

Sustainable Architect Wins Prestigious Award

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Should we ask ourselves how architecture can profoundly impact communities, we can be inspired by Francis Kere, recipient of the 2022 Pritzker Architecture Prize. He is a living example of the sustainable possibilities of good design and the strength of communities. Kere's website, <https://www.kerearchitecture.com/>, says "Informed by tradition, our practice explores new modes of construction for which the foundations have long been laid. Innovative uses of local resources and participatory design methods allow us to work beyond the boundaries of most established design practices and shed dominant norms to set our own precedents." In a nutshell, Kere has opened the eyes of the community that raised and nurtured him to new possibilities using traditional local materials and sweat equity of the community to build architecture that uplifts and nurtures that community.

In its reporting about the prize, the New York Times quotes the jury: "His buildings, for and with communities, are directly of those communities — in their making, their materials, their programs and their unique characters," the jury said in its citation. "They are tied to the ground on which they sit and to the people who sit within them. They have presence without pretense and an impact shaped by grace." (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/arts/design/pritzker-prize-francis-kere.html>) The Pritzker Prize website includes a biography of Kéré Francis Kéré, a slide show of selected works, the announcement and the full Jury Citation. (<https://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/diebedo-francis-kere>)

In an interview with NPR, Michel Martin asks Kere if he remembers when "the spark was lit within you to say, I could do better than this?" Kere responds "Yeah. It was this experience, sitting with more than hundred other kids. So - and it was so hot - let's say over 100 degree Fahrenheit, you know, over 100 degree. And then with - in the darkness, while outside, you had this sunlight, you know? And I was saying, if I become adult one day, I will make things better, you know? Just create comfortable classrooms, you know, and spaces and beautiful architecture. Yeah. And so we are." (<https://www.npr.org/2022/03/19/1087750667/pritzer-winner-diebedo-francis-kere-makes-buildings-to-serve-west-african-commun>)

This 2016 article highlights some of his background. "Mr. Kéré won a scholarship to study in Germany and worked his way into architecture school at the Technical University of Berlin. For his first student project, in 2001, he raised \$50,000 to build an elementary school in his native village of Gando. He enlisted the help of local villagers, drawing blueprints for them in the sand. He dug up red clay and compressed it into bricks." "Wow, this is the same material that we know, but we're using it differently." I want to show people that you can build a structure from wood from the eucalyptus tree which they've only used for firewood. Or that you can make durable bricks out of clay, which they thought was a "poor people's" building material. I want people to question the old ways of doing things. That's the only way that things will ever change."

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/19/arts/design/in-burkina-faso-rebuilding-with-a-local-touch.html>)

Take the time to view Kere's 12 minute TED talk from 2013.

(https://www.ted.com/talks/diebedo_francis_kere_how_to_build_with_clay_and_community?language=en) He speaks of his home village of Gando, Burkina Faso. Still no electricity, still lacking clean drinking water. But through his efforts the village now has a school which is light, airy and comfortable. He started fundraising for the Gando school project as a student. His home people questioned the use of clay, a traditional material that they believed could not possibly be the best one in current times. He convinced them otherwise, and they as a community were able to build an elementary school that could accommodate a student body of 700, up from the original 120 crowded into dark, stifling, hot classrooms.

The TED Talk includes video documentation of how the villagers participated, using old-school techniques to accomplish sophisticated finishes. He shows how he was able to engage workers with no education to engineer quality buildings. His final words in this TED Talk are “I hope now that I was able to make my community proud through this work, and I hope I was able to prove you the power of community, and to show you that architecture can be inspiring for communities to shape their own future.”

The scope of Kere’s work includes a campus built in 2021 in Kenya. “The project responds to the pressing challenge of youth unemployment faced in the region by offering high-level training and access to international job opportunities, “ (<https://www.archdaily.com/964238/startup-lions-campus-kere-architecture>) “The Startup Lions Campus is an information and communication technologies (ICT) campus, located on the banks of Lake Turkana, Kenya. ...The building takes inspiration from the towering mounds built by termite colonies in the region. Tall ventilation towers create a stack effect to naturally cool the main working spaces by extracting warm air upwards, while fresh air is introduced through specially designed low-level openings. This system allows the campus to withstand high temperatures and is especially well suited as it prevents dust from damaging the IT equipment. “ The use of natural ventilation techniques in order to cool high tech equipment is a sustainable practice architects could replicate in many areas of the world currently running air-conditioning 24/7.

“I am hoping to change the paradigm, push people to dream and undergo risk. It is not because you are rich that you should waste material. It is not because you are poor that you should not try to create quality,” says Kéré. “Everyone deserves quality, everyone deserves luxury, and everyone deserves comfort. We are interlinked and concerns in climate, democracy and scarcity are concerns for us all.” (<https://www.bdcnetwork.com/diebedo-francis-kere-named-2022-pritzker-architecture-prize-recipient>)

Kere’s work is found not only in Africa, but throughout the world including the United States. We can learn much from his processes, his connection to the communities he serves, the language of the local materials he sources, and the sustainability of his designs. We have some new gems to add to our travel bucket list.

Beck, Thomas W., Together We Build, “Sustainable Architect Wins Prestigious Award”, *Estes Park Trail Gazette*, Friday, March 23, 2022, <https://www.eptrail.com/2022/03/23/together-we-build-sustainable-architect-wins-prestigious-award/>