BRILLAMMENT LUMINEUX

AP2013 ALL ROADS LEAD TO LAGOS

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FIRST GRADUATES EVER

the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology in Rwanda

By Tomà Berlanda, PhD

A School of Architecture

In order for a school of architecture to really call itself as such, it needs to produce architects. The Department of Architecture at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) celebrated this important event on May 2nd and 3rd earlier this year. A two day final review of 19 Thesis projects marked the end of the first ever full cycle of five years undergraduate students in architecture completing their studies in Rwanda. The actual graduation ceremony will take place later this fall, but from a teaching perspective the effort is now complete.

Started in January 2009, Kigali’s program has brought together many different perspectives to discuss and elaborate what a new school of architecture, the first ever in the country, should teach. This has called for reflections on what would be the balance between
imported architectural education methods and local solutions, building upon ideas and experiences, which around 20 staff members from 4 different continents brought to the table over the years.

All the curricular debate and experimentation culminated in a final year project, a thesis, established as the means to test both the competence of graduates, and their ability to develop a contention with architectural relevance, manifested and investigated through architectural design research.

The Department engaged in drafting a Thesis Policy in the spring of 2012. The work was led by myself as Thesis Coordinator, together with dr. Ilaria Boniburini, Research coordinator and Garret Gantner, Head of Department at the time. The proposed structure envisioned the creation of Thesis studios in which the students (24 for the first class) would be grouped according to their own specific proposal in a determined number of broad topics. The year long process, very much a project in and of its own, was supported by the presence of a Thesis Committee, comprised of 4 other faculty members, Nerea Amorós Elorduy, Kefa Angwenyi, Wambete Soita and Michelle Stadelman, in order to open up the discussion on the work through a series of periodical group reviews. Thus students could appreciate different insights and develop their critical thinking and questioning skills which are essential to operate as architects.

In order to keep the description of the topics relatively loose, Culture, Society and Environment, were the proposals for the first Thesis year. The themes were then detailed within each studio as a result of each instructor’ specific area of expertise. Hence Boniburini’s studio became an effort to discuss the topics of “Building Communities,” whereas Gantner’s approach focused on “Environmental Metrics of Design.”

What is presented here is a selection of the projects developed in the studio I led on “Architectural Topographies”, an interpretation of the cultural role landscape plays in Rwanda.

Cultural Role of Landscapes in Rwanda

The specific topic of the studio lay within the cultural and spatial implications of an architectural design and its site, with particular reference to the interaction between landscape and memory. Ultimately, across a theoretical framework and exploration along different geographical and cultural areas, each individual student project addressed where and how the link between built object and its site can be established.
Using the notion of “topography” quite literally, that is “writing a place,” each student was led to recognise, analyse, investigate and choose among many possible solutions to prove his or her ability to deliver a final project resulting from a logical concatenation of elements.

Richard Mpizi reinterprets the traditional “urugo” settlement model through a project which carefully examines the relationship between living habits and agriculture. The result of a design research on traditional and existing houses of Rwandans, aimed at reinterpreting how they respect the beauty of the “thousand hills” landscape faced with the challenge of population growth, it provides an alternative to imported suburban settlement patterns.

Amélie Ntigulirwa’s “Architecture for healing” explores the phenomenological approach to design. The thesis investigates how emotions are intrinsically connected to the atmospheric perception of space. The scheme is dedicated to widows and orphans of the 1994 Genocide, a specific group of individuals which were left with traumatic fears and sufferings. The project aims at providing them with a healing environment through the creation of a sequence of meditation spaces built out of local materials, using different colours based on their effect on human beings.

This is done through the design of a new residential development for a rural hillside area in Kigali, where dwelling units comprise of the house for the family, shelter for livestock and spaces for agricultural crops. An ecological system integrated within the slope and the buildings, foresees a symbiotic relation between architecture and ground.

The choice of the site, located in a calm area at the top of the Rebero mountain overlooking the Bugesera landscape, where the buildings are carefully placed in relation to the views and the slope, is part of the healing process.

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In order for a school of architecture to really call itself as such, it needs to produce architects. The Department of Architecture at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) celebrated this important event on May 2nd and 3rd earlier this year. A two day final review of 19 Thesis projects marked the end of the first ever full cycle of five years undergraduate students in architecture completing their studies in Rwanda. The actual graduation ceremony will take place later this fall, but from a teaching perspective the effort is now complete.
Solange Muhirwa’s project reconceives Rutare royal cemetery as means to investigate how, throughout history, Rwandan culture used to celebrate the burial of dead kings. In recent times this cemetery, where 9 royal tombs are located, has been neglected and little evidence is to be found indicating its historical significance or pointing out the traces of its past. For this reason the design does not limit itself to a series of funerary monuments, but places them within a spiritual landscape, a connection linking the stations of a journey where the visitor can move along.

It is conceived to reflect, through architectural interventions, the Rwandan culture of mourning the death of a king, but also, more widely, the intrinsic relation between memory and site. The topic of memory is present also in Jacques Murama’s scheme for a Genocide memorial, prized with the Best Student Award. The scope of the project is to demonstrate the ability of physical elements such as a wall, roof or floor, and materials, to define and conserve traces and places of memories. Through the design of a memorial to remember the victims thrown into the Nyabarongo river in 1994, the exploration seeks to expand the notion of architectural elements beyond their normal structural uses and aesthetic values. It brings people to the river through a sequence of rooms which are marked with the reinterpreted traces of history of this site. Ultimately it attempts to show the role of architecture as a discipline capable of writing the history of a place through its landscape and topography.

Across the different, and somehow disparate, topics, the common thread is an inquiry over the cultural significance of transformations of the built environment which deal with the landscape. All dealt with and investigated topics which have general theoretical relevance, and still managed to develop proposals which are strongly tied to Rwanda’s landscape.
The ontological importance of the ground, both physically, and also in terms of “grounding” thoughts on solid foundations, will hopefully be a strong tool for empowering the first graduating class to begin their professional career.

About the author
Tomà Berlanda, architect and ph.d., was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Architecture at KIST between January 2011 and May 2013. He is the co-founder of ASA studio, based in Kigali.

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