

Masterarbeit

# **mudLIBRARY**

**Social sustainability in development context:  
case study of a building workshop**



## mudLIBRARY

### Social sustainability in development context: case study of a building workshop

ausgeführt zum Zwecke der Erlangung des akademischen  
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**Frau Andrea Rieger-Jandl**

**Ao.Univ.Prof.in Dipl.-Ing. Dr.in phil.**

**Forschungsbereich Baugeschichte und Bauforschung E251-01  
Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Bauforschung und Denkmalpflege**

eingereicht an der Technischen Universität Wien

Fakultät für Architektur & Raumplanung

**Aimée Beatrice Timircan**

**01529711**

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Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die soziale Nachhaltigkeit der menschlichen Interaktionen und Dynamiken zu analysieren und darzustellen, die sich bei der Umsetzung des Bibliotheksprojekts „mudLIBRARY“ in Nsutem, Ghana, entwickelt haben. Während einer 12-wöchigen Feldarbeit in Nsutem wurde eine Reihe verschiedener Methoden angewandt, um die kulturellen und sozialen Dynamiken rund um den Bauprozess zu verstehen, die sowohl aus anthropologischen Forschungsmethoden als auch aus architektonischer Feldarbeit und Theorie stammen. Insbesondere wurden ethnografische Daten und phänomenologische Beobachtungen in Form von ausführlichen Interviews und Erfahrungsberichten erhoben. Darüber hinaus wurde die lokale Lehm- und Ziegelbaukultur in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart sowohl unter architektonischen als auch soziokulturellen Aspekten analysiert. Die Gruppen, die in die Beobachtung einbezogen wurden, waren die europäischen Akteure des Projekts, die Organisatoren und Freiwilligen, die lokalen Fachleute, die an dem Projekt beteiligt waren, und die umliegende Gemeinde, die das Projekt aufnahm. Die Frage, die die Arbeit leitete, lautete: „Soziale Nachhaltigkeit in einem Entwicklungskontext: Was macht eine Design-Built nachhaltig?“

This work aims to analyze and depict the social sustainability of the human interactions and dynamics developed within the implementation of the library project "mudLIBRARY" in Nsutem, Ghana. Throughout a 12-week on-field work in Nsutem, a set of different methods have been used to understand the cultural and social dynamics surrounding the building process, both borrowed from anthropological research methodologies and architectural fieldwork and theory. In particular, ethnographic data and phenomenological observations have been sampled in the form of in-depth interviews and shared-experience documentation. Furthermore, the local earthen building culture, both past and present has been analyzed from both its architectural and socio-cultural aspects. The groups that have been involved in the observation were the European actors of the project, organizers and volunteers, the local professionals involved in the project, and the surrounding community on the receiving end. The question guiding the work was: "Social sustainability in a development context: what makes a building workshop sustainable?"

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## **SONG OF EGBE, THE CHILDREN'S MASK SOCIETY**

**We assemble under a great shade tree.  
It is a hot shade.  
They killed the cock in their mouth,  
And said: "Rain will beat you!"  
No rain can beat us as long as Egbe exists.  
We belong to Egbe. Listen to us, Egbe.  
Companions must know each other.  
Akanbi show me my Egbe.  
Nobody shall dare to mock us.**



The Moon Cannot Fight - Yoruba children's Poems

Ulli Beier and Bakare Gbadamosi

illustrated by Georgina Betts

# introduction

This research project and master thesis is framed around the project *mudLIBRARY*<sup>01</sup> in Nsutem, Ghana. The work aims to depict with a critical outlook how the process of building a library out of rammed earth has impacted the local community and the European volunteers and to evaluate its effectiveness within the social and development goals of a cooperation project. There are many design-build projects now, originated in Austria and Vienna, run by small NGOs, universities, university students, and private individuals with good intentions that aim to bring help to various sub-saharan countries, Ghana being one of them. However good intentions are not enough to assure the success of a project. Even the definition of success of such a project can be problematic and does not necessarily imply a conscious agenda of de-colonization and a reflection on inherent racism and cultural colonialism. Development itself has a long-standing theoretical background that carries in itself an idea that the West knows better than the others<sup>02</sup>. Many development projects that have sustainable goals on paper, carry this intrinsically, in their methods and practical realization. Social sustainability and resilience theories<sup>03</sup>, which are lately promoted in the development discourse, show that a process

is not completely resilient and sustainable unless the loop stays in motion: after the realization of the program, there should be a consequent step of feedback: a critical evaluation of what has work, what has not, how does it develop in time and how it needs to be adjusted to the new needs and goals of the community affected. Without this critical outlook, many projects in the development cooperation field are presented frozen in time: to the ideal time of their conclusion, their hand-in, where everything still looks picture perfect, people are happy and grateful and celebrating a gift. This is overwhelmingly true in architecture practice, and it finds its roots also in the Western building culture. Western, European architects build buildings to last, to function to Western standards of physical and social comfort, look pretty, and hopefully never to be touched, fixed, or modified again without an investment in time and monetary resources. And it is common to translate this practice to the projects that are being designed for others. A few climatic and cultural adjustments are made, often from here, Europe, with a European idea of what could be needed in Africa, South Asia, or South America, an idea that is influenced by centuries of colonialism, racism, and exoticism. With these small

adjustments, projects are being funded, built, and presented in their success: here success is defined as a standing functioning and aesthetically pleasing building. Moreover, the project must be presented as a success, or else future projects and funds will be compromised and the credibility of the actors will be damaged. Here is a fragility that this work is trying to approach, in the specific case of the *mudLIBRARY* project. The success of the project is not defined only from the structural point of view, but also from its social and cultural impact. During and after the realization of the building, field research has been conducted in parallel, to observe and evaluate from a critical standpoint how the process has been perceived and carried through by the various actors involved in it: both women and men, both project leaders and project petitioners, both western volunteers and local workers, both givers and receivers, white and colored, *obroni* and *obibini*<sup>04</sup>. The methods of these observations and evaluations were borrowed from anthropological qualitative studies: observations of participants, interviews, visual data, and oral histories. Criteria of the observations carried during the building process refer to the social sustainability theories and are participation, harmonious collaboration, deconstruction of hierarchies, gender equality, and recognition, transparent communication despite cultural differences, interexchange of technical and cultural knowledge, the opening of new critical views towards building, work and educational practice. In addition to the evaluations on the

building process itself, an architectural field study has been carried out to inquire about the presence, condition, and relationship of the local community towards buildings, specifically earthen ones. The goal of this part of the work is to critically understand the social and cultural interaction the building workshop designed with a Western eye had with the local community; and to inquire about what makes the project socially sustainable and how can this complex interaction avoid being a subtle form of cultural colonialism and can manage to empower the locals and bring a positive view on earthen building culture.



Ese ne Tekrema "teeth and tongue"

Symbol of improvement, advancement, growth, the need for friendliness and interdependence.

01 for project details: <https://www.archifair.org/mudlibrary/>

02 Easterly, W. (2006). *The White Man's Burden*; The Penguin Press. New York

03 Davoudi, S. (2012). *Resilience, a bridging concept or a dead end?*; New Castle University, UK

04 in the local language TWI, meaning "strangers, white people" and "local people, ghanaians"



## genealogy of a library project

Nana Osabarima Baafi Sarpong Kumankoma, chief of Nsutem and a Searcher<sup>01</sup> who lived many years in the USA before returning to Ghana to take over his duties as village king, focused some of his resources on expanding the educational opportunities of the village and promoting literacy among the residents. In 2018 he launched an appeal, he called on the "indigenous people, the government, government agencies, NGOs, the general public and all generous people, be it a group or individuals, to help build a library for the people of Nsutem". His call had been heard, and for it, the government gave him permission to use a plot of land between the primary and secondary schools. It had been also heard by Sylvia Arthur, also a Searcher and founder of the Ghanaian-based NGO *Bookdropghana* and of the library of the African diaspora *LOATAD*, who was, and still is, actively working on improving literacy in Ghana and providing access to libraries and literacy workshops to children and adults.

Sylvia said that she could provide everything that the library needed to work: books, workshops, organization, structure, knowledge, and experience, but she could not build it. Therefore, she contacted her friends from the construction company Hive Earth, Kwame Deheer and Joelle Eyeson, whose work with earthen construction she greatly admired. Hive Earth, an Accra-based company with Ghanaese founders and background, realized that the best course of action for this non-profit project was to appeal to their friends and collaborators from Europe, Archifair, the Vienna-based NGO with whom they worked on a similar non-profit project a few years earlier, in 2017.

From then on, Archifair took the lead in the project: coordinating the various partners involved, designing the library, organizing the construction budget through donations and sponsorships, organizing the construction workshop, and bringing it to completion.

*"According to our schedule, the idea was to start with the first lecture at Vienna University of Technology in March 2020 to inform volunteers about the project. Also, we wanted to start looking for sponsors as soon as possible. This meeting took place at the beginning of March 2020. Our plan for the lecture and implementation of the building would be thrown out a week later with the first COVID lockdown."*<sup>02</sup>

In winter 2020, European winter but the Ghanaese peak of the hot and dry season, Hannah from Archifar traveled to Nsutem to meet with Nana and the village, Sylvia and Seth from LOATAD, and Kwame from Hive Earth. During the few weeks she spent there, the needs and requirements of the various parties have been analyzed and the design process has been started. Upon her return to Austria, the Archifair team, at the time counting its founders Anna Schweiger, Jaap Willemsen, the newly entered Luisa Zunft, and Hannah Berger herself, started working in parallel on the design of the library, on the workshop planning and the funds and donations collecting.

They had an ambitious plan and schedule: during spring 2020 they were to design the building, organize a team of volunteers through the architecture faculty of TU Wien to build together with the local community, and collect donations. In summer, during a 12-week workshop, they would have been building in Nsutem. This plan met an unfortunate and early demise: during the COVID-19 pandemic it was impossible to move and many donations that were meant to go to building projects were repurposed for the health emergency. The project ended up being postponed until summer 2022.

01 Easterly, W. (2006). *The White Man's Burden*; The Penguin Press. New York

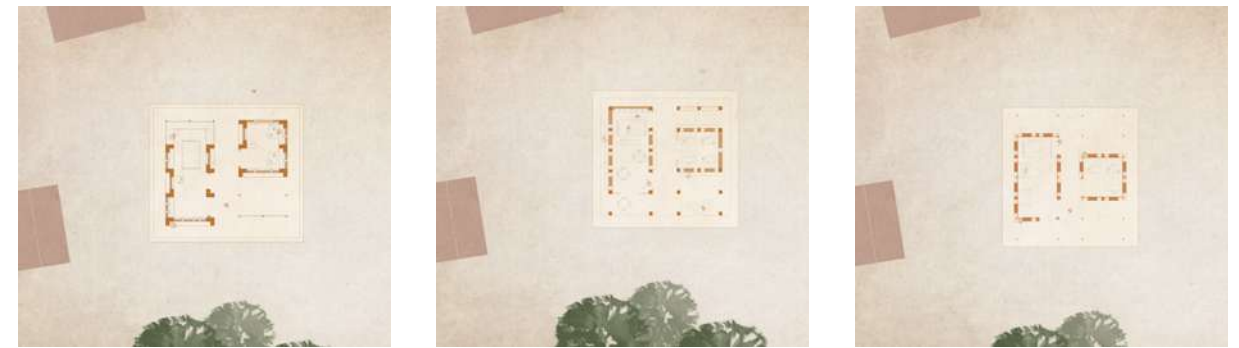
02 Berger H. (2023), mudLIBRARY. *Designing a Library in Ghana*. TU Wien. Vienna



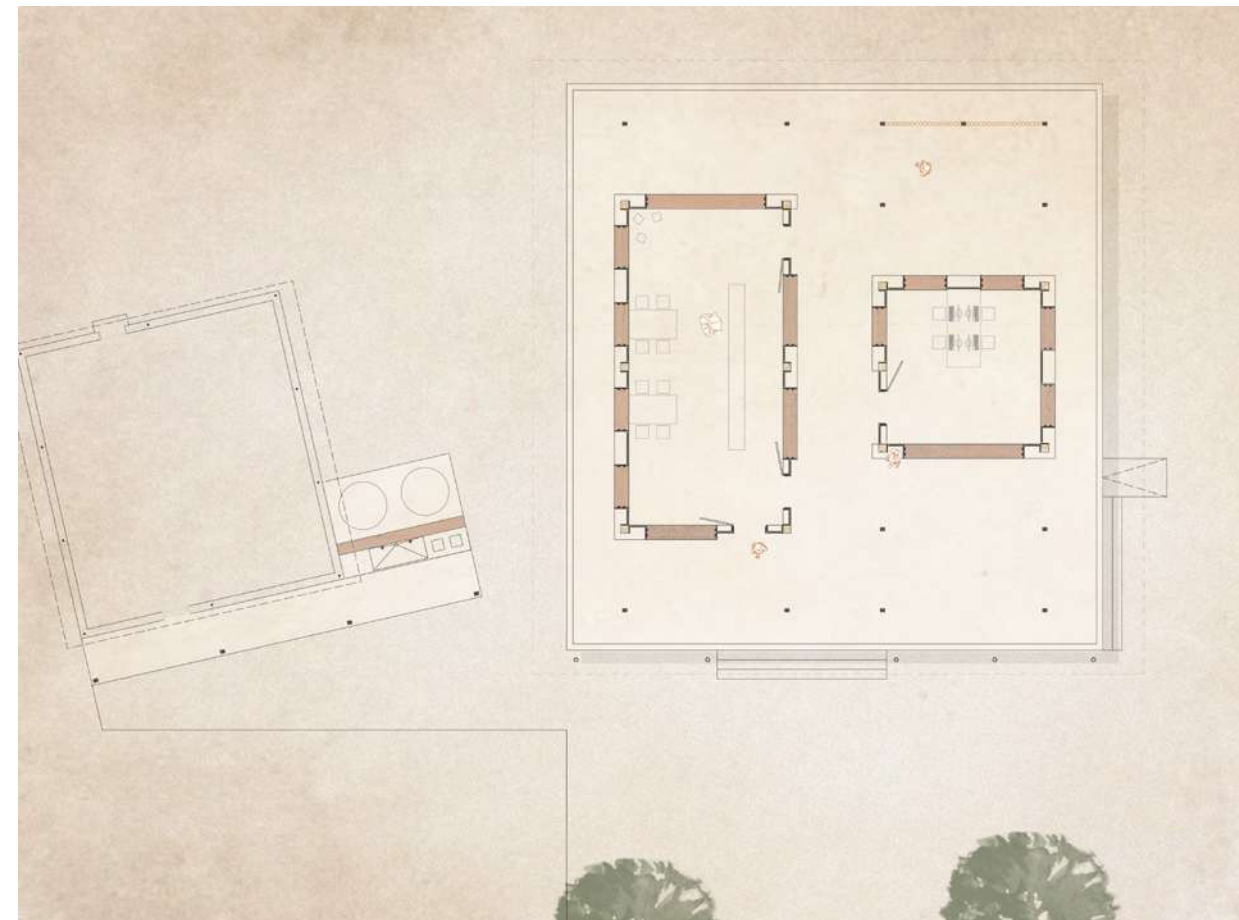
The COVID-19 pandemic, not subject of this work, changed many of the conditions and arrangements that were in place during the first attempt of the project. It took two years for Archifair to be able to proceed again with a new version of the original plan. During that time many of the original sponsors withdrew, due to the general financial strain and shift in priorities of the Austrian post-pandemic social situation, the design met few variations and the team grew with two new members: Manuel Obermoser and this author, Beatrice Aimée.

In spring 2022 a new timeline was laid down and new financing calls were sent out. Simultaneously, under the guidance of professor and researcher Andrea Riegel-Jandel, Archifair started a series of lectures for the volunteers of the Technical University who would join the building phase in the same summer, and the final design was completed.

The final design of the library included two rooms and a generous outdoor area and portico, under a double shed roof. Due to the materials available in the area, the foundation was planned to be out of concrete, the roof supporting pillars as well, while the walls were decided to be in pure rammed earth, a technique in which both Hive Earth and Archifair are specialized and that was highly appreciated by the team of LOATAD. The roof was supported by a wooden beam system and covered with aluminum roof sheets locally folded and assembled. LOATAD and Archifair agreed that the goals of the design were to provide indoor space for storing books and learning, a computer room, and enough covered free space to accommodate both the daily activities of the community and special events and literacy workshops which need a certain spatial flexibility.



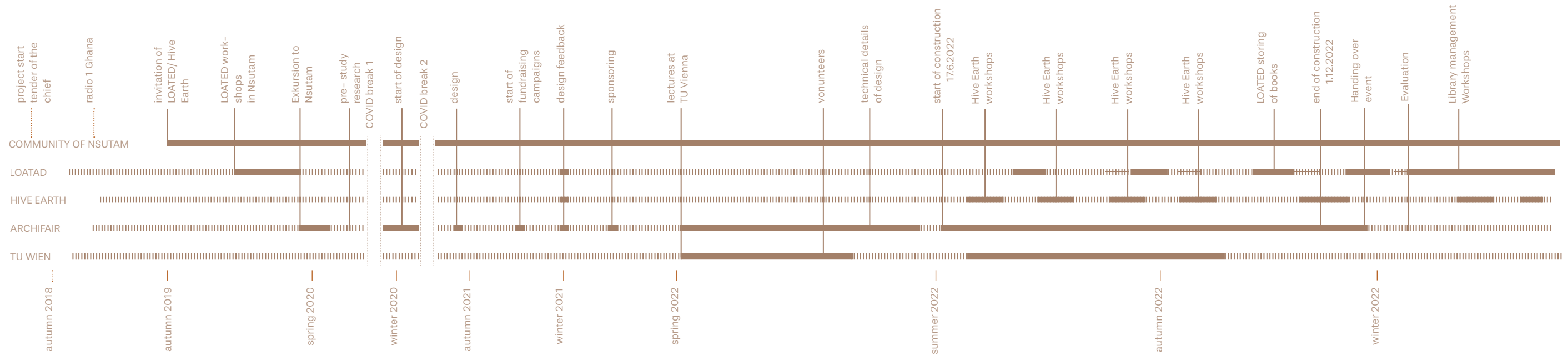
Design variations Berger H. (2023), mudLIBRARY. Designing a Library in Ghana. TU Wien. Vienna



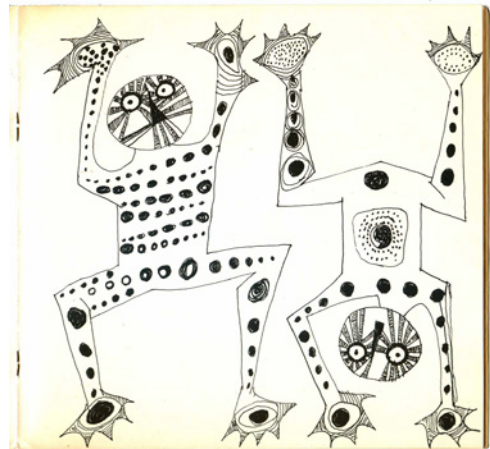
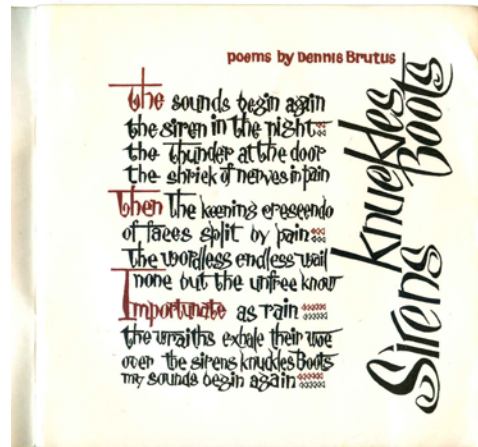
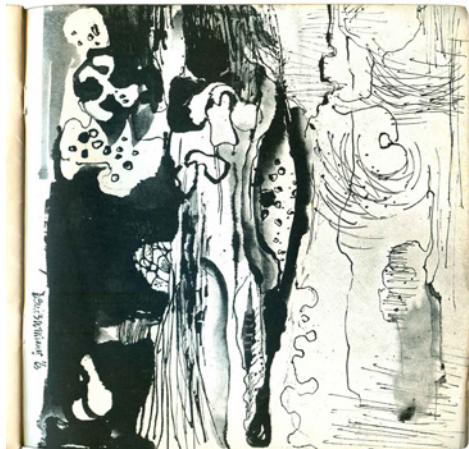
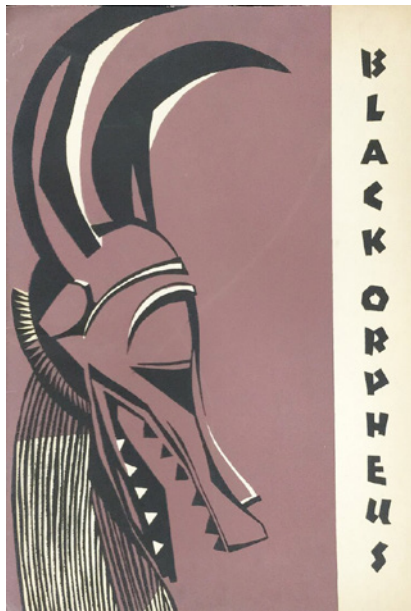
Final Design Berger H. (2023), mudLIBRARY. Designing a Library in Ghana. TU Wien. Vienna

At the beginning of July 2022 the Archifair team formed by Hannah, Luisa, Manuel, and the freshly added Beatrice, left for Ghana a couple of weeks before the arrival of the volunteers, to set up the work. During what will be called in the following observations "week0", the team met with the village, organized the lodgings and meals for the volunteers, acquired the first tools, organized the local workers and collaborators, and the clearing of the plot. In the following twelve weeks, four groups of 12 to 15 volunteers joined the construction site, each of them for a three-week workshop where they worked alongside the local workers directly on the library, learning a large variety of construction tasks and tools, with a focus on the rammed earth techniques. During the last couple of weeks of the planned workshop, it became clear that the library would not be completed within

the planned departure of the volunteers. Various reasons contributed to the delays: some of which were linked with the unforeseeable bad weather and heavy rains that regularly hit in September, some linked with late material deliveries, and some with small changes and adjustments in the project itself. By the first week of October, the mixed team of volunteers and local workers successfully managed to finish the building up to the roof, with only windows, doors, and furniture missing from its completion. Manuel and Luisa of Archifair decided to prolong their stay and see the building to completion together with the local workers and some local young volunteers, who spontaneously decided to join the work. Finally, at the beginning of December 2022, the library was handed to the community during a colorful ceremony.









week 01



week 05



week 09



week 13



week 02



week 06



week 10



week 14



week 03



week 07



week 11



week 15



week 04



week 08



week 12



week 16

I don't remember now how we got on to the subject, but one day Teacher said that the palms of the black's hands were much lighter than the rest of their bodies because only a few centuries ago they walked around on all fours, like wild animals, so their palms weren't exposed to the sun, which made the rest of their bodies darker and darker. I thought of this when Father Christiano told us after catechism that we were absolutely hopeless, and that even the blacks were better than us, and he went back to this thing about their hands being lighter, and said it was like that because they always went about with their hands folded together, praying in secret. I thought this was so funny, this thing of the black's hands being lighter, that you should just see me now - I don't let go of anyone, whoever they are, until they tell me why they think that the palms of the black's hands are lighter. Dona Dores, for instance, told me that God made their hands lighter like that so they wouldn't dirty the food they made for their masters, or anything else they were ordered to do that had to be kept quite clean.

Senhor Antunes, the Coca Cola man, who only comes to the village now and again when all the Cokes in the cantinas have been sold, said to me that everything I had been told was a lot of baloney. Of course I don't know if it was really, but he assured me it was. After I said yes, all right, it was baloney, then he told me what he knew about this thing of the black's hands. It was like this: 'Long ago, many years ago, God, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, St Peter, many other saints, all the angels that were in Heaven then, and some of the people who had died and gone to Heaven - they all had a meeting and decided to make blacks. Do you know how? They got hold of some clay and pressed it into some second-hand moulds. And to bake the clay of the creatures they took them to the Heavenly kilns. Because they were in a hurry and there was no

room next to the fire, they hung them in the chimneys. Smoke, smoke, smoke and there you have them, black as coals. And now do you want to know why their hands stayed white? Well, didn't they have to hold on while their clay baked?'

When he had told me this Senhor Antunes and the other men who were around us were very pleased and they all burst out laughing. That very same day Senhor Frias called me after Senhor Antunes had gone away, and told me that everything I had heard from them there had been just one big pack of lies. Really and truly, what he knew about the black's hands was right - that God finished making men and told them to bathe in a lake in Heaven. After bathing the people were nice and white. The blacks, well, they were made very early in the morning, and at this hour the water in the lake was very cold, so they only wet the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet before dressing and coming into the world.

But I read in a book that happened to mention it, that the blacks have hands lighter like this because they spent their lives bent over, gathering the white cotton of Virginia and I don't know where else. Of course Dona Estefânia didn't agree when I told her this. According to her it's only because their hands became bleached with all that washing.

Well, I don't know what to think about all this, but the truth is that however calloused and cracked they may be, a black's hands are always lighter than all the rest of him. And that's that!

My mother is the only one who must be right about this question of a black's hands being lighter than the rest of his body. On the day that we were talking about it, us two, I was telling her what I already knew about the question, and she just couldn't stop laughing. What I thought was strange was that she didn't tell me at once what she thought about

all this, and she only answered me when she was sure that I wouldn't get tired of bothering her about it. And even then she was crying and clutching herself around the stomach like someone who had laughed so much that it was quite unbearable. What she said was more or less this: 'God made blacks because they had to be. They had to be, my son. He thought they really had to be. . . . Afterwards he regretted having made them because the other men laughed at them and took them off to their homes and put them to serve like slaves or not much better. But because he couldn't make them all be white, for those who were used to seeing them black would complain, He made it so that the palms of their hands would be exactly like the palms of the hands of other men. And do you know why that was? Of course you don't know, and it's not surprising, because many, many people don't know. Well, listen: it was to show that what men do is only the work of men.... That what men do is done by hands that are the same - hands of people who, if they had any sense, would know that before everything else they are men. He must have been thinking of this when He made the hands of the blacks be the same as the hands of those men who thank God they are not black!'

After telling me all this, my mother kissed my hands. As I ran off into the yard to play ball, I thought that I had never seen a person cry so much when nobody had hit them.

## questions and tools

### *Social sustainability in development context: what makes a building workshop sustainable?*

*Was there a positive interaction and exchange between organizers, volunteers and locals?*

*Did the local community show interest and participation and appreciation in the building process?*

*Was the earthen architecture technique chosen for the building appreciated and trusted by the local community?*

*Are the dimensions of inclusion, cohesion, resilience and process legitimacy reached by the project?*

This thesis tells a bit more than the sweet story of a good building realized through donations and volunteering in Western Africa. Next to the funny anecdotes, the bright pictures, the muddy hands, and the sweaty foreheads, there is a reflection on the effectiveness of the design-build project and workshop from the point of view of its social sustainability. This retelling of the project, with the eyes of a planner and the tools borrowed from social and anthropological studies, aims to reflect on what building in context entails when it comes to the topic of social sustainability. A design-build, a workshop in context, is here not to be described as construction that grows in size and detail with the passing of weeks, but more as a collective story of humans, whose presence made a difference in the context and whose actions and hands molded not only space and material but also the perception of the project itself. Their care or their callousness, their voices saturating the air with commands or motivating whoops, defined a part of the success or in the shortcomings of the project itself. Therefore, the difficulties and the solutions here depicted, do not talk about material tools, or lack thereof, but they talk about people working together and the outcomes of their collaboration and communication forms.

For an ample overview of the project, and for a retelling of it from the point of views of architectural design, ecological sustainability and details of the construction progress, it is advised to consult the correlated works of Hannah Berger<sup>03</sup>, Manuel Obermoser<sup>04</sup> and Luisa Zunft<sup>05</sup>.

Part of the premises that led to this approach to the project is the idea that how things are done matters.<sup>01</sup> The images and the actions of the people working on the project influence the reality of it and they stay in the imaginary, in the immaterial plane of those who bore testimony. The volunteers who have been working in the library, their faces, and their presence are imprinted in the imagination of the locals. Their stories will be traded down for months and probably years to come, probably as anecdotes and funny facts, whose poetry will be in the exceptionality of their banality. The woman sewing clothes at the blue shop across the street will still tell about the weird hat they had to sew for that one very very tall *obroni*<sup>02</sup>; or the jumpsuit they had to re sew twice for that nice but very picky young mixed-race woman. The coconut seller will tell his uncle about the time he had to explain to some clueless white boys how to open a nut with a machete, and about how horrifying it was to see a grown man incapable of handling such a basic tool. But more importantly, the building will remind the village elders of how it was to coordinate with Western professionals, it will remind the workers of how they were treated on the construction site and it will remind the children of whether they felt welcomed or rejected.

01 Patrick, B. et al. (2023). Social Sustainability in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.  
in the local language Twi, meaning "foreigner, white person"  
02 Berger H. (2023), mudLIBRARY. Designing a Library in Ghana. TU Wien. Vienna  
03 Obermoser M. (2003), mudLIBRARY. Umsetzung einer Bibliothek in Ghana. TU Wien. Vienna  
04 Zunft L. (2003), mudLIBRARY, Architecture in Development Context. TU Wien. Vienna  
05



Additionally to these human components, the materiality of the library, and earth, influenced as well the perception of the building, besides the aspects of shape and aesthetic. Earthen architecture, a vernacular and ancient way of building, is in the context not only an architectural and technical choice for the building, whose economic and environmental sustainability can be measured in numbers and parameters; but it is also a choice that can raise feelings and convey notions in both volunteers and local community. Therefore, it has relevance in defining the social sustainability of the project. Depending on the context, earthen walls might be associated with poverty, lack of means, and instability. Their lack of resistance to violent rains, together with the process of hand-manufacturing, connects them for some to a feeling of temporality, and therefore volatility. It might be counterintuitive to think that a wall whose mass reaches a few tons could look vulnerable, but sometimes that is the case. Moreover, the millennia of history of earthen architecture renders it obsolete and primitive in the eyes of some, while in the eyes of others, it is a venerable craft to behold and save. At the same time, some people see the earthen walls as luxury products, because of their cost-intensive hand labor, and consequently, they become crafted elements and artistic inserts to be proud of. Sometimes, their technical advantages, such as the ability to maintain a comfortable room temperature in hot weather without mechanical ventilation are a saving grace, and other times a negligible aspect. Their color and feeling to the touch can be a sign of well-being as much as a

sign of our-datedness. How the material of the building is perceived is not a quantitative topic, it is a cultural and social one that is influenced by the local history and by the words, actions, and demeanor of those handling the construction. The molding of space is a molding of perception and mind, and the materiality of a wall, the color of a door, or the intermittent shade of a portico can contribute to the joy of a memory or the bitterness of a moment.<sup>03</sup> Shades, curves, corners, all that form is, imprints itself in the minds of the people around it, the outside environment resonating with the inside environment, reshaping feelings and neuronal paths. As the surroundings are shaped, so do they shape their inhabitants, and every touch is as forming on the physical, visible, and external plane as much as it is on the internal, invisible, and immaterial plane. Every hand, every foot that touched the concrete of the library's foundations or the grains of the earth that have been rammed in it, has been touched back. Earth, mud, and clay in particular, is a material that carries the memory of the touch<sup>04</sup> and it is carried in the memory of those who touch it as well.

To answer these questions and reflect on these topics, a variety of observations and interviews have been collected during the duration of the 12-week building workshop of mudLIBRARY, between July and October 2022, in Nsutem, Ghana.

Firstly, there has been carried on a weekly journal with field notes about the different participants in the building workshop and their interactions with each other, with the community, and with the space. Participant observations are a common method in anthropological studies that allows the researcher to immerse themselves in the culture or community being studied to gain a deep understanding of social behaviors and interactions.<sup>05</sup> The questions that accompanied these observations were variations of the following: what motivates people from different backgrounds to cooperate?; how is trust built?; how do the locals feel about having so many Westerners intervene and change something of theirs?; what do the volunteers learn from the interaction within the context?; how do the cultural differences influence the process?; where is there an intrinsic hierarchy?; which patterns of movement and interactions are between the groups?; how is participation and curiosity cultivated?; how is distance created?; what kind of narrative stays with the locals, beyond the earthen walls?; what kind of expectations are in place?; What does a different building method than usual feel for the local community?; what does a material like earth evoke in the local community?; Where is there interest in learning?; etc.

A second tool used to collect a deeper understanding of the different points of views and perceptions of the building workshop was interviews.

The experience shared by the four group of volunteers who were on site for three weeks at a time has been recorded in the form of focus-group interviews.<sup>07</sup> These interviews took place on the last day of work and sammled the volunteers in a quiet setting to converse converse and answer together a short set of questions for an hour or two, all of them recorded in audio, video and notes. The questions<sup>08</sup>, always the same for each group, were aimed to reflect on the their shared experiences during their weeks in Nsutem. This method was particularly effective because of the groups' homogeneity: besides being of similar background, age and education, the volunteers worked and lived together for the whole duration of the workshop, and therefore experienced, although from each individual point of view, the same situations. These conversations at the end of each three weeks blocks became a moment of retrospection and feedback, which brought to their own awareness and to the one of the project coordinators important elements of the experience on site, and of the interactions in place.

03 Botton, de A. (2006) *The Architecture of Happiness*. Pantheon Books. USA  
04 from informal conversations with the potterer Ena Kirchner

06 Denzin, Norman K; Lincoln, Yvonna S. (Hrsg.) (2005): *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.  
07 Denzin, Norman K; Lincoln, Yvonna S. (Hrsg.) (2005): *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.  
08 the full set of interview question is in Appendix, pag. 188

Additionally to the focus group interviews with the volunteers, also single-person semi-formal interviews with the other actors of the project have been recorded. This author had a wide number of conversations with the team of Archifair, with elders of the village who assisted with the organisation of the construction site, with the other project partners, with some of the workers on site and with the people of the village who happened to engage with the building process, adults and children. These conversations and interviews, some of them formally recorded and some noted down, also followed similar questions<sup>09</sup> to the ones asked to the volunteers. The purpose of these questions and guides was to be able to formulate a wider picture of the experiences and to have comparable informations.

Finally, in the last weeks of the building workshop, 16 in-depth interviews with the inhabitants of Nsutem have been conducted. Since these one-on-one interviews took place in the houses of the subjects interviewed, they were all recorded in the last stages of the building workshop, once the author of the interviews was already well integrated and connected with the village. This choice of timing, together with the help of a well-respected translator, Nico the *Okyeme*<sup>10</sup>, helped the author to build trust with the interview subjects and to collect possibly more detailed and honest answers. The interviews followed a detailed set of questions<sup>11</sup>, were recorded and noted, and the houses of the interview subjects were analyzed through sketches and photography. This work aimed to understand the building culture of the village, in particular the presence of earthen architecture, the perception the local people have of their own earthen houses, and the perception they have of the new earthen library.

09 the full set of interview question is in Appendix, pag. 188

10 *Okyeme* is the head linguist of the king, an important and respected position in the village council

11 the full set of interview question is in Appendix, pag. 188

The material collected during the time in Nsutem is contextualized in this work and analyzed to find an answer to the initial research question: what made the building workshop of mudLIBRARY socially sustainable? For this purpose, the material is divided by topics and themes, to find patterns of actions, thoughts, feelings, words, and reflections that can depict a wide, critical, and multifaceted picture. Firstly the context in which the project needs to be understood is depicted: the village of Nsutem, some theory of development work and social sustainability, and the earthen architecture technique of rammed earth. Then the main topics of interacting and building are defined and investigated in their subtopics. The interactions that defined the project are subdivided into different levels: between the project partners, between the project coordinators and the volunteers and workers, and between the foreign helpers and the local community. The building topic is subdivided into space and materiality, where space moves to describe the connotations of space from the site to the village, and materiality looks at the perception of the earthen architecture present in the village and moves back to the one of the library. A final step is to look at the topics that stand out with the four dimensions of social sustainability introduced by the World Bank's 2023 publication "Social Sustainability in Development: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century": social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy.

Nevertheless, as stated in the beginning, this thesis hopes to tell more than a building story from a traditional Western point of view. The context, Nsutem, Ghana, Western Africa, is never to be forgotten. The language used to understand what a group of Western planners did for a social context that is black and formerly colonia cannot be a Western language only. Therefore, mixed in between the words of this author are the words of others, images, and impressions of the culture that is not only the background but also the main reason why this project and many other projects have happened. These pages, recognizable by their brown background, are tools to bring the presence of the cultural context in the book and to deepen the understanding of what the observations and the conclusions here collected entail. The context is an undeniable presence that has shaped the project and therefore it is also a presence that shapes this work.



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Take up the White Man's burden--  
Send forth the best ye breed--  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need;  
To wait in heavy harness,  
On fluttered folk and wild--  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden--  
In patience to abide,  
To veil the threat of terror  
And check the show of pride;  
By open speech and simple,  
An hundred times made plain  
To seek another's profit,  
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden--  
The savage wars of peace--  
Fill full the mouth of Famine  
And bid the sickness cease;  
And when your goal is nearest  
The end for others sought,  
Watch sloth and heathen Folly  
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden--  
No tawdry rule of kings,  
But toil of serf and sweeper--  
The tale of common things.  
The ports ye shall not enter,  
The roads ye shall not tread,  
Go mark them with your living,  
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden--  
Ye dare not stoop to less--  
Nor call too loud on Freedom  
To cloke your weariness;  
By all ye cry or whisper,  
By all ye leave or do,  
The silent, sullen peoples  
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden--  
And reap his old reward:  
The blame of those ye better,  
The hate of those ye guard--  
The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light--  
"Why brought he us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden--  
Have done with childish days--  
The lightly proffered laurel,  
The easy, ungrudged praise.  
Comes now, to search your manhood  
Through all the thankless years  
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,  
The judgment of your peers!

Rudyard Kipling,  
The White Man's Burden, 1899

## context

### *some theories, some practice*

#### *Development*

*[uncountable] the steady growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger, etc.*

*(economics) the growth of the economy of a country or region through increased business activity*

*[uncountable, countable] the process of producing or creating something new or more advanced; a new or advanced product or idea*

*[countable, usually plural] a new event or stage that is likely to affect what happens in a continuing situation*<sup>01</sup>

#### *Development*

*1756, "a gradual unfolding, a full working out or disclosure of the details of something;" see develop + -ment. Meaning "the internal process of expanding and growing" is by 1796; sense of "advancement through progressive stages" is by 1836.*

*Of property, with a sense of "a bringing out of the latent possibilities" for use or profit, from 1885 (Pickering's glossary of Americanisms, 1816, has betterments "The improvements made on new lands, by cultivation, and the erection of buildings, &c."). Meaning "state of economic advancement" is from 1902.*<sup>02</sup>

The mudLIBRARY of Archifair is a drop in a sea of projects set up to help the "less fortunate". Nowadays it sounds inappropriate to call such a project a help or aid project, and in line with the SDGs and the new spread of awareness in terms of sustainability, it becomes a project of cooperation. Politically and socially aware naming aside, it is a form of moving resources from the western or northern countries to the south, from the rich to the poor, to increase the life quality of the latter through the knowledge and riches of the former. Though its small scale, both in time and budget, mudLIBRARY still enters a contemporary story of thousands of projects and decades of development aid, and it carries within parts of the beliefs and theories that have marked the interaction between the Global North and the Global South. It is therefore important to form an understanding of the theoretical and cultural frame within which such projects are planned and realized, to be capable of actually acquiring the awareness of concept and of speech that is required when talking of cooperation and sustainability.

*„Fourth, we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.“*<sup>03</sup>

With a look at its etymology, development can be explained as a word that carries the meanings of change, growth, advancement, and unfolding. It implies a slightly positive process, but it does not define a specific field of application, nor does it describe how this process unfolds and whether or not it is perceived as positive when it is through. Development can indeed be used in many fields: in medical language, it can describe the growth of children, in technical language it can define the process of inventing and bringing into function a hardware or software, in agriculture it can mark the application of a more efficient technique. Whether the child becomes a perfectly functioning adult, the software achieves its purposes and the crops are healthier, is to be defined and evaluated at a later moment. In the economic and political field, the concept of development has come to use in recent history. The definition that there are underdeveloped countries can be traced to the inaugural address of US President Harry S. Truman in 1949 and its following theories and applications<sup>04</sup>.

01 from (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/development?q=development> - visited on 2024.02.20)

02 from ([https://www.etymonline.com/word/development#etymonline\\_v\\_29650](https://www.etymonline.com/word/development#etymonline_v_29650) - visited 2024.02.20)

03 Truman, January 20, 1949. Inaugural address speech.

04 Chant, S. McIlwaine, C. (2008). Geographies of Development in the 21st Century. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited

In his speech, Truman defined an essential mission for the "prosperous" countries, as assistants to the less fortunate areas, charitable givers that would bring development, teach a better way of living, and relieve them of their misfortune. Within this frame, the term took for the common understanding a positive connotation: development, in economic and cultural terms, is not only positive and desirable but also has the connotation of the industrial and economic path of the Global North. To back this understanding and the subsequent application of assistance to the poor, a considerable amount of theories have been written and discussed. For this thesis, it is not essential to go into detail about what the different theories entailed and how they responded to the events of the last decades<sup>05</sup>, but it is important to understand what they meant for the various actors and actions, or interventions, that the western countries have promoted since then.

In a post-war world, during the peak of colonial liberation, Truman's speech described the division of the world not anymore as colonizers and colonized, owners and owned, but as developed and underdeveloped, as in richer-wiser and poorer-ignorant. The definition, although putting all countries on the same level, carried the idea that the seconds, or to be precise thirds, lived in undignified condition, and it "became an emblem for the imposition of the North American ideals on the rest of the world"<sup>06</sup>. This discourse carried inherently a moral and cultural judgment towards the "underdeveloped" countries, which were seen almost at fault for not having been capable of making it on their

own. The local knowledge and culture were therefore perceived as inferior and faulty<sup>07</sup>, an assumption that led to justifying not only decades of economic interventions but also decades of cultural and social interventions, where the Northern countries still felt entitled, similarly to the colonial times of Kipling<sup>08</sup>, to teach others how they should live properly.

*"The poorest countries are in a poverty trap (they are poor only because they started poor) from which they cannot emerge without an aidfinanced Big Push, involving investments and actions to address all constraints to development, after which they will have a takeoff into self-sustained growth, and aid will no longer be needed. This was exactly the legend that gave birth to foreign aid in the 1950s; it is exactly the legend that the advocates of a massive aid increase are telling today. This chapter will test this legend against the evidence that has accumulated over the past fifty years in between the original legend and its remake a half century later. I will tell you up front what you have already guessed: the evidence does not support the legend. This is a classic example of trying again something that didn't work before, one of the traits of Planners."<sup>09</sup>*

*"The legend dates back to the 1950s. Many things have changed since the 1950s—we now have air-conditioning, the Internet, new life-saving drugs, and sex in movies. Yet one thing is unchanged: the legend that inspired foreign aid in the 1950s is the same legend that inspires foreign aid today."<sup>10</sup>*

To this day this approach to the others survives, in the shadows of development work. It is still common, even among non-western and non-white populations to think that the northern lifestyle and technical advancement is by default better, and the goal of the other countries is to strive to adjust and adopt the-better-lifestyle, possibly talk at least one of the-better-languages such as English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and desire the comforts and habits that come with this sort of economic power. It is undeniable that this evaluation of worth, even from a cultural and social point of view, carries within itself the traces of the global colonial past and the rooted belief of Western superiority, but it also carries the belief that the West can choose better what works for the rest.

Handing aid, or charity to Africa, Asia, or Latin America is still seen as part of development work and a noble duty of the West, not far from the cinematic "white savior complex", where it is always the white, possibly blonde and male, protagonist who manages through his heroic actions not only to carry the whole plot on his shoulders but also saves the misfortunate colored side characters that happened to fall into distress. This mindset still afflicts many good-willed volunteers and workers in context settings, and it implicitly perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces power imbalances, and is linked to the concept of white privilege and the idea that white individuals are positioned as essential helpers in addressing social issues.<sup>11</sup>

But handling aid, especially from a cultural background where the charitable are also perceived as implicitly wiser than the charitees, comes with the self-given power to decide what is worth aiding and in which form it is worth aiding.

Experience has by now shown that much of the help handled in the last decades has been quite ineffective. By the end of the 90s, it became clear that the direct economic aid, the big charity, and the big loans, did not, in fact, help "take off" the economies of the Global South as most theories post-Truman assumed they would, and the little examples of economies that did take off, such as the five Asian tigers or Botswana, are also the ones that have received the less help, or intervention, from the Global North.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>05</sup> a detailed retelling of the development theories of the past century is to be found in the complementary thesis:

Zunft, L. (2003). Architecture in the development context = Architektur im Entwicklungskontext. Wien

<sup>06</sup> Chant, S. McIlwaine, C. (2008). Geographies of Development in the 21st Century. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited Esteve,

<sup>07</sup> Chant, S. McIlwaine, C. (2008). Geographies of Development in the 21st Century. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited Esteve,

<sup>08</sup> refers to the poem introducing this chapter: Kipling, R (1899). The white man's burden. McClure's Magazine

<sup>09</sup> Easterly, W. (2006). The White Man's Burden; The Penguin Press. New York

<sup>10</sup> Easterly, W. (2006). The White Man's Burden; The Penguin Press. New York

<sup>11</sup> Finnegan, A. C. (2022). Growing Up White Saviors. Journal of Applied Social Science

*"It is also interesting that the notable East Asian success stories—China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand—were never completely colonized by Europeans. In contrast, East Asia's main disappointment, the Philippines, was colonized by Spain and the United States."*

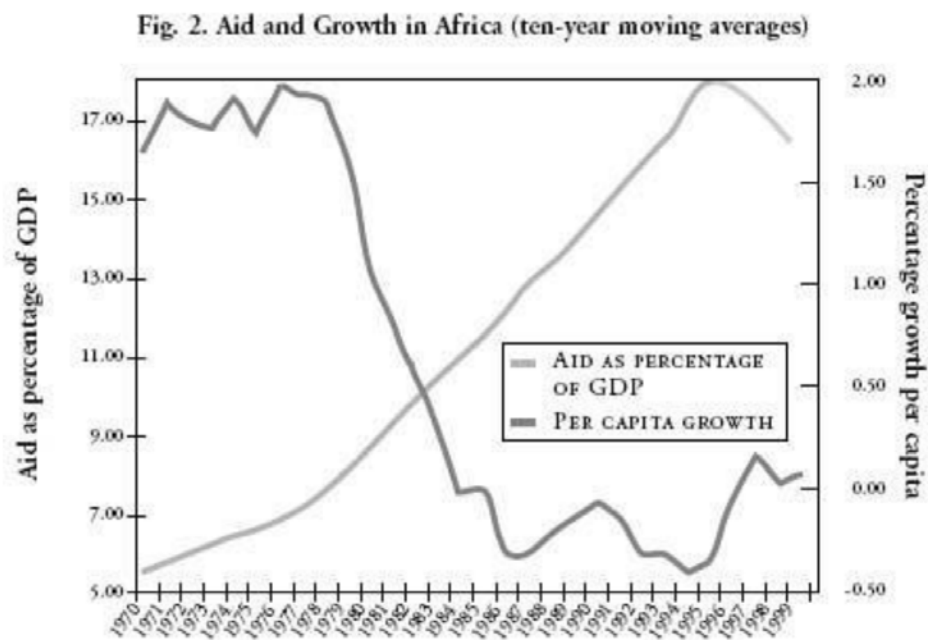
*"The success of Japan, China, the East Asian Tigers, India, Turkey, Botswana, and Chile is turning into a comic relic of the arrogance of the West. Americans and Western Europeans will one day realize that they are not, after all, the saviors of the Rest. Even when the West fails to "develop" the Rest, the Rest develops itself. The great bulk of development success in the Rest comes from self-reliant, exploratory efforts, and the borrowing of ideas, institutions, and technology from the West when it suits the Rest to do so."<sup>12</sup>*

This statement, probably painful to admit to whoever believed and still believes that good intentions and some donations can save the world, is backed by numbers and studies. Looking at the research of Rajan and Subramanian of 2005<sup>13</sup>, the numbers showing economic growth, measured in the standard GDP, of many African countries display quite an unflattering downward curve. Even those who received an average of 15% of their income from foreign donors in the 90s did not enter an accelerated growth process. "aid accelerated as growth fell".<sup>12</sup> The graphs do not look better even when looking at the previous decades, nor did evaluating the type of aid (unilateral, bilateral, less politically tied) give different outcomes.

What the North thought would be the solution, that is to say, replicating its model of economic growth to achieve social well-being, has been largely disproved. Reality is much more complex, and the local history of each area, the local governments, the specific cultural practices, and the social priorities that guide the life choices of each individual or family, have an undeniable impact on whether or not an external act of "help" actually helps. Therefore, even for expert economists and development researchers, it is still difficult to explain in detail why decades of help policies have failed. Next to piles of economic theories and studies, there are heaps of political theories as well, blaming the failure on bad governments, corruption, and embezzlement. The complexity of it all is hard to recount, and blame is hard to place when the bigger historical picture comes into play and the remains of colonialism are also taken into account. Much of the instability and ineffectiveness that former colonial Global South countries face has been systematically planted during colonial times, to facilitate the control of territory and the indigenous population. Their traditional structures have been weakened and twisted into a form that would benefit the Whites, and even now what we see of their culture and tradition is often a simplified and feeble shadow of a past complex and running system.

*"Even when chiefs existed, they had limited powers before colonial times. There were only loose confederations of the Akan peoples of Ghana, the Ashanti and the Fanti. The chiefs of these confederations had limited powers, acting with the concurrence of their counselors. A chief who acted on his own could expect to lose his throne. The colonizers took over the decentralized system of rule in Africa, yet removed the checks and balances on that rule. The restored Ashanti Confederacy of 1935 under the British lacked the counselors who had previously shared power with the chief. The confederacy quickly abolished "youngmen's associations," another traditional check on chiefly power."*  
*"A European observer in Nigeria noted, "The chief is the law, subject to only one higher authority, the white official stationed in his state as advisor. The chief hires his own police...he is often the prosecutor and the judge combined and he employs the jailer to hold his victims in custody at his pleasure. No oriental despot ever had greater power than these black tyrants, thanks to the support which they receive from the white officials who quietly keep in the background. Thus Europeans may have actually increased despotism in Africa."<sup>14</sup>*

Figure from Easterly, W. (2006). The White Man's Burden; The Penguin Press. New York



<sup>12</sup> Easterly, W. (2006). The White Man's Burden; The Penguin Press. New York  
<sup>13</sup> Rajan R, Subramanian A. (2005). Aid and Growth: What Does the Cross-Country Evidence Really Show? IMF mimeograph

<sup>14</sup> Easterly, W. (2006). The White Man's Burden; The Penguin Press. New York

*"I argue that there are many lessons to be gained from the previous wave of Western intervention in the Rest—as many problems were created by colonizers' incompetence as by their exploitation. It is at least ironic that some offer a new White Man's Burden to clean up the mess left behind by the old White Man's Burden."<sup>15</sup>*

This author and this thesis do not aim to delve deeper into this chase of a complex and painful truth. Instead, this is an invitation to reflect on how much of the ideas of "helping" and "donating" are tied with inefficient practices and a paternalistic post-colonial culture, but it is also still present in Western common sense. Much of this charitable attitude permeates the discourse around the various, even smaller-scale projects that are being implemented in the Global South context, regardless of their ineffectiveness, and part of the responsibility of the planners lies in understanding and possibly re-evaluating these strategies.

*"Poor countries without aid had no trouble having positive growth. This is a critical finding—the poorest countries can grow and develop on their own. Since foreign aid received does not explain these successes, perhaps they happened for entirely home-grown reasons. The Searchers among the poor can find a way toward higher living standards; they do not have to wait for the West to save them"<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>15</sup> here this author quotes multiple instances from Easterly's book, for their direct delivery of a this critical message  
Easterly, W. (2006). *The White Man's Burden*; The Penguin Press. New York

<sup>16</sup> Chambers, R. (1999) *Consultations with the poor*, Poverty Group, World Bank

*"However, even with the best of motives, colonial officials suffered from all the same problems that characterize today's White Man's Burden: excessive self confidence of bureaucrats, coercive top-down planning, desultory knowledge of local conditions, and little feedback from the locals on what worked. Under the theory that "whites know best," colonialists forced development schemes on the locals rather than respecting their economic choices."*

*"Far from promoting "participation," planning patronizes and diminishes the poor, who have little voice to say what they want and need."<sup>5</sup>*

"Scholars of religion talk about the paradox of evil, which says you cannot have all three of the following conditions hold: (1) a benevolent God; (2) an allknowing and all-powerful God; and (3) evil things happening to good people. If you have (1) and (2), then why would God (3) let bad things happen to good people?

Similarly, in the White Man's Burden, you cannot have all the following hold: (1) the White Man's Burden is acting in the interests of the poor in the Rest; (2) the White Man's Burden is effective at resolving poor people's problems; and (3) lots of bad things, whose prevention was affordable, are happening to poor people. If (3) happens, then either (1) or (2) must not hold."<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the situation is not hopeless and the last decades have been expanding the discourse around development. There has been growth, and there are places where the life conditions and access to basic needs have been steadily improving. Interestingly enough, many of the recorded examples of successful stories can be described as self-help or bottom-up intervention, where people who worked closely with local communities, or who were themselves raised in those communities, applied creative but culturally fitting solutions that were quite effectively integrated with said communities and brought direct positive effect on their general well-being and specific needs. The specificity and multiplicity of each landscape are often forgotten (Easterly 2006) when it comes to projects that are planned from air-conditioned and white-walled offices in the west, and the actual definition of well-being gets tainted with the expectations of the planners. Besides basic needs, what well-being means and what is a priority of improvement is a culturally distinct topic. Involvement of the communities who are poor and in need in their own process of help and betterment is essential<sup>16</sup>.

*"The poor want institutions they can participate in, and whom they can trust to be relevant, to care and to listen."<sup>16</sup>*

<sup>15</sup> here this author quotes multiple instances from Easterly's book, for their direct delivery of a this critical message  
Easterly, W. (2006). *The White Man's Burden*; The Penguin Press. New York

<sup>16</sup> Chambers, R. (1999) *Consultations with the poor*, Poverty Group, World Bank

*"The Planners have dominated the past generation of efforts of the West to help the Rest. The utopian Planners cannot transform the Rest—at least, not for the better. While the Rest is transforming itself, the Planners' global social engineering has failed to help the poor, and it will always so fail. The Planners gave us the second tragedy of the world's poor, that twelve-cent medicines do not reach children dying of malaria, that four-dollar bed nets do not get to the poor to prevent malaria, that three dollars does not get to each new mother to prevent millions of child deaths. Planners made little progress on the first tragedy of the world's poor, that the poor suffer from many calamities that could be averted. With this historical record, perhaps sixty years of Planners is enough. Maybe it is now time to give the Searchers a chance. Even though the biggest payoff comes from local Searchers who solve their own problems, Searchers from the rich West can do good, specific things for poor people. Searchers can make progress on the second tragedy, which would then make progress possible on the first tragedy. Let the Searchers try their hands at ways for the medicines, bed nets, and aid money to finally reach the poor."<sup>15</sup>*



*"It [the thesis of Easterly, edit.] points instead to the Searchers with knowledge of local conditions, experimental results from interventions, and some way to get feedback from the poor, who will find out (and are already finding out) all the variable and complicated answers of how to make aid work."*<sup>17</sup>

The advantages of Searchers, people who see a problem within a known and understood social structure and aim with minimal and well-budgeted interventions to bring a change, are their ability to integrate their work within the specific frames of their communities. Their projects are more easily trusted, they receive direct feedback and they are capable of resilience and reaction to unforeseen events. These essential features in determining the success and long-term impact of any development action can be described with the concept of social sustainability. Sustainability and cooperation have become the main topics of development work in the last decade. The UN defined the current 17 development goals in 2015 as SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals, to promote projects where communities across the world, regardless of whether they reside in richer or poorer countries, can work to build a future that doesn't only entail economic growth, but also betterment of every human's life conditions, with care for the natural world and for the generations to come.

Sustainable development is not a new concept though, especially when it comes to the ecological dimension. A sustainable ecosystem can continue providing what is needed for its survival and balance over the years to come. Environmental sustainability is quite an intuitive concept that has been practiced over millennia throughout most human societies. It has been for a long time self-evident that the trees cut in a forest should not exceed the capacity of the same forest to replenish itself over the years, or that the quantity of fish fished in a body of water should not compromise the ability of the fish population to multiply itself for the next seasons. Traces of this human sensibility towards ecological sustainability are still found across the planet in folklore, tales, and proverbs.

*"The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests."*<sup>18</sup>

*Only a fool would cut off the tree to eat its fruits.  
(Romanian: Prostul taie pomul ca să-i mănânce rodul.)*<sup>19</sup>

*"When there is something wrong in the forest, there is something wrong in society."  
(Zimbabwe)*<sup>20</sup>

Economic sustainability has also been lengthily discussed within the frame of global development, already brought to the forefront of the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, and not much later, in 1980, the phrase sustainable development was introduced in the publication World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development<sup>21</sup>.

*"The goal of sustainable development is to bring the environment, society and economy into balance. All three dimensions are on an equal footing. There are different opinions on the weighting of the dimensions. In addition, there are often conflicts of objectives, i.e. two goals are difficult to reconcile or are even mutually exclusive. It is necessary to weigh things up or set priorities in such cases."*<sup>21</sup>

*"Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."*<sup>21</sup>

Looking at the classic definition of sustainable development, formulated by Brundtland in 1987, the concept seems to be in theory easily graspable. In practice it reveals itself extremely complex and challenging, especially within the frames of our economic system, based on short-term profits and growth<sup>22</sup>. The complexity of planning growth and profits over decades and generations, while embracing the unforeseen interactions and changes in both human societies and environmental landscapes, increases substantially and requires careful planning and deep understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of development of human societies.

Therefore sustainable development is often defined through three dimensions or pillars: environmental, economic, and social. The latter, a key element of this strategy, is also a more elusive concept than the others, because of its qualitative rather than quantitative aspect. While for environmental and economic sustainability many measurement parameters have been set over the decades, such as CO2 emissions or debt dynamics and various growth and production indexes, for social sustainability the analytical foundations remain undeveloped<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, there are some principles and definitions that can be applied to understand, plan, and work on projects within the dimension of social sustainability.

<sup>17</sup> Easterly, W. (2006). *The White Man's Burden*; The Penguin Press. New York  
<sup>18</sup> from the official website of the SDGs <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<sup>19</sup> traditional proverb in Romanian, mother tongue of this author  
<sup>20</sup> KANU, I. A. (year?) Proverbs as sources of African Environmental Ethics, Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State  
<sup>21</sup> Sachs, Jeffrey, Pan, Ki-mun. (2005) *The Age of Sustainable Development*  
<sup>22</sup> Arrow, K. J. et al. (2004). Are we consuming too much?. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*  
<sup>23</sup> Patrick, B. et al. (2023). *Social Sustainability in Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

These principles are worth considering especially while keeping in mind the hefty inheritance of colonialistic and white savior views in development work. To increase the effectiveness of development work and overcome old patterns of bias, an understanding of social sustainability can be of considerable help.

*Poverty is like heat; you cannot see it; you can only feel it; so to know poverty you have to go through it. Adaboya, Ghana*<sup>25</sup>

The World Bank points out, in the 2023 publication "Social Sustainability in Development" four dimensions of social sustainability that might provide guidance in its applications: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience, and process legitimacy.

These four dimensions have been studied to be correlated with poverty reduction, human development, and inequality, through a cross-country data analysis run through the Social Sustainability Global Database (SSGD) of the World Bank. Numbers aside, these aspects can be understood also with a simple mental exercise in sensibility and empathy, especially by those who have spent some of their time and energy living and working in a community setting. For a common project to move forward, let's say a shared urban gardening project, there must be first and foremost a common purpose and willingness to trust and cooperate between the people taking part in the garden. It is very hard to harvest enough vegetables to feed everyone, if some people never want to plant vegetables, take up planting decorative flowers in half of the garden space while the other people are on holiday. This would of course end in a fight and therefore compromise part of the garden pro-

*Social sustainability increases when more people feel part of the development process and believe that they and their descendants will benefit from it.*

*Communities and societies that are more socially sustainable are more willing and able to work together to overcome challenges, deliver public goods, and allocate scarce resources in ways perceived to be legitimate and fair so that all people may thrive over time.*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> opening quote from Patrick, B. et al. (2023). Social Sustainability in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.  
<sup>25</sup> Patrick, B. et al. (2023). Social Sustainability in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.

ject. There must be a common agreement about why a project is even started and trust that everyone is on board cooperating for a common good. That is social cohesion. Furthermore, if the garden project wants to succeed, all members need to be enabled to participate: if some of the members are too short to access the high beds, or some have bad knees and cannot work on the ground, or some simply do not hold enough knowledge to work independently, and the others do not want to invest some of the common budget or the common time to bring in the necessary adaptations to make the garden beds accessible with a similar degree of comfort and knowledge for all its members, then there will be some imbalance. And some people will simply give up participating because they cannot find inclusion. Another important topic to observe, when it comes to the success of the garden project, is that both the garden and its gardeners can withstand unforeseen negative events. If during a bus trip to buy new seeds at the local glasshouse, the bus has an accident and a large part of the gardeners get hurt, but do not have insurance to cover their medical expenses for a speedy recovery, the project might as well be in danger. In that case, in a resilient project, the other members might have the means to cover the work for the hurt ones and help them get in shape and back into the group as soon as possible. Finally, another important dimension of trust in the gardening project is that the group finds legitimate and fair whoever takes the role of major authority in garden-related decisions, for example, the people with major expertise and experience, and finds their decisions resonant, beneficial, transpar-

ent and in line with the group's goals and wishes. No one likes to go out of a gardening meeting thinking that their ideas have been completely ignored and starting to doubt that the decision makers might not even know or care what is the right thing to do to get the juiciest cherry tomatoes all kids like. Or worse, the suspicion arises that the same people who are making the decisions are the ones having the most advantages out of the harvest. That is a good description of process legitimacy. It is not hard to remember what makes participating in community activities, of whichever scale, potentially frustrating and ineffective. In a similar form, a development project done with the most beautiful goals, with the wish of working with a community, or providing it the tools to overcome the various obstacles to its well-being, can become frustrating and ineffective. The community, which is supposed to receive the project's benefits, might even progressively reject it: slowly lose engagement and participation, show little interest in understanding how to continue it in the future once the active part of the collaboration is closed, or even openly express skepticism and discontent.

*"A key take-away from this book is that how development is done matters. How goals are formulated and how policies and programs are designed and implemented can often mean the difference between success and failure."<sup>26</sup>*

How things are done matters, and how people feel, what their take is, all of this matters. Anna Heringer, whose beautifully executed projects are recounted as an example of success and sensibility, wrote "form follows love"<sup>27</sup>: a poetic formulation of the same principle, to work with others for their improvement must imply understanding and respecting their specific needs, and caring for them to be fulfilled. This thesis aims to look at these aspects of applied care, with honest observations and some mindful self-criticism.

26

Patrick, B. et al. (2023). Social Sustainability in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.

27

from the title of the future publication: Heringer, A. (2024). Form Follows Love, Birkhäuser



A VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE CREEPS THROUGH a small town in Ghana along the road from Accra to Cape Coast. It is night. It is hot. The Beetle is small for its five passengers. The air smells of wood smoke. There are no streetlights. The driver—my father—picks his way through the Ghanaian walkers on the road.

The car hits frequent potholes. Unlighted vehicles pass us going in the opposite direction. We come out of the town and are in the bush. The smells are now of tropical flowers. We come to the guesthouse where we will spend the night. The bungalow has no light. Somebody lights a kerosene lantern. The odor of kerosene drives out every other smell. For the rest of my life, whenever I smell kerosene, I think of Ghana. My brother, sister, and I stumble sleepily into the wooden guesthouse with verandas, a leftover from British colonizers. My nervous mother, to whom every blind curve in the road was an existential crisis, copes with tropical disorder. The bungalow has only one bedroom; the rest of us make do with sofas or chairs pushed together. We are skittish after sighting a few insects and even bats in the bungalow. We go to sleep anyway, to the rhythms of drums in nearby villages and surf on the nearby coast. My father is a biology professor at the University College of Cape Coast, Ghana, part of the American program to lend knowledge to the development of Africa. We are a family of five from Bowling Green, Ohio. We are white people and we have come to save you. I am twelve years old.

Thirty-five years later, I am again on the road from Accra to Cape Coast. I am a development economics professor, having spent many of the intervening years working on the quest to transform the poor countries of the world, sixteen of them working for the World Bank. Our car is bumping along on one of the worst roads I have ever seen; the donors are building

a new road next to the wretched road. Our car swings into the small town of Mprumem, a village of mud huts with thatched roofs. My traveling companion knows the chief of Mprumem, who curiously enough is a Ghanaian immigrant to the United States, working as a university professor in Akron, Ohio. He spends part of every year in Mprumem.

The village elders come to greet us, marching in a dignified file with ceremonial robes and carved walking sticks, scattering goats and chickens, followed by a crowd of curious children. As part of the welcoming ceremony, the elders pass around a glass of schnapps. Each of us in turn (excluding the children) drinks half the contents of the glass and throws the rest on the ground; the attendant then refills the glass for the next person.

The older village elders tell us about how life has changed over time. Many villagers used to suffer from Guinea worm disease when they had to get their water from a contaminated water hole. Guinea worm disease is caused by a tiny water flea that contains the worm larvae. When people drink water containing such fleas, they get infected with the larvae. The larvae hatch inside their bodies, eventually growing to worms as long as three feet. The worms eventually emerge from open sores on the skin. They take weeks to emerge, during which the victim is in agony and cannot work or attend school.

Now the villagers get piped water from the nearby city of Winneba, and there is no Guinea worm. The expansion of water services was financed partly by foreign aid. Even though the water supply is periodically interrupted, the chief has built a water reservoir (financed by Western donations) to store water to tide the people over during water cutoffs. Children are healthier. What's more, the returning chief has also built a junior high school, also financed by Western donations.

Night falls. With only a few homes with electricity, the village is deep in a darkness that few Western urbanites could imagine. The Milky Way is visible in the sky overhead. Walking along the main street of the village, I try not to bump into other walkers in the darkness. A little light comes from vendors selling omelets by candlelight on the street. Fifty people are gathered around to watch television outdoors on one of the few electric hookups. They are watching a funeral. Another part of the funeral occasion that I don't fully comprehend: across the street, speakers are booming out heavy metal, quite a change from the drums of thirty-five years ago. Even the few electric hookups are an improvement from thirty-five years ago (although I personally prefer drums to heavy metal), when so many villages had no electricity at all. Accommodation for the night is basic, but free of insects or bats.

This snapshot, like the other ones interspersed throughout the book, shows anecdotal evidence of how Searchers, like the chief from Akron, Ohio, or some in the aid agencies, find piecemeal improvements that work, such as electric power, piped water, a water reservoir, the wiped-out Guinea worm, a junior high school.

I mean these anecdotes to be suggestive, not "proof" that aid Searchers do better than Planners. (The main text of the book addresses that big issue.) Few of the small interventions that I will describe have been rigorously evaluated, which the book will argue is necessary to make progress. But few things have been rigorously evaluated in foreign aid, period. We have to start somewhere to get ideas on things that could work. There is still so much more that could be done in Ghana to prevent needless tragedy. Only 46 percent of infants with diarrhea receive the cheap treatment of oral rehydration therapy that dramatically lowers the risk of death. Twenty-nine percent of children are still stunted from malnu-

trition, which could be alleviated with timely treatment of anti-diarrhea programs, feeding programs, and nutritional supplements. Thirty-one percent of children do not receive the cheap immunizations against childhood killer diseases.

These interventions always seem puny compared with the grand visions of the Planners. Yet if you multiply the Searchers exponentially and contrast their numerous interventions to plans that don't actually work, if you consider the doable things that don't get done because aid does not have enough Searchers, you have a way of thinking about aid that will help the poor more than Gordon Brown's eloquence.

William Easterly,

Extract from *The White Man's Burden*, 2006



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Drone picture of Nsutem, Lex Glodé, Nsutem, 2022

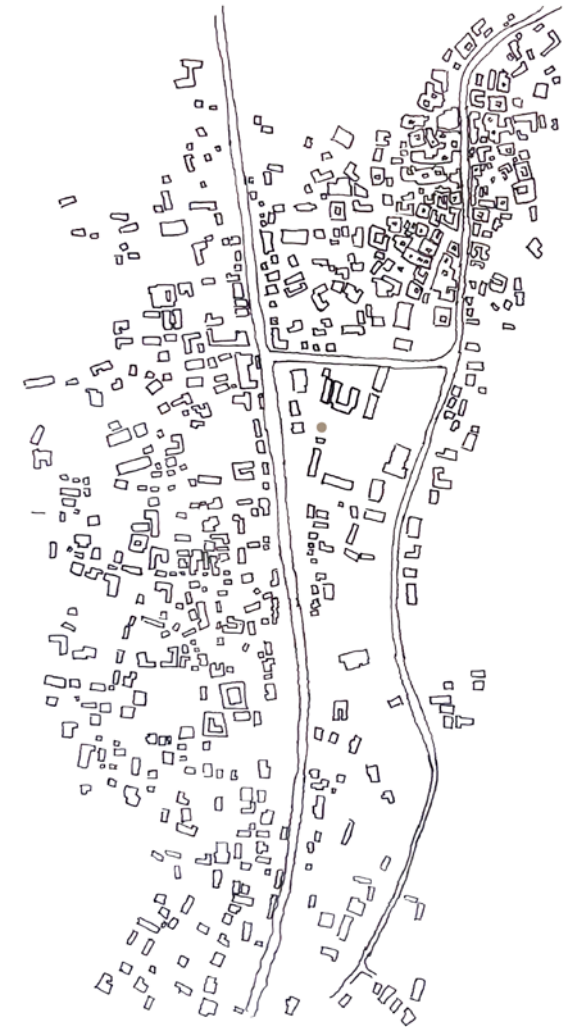
## context

### *a village*

Nana and his elders council, starters of the library project, sit every Tuesday afternoon for business in the Chief's palace in the old part of Nsutem. The village, apparently small and cozy, stretches itself around the main road that connects Accra to Kumasi and counts a surprising number of around 3.000 to 5.000 inhabitants. And with much honesty, this author cannot say how many people there are in Nsutem, many officials of the area have been asked and never the same answer has been given. It depends on how one counts them, but Nana feels responsible for 5.000<sup>01</sup>. Probably counting people with utmost precision, like merchandise in a supermarket or products in a factory, is a custom mainly of Western countries, a peculiarity of sorts and a need for precision and control that the inhabitants of Nsutem do not feel necessary. For the inhabitants of Nsutem, it is also not necessary to define a city center as Westerners would define it, nor city borders.

The village develops organically to the west and the east of the road, a trafficked asphalt line that does not sleep. One can moreless say that Nsutem starts at LindaDor in the south, even though there are some newer houses that claim to appertain to Nsutem also south-west from LindaDor, and finishes in the north with the Paradise resort, an American-style diner in front of which sits the residency of nana himself, like a guardian of the town. It might be expected of the king of the village, because Nana is king to his people, even though he has a king above him, who has another king above him as well, to live in the center of the village. But, as previously mentioned, not everything obvious to the reader is obvious to the people of another place. Nana lives where he is supposed to live, in a modern and spacious house, with an ample courtyard, and a good view of the roads that lead to the goldmines. It takes only five minutes by car, or Pragma, to move from Paradise to the chief's palace, and it takes only five more to get to LindaDor.

In the past Nsutem was defined by its rivers, six of them which stream through and around it. In the Akan language Twi, "Nsutam" results as the combination of the words "Nsu", meaning water, and "Ntam" meaning in-between. All the locals speak Twi, many of them speak English, and most of them would give the same translation to the name of the village. It is common knowledge, still nowadays where the street made understanding the natural village structure harder, in Nsutem water is never missing. The village is in the plains, with dense clay-saturated red and brown earth covered with luscious green vegetation during the rainy season. Nsutem is above the line of the tropical forests, and enough kilometers away from the wet winds of the coast to start showing the heat of the savannah in the dry season. On the horizon roll lazy hills, remains of ancient mountains that melted into lumps covered with fog and trees, into the clay that the rivers left around Nsutem, and into the gold that is being dug on the borders of the city, but about the gold one does not talk too much.



Sketch of Nsutem, Florian Bayer, 2022

01 conversation with Nana, August 2022, Nsutem



The village is not the placid type of cozy though, it is the friendly, lively, loud, and hot kind. The asphalt road might be setting a certain tone, vibrating with packed trotters and overloaded trucks, blazing heat day and night, but it's the music from large speakers and the voices of the population that saturate the atmosphere. Business happens everywhere, from bars with small gardens to small colorful shops in metal boxes, to little table stands on the corner of the busy street, to ladies-sellers walking back and forth with baskets on their heads selling deep-fried spring rolls with various fillings, some watery or less watery version of the local porridge, some suspiciously orange looking dry mussels, and some more. Nsutem is never quiet, never really still, and even in the depth of the night some church will start a function, some teenage boys will be running with the Pragyas and some lady will be snoozing in front of the television of her shop, waiting for a tired driver to buy sliced mango and coca-colas.

Some central parts of this life happen around the chief's palace, especially because of the Tuesday business and the Saturday and Sunday ceremonies. The house to the left of the palace, just behind it, is defined as the oldest in town, the house of the founders who moved there 150 years prior<sup>02</sup> and brought with them Thano, the village's warrior spirit, and protector. On the right of the palace, there is the partially covered ceremonial square, where most important village functions, in particular the boisterous funerals, usually take place. The Ashanti culture is omnipresent, with its symbols decorating the walls of the houses and the clothes of the lot, the Twi language mixing with English in the air, and the smell of the groundnut soup and jollof rice turning heads at every corner. In Nsutem everyone seems to be tied to everyone, aunties and mamies sell the vegetables at the corners, and it should not come as a surprise that the taxi driver turned out to be the cousin or son of someone. And everyone seems to have a relative in the next cities, the distances never quite clear: on certain days one would think that people never move out of the village, on others it seems that they are constantly moving between Accra, Koforidua, or Kumasi. It is hard for the external observer to know, at first glance, which families have more means and more connections and which are the ones who live out of their fields and some small business.

Once in Accra, the coast becomes accessible, even though it does not hold as much attraction to the people of Nsutem as much as it does for tourists and volunteers. For them, the capital is the most attractive place to go to. When talking to the villagers, it feels like everyone has one or a few family members, who live and work in the city. That might also lay in the fact that they have a wider sense of family than this author, a European-born and raised person, has. Nevertheless, there are many good reasons for people from Nsutem, and many other parts of Ghana, to move to Accra, a fact that contributes to the fast-increasing number of inhabitants of the capital, to the informal settlements and black markets, and to the vibrant charm of a city that seems to have reached its lanky teenage state. Some parts of Accra are neat and organized, with large western-style streets, tall concrete buildings, and gated hotels that would make proud every rich important guest of the country; while some are still unsure in which direction to grow, smaller quarters of a few stories houses in the most different styles, with cute shops, little restaurants, and buying bars, all telling a story of a tropical educated youth who wants to make it; and some parts are still informal, in need of care and infrastructure, bustling with so much life, so many baby goats roaming and kids running and young ladies laughing, but also with so much sadness, vulnerability, dirt, and danger.

Despite its disparities, Accra is known as one of the most secure capitals in Western Africa, and Ghana, with its stable government and economy, attracts many visitors and helping hands who want to make a difference, but in a safe way.



Gye Nyame  
Except God

It expresses the omnipotence and supremacy of God in all affairs. Gye Nyame is arguably the most popular Adinkra symbol in Ghana. It expresses the deep faith the Akans have in the Supreme Being.



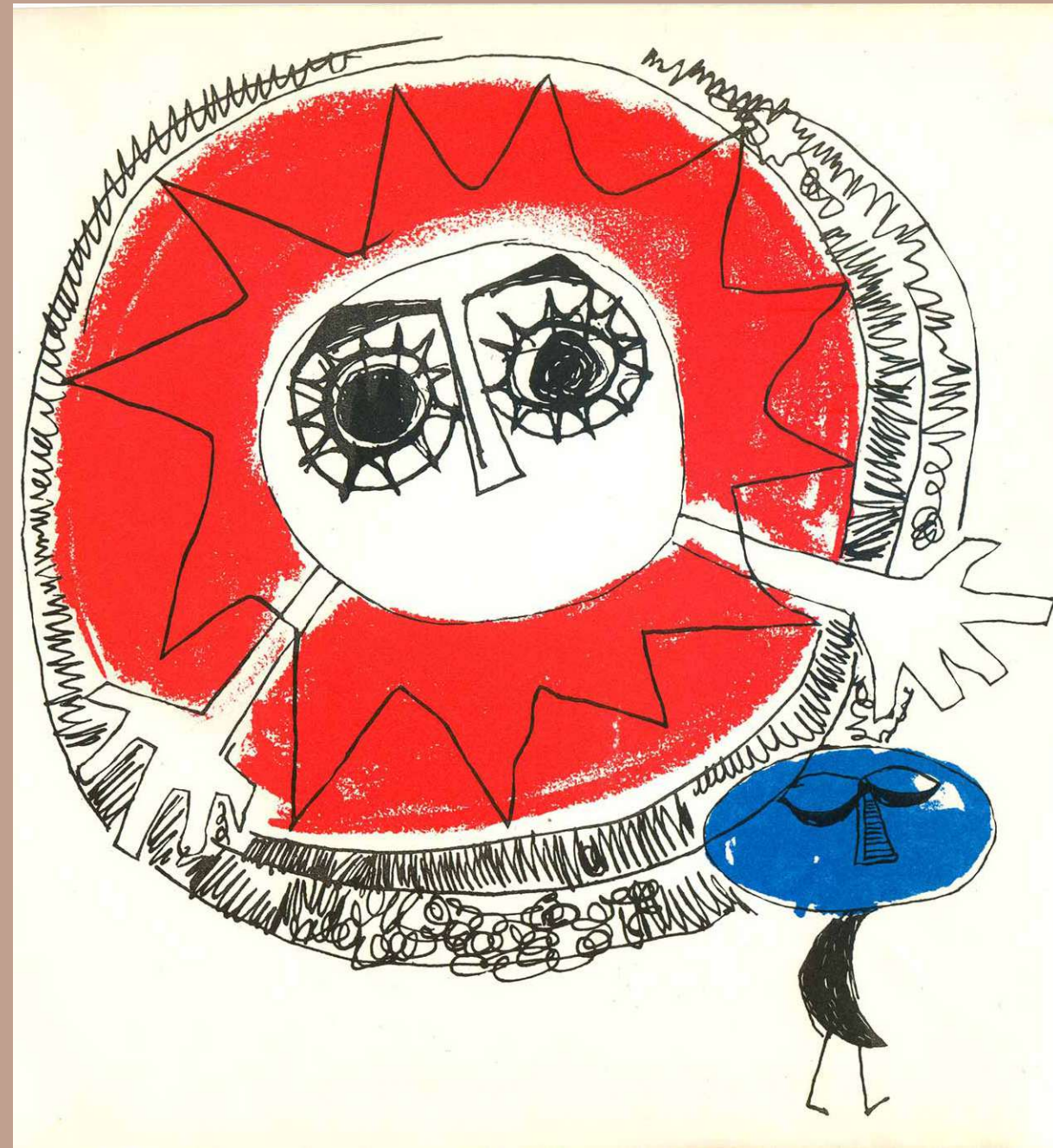


Troto from Accra to Kumasi, Beatrice Aimée, on the road, 2022

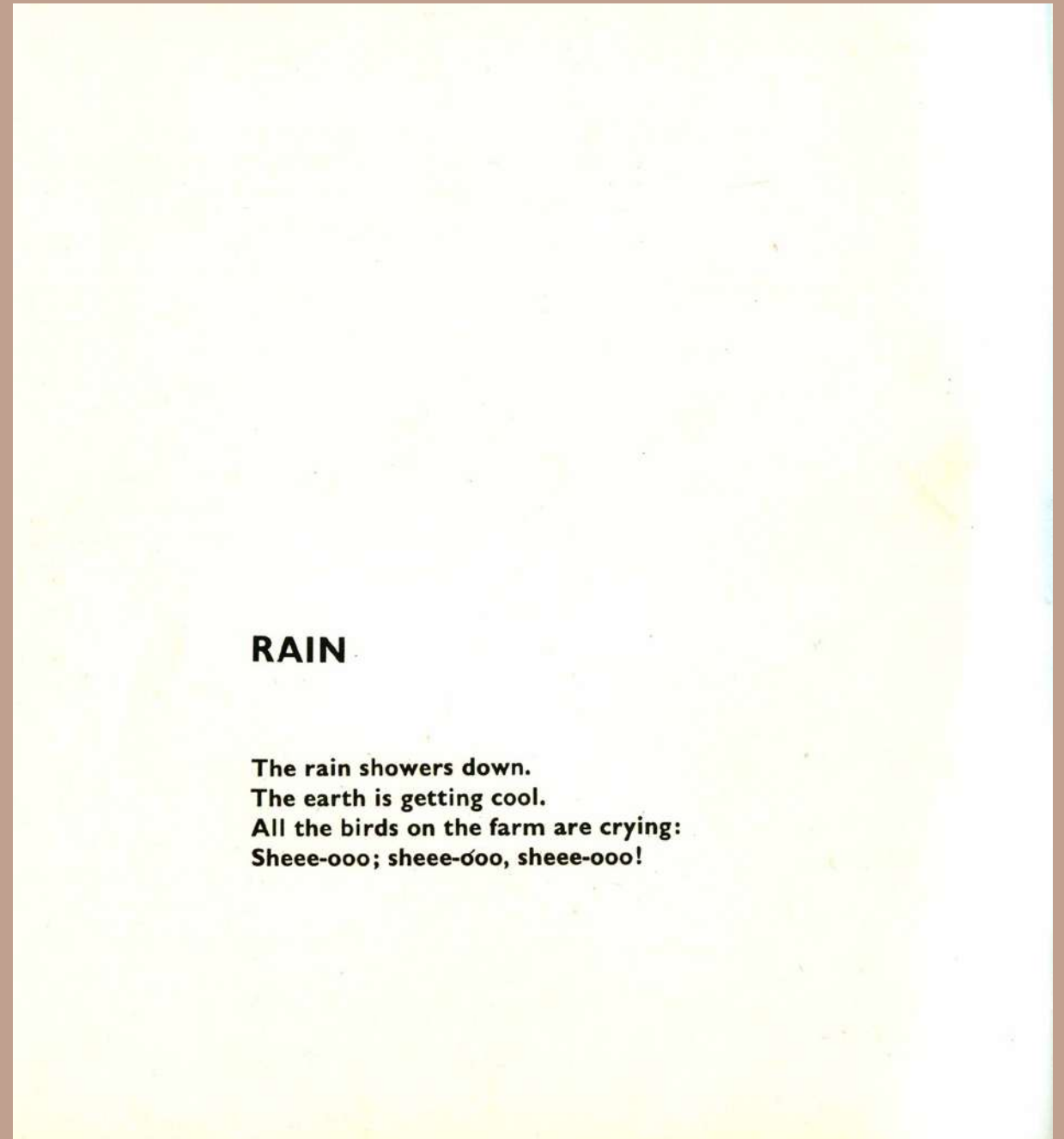


Accra views, Beatrice Aimée, Accra, 2022





The Moon Cannot Fight - Yoruba children's Poems  
Ulli Beier and Bakare Gbadamosi  
illustrated by Georgina Betts



## RAIN

The rain showers down.  
The earth is getting cool.  
All the birds on the farm are crying:  
Sheee-ooo; sheee-ooo, sheee-ooo!

# interacting

## *with the project partners*

There were many layers of interaction and communication coming into play in mudLIBRARY. A big part of the work surrounding the planning and the realization of the building revolved around the communication and coordination between the different parties involved in starting the project, in planning it and in building it. In a setting where language and culture are also a key topic, and where monetary reward is not at all one, the ways of interacting among the project members became an essential element in determining the accomplishment of the goals of the project.

Many of the observations collected during the construction workshop were aimed to understand and interpret the dynamics of communication on and around the building, and what role they played in the well-being of both the people working on the project and on the people who would take over the library once completed.

The first levels of communication were between the different parties on the project board, mostly mediated by the design and executive team of Archifair: the village leadership, Book Drop Ghana and Hive Earth. The village leadership was representing the client, whose interest was primarily to have the library finished in a way that the village could use it and benefit from it; but also to have the people volunteering for it feel welcomed and safe, the workers from the village fairly treated, the community comfortable with the procedure and the authorities above them recognize and validate the work achieved. Book Drop Ghana, the NGO who provided the books and the guidance needed to accomplish a functioning library, was interested in having the necessary spatial and infrastructural features for the library to succeed and in implementing an organizational structure and a running program that would facilitate the library to operate in time and be socially resilient. Hive Earth on the other side was called to provide

some of the tools and framework needed to build, technical consultancy on the building technique of rammed earth and informative workshops aimed to spread knowledge and awareness towards the work executed for European and local volunteers, and local workers. Archifair, as the project coordinators and planners, held the central role in conceptualizing and organizing the construction project. Their interactions primarily revolved around articulating the design vision, negotiating resources, and coordinating tasks among stakeholders.

During the design phase, which happened previously of the twelve weeks which defined the construction workshop, most of that communication involved understanding the needs and wishes revolving around the spatial organization and facility requirements of the building.<sup>01</sup>

During the workshop phase, the goals of the communication mediated by Archifair revolved around the coordination of the construction site. Infrastructure, tools, material, workers, meals, retribution, lodgment, transfer and so on, became the main topics of interaction.

The village leadership played a pivotal role in providing local context, allocating resources, and ensuring community engagement and ownership throughout the project. They supplied water, electricity, storage, break rooms and toilet facilities on the construction site, while also mediating the local human resources, the community engagement and security issues. All these topics were agreed on during week0, the week before the arrival of the first team of volunteers and the official beginning of the construction site, when Hannah, Manuel, Luisa and Beatrice had various coordinating meetings with Nana and the village elders.

<sup>01</sup> more information about the design process in the correlated work: Berger H. (2023), mudLIBRARY. Designing a Library in Ghana. TU Wien. Vienna

These first meetings were held at the Palace, in the green air-conditioned guest room, where they were also greeted upon their arrival, on the 9th of July 2022. On that sweltering Saturday, they were picked up from Linda Dor by a ceremoniously dressed in blue Nana Opoku and Nana Osabarima and brought first thing first to the palace, where the elder committee of the village was waiting for them. They sat on dark leather couches between smiling elderly ladies and offered Club beers. They were introduced to the council and the council was introduced to them. They were explained the village's uses and traditions and introduced to the people who would be responsible for helping them in the following weeks. With that meeting the collaboration between the village and the project planners was kicked-off and their first allocation in a familiar guest house in Osino, just a couple of kilometers further north the road from the King's residence, was arranged for them and negotiated at a fair price. In the following days a whirlwind of diverse meetings followed to define the details of the construction workshop.

For the volunteers boarding it was first agreed to stay in the bungalows of the Coco College in Bunso, just a couple of kilometers from Linda Dor towards east, in the direction of Koforidua.

It was also agreed with the schools around the construction site that the volunteers will be allowed to use one of the empty rooms of the old primary school as a break room, sharing it with the church practices. Further storage rooms for materials and tools were set, between the old school, the new primary school and the mensa. Nana agreed on providing water and electricity and negotiated with the clinic the free use of their toilet facilities for the volunteers. For the volunteers boarding it was first agreed to stay in the bungalows of the Coco College in Bunso, just a couple of kilometers from Linda Dor towards east, in the direction of Koforidua.

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Besides the agreements on the construction works' infrastructure, during the meetings a few members of the council took practical tasks to accompany the process:

Gyasihene assured his presence under the shadow of the almond trees next to the construction site, to guarantee that no one would interfere with the work;

Nana Opoku was entrusted to help the project team with material errands and price negotiations;

Nico the Okyeme (note) agreed to take a break from his retirement and work again as a driver for the volunteers and team leaders;

while Madame Afua and Madame Joy agreed to prepare two meals a day, breakfast and lunch, for volunteers and workers. In those meetings it was also defined a small team of builders, led by Samuel, son of Nico and experienced mason, to assist the volunteers for the duration of the project and lead the concrete works.

By Sunday the 17th of July, when the first group of volunteers arrived, everything was set and ready to be kicked off the following day. Monday the 18th of July was the beginning of week 1, and of the workshop.

*Time feels different here. We were supposed to be ready to go at 9, we received a call at 10.15 where we were invited to walk ourselves to breakfast and then go to the chief's house. At his house we were invited to wait under the hexagonal outdoor patio, not a regular hexagon. We were then brought to the chief's palace to join the Sunday festivities and meet the elders. After the meeting, which consisted in sitting for a few hours waiting, we've been freed by Richard (Oppong) and brought to the Radio station, a place-to-be for the local youth. We've been briefly joined by Gyasi, an active church member, who showed himself very enthusiastic to help us in our endeavors. He offered us to be featured and interviewed on the local radio, which was already a plan organized through Seth [contact person from BookDropGhana], and expanded the offer to the possibility of arranging and running our own show on the radio. And maybe make it a recurring one that could continue even after we leave. We visited together the site where the library would be placed, and discussed possible arrangements to involve the local community in the project. A cozy cigarette break in Oppong's garden brought our day to conclusion, sitting in monoblock chairs under the shade of a beautiful "coco", for us Europeans commonly known as cacao tree.<sup>02</sup>*

While the days of the week<sup>0</sup> were quite challenging for the Archifair team in terms of energy and time, all the talks and arrangements that took place during those days were always friendly and appreciative. Nana and his council showed much consideration towards Hannah, Manuel, Luisa and Beatrice; not only by treating them with respect and making clear that they held importance and authority in front of the village, but also tried their best to make them feel comfortable and serene, striking jokes from time to time, inviting them in some of their local affairs and asking some of the younger active members of the village, like Richard Oppong, to accompany them. Akwaba, they would repeat often. Welcome. And welcomed they felt.

In the following twelve weeks of the project, the team formed by the village was in constant communication with the project responsables from Archifair, assisting on each step of the realization of the project.<sup>03</sup> With time the communication grew even closer and easier, with a trust and a friendliness that made most meetings feel quite pleasant, and most tasks to tackle or problems to solve feel always feasible. It became normal for Hannah or for this author to drive with Nana Opoku to sort out some material deliveries, such as the rammed earth, or to buy beers for the volunteers to enjoy in the evening. In-between these drives there were often stops for a cola and a hello at a friend's shop in Osino, or at his wife's shop in Nsutem, because in Nsutem time and productivity always left leeway also for the human aspects of life. And it was no surprise that during one of those spontaneous stops, to greet Nana Opoku's grandma, Hannah and Bea found the most fitting earth for the rammed earth walls: it was just sitting in her garden in a pile, freshly dug out for her house expansion and basically ready to be moved to the library. Nana's Grandma did not hesitate to gift her earth to the project, and half of the earth mixes used for walls were known later on by everybody as "Grandma's".

While coordinating with the village, the Archifair team was also in active communication with Kwame and Joelle from HiveEarth about their assistance and consultancy on the project. Hive Earth, the Ghanaian company that connected Archifair with the project, was supporting the library built with their expertise on the rammed earth technique, their knowledge on the local soil and material and with some of the specific tools and equipment needed for the earthen walls. During the first weeks Kwame visited a few times Nsutem to bring the framework for the rammed walls; to scout the area together with Hannah and nana Opoku in search for a good earth mixture; and to test together with the volunteers the options found during the scouting missions. The latter activity was framed in the form of a workshop, as it had been initially agreed: each of the four groups of volunteers, students of architecture, were given the chance to learn about rammed earth and its practice in Ghana from Kwame himself and benefit from his unfiltered and local knowledge.

On the 21st of July, during week 1, Kwame, fashionably late and hard to reach, started his first workshop for Group 1. Wearing dark jeans and tshirt, dreadlocks and red helmet, he charmed volunteers and local workers alike with his passion for his work. He showed how to evaluate the different soils collected, how to try different mixes and how to ram them in the test forms. Under the shade of the almond trees, he told them stories of his work and how he got to learn and experience what he did. Kwame, together with his partner in life and in work Joelle started HiveEarth with a small budget and little space, mostly the garden of his mother's house in Accra, a bit like a startup dream. And talking with him made people dream: dream of being brave enough to learn something unexpected and unusual, dream of finding that impressive drive to make out of an interest an opportunity, and dream of having the guts to follow through with any project. After this first workshop with HiveEarth it was clear that his words and stories would benefit not only the volunteers, but also the local community, workers and curious passersby alike. Therefore the Archifair team started planning a more inclusive workshop, where more people from the village could be involved and Kwame would also explain everything in Twi, the local Akan language. The goal of this workshop was to improve the inclusivity of the project, to reach out to more people in the village and share the skills also with those who normally could not access such knowledge.

<sup>03</sup> for details about the weekly progress of the building it is possible to consult the correlated work: Obermoser M. (2003), mudLIBRARY. Umsetzung einer Bibliothek in Ghana. TU Wien. Vienna



In parallel to the building workshops, Sylvia and Seth from BookDrop Ghana were also in talks with Archifair and the village representatives. Their goal was to bridge the construction phase with the post-construction period, focusing on library operations, community outreach, and sustainability.

Their work started already in 2020 when they first visited Nsutem to initiate the project and start implementing their methodology: Communities of Literacy™ (CoL).<sup>04</sup> Within the framework of their method, they started a first practical workshop with schools and the local radio: they invited some of the local youth to learn storytelling and documentary making and to start spreading interest and awareness about the possibilities that literature and information exchange media could offer. Their work method could be described within the framework of social sustainability with the term empowerment, or inclusion<sup>05</sup>, and their kind and friendly approach made them very much welcomed both by the people of Nsutem at first, and by the volunteers later on.

Seth, who for organizational reasons took over most of project coordination during the workshop weeks, took the time to visit and check regularly the construction site in Nsutem, and to share the expertise of Bookdropghana with the team of Archifair and with the volunteers. Sometimes these were conversations about the importance of literacy and showing to the local youth a larger variety of skills they could learn and use while walking between the red earth piles on the construction site. Other times there were conversations about the importance of conserving the traditional culture, of understanding it and saving it from being forgotten, in his hometown Akosombo, while enjoying the slow and steady flow of the Volta river and the rich rustle of the tree groves. But mostly it was while balancing on the wooden boards of the construction site and looking at the rammed earth walls that he was sharing his knowledge about the region and the Akan culture and offered his support for any practical issues. His presence, support, and enthusiasm towards the building, were vital in strengthening the feeling of cohesivity in the people working on site, reminding them of their purpose and giving them trust that someone will be there to take care of their work once it is done.

Finally, towards the end of the construction workshop, during week 10, Seth inaugurated the library board and its first meeting, formed by two representatives of the village council, the district mayor, the middle school's director, a representative of the local youth, and Seth himself. The library board was instituted under the guidance of Bookdropghana to ensure that the library would become self-sustained and continue to function for many years to come, giving direct responsibility to a diverse group of representative figures to solve any problems concerning the library and to ensure resilience.

*The aim of the project is to create Ghana's first Community of Literacy™ in Nsutam by involving everyone in the community, from the top down, in a programme aimed at improving the literacy skills in the community as a whole by working with groups of individuals. Nsutam COL aims to create a sense of ownership and agency about the project by handing over responsibility for the creation and development of the programme to the community from the start, providing training and knowledge transfer immediately to equip members of the community to go out and hone, apply, and share their newly acquired skills. The home of the Community of Literacy is the library<sup>06</sup>*

The forms of communication on this level of the project were key factors in determining its process legitimacy. The language and tones chosen, the courtesies, and the regard shown one another determined the base of trust needed to run the construction site in harmony with the different parties.

Even when conflicts arose, because of the strong basis of trust between the different parties of the project, it was possible to solve them without compromising the workflow and the overall harmony. Topics such as money embezzlement, unfair payments, or favoritism, which are common problems in projects in context, could be well avoided within the project frame, because of the shared purpose and cohesion that was built in the collaboration. Towards the last weeks of the projects, there was no doubt that giving money to Madame Joy to buy the groceries missing would result in probably even better bargains than when the groceries were bought in the company of the Archifair team or of the volunteers, and they would not hesitate to bring back every cent of change, even when told to buy themselves a cola as a thanks.

04 concept explained in the paper: Arthur S. (2018), Communities of Literacy concept paper  
05 the concept of inclusion is discussed in the chapter *some theories some practice*

06 extract from the concept realized by Bookdropghana for Nsutem in 2019



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visits on the construction site, Archifair, Nsutem, 2022



# interacting

## *with the volunteers and workers*

The next level of communication that shaped the project was between the team of Archifair and the volunteers, and between the team of Archifair and the local workers. This communication carried an inherent hierarchy, different from the previous level between the various project partners. Hannah, Manuel, Luisa, Beatrice, and later on Anna and Jaap<sup>01</sup> carried the knowledge and responsibility of coordinating and advancing the project, which meant they were automatically on a higher standing than the volunteers coming to learn and work. Yet, the inherent hierarchical structure did not stay unchanged and unquestioned during the project development, but quite some thoughts and actions were dedicated to understanding which form of communication, and work structure would benefit the project. Generally, hierarchical top to down structures feel safer for the people who carry the most responsibility: it is indeed reassuring for the people in charge to know that their decisions will be applied in a controlled manner, and the results will most likely align with their vision and expectations. An order-action-based structure, with clear levels of authority, promotes a feeling of self-efficacy<sup>02</sup> and fulfills the need for control over oneself and over the rest, in this case, the work to achieve.

But a hierarchical approach is not wished for, nor optimal when it comes to a project such as mudLibrary. Working with volunteers and with a different cultural context than the one "at home" requires both a form of communication and management that can instill trust, reliance, and motivation. The best incentive to work for a common benefit is a feeling of personal reward that is not based on a monetary exchange. People who volunteer can be moved through feelings like appreciation, belonging, and community, or personal growth in experience, knowledge, and practical skills. To instill this kind of feeling, a closer, positive, and sensitive approach to the work done on the construction site was fundamental: and it showed up not only through the observations carried out during the different project weeks and groups, but also through the focus group interviews.

Nevertheless, flattening the hierarchy and implementing clear, positive, and rewarding communication was a process that took some time and tryouts for the team in charge of the project. To understand this, the circumstances of the project and its planning need to be considered. The focus of the first weeks was on organizational challenges: most of the tools, materials, and services needed to run the construction site could not be organized in advance from Europe, but needed to be agreed on in loco and in real-time. These demanding and stressful tasks, together with the exposure to a completely different cultural environment, weighed down on the confidence and feeling of control of the Archifair coordinating team, which resulted in fewer personal resources to invest in the interaction with the volunteers, and into an instinctive leaning towards a colder and more controlled behavior.

For example, in the first weeks, it was decided to not rent a concrete mixing machine, since the cost of the machine and the laborer needed to keep it functioning greatly exceeded the cost of having masons and volunteers mix the concrete by hand. This was a burdensome decision: asking for harder manual labor of the team and risking the efficiency and timing of the whole work calendar. These kinds of top-down decisions that needed to be taken to pursue the tight schedule set for the library construction resulted also in a more top-down communication with the group of volunteers and with the workers on the construction site. Also, a part of the Archifair coordinating team who was in loco in the first weeks had limited experience with the context, both culturally and professionally, and with the modality of the workshop.

01 Anna and Jaap, founders of Archifair, joined the coordinating team during the weeks 4 to 8 of the project

02 Friesen, J., Kay, A. C., Eibach, R. P., & Galinsky, A. D. (2014). Seeking structure in social organization: compensatory control and the psychological advantages of hierarchy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*

These aspects came out quite clearly during the first focus group interview, where the group felt the need to give feedback and guidance to the project coordinators on how they would have preferred to be talked to and motivated during their first weeks on the construction site. The group interviews revealed themselves in hindsight also as a good tool to improve overall communication and cooperation, giving the volunteers a platform to feel listened to and understood, and giving the coordinative team a tool to assess and integrate topics that have been forgone in the first weeks and revealed themselves important later on, such as a good presentation round and tour of the facilities on the first work day of the volunteers'. Furthermore, by comparing the different group interviews, it is possible to observe the dynamicity of the communication and interpersonal processes and compare the different factors that influenced the changes.

The second group, when asked the same questions during the focus interview expressed the wish to have been had more practical things about the work and the community explained in the first days. Although the group was initiated to the construction work with a bit more security and started with a very positive attitude, after facing some organizational and cultural challenges such as moving residence alone, it lost much of its confidence and trust. The situation worsened when the accommodations of the volunteers had to be separated from the coordinating team due to space reasons, during the weekend between weeks 5 and 6. The volunteers had to move to a guesthouse in the center of the village, and the move coincided with the resting break of a part of the Archifair coordinating team, Hannah, Manuel, Luisa, and Beatrice.

While Anna and Jaap stayed and worked on-site, they could not provide the same sense of familiarity that the core team managed to build with the group, leading the volunteers to feel to a certain extent exposed and fragile. By the end of their stay, Group2 looked tired and depleted, and their feedback resonated a lot with their light state of discouragement.

On the other hand, when the third group entered an already settled system. No more moves were to be done and many key decisions for the project have been achieved. The coordinating team was at that point in good harmony with their village cooperators and at ease with the routine that consolidated itself on the construction site. By the first day of the third group, the Archifair team was used to interacting with the volunteers and was at ease in presenting themselves and the work ahead: tasks and roles were more defined, there were less hesitations and therefore also more confidence in giving instructions and at the same time working side to side and sharing some of the problems arising. Most of the third group did not doubt the guidance of the team and the mutual collaboration was fastly established, with the coordinating team also being capable of spending much time working close on site. These aspects build a feeling of closeness and sympathy, and while Group3 was the least homogenous and cohesive, it agreed well with the leading team, and it did not lose much of its motivation, despite the unexpected torrential rains that ate up a lot of the available construction time.

With Group3 leaving with a very positive feedback, Group4 was welcomed in Nsutem with the most familiarity and trust. The project weeks were nearing to an end, and with the unfortunate weather hitting the previous weeks, there was a significant delay in the building progress. At that point the Archifair team adopted a very transparent and straightforward attitude: they explained to the volunteers how much work was left and included them completely in the responsibility of moving forward the project as much and as fast as possible. Part of the trust that the coordinating team had was also due to the fact that in the last group there were two experienced carpenters who could be given a high responsibility and important task without much supervision: building the roof beams. Nonetheless, the direct, inclusive and trusting approach had the most positive influence on the progress.

A further observation needs to be noted on this topic. While groups of volunteers do respond and react to their coordinators and the perceived quality of communication, they do as well react to the individual characters and the resulting internal dynamics within the group. It would be an oversimplification to say that only the project status and the overall communication would determine the efficacy and motivation of a group. Nonetheless, the groups did have a certain homogeneity in their background, age, gender distribution, and education. Furthermore, in this specific case, the last group can be considered very similar to the first one also in terms of its internal dynamics and cohesion. It is therefore still indicative to look at the different results in terms of motivation, satisfaction, and feedback. The last interview with Group4 was indeed the most relaxed and also the most honest and spontaneous. It also moved further away from the conversation questions, and the group also followed a thread of reflections and debated about the project, the village, and the materiality of the building. By considering the differences between the interview answers, it can be seen how the team of Archifair managed to flatten the hierarchy between them and the volunteers on the construction work and how this benefitted the motivation and general contentment. For the working teams, it made a difference how they were addressed, how involved they felt in the project, and how responsible they felt. The more cohesive the group felt the more incentivized it felt to do their best and work the hardest.









# interacting

## *with the community*

Finally, the last layer of communication which was pivotal for the project, was the one between the volunteers and the people of Nsutem: their working colleagues and the local community. Participation: the ability to work closely with the locals and to interact with the community was one of the premises Archifair, together with the other project teams, held in high importance. It was clear to them that for the library to be accepted, for it to be put to use and gain resilience, and in general to share the most benefits of the whole experience with the community, a positive and engaging interaction was considered a priority. As much as the library design could be sustainable from the point of view of its materiality, its social sustainability was defined also through the way the construction work would be carried out.

The fact that all the project partners were in agreement with this topic and facilitated its application in practice. From the beginning, the Archifair team and the volunteers have felt welcomed and taken care of in the village. The elders treated them with courtesy and respect, and their respect meant also that the villagers held them in respect as well. Nevertheless, courtesy and respect did not automatically determine closeness and involvement. Out of respect people would not necessarily go to look at the construction site, nor would they try to participate in the workshops. As the receivers of charity, and as the inherently inferior in power and expertise, the people of Nsutem would not feel allowed to get too close to the volunteer's work, unless invited. While this topic is strongly accentuated by the skin color and country provenience of the volunteers, it is also a phenomenon that can be observed in more homogenous settings.

There is automatically a distance when two groups of people interact, one on the receiving end of the grace of the other. The distance is also further accentuated when there are imbalances or differences in the form of education and perceived social stance. The fact that the students appear as a cohesive group with higher expertise automatically places a small barrier between them and the community they've joined: there is a certain shyness, a tendency of letting people who are considered better known to work in peace or even to lead the joint group. It often falls on the single "braver" individual to break the ice, or on the group who is regarded as higher in stance to step towards the others and involve them more. This phenomenon could be observed during the mudLibrary workshop.

While feeling welcomed in Nsutem, the volunteers and the coordinating team alike also mostly felt like a separate entity. The village elders, to ensure their security, were very attentive from the very beginning to drive them securely where they needed, to help them eat healthy meals, to not let them wander around alone at nightfall and even to accompany them in their free time activities. Nana asked the coordinating team multiple times to avoid using the *pragyas*<sup>01</sup> that were zapping through the village under the slightly over-confident stirring hands of the local youth, and when some of the volunteer groups started exploring the local bars and nightlife, they were often warned about which places to avoid. This kindness resulted in keeping the group somehow separated and controlled in their interaction with the village and, together with the inherent difference between the European volunteers and the rest, it posed a certain distance, founded also in respect, between them and the local community.

01 light motorized tricycle used for the transport of passengers

However, only after a few weeks on the construction site, this distance became visible: the team of Archifair noticed that even though the library site was positioned quite centrally in the village, very few people visited and engaged with it, contrary to what expected and wished for. There were constant interactions with the people tasked directly by Nana or Seth to help, and there were informal interactions with the ladies who had businesses around the area of the construction site, but very little happened besides that. The team indeed expressed from the very first meeting with the village that they would be more than happy to involve any interested person of Nsutem on the construction site and share their knowledge and experience with them. Spontaneous volunteers from the village were welcome and hoped for, but they did not come. It was almost disorienting to see how much of the unemployed youth of the village, many young men in their early 20s, did not throw more than a second look towards the building and the European volunteers.

To incentivize participation, they also tried, together with the help of BookDrop Ghana and Radio1 of Nsutem, to organize and stream a program to inform the community of what was going on. The idea could not become a regular show, but the team was invited to appear in a couple of interviews, the first one already during the third week of the project.

Regardless of the interview, the participation to the construction site from the adults of the village was very rare and mostly limited to occasional visits, except a few individuals that took the initiative to break the invisible wall.

The first person to do so and join out of personal interest was Fidelis, a young Nigerian man in his early twenties, who moved to Nsutem to work in the gold mines. Fidelis joined during week5 and stayed until the very end, involving also in the last weeks of the project some other con-nationals and friends. When asked what made him stay with the library construction site, he did not hesitate to say that he saw more value in learning and working for a good cause, than earning easy money mining. Fidelis became an important member of the working team, readily learning everything there was to do and executing it always with ability. The next person to join the construction workshop during week6 was Rose, a Ghanaian woman in her mid-thirties, who also recently moved to Nsutem from the neighboring village in search of work. Rose was also curious to learn new skills and to interact with the team and she stayed a regular on-site for a few weeks, where she worked and learned with joy, and shared some beautiful traditional songs and her bargaining skills.

By the mid of the project, the team of Archifair decided to organize an official open workshop day with Kwame from HiveEarth and to use that as a gate to reach the local population. They also talked with Nana, who, despite his skepticism, promised to officially announce the workshop and invite people to take part in it. On a cloudy day, the 6th of September 2022, week8, Kwame kicked off the workshop in both Twi and English about rammed earth. To take part in the workshop, besides the group3 of volunteers and Kromuel, one of the paid local workers, were only Fidelis and Grace. From that day on, Grace, a single woman from Nsutem in her mid-fifties, also joined regularly the construction work, to learn how rammed earth walls are made. She was a gracious, friendly presence on the site, who despite the language barrier, put energy and enthusiasm into everything she did.

*Nana expressed his apologies for the lack of engagement of the villagers. "They are used to receiving gifts, and they see them as gifts from you. So they do not understand that they should also work. They don't understand why they should work for free and they do not know that you also do this for free. That's why it is important to tell them".<sup>02</sup>*

Finally, towards the end of the project, a few more friends of Richard Oppong and of Fidelis joined in to help finish the library, through the connection already established by their friends. Overall the participative part of the project did not happen in a consistent and incisive way, to the disappointment and surprise of the Archifair team. It was indeed surprising for the team to feel so welcomed and generally on very good terms with all the people they have interacted with in the village, from the hairdressers to the fruit vendors, from the ladies walking with lunch snacks on their heads to the boys wildly driving the pragyas, but to have so little response to their invitations for participation.

While Nana's apology and observation pointed out a cultural factor influencing the resulting lack of participation, that was still not a complete explanation. As previously mentioned, the implicit barrier between Western-educated volunteers and local people needed more than a few nudges to be crossed. One option could have been to spend some human and time resources from the Archifair team to purposely visit some of the village's cultural and educational spaces, such as the high school in the south, or the football club, and to talk directly and intensely with the people there. Another option considered in hindsight, during many conversations with Anna (note), was to involve students from the closest architecture university, in Kumasi. Having people of a similar age and education level as the volunteers would have facilitated the trading of skills and opened up more possibilities for an inclusive process. Anyhow, the key takeaway from this situation was that simply declaring to be open for collaboration and exchange was not enough in such a project. When working with such a large amount of volunteers from outside the local context, there needed to be a more active and direct strategy to include the local community.

Despite the low rate of participation and interaction with the building workshop from the adult part of the community, the children from the schools around the construction site showed tremendous enthusiasm towards the volunteers. From the first day to the last, hordes of kids from kindergarten to primary school would run over to the volunteers to ask them their names, to involve them in their games, to hold hands, or to simply stare at them in awe. Children in Nsutem were not shy and did not hesitate to take by hand the occasional volunteer who could not say no to such amounts of cuteness and kidnap them to their classrooms for a playing and singing session. After a few weeks, the kids knew the names of most volunteers and would not shy from calling them out loud, similar to a crowd of fans when seeing their favorite star on a red carpet. On a few occasions, the kids have also been a gateway in starting conversations with local people who did not have much business around the library site and therefore were not well informed of what was going on. Their joyful hellos were particularly welcomed during the explorations through the village and the interviews were done with the local households since they could convince a cautious mother or older sister to open up and talk with the obroni, the foreigners. It is indeed logical, that if the kids know someone from school and like them so much, they are most likely okay people to talk to.

Besides the playful engagement of the younger kids, a group of middle school boys showed particular interest in the volunteers and the work done. Led by two brave, goofy, and slightly shameless individuals, Dyland and Christopher, the group of kids slowly developed sincere friendships with the team of Archifair and with some of the volunteers. They would hang out around the construction site in most of their free time, talking, asking questions, listening, and learning, to the extent that they became a familiar part of the daily business. Talking with the kids became for the working teams a routine but also a tool for collecting feedback and understanding some of the village dynamics and cultural differences. The unfiltered fourteen to seventeen-year-olds would gladly explain any question to their best and ask in return only for attention and romantic advice, making the volunteers feel faster closer to the village and the local culture and strengthening their feelings of inclusion and purpose.

02 from conversation with Nana, after the lack of participation in the open workshop, week8, September 2022

Interacting with the teenagers was also a comforting routine for the coordinating Archifair team. Through them, it was possible to grasp how they were perceived by the schoolchildren, and what kind of impression their work would leave on them. They would comment freely on how much they trusted the rammed earth walls, or on whether they found them aesthetically pleasing or not. It was also satisfying to hear them open up to new ideas about what is possible and achievable for them and their peers. In the beginning, they did not hide their wonder about the fact that more than 50% of the working team was composed of women. By the time Rose and Grace also joined the construction work, it was already clear that in these kids, and some people from Nsutem, the idea of appreciating a woman doing a "traditionally men's job" had been planted.

*"I don't believe these walls hold. You need to run into them for me to see. I will not go inside before"<sup>03</sup>*

*"Oh now it looks very stable, very beautiful, I trust it I trust it"<sup>04</sup>*

This topic was also quite present in the interaction between the Ghanaian masons and the volunteers on the construction site. During the first weeks, the workers were fairly confused about being flanked by a consistent amount of working women, and on several occasions, they tried to take away from them some of the most physically demanding jobs or to over-explain the use of simple tools. It was never a particularly disrespectful event or ill-meant, but to the ladies of group1, being explained how to use a water lever was offensive.

03 from conversation with Dyland, week7, September 2022  
04 from conversation with Dyland, week12, October 2022

*" When we build the tools and everything, they had a bit of a skeptical look at us: how we used to tools and what our knowledge was about using tools. And with time, they saw that we were used to it and they started telling us that were doing great and putting a lot of effort in it. It was quite nice how that turned, especially for the women in our group. At the beginning, they were watching out and always trying to help out or just to show us how it should be done correctly. There was an episode with the water level. I'm not sure what to tell, but they explained stuff we already know even when we told them that we know for like 10 times, but they didn't stop explaining. It was really weird, I never had such a feeling. They did not mean it in a bad way or anything, they really just wanted to help."<sup>05</sup>*

05 extract from focus group interview with group1, week 3, August 2022

But with the passing of weeks, the trust the workers had in both the female and male volunteers increased, and strong bonds of respect and camaraderie were built, despite sometimes the language barriers. If in the first weeks, Samuel or Kromuel would take a shovel away and do the job themselves or over-explain the correct angle to achieve the most force when using it, later in the project they would not blink an eye at any of the volunteers carrying kg of earth mixes on bowls above their heads or ramming hours long under the sun. It became quickly clear that when it came to low-tech arrangements, the Ghanaian workers knew quite well how to get things done, while when it came to precision work, numbers, and electric tools, the volunteers had more practice. While lunch times and break times stayed separated until the end, the collaboration on the construction site became quite quickly a good exchange of skills and tricks, with mutual respect towards the different parties.









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The sun visits those who desire him. The room has four windows. All four are wide open and the room remains dark: the lung of a consumptive, inhaling air, yet unable to expand.

Furniture is lined up in the room, ready to fly away when it is touched. It is intended for a tribe of wandering angels? There is a rare little statue here, that was finished only after it had buried three Chinese carvers in succession. There are also carpets here, that would fetch so much money if sold in North America that one could bribe the deputies of a highly developed country with it.

A dark room with four windows all wide open, wonderful objects... and a man who never dared to ask himself why he was alive.

Suddenly the door was opened. Something penetrated that is divided into two colours, white and brown. One could say an autumn day, hesitating between rain and sunshine. Something that moves slowly: the hand of a painter, formulating an idea.

Something entered. The white spread out into all the corners of the room, illuminated them, while the brown went straight to the windows. Then the sun was led into the room. The door had opened for a young girl, Amina. 'Are you coming to me with empty hands?'

'Forgive me, my friend, I have not finished the jumper; only one sleeve remains. I had hardly reached my house last night when I started work, but I was interrupted by the visit of a girl friend. And this morning I had to go out. My father had given me all kinds of commissions.'

'Very well, very well! Visits in the evening and outings in the morning. And yet you know that I am waiting impatiently for that jumper. And I told you that I was going to drive into the desert tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, with a few friends. Had I not explained to you that I wanted to put on sporty clothes and therefore needed the jumper? Moreover,

I'd already told my friends about it. What will they be thinking, when it does not adorn my chest? Do you want me to become their laughing-stock? Why this silence.... ? Because you have lied to me. How pale your face is. Your eyelids seem to have fought each other all night refusing to come together. Listen! Did I perhaps ask you to knit this jumper? You wanted to give it to me. You said to me: "You will see how skilful I am, and if I am not, I will try to become skilful for the love of you. You will wear a jumper that will have no equal. My eyes, watching my fingers, will communicate a gay freshness to it." All that is just poetry, my dear. But the jumper, the concrete object, where is it? You turn your head away. Well, that's better.'

On the Nile, of which one sees neither the beginning nor the end. Here one can breathe more freely; no danger of suffocating. Amina leant on a wall at the riverbank. The dams were not built for Amina; nothing can flood her. She is overflowing her- self. She was created to spread out, to overflow. Amina is a second Nile.

The bridge suddenly divided into two parts in order to let a sailing bark pass. Since there was no wind the oars were at work, but very gently. One could have said the bark was asking permission from the water to glide along, or it apologized for dividing the water.

Amina asked the bark, 'Where are you going? What are you carrying? Honey or straw? Corn or perhaps dates? The journey has surely exhausted you. May he who is expecting you not receive the honey melted by the sun, the straw soaked in water, the corn eaten by beetles nor the dates soiled by dust! What is the use of your journey, if your load does not satisfy? He who is expecting you will not appreciate the hardships you endured but what could you have endured in gliding along like that? After all you are a bark. Do walls exhaust the warrior? Was he not born to fight? Oh bark, stop, stop, before you disappear from my sight... you disappear too fast, for I want to rest my eyes this night. Before you disappear, bark, I say this to you: it is harder to throw anchor than to sail... the bridge is still open. If there is danger that your load might

disappoint, turn back. Fear the ignorance of the heart. Bark, turn back, turn back!

'What have you been doing, Amina? Your defeat is written on your face.'

'Defeat? You are right, father.'

'Whom did you talk to? What did you say to each other?' 'Early on I went to the same master. I apologized for not being able to keep my promise. I repeated the words to him, words that your father had impressed upon me. I said that I could not bring this jumper because I had suddenly run out of wool, that this wool was rare, and that yesterday I tried in vain to get it. But he became angry and threatened and gave me a deadline. I must bring the jumper tomorrow morning before nine o'clock. I must submit, I must... I fear the competition. Who knows? Another girl could have more skilful fingers.'

'Do you think he will give us a few piasters? Or will he insist not to pay anything for the first work.'

'He will not give us anything, father.' 'And if you told him the truth?'

'Should I tell him then that I could not keep my word because we were without electric light, since we had not been able to pay the electric light bill and I could not knit in the dark? Should I tell him I was from eight in the morning till six in the evening with my aunt, that I look after her children and that she feeds both of us in return? Or should I tell him that you have lost your job? No, no, I cannot accept any alms from this man.'

'But these are not alms, Amina. And if they were alms, is this man so mean that you should fear to arouse his pity? I should like to meet him.'

'No father, no, you shall not meet him. I have no doubt that he would have given us a pound, or even two, if I had explained our position to him, but I did not dare to. Can I ask him to help me, when he believes that our needs are provided for?' 'But they are not provided for.'

'But he believes it... or rather, I made him believe it. No. It is impossible to accept even the smallest gift from this man. He knows nothing about poverty. I cannot be responsible for exposing the wounds to him.'

'Strange.'

'Oh, if only you knew...'

'If I knew what?'

'Have I said anything? Have I?'

'You said: if only you knew.'

'Then I have not said anything at all. Anyhow, I have nothing to say.'

'So you will knit that sleeve tonight?'

'Yes.'

'And your eyes? I fear you will ruin them.'

'Fear nothing, father. I have been resting them since noon. Since I let my eyes glide over the Nile: a little, just a little.' 'But with what light will you be knitting?'

'With the light of something that is burning here in my breast.'

'You spoke so softly. I could not understand it.'

'I said: with the light of the moon... the moon is the friend of those who live in darkness.'

The father sat down beside his daughter. Amina's fingers began to move and the wool unraveled.

The father pressed the girl to his breast. 'Amina, do not leave me. My love for you is like that of a husband. You are happy with me. Would you be equally happy with a companion, Amina? Why are your eyes suddenly moist? Are you beginning to weep before the moon? Ah, Amina. . . Amina . . . I have expressed myself badly. Forgive me, with my words I was thinking only of myself.'

Amina replied, 'Can a man think of anything but himself?' And her fingers began to move again.

The Bark

BISHR FARES

translated by UILLI BEIER

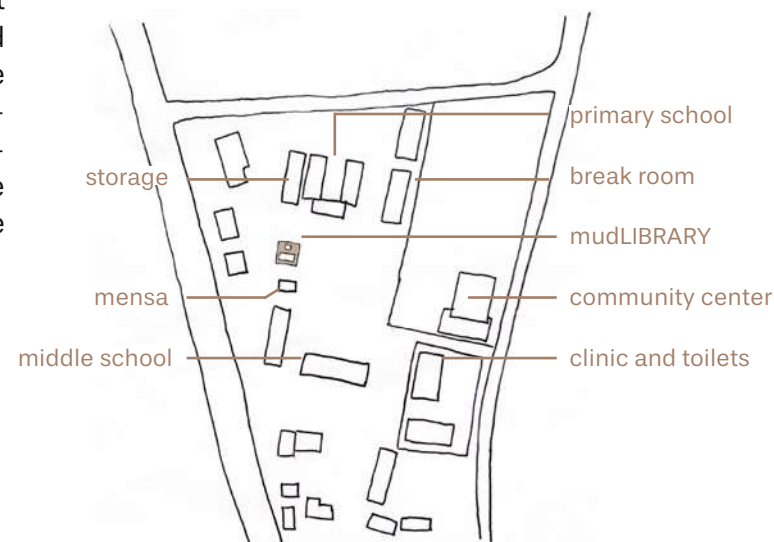
1969

# building

## space: from the site to the vilage

On school days it felt like the whole vilage life happens in the space in between the schools. There weren't many spaces in Nsutem that gave the feeling of a central square as much as the clearing between the elementary and middle school buildings. The clearing was surrounded by the only three asphalted streets of Nsutem: the main road from Accra to Kumasi, the smaller and curvier old road on which, just a few meters forward sit the Palace and the Shrine, and the connecting road between them. To the Western observers, the clearing felt familiar and intentional, like it was meant to become a village square in the ways of the north. Nana [Osabarima Baafi Sarpong Kumankoma], who has lived many years in the States<sup>01</sup>, had guided it that way: the fairly new health clinic and the new community center defined the space on the east, while the mensa together with the new library closed the circle between the school buildings on the south and on the north. In the center of the clearing, four beautiful Indian almond trees provided shade and snacks to the children playing in the brakes.

Since Hanna's first visit in 2020, the space changed drastically and definitely, with the addition of the new buildings, or building skeletons: the running clinic, the completed but not yet opened cultural center, the not-even-close-to-completion new chief's palace, and a couple of undefined industrial buildings on the main street side. One of the recurring jokes during the stay in Nsutem was that, if Archifair needed a future project, they could always build the new chief's palace, just next to the community center and the schools. This author does not doubt that, once the planned chief's palace is erected, Nsutem's vilage center will gain an even more defined European charm.



01 from conversation with Nana, week 0, july 2022

Even at the time of the construction site, in the mornings, it felt like a Mediterranean square. On the school porticos, ladies were sitting and chatting in the shade. Some of them had babies, some of them were older, but they all carried all sorts of homemade snacks and meals, and they sold one or two cedi to the kids on breaks. Some had spring rolls with fish or beans or meat, some had ice cream, some had little bottles filled with frozen sobolo juice, and some had noodles and rice balls. During those morning hours, the square was buzzing with the light chatter of the passers-by, some going to the clinic, some just walking with goods to sell on their heads; with the laughs of the ladies gossiping in the shade; with the barely contained noises of the classrooms; with the occasional car that rumbles through the clearing, usually some palace member on official duty or a pradya delivering someone and disappearing as fast as it appeared. But when the bell rang, the square became the children's realm: there was screaming, laughing and running, crying and fighting, playing ball and clapping hands, smashing almonds and bottles of frozen juices. The trees' shade was preferred by the boisterous kindergarten kids and younger girls, while in the grass next to the wall of the community center and of the clinic the boys were playing ball. The middle school kids, especially the older girls, were strolling closer to the middle school's classrooms, already too grown up to run and scream, and definitely more interested in gossiping and giggling. The middle school boys were a bit lost, as they usually are at that age, some mingling with girls, some still playing football, some

seeking new things to do. To some of them, the construction site became a major point of interest, and the least shy among them sought the company of the volunteers at every free moment. The younger kids were also interested in the volunteers, the obroni, and the white people from far away. They would ask for the names of the volunteers and stand at the borders of the site's border calling their attention. For the youngest, it was firstly a matter of pure fascination, a desire to see and interact with people whom they most certainly knew from television only. Later they developed a desire to make friends as well, to show their games and their classrooms and flaunt their skills in English and singing. While the construction site was active and schools were open, the noises of the square in the morning were often drowned by choirs of "obroni"<sup>02</sup> or by the names of the most charismatic volunteers passing through, the ones that caught the most attention, while most of the noises of the building were often falling in the background, with the sole exception of ramming. Ramming earth was the loudest.

02 in the local language Twi, meaning "foreigners, withe people"

In the late afternoons, when school was over and the light went from bright golden to the dreamy orange glow of National Geographic's famous savannah documentaries, the clearing was quieter but never empty. People would walk through, stop, chat, offer some items or some greetings, and move on. Some children, the ones that lived in the side of the village, would still play ball on the grass, challenging and taunting from time to time the volunteers to join them. A group of volunteers, at the very end, did join them. On a scorching Sunday afternoon, they ran with the kids and the ball and lost the match. This author is still uncertain whether they gracefully let the kids win, or were really outrun by their thin tan legs.

During the weeks when the construction workshop took place, the square's life adapted itself around it, accepting and welcoming the workers and the work as a natural part of itself. The coexistence of such a heavy and technical event with the learning environment was not one of annoyed ignorance, but an easy and interactive sharing of spaces. The space of construction itself was delimited and belted, clearly forbidding kids and passersby to step into it for safety reasons. Nonetheless, the border became an attraction to some, small kids testing boundaries and strolling from one corner of the bordered clearing to the other like models on a walkway, or others asking for attention by hanging on the tape, which would inevitably break at least once every two days. To the goats, omnipresent and ludicrous village creatures freely roaming the area in search of tasty food, the border was nonexistent and the growing building skeleton became their own personal playground. They were clearly offended when the volunteers would reclaim the wooden boards they were balancing on, or forbid them to munch on the trash bags collected under the trees at the end of the day.

The storage and utility rooms instead, were integrated with the school landscape. The first storage was in the old school building. In one room were stored the metal wires needed for the concrete work, while another room, called the church, served as a break room and rest space for the volunteers. The church never ceased its evening activities as a church and choir practice room, and while in one corner sat the mini fridge, the water cooker, and the plate for coffee, in the other one was the stand for the bible and music boxes for the choir. Not much later after the start of the workshop, it was decided that the mensa, a shed in not the best conditions, would also become partially part of the construction site, because of its proximity and comfort. The initial idea to have a small storage corner and break room for the workers during the hours when the building was not serving food to the kids expanded in time: by the 6th week half of the mensa became as well the earth mixing room. There, the volunteers would prepare and store the mix needed for the rammed earth walls, while the other half of the building continued its function as a place where food would be served and eaten. It was fascinating to see no annoyance in the faces of the kids, and no discomfort in the faces of the food-serving ladies. The borders of the space were soft and adaptable, and such was the sentiment of the people using it. The people from Nsutem could accept the temporary changes as part of their everyday life, and look at them pass with the curiosity

While being one of the hearts of the village, the clearing where the library has been built did not represent the spatial system of Nsutem. Nsutem is an organic village, where spaces for commerce, for houses or for prayer, where roads, clearings and paths are not as clear and defined as one would imagine. To understand the village, a foreigner would need to walk through it a few times, let themselves get lost and find themselves again in front of one small blue shop selling coca cola, washing powder and Indomie, a combination weird enough to notice, to find some feeling of orientation. The visitor would also need to be careful to not confuse a path between houses with a path inside houses, and walk inside some lady's courtyard, while she is plucking a chicken while telling off the goats nibbling on the trash. Many households, differently from what one might expect, do not form an enclosed courtyard. They all tend to have an "atrium" structure, with rooms ordered in a circular or square motion, but they are mostly incomplete, leaving what could potentially be an enclosed atrium house an open L shaped, U shaped aggregate of smaller buildings.

Houses, like people, shops, streets in Nsutem are growing organisms, never really finished but ready to react to the ever changing life situations. Whether it is an extra kid to take care of, or an uncle to take in, or a storm rips down a piece of roof or wall, the houses, just like their inhabitants adapt. So, while walking through the village, a visitor must always be friendly and respectful, and when the path is unclear ask for guidance with humbleness. Paths are usually made of beaten earth, its clay-rich quality and poorness in stones making it quite a reliable and sturdy system, though not taken care of enough to fight the erosion of the rainy season's precipitation. Bumps and holes are a normal occurrence, nothing that stops the old taxis, mostly imported from Europe when at the end of their allowed lifespan in the West<sup>03</sup>.

03 The Customs Division of the Ghana Revenue Authority estimates that used vehicles constitute some 80% of the about 100,000 vehicles imported into Ghana every year. Some sources even put the figure at 90%.  
<https://digitaltransport4africa.org/why-africa-cant-ban-its-way-out-of-used-vehicle-socio-environmental-harms-a-view-from-ghana/>  
<https://africasacountry.com/2023/01/the-used-car-problem>

During the construction workshop, the exploration of the village was not particularly encouraged by the elders. The volunteers were warmly welcomed and protected, but that also meant that they were kept away from potential dangers. Nana explained to the coordinating team on multiple occasions his worries: for him and the elders it was very important that his guests, who were working for the village, would always feel safe and welcomed. *Akwaba*.

It took weeks to build the mutual trust needed for the volunteers to be free to even just take a pragra, and to go have drinks in the local bars. In the eyes of the elders, the volunteers were a bunch of sweet and clueless kids, and in a village such as Nsutem, it was hard to say if everyone was aware of their presence with the role of volunteering and if everyone was genuinely happy with this fact. But with time, the coordinating team and the volunteers gained confidence in interacting with the local people, made bonds of trust and friendship with some of them and slowly ventured further in the discovery of the village. The exploration, besides being guided by a cultural interest, was also guided by an architectural one: to figure out the local building culture and relationship with the material chosen for the library, namely earth.

04 in the local language Twi, meaning "welcome"





Drone views of Nsutem, Lex Glodé, Nsutem, 2022







IV

What happens under the earth  
At the distant Nadir?  
Bend over a fountain,  
A river,  
A source,  
There you will see the moon  
Fallen into a hole  
And you will see yourself  
Luminous and silent,  
Among rootless trees,  
Refuge of dumb birds.

## building

### *material: from the village to the library*

To understand the earthen building tradition of Nsutem, both an on-foot and an interview-based exploration was led: the empirical observation serving as a basis for the interviews and as a way to check where the answers of the interviewees might be imprecise. Through the first village explorations, it was not easy to determine its structure, different from what the Western observer is used to, nor the composition of the houses. It was firstly thought that only a few broken traditional clay houses remained in the village, the few that one could easily identify through their missing walls or some newer sheds in the poorer areas of the village. Only after a few conversations with Nico and the other village elders, it became clear that in Nsutem there were still a considerable amount of earth houses, mostly covered in concrete plaster and masked into looking as modern as possible.

A high concentration of houses made out of clay was to be found near the chief's palace, on the eastern side of the road, in what was the first nucleus of the village, since its foundation between 150 and 180 years prior<sup>01</sup>. These houses were made with the **atakpamé** technique. They were also the most complete and traditional in form and function, in either an atrium form or surrounded by a wall. Atakpamé was an established clay building technique, originally from the northern part of Ghana and from Burkina Faso. During the conversations and interviews with the village elders, it came to attention that the houses were mostly done by traveling builders, who would move village to village from the north, building houses and teaching how to maintain them.

"They were coming from the north, from Benin, the builders. Now they don't come anymore"<sup>03</sup>



Atakpamé houses can be considered a good example of a circular building technique: the walls of the house were made with the soil under and around it. Most of these houses had a strong base out of very dense earth with a high percentage of clay, sometimes up to one meter high. The walls were done with balls out of clay, laid in layers of 40 to 50 cm in height and 28 cm in thickness, and then let air dry. The balls were prepared next to the house: holes filled with water were made for the soil to be mixed and stirred with hands and feet, activating and distributing the clay's plasticity evenly. To build in Atakpamé, the soil needed to be rich in clay, silicates, and sand particles, while stones and gravel were not welcome. Once ready, the balls were passed, often launched into the air, to the builder who would sit on the wall and press them into shape. Once reached the desired height for the rooms, not less than 3 meters, the house was completed with a roof held by wooden beams. In all the visited atakpamé houses the wooden roof structure was still intact and original, but the original roof, possibly out of straw, had been substituted with the metal sheet roof, which required less maintenance. This technique produced sturdy, trustworthy walls good room temperature, and comfortable humidity levels. The houses that were inhabited and taken care of, in the form of small repairs every three to five years of the plaster or an eventual leaking roof, were all in very good shape. Also, most of the people interviewed admitted that inside the earthen rooms, they felt more comfortable than in rooms out of concrete blocks without air conditioning<sup>03</sup>

01 from interview with Gyasyhene, village elder and descendant of the village founders, September 2022  
02 from conversation with Nico, the village eldest linguist and translator, after the second interview, September 2022

03 ten people out of the sixteen interviewed confirmed that they felt cooler in earthen rooms; some of the other people interviewed never lived in earthen rooms and could not answer the question

Instead, on the newer sides of the village, towards the north, the south, and the west, many buildings were built in cement blocks. Cement-block is observed to be the main technique used to build new houses, not only in Nsutem, but in the whole southern part of Ghana<sup>04</sup>. In the village, when someone wants a new house or wants to expand an existing house, cement blocks are the automatic answer<sup>05</sup>. They are a symbol of modernity and wealth and they are considered more stable and reliable than earthen houses, even though those earthen houses have been standing almost intact since the village's foundation. Nevertheless, not everybody can afford a cement block house, which comes to completion at a price between 50.000 and 100.00 cedi<sup>06</sup>, while a poor household might have only 500 cedi monthly to survive<sup>07</sup>. Therefore, an interesting number of houses, or rooms<sup>08</sup> on the western side of the village are built with the wattle and daub technique, locally called **kyekyereta**. They are earthen houses as well, with a bamboo framework as a base and clay balls pressed in between and on top of it. In terms of stability, durability, and costs these are the cheapest and the most liable houses, and the families that live in such dwellings are the poorest farmer families.



04 from empirical observations  
05 15 subjects of the interviews answered that they would build a house in cement blocks if they could afford it  
06 from the households interviews, cost range suggested by the people interviewed  
07 from conversation with Nana, week 9, September 2022  
08 some poorer households built only one room at a time

They often could not afford more than a room or two for the whole family, and they chose the kyekyereta technique also because the person who built it in Nsutem, Ofori, the last one carrying the knowledge, happened to be a man with a disability. Having a disability in this context meant that the person was being paid less than average for their work. A social bias and unfairness that happened to be the main reason why this technique was still in use in the village, and why it was possible to talk directly with someone working with it. During week10, it was possible to talk with Ofori, the last master of the town, and learn from him the concept behind the kyekyereta technique. These wattle and daub walls consisted of a regular framework system of vertical wooden pillars, of quite sturdy wood and horizontal, lighter, wooden barks, usually out of bamboo. The framework was directly fixed in the ground, without a base, an economical choice but structural weakness which made the room susceptible to flooding and the clay walls weak to crack and break in their lower parts, where they absorbed water. Once the framework was completed, the master kyekyereta prepared the clay-earth mixture, usually a quite dense one without much sand or stones, and filled the framework. The quality of the wall was highly dependent on the quality of the framework, the time the builder could spend making it carefully, and on the weather conditions. The roof, out of a simple metal sheet supported by wooden beams, was the last element to be built, leaving the whole structure in danger of rain while being built.



Sketch of Nsutem, Florian Bayer, 2022

Nsutem's traditional earthen houses, some older than a century, do not come as a surprise. Ghana has a long-lasting tradition of earthen buildings. Like many countries in sub-Saharan western Africa, earth was the main construction method used until the second half of the 20th century. The Ghanaian soil is rich in clay and poor in stones, therefore it worked naturally well with the aforementioned building techniques, atakpamé and wattle and daub. These vernacular techniques, like all earthen architecture techniques, had big advantages when it came to their technical and economical sustainability. Firstly, it was possible to build using mostly the soil around the household, which meant a very small economic strain even on the poorest families. Yet, with techniques advanced like atakpame, the houses presented as well the technical advantages of earthen architecture: the thermal mass of the walls had excellent heat retention, temperature and humidity regulation, and good acoustic properties. They were comfortable houses, and when realized with skill, like some of the old houses of Nsutem, they were meant to last long. The material's susceptibility to water erosion was countered with large foundations and slight roof overhangs. Furthermore, because of the availability of clay and earth and its relative handiness, it was easy for the families to repair their houses with their own hands.

Nevertheless, these advantages, which are also the ones that brought Bookdrop-ghana and Archifair to choose an earthen building technique for the library, are not appreciated anymore by the local community. From the 16 household interviews conducted during the building workshop, very few positive opinions surfaced about mud buildings. The standard answer to the question "Which building materials would you prefer [for a new house] ? Local? Imported?" was "cement blocks", because "they are modern and modern is better". The answer was so homogenous and direct, that most of the interviewed people used the same words. This was even more surprising when noticing that out of 10 people, who had lived previously or at the same time of the interview in earthen houses, all of them answered that the earthen rooms felt more comfortable but their preference for a new house stayed on concrete buildings with air conditioning. From these answers emerged starkly that the topic of social status and integration with the social environment had a priority in comparison with the topic of comfort. This also indicated a social bias towards earthen houses, which were seen as obsolete and as a sign of poverty for the family who dwelled in them.

This topic becomes relevant when evaluating which role the materiality of the mudLIBRARY project played in the perception of it and the interest of the community. Knowing how earthen houses are commonly declared as unstable and unfitting<sup>09</sup> the slightly confused and uncertain reactions of the locals towards the rammed earth walls become clearer. In the first five weeks of the project, when the first material try-outs were made and the first two walls were built, more often than not the people visiting the construction site would have a skeptical look in their eyes, often masked with a smile and a phrase like "we trust that you know what you are doing".<sup>10</sup> Only after most of the walls were standing, and their mass and sturdiness, despite the bad weather that hit the village during September 2022, did the dubious looks start to fade, and the appreciation towards the aesthetic quality of the material emerged.

By the time the roof was mounted and the walls were uncovered from their black weather protection wrapping, during week 12 of the construction workshops, the comments became starkly positive, but also somehow distanced from the material itself. They saw the rammed earth walls of the library almost as a new building type, modern and therefore positive. But, they also commented on how only the Archifair team could achieve something so modern and good. These comments, although formulated also to show particular appreciation and recognition of the efforts of the volunteers and the Archifair team, were also implicitly excluding the local community from participating and relating directly with the building and the rammed earth technique. They did not see it as something to their level of competence, a technique that they could learn and practice directly, but they saw it as something to look at from afar, a monument of sorts.

09 from interview with Richard Oppong, week 6, August 2022

10 this comment was made in various form during the twelve weeks workshops by the local collaborators

These ways of seeing and thinking about the rammed earth walls during and after the construction workshop led to certain behaviors toward the building itself. The initial skepticism and doubt meant that people would tend to keep their distance and observe, rather than get directly involved in the construction work. This tendency lowered the motivation to participate and to exchange knowledge. Furthermore, by having little to no people getting too into contact with the building technique, it means that few people of Nsutem carry any knowledge about how to repair and maintain the building. While this is a problem that can be fixed, since HiveEarth, the rammed earth experts on site, is a company based in Accra that can intervene if something needs to be repaired, it still has an impact on the overall resilience of the project.

*"It's a new type of building, it's modern. There is need for modernization in Nsutem, people will look at it and learn"<sup>12</sup>*

It is possible to conclude that the lack of integration and correlation between the rammed earth library and the native earthen architecture in the perception of the community, influenced negatively the dimension of inclusion and resilience. The rammed earth technique is a highly effective way to use earthen material for building, with many advantages in terms of costs, design, and technology<sup>13</sup>, but from the point of view of its social sustainability, it also carries some disadvantages.

09 from interview with Kwedwo, the secretary of the village council, week 12, October 2022

13 for detailed explanation of the advantages of rammed earth consult the correlated work: Berger H. (2023), mudLIBRARY. Designing a Library in Ghana. TU Wien. Vienna

An interesting topic that emerged in some conversations with the volunteers and in the focus group interview with group 4, is that in a context such as Nsutem, a revisitation of the Atakpamé technique could have achieved a stronger impact on the perception and relationship with earthen architecture. A project using that concept was at the time being built in Tatale, under the guidance of Anna Heringer<sup>14</sup>. There the vernacular knowledge of earthen architecture had been revived and a large portion of the community has been involved in the building process. With some well-thought-out precautions and measures, a technique such as atakpame can become not only sturdy, massive, and resistant, but also aesthetically appealing. The advantage of taking something known by the local community and giving it a slightly modern twist is not small: it becomes relatable and therefore replicable.

*"Even the first glance at the floor plan, at the idea of architecture shows that an architect is not looking for self-realization, but is building on cultural, social, human, craft and sustainable foundations with love and sensitivity. The shapes, the spaces dance and swing, not European grid-based thinking or maximizing, but cheerfulness and light-heartedness speak from the design.*

*It will certainly be a very exciting architecture, that still draws its strength from the tradition and knowledge of the people and the region."<sup>15</sup>*

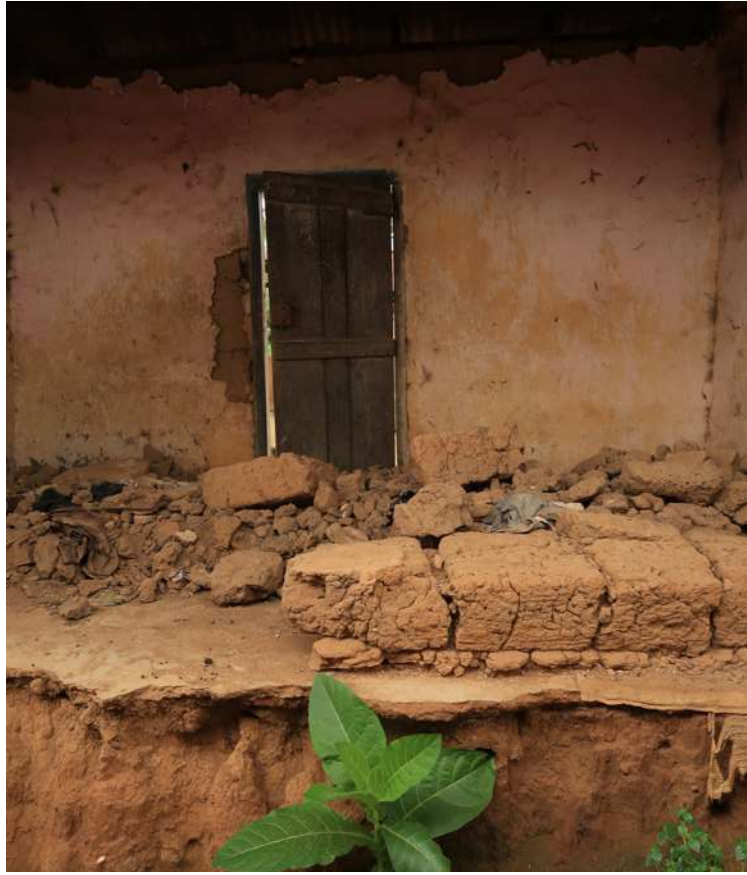
14 Vocational School Tatale, Anna Heringer <https://www.anna-heringer.com/projects/vocational-school-tatale-ghana/>  
15 Peter Reischer about the Vocational School Tatale, of Anna Heringer

























When the madman came, he found the master in the same position lying down, one arm along his body, the other over his eyes.

The man was wrapped in an old frock coat. His slightest gesture revealed that he wore the full habit of the Diallobe. The frock coat's age, its questionable cleanliness compared to the immaculate boubous gave him an unusual quality. His appearance, like his clothes, also left a strange impression. His features were motionless with the exception of his eyes where there was a continual restlessness. One might have said that he knew an uncanny secret harmful to the world which he constantly strove not to reveal. He had a shifting glance. Expressions were destroyed almost as soon as they were born. One doubted that he could have a single lucid thought.

He had spoken very little since they had named him 'the madman'.

This man, who was an authentic son of the region, had once gone away. Even his family had not known where he went. He had remained away for many years. Then one morning he came back, dressed in his frock coat. When he returned he talked all the time. He claimed that he had come back from the whiteman's country and that there he had fought against the whites. In the beginning one took him at his word, although none of the other sons of the region, who had been in the war against the whites, reported having seen him there. But soon one began to question what he said.

At first his tale was so extravagant that it was difficult to believe him. But even more than this extravagance, it was the mimicry of the man which was alarming. For while he spoke the madman began to relive, as if delirious, the circumstances of his tale. One day, explaining how he had been wounded in the stomach - he did, in fact, have a scar there - the man suddenly shrivelled up, then fell down, his arms to his stomach

gasping in agony. A long fever had followed. Since then they contrived to avoid him, while he himself only recovered from his fits in order to search for obliging listeners. Before them, he dramatically relived his memories.

One day, he learned that he had been named 'the madman'. Then he was silent. Nevertheless the name remained.

The man sat down next to the master whom he believed asleep and waited for him to awaken.

'Ah! Is it you? What are you doing here?'

'They wear you out a lot, all those people, don't they?' And the madman vaguely designated the houses around the master's home.

'Chase them away. You will chase them next time they come?'

His glittering look seemed, for a fraction of a second, to be anxiously awaiting an answer.

'Tell me you'll chase them away...'

'Yes, I will.'

The man became calm.

'Now they come to you. They are as humble and sweet as lambs. But don't let that fool you. At heart, they are not lambs. It's because you are still here, with your empty house and your old clothes, that they are still lambs. But you are going to die. Then they will change, I assure you; as soon as you die. You alone delay their metamorphosis.'

He leaned over and passionately kissed the master's hand. The master started and pulled back his hand as if it had been burned. Then, reconsidering, he gave it back to the madman who began to stroke it.

'You see, when you die, all these straw huts will die with you. Everything here will be as it is there. You know, there...'

The master, who was still lying down, wanted to get up, but the madman gently held him back. He drew a little nearer and carefully raising the master's head, he placed it comfortably on his lap.

'What's is it like there?' asked the master.

A furtive expression of joy flashed across the madman's face. 'Really? Do

you want me to tell you?"

'Yes, tell me.'

And then the madman spoke:

'It was the morning that I landed there. From the very beginning I felt an unspeakable anguish. It seemed that my heart and my body were shrivelling up. I shuddered and went back to the huge landing shed. My legs were limp and trembling. I wanted desperately to sit down. Around me the tile-floor was like a glittering mirror which echoed the sound of footsteps. In the middle of the immense shed I noticed several arm-chairs. But I had hardly looked over there when once again I felt myself shrivelling. It was as if my whole body was rebelling. I put down my suitcases and sat on the cold tiling. Around me, the passers-by stopped. A woman came over to me. She spoke to me. I thought she was asking if I felt well. My body became quiet despite the cold of the tiling which penetrated my bones. I lowered my hands on the icy floor. I even had the desire to take off my shoes, in order to touch the glittering sea-green mirror. But I was vaguely aware of an incongruity. I simply extended my legs on the chilling block.'

The master raised himself a little to meet the look of the madman. He was struck by the sudden coherence of the tale. His amazement grew when he saw that this look was fixed. He had never seen him like this. The master put his head back on the madman's lap. He realized that the man was trembling slightly. 'Already a small group had gathered around me. A man pushed his way to me and took me by the wrist. Then he beckoned to someone to put me on a nearby sofa. Eager hands were held out to lift me up. I kept them off and stood up by myself, rising above the group. I had recovered my serenity and now that I was standing, there was nothing about me that did not appear stable and sane. Around me, I sensed the people consulting, surprised at my sudden recovery. I sputtered out words of excuse. Then, bending down, I took a heavy suitcase in each hand and went through the circle of wondering spectators. But I was hardly in the street when once again I felt myself shrivelling. I con-

cealed it with considerable effort and hurried away from there. Behind me, I sensed everyone staring from the immense room. I turned a corner and finding an entrance-way sheltered from the passers-by, I sat down on one of my suitcases. It was just in time for my trembling had once again become apparent. What I felt was more than my body's rebellion. Now that I was sitting down, the trembling again diminished. It had seemed to correspond to my inner anguish. A man, passing by, wanted to stop. I turned my head. He hesitated, then, shaking his head, continued on his way. I watched him go. His back was lost among other backs, his grey suit among other grey suits. The hard sound of his shoes mingled with the sound of others which rang out on the asphalt. The asphalt... I glanced over the whole expanse and saw no end to the stone. There the ice of the felspar, here the clear grey of the stone, this lustreless black of asphalt. Nowhere the fresh softness of the bare earth. Over the hard asphalt, my eyes thirsted in vain for an unadorned foot. But there were no feet. On the hard stone, nothing but the cracking of a thousand eggshells. Had man no longer feet of flesh? A woman went by. Her pink calves hardened weirdly into two black spikes. Since I had arrived I hadn't seen a single foot. All I saw was the tide of shells sweeping over the asphalt. Everywhere, from the ground to the top of the buildings, the bare and resonant shell made the street into a granite basin. This valley of stone was split by a fantastic river of maddened machines. I was familiar with automobiles. Yet never had they seemed so sovereign and desperate. On the street where they precedence, not one human being walked. I had never seen. that, master of the Diallobe. There, before me, in the midst of that great mass of inhabited dwellings, I contemplated an inhuman vista, devoid of men. Imagine, master, in the very heart of what man has made, an expanse forbidden to his own flesh, even to his bare feet....'

'Is that really true? Can it be true that in the heart of his own dwelling the furtive silhouette of man only knows confined spaces?'

The madman trembled with joy, seeing how well he had been under-

stood.

'Yes, I saw him. You know, master, the fragile silhouette which leans upon one leg, then the other, in order to advance...' 'Well?'

'I have seen him, in his own dwelling of confined spaces. Machines reigned there.'

The madman was silent. For a long time the two men didn't speak; then, gently, the master asked:

'What else did you see?'

'Really? Do you want me to tell you?'

"Yes, tell me."

'I saw the machines. They are shells, twisted into many forms, and move as they will. But, you know that the expanse has no inner life at all; it has, therefore, nothing to lose. It cannot be hurt, like the silhouette, but only become further twisted. Also, it has driven back the silhouette, easily frightened, and has destroyed its inner life.'

'I understand, go on.'

"This expanse is autonomous. But, you know that it is the stability itself which makes the movement apparent. And now it has begun to move. Its movement is more complete than the jerky advance of the hesitant silhouette. It cannot fall, where would it fall? Also, it has driven back the silhouette, easily frightened, and destroyed its movement.'

The madman was silent. The master, supporting himself on his elbow, raised himself up and saw that the madman was weeping.

The master sat down then and drew the madman to him. The madman leaned on him, his head resting on the master's shoulder. The master wiped away his tears, then, tenderly, began to rock him.

'Master, I want to pray with you, to drive back the horde. Once more, obscene chaos is in the world and threatens us.'

Ambiguous Adventure  
SHEIKH AMIDOU KANE  
An Extract from L'Aventure Ambiguë  
translated by WENDY SPIEGEL  
1969 ???

# conclusion

## *some considerations about social sustainability*

One of the frequent questions that the team of Archifair and this author have faced in the one and a half year following the library construction from the volunteers that have been there was: *"Is the library in use?"*.

It was interesting to observe how the question has been accompanied by a bit of anxious expectation in the eyes of the people raising it, as if, the functionality of the library up to their standards and expectations would legitimize and confirm the success of the building and their work. To confirm the observation was their slight disappointment when someone would say *"No, it has been mostly closed so far"* and *"They are waiting for the king to inaugurate it"*. To that followed the reassurance, that there is a library board who is taking care that the building is in use at least during school times and that the opening of a public building in the context of Nsutem, Ghana, would go through a different bureaucratic process than the ones in Europe.

Their opening ceremony and usage intensity would move according to their traditions and timings. An example of that exact process was standing next to us all summer, just across the clearing: the new community center of the village also waited for months until everything was ready for its inauguration.

Why the need for such reassurance?

A project such as mudLIBRARY is supposed to be built for the long haul. It is there to stand as an example of what can be done, and it is there also as a memory of what has been done by and with the community. As a gift, it is meant to be used and misused however the receivers of the gift feel fit. The usage of the library within a certain amount of time and the frame of a certain expectation is not the only factor that determines the social sustainability of the project itself.

*"Development actors, including governments, international financial institutions, NGOs reliant on donor funding, and other stakeholders, often operate on project timelines that are too short to achieve measurable results in terms of social change."<sup>01</sup>*

The joint work of Archifair, the village, Hive Earth, and Bookdropghana built already the basis of a library project with sustainability as a forefront topic, that could sustain the passing of time, and make a difference in the years. With the support of the village council during the planning and building phase and with the institution of a heterogeneous library board with a clear plan for its usage and maintenance, the project has a high chance of being in use for a long time. Yet, it is not always the case that what is offered by the administration, or by planners, is appreciated by the population, as mentioned in the chapter *some theories, some practice*. To understand whether the inhabitants of Nsutem might even want to use the library, it is important to look again at the dimensions that define social sustainability: social cohesion, process legitimacy, resilience and inclusion, discussed in the chapter *some theories, some practice*.

As widely described in the first part of the *interacting* chapter, the various parties that coordinated the project managed to achieve a high degree of trust and collaboration. The village council widely supported the construction process and helped solve any matter and obstacle arising during the 12 weeks of the workshop and the following weeks of the building completion: from the most trivial matters like buying cheap snacks and drinks for the workers and volunteers, to the more complex issues like the delays in wood deliveries or the phone theft incident. There was never a moment where the Archifair team felt left alone and the 24/7 assistance they received was fundamental in building and keeping trust and motivation. Similarly, Bookdropghana and HiveEarth, while based in Accra, were present and responsive to any matter concerning their parts of the project. Workers, volunteers, and coordinators alike felt a strong **social cohesion**, they were willing to cooperate despite any kind of cultural or linguistic barriers, and they believed in the shared purpose of the construction. Seeing Samuel, the local skilled mason, showing up every day on the construction site even while bearing with the symptoms of malaria, or Kromuel spending hours on top of the walls framework, ramming with notable speed and force the earth mix despite the blazing heat, left no doubt in the sense of purpose and cooperation the workers shared with the volunteers.

01

Patrick, B. et al. (2023). *Social Sustainability in Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Furthermore, the fact that the team of Archifair had such a strong collaboration with the local authority, the village elders, was recognized by the municipal authority, and had the needed support to navigate the cultural contest as smoothly as possible, allowed the work done to be seen as legitimate, fair and beneficial. This perception has also appeared in the interviews with the local population, in their welcoming and opening behaviors and their comments of gratitude towards the work done. Therefore the dimension of **process legitimacy** was strong in the building workshop.

On the other hand, the **resilience** of the project is slightly harder to determine. Resilience, is defined as the ability, capacity, and flexibility to prepare for, cope with, recover from, and adapt to shocks over time<sup>02</sup>. In the mudLIBRARY, resilience would be the capacity to recover its functionality in case the accessibility and usage of the library is compromised. In case of an external shock factor, the active cooperation of NGO Bookdropghana in the library board means that the village has access to close assistance, both in material and intellectual form. That can help greatly in solving administrative problems, or building mishaps. However, when it comes to internal shock factors, such as the local population losing interest in maintaining and using the library, the recovery would also need to lay in the hands of the members of the community.

Nana, chief of the village and initiator of the project, spoke with fondness about the library and the access to education. To him, as much as for many of the elders in the council, it was important to provide opportunities to learn, as they recognized how the opportunities they had under one of the previous chiefs<sup>03</sup> were important milestones in their lives. From the side of the village leadership, the commitment to education was there. From the younger people's perspective, it was not as clear. The youth who got close to the volunteers showed a growing interest and commitment to the library. They went from suspicious comments like "*but I do not like to read, it's boring*"<sup>04</sup> and "*I do not trust the earth walls*"<sup>05</sup>, to signing up for becoming part of the library committee and spending much of their free time around it. Through the positive interaction with the workers and the volunteers, their opinions and interest in the library had a drastic positive curve. On another note, there was a consistent amount of young people in the village who did not get involved, nor showed interest in the building: to them, the mere presence of the volunteers was not enough to evoke interest. To get them involved, more engaging work with the community needed to be done, and more resources needed to be spent in that direction. Whether this work would have increased the resilience to internal shocks of the library is not sure, but it would surely have increased the feeling of **inclusion**.

02 Patrick, B. et al. (2023). Social Sustainability in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.

03 from conversations with Nana, during the week 3. He explained that the library would be named after a previous village chief, Nana Joseph Kofi Darteh, who forced parents to let their kids go to school instead of bringing them on the fields.

04 from conversation with Christopher, during week 4

05 from conversation with Dyland, during week 6

Looking back at the weeks of the project, it becomes clear that for the Archifair team, taking time for all the meetings and greetings with the village councils, accepting their grace, and holding the soft hands of the old madames was never a minute wasted. Every sincere smile the volunteers exchanged with the passersbys on the project's site, every hello to the children and every how are you to the food sellers added a layer of trust and reliance between the ones that came from afar, the *obroni* and the ones living in Nsutem, the *obibini*<sup>06</sup>. How things have been done mattered, and where the human resources of the project have been directed, defined a good baseline for its social sustainability. There were many people in the village that felt touched by the process of building the library and believed in its benefits in the long term.

*[..] how development is done matters. How goals are formulated and how policies and programs are designed and implemented can often mean the difference between success and failure.*

06 from the local language Twi, *obroni* means "foreigner, white person", *obibini* means "local, ghanaiian"

07 the solutions listed emerged during various conversations internal the Archifair Team, after the building workshop

There were fragilities, especially in terms of **inclusion** and **participation**. The open workshop was not visited by the local people who were not directly involved in the project, and the exchange of knowledge and skills, while being very intense and rich on-site between workers and volunteers, did not reach out to the various layers of the Nsutem population. To achieve this, different methods of active engagement with the local community would have needed to be put in place, previous to and during the construction workshop. Possible solutions could have been<sup>07</sup>: visiting the schools in an official form and hosting a class, inviting local high schools or universities to join the construction site and even out the numbers of foreigners with the number of Ghanaians working, or putting in place a system to subscribe local volunteers and offer them some form of recognition for their participation, like a skills certificate from Hive Earth. However, it is important to consider that these methods would cost a part of the project's budget and resources and are therefore not always easy to prioritize and implement.

Another topic not to be dismissed lies in the building technique chosen for the library. While the material, earth, was a material many people in Nsutem were familiar with, the technique of rammed earth was not. That posed a barrier, one determined by knowledge, between the people working on site and the people watching. This barrier, together with the general skepticism towards earth as a modern and good building material also influenced the motivation of the local community to get involved and to learn during the construction process. On the other hand, once the library was finished, the choice of a highly esthetic technique such as rammed earth achieved another purpose: moving the perception of the earth as a construction material from obsolete to potentially beautiful and modern<sup>08</sup>.

To conclude, a building workshop such as mudLIBRARY can be socially sustainable. However, the choices and actions needed to ensure its social sustainability imply careful consideration and awareness. The goals and the project partners need to be well aligned and defined from the beginning, to ensure a trustful collaboration. Furthermore, when it comes to the building phase, there needs to be a founded base of knowledge of the local culture and situation, to find informed and effective decisions on which aspects to prioritize and to implement to achieve both the goal of having a finished building and having a community happy to receive and use it.

<sup>08</sup> At the end of the building workshop, during week 12, multiple close collaborators from the village stated their admiration for the building. Among them were Nana, Nico, Richard Oppong, Gyasy from Radio1. None of these people expected such a modern building resulting out of earthen architecture.









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# Interviews

noted and/or recorded

## *Volunteers*

### **Group1**

Focus group interview on 05.08.2022

**participants:** Benjamin, Nadine, Max, Victoria, Lioba, Noa, Vinzent, Ann, Lea, Claudius, Ramona, Andrea, Lorenz

### **Group2**

Focus group interview on 26.08.2022

**participants:** Lalli, Marie, Özgür, Tobias, Johanna, Sebastian, Flora, Lea, Carolina, Caterina, Georg, Susanna, Lorenz, Verena, Lorenz, Marie, Vivi

### **Group3**

Focus group interview on 16.09.2022

**participants:** Lisa, Hanna, Sebastian, Georg, Lena, Roland, Katharina, Luise, Killian, Sophie, Raphael

### **Group4**

Focus group interview on 06.10.2022

**participants:** Florentin, Flora, Marten, Hannah, Marcel, Lex, Victoria, Jakob, Benjamin, Marcel, Laura, Ines

## *Workers*

### **Fidelis**

semi-formal interview on 06.10.2022

### **Samuel**

semi-formal interview on 06.10.2022

### **Kromuel**

semi-formal interview on 06.10.2022

## *Elders of the community*

### **Asomaning (secretary)**

semi-formal interview on 04.10.2022

### **Nana Opoku (chief of youth)**

semi-formal interview on 04.10.2022

### **Nico (linguist)**

semi-formal interview on 06.10.2022

### **Gyasihene (key holder)**

semi-formal interview on 06.10.2022

### **Ernest (family chief)**

semi-formal interview on 07.10.2022

## *Households interviews*

### **Oppong Kwaku Richard (Kyekyeku)**

interview on 27.08.2022

### **Dyland and his family**

interview on 31.08.2022

### **Alice, Samuel and Manfi**

interview on 14.09.2022

### **Nana Adwoa Aferebea**

interview on 14.09.2022

### **Stella Boawa**

interview on 16.09.2022

### **Asomaning Kwadwo**

interview on 16.09.2022

### **Gyasihene and Comfort Ampomaa**

interview on 20.09.2022

### **Ernest**

interview on 20.09.2022

### **Laurentia Edukuru**

interview on 20.09.2022

### **Sherayu Jakubu**

interview on 22.09.2022

### **Mary Aferidia**

interview on 22.09.2022

### **Richard Amoako**

interview on 22.09.2022

### **Akosua Baawaa**

interview on 23.09.2022

### **Sandra Afia Awusi**

interview on 28.10.2022

### **Isaac Ofori**

interview on 01.10.2022

### **Emmanuel Kuaku Opoku**

interview on 04.10.2022

# appendix

## Volunteers

Focus group interview, interview done on the 13th or 14th day of work

How do you think you have been perceived by the locals/the community?

at arrival (first days)  
during work (second week)  
at the end (last days)

How do you think your work has been perceived by the local community? Which role do you think you have in the eyes of the local community?

How was your work with the local professionals? How do you think your knowledge and skill set has been received? Were you able to share any of it?

was it respected?  
was there curiosity to learn from you?  
did you feel skepticism?  
did you feel appreciated?  
could you express yourself well?

How do you evaluate your work, your interactions and overall experience?

in terms of satisfaction with the output  
in terms of learning & developing skills  
(both soft skills and architecture related skills)

Do you think the project has the potential to have a long term positive impact on the building culture of the area?

yes, why?  
no, what is missing?

Do you think there might be negative consequences to the project on the village?

What impact & changes do you think this experience will bring you as an architecture student and future professional?

will you consider incorporating rammed earth and clay in your pro

## Workers

single-person semi-formal interview, done in week 12

How do you think your work knowledge and skills have been perceived by the european volunteers?

was it respected?  
was there curiosity to learn from you?  
did you feel skepticism?  
did you feel appreciated?  
could you express yourself well?

How did the volunteers approach you?

were they friendly?  
were they rather working separated from you?  
were they trying to collaborate with you? learn from you?  
were they antagonizing you?  
did you enjoy working with them?

How was the approach of the leadership towards you?

did you feel respected?  
was it easy to understand their orders and the reason behind them?  
were there moments where you thought they were wrong?

What do you think about the rammed earth technique? Would you wish to use it again in your work?

Is there any other technique that you found interesting and would like to use in the future?

### *Elders of the community*

single-person semi-formal interview,  
done in week 12

How do you think the Library project has  
been perceived by the the community?  
Who got involved?

during the planning part  
during the construction  
at the end

How do you think the community felt about  
involving a group of european volunteers  
in the building part of the project?

how do you think their knowledge and  
skill set has been received?

Are you satisfied with the collaboration  
that has been in place?

what would you have wished for dif-  
ferently?  
From your side?  
From the volunteer's side?

Are you satisfied with the end result?

with the library as a building?  
with the aesthetic value of the library  
with the reception of the library from  
the community

Do you think the Library could change the  
view of the local community on earth/clay  
as a modern construction material?

### *Children and locals*

informal conversations

Do you know what we are building next to  
the school? Who told you about it?

Do you know what you can find in a library?  
Do you look forward to using (internet /  
computer /books /projector /headphones  
and audiobooks/ cozy sitting places)?

Have the volunteers (white people could  
be also a way to address them) been  
friendly with you so far? Have you ever  
talked with them?

Did you teach something to the volun-  
teers? Would you want to?  
Did you learn something from the volun-  
teers? Would you want to?



## *In-depth Interviews to local households*

Household #  
Location

### *Section 1* household and usage of space

Who built the house?

family members / friends / specialist  
/ construction firm

When was the house built?

How many rooms are in the house? What are they used for?

Who is living in these rooms?

age / profession

Relationships of other household members to the informant

Number of household members who are employed

Total income of the household

Duties of non-employed household members

Main activities in which rooms?

cooking / eating / sitting together /  
having guests / sleeping / working

In which room do you spend most of your time? And the other family members (gender/ages)?

Which room is the most comfortable? Why (furniture, temperature, privacy)?

Which of these comforts is present in the house?

running water / indoor toilet / waste disposal / radio / television / smartphones - internet

Which of the previous comforts are wished for?

### *Section 2* Building of the house

Which materials have been used in this house?

walls / roof / floor / windows / doors

Where did you get the materials from? What is available on the market? (Prices and where do they come from)

Wood / Stone / Gravel / Cement /  
Corrugated iron / Steel / Woven mats  
/ Animal skin

Are the materials the most used in the village? What is different from your neighbours?

Do you think your house is beautiful?

Is mud used as a construction material? In what way?

mud plastering (pure or any aggregates? How is the plastering applied? Plastering inside the house?) / rammed earth / mud bricks (how are they pro-

duced? with which water? which aggregates? Sand, straw, grass, cotton, cement...?)

Do you think mud buildings are beautiful?

Do you think mud buildings are comfortable?

Has your house been enlarged or transformed? Are you planning to enlarge it?

### Section 3 Desires

If you could change your house, would you?

How many rooms would the ideal house have?

Which building materials would you prefer? Local? Imported?

Would you consider using mud-earth-bricks for a new house?

How much would a new house cost?

Would you like to engage a professional person to build it?

### Section 4 Public Space

Which other buildings do you visit in your daily routine? What are they made of? How do they look like?

What is your favorite place in the village besides your house? How is it made? What makes it comfortable?

Which is the most beautiful building in the village? What is it made of? Is it comfortable?

How do you move around for your daily errands?

How much time do you spend outside?

Where would you wish to spend more time?

### Section 5 Personal data

Name of respondent

male / female / other  
age

Respondent's

religion  
mother tongue / other languages

Family status

married / not married / divorced / other

Members of household

male / female

Education

Profession



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The above mentioned original version of this thesis is available at TU Wien Bibliothek.

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The mudLIBRARY project was tough, but it was also a joyful process. Many things did not go as expected on the construction site, and every day was a challenge to our collective creativity, problem solving and social skills. But I do believe it left a positive trace. It was a positive experience as a whole and there was so much heart involved in it, so much love, care and friendship. It was expansive, for me and for all those who interacted with it.