E.S. Alcock who promoted "swishcrete" in the Gold Coast, Laurie Baker in Kerala, or CRAterre in Francophone Africa, and then returned through the training of local cultural and building practitioners. Those circulations are not that straightforward. Their lineages also lead us to the bigger question of the afterlives of buildings or projects, both at the scale of technologies, and also at the scale of the built project's appropriation.

Viviana d'Auria: Appropriations have indeed been important to look into. We did so together in 2017, when we discussed the interest of understanding appropriation as an act of subversion against spatial and cultural hegemony

which would also manifest itself in material terms.[6] We examined the potential meaning of such appropriations in a number of sites, testing the hypothesis that there might be a kind of third term generated by the outcome of an ambivalent interplay between the developmental frame and its contestation. This understanding of appropriation also supports the idea of moving beyond a static image of buildings and what they represented, and understanding how the appropriations enacted through daily inhabitation could act as a counter figure too. While modernism at large was the focus of our past work, this view on appropriation related to insurgencies in the domain of developmentalist initiatives too. What we can read in the appropriations of developmental projects says something about post-development alternatives in that they embody a critique to development and its material manifestations. This contestation should not be set in a reductive action-reaction relationship but rather viewed as an interplay. This would also entail looking at decades-long transformations not just at the scale of buildings, but at the scale of larger sites that can actually show how contestations accumulate. The areas around the Volta Lake in Ghana for example, have completely transfigured the kind of territory that dam-induced development was expected to materialize: the seamlessness of transportation and mobility of goods, the mechanization of agriculture, etc. which actually did not happen as foreseen. Taken together, these appropriations generate a very different interpretation of that territory. But maybe you have something to add on appropriation as well, Hannah?

Hannah le Roux: Scales of appropriation are interesting. One scale involves foreign experts adapting indigenous construction technology—in what we might call cultural appropriation—followed by their codification. Experts are metrics-driven and have resources to finance the machines and the economies of scale that would support the creation of multiple buildings. The buildings may then get reappropriated too, but so do the technologies. In a second leap in scale, as these projects become larger, for instance in the creation of zones to resettle workers that were deemed necessary in the name of development, they contribute to other cultures that were not foreseen, including economic ones. But there is another scale of appropriation that I think became very relevant. This was the local appropriation of development aid projects for influence or reward to constituencies. As development aid started to become a tool of political governance, it might have become distasteful for some professionals to work in this field.

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6 Viviana d'Auria and Hannah le Roux, "Quand la vie prend le dessus : les interactions entre l'utopie bâtie et l'habiter," *CLARA*, no. 4, 2017, p. 9-28. DOI: 10.3917/clara.004.0009

PART 2 – Payback and Pushback

Viviana d'Auria: This brings us back to the issue of corruption as a dimension that further complicates the ambivalence of development aid and impacts and replicates, even multiplies, the way privileges start being distributed across the organizational field that links "donors" to the "recipients" of aid schemes and funding. Development cooperation schemes set up a very particular and very precise kind of logic that does not dissipate with flagship independence despite the impulse of liberation movements. It hinders the possibility of a clear rupture between colonial and post-colonial phases, a transition that ultimately became much more complicated than a more distinctive shift from one phase to the next. Nonetheless, we should not dismiss that development was also heralded as a means to decolonize at the same time. However, as the realization of the nation state, as a constructive unit, became increasingly important and primordial, achieving decolonization at such a scale was inevitably complex. Indicatively, development was all about "nations", with the UN as the apotheosis of this way of conceiving the constituencies and boundaries of development cooperation.

It meant setting up a logic that promoted large-scale projects for development. Nations had to undergo urbanization and industrialization, they had to initiate nationwide housing programs, new towns, hydroelectric power schemes, and forced resettlement processes of all kinds, etc. Most tragically, however, these large-scale development projects occurred when the economic bias of development was not only dominant but at its maximum. Projects came with an economic framework that was heavily unjust, initiating and then consolidating the proliferation and deepening of debt. Today we still hear ironic calls from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to reduce developing countries' "debt distress" to enable global prosperity, and these kinds of pleas appear largely oblivious of the unfair financial architecture that was put in place while development aid was becoming increasingly widespread and pervasive.

Hannah le Roux: The initial and very schematic idea of the colonizers was that they would continue to get a return on their earlier investments in building the colony. It was seen as a kind of extractive machine that would continue to bear fruit for them, and development thinking followed in the same vein. A very clear image of this is Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew's reconfiguration in the 1940s of the village around the truck park (**fig. 1**). In the scheme they promoted, the access road and the truck park were the most modern and most fluid of all the infrastructures, pushing away washing spots next to the river

or old trees or the palaver places along the windy road, or even eliminating them in building the hinterland network. Here the return on investment involves access to cheap commodities, but it's not direct. It's not people who are immediately paying back money for the buildings, but rather the whole geography that's being placed "in development". This bears future fruits for the neo-colonial state, which will develop through debt.

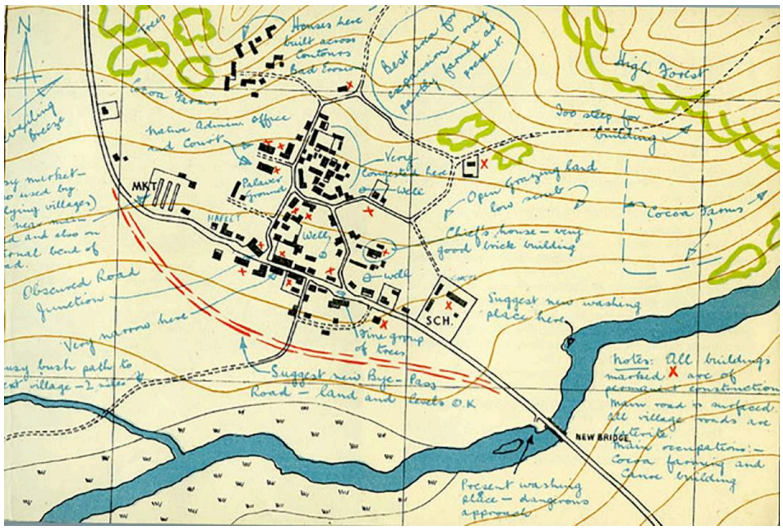

Figure 1: Example of a village survey, West Africa.

Source: Jane B. Drew, E. Maxwell Fry, in collaboration with Harry L. Ford. *Village Housing in the Tropics,* London: Lund Humphries, 1947 (reprinted 1953), p. 3.

Something worth more study is the shift in the late 1970s towards microloans as a way to extend the logic of development debt to projects of sites and services, and so to self-help recipients to buy building materials. It stimulated, along with the development of building materials suppliers, a scattered distribution of micro-sized packets of cement. Asbestos cement products, windows, electrical goods, and so on were made available so that the once emancipatory notion of self-help also became an entry point for the market-driven expansionism of British, Belgian, American, Swiss, and other constructed products. There is a conflation implicit here between the postcolonial country and the postcolonial market. This market expanded at scale because once people could access loans against their own land there was a much larger demand for materials and services. The other loans are the ones Arundhati Roy is talking about for the dams and other grand schemes—mines, so-called development projects, grand highways, ports—which almost inevitably have partners in foreign construction companies, or perhaps

build up a local elite of construction interests. Together they create indebted individuals and countries.

For experts whose affiliations were local, this shift created an unfair and inequitable situation. Payback on loans is burdensome and it really can only be achieved through more resource extraction, which has its own negative impacts. Some of these figures suffered—to some degree or another—a crisis of conscience about what they were doing. After an initial enthusiasm about the idea of development, they quickly realized that they were part of a larger machine of extraction. They became uncomfortable. Given that they were also operating at the time when the grand resistance movements to colonization had ended, since nominally the countries were no longer colonized but independent, a lot of the rhetoric was still there and segued into narratives of cultural decolonization.

An interesting figure in this regard is Albert Memmi, who expressed sympathy with the project of decolonization but at the same time came to recognize that in his own identity as an Algerian Jew, he could not be Berber or an Arab indigene. His role was different. His classic text on *The Colonizer and the Colonized* also includes *the colonizer who refuses*: someone who acknowledges their position as colonizer, but who tries to refuse to perpetuate certain agendas and to rather create solidarity with the locals.[7] But Memmi came to the conclusion that this is also an impossible identity: someone will never fully be accepted as a local person. Ultimately the refuser, like the rest of the colonizing community, leaves the colonized country, unable to continue to practice radical empathy or support for that project of decolonization, at least there. This negative identity is another thing that the figures I spoke of had in common. They did not dig in. They did not die in the countries where they practiced. They almost inevitably return home to their birth country, even after decades in the field and despite holding much sympathy and strong friendships with decolonial figures. They did not continue to operate there. Their refusal to remain as experts might be equivalent in architectural practice to Memmi's characterization of colonizers who refused. Even as their work leant towards solidarity, respect, and transfers in relation to indigenous placemaking, so their awareness of not-belonging became more clear.

7 Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* [first published as *Portrait du colonisé,* précédé du *Portrait du colonisateur*, Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1957], London: Earthscan, 2003.

PART 3 – Education and Re-Education

Viviana d'Auria: Well, the building of expertise we discussed earlier did not stop at the planning and transformation of the built environment, but started extending from the field of architecture and planning to how planners, future planners, and architects would be trained. The advisors to planning bodies, became advisors to training institutes as these too were established since the nexus between housing, education, and development was a crucial one. As part of a highly recognizable mechanism of assuming that there was a lack of particular skills in particular sites, which was typical of a developmental standpoint, the shortage of trained or skilled professionals became a major point underscored in the reports that experts like Charles Abrams or Otto Königsberger compiled after their missions as part of the UN technical diplomacy.[8] This lack of skilled professionals meant that "development experts" started presenting the need, the necessity, in fact, for setting up architecture and urban planning schools across the world in sites that were rapidly developing and urbanizing so that development could be followed through, and its physical manifestation could gain impetus. It happened with the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana, and with the Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) in Indonesia between 1958 and 1965, and their respective institutional histories offer glimpses into the complexity of how geo-politics played out in their establishment.[9] Individual agencies and non-alignment offered scope for interpreting the content of curricula being set up, especially in the mid-term. The histories of these particular training bodies deserve a kind of nuanced description themselves. Their establishment follows a developmentalist agenda, but they are also sites for contesting or at least re-articulating a particular professional

8 Charles Abrams, Vladimir Bodiansky and Otto H. G. Koenigsberger, *Report on housing in the Gold Coast*, New York, NY: United Nations Technical Assistance Administration, 1956. As indicated in the Foreword (p. iii), the report consists of two volumes of which the first refers to the visit by the Mission between October 1954 and January 1955, whereas the second resulted from Otto Koenigsberger's return visit as Housing Co-ordinator for a period of 7 months in 1956. Also included in the report as an Annex was Robert Gardner-Medwin and J.A.L. Matheson's 1956 report for the Council of Kumasi College of Technology.

9 KNUST's history has been recounted by several authors. Of relevance to this conversation are: Burak Erdim, "Revolution or a Country of Transition: Community Planning a New Profession in Decolonizing Ghana and Beyond," *Arris*, vol. 27, p. 22-35, 2016. DOI: 10.1353/arr.2016.0002; Albert Brenchat-Aguilar, "Functional Environs: Austin Tetteh's Situated World(mak)ing Planning Practice, 1950-80, "*Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002, p. 458-485. DOI: 10.1080/13264826.2023.2180808. For a detailed account of ITB's establishment, including UNTAA's involvement, see: Ellen Shoshkes, "Jaqueline Tyrwhitt: The United Nations and Planning Education in Indonesia," *OASE*, no. 95, 2015, themed issue *Crossing Boundaries. Transcultural Practices in Architecture and Urbanism,* p. 73-84. URL: https://www.oasejournal.nl/en/Issues/95/JaquelineTyrwhitt. Accessed 21 December 2023.

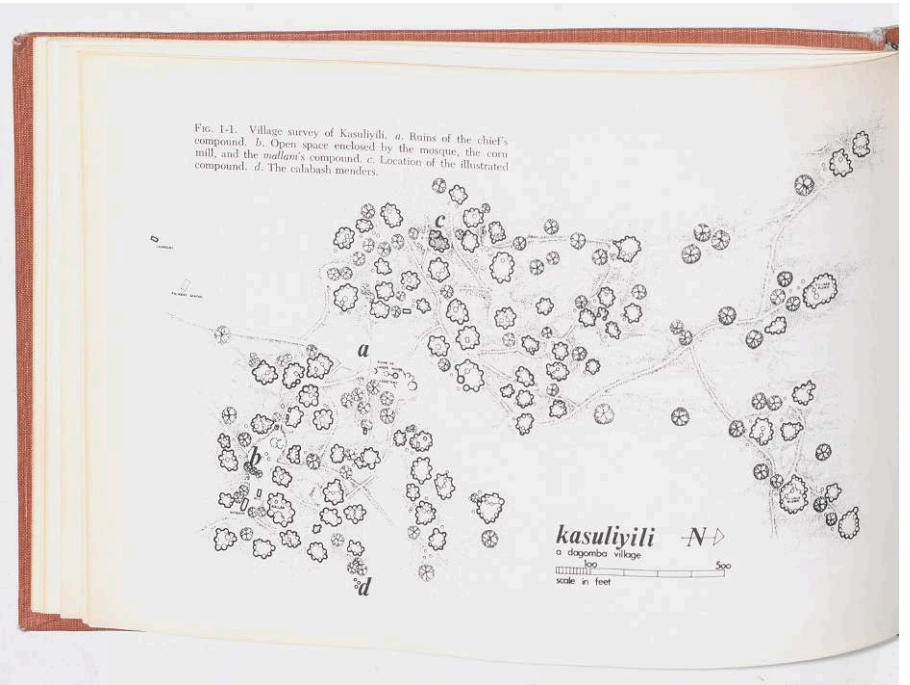

Figure 2: Kasuliyili, a Dagomba village.

Source: Labelle Prussin, *Architecture in Northern Ghana: A Study of Forms and Functions*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969, p. 24-25.

profile. The description of what an architectural project should look like, the materials used, what scales and conventions should be followed, what should be considered heritage or become matters of concern.

These are real questions that come to the fore in looking at the programs and the curricula set out. The moment of optimism that was part and parcel of early decolonization meant that teaching content—as with other fields—was considered as a transformable and transformative matter. We see how, for the KNUST, documenting the evolution of some of the forced resettlement townships that had been implemented during the 1960s as part of the Volta River Project, sets the scene for a critical re-consideration of vernacular architectures, without essentialism.[10] These spontaneous transformations had previously been labeled as "unauthorized structures" by the professionals

10 Following the *Occasional Reports* published by KNUST Faculty throughout the 1960s, which focused on sites where major infrastructural projects had been implemented, the KNUST Faculty of Architecture published the magazine *Environ* in the late 1970s. The second issue in March 1978 included surveys of the resettlement township of Makongo, where the originally proposed extensions were contrasted with the actually built ones, epitomizing a reflection on development schemes, housing types and indigenous building traditions.

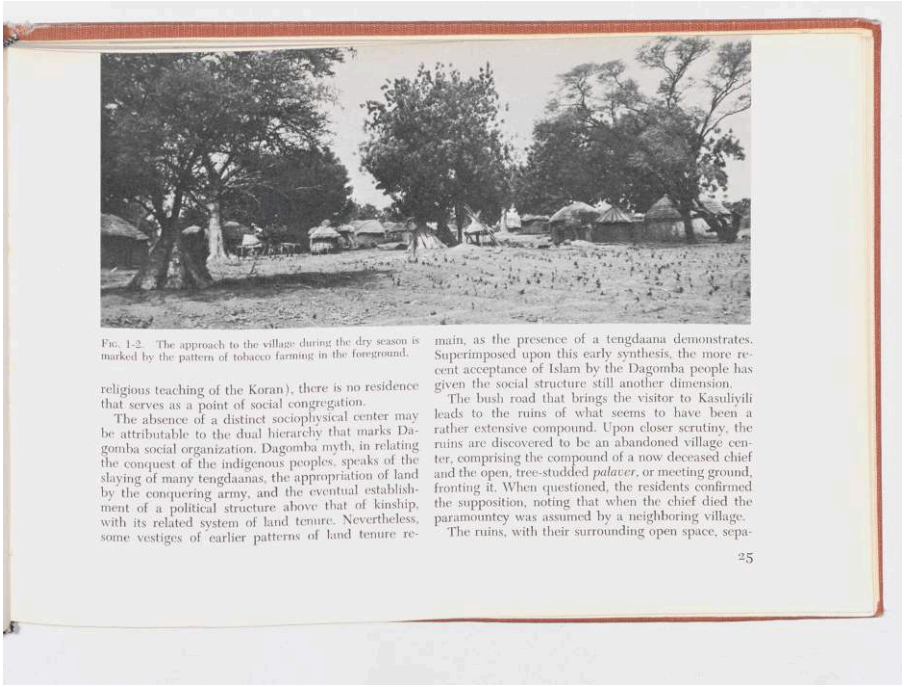

FIG. 1-2. The approach to the village during the dry season is marked by the pattern of tobacco farming in the foreground.

religious teaching of the Koran), there is no residence that serves as a point of social congregation.

The absence of a distinct sociophysical center may be attributable to the dual hierarchy that marks Dagomba social organization. Dagomba myth, in relating the conquest of the indigenous peoples, speaks of the slaying of many tengdaanas, the appropriation of land by the conquering army, and the eventual establishment of a political structure above that of kinship, with its related system of land tenure. Nevertheless, some vestiges of earlier patterns of land tenure remain, as the presence of a tengdaana demonstrates. Superimposed upon this early synthesis, the more recent acceptance of Islam by the Dagomba people has given the social structure still another dimension.

The bush road that brings the visitor to Kasuliyili leads to the ruins of what seems to have been a rather extensive compound. Upon closer scrutiny, the ruins are discovered to be an abandoned village center, comprising the compound of a now deceased chief and the open, tree-studded *palaver*, or meeting ground, fronting it. When questioned, the residents confirmed the supposition, noting that when the chief died the paramountcy was assumed by a neighboring village.

The ruins, with their surrounding open space, sepa-

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monitoring the evolution of the new townships.[11] Such townships were expected to grow by subscribing to a fixed layout and be built by using modern materials for which micro-loans were made available, revealing both the normative mindset behind the regulatory frameworks governing housing transformation, and their logic as a debt-burdened construction scheme.

So at the KNUST, some of the staff involved in teaching started examining what had actually happened at the Volta River Project's first manifestations, they began looking at sites which have not yet been caught in the maelstrom of development, heritage that had been previously neglected, including, for example, the indigenous settlement patterns from northern Ghana, that Labelle Prussin would document (**fig. 2**).

The lack of skilled professionals in the so-called "global South" did not only lead to the establishment of new training institutions there. Development cooperation schemes also translated into setting up new programs elsewhere, with a whole set of sites for training professionals being set up in the "North". Professionals attending such programs would supposedly return to their

11 Miles Danby, "House Design," *in* Robert Chambers (ed.), *The Volta Resettlement Experience*, London: Pall Mall Press, 1970, p. 176.

home countries and become transformative agents of change. There are a number of such programs still present in Europe, of which some were initiated with the patronage of the United Nations. There are only a handful remaining today, such as the Development Planning Unit at University College London (UCL), or the Master of Human Settlements at the KU Leuven. The way they continue to articulate an interdisciplinary approach to the built environment is thought-provoking, and it is of interest to see what kind of changes have been made to their curricula in the course of their five to six decades of existence. There is often an emphasis on on-site training and intensive fieldwork, which comes with a whole set of challenges, ethical questions, and interrogations about participants' positionality. In Leuven for example, fieldwork is viewed as a way to generate trans-local expertise, where a contextual approach is possible together with a critical understanding of the global picture. Does it become any easier for attendees of such programs to become aid hackers? Does it facilitate their professional re-articulation? This process does recall the insistence of John Turner on the importance of self-determination, which also touched upon what he termed his own "re-education" as a professional after experiencing post-earthquake reconstruction in Peru.[12]

Hannah le Roux: The post-Independence period was one of increasing work mobility as well as people moving to teach within a network of new schools, either temporarily, as in the workshops that Julian Beinart and Ulli Beier set up, but also through post-graduate education opportunities mentioned earlier and the CINVA (Inter-American Housing and Planning Center) in South America.[13] The re-formation of people who were trained initially as architects in a conventional sense is interesting. Self-re-education happened in their movement to another center of expertise.

For instance, Alan Vaughan-Richards attended the course in Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association in the 1950s with the view that he would work overseas. Jorge Arrigone went to the CINVA with a view of moving beyond his native Argentina and knowing that his initial architecture degree was not that mobile. Sometimes, university years are emancipatory, but more often than not it is the remplacement that enables change. Moving into

12 John F.C. Turner, "The Reeducation of a Professional," *in* John F.C. Turner and Robert Fichter (eds.), *Freedom to Build, dweller control of the housing process*, London; New York, NY: MacMillan, 1972, p. 122-147. On this note see also: Helen Gyger, "John F.C. Turner in Peru: Reflections on the Development of a Practice," *in* Viviana d'Auria, Bruno de Meulder and Kelly Shannon, *Human Settlements, Formulations and (re)Calibrations*, Amsterdam: SUN Academia, 2010, p. 28-37.

13 Martha L.P. Rodriguez, "El Programa CINVA y la accion comunal," *Bitācora*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2008, p. 185-192.

these new territories of practice seems to have changed people and allowed them to quite consciously think about their own identities, and to provoke work on mimicking indigenous identities and practices. Through this labor there was a reconfiguration of their own practices in a more self-conscious way towards a kind of hybridization of indigenous and effectively modernist approaches.

In another case, Pancho Guedes trained as an architect in Johannesburg and returned to Mozambique, which became his adopted homeland. He worked closely with visual artists and craftsmen because he felt that their kind of unselfconscious mode of design was something that could guide him in his own attempts to self-educate. He also became a strong documentary worker. His photographs of adaptations at street level of the very basic houses explore other forms of expression.[14] These projects use a couple of modalities: one is the visual study, but he also considered how people physically made things. The latter fed into the language of his so-called "clandestine style" of thatch, reeds, and wooden poles. Designing buildings in this way blended them into their surroundings not only aesthetically, but also allowed non-government organizations to place buildings into areas of the city where people were living without proper facilities. They could then carry out education projects that were not controlled by the colonial powers. This kind of clandestine work was one genre of hacking.

Another figure is Labelle Prussin, who we mentioned earlier. She went to Berkeley and was a well-trained architect. She got a position with an international contractor in Ghana but following a car accident, she managed to extract herself from it, to send her daughters to boarding school, and to become a teacher at KNUST and a researcher in Northern Ghana. She started to engage with courtyard architectures and very importantly, female nomadic architectural practices.[15] Alan Vaughan-Richards initially came to Lagos as an employee of the Architects Co-Partnership, but at the time of decolonization married Ayo Vaughan, a Lagosian woman whose family gifted them a piece of land in Ikoyi. He began making connections with local designers and artists through patronage, although with limited resources. He used wood as the cladding for circular forms, while pursuing other technological experiments with organic concrete sections.[16] Both Prussin and Vaughan-Richards were

14 Amancio d'Alpoim Guedes *in* John Donat (ed.), *World Architecture Today*. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1964.

15 Labelle Prussin, *African Nomadic Architecture: Space, Place and Gender*, Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press; The National Museum of African Art, 1995.

16 Hannah le Roux, "Modern Architecture in Post-Colonial Ghana and Nigeria," *Architectural History*,

people whose trajectory was economically not very successful, but one that allowed them to contribute significant alternative perspectives to bigger development projects.

PART 4 – Architectural History and Multiple Micro-Histories

Hannah le Roux: The fourth discussion is around ways to construct histories that create a more nuanced approach to understand development aid and the segue from the colonial to the post-colonial moment. Biography can work as a method to retrieve lost possibilities for de-colonial strategy. In preparing the talk, I scoured the lives and practices of some individuals for evidence of early activism. In doubly foreign ways, they independently found ways—sometimes exploiting, and sometimes relinquishing the privilege of their foreignness—to connect below the radar screen towards diverse, non-sanctioned ends. In the handful of stories, the ambivalent potentials of minimalism, the practice of care, and the double face of appropriation became tools for the counter production of space. These narratives moved beyond the binary of "true believers" and "operational experts" in development projects, and leant on Saskia Sassen's belief that frontier sites can be hacked by the powerless in the process of making.[17]

Biography as a method can give some insight into the shifts that people took across careers and places. Many personal stories have been forgotten or if they were documented, this was sometimes only for one portion of their career which was when they were in the metropolitan spotlight. But they had pre- and post-spotlight lives as well, which are worth looking at because they often go on to repudiate their earlier positions. Biography has value in getting us to understand the long trajectory.

Building biographies also count. Many of the buildings were only visible at the time they were designed. Sometimes again much later, perhaps rescued through a photography project, or if they are significant buildings, when they are faced with demolition. In the meantime, buildings have had their own long life that is really only known to the people who live in them. The disjunction between those who designed them and those who lived in them is

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vol. 47, 2004. URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1568827. Accessed 21 December 2023.

17 Kim De Raedt, "Between 'True Believers' and Operational Experts: UNESCO Architects and School Building in Post-Colonial Africa," *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2014. DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2014.881905; Saskia Sassen, "Cities Help Us Hack Formal Power Systems," *in* Maria Manuela Mendes, Teresa Sá and João Cabral (eds.), *Architecture and the Social Sciences: Inter- and Multidisciplinary Approaches between Society and Space*, Springer International, 2017.

a huge, problematic part of our historiography—Western historiography—of development architecture. So there are a lot of blind spots to address.

Viviana d'Auria: A second method we have been talking about deals with what scholars have termed "cross-cultural contact zones" and that within architecture, comprise materials that have been neglected to date.[18] These architectural contact zones were substantially present in the world of development aid, and included proceedings, journals, reports, minutes of meetings, summer schools, competitions and so forth. As has been pointed out, this array of materials offers a conception of architectural development that is based on a more global and multidirectional exchange of knowledge. Moreover, these materials can also reveal internal debates or contentions around certain questions that are bypassed when the emphasis remains on the material outcome of a certain decision-making process. One telling example is presented by discussions around housing standards in the context of the Volta River Project, debated at various meetings between colonial and post-colonial government officials and representatives of aluminum companies at the intersection of comfort, economics and dwelling cultures.[19] We do not know enough about this kind of history of decision-making in the lead up of certain projects. Relatedly, we must also be attentive to the systematic removal of particular voices in final reports which contact zones can on the other hand make more obvious. I am thinking here of the indigenous researchers from the Ahmadu Bello University who supported Max Lock in his urban planning tasks and how they were anonymized, but whose involvement you referred to.[20] As part of these contact zones we can include the curricular propositions, revisions and reforms concerning the teaching content at some of the institutions we have mentioned earlier, where development aid professionals were and in some cases still are being trained.

Hannah le Roux: Perhaps to add to the story of the contact zones is the role of self-published technical literature that circulated between centers of media-making and sites of application. I have been looking at several small collections

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18 Tom Avermaete and Cathelijne Nuijsink, "Architectural Contact Zones: Another Way to Write Global Histories of the Post-War Period?," *Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2021, p. 350-361. DOI: 10.1080/13264826.2021.1939745

19 Meeting minutes of the Volta River Project Working Group "C" are particularly revealing in this regard, and can be consulted at Ithaca (USA), Cornell University, Charles Abrams Papers. See also: Preparatory Commission, *The Volta River Project. 2. Appendices to the Report of the Preparatory Commission*, London: HMSO, 1956.

20 Hannah le Roux, "Comfort, Violence, Care: Decolonising Tropical Architecture at Blida, 1956," *ABE Journal*, no. 17, 2020. DOI: 10.4000/abe.8197

of the gray literature that was used to spread ideas between remote development aid experts. These publications may have circulated through the centralized agencies directly, via traveling experts, as well through personal trades at conferences, and then back again to other development sites. The subject could be technology—sanitation, adobe, roofing. They circulated globally in a very elastic way through people who sometimes only met each other every five years or so, if at all. But there was nonetheless an active circulation of ideas and experience running counter to the hegemonic knowledge that they might have had. Following the mobility of these manuals and other brochures will be important in understanding it as a potential counterproject.

Another insight concerns the narratives of failure. Earlier, I mentioned Jorge Luis Arrigone, who was trying to insert a liberal self-help scheme into the South African apartheid housing policy, in what was in effect a bizarre situation. Ultimately, he only succeeded in building a pilot scheme of less than 50 houses.[21] Narratives of failure are important because there are many such projects that are unfinished, and which are often the sort of object of ridicule and proof of the failure of development aid. However, they are still very interesting for our architectural histories and we do not abandon them because they were not significant in scale, just like Balkrishna Doshi's Belapur housing scheme. Their impact was outsized in relation to their scale, the physical scale. The other famous narrative of failure is a story of New Gourna, where Hassan Fathy reported a very early accusation of vested interests in cement as a building material by officials responsible for specifying low-cost housing.[22] His text gives us an idea of the distant impact of certain materials, companies, service providers, financiers and so on, on what could actually be built. Narratives of failure, therefore, are not the end of stories, but the beginnings of other stories that we need to tell.

In relation to that, I spoke a bit about scale through the complex story of a bridge at Mzamba in South Africa designed and built by a small non-profit team, buildCollective, led by the Austrian architect Marlene Wagner in 2015 (**fig. 3**). A community in rural Pondoland had asked for a bridge so they could cross the river between their tribal land and a casino resort that was built at the end of apartheid and where a lot of their people worked. There was a

21 Hannah le Roux, "CINVA to Siyabuswa: the Unruly Path of Global Self-Help Housing," *in* Vikramaditya Prakash, Maristella Casciata and Daniel E. Coslett (eds.), *Rethinking Global Modernism: Architectural Historiography and the Postcolonial*, London: Routledge, 2021; Jorge Luis Arrigone, *Draft. Core Housing Experimental Project - Siyabuswa. Interim Evaluation Report no. 1 – August, 1980*, National Building Research Institute, JLASHA, 1980.

22 Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt,* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976 (1969).

Figure 3: Mzamba footbridge, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Design / build by buildCollective (Marlene Wagner and Elias Rubin), 2013-2015.

Source: Marlene Wagner.

school on the casino side, but not where the community resides. Children had to cross the river—which had slippery rocks—to and from school daily, and pensioners did the same to get their monthly grant handouts.[23]

But there was a coincidence in time between the building of this bridge and the awarding of a contract for a mega bridge project, part of the South African National Roads Agency's plans—first mooted in the apartheid era—to create a major toll road parallel to the coast. The Mtentu bridge, spanning another divisive coastal river, was designed by the Danish firm Dissing+Weitling in 2007 and lauded as the longest such bridge in Africa—such metrics are always cited.[24] A building contract (around 100 million euros) was awarded to a partnership of South African and Austrian engineering firms who then exited in the face of community and environmental protests against it, as well as the road itself. It is now being completed by a Chinese contractor with South African engineering consultants.

There was no financial or professional connection between the micro and macro projects, but one needs to ask how small acts of development aid, not necessarily in a direct way, open the window towards huge opportunities for

23 "From Mzamba to Mzamba Bridge," 2015. URL: https://buildcollective.net/onsite/from-bridgingmzamba-to-mzambabridge/. Accessed 21 December 2023.

24 "Msikaba and Mtentu Bridges. Danish bridge expertise exported to South Africa," *Dissing and Weitling*. n.d. URL: https://dissingweitling.com/en/project/msikaba-and-mtentu-bridges. Accessed 22 October 2023.

development contracts that come from other countries. As Łukasz Stanek has noted, diplomatic initiatives that result in a gift of a small bridge might align with megaprojects in the same country. But here, the small bridge that connected, and the large one that created conflict within their respective communities in Pondoland are very different. The micro project broke down a kind of geography of exclusion for this particular community and allows them to access rights. It had an out-of-scale impact, which in turn I think led to a kind of agency in the community and the ability to realize they could also resist certain kinds of projects, placing the megaproject on hold for nearly five years. Again, the lines of connection are not that clear to me, but it makes for very interesting history-making where we start to understand how these scales of action, which seem diverse and belong to different stories, could actually be told together. This brings us back perhaps to the beginning, to Arundhati Roy's critique of huge dams and the way in which they can be resisted through multiple small actions, rather than pushing back at the scale of the mega project.

Viviana d'Auria: It becomes interesting to chart, at this point, the kind of interconnections that we can start finding across this conversation. We began by discussing "internal" versus "external" expertise and the importance of disconnecting from the binary thinking that permeates such classifications, which is also reflected in the binary between "micro" and "macro" scales that have been used to interpret development projects and their lives, and start building an assessment of their successes and failures in rather simplistic terms. This evaluation is especially reductive when the place and role of certain projects and technologies is severed from their circulation and impact in knowledge creation, notwithstanding the vicissitudes in actually implementing particular initiatives in certain locales. Another aspect that is scale-sensitive is that of mapping contestations. They might happen implicitly at the scale of modifying, appropriating, and hacking the procedures and materialities of development aid, and may be interesting to look at in their cumulative potential rather than as singular micro-resistances.

At the same time, we should not dismiss the fact that certain scales of action are entangled. In the case of loans within the Volta River Project, for example, they were happening at different scales, but concurrently. Loans for roofs were imagined as the way forward for the forcibly resettled Ghanaians who were expected to take charge of a core house in a new township. At the same time, the nation-state was building up debt to implement the multi-purpose river basin development scheme that would include a dam, new industrial towns, and a harbor, amongst others. What becomes interesting for us is to hold onto

this idea of apprehending and documenting how contestation and resistance started happening. Can we make this appear as a set of practices and sites which have really been neglected because they were "unsuccessful" in developmental terms? Relatedly, documenting the accumulation of appropriations within certain sites over several generations could potentially reveal contestations that might otherwise remain implicit.

Hannah le Roux: There is more research needed. It takes more time to locate particular kinds of media or to start tracking the mobility of certain agents of transformation. It seems that the more one looks, the more there seems to be a multitude of practices at play. I think this richness of sources may not quite be a call for optimism—resources being short for its research—but at least a call to continue to work to push back the kind of hegemonic interpretation of history which connects definitions of development. Once these multiple micro-histories accumulate, we could start seeing them as a field in itself that is quite powerful in a certain sense. At least, using Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's term, they provide evidence to challenge the power of a single story.[25] An important strategy that we can see in recent exhibitions—and we had our discussion soon after viewing *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy* at C.I.II.III.IV.A-CIVA—is to return to colonial archives using much more critical voices.[26] The curators used the work of visual artists who, although obviously constrained within their own conditions, are passionately defiant against so-called colonial gifts. We recall then how many of these figures in my collection of hacking stories were themselves either patronizing artists or inspired by artists. When you talk about a resistant field of micro-practices, the world of art, as both practice and its proximity to contemporary critical theories gives us a model from which to canonize this field of study. We would then have people to look back on and to applaud for pioneering work in attempting to break down patronizing foreign supremacy in favor of multiple small acts of resistance that ultimately could underscore the edifice of development.

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25 Chimandanda Ngozi Adichi, *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED, 2009. URL: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story. Accessed 21 December 2023.

26 Sammy Baloji, Silvia Francescini, Nikolaus Hirsch and Estelle Lecaille, Exhibition Catalogue (Brussel, CIVA, March 17-September 3, 2023), "Style Congo: Heritage & Heresy," Brussels: CIVA, 2023. URL: https://www.civa.brussels/en/exhibitions-events/style-congo. Accessed 21 December 2023.