

Tillers of the Horizon: Projecting Public Spaces by Women in Post-genocide Rwanda

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(1) Traditional Rwandan homestead; (2) Imidugudu, Kigali; (3) Women's basketry workshop, SERUKA Masoro Imidugudu; (4) ARTCF sewing workshop.

Report

Project Overview:

After the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, women constituted 74% of the population. Since that time, the gender balance has shifted toward equilibrium – now around 54% female. For the past fourteen years, with a significant portion of Rwanda's male population still in prison or exiled, women have been occupying new roles in reconstructing Rwanda's social fabric. A popular statistic regarding Rwanda is the high number of women holding seats in Parliament – nearing 50%, the most egalitarian national governing body in the world. Simultaneously, the Rwandan government, led by president Paul Kagame, has been attracting significant foreign investment in Vision 2020, an ambitious plan for the country which touches every aspect of its economy and society. As this plan unfolds, each village in the country will undergo a shift to imidugudu-isation – grouped housing, in translation. Women will be among the most affected by the concomitant agrarian reform and the expectation that, by the year 2020, 90% of Rwandans will be living in dense housing developments on small plots of land close to their neighbors. As an interdisciplinary consulting group of architects, artists, and educators whose research and work focuses on the construction of public space by women, General Architecture traveled to Rwanda in February of 2008 with the support of the Boston Society of Architects and the New York League of Architects to investigate women's roles in Rwanda's post-conflict development.

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Research Methods:

For the three months preceding work in Rwanda, General Architecture created a database of contacts within the country including non-governmental associations working with women, universities with engineering and human sciences research departments focusing on imidugudu, and government agencies related to women's issues, planning, and natural resources.

Once in Rwanda, General Architecture conducted interviews with three NGOs: SERUKA, Life for Relief and Economic Justice, and the Association des Rwandaises Travailleurs Chretiennes / Femmes, domestic NGOs addressing the needs of women in the transition to imidugudu. In addition, we held introductory meetings with the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology, the National University of Rwanda, and the Institut de Recherche, Sciences, et Technologie as well as the Ministries of Land, Infrastructure, Statistics, and Commerce and the Kigali City Department of Planning.

After initial meetings, our on-site research commenced in the form of neighborhood walks, documented in drawings, photos, and video; workshops in which large groups of women gathered to learn video and sound recording skills in order to record each others' contributions to the process; and site visits to new, existing, and historically experimental imidugudu as well as community organizations such as childrens' homes, schools, and churches. These visits and workshops were carried out in cities and villages in all districts in Rwanda excepting the furthest north along the Ugandan border.

Our research concluded with secondary meetings with community members and NGOs, and closing meetings with KIST and the Kigali City Department of Planning. Since February, we have maintained email communication with the NGOs ARTCF and SERUKA around our findings, continuing our consulting with these groups and working with KIST's nascent architecture department on teaching assignments and design studios around future NGO-university collaborations.

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Findings:

On the national and local government level, our primary inquiry regarded the government's policy, moving forward quickly as a part of Vision 2020, of moving every Rwandan into dense housing developments (imidugudu) from the traditional, scattered settlements or urban housing - predominantly informally built, seismically unstable structures. The national agencies described a transition from an agrarian society where 90% of rural families rely on subsistence farming to an economy in which farming will represent just 30% of the national GDP by the year 2020. Rural residents would be moved from dwellings typically situated in the middle of a plot of farmland, or at a roadside with land behind, to grouped housing developments resembling western suburbs. These settlements are to include or engender 'active development centres... equipped with basic infrastructure and services... as an entry point into the development of non-agricultural income generating activities.'¹ The resulting tracts of land would be massively fertilized in preparation for larger-scale agricultural projects with an eye to foreign investment and eventual export.

In speaking with the Kigali city planning agency, a similar plan was described for slum eradication, in which densely packed informal communities in the capital would be relocated to imidugudu housing on the outskirts of town, while new mid-to-high income housing would be built in the city center with the resultant space. We visited Batsinda, a government-designed imidugudu which implemented some of the most recent strategies for green building, including biogas toilet / kitchen burner connections and concrete-reinforced mud brick walls which offered more seismic stability (we experienced four small earthquakes in our month's stay in Rwanda) than traditional adobe-style construction. While these houses offered excellent efficiency, residents would have to finance the \$6000 cost of purchasing a home, which occupied a plot of land roughly 200x300sq/m. Our team pointed out that many women heads of household tend to make between \$1 and \$5 a day, and report being able to afford one round-trip cross-urban taxi ride per week. The planning office replied that Batsinda, though designed to replace one of the most destitute slums in the city, could only accommodate low-income residents, and not very-low- or no-income residents. They estimated this would exclude about 10% of Rwandans. This particular community did not feature a development centre, market or other community gathering place, and the commute from the city took about thirty minutes. Regardless, the slum of Ubumwe was in the process of being cleared at the time of our visit, with the goal of moving its residents to Batsinda. However, the completion of Batsinda was scheduled for at least two months after the demolition of Ubumwe.

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Findings cont'd:

Academic researchers at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology's Engineering and nascent Architecture departments clarified many points in the design approach to the national imidugudu program. We were able to see the technical developments that had accompanied the progression of imidugudu, from failed experiments initiated by the government in the 1970's, to the more thriving communities near Butare which had benefited from infrastructure planning, to the present-day national program.

The technical investigation into green building techniques and rapid, large-scale development has created a thinktank in the engineering department at KIST which includes researchers from Kenya, India, Uganda and elsewhere focusing on sustainable energy, structural engineering, and integration of biofuels and waste management into home efficiency. Bamboo, alternatives to concrete, cardboard, and recycled metals are among the materials under scrutiny for inclusion in imidugudu design. The architecture and environmental planning department at KIST is creating the first Master's program in Architecture in Rwanda, and will be employing local and foreign lecturers, including General Architecture, to enact theoretical and practical design studio courses to integrate the new department into work being undertaken at a rapid pace by NGOs and the government.

At the Institut de Recherche des Sciences et Technologie and the National University of Rwanda, the social sciences department is heavily involved with tracing the history of imidugudu in Rwanda, and has studied the major social impact of the cultural transition involved in moving a society based on mores of privacy and separation toward more communal living. The panel of researchers from IRST's sociology, literature, history, and geography departments projected an initial embrace of safer living conditions in the wake of the genocide, particularly among widows and vulnerable groups, with more disconnects forming in rural areas and outlying imidugudu, where access to infrastructure and employment posed more difficulty for residents. NUR's geography team is supporting a large-scale GIS mapping project, providing crucial information for imidugudu projects undertaken by the government, NGOs and, now, General Architecture.

By far, the richest body of information on women's relationships to public space took shape in our conversations with NGOs and their constituencies. Whereas the government is mobilizing imidugudu conversion in urban areas and mandating shifts in zoning and land use in rural areas of the country, only 60% of the population will be able to feasibly make the transition using personal resources or government economic assistance. NGOs, mainly domestic organizations,

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Findings cont'd:

are providing much of the planning and ongoing support for the success of imidugudu. Examples of the expectations for a society organized around imidugudu include government mandates (each house must maintain a kitchen garden), wide-sweeping support programs (a cow in every home), proposed standards (access to water and electricity in each imidugudu), and economic development schemes (the basketry program known as Agaseke). While imidugudu develops as a concept and as an administrative replacement for the village structure, NGOs are assisting householders to enact elements like kitchen gardens, helping them to connect to the water and energy resources that come near but not into their new homes, and to realize economic opportunity beyond the very young basketry and other craft initiatives.

We visited the sewing centres operated by ARTCF to witness tailoring classes in session and interview students and teachers on their needs for expanding their centre – while it operates in a one-level storefront now, and serves 12 women in each six-month session, ARTCF has the capacity to expand operations into a two-level building offering five housing units to older members of the sewing guild's community, a boutique for sales of student products, and a school offering two to three times the student capacity each session as well as coursework in literacy and math.

We also held three courses of meetings with the NGO Life for Relief and Economic Justice to record the education, health, housing, and energy resources needs of the 120 members of the NGO's Kacyiru, Kigali neighborhood women's association. In these meetings, it became clear that almost all of the women looked forward to the transition from living in the Kacyiru slum to imidugudu; however, they knew little of what would be required in terms of income or loan financing, proof of tenancy or property ownership, or relocation. Their needs for adult education centres were dire, and the interest in small business was widespread throughout the group – many had gained membership to a local silk cooperative to which they contributed one day per week of construction work. Others showed interest in privatization schemes in which they could purchase pump access to potable water holdings from local energy companies and ensure better access to water for themselves and their neighbors while making a small profit – there were only two pumps in the neighborhood of Kacyiru, and both were located closer to the borders of the sector, where higher-income dwellings bordered the slum. They indicated an interest in trash and recycling collection income, as this service did not exist in Kacyiru, and they suggested that nearer schools would help them to see their children through to secondary school without the challenge of securing costly transport.

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Findings cont'd:

In visiting two of the city's eight government-sponsored homes for street children, we learned that many families sent their children to 'live' at these homes during the day; therefore the homes were quite full when we visited, and children were engaging in activities such as woodworking, animal husbandry, food preparation, cleaning and silkscreening. In subsequent visits to imidugudu near Kigali and Butare, we learned that women heads of household who helped to build the houses they now live in had gained building skills but felt unable to construct their own furniture. General Architecture hopes, through design studios at KIST, to promote collaboration between women and other householders and these young woodworkers, as well as KIST architecture students, in furniture design and construction.

The most successful model of community development around imidugudu came from site visits with SERUKA's imidugudu in Masoro, outside of Kigali. Although this community stands at a distance from the city which makes commuting unsustainable for residents, the town has organized regular truck transport to export goods made at its community center. The crafts and education cooperative which has been built to serve the needs of the imidugudu's 200 residents features embroidery, tailoring, basketry, bakery, soap-making, bee-keeping, and literacy workshop spaces which are open to residents throughout the week. Organized by one resident, Constance Bangire, this cooperative provides work to a significant portion of the community and provides a space for sharing innovation, a critical element of living in a community of identically designed houses. Families in this community have developed kitchen gardens which allow them to cultivate rabbits, mushrooms, cheese, compost, and young plants in one unit identical to the plan of the composting toilet which serves each household. Others have researched and implemented traditional gardening, orchard technologies, and home improvement techniques. General Architecture is currently working with SERUKA to design a second imidugudu, taking into account the public space needs described by residents of Masoro.

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Results/Outcomes:

As General Architecture works to create a website and publications (beta webpage at <http://generalarchitecture.sampasite.com>), we are simultaneously continuing communication with the groups with whom we met in February. Our members are teaching at SUNY Syracuse and UT Austin, and BSA Grant Recipient Amanda Eicher is studying at UC Berkeley (MFA '10), and with each school we are working to create design studio programs which will bring students into collaboration with KIST's architecture department. Additionally, General Architecture's Michael Beaman is working with students at the University of Texas, Austin to provide support in diverse mapping of Rwanda in collaboration with NUR's GIS project. Eicher is in the process of creating a sound and video archive for practical and creative use; portions of this were shown in gallery exhibitions at The Luggage Store Gallery and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco this year. All General Architecture members are contributing to the manuscript for a book titled 'Tillers of the Horizon.' Construction is expected to begin in June 2009 of a GA-designed second imidugudu near Masoro in collaboration with SERUKA, and we are working with ARTCF on the design of their Kigali storefront, school, and residential center. Our collaboration with KIST will include yearly team-teaching during the summer session (June – September), beginning in June 2009, as well as design of studio classes such as the furniture design workshop described above. It is foreseeable that our focus as teachers and researchers may change in the coming years, given the political climate and conflict at Rwanda's border with Congo, but it is our hope that we may continue to work with Rwanda's people, and especially Rwanda's women, despite complications between nations in the region.

In conclusion, we found that public space is presently undergoing a dramatic shift in Rwanda. Whereas women may have had access to urban public space before the conflict; in the course of reconstruction, informal markets, roadside sales and meeting locations, and even sidewalks and transport spaces have become increasingly regulated. This has impacted women more directly than men, moving women-owned businesses into rented storefronts and markets, and into the taxed economy. In rural areas, the farmed spaces where homes once were built are being traded for imidugudu allocations, where plots of land average 200 by 300 meters. The workspace of farms, where neighbors met during their work days, is being traded for front and back yards, which also must house kitchen gardens, composting toilets, and other industries. In this climate, women are innovating economic opportunity in the form of ownership of water pumps, craft circles which

meet in front yards, and shared cooking time which yields communal access to foods. In many imidugudu, or with the help of NGOs, they are using their building skills to construct cooperative spaces for elaboration of techniques such as bee-keeping, soap-making, bread-baking. However, the rate at which imidugudu transition is being unfolded by the government creates a tendency toward housing with little interstitial space, and the Rwandan cultural norm of privacy is settled into close quarters with neighbors under the rubric of universal housing and results-based development. It is our hope that small, interdisciplinary, research-based design teams can offer the possibility of innovation and deviation within this fast-paced growth, and support women's evident strength in creating public spaces and social mores that continue to change Rwandan society.

ⁱ Rwanda Vision 2020. Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. Kigali: July 2000.