Mudzi Owala *Village of Light*

Lessons from Malawi

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores my journey to a small corner of Africa, where I lived with and learned from the communities of rural Malawi. In particular, it examines the architectural lessons that emerged from my involvement in a local building project called *Mudzi Owala* (Village of Light).

My African travels were inspired by the realization that more than ninety percent of the total number of architects in the world live and work in the wealthiest countries, cities, and neighbourhoods. While most architectural schools focus on design studio-based education, the exemplified clients and projects account for less than ten percent of the population on a global scale. Over time, I have realized that my interest lies in working with those without access to standard architectural services namely, the overwhelming majority of the population.

In an era dominated by global challenges such as large-scale informal settlements, unsustainable development, and resource scarcity, the traditional role and training of the "desk architect" can be increasingly questioned. In the 21st century, the role of the architect demands the cultivation of many so-called non-architectural skills and experiences. The contrast between my traditional architectural education and the realities I witnessed in my adopted community led me to a new understanding of architecture that fundamentally changed my mindset about what it means to work as an architect.

This thesis is a collection of architectural research, reflections, and responses shared as a series of lessons. Represented through personal narrative and photography, the result is an account of my travels in Malawi as a means of understanding how our approach to the role of the architect may change in order to be able to meet the challenges that define our new global reality.

ZIKOMO KWAMBIRI

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To the ultimate Author of the greatest story of all,
whose lessons transcend culture, space and time

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INTRODUCTION

> Architects are by nature and pursuit, leaders and teachers. If architecture is going to inspire community, or stimulate the status quo in making responsible environmental and social structural changes now and in the future, it will take what I call the 'subversive leadership' of academicians and practitioners to remind the student of architecture that theory and practice are not only interwoven with one's culture but with the responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency, and challenging the power of the status quo.[1]
>
> Samuel Mockbee, *architect & founder of Rural Studio*

More than ninety percent of the total number of architects in the world live in the wealthiest countries, cities, and neighbourhoods.[2] In architectural schools across North America, typical design studio projects include commercial office towers, museums, and art galleries. On a global scale, however, these clients and projects account for less than ten percent of the population. Those who cannot afford standard architectural services constitute the overwhelming majority of the world. New ways of working are demanded in order to stay relevant and sustainable. This does not mean abandoning the skills and ways of thinking that go into the production of buildings; instead, they can be deployed and developed in other settings as well.

This thesis questions the social responsibility of the architect, a concept strongly adopted by Samuel Mockbee as "the responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency, and challenging the power of the status quo."[3] This era presents many global challenges for architects to address an era of "soft" information and data, informal settlements, rapid urbanization, unsustainable development, worldwide climate change crisis, increased social division, and resource scarcity. More broadly speaking, architecture can be defined as the "field of interaction between people and the built environment how they respond to and influence it, and ultimately make it."[4] In a world dominated by chaos, we are increasingly removed from the security of the traditional practice of the "desk architect." Sumita Sinha, founder of Architects for Change (RIBA's Equality & Diversity Forum) and recipient of the UIA:UNESCO International Design Award,

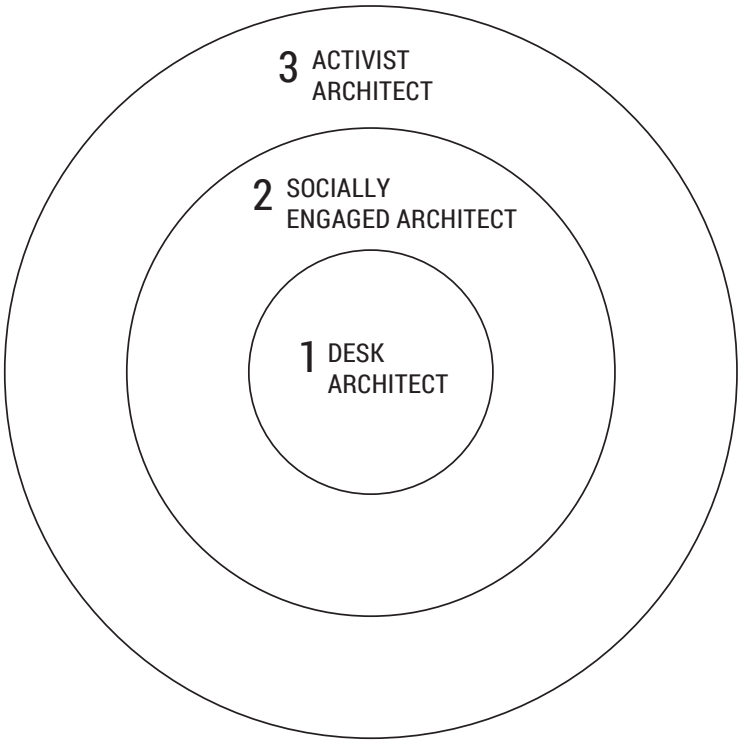


Figure 1: *Three types of architect*

uses this term to describe the typical architectural practitioner, a territory well-known and well-travelled.[5] This kind of architect has a few select clients who know what they want and possess the money, ideas, and power to realize their projects. Beyond the realm of the desk architect lies the more socially engaged architect, one who works in areas such as infrastructure, community projects, or social housing.[6] He has clients with whom he interacts via various agents such as housing associations and local bodies. There is some consultation and participation, but the whole process of design is managed in a tight sequence. But further out towards the edge of architecture is an area of rapid change, scarce resources, diverse culture, and much complexity. Here, the "activist architect" works among an extended peer community of the housewife, the slum dweller, the community groups, the stakeholders, the advocacy, or human rights lawyer.[7] The design process is multidisciplinary, indeterminate, and holistic.

The notion of serving underserved communities is ingrained into my value system, both by my Christian faith, as well as the examples of my family and community around me. For two years, I worked professionally on Qatar-based projects for members of the royal family and the real estate developer responsible for turning the desert into a mega-metropolis. Never before had I witnessed firsthand to this degree the role of architecture in making visible the wealth and power of those in authority. This realization spurred a change in direction, back to my deeply embedded inclination to care for those more vulnerable and less fortunate "the fatherless, the widow, the sojourner."[8] Whether for the rich or for the poor, design seeks not only to build a physical landscape, but to understand and represent a collective social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, and historical context. In this way, architecture serves as a narrative and celebration of a true identity of place and people.

It is clear that not only architects are involved in the creative production of the built environment. Typically, discussion focuses almost exclusively on the guiding hand of the individual architect, excluding the multiple voices and actions of others. However, spatial production belongs to a much wider group of actors from artists to users, politicians to builders with a diverse range of skills and motives. In this context, how can an architect effectively learn how to understand different societies and work with communities from a different background than his own? What skills and experiences ought one become exposed to in order to be able to address today's multifaceted challenges?

With these questions in mind, I set off to spend some time living in a rural, impoverished community in Malawi, Africa. Inspired by the work of Chilean architect and 2016 Pritzker Architecture Prize laureate Alejandro Aravena that "epitomizes the revival of a more socially engaged architect," I desired to use this exercise to learn from local perspectives and bring listening and learning into the foreground.

The story of my relationship with Africa begins nine years ago, the day I first moved out of my parent's home, left the west coast of Canada, and began a life of my own halfway across the country. I was introduced to the thrill of pushing myself outside of my comfort zone and discovering the unknown, a sense of adrenaline that has continued to fuel me ever since. Over the past few years, my passion for travel has developed further. What began as a fascination with European cities and cultures, each so deeply and uniquely embedded in their own history and lifestyle, quickly expanded as I realized the beauty of cultural diversity across the human race. I lived for two weeks among a community in *Ciudad Vieja* (Old City), Guatemala. Being welcomed into the home of a local multigenerational family and gaining an intimate glimpse into their daily life opened my eyes to the ability for human relationships to bridge differences in geographic distance, social upbringing, and economic stability.

Travelling is important training for an architect. One cannot design good architecture just by reading or working for other architects. Travel is the catalyst by which one encounters different kinds of people with different backgrounds, and from which the critical skills of listening and observation are developed. In a field where there are no universal solutions, the broader one's horizons, the more equipped one may be.

In the summer of 2015, a desire to do something more constructive with my travels led me to an opportunity to go to Malawi, Africa as a volunteer architectural intern with an international team of architects and engineers. My work there centered around responding to a local organization's request for help with evaluating their headquarters' existing conditions and capacities, and shaping a vision for potential future expansion in the area of Thondwe, near Zomba. It was my first time on the African continent; thus began my love affair with Africa. The vastness of the untouched landscape juxtaposed against the harsh conditions of life for impoverished rural populations was striking. My contact with local Malawians was nonetheless limited as I primarily communicated only with a small group of leaders. A few weeks' visit was not nearly enough to see and experience all that this country had to share.

This inspired a desire to return, to reacquaint myself with Malawian culture, to listen to the men, women, and children of the villages to understand their needs and struggles, and to learn of important "non-architectural" issues through the lens of an architect and explore the ways I might be able to engage with them.

A few months later, I was introduced to Sarah, the sister of a close friend of mine. I knew she had been working abroad for many years, and she invited me to come visit her.

"Where do you work?" I asked.

"Malawi, in Africa."

That was it. I was set to return.

My perception and experience of the world is yet malleable. Architectural theorist David Leatherbarrow portrays the architect as such: "Lacking a plan, map, or

survey, he intends to develop one. His purpose is neither design nor construction, instead understanding."[9] Following in the vein of the theme of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, this two-year personal journey of exploring the possibilities of architecture is my "Reporting from the Front."[10]

This thesis is structured as a series of lessons interspersed with personal accounts of my journey through diary entries, organized more or less chronologically.

THE ART OF PREPARATION forms a group of lessons centred on the process of preparing the mind, heart, and soul for my time spent abroad. Academic research on the historical, political, social, and cultural context of Malawi is conducted in "Preparing the Mind," followed by a self-evaluation of intention and embedded personal assumptions that would interfere with fruitful engagement in "Preparing the Heart." Lastly, "Preparing the Soul" discusses the fundamental concept of service as a core component of the architectural discipline.

After this preparation, the story of my relationship with *Mudzi Owala* (Village of Light), a local building project, is presented in THE JOURNEY BEGINS. This section chronicles my serendipitous discovery of the opportunity part-way through my stay and my subsequent stages of involvement.

The second half of the lessons, curated as THE ART OF FIELDWORK, describes my experiences and new perspectives gained while fully immersed in Malawian daily life, actively participating within the community. The anecdotal insights are further organized into themes of "Engaging with People," "Listening and Observing," "Empowering Others," and "Maintaining Relationships."

Returning once more to the *Mudzi Owala* project, the narrative of my role in that task concludes in THE JOURNEY ENDS. Although my time in Malawi eventually comes to a close, the learning and storytelling remains an ongoing pursuit beyond the scope of this work.

These are my lessons from Malawi.

PROLOGUE

> Westerners arriving in Africa for the first time are always struck by its beauty and size – even the sky seems higher. And they often find themselves suddenly cracked open. They lose inhibitions, feel more alive, more themselves, and they begin to understand why, until then, they have only half lived.
>
> In Africa the essentials of existence – light, earth, water, food, birth, family, love, sickness, death – are more immediate, more intense. Visitors suddenly realize what life is for. To risk a huge generalization: amid our wasteful wealth and time-pressed lives we have lost human values that still abound in Africa.[11]
>
> Richard Dowden

The engine of the plane finally roars to a halt. It has been a long transatlantic journey from Toronto to Addis Ababa to my final destination of Lilongwe. I am eager to disembark and step foot on the African continent once more, a wave of excitement crashing over me.

. . . . .

I remember the last time I arrived in this city, foolishly almost ending up in the wrong place altogether! Not realizing that the small plane leaving Addis Ababa makes more than one landing in Malawi before arriving at my destination, I naturally disembarked at the first stop, somehow missing the pilot's announcement of our location. I boarded the shuttle bus leading from the plane to the airport, where a customs officer promptly directed a laser temperature gun infrared thermometer at my forehead to ensure that I was entering the country in good health. Shuffled in line toward the customs desk, I turned around, expecting to find fellow travellers who I knew were heading to the same city. Surprisingly, they weren't there, even as group after group slowly appeared while the shuttle bus made several rounds. Fifteen minutes later, as I was nearing the entry point, I decided something was not quite right and stepped out of line to ask the officer hesitantly, "Am I in Lilongwe?"

"No, this is the Blantyre airport, ma'am," he responded.

There was a pregnant pause as I processed this information slowly, keeping

calm despite the news. I pointed to my boarding ticket.

"Oh….I'm supposed to go to Lilongwe…?" I showed the man, still a little confused.

"Oh!" It was his turn to pause before proceeding.

"Well….come with me," he led me back out of the airport through the entrance I had gone through. We stood facing the tarmac at the multiple planes on the ground, surrounded by bustling ground personnel loading and unloading cargo from the planes. With a slow, grand, sweeping gesture of his right arm guiding a panoramic view of the tarmac, he asked me optimistically, "Which one was your plane?"

I stared at the dozens of identical Ethiopian Airlines planes scattered in front of me. I almost laughed at the sheer absurdity of the situation in which I had found myself. Of course this would be the start of my adventure! Thankfully, I was able to retrace my steps and pointed to a plane that I was fairly certain was mine. The officer quickly hailed down a passing cargo vehicle on the tarmac and explained my condition to the driver, who cheerfully invited me to hop in for a ride in order to reach the plane as swiftly as possible, before it took off for its next destination – a five-hour flight away.

"Is this your first time in Malawi?" the laidback driver asked with a beaming, friendly smile.

Sheepishly, I replied with a laugh, "Clearly it is!"

Fortunately, I reached the plane before they were ready for takeoff and re-boarded, much to the confusion of the flight attendants. Waving goodbye to the extremely helpful driver, I breathed an enormous sigh of relief, thankful that I had not been stranded in a foreign city with no way of reconnecting with my friends in Malawi.

. . . . .

As I approach the Lilongwe International Airport again a year later, I am confident. I recognize this place very well, and I know I have made it to the correct city without any trouble. I look back on my previous mistake and smile to myself.

This time, I am embarking on a three-month internship with the faith-based organization that Sarah has been working with for the past six years, ACTION International Ministries. My tasks are primarily to shadow and assist Sarah in her daily work, which involves teaching youth, women, and children of the rural villages of the district of Ntcheu in Malawi. Mostly, however, I hope to immerse myself in the community, meeting people and asking questions. I enter with no preconceived architectural issues to solve; I will simply experience life here through an architect's eyes.

At the arrivals area of the airport, I am greeted at the end of my long journey

by Sarah, who I last saw several months ago in Toronto before she returned to Malawi herself. It is so, so wonderful to see a familiar welcoming face! She is accompanied by an older woman who is the wife of the director of the organization's base in Malawi.

"Call me Mama," she smiles warmly. "Papa [the director], Sarah and I – we are your family here."

We approach the parking lot and walk toward an old minivan, which Mama has fondly named "Noah." To my surprise, she enters the driver's seat and prepares to navigate her way out of the airport.

"You drive?!" I exclaim before I can stop myself. I cannot help it; I had simply not expected a woman in her seventies to possess the gumption to drive a minivan through the fast-paced, dangerous roads of this country. I had assumed the organization would have assigned a driver to pick up visitors and staff, as is typical of many previous experiences abroad.

"Of course!" Mama replied with a hint of bewilderment, as if I had asked a ridiculous question. With utmost confidence, she pulls the gearshift and sets the vehicle into motion.

I humbly sit back in my seat, wildly excited and mind-blown. Already my assumptions have been called out, and I know that the next few months will be an experience like never before. Tiyeni! Let's go!

THE ART OF PREPARATION

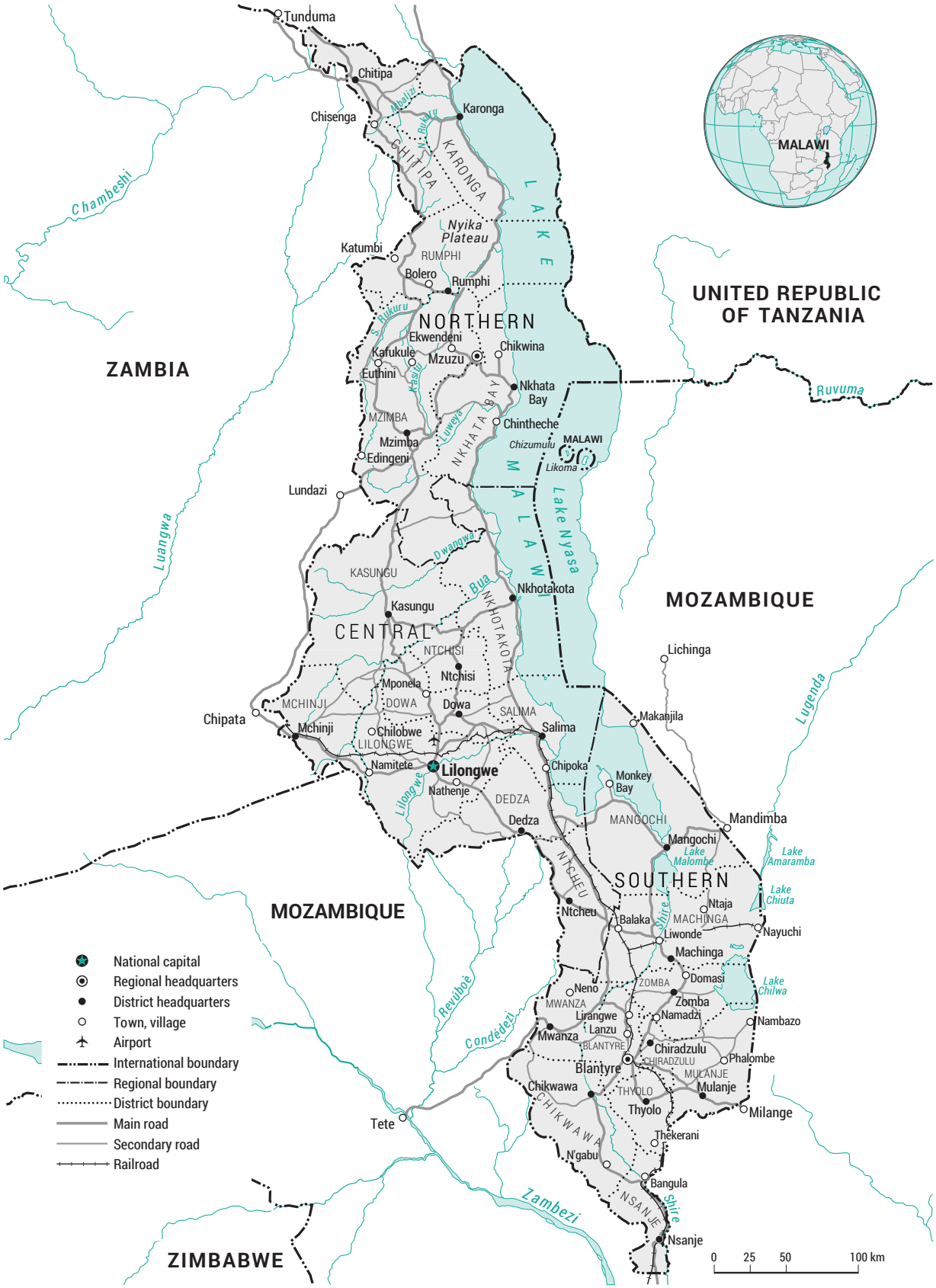
Lessons Part One

PREPARING THE MIND

ARRIVING INFORMED

> It is also obvious that the place one is inspired by is of profound importance. The chance of not being from that place is not a crippling deficiency that will render one incapable of inspiration. What is important is using one's talent, intellect and energy in order to gain an appreciation and affection for people and place.[1]
>
> Samuel Mockbee

My eight months of coursework in Cambridge, Ontario before my actual trip to Malawi are spent in research. If one is to travel to a foreign culture, it is critical to arrive as informed as possible. Nothing creates barriers, fosters disconnect, and hinders growth as much as ignorance. In order to be able to ask relevant questions when the opportunity arises, one must have some idea of what is even relevant to begin with. Moreover, one's background knowledge must extend further than the distant, static information acquired from textbooks or tourism guides. Beyond history and demographics, statistics and geography, my attempts at immersion into Malawian culture include seeking out language and music, literature and art, conversations with those already there. I wish to return to Malawi with a fuller understanding, demonstrating a genuine appreciation and affection for people and place.


Tunduma
Chitipa
Chisenga
Karonga
CHITIPA
KARONGA
Nyika Plateau
RUMPHI
Katumbi
Bolero
Rumphi
NORTHERN
Ekwendeni
Mzuzu
Chikwina
Kafukule
Euthini
Nkhata Bay
NKHATA BAY
MZIMBA
Mzimba
Edingeni
Chintheche
Chizumulu
MALAWI
Likoma
Lundazi
KASUNGU
Kasungu
CENTRAL
NKHOTAKOTA
Nkhotakota
NTCHISI
Ntchisi
Mponela
DOWA
Dowa
SALIMA
Salima
MCHINJI
Mchinji
Chipata
Chilobwe
LILONGWE
Namitete
Lilongwe
Nathenje
DEDZA
Dedza
Chipoka
Monkey Bay
MANGOCHI
Mangochi
Mandimba
Lichinga
Makanjila
SOUTHERN
NTCHEU
Ntcheu
Balaka
MACHINGA
Liwonde
Ntaja
Nayuchi
Machinga
Domasi
ZOMBA
Zomba
Namadzi
Nambazo
Neno
MWANZA
Mwanza
Lirangwe
Lanzu
BLANTYRE
Blantyre
Chiradzulu
CHIRADZULU
Phalombe
MULANJE
Mulanje
Milange
Chikwawa
CHIKWAWA
THYOLO
Thyolo
Thekerani
N'gabu
Bangula
NSANJE
Nsanje
Tete
ZAMBIA
MOZAMBIQUE
UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA
ZIMBABWE
LAKE MALAWI
Lake Nyasa
Lake Malombe
Lake Amaramba
Lake Chiuta
Lake Chilwa
Chambeshi
Luangwa
Ruvuma
Lugenda
Revuboe
Condedezi
Zambezi
Shire
Bua
Dwangwa
Lilongwe
Luweya
Kasitu
Rukuru
Mbelizi
National capital
Regional headquarters
District headquarters
Town, village
Airport
International boundary
Regional boundary
District boundary
Main road
Secondary road
Railroad
0 25 50 100 km

THE STORY OF MALAWI *THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA*

Malawi is a landlocked country in southeastern Africa, bordered by Tanzania to the north, Lake Malawi to the east, Mozambique to the southeast, and Zambia to the west. Endowed with spectacular highlands and extensive lakes, it occupies a narrow, curving strip of land along the East African Rift Valley.[2] Lake Malawi, the country's most prominent physical feature, is 580 kilometres long and accounts for more than one-fifth of the country's total area.[3] Malawi's subtropical climate consists of two main seasons the dry season, which lasts from May to October, and the rainy season, which lasts from November to April.[4]

The eastern coast of Africa has been a focal point of major international trade all the way back to the days of Phoenician traders at the time of Christ. Human skeletons and imaginative cave paintings have been found as far back as 8000 BC in the area of present day Malawi.[5] Between the 10th and 15th centuries AD, several waves of Bantu-speaking peoples began migrating into the area from the Congo. These loosely formed local clans or tribal states created centralized systems of government, establishing the Maravi Confederacy around 1480, which consisted of present day Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique.[6] Reaching its peak between 1600 and 1650, this agricultural, trade-based kingdom was ruled by a *kalonga* until its gradual collapse around 1700.[7] Better and more productive agricultural practices were adopted, shifting cultivation of indigenous varieties of millet and sorghum to more intensive cultivation of crops with a higher carbohydrate content, such as corn (maize), cassava (manioc), and rice.[8]

The independent growth of indigenous governments and improved economic systems was severely overturned by the arrival of foreign intruders and the slave trade. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Portuguese traders and Jesuits arrived, soon turning the region into a battlefield over gold and religion.[9] The slave trade in Malawi increased dramatically between 1790 and 1860 because of the growing demand for slaves on Africa's east coast.[10] By 1839, the coastal trading centers of Kronga, Nkhotakota, and Salima on Lake Malawi became infamous slave trading centres, handling over 40,000 slaves.[11] Swahili-speaking slave traders from the east and the Ngoni and Yao peoples fleeing the south entered present day Malawi between 1830 and 1860. These slave traders introduced Islam to Malawi, converting the marauding Yao who were capturing slaves.[12]

Christianity was introduced in the 1860s by David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary, and other missionaries who came to Malawi after Livingstone's death in 1873.[13] Livingstone reached present day Malawi after crossing the continent from west to east, witnessing the brutality of the slave trade. Appalled by the "river of death" he encountered, Livingstone eventually helped lead the abolition of the slave trade in eastern Africa.[14] Christianity owed its success to the protection given to the missionaries by the upcoming British colonial government.[15]

The next few years of the Scramble for Africa saw the European nations of

Figure 2: *(opposite) Map of Malawi, 2017*

Germany, France, England, and Portugal laying claim across the African continent. In 1891, the British established the Nyasaland Districts Protectorate over present day Malawi and Zambia, which was called the British Central African Protectorate from 1893 and Nyasaland from 1907.[16] Throughout colonial rule, strong links existed between Nyasaland (Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe).[17] While Malawi was heavily populated, it was the least developed of the three countries. Only a few Europeans settled there, and at no time did they control more than fifteen percent of the land.[18] Under the colonial regime, roads and railways were built, and the cultivation of cash crops by European settlers was introduced.[19] Yet, the colonial administration did little to enhance the welfare of the African majority. Furthermore, between 1951 and 1953, in spite of bitter opposition from its African inhabitants, the colonial government decided to join the colonies of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland into the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.[20]

This imposition of the federation, which Africans feared as an increase in colonial power, prompted the rise of a nationalist movement with the formation of the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC).[21] Beginning during the period between the World Wars, African nationalism gathered momentum in the early 1950s. The full force of nationalism as an instrument of change became evident after 1958 under the leadership of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who had returned to the country that year after having studied and practiced medicine abroad.[22] After several protests and riots, the federation was dissolved in 1963, and Banda became the Prime Minister of Nyasaland on February 1, 1963.[23] Nyasaland – renamed Malawi – was granted full independence as a member of the Commonwealth of Nations on July 6, 1964.[24]

Soon after independence, a serious dispute arose between Banda and most of his cabinet ministers, primarily over his diplomatic ties with the apartheid regime in white-ruled Mozambique and South Africa.[25] On July 6, 1966, Malawi became a republic and Banda was elected president; in 1971, he was made president for life.[26] Malawi's 1966 constitution established a one-party state under the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) controlled by Banda, who consistently and ruthlessly suppressed any opposition.[27] During his time in office, Banda maintained a peaceful, conservative, pro-Western state, in contrast to a number of other African states. He brought previously warring tribes into a "one nation" relationship, and improved the transport, infrastructure, and communication systems, especially the road and railway networks. He connected north and south with a tarmac paved roadway – the M1 highway – and moved the capital from Zomba in the south to the more centrally located city of Lilongwe.[28] Economic growth occurred, with much emphasis on cash crop production and food security. While many of the emerging nations were experiencing mass exodus to the urban areas, Banda offered incentives to keep the village community located in the rural areas. This resulted in much slower growth in the cities and helped maintain low crime rates.[29] Nevertheless, by the end of the

Banda administration, the country was still near the bottom of the world's economic ladder.[30]

Many opposition groups, supported by pressure from international financial aid donors, began to rally for multiparty democracy and political reform. In May 1994, the first free elections in more than thirty years took place.[31] Banda was defeated by Bakili Muluzi by a substantial margin, who served two consecutive terms of five years each.[32] In 1995, a new constitution began transforming Malawi into a democratic society. Muluzi's first term in office brought the country greater democracy and freedoms of speech, assembly, and association.[33] With limited success, Muluzi's administration also promised to root out government corruption and reduce poverty and food shortages in the country. Muluzi pursued good relations with a number of Arab countries and sought to play a more active role in African affairs than his predecessor.[34] During Muluzi's second term, he drew domestic and international criticism for some of his actions, which were viewed as increasingly autocratic.[35] Moreover, the government had failed to adequately respond to a severe food shortage in 2001, and declared a famine by February 2002.[36] Unfortunately, international aid was slow to arrive to the country or was withheld entirely because of the belief that government mismanagement and corruption had contributed to the food shortage.[37]

In 2004, Muluzi's handpicked successor, Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika, was declared the winner of a tainted election.[38] Mutharika's administration quickly set out to improve government operations by eliminating corruption and streamlining spending. His actions impressed international donors, who resumed the flow of foreign aid previously withheld in protest of the corruption of Muluzi's administration.[39] At the same time, economic and social progress remained hampered due to the HIV/AIDS crisis and lack of economically viable resources and adequate infrastructure.[40]

As Mutharika's rule grew increasingly autocratic during his second term, nationwide protests erupted in 2011, fueled by discontent with the country's political and economic situation.[41] International donors grew dissatisfied with the way that Mutharika was handling the country's economic problems and were concerned about the administration's disregard toward the well-being of its citizens. As a result, the country lost millions of dollars of much-needed aid, particularly from Great Britain.[42] Amidst simmering political discontent, rising food prices, fuel shortages, and a power crisis, Mutharika died of a heart attack on April 5, 2012.[43] With strong domestic and international support to counter Mutharika's small circle of key supporters, vice-president Joyce Banda was sworn in as acting president that same day.[44]

Banda moved quickly to counter the policies of Mutharika's administration. During her first few months in office, she restored diplomatic relations with Great Britain and normalized relations with donors. Banda also focused on restoring democratic practices, repairing the economy, and eliminating government corruption.[45] One of her first economic decisions as president was to devalue the country's currency, the *kwacha*, an act that was backed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and donors but criticized at home, and prompted a jump in the inflation

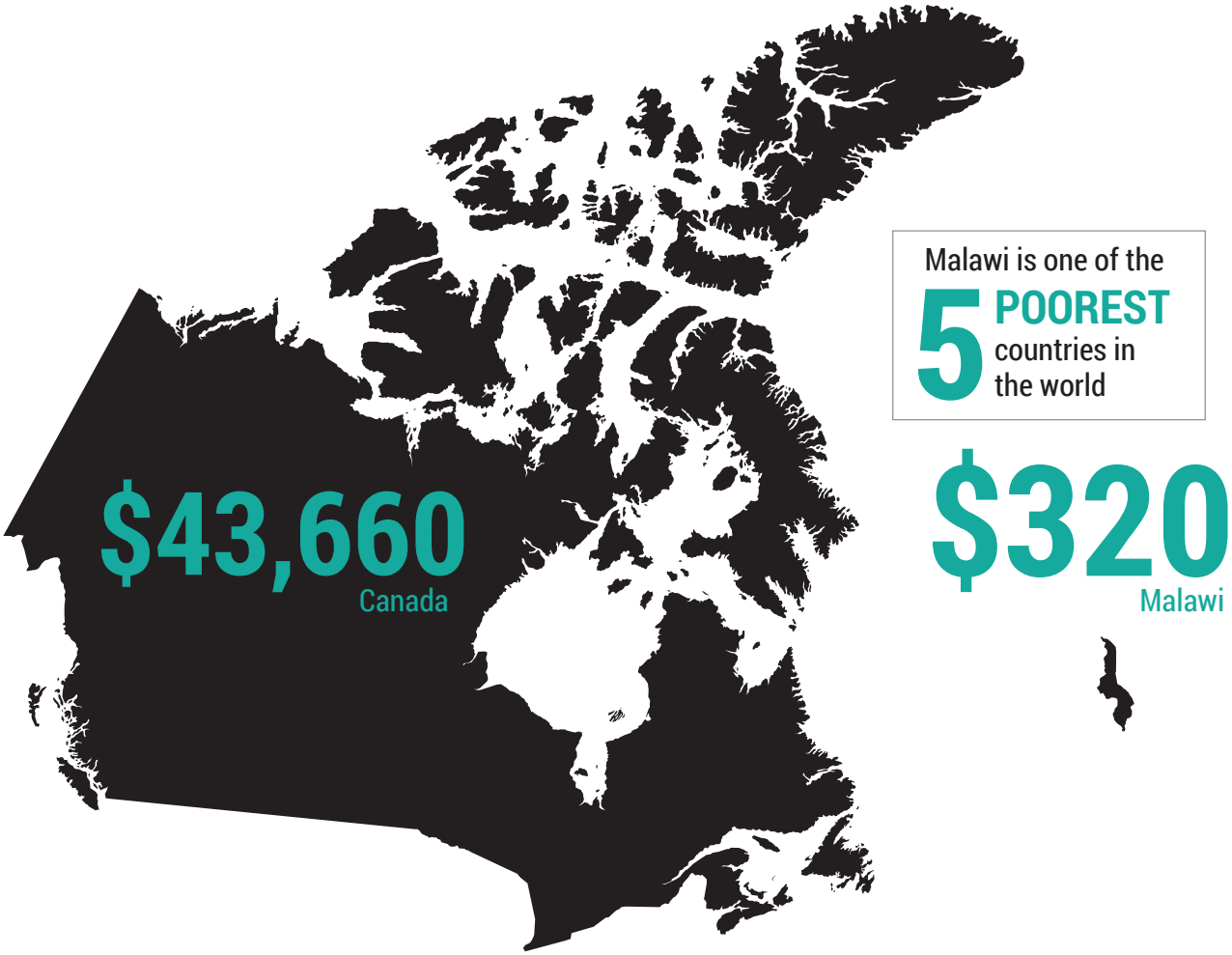


Figure 3: *Comparison of Gross Net Income per capita (Atlas Method) between Canada and Malawi, 2016*

rate.[46] Her policies were somewhat effective, as donors resumed a flow of funding to Malawi, the inflation rate eventually began to fall, and the country's economic growth rate more than doubled during her first two years as president. Still, much of the country remained at or below the poverty level.[47]

Malawi's battle with corruption was exposed in 2013 with the cash-gate scandal, a massive fraud and corruption operation that allegedly involved senior-level government officials, including some cabinet ministers in Banda's administration.[48] A report presented evidence that more than $30 million had been stolen from the government during a six-month period in 2013, with estimates increasing up to $250 million as the investigations continued.[49] The cash-gate scandal was one of the issues that figured prominently in campaigns for the May 2014 elections. Voting did not go smoothly, but Peter Mutharika, brother of the former president, was declared the winner and sworn in as president on May 31, 2014.[50]

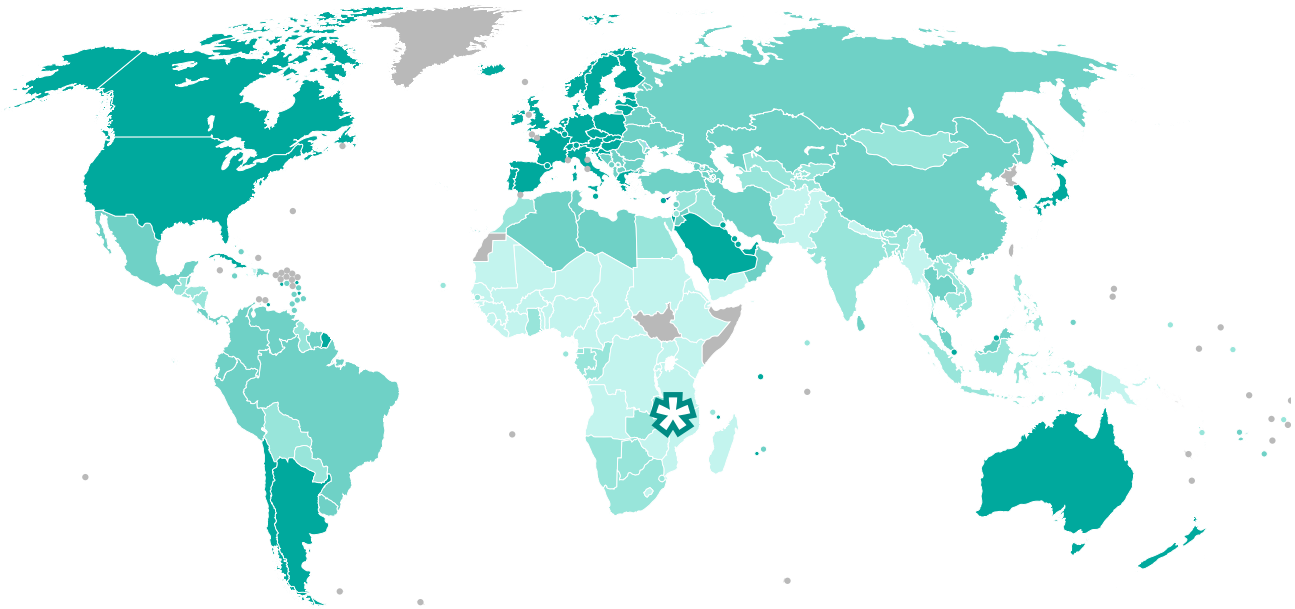
MALAWI TODAY

Today, Malawi is defined by the United Nations as one of the world's "Least Developed Countries," ranking as low as number 170 out of 188 countries on the 2015 Human Development Index.[51] Consistently ranking among the five poorest countries in the world, the following topics provide a description of the current state of Malawi.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Although Malawi is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, it is also one of the least urbanized, with eighty-four percent of the population of over sixteen million people living in rural settlements, often without basic services.[52] Over half of Malawians live in absolute poverty and rely on subsistence farming. A rural village called a *mudzi* is usually small. Organized around the extended family, it is limited by the amount of water and arable land available in the vicinity.[53] On the plateaus, which support the bulk of the population, the most common village sites are at the margins of *madambo*, which are usually contiguous with streams or rivers and are characterized by woodland, grassland, and fertile alluvial soils.[54] In highland areas, scattered villages are located near perennial mountain streams and pockets of arable land. The larger settlements around Lake Malawi originated in the 19th century as collection points for slaves and later developed as lakeside ports.[55] Improvements in communications and the sinking of wells in semiarid areas permitted the establishment of new settlements in previously uninhabited areas.[56]

Architecture is changing: the traditional round, mud-walled, grass-roofed hut is giving way to rectangular brick buildings with corrugated iron roofs.[57] Urban development began in the colonial era with the arrival of missionaries, traders,



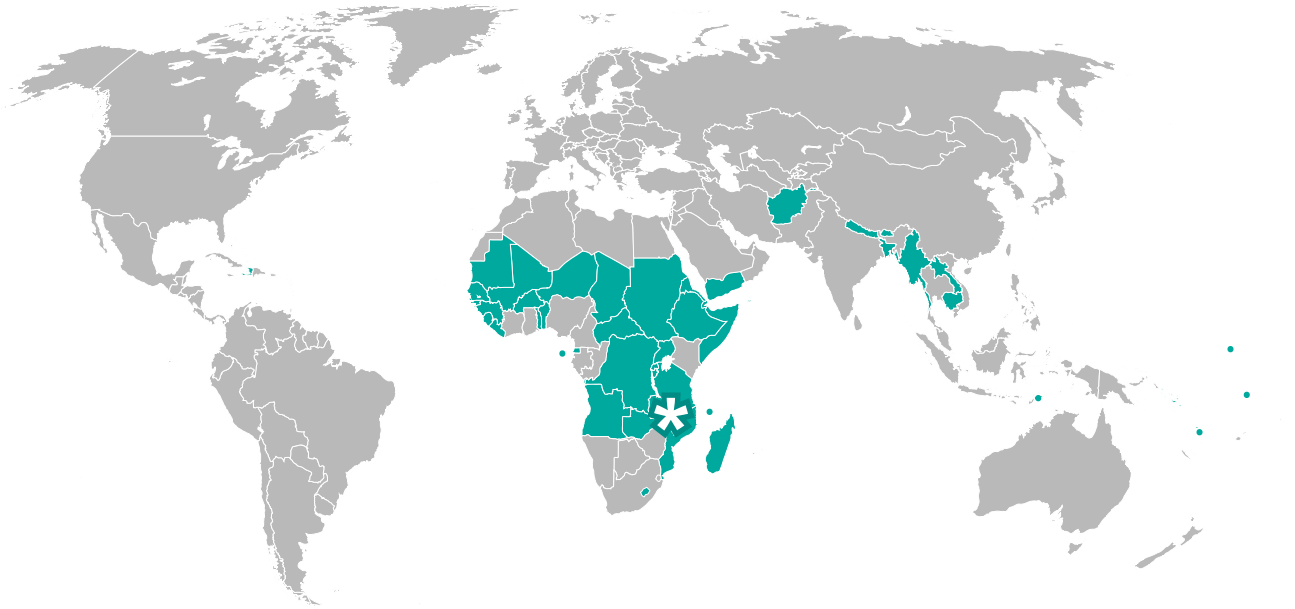
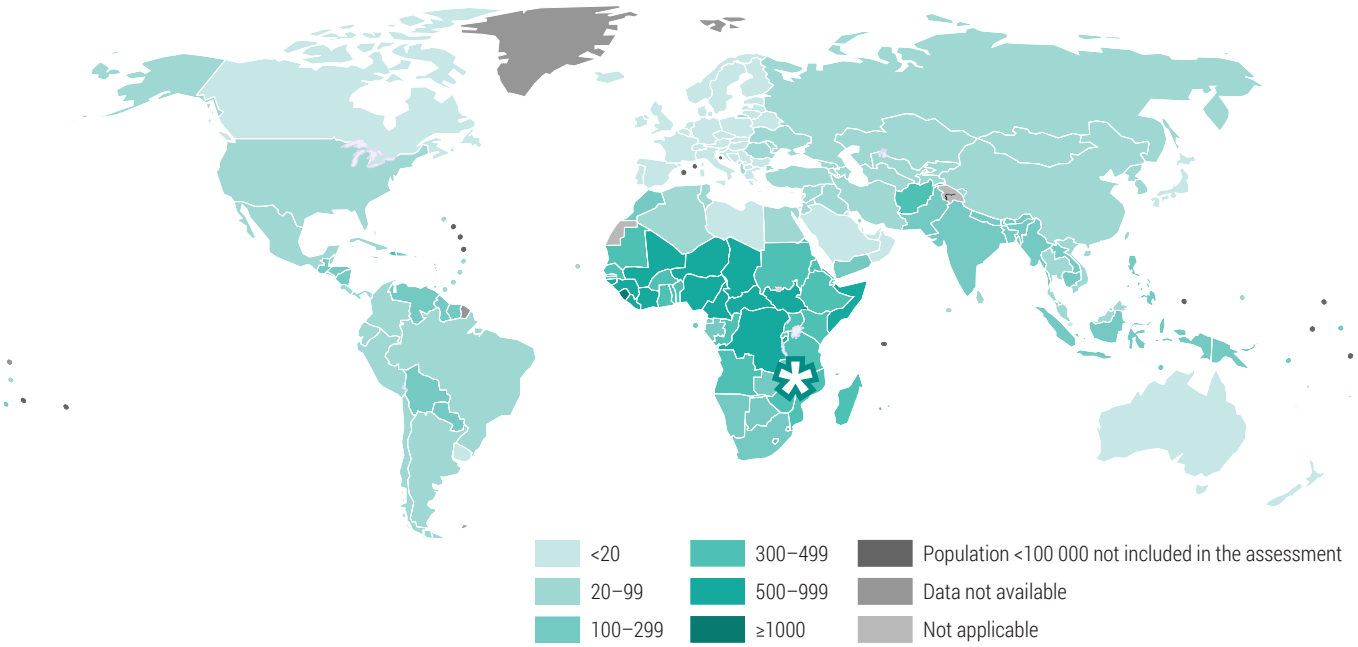


Figure 4: *(top) United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI)*
Figure 5: *(bottom) "Least Developed Countries" (LDC), according to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)*



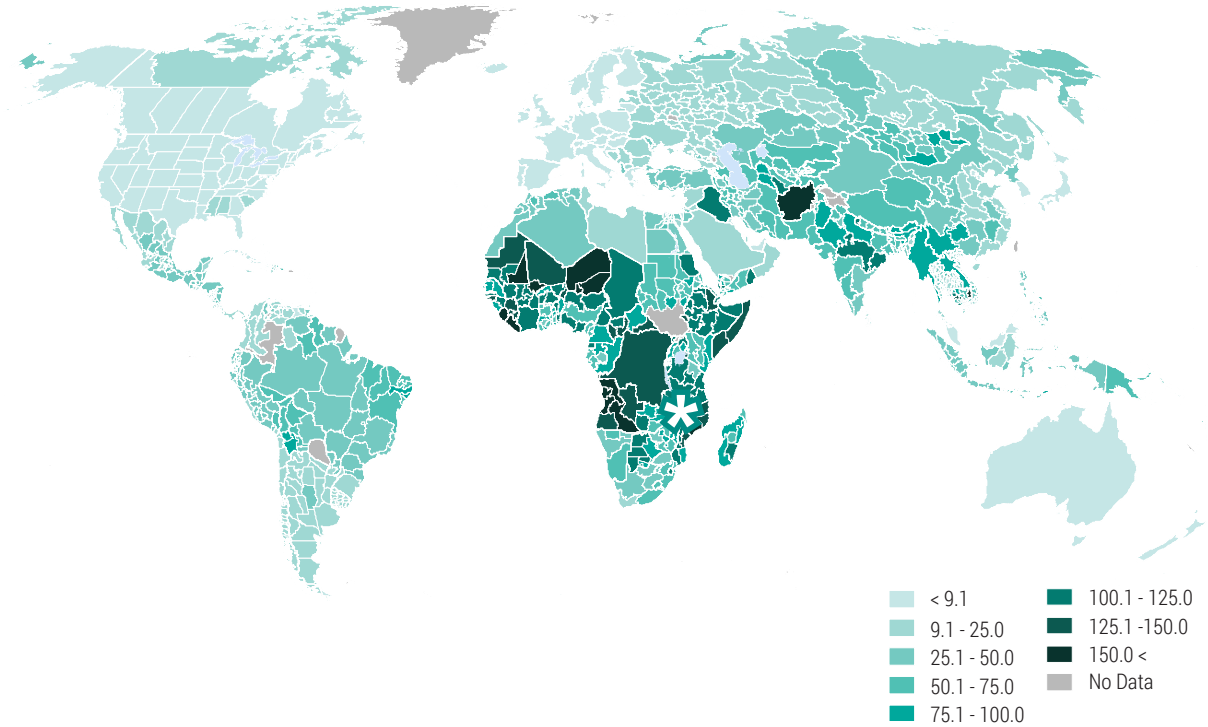
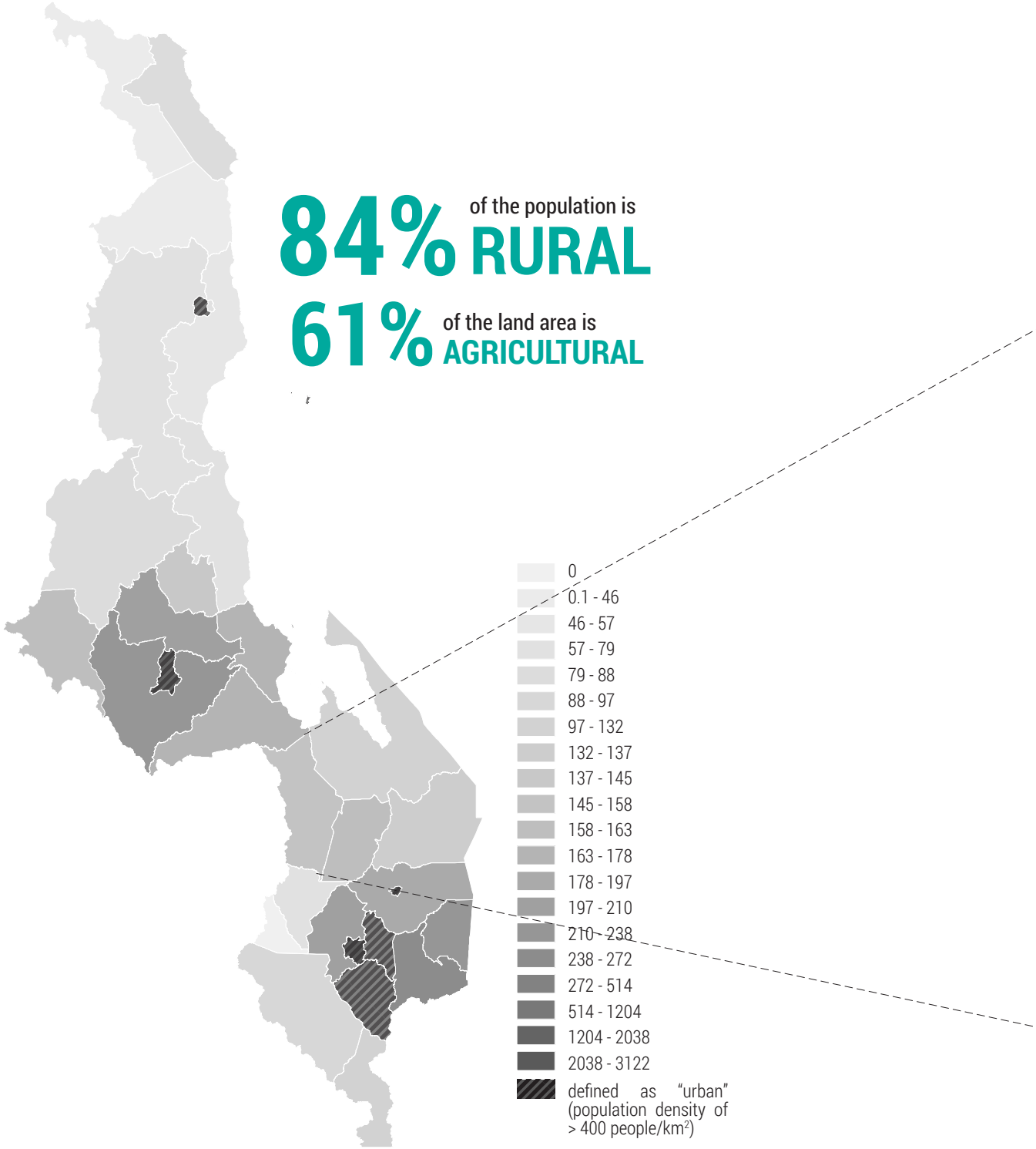


Figure 6: *(top) Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births), 2013*
Figure 7: *(bottom) Infant Mortality Rate (deaths per 1,000 live births), 2000*


84% of the population is RURAL
61% of the land area is AGRICULTURAL
0
0.1 - 46
46 - 57
57 - 79
79 - 88
88 - 97
97 - 132
132 - 137
137 - 145
145 - 158
158 - 163
163 - 178
178 - 197
197 - 210
210 - 238
238 - 272
272 - 514
514 - 1204
1204 - 2038
2038 - 3122
defined as "urban" (population density of > 400 people/km²)

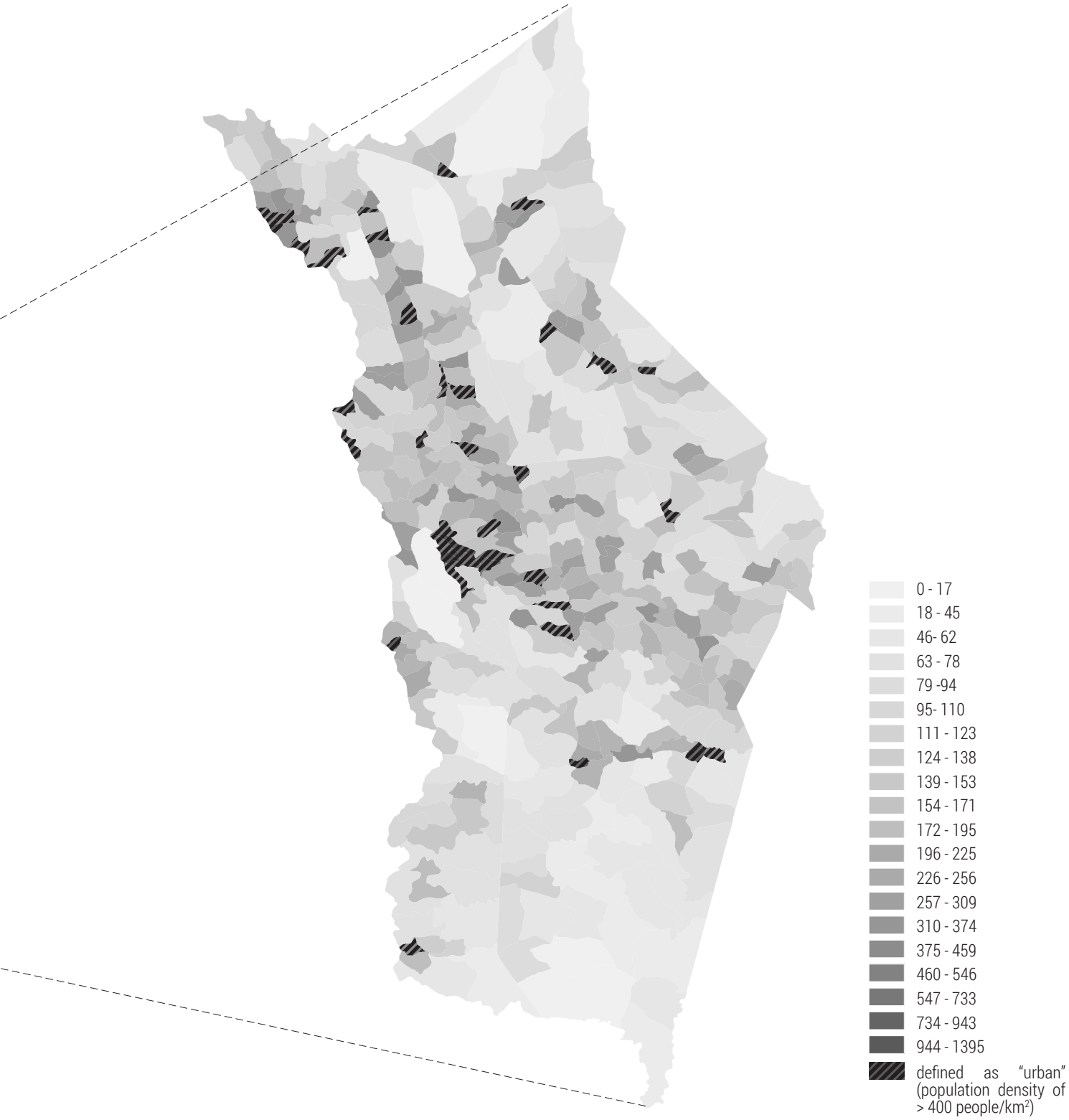
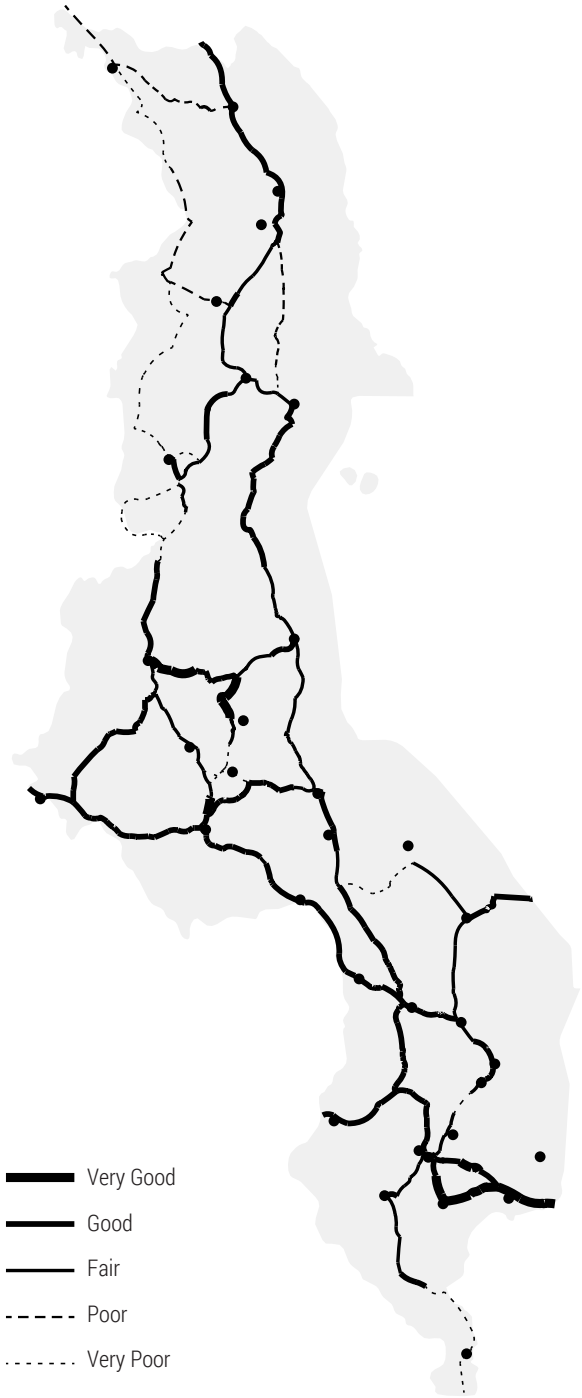


Figure 8: *Population Density in Malawi and Ntcheu District*

Railroad
Paved road
Unpaved road
Secondary road
Tertiary road
1 hour walking radius (5km)
Major settlement


Very Good
Good
Fair
Poor
Very Poor

and administrators and was further stimulated by the construction of the railway. Important urban centres include Blantyre, Zomba, Mzuzu, and Lilongwe, which form a few of Malawi's twenty-eight districts.[58] Although some district centres and missionary stations have an urban appearance, they are closely associated with the rural settlements surrounding them. Blantyre, Malawi's industrial and commercial centre, is situated in a depression on the Shire Highlands at an elevation of about 3,400 feet (1,040 metres). Zomba, the capital of Malawi until 1975 and now the seat of the University of Malawi, lies at the foot of Zomba Mountain. Lilongwe, Malawi's capital since 1975 and a centre of agricultural industry, is located in the central region. Mzuzu, long associated with the wood industry, is situated farther north on the Viphya highlands.[59]

WATER MANAGEMENT, POWER & SANITATION

Malawi's water resources are plentiful, although some rural areas are inadequately supplied. Most of the rivers are seasonal, but a few large ones, particularly the Shire River along its middle course, have considerable potential for irrigation and electricity generation.[60] Power demands are met by hydroelectric schemes, including those at Nkula Falls, Kapichira, and Tedzani Falls, and by diesel plants.[61] Major consumers of electric power include the industrial areas of the south near Blantyre, where electricity consumption has steadily multiplied, and the industrial area of Lilongwe; the vast sugar estates at Nchalo and Dwangwa also consume much electricity.[62] By contrast, only a fraction of Malawians themselves have electrical access, and almost all domestic energy needs are met by firewood.[63] Power availability has been hindered by different factors. The drying of rivers due to deforestation near their sources and along their courses has resulted in a reduction of water flow into Lake Malawi, which in turn has adversely affected the currents of the Shire, on which the Nkula and Tedzani hydroelectric plants are located.[64] The devaluation of Malawian currency, the *kwacha*, has also had some effect on electricity supply in the country, as spare parts can be expensive and difficult to obtain. These factors have at times led to load shedding of electricity and therefore an irregular availability of power.[65]

HEALTH

In Malawi, there is a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, some of the highest maternal and child mortality rates in Sub-Saharan Africa, low awareness of basic health risks, inadequate facilities, and poor infrastructure to reach centralized facilities from remote areas.[66]

Like many African countries, Malawi's common diseases include malaria, measles, tuberculosis, anemia, gastroenteritis, pneumonia, schistosomiasis, and

Figure 9: *(opposite) Existing Infrastructure and Road Conditions*

trachoma.[67] Cost-effective primary health care facilities and services have begun to be implemented. The Essential Health Package, a government program launched in the early 2000s, places emphasis on immunization, reproductive health, and nutrition.[68] The incidence of HIV/AIDS in Malawi affecting one-seventh of the population is among the highest rates in the world, further taxing the country's overburdened health care system.[69] In response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, a number of major initiatives have been developed, including the National Strategic Framework, the National AIDS Commission, and the National HIV/AIDS Policy, each implemented in the early 2000s.[70]

Health facilities include major hospitals at Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mzuzu, and Zomba.[71] District hospitals, rural clinics, dispensaries, and health centres also operate throughout the country, but still severely inadequately serve its population. There is a mental health hospital at Zomba, and other dedicated facilities, such as those linked with maternity care, are also in operation. Christian missionary societies run a number of hospitals in the country.[72]

Health care in Malawi is constrained by shortages of both personnel and supplies. Malawi has one of the highest population-to-physician ratios in all of sub-Saharan Africa.[73] Attempts to address the shortage of health care professionals include the expansion of training of medical personnel at all levels. It is hoped that the medical college at the University of Malawi, opened in 1991, will provide long-term assistance with alleviating the shortage of doctors.[74] Community-managed Drug Revolving Funds have been introduced at clinics to deal with the shortage of drugs (most of which are imported), and to provide for those without access to health facilities. Following an initial investment, drugs are provided to the community at a discounted cost, and the income is used to resupply stock.[75]

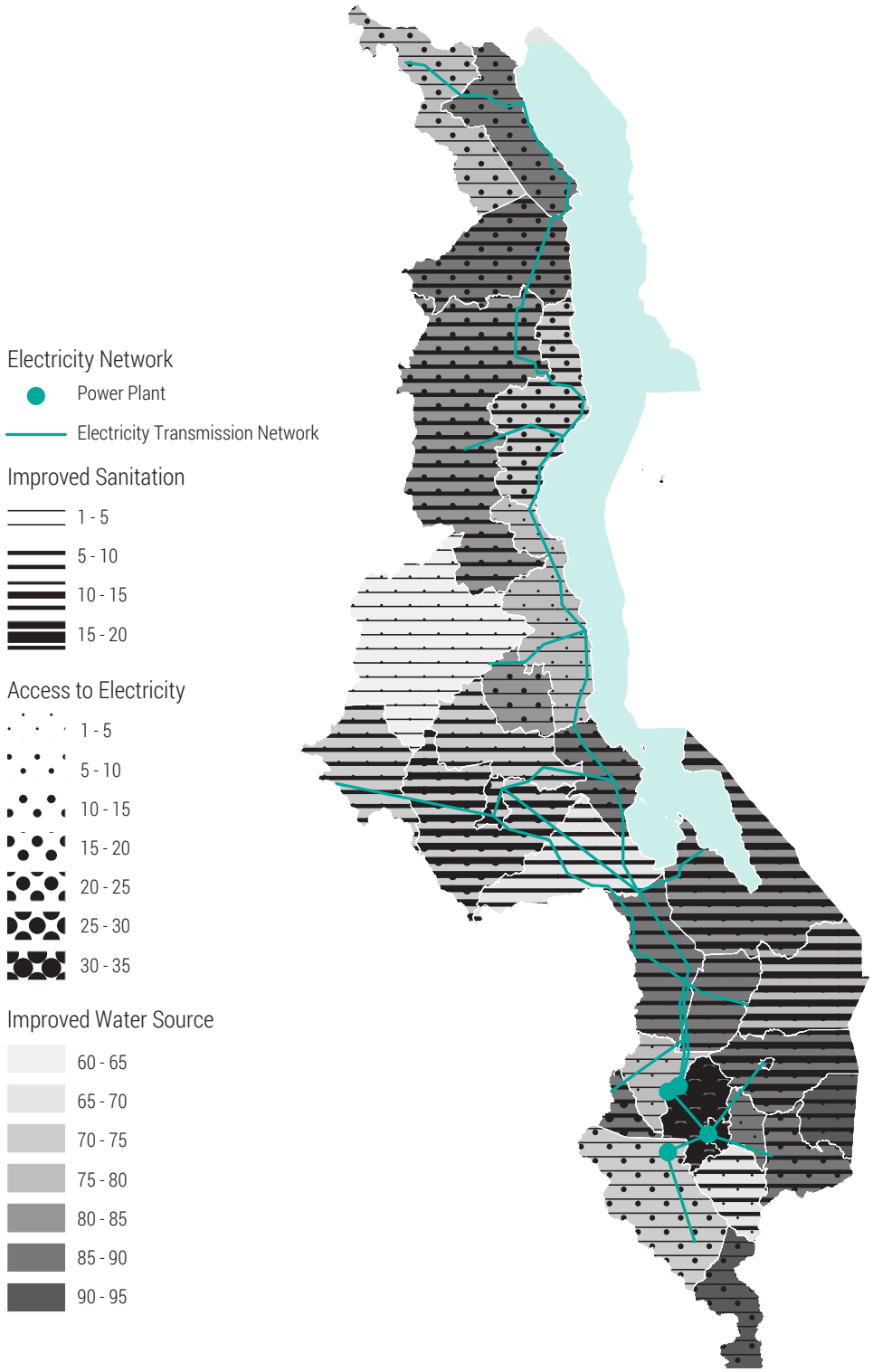


Figure 10: *Basic Services*
Percentage distribution of households and population with improved sources of household drinking water, improved sanitation (toilet/latrine facilities), and access to electricity

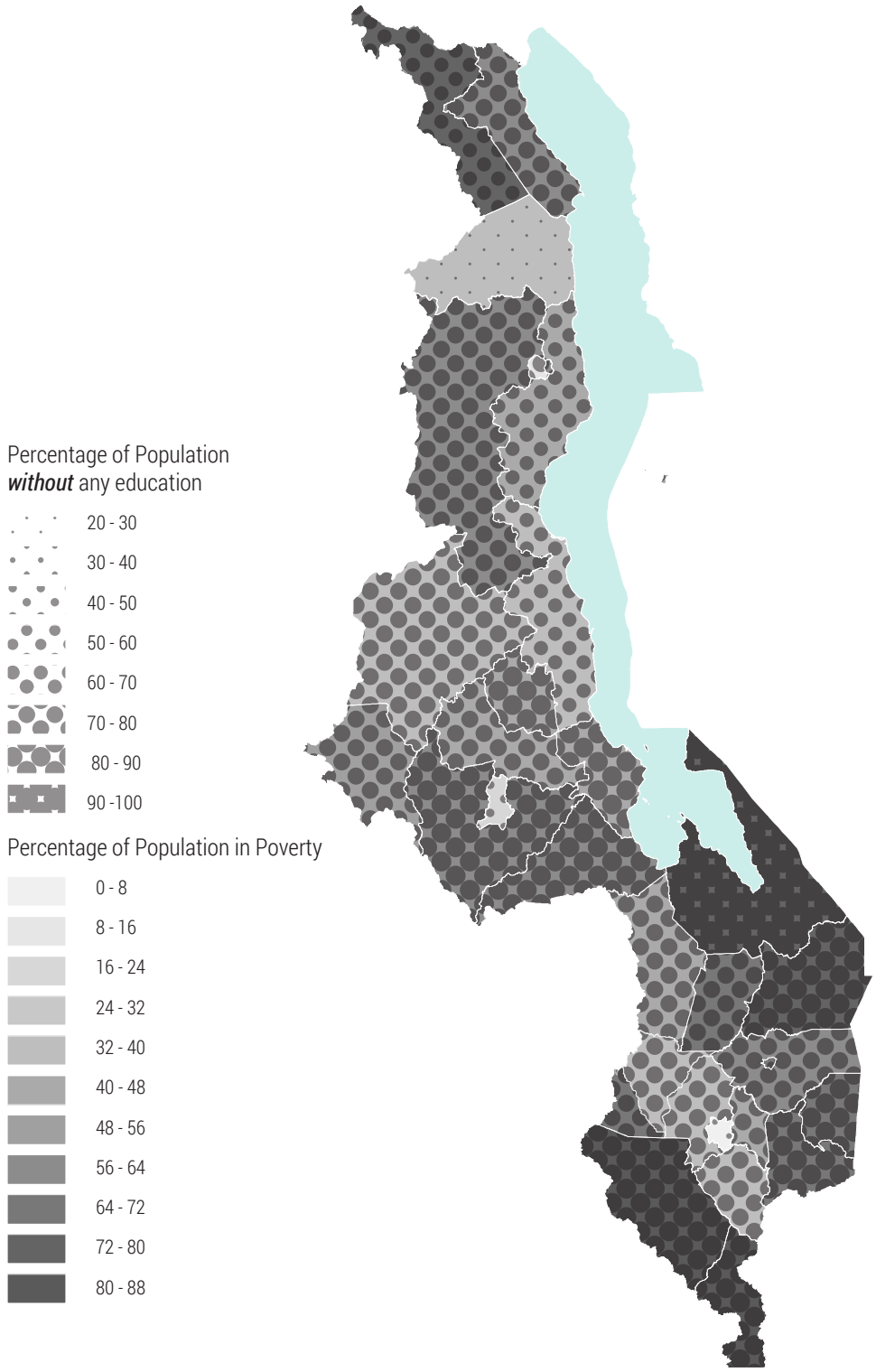


Figure 11: *Percentages of Poverty and Education in Malawi*

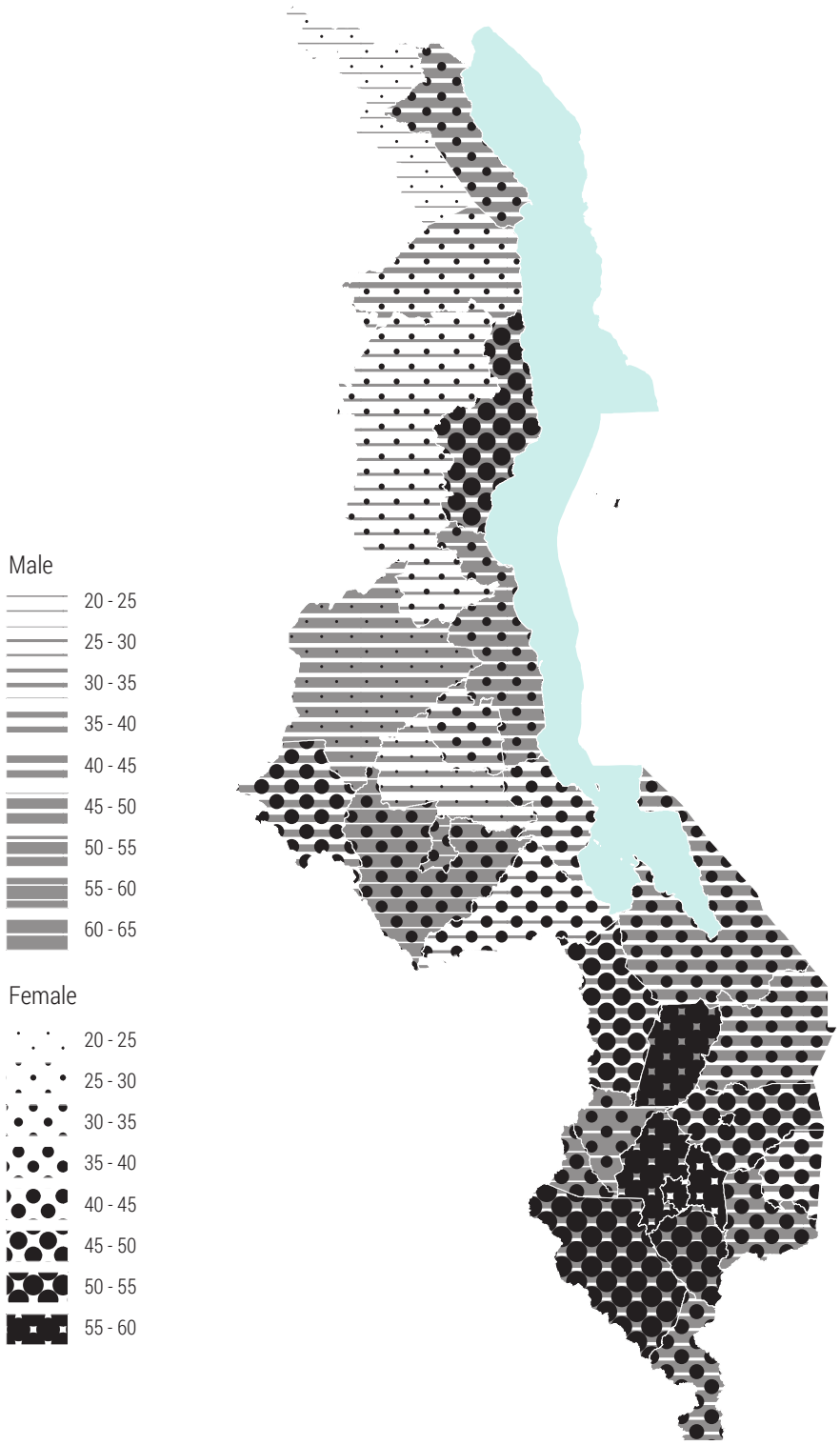


Figure 12: *HIV/AIDS Awareness*
Percentage of men and women age 15-49 with a comprehensive knowledge about AIDS, by district of residence. "Comprehensive knowledge" means knowing that consistent use of condom during sexual intercourse and having just one uninfected faithful partner can reduce the chance of getting the AIDS virus, knowing that a healthy-looking person can have the AIDS virus, and rejecting the two most common local misconceptions about AIDS transmission or prevention.

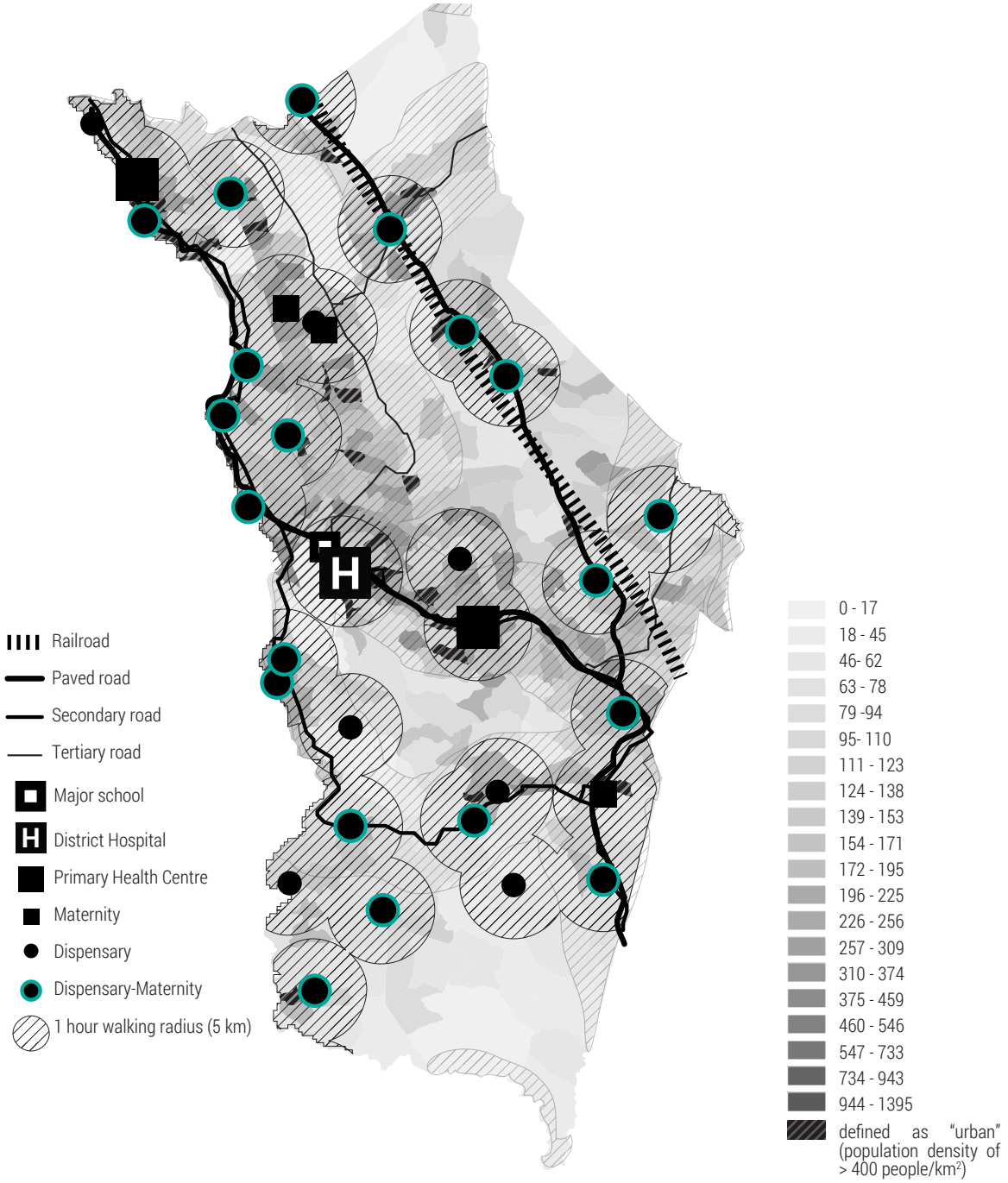


Figure 13: *Ntcheu District [served vs. underserved areas]*
This map highlights the areas of the Ntcheu district in Malawi which are outside of a 1-hour walking radius from any health facility or school, demonstrating which regions and populations are the most underserved.

Figure 14: *Aerial image of Ntcheu Boma*

HOME OF
ACTION
H

PREPARING THE MIND

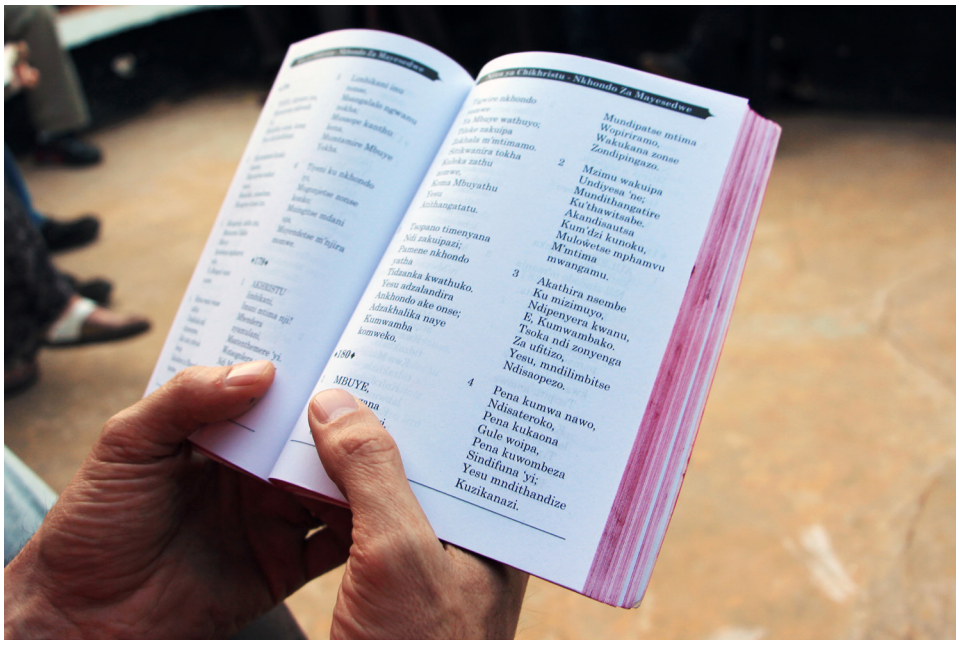
GLIMPSES OF LIFE

In my attempts to connect and to "fact-check" my research with real anecdotes, I initiate several conversations with Sarah to obtain a personal perspective that applies specifically to her region in Ntcheu District. The following series of pictures and responses from Sarah reveals excerpts of her life, adding vibrant colour to my limited understanding of Malawi.

I live and work in the central region of Malawi called Ntcheu (n-chay-oo). There are approximately one million people in this area. It is a more elevated mountainous area with many mountainside villages overlooking valleys. There are not many natural water sources – only small, ankle-deep streams – so water supply is limited. We often run out of water and have to find it elsewhere, where it is not clean. In villages closer to the tarmac road, there are boreholes, but going deeper into the bush, there may not be many. Often the boreholes also run dry in the dry season and it is hard to find water again.

I travel to various villages within the area of Bawi, the northern area of Mlangeni, and the area of Mafunda, among others. The areas of Mafunda and Salima are especially impoverished due to the location of the villages in the valley. There it is difficult to grow crops, because the valley is often flooded in between the mountains, or there are landslides during rainy season, and transportation in and out of the area is extremely difficult.

Figure 15: *Aerial image of a rural village in Ntcheu District*



One way to become engaged in the Malawian community is to join them in song. Music is engrained in their culture in a beautiful way. I remember watching children playing on the street; instead of conversation, they would be strolling along casually in song. Whenever there is a group gathered, their voices blend into a full chorus of rich harmonies, easy rhythms, and lively dance. It amazes me how naturally it comes to them, how one leads the melody and the others know exactly their parts, however improvised they may be. It is as if each child is born with a gifted ear!

It is impossible to simply watch without aching to join along. There is a songbook with lyrics, not that any Malawian needs it. For me, however, it is an indispensable tool in learning the words in an otherwise foreign territory. As Chichewa is fairly phonetic, it is relatively easy for me to follow. Despite my stumbling through the music, an instant feeling of belonging, connection, and acceptance into this inner circle overwhelms me.

Figure 16: *Chichewa songbook*

People here are eager for training, eager for free healthcare. Each woman has lost at least one child, so they understand the severity of the situation. Clinics in the villages are extremely popular. Local villagers will grab onto qualified people teaching something that affects them closely.

On the other hand, villagers are less receptive to training and learning new things about subjects that they think they already know, such as farming. Traditional farming techniques have been passed down through families for generations, so there is pride in that. They are much more likely to listen to things that they are not knowledgeable about, such as health training.

Figure 17: *Community health workshop at the Bwaila Maternity Hospital*

Every village has a chief and a witch doctor, who often work in tandem as authority figures. Some are good and well-respected chiefs; others are irresponsible, even drunkards. A head chief oversees a group of approximately ten villages. In this matriarchal society, sometimes women can hold positions of high authority. The local police are not always law-abiding, but they will usually respect the head chief and foreigners. They will turn a blind eye to certain things, especially since they are not paid much and thus unmotivated. Here, one's relationship to each other is important.

We sometimes interact with local chiefs and police, and try to maintain friendly and cooperative relations with local authorities. In fact, Nkhata's (our guard's) wife is the head chief (headwoman in the Ngoni tribe) in charge of fourteen villages! We were invited to participate in her coronation ceremony, which was quite a big deal.

Figure 18: *Coronation ceremony of Nkhata's wife, head chief of the Ngoni tribe.*
She wears a chitenje with the distinct pattern of her tribe.

The Chief of Chiefs came up from Blantyre to officiate. We were given traditional Ngoni regalia as honoured guests and sat in a VIP section right behind the big chiefs. Around 500-600 people gathered in a circle around while the Chief of Chiefs addressed the assembled tribe and dignitaries. We celebrated with friends and staff whom we have come to know: Olipa, Gloria, and Deborah, who we have watched grow from a tiny baby.

There was a lot of traditional dancing and singing. Of course we joined in. I wish you could have seen Mama dancing across the centre area as we made our way to give our gifts to the Chief. The crowd went crazy, clapping and hollering. What a lady! I did my own little jig. When I put my Ngoni headdress on, again the crowd cheered and whistled. I am not sure whether they were cheering for my dancing or my headdress.

Figure 19: *Coronation ceremony celebrations*

PREPARING THE HEART

EVOLVING INTENTIONS

My wish to travel to Malawi may have been rooted in vague, romanticized intentions. I wished to understand the contemporary condition of rural poverty. I wished to learn about a different culture; to understand how this society's spatial structure is linked to its relational structure in ways impossible to discern from the outside; to gain a sensitivity in terms of the "right" and "wrong" of architectural intervention. I wished to offer my services as an architectural designer with an open mind, without arrogant assumption that I can be of help at all. Rather than a statement of "I have come here to help," or even a presumptuous inquiry of "How can I help?", I sought to ask humbler questions, such as, "Can I be of help? If so, in what capacity? And if not, what can I learn?"

The contents of this thesis are built upon a new way of seeing, and on empathy. In the interest of understanding a place and in order to suppose new ways of building, I must leave behind much of the academic vocabulary I have inherited in my education so far. Setting aside certain ways of seeing and thinking, I must mediate between my academic perspectives grounded deeply on Eurocentric philosophies and practices and a new worldview. Assumptions and practices must be abandoned in favour of new growth, new relationships, and new possibilities. This thesis is a representation of an aspiring architect's attempt to navigate a foreign context and search for the possibility of her place within it.

What do I want to do there?
Oh, how I have struggled with this question!

Many writers and architects have questioned the role, motives, and effectiveness of architects in building in foreign and unfamiliar contexts, never mind the post-colonial scene that is Africa. Ultimately, as an architect, the goal of my research is to identify a method and role for appropriate design practice in Malawi. This study has, however, been plagued with self-doubt since the beginning. A series of questions inevitably arises: "What right do I have to intervene? What is my place?"

To propose an architectural solution is to propose an intervention into an existing situation. For the most part, past interventions by Westerners in Africa have not set a positive precedent. Warning after warning against acting with a colonialist attitude has resulted in a sort of personal paralysis. By virtue of my identity as a citizen of a wealthy Western capitalist country, my basic assumptions and motivations

for intervening in Africa are unavoidably placed into question.

However, to argue that architectural intervention by a foreign designer is a form of cultural colonization to be avoided at all costs is a condemnation that simply leads to cultural and political impasse at a time of dynamic global exchange. There are 153,000 licensed designers in the country of Italy alone; by comparison, there are approximately 35,000 designers across the entire African continent.[1] Research shows that there is only one formal architectural program in Malawi, offered by the Malawi Polytechnic, one of the constituent colleges of the University of Malawi.[2] It can be said that even native Malawians who are foreign-educated and return to their country may have difficulty avoiding the form of subtle ideological and cultural imposition that they may have gained through their experiences. As a result, any architect, no matter his background, must proceed with a heightened awareness of political, social, and historical context if his intervention is to succeed.

Working in this territory often includes tackling a myriad of seemingly unsolvable challenges, such as not knowing quite who the client is (the community? The donor? The authorities?), being unsure of what sort of project is actually needed (housing? Water and sanitation? Community infrastructure?), and how to decide the most appropriate processes for ensuring these projects actually lead to some level of effectiveness or sticking power. Without a longer-term plan, the prospects for many propositions seem very bleak.

Above all, good architecture builds up people. I wish to explore a design process in which making a good relationship is acknowledged to be an aspiration higher than, but complementary to, the ambition of erecting a structure. In this way, questions of "What right do I have to intervene" transform into questions of "Am I willing to learn what it takes to earn a person's trust? Will I do what it takes to earn that trust, even if it means changing or abandoning my original agenda?"

Prior to leaving Cambridge for Malawi, I had spent eight months in hopeful anticipation that one of my messages to the community would be met with a response. I weaved in and out of touch with different community members, and for some time it seemed like living in Malawi while working on my thesis was an unrealistic aspiration. I was in academic limbo, refusing to design solutions for and make assumptions about people I had never met and a place I had never been.

Eventually, I am invited to Malawi to live with Sarah among the rural villages of the Ntcheu district. I am not an architect arriving in Africa to market my knowledge, nor an educator, nor an expert, nor an academic researcher. I am a girl, joining daily life and hoping to establish my own connection to this place.

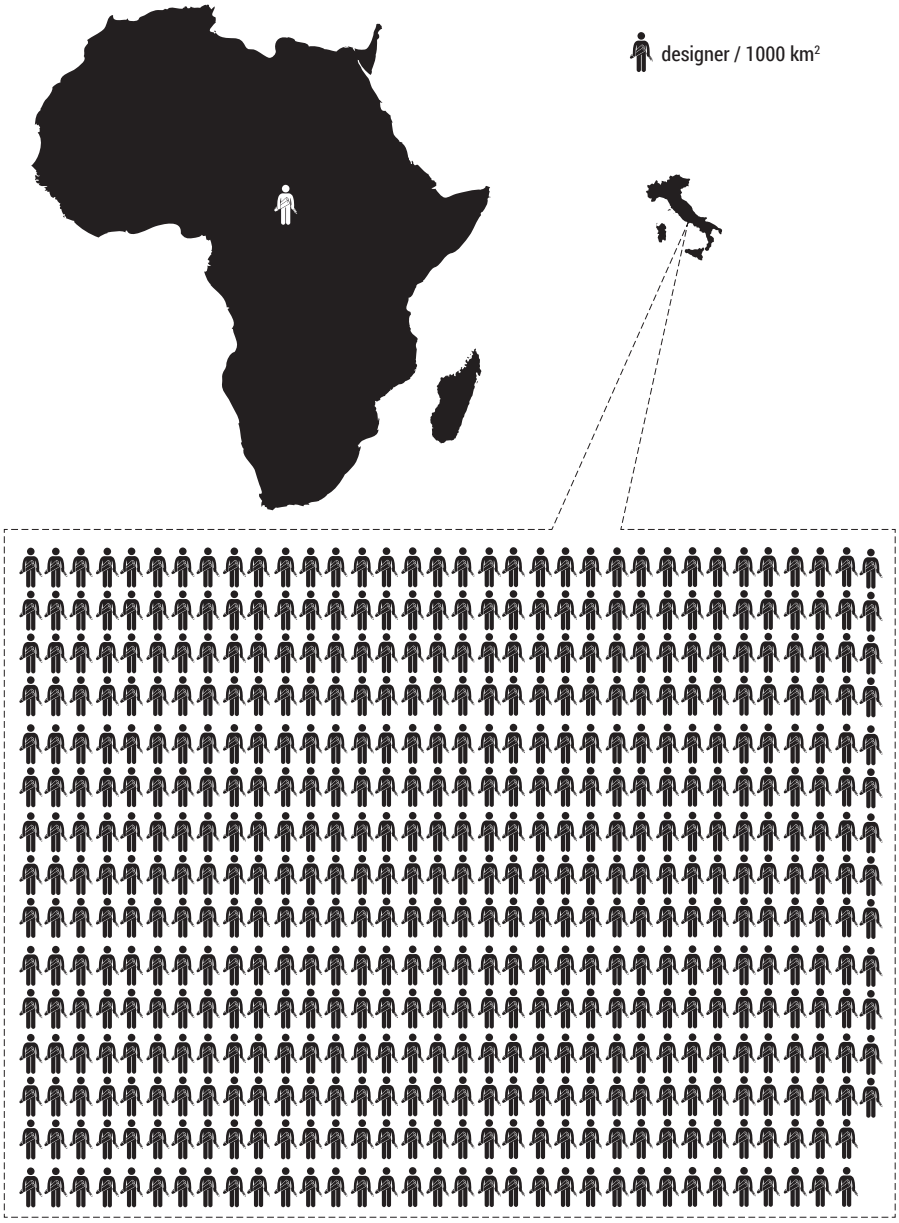


Figure 20: *Comparison of the number of designers per area in Africa vs. Italy*

PREPARING THE HEART

MUTU WOFEWA *EMPTY YOUR BRAIN*

After having been in Malawi for almost three months, there is a new team of workers arriving to spend three weeks with us in a few days. As a fellow visitor who has preceded them, I am put in charge of preparing an orientation manual and presentation to give them on their first day in the country. Topics include typical greetings, customary gestures, local food, daily routines to be expected, nuances of proper etiquette among local people, and the like. Standing before this group of fresh-faced youth at Koko Bean Café in the Lilongwe Wildlife Centre where we have gathered, Sarah, Mtinga, and I each take turns to deliver this presentation. When it is Mtinga's turn, I lean in and listen closely, eagerly anticipating what wise and genuine words this Malawian has to offer visitors to his country. As a translator, Mtinga has been exposed to far more *azungu* (people of "white skin") than most Malawians and seen many of them come and go. Of all people, I am certain that he is the most experienced and qualified one to speak on this topic.

"The most important thing," Mtinga declares passionately, "is to empty your brain. You are in Malawi now, so you must empty your brain. Maybe you already have ideas, but you must leave them. You will see many things here, and learn many things. It will be no good if you do not empty your brain."

In Chichewa, there is an expression called *mutu wofewa*, which literally means to have a "soft mind." I have heard it used to describe one whose mind is "soft" because he can speak a little of the language, unlike most foreigners who cannot speak Chichewa at all. Instead, they have *mutu wouma*, or "hard, dried out" minds. This concept remains with me to this day. What does it mean to have a soft mind?

A few weeks ago, an elderly American man working for a non-governmental organization saw me struggling my way through a conversation in Chichewa. Although I butcher ninety-five percent of my attempted phrases, this man was nevertheless impressed, exclaiming, "See, she's talented. Me, I'm too old for that. I'm not even going to try."

That's when I understood. Here was a mind that had lost its "softness;" it had trouble exploring new languages and ideas, and no longer had the energy to try. I cannot claim to speak Chichewa, but I realized that what I do know has very little to do with talent. Having a soft mind does not necessarily mean being clever. I have

Figure 21: *Mtinga sharing his wisdom atop a hill in his home village of Chikuli.*

learned what little I know because I truly want to meet people, to understand their ideas, to share perspectives, and to experience a new way of interpreting the world.

It is natural for minds to become more rigid as they age, as the saying of old dogs and new tricks goes. Years of experiences and ideas build up mental models of the world that only fortify with time. These structures can think through familiar thought patterns with amazing swiftness, but often struggle to see things in a new light. However, in this expanded realm of architecture, new ways of thinking are exactly what is needed. More and more, I realize how essential it is for me as an aspiring architect to cultivate a "soft" mind. I continually have to check assumptions, seek new perspectives, recalibrate expectations, and be able to rebuild mental models as my learning grows. Otherwise, my thinking risks being trapped within the same rigidity that makes one's efforts ineffective. Perhaps learning a language helps the mind to soften, but there is much more that is involved and required. The factors sustaining many of our current global crises including poverty and climate change have existed for a long time, and it is soft minds, not rigid ones, that are needed to innovate outside of conventional approaches.

PREPARING THE HEART

UNDERSTANDING PERMANENCE AND PROGRESS

Learning how to maintain *mutu wofewa* is an ongoing struggle. An architect's mind is a byproduct of his personal experiences combined with his professional training. In order to avoid imposing inappropriate solutions, one must investigate the assumptions, values and practices that have been embedded within his or her cultural and educational upbringing.

Every architect works upon assumptions. As a young graduate fresh out of architecture school, one's assumptions may be limited to those given within typical design studio briefs. As one begins to navigate the professional world and develops a specific skill set based on a growing body of experience, his assumptions become more refined and more knowledgeable. A clearer sense of budget, a greater wisdom in the building construction process, a familiarity with material availability and feasibility, and a better understanding of how to work with the other players involved in a project are all factors that direct one's everyday design decisions. However, this base of assumptions remains highly contextual and specific to a particular way of thinking, a particular location, and a particular culture.

For instance, assumptions may lie in the ideas of progress and permanence. In *The Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi argues that architecture "is deeply rooted in the formation of civilization and is a permanent, universal, and necessary artifact."[3] He views architecture as an act of institutionalization, fixing ideas about governance, identity, and lifestyle in time and place in a public realm, where those ideas can become part of a collective experience of history, place, and identity. However, Rossi's understanding of cities and artifacts as works of art that both condition and are conditioned by their inhabitants, and of architectural artifacts as common points of reference that link a city with its past, is rooted in a Western way of thinking based on several fundamental concepts that are not necessarily universal.

One of the most primary assumptions is the idea of progress as an ultimate goal. Inextricably linked with this Western value of progress is the idea of permanence, defined as things, ideas, and human accomplishments that last. At first glance, progress and permanence may seem to be paradoxical values, as the notion of progress implies moving forward and constant change. Yet progress does not mean only change, but rather change advancing in a certain direction that a person or group of persons determines to be 'good.' It is only when ideas, institutions, concepts, and

the accomplishments of individuals are partially immortalized first and lent a degree of permanence that the idea of progress implying critical reevaluation, growth, or evolution of ideas, institutions, and concepts can emerge.[4]

These concepts of progress and permanence as applied to whole societies emerged in the West largely as a consequence of the study of national histories, the science of chronology, and heavy use of the written word. The study of history reveals how people, conditions, and ideas have changed over time, while chronology allows systematic comparison of events according to a scale of reference. Such developments are directly dependent on writing a technology that enables people to institutionalize facts, interpretations, concepts, and events for later study.[5]

Incidentally, architecture was also essential to the development of the Western idea of progress. When Aldo Rossi wrote in *The Architecture of the City* that "the city is the locus of the collective memory," he referred to the city as a collection of relatively permanent artifacts and as an artifact itself, changing over time, but also retaining an awareness of its past through monuments that make the past present.[6] Architecture in the West has always had a tendency to reflect, and over time, to commemorate the technologies and beliefs of a particular time and/or place. While most of the written words of antiquity were lost to Europe during the Dark Ages, stone architecture persisted as a reliable record of technological and social change.

It is important to recognize these Western biases so deeply rooted in our cultural upbringing. This becomes especially critical whenever a visiting or foreign architect encounters a cultural framework beyond his own. For example, one cannot simply apply these concepts of architecture and urbanism to an African context. In the West, we often attempt to transplant solutions to our own problems on developing countries without taking into account the history, context, and conditions that led the evolution of the concepts that support those solutions.[7] The fundamental concepts of progress and permanence to which the profession and art of architecture as understood in the West is intimately connected lack a strong cultural basis in much of Africa, and yet are simply taken for granted by most Westerners involved in aid and design work. It is perhaps this imposition of Western values within an African context that has historically marked foreign involvement, including architectural intervention by architects, as so problematic.

The colonization of Africa by Europeans alienated Africans from their land through the introduction of the concept of private property, and led to the concentration of colonial power in centralized settlements.[8] Still visible across the African continent, clock towers were among the first buildings to be erected in these settlements by Europeans perhaps as a declaration that time was to be experienced in a European, non-African manner.[9] In pre-colonial Malawi, people were generally

isolated in small tribal groups. In the context of pre-modern African building culture, one must realize that most buildings were never intended to last indefinitely. The *cour* (courtyard) as the hearth of the family could last for many generations, but the *cases* (living quarters) intended for individuals were only meant to serve for a certain stage of life or for one generation.[10] Often, family structures and the addition of children and in-laws required a great deal of adaptability in house construction. Most people lived in structures made of mud walls reinforced with sticks and sloping thatch or flat mud roofs. In tune with annual seasonal cycles, the roofs required repair or even full replacement after every rainy season.[11] The walls were in constant need of attention as the rain and the wind would cause them to slowly disintegrate, while termites and ants would eat away the sticks as soon as they became exposed. If the soil used for farming was not particularly good, nutrient depletion gradually required whole villages to sometimes migrate to clear new land. Buildings were optimally designed and built to serve this conscious temporality.[12] The traditional African dwelling is an example of extreme sustainability and cradle-to-cradle design. With a less fixed relationship to place, there was no need for a great deal of concern over architectural theory, specialization, or permanence.

How, then, does one act within a social context where there is no tradition of permanent architecture with an overarching purpose of communicating a record of events? One cannot, as the colonialists did, paternalistically dismiss such societies as inferior, primitive, or in need of development and progress. While more permanent forms of architecture have now been introduced in Malawi, they have not been fully reinterpreted for their new context. The same is true for most other imported Western technologies, infrastructures, and concepts, largely because the problems with working within a foreign conceptual framework have not been fully acknowledged by those who attempt to impose it. There is little doubt that the quality of life in terms of health, life expectancy, education, and opportunity for most Africans could, under the right circumstances, be greatly improved by technologies and infrastructures that were developed within a progressive mindset. However, the reality is that progress remains a very abstract concept to most Africans, undermined by more concrete things like the need for food and work. In general, little public concern is given to the long-term maintenance of material things. During a trip to the nearest city of Blantyre, one shopkeeper proudly bragged to me that his shoes, made of better quality than any competing store, are "guaranteed to last five months!!!" Subsistence lifestyles make it near impossible to choose the more expensive yet longer-lasting option over that which is cheaper and disposable. Furthermore, the idea of collective progress has developed a loss of credibility due to its links to Western colonialism, exploitation, conquest, and environmental destruction. As a result, an anti-institutional and deliberately temporary and unengaged stance is, for some Africans, an act of critical defiance.[13]

An interesting challenge for architecture and design thus presents itself. Architecture as an art and a profession requires a belief in the importance of technique and the ability of buildings to communicate as well as to influence ideas. Architects find value in their work because of a belief in the significance and meaning of what they are creating; a sense of accomplishment is achieved through creating a wonderful object or place whose influence extends to those beyond its direct audience and outlives its creator. Architects in the West have also been educated and trained to produce buildings that endure due to a sense of sustainability, durability, and resilience. The question becomes, to what extent is this emphasis on history, preservation, and progress an externally imposed ethic?

Instead, it may be helpful to understand that Malawian society is primarily rural, rooted in small subsistence farming communities and cultural groups.[14] Over eighty-four percent of Malawians remain in these close communities to which they hold deep ancestral ties and where traditional beliefs and social structures remain largely intact. Developed as a method of survival, their ethical code is determined not by municipal or federal governments, but by sets of loyalties and allegiances based on village social structures.[15] As the government historically could not always be entirely depended upon for justice, law, and order, and new economic opportunities cannot keep up with the population, one's network of connections is the key to any level of success. Here, whom a person knows is of utmost importance, and loyalty to one's family, ancestral village, or tribal group is seen as one's only means of advancement as well as one's most dependable social infrastructure. It is a world where there is not enough for everyone; but yet, somehow, the old, the young, the sick and the unfortunate are still cared for.

The image of African pre-modern building culture evolved in the 1960s, from the denigrating image of the "mud hut" to "architecture without architects."[16] Marking the formalization of the informal tradition of local building, the work of Bernard Rudofsky elevated traditional African building to the status of architecture and master bricklayers into architects.[17] In this sense, since each and every family probably has a master bricklayer, the area most likely possesses the greatest density of architects in the world.[18] In fact, the need to help one another build their own home solidifies social relationships, as host families offer food to neighbours in exchange for labour in a mutually recurring cycle. Diébédo Francis Kéré, an architect from Burkina Faso, explains:

> In traditional Africa, architecture is a social fact. Whoever needs to build a house first petitions the village which, generally, grants permission to build on a specific plot of land. First, it is important to underline that there is no need to pay for land in order to be able to live in the village and build a house surrounded by a small garden for growing food. This is considered a pure necessity. Second, if you do build a house, you can't do it alone. It's a

> job that involves the village community: everyone participates. Usually we use clay: the women take care of the water, the men mix it with clay and children help in their own way. Everyone takes part in the construction work. Those who can build straight walls become bricklayers and the others help as they can. Those who are unable build sit in to give advice. The elders warn: "Think of rain ....pay attention to the wind....orient it this way or that other."[19]

This emphasis on relationships impacts the process and goals of design. In terms of foreign interaction and intervention, the localized approach of many NGOs means that they are often able to deliver services effectively precisely because of their ability to make use of relational networks.[20]

In Malawi, it is not just the symbolic content or the construction technology that requires cultural relevance, but also the fundamental interpretation of architectural meaning and value that informs the design process. Just as the British Empire eventually lost the fight against the subtle resistance of the people of Malawi, so too will architecture that consciously or unconsciously attempts to transform Malawian society through its own form of arrogant structural and aesthetic imposition.

The struggle for architects in Malawi is how to negotiate the dual need for permanence for the sake of generating a stable physical, economic, and sociopolitical environment, as well as the need to make their work relevant to an audience with a very different worldview. This negotiation is essential if architecture is to achieve local relevance. It seems that the key to relevant architecture lies in the principles of improvisation, flexibility, and relational identity, which help to continue Malawi's complex and rich cultural diversity.

PREPARING THE SOUL

SERVICE AS THE SOUL OF ARCHITECTURE

> The craft of questions, the craft of stories, the craft of the hands all these are the making of something, and that something is soul.[1]
>
> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run With The Wolves*

What is the *soul* of architecture? The above quotation by Clarissa Pinkola Estes serves as the basis for an investigation of this question. Soul is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a person's moral or emotional nature or sense of identity;" "emotion or intellectual energy or intensity, especially as revealed in a work of art;" "the essence or embodiment of a specified quality."[2] Using this description, I identify the concept of service as the soul of architecture. It can be argued that the act of serving is the source of architecture's emotion and intellectual energy, its moral nature, and the essence and embodiment of its highest calling. However, this defining element of service has not been thoroughly explored in contemporary writings on the profession, nor is it particularly obvious when observing the behaviour of many architects. It is worthwhile, therefore, to examine the nature of service in architecture why it is central, what it means, and how to exemplify it.

Architecture, to me, begins and ends as an act of service. Whether designing a royal palace in Qatar or a house for a low-income family, architecture is an expression of needs and desires and forces that are outside oneself. Many architects believe that architecture is simply about design through form-making. Of course, in its built manifestation, architecture inherently showcases form. However, that was never meant to be the main point. What is architecture if not a medium for conveying and improving social conditions? Design through form-making is merely the means of embedding these social effects into the built environment As a profession, architecture is rooted in prosocial behaviour.

In *The Design Way*, Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman describe that this drive of service is what differentiates design from other fields of work:

> Design is, by definition, a service relationship. All design activities are animated through dynamic relationships between those being served clients, surrogate clients (those who act on behalf of clients), customers and consumers or end users and those in service, including the designers. Design ideally is about service on behalf of the other not merely about changing someone's behaviour for their own good or convincing them to buy products and services.[3]

The presence of a service relationship in design creates a clear distinction between the tradition of design and the traditions of science or art. Science and art are fundamentally self-serving cultures of inquiry and action the former being motivated by the scientist's own curiosity and passion for objective knowledge, and the latter being motivated by the artist's need for self-expression of his feelings, understanding, and critique of the world.[4] Thus the scientist's contribution to society is subsequent knowledge that may coincidentally be of use at some point in human affairs, while the artist's insight is shared with others who make what they will of these personal glimpses into the human condition. Alternatively, designers, including architects, are not self-serving but other-serving.[5]

While architecture is often referred to as an applied science or an applied art a midpoint between the two opposites it is important to instead treat architecture as a profession in its own right based in the design tradition. To view the profession in this light is significant to its praxis, since every profession is historically supported by different educational philosophies derived from distinct values and structure.[6] For example, scientific pedagogy emphasizes learning how to determine the true nature of the material world through controlled input from sensory data to produce objective, factual knowledge that is confirmable and replicable.[7] In contrast, art education teaches how to give self-expression to emotions and feelings in the attempt to produce subjective and personalized knowledge.[8] Design, then, boasts of its own intellectual tradition and unique approach to education which strives to gain both objective and subjective understanding on behalf of another's interests. Placing priority on the idea of service, design pedagogy integrates reflective thought and practical action in a way that unifies the knowledge of "why" with the knowledge of "how."[9] Service is central to design because it is the distinguishing factor of the entire industry.

DEFINING SERVICE

Whether concrete or conceptual, architecture derives its value and significance from this intentional service relationship, which gives meaning to individual and collective lives. Yet the idea of service in architecture holds a distinct application that is often misunderstood and misapplied. Service here is best described as "a complex and systemic relationship with a particular focus on responsibility, accountability, and intention."[10]

Firstly, despite its etymological roots from the Latin *servire* and Etruscan *servus*, meaning "to be a slave," I would argue that acting in service, or *to serve*, does not necessarily mean being subservient.[11] By the late 12th century, the term had developed into the Old French *servir*, meaning "to minister, give aid, to do duty toward, show devotion to; offer, provide with."[12] However, the architectural service relationship extends beyond acting as a mere facilitator on behalf of someone else's needs. Service is not about helping people create what they already know they want. Describing the purpose of engaging the client's participation in the design process, Alejandro Aravena explains:

> You're not asking people for the answers. What we're trying to do is to identify what is the problem. What we're trying to do by asking people to participate is envision what is the question, not what is the answer. There's nothing worse than answering the wrong questions well.[13]

True success as an architect occurs when that which emerges from the design process meets and exceeds the client's original expression of what they (usually only dimly) perceived as desirable in the beginning, known as the client's *desiderata*.[14] Since clients may not fully know what is concretely desired in the beginning, the architect must help bring to the surface a clearer articulation of a client's desiderata.[15] The architect's role is to deliver that desiderata, which was not fully imagined from the beginning by either client or architect, and to provide end results that are expected yet unexpected. Those who are being served should be presented with an outcome that aligns with what is desired, but also adds the surprise of a new, unanticipated benefit that is appropriate and transcends original expectations.[16] A design is considered successful when the expected-unexpected outcomes serve the right people for the right purpose at the right time in the right place.

Secondly, it is important to understand that service is not synonymous with servitude. Instead, service treats the other as an equal – not in terms of being similar or equivalent, but equal as in equitable partnerships.[17] On this note, service is also

distinct from helping, which creates a unilateral relationship whereby all power and resources reside with the helper, leaving those receiving help in a position of indebtedness:

> Serving is different from helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals…Service is a relationship between equals…Helping incurs debt. When you help someone, they owe you one. But serving, like healing, is mutual…I am as served as the person I am serving.[18]

In Western culture, helping relationships are extremely prevalent, particularly among non-profit or governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which spend millions of dollars on behalf of the helpless and vulnerable. In some cases, this may be necessary when there seem to be no good alternatives or sufficient humanitarian concern to justify an urgent, unilateral intervention into the lives of others. However, helping relationships often exemplified in development work tend to possess little credibility due to their historical and social associations with the negative narratives of Western colonialism, exploitation, conquest, and environmental destruction. It is clear that these quick-fix, "doing good" approaches often lead to the formation of habitually unequal relationships and tend to prevent healthier service relationships from forming.[19] Those with the power and resources often treat people who are culturally, socially, or economically different as simply needy, weaker, or helpless. The danger in a helping attitude is that one may take away from people more than he could ever give them by diminishing their self-esteem and their sense of worth and capacity. As a result, often the providers perhaps unconsciously use the helpless and powerless to build a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in their own lives. The helpless are there to be taken care of in order to reinforce the provider's status in terms of power or success.[20]

Related yet separate to the idea of helping is that of fixing, defined by Rachel Naomi Remen as "a form of judgment…an inequality of expertise."[21] If a helping relationship is characterized by the "strong" helping the "weak," a fixing relationship is characterized by the "master/expert" solving the problems of the "backward." In both cases, the mindset and outcome are flawed and unsustainable because the goal of capacity development is lacking:

> We should ask ourselves why our society equates knowledge transfer with the transfer of technology…These two things are not the same: while one aims at capacity building, helping the partner to develop a set of skills, and combining it with the capacity to think and act critically, the other aims at setting the partner in front of a solution that just has to be applied.[22]

Anthropologist Arturo Escobar argues that as a set of ideas and practices, "development" has historically functioned over the 20th century as a mechanism for the colonial and neo-colonial domination of the South by the North.[23] It has often been argued that the term "development" and the idea of "fixing" are inherently judgmental, for they involve a standard against which things are compared. While "they" in the South are undeveloped, or in the process of being developed, it is implied that "we" in the North have already reached that coveted state.

Instead, a correctly established service relationship involves everyone at the same pace, the architect "co-moving" with the client. An architect must be in a balanced relationship of power and influence with the client. One important aspect of the architect's role is to act as an intermediary between top-down developers and voiceless communities. At its root, then, design is a form of democracy "the democracy of self-determination through interrelationships of service that embraces the growing diversity and complexity of human interests in the contemporary world."[24]

DELIVERING SERVICE

To improve and succeed as an architect, therefore, is to discover how to develop and deliver this act of service. Returning to the quotation by Estes provides a guide to accomplishing this pursuit. One can develop soul and by extension, service by participating in the craft of questions, the craft of stories, and the craft of the hands. The notion of these crafts can be expanded to interpret the craft of questions as a quest to cultivate empathy and compassion; the craft of stories as a quest to gather knowledge; and the craft of hands as a quest to gain first-hand practice. Together, these three components ensure that an appropriate design situation will emerge where connections are formed, relationships are built, and design goals achieved by focusing on desires and open communication.

The first of the three crafts that of questions, or the development of empathy and compassion through an inquisitive understanding of the other's situation is critical to the ability to serve one another. A symbiotic service relationship is only possible if there is an exchange of empathy. The terms *empathy* and *compassion* are often used fairly synonymously, but new evidence suggests that understanding how empathy and compassion are different is essential to understanding resilience in the face of difficulties.[25] Empathy, a core socio-emotional skill, involves the vicarious experience or "mirroring" of another's feelings. Those lacking cognitive empathy struggle with *understanding* what others are thinking or feeling, while those lacking affective empathy have trouble *feeling* for others.[26] Empathy is the ability to "be" as the other while remaining a whole self, to stand in someone else's place while simultaneously standing on your own. It is important to foster empathy on both an individual and societal level. During the process of serving, empathy allows a

clearer understanding of a client's desiderata in order to direct alignment in a design situation.[27]

On the other hand, compassion involves concern or caring in response to another's suffering and a motivation to act on their behalf.[28] Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas define compassion as "the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help."[29] As such, it has been conceptualized as a motivation, as well as a state and a trait. Compassion triggers positive affect in the face of difficulty, an emotion that is not *schadenfreude* but rather affiliation feelings that make us feel closer to others and motivated to care for them.[30] An architect acts on a client's behalf by drawing out his or her desires using the principles of empathy and compassion. The architect tries to discern the underlying intentions of the client's vaguely-expressed desiderata which, most often, the client does not yet even fully recognize himself.[31] To serve means to build on these delicate findings of direction and purpose, and to concretely conceptualize them in such a way that they surpass the client's own understandings and imagination, while fully representing his or her authentic self-interests.

It is equally essential to develop the craft of stories, or the process of gathering further knowledge of the situation, context, and various perspectives through effective communication between an architect and his or her client. Design communication involves a heightened and refined ability to listen to things both said and unsaid. It is about helping people express what they believe will help them live fuller lives. A good architect does not spend time "selling" in a traditional marketing sense and convincing clients of needs or desires that they have not intended.[32] Instead, it is a client's own desiderata that should trigger and aim the process, rather than someone else's limited understanding of what is best for them. The client is a full member of the design team, the storyteller whose intel is imperative. The architect's role is to exercise James Hillman's concept of *notitia*, the "capacity to form true notions of things from attentive noticing."[33] Notitia is an act of complete and uncompromising attention, one that senses every nuance and brings into focus details and patterns of connection that elude more passive encounters. One who practices notitia is aware and open to all input rather than selective of predefined input as exemplified by routine.[34]

Lastly, it is impossible to serve without first-hand experience in projects involving fully immersed engagement within the community. This is the craft of the hands. To be in service is to be proactive. This means the architect cannot wait around for things to just fall into place. Samuel Mockbee echoes this mandate of actively leading and initiating:

> Architects are by nature and pursuit, leaders and teachers. If architecture is going to inspire community, or stimulate the

> status quo in making responsible environmental and social structural changes now and in the future, it will take what I call the 'subversive leadership' of academicians and practitioners to remind the student of architecture that theory and practice are not only interwoven with one's culture but with the responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency, and challenging the power of the status quo.[35]

Serving begins with simply becoming involved not necessarily as a master or an expert, but as an observer, a fellow citizen, and a member of a wider community. When the architect approaches cultures and worldviews he has not been conditioned to understand, he must go beyond pure research, which implies a certain distance and separation, and surrender to experience:

> Fixing and helping create a distance between people, an experience of difference. We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch.[36]

Removing this distance and building connection requires physically immersing oneself in the environment of the served and engaging with them in order to develop an authentic presence and position. The ability to serve is dependent on experiential learning. There is much that can only be learned through practice, through making in-situ design judgments, and through reflection on authentic life experiences:

> Architecture won't begin to alleviate all of these social woes. But what is necessary is a willingness to seek solutions to poverty in its own context, not outside it. What is required is the replacement of abstract opinions with knowledge based on real human contact and personal realization applied to the work and place…What is important is using one's talent, intellect and energy in order to gain an appreciation and affection for people and place.[37]

In conclusion, this statement by Rachel Naomi Remen perfectly encapsulates the nature of service as the soul of architecture:

> Helping, fixing and serving represent three different ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work of the soul.[38]

One can help and fix without serving. And one can serve without fixing or helping. These may look similar from a distance, but the inner experience is vastly different,

as is the outcome. Service is the soul of architecture, the defining characteristic and driving force of this profession. It is the source of architecture's energy and the essence of its greatest purpose. This is achieved by a three-fold combination of compassion, knowledge, and practice of empathizing, listening, and conspiring (literally, "breathing together").

Why is it important to identify the soul of architecture at all? In the words of John Ruskin, "The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get from it, but what they become by it."[39] Through practicing the craft of questions, the craft of stories, and the craft of the hands, one can develop insight into new possibilities of practice and the role of architecture. It is through the act of serving that the architect experiences ultimate strength, energy, fulfillment, joy, and success.

Figure 22: *Debby and Gloria washing laundry together. Clothes are scrubbed on the concrete block, then hung to dry in the backyard.*

Figure 23: *The youth of the villages of Mlangeni and Kanyimbo 1 and I leading a youth conference together*

the journey begins...

Figure 24: *(previous page) Travelling by foot along the M1 Highway to Kanyimbo village*
Figure 25: *Abusa Phiri searching for property on sale*

June 13, 2016

I have been here for almost a month now and have finally settled comfortably into a daily routine. Among other things, my duties include cooking lunch and dinner for the entire household two days a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays), and serving the guards and local workers tea and breakfast every morning during their 10 AM break. Tea, a ubiquitous drink across most of the world, serves as an important aspect of hospitality. Whenever I visit another Malawian's home, I am always offered a cup of tea. Each time we organize large events or teaching sessions for the local people which may consist of hundreds of people, we must budget time and resources to serve every participant a cup of tea, brewed in bulk and served from large laundry-sized plastic pails. I have been taught the "correct" way to make tea for a Malawian: tea is enjoyed extremely weak and extremely sweet. After pouring boiling water into a cup, I dip a Rab's tea bag into the cup and swish it around for no longer than six seconds before quickly taking it out. Cremera (cream powder) is added to turn the dark-coloured water into a whiter mixture, then a minimum of three heaping spoonfuls of sugar is stirred. While I struggle to politely sip the tea given to me as the amount of sugar in one cup renders it excessively sweet, my Malawian friends gulp this tea as if it were water, explaining that they rely on this to provide them with energy when working in the fields and that my sugar intake is equally high considering the amount of "cakes and cookies" prevalent in my culture yet absent in theirs. These mundane aspects of my day are all part and parcel of living here longer-term, and contributing to these daily chores makes me feel like I truly belong to this household, however temporary it may be.

Today, after serving tea, I retreat to my room to help prepare for Sarah's classes scheduled for a few hours later. However, shortly after, Papa summons me. He explains, "We have been attempting to begin a new project here which consists of a new school building with offices and library, and eventually an adjacent health clinic and orphan's care centre. We have been looking for land to purchase, but up to this point have not been able to find anyone willing to sell to us."

Along with Papa, I learn that this project is initiated and spearheaded by Abusa Phiri, a local Malawian with a business background who became a pastor of one of the town's churches, Ntcheu Baptist Church. He is an extremely well-respected man by the villagers, owning property in Ntcheu Boma (the town centre) from which he runs a restaurant, inn, and charitable business selling infant's milk for orphans. Growing up in the same rural poverty as all the other villagers, he currently sits as head and member of various community committees and boards, using his authority and leadership skills to compassionately and humbly serve his community's well-being. In this close-knit society, his network of relatives and relationships is extremely vast; families across the entire district know his name, and as a pastor, he does not hesitate to spend significant time and resources visiting and assisting struggling families, caring for the sick, and meeting with others. This powerful combination of compassion, business savvy, and local knowledge converge into the

best possible man for undertaking and overseeing this ambitious project.

In rural Malawi, land is not often sold and bought. It is simply passed down. Land ownership is based on family inheritance. In order for family-owned land to be sold, it must first be approved by the village chief and the landowner's entire family, as each family member is expected to receive some portion of the profit. In the case of larger building works, the project leader must simply canvas the community for anybody willing to sell a portion of their land. And so this was the case for this new project. However, this is not easily done by a mzungu. There is no widely read newspaper, no access to mass communication except word of mouth. Villagers are wary of making business transactions with foreigners, and unfortunately, rightly so. But with his connections and upright reputation, it is a different story altogether with Abusa Phiri. Fueled by excitement and momentum, he canvases the area and throws himself heartily into the property search.

A few weeks ago, Abusa Phiri had found a man who was willing to sell his allotment of his family's land, but this had been thwarted by family conflict, because the man's younger brother wanted to save this land for his two children to eventually farm instead. And so the property search continued.

However, today Abusa Phiri receives news that the landowner's siblings have reconsidered and are now willing to sell a portion of their family property for the school and clinic. A few days from now, Papa and Abusa Phiri have planned a site visit to meet with the landowner and inspect the property for sale. Aware of my architectural background, Papa asks if I would be interested in accompanying them to help them survey the property and determine whether its size will be sufficient for the plans and program they have in mind.

I can barely contain my excitement. I had intentionally arrived in Malawi with no expectations, no pre-determined plans, or imposed projects. Yet lo and behold, an opportunity has presented itself! A real project, established at the grassroots level, as it should be. Perhaps I will be able to explore the potential role of an architect among life here, after all.

Figure 26: *Landowner Jeremiah showing his property*

June 15, 2016

The day begins as usual at 5:30 AM with a normal (read: substantial) amount of hustle and bustle around the house. By the time I step outside of my room, the bubbly laughs of Gloria and Olipa, our house staff, fill the air with energy; Mtinga has arrived to work on translating resources; Daniel and another builder are busy digging the foundation for a pavilion in the backyard; and seven other local workers are clearing the organization's property for a fence to be built in the front.

There is a regular and endless hive of activity, whether visits from Abusa Phiri for meetings, Billy coming in to pick up and drop off grocery orders, Promise coming to discuss his upcoming test and interview with Mama, Andreas and Debby popping by to chat or to help with various errands. All of this goes on every day without me even realizing it if I hole myself up in my room as I often do, to my own loss. I have realized that it is important to be simply present in order to be part of conversations, to greet people, to learn as much as I can about what goes on. There is so much that happens that I am not even aware of! I need to wake up earlier, stay out of my room more, be present among people as tiring as it is and as much as I want personal space and time. Mornings are the busiest time of day; evenings are when I can enjoy more time to myself.

Papa informs me that the site visit begins at 10 AM. I wear a chitenje and Birkenstocks as usual, as the thought of appearing in public in "trousers" is practically unthinkable. Papa, Mama, Abusa Phiri, and I drive to the site, which is just beyond the outskirts of town, and are met by the landowner and his brothers. Exchanging typical greetings, the landowner introduces himself as Jeremiah. Abusa Phiri acts as a translator for us, as we explain our wish to walk through the site and do a casual survey before making a decision on whether or not to proceed with the purchase.

It is a beautiful day. Jeremiah leads us through the untamed bush, covered in weeds. The land overlooks a ravine with a river running some distance below, and the views over the valley toward the other side of the hill are glorious. Several mango trees are scattered around. As we walk, Mama and I are swarmed with ants running across the ground. To our dismay, they cover our exposed feet and begin crawling up our legs in a most uncomfortable fashion! The ants, however, do not seem to bother the Malawians in the slightest, only targeting the azungu. We awkwardly dance around as we head further and further into the property, trying to minimize the amount of time our feet remain in one place. The dense, tall, wild grasses and sharp, dry twigs force us to lift our feet quite high when walking to prevent tripping, like wading through a sea of thorns; however, this is extremely difficult, if not impossible, while wearing an ankle-length, stiffly wrapped skirt! Burrs from surrounding foliage catch on our clothes and prick our skin. I struggle with great surprise and the utmost effort, lagging behind the other men, trying not to let it show how silly I feel. Never before has the art of walking seemed to require such skill. How do the local women

Figure 27: *(above) View from Jeremiah's property looking north along the M1 Highway toward Ntcheu Boma*

Figure 28: *(below) View of entrance to Jeremiah's property from the M1 Highway*

Figure 29: *(above) View from within Jeremiah's property*
Figure 30: *(below) View of Abusa Phiri, Jeremiah, and Jeremiah's brother walking along the property*

Figure 31: *(above) View of tall wild grasses within property*
Figure 32: *(below) View looking south within property*

traipse around with such ease?!

Approximately five metres in from the roadside lies a massive area of cleared land from which bricks are being made, the soil a deep burnt red hue. As we conduct our survey, we see local labourers hard at work mixing amounts of soil with water from a dug pit until it forms a paste to be packed into handmade wooden moulds. With large gasoline tanks filled with water balanced on their heads, a few women are tasked with the job of fetching water from the nearby river to continuously feed the pit with water. Eventually the moulds are emptied and the freshly formed bricks are laid out in a tight grid on the ground to be dried by the sun for weeks. Row after row after row of bricks can be seen across the property, in various stages of drying. There must be hundreds lying about. Enormous piles of dried bricks have been stacked into kiln formation – comprised of hundreds of bricks and measuring roughly four metres long by up to almost three metres high – waiting to be burned overnight in the last stage of the brick-making process. As the men work in assembly line manner, I see them keenly observing us with utmost curiosity, trying to figure out what these clumsy-looking azungu could possibly be doing, walking around in aimless circles on Jeremiah's land.

The surprisingly laborious journey feels like a trek through the jungle. One must be careful to avoid both brushing against the sharp tall grasses and stepping on the extremely wet and fragile fresh bricks which create a minefield of non-traversable swaths of terrain. I find it difficult to gauge space when I cannot walk freely within it. This land survey is a far cry from the site visit of an empty parking lot in the middle of an urban megacity.

"How much land are you selling?" Papa asks to clarify.

"My portion of land," Jeremiah responds. "From this tree to that tree to that tree to this tree," he vaguely indicates with a pointed finger.

His brothers nod in agreement, everything crystal clear. We take a slow panoramic glance at the scenery around us – disoriented, unfamiliar, unsure.

"There are a lot of trees…" I think aloud, trying to understand the boundaries that Jeremiah just indicated. Amidst a sea of greenery, I have already lost track of the ones to which he pointed.

It soon becomes apparent that more concrete property boundaries need to be established before land negotiations can be settled.

"Let us take a break for lunch," Abusa Phiri suggests. "We should meet back here at one in the afternoon. I will go to the market and buy some string and some poles, and then we can mark the land."

Addressing Jeremiah and his brothers, Abusa Phiri continues, "In the meantime, before we come back, please slash the wild grasses and make a clear pathway for us to walk with the string. We will pay you for this labour."

Before I return for the afternoon site meeting, I change my sandals into closed Blundstone boots with tall socks, which I have never worn in Malawi before this occasion due to the heat. After a single glance, Papa bursts into guffaws of laughter and teases me for wearing "army boots." I admit that it does seem slightly overkill and particularly ridiculous when paired with the long skirt of my chitenje. I wear a long-sleeved shirt to prevent the burrs from rubbing against my arms. This time, I arrive prepared.

Upon re-arrival to the site, Mama warmly greets each worker with the traditional sayings and handshake. They are surprised to see her familiarity with their ways and eagerly reciprocate her friendliness. Acutely aware that establishing friendly relations and trust from the beginning is critical, Mama generously compensates each man for his land-clearing labour with 1000 kwacha (just over a dollar) each, far more than any of them would earn in a day. What she does not realize is that one who pays others is immediately regarded as the one with the highest authority. Coupled with a society that highly respects its elderly female agogos (grandmothers) as wise and kind caretakers of the community, from this point forward, Mama is extremely well esteemed by the landowners, even more so than Papa, who ironically holds the position of Director. As he likes to joke, "They all love Mama. She is the one who gets things done around here. I'm just chopped liver!"

The only boundary under contention is the eastern boundary. The northern boundary is naturally set along the edge of the M1 highway, the sole major north-south, cross-country roadway that links all of Malawi's major cities. The western boundary is also determined following the edge of an existing foot path leading inward from the M1 highway to the nearest village. And so the eastern boundary-setting exercise begins. With ease, Jeremiah hammers the first wooden stake into the ground at the edge of the highway and ties one end of a ball of string around it. Abusa Phiri commands him to walk down the property in a straight line through the newly cleared path to the opposite end. The property is sloped such that when one stands at the stake in the ground, the person standing at the far end of the property is not visible, hidden at grade which is metres lower at that point. Unfortunately, a tall kiln of bricks stands directly in the middle of this path, so the string must be precariously stretched over the top of the kiln on its way to the other side.

Mama stands at the highway edge, while Jeremiah stands at the interior edge. Neither person is visible from where the other is standing. The negotiation process of how this line should be drawn highlights the sheer arbitrariness of land ownership. Mama argues for Jeremiah to walk slightly to the right, while Jeremiah's spectating family argues he should move to the left. Without measurement tools or an aerial image, "straight" loses meaning. Straight relative to what? All the lines being drawn by this piece of string held taut between two fixed points are, by nature, straight. I stand at the middle point of this line-in-the-air, trying to act as the mediating third-party. Both Mama and Jeremiah look to me as the "professional" to

make the final call. Lacking instruments, I use my naked eyes to try to determine the most accurately perpendicular line from the M1 highway, hoping that it is not drastically skewed. However, in the end, the accuracy of the line's perpendicularity is not important, as long as it is clearly marked and both parties are content. As it is, the concept of "straight" grid-like property allocation comes from the West, an indicator of colonization as they took over foreign land. In the Scramble for Africa at the turn of the 20th century, national boundaries were arbitrarily drawn by foreign powers across the African continent, completely disregarding ethnic tribes, traditional structures, and existing societies. With that reminder, here we attempt to derive our boundaries from natural or pre-existing elements instead: the highway, the foot path, the natural clearing in between trees.

As the matter is settled, Jeremiah drives the second wooden stake into the ground and securely ties the open end of the string. In order to document the boundaries that we have just agreed upon to proceed with site planning, I slowly walk the perimeter of the site with my phone in hand, using its GPS system to track the coordinates. This method is not foolproof, as the GPS tracks every step I make, including the times I must detour slightly due to obstacles such as drying piles of bricks, but at least with the corners mapped, I hope I can draw lines connecting the dots once I am back on my computer at home.

Having settled the matter of boundaries, Abusa Phiri is quick to jump onto the next order of business: "What about the bricks you are making on site? You have dug out much of the soil here to make them," sweeping his arm to point out the vast, deep holes that have been excavated near the roadside.

Jeremiah explains that some of the bricks are being made for him to sell for his own profit, while some of the bricks are owned by another party who has made an agreement with him to "purchase" his soil for the use of making bricks which the other party will then sell for profit.

"If we buy this land, we insist that you stop making more bricks immediately. Whoever else is making bricks here must also finish what they have started and then stop," Abusa Phiri firmly declares.

"Are you planning to build here?" Jeremiah asks. "If you buy all of our bricks, it will save you transportation costs."

He makes a valid point. With his vast local network and business saavy, Abusa Phiri does some quick calculations to determine the economic benefit of this proposal. He estimates that it would cost three to four million kwacha in transportation fees if bricks were made from his nearest source in the Kanjati area, money that would be saved if we simply used the bricks already in the process of being moulded on site. A quick glance by his experienced eyes evaluates that the soil on this land is actually fairly good for brickmaking. The quality of bricks can vary extremely depending on from which area of Malawi it is formed; even from my various travels to different villages in different regions, I can notice differences in the quality

Figure 33: *Abusa Phiri setting up one end of the string to demarcate the property boundary*

of soil and ensuing quality of construction. In some villages, every house appears to be falling apart with large, holey bricks that seem to have a high percentage of loose clay, while other villages consist of houses that are built with smaller, sturdier, tightly stacked bricks.

Jeremiah states that he has currently made thirty thousand bricks on site. If we agree to buy one hundred thousand bricks, he promises to make seventy thousand more for us. A two-and-a-half-metre-tall security fence along the eastern boundary would require fifty to seventy-five thousand bricks alone. We also note that we can save much of the wild grasses that will need to be cleared on this untouched piece of property in order to use for thatch roof construction to maximize on local resources.

"Now we must discuss the trees," facilitates Abusa Phiri with his characteristic meticulousness and efficiency.

Knowing the tendency for Malawians to mindlessly cut down every tree for firewood without a thought toward the increasingly devastating national deforestation crisis, he declares, "There are several mature mango trees that we would like to keep."

Papa nods in agreement, trying to explain how keeping trees is important because they enhance the natural beauty of the site, provide areas of shade, and assist with water management during flooding seasons. However, imagine the looks of utter confusion and surprise on the faces of Jeremiah and his family members as they consider this outlandish idea.

"But we need to cut down all the trees on the property for firewood to burn the bricks that you require!" Jeremiah protests. "How else will we be able to burn the bricks?"

After a moment's thought, he suggests, "Either we need to cut down all the trees here for firewood, or you need to provide us with money to buy trees on other properties to cut for brick burning."

"And how much money does a tree cost?" Mama inquires.

"For thirty thousand bricks, I will need ten small trees. For one hundred thousand bricks, I will need thirty tonnes of firewood. That will cost ten thousand dollars. The cost is not just for the trees; you must include costs for labour and transport."

"Ten thousand dollars!" Mama exclaims. "And what if we just want to buy half a tree?" she teases, as she often does.

However, the humour is lost on Jeremiah, who stares back incredulously at this idiotic woman who seems to have no idea how trees are harvested. After a moment's pause, Mama explains her joke and he immediately lightens up, all tension released.

A compromise is reached whereby Jeremiah is allowed to cut down the smaller, less significant trees on the property for firewood, while we aim to conduct some initial site planning to determine which of the larger trees, if any, we wish to protect as part of the campus design. It is clear that I will be assisting in this

particular task over the next little while.

"When will you come back to me with a final decision of your commitment to buy this land?" Jeremiah asks anxiously. "I need money to pay for my child's school tuition. Please respond to me in a few days, because the City has also just approached me to buy this land."

Even if this were not a bluff, we know that the City would only be attempting to buy this land from Jeremiah because they know that foreigners are interested, and thus the land must be valuable and worth buying. From past experience, Abusa Phiri also knows that if the City were to buy Jeremiah's land, the city officials would act corruptly and try to eventually sell it at an unthinkably high cost, cheating Jeremiah of enormous profit and preventing any villagers from using or benefitting from this land.

In parting, Jeremiah also gives us strict instructions and a warning not to come back to this land to give him the money – roughly $3,000 US – because the rest of the villagers will see that azungu are paying Jeremiah's family and assume that they have become rich. This puts the lives of himself and his family at risk for kidnapping or murder. Instead, another meeting is to be set up at a different location altogether, after which he will head straight to the bank to deposit the funds, dissuading any of his neighbours from coming after him. Payment must be made in kwacha, not cheque, due to the high occurrence of fraud.

And with that, it is now up to ACTION Malawi Trust to make a decision and obtain approval from its Board for this land purchase. In order to do so, they would like some preliminary design planning to be completed to better gauge the project's feasibility and whether the space is appropriate for their needs. With time pressure given by Jeremiah for a response, I have suddenly been tasked with laying down a vision and helping to progress Papa and Abusa Phiri's long-dreamt project. Everything that I had been exploring and researching during my previous terms in Cambridge in preparation for this experience will finally be put to the test.

Figure 34: *Part One of eastern property boundary exercise using string tied between two stakes to draw a straight line between M1 Highway and far corner of property*

Figure 35: *Part Two of eastern property boundary exercise, with string straddling a tall pile of bricks on site*

Figure 36: *(above) Local brickmaker rinsing his mould in a pit of "water"*
Figure 37: *(below) Local brickmakers transporting filled brick moulds from the clay pit to the area where the new bricks will be dried on the ground*

Figure 38: *(above) Local brickmaker carrying brick mould to drying area*
Figure 39: *(below) Local brickmaker emptying mould to lay new bricks to dry on the ground*

Figure 40: *Panoramic view of the entire site's street frontage as viewed from the M1 Highway*

Figure 41: *(following page) Marking property boundaries using significant trees on site*

Figure 42: *(previous page) Agricultural fields on property*
Figure 43: *Papa, Mama, and Abusa Phiri meeting around the dining table to discuss plans for Mudzi Owala*

June 16, 2016

This evening, I sit down at the dining table with Papa and Mama to discuss their plans and vision for the property. They share with me the program and specific spaces they imagine, and their initial thoughts of where each should be located in relation to the others and the site. From this program brief, I am commissioned to draft a masterplan to show them how their ideas can be spatially visualized.

SCHOOL CAMPUS

The principal program of the site will be a new school campus for the Action Malawi School of the Bible. In addition to a new, large lecture hall, it will include auxiliary buildings such as a school library, offices, kitchen, eating area, student dormitories, and staff residences. The main lecture hall should fit approximately two hundred people seated at long rows of tables, with a front stage and washrooms. A new library room will house Papa's collection of books, to be transported from his personal home in the United States to this new facility. This library will also serve as one of two smaller seminar rooms. Offices for the Director, Vice-President, and other staff will be provided, as well as a three-unit self-contained apartment building for teachers, guests, and medical staff. A kitchen with both indoor and outdoor components to allow cooking inside with appliances as well as traditional outdoor cooking will serve a new outdoor eating area for students. Separate dormitories for fifty men and fifty women, with washrooms, will also be provided for students who must board due to the distance of the school from their home villages.

ORPHAN CARE CENTRE

Malawi is known as a nation of orphans. Instead of providing yet another orphanage among a sea of orphanages, this organization aims to create a temporary care facility for orphans to use on a drop-in basis. Living among the local communities over many years has taught Papa, Mama, and Sarah that it is actually much better for orphans to be taken care of by extended family members as is typically common in traditional Malawian culture. A normal family unit often consists of a faithful agogo (grandmother), well beyond her child-rearing years, nevertheless raising five to ten of her own orphaned grandchildren, her friends' children, and any other "leftover" children in her community. This informal adoption is clearly reflected in the language used to describe these relationships. In Chichewa, the term for an aunt literally translates to "second mother." As a result of this upbringing, the child preserves a semblance of his family heritage despite a lack of parents, which is important for the institution of land inheritance. In contrast, orphans who are removed from their extended families and raised in an orphanage that may be dozens of kilometres away from their native villages will "graduate" at the age of adulthood without any ties to home or family, and thus without any chance of being given a portion of their family's land. However, due to the extreme poverty that is so pervasive across the country, it

Figure 44: *Esther's House Orphanage and Medical Clinic by Modus Studio Architecture & Prototyping, a local precedent project in Ntcheu area*
Figure 45: *"Malo a Mcherezo" Orphan Care and School, another local precedent project in Chiole*

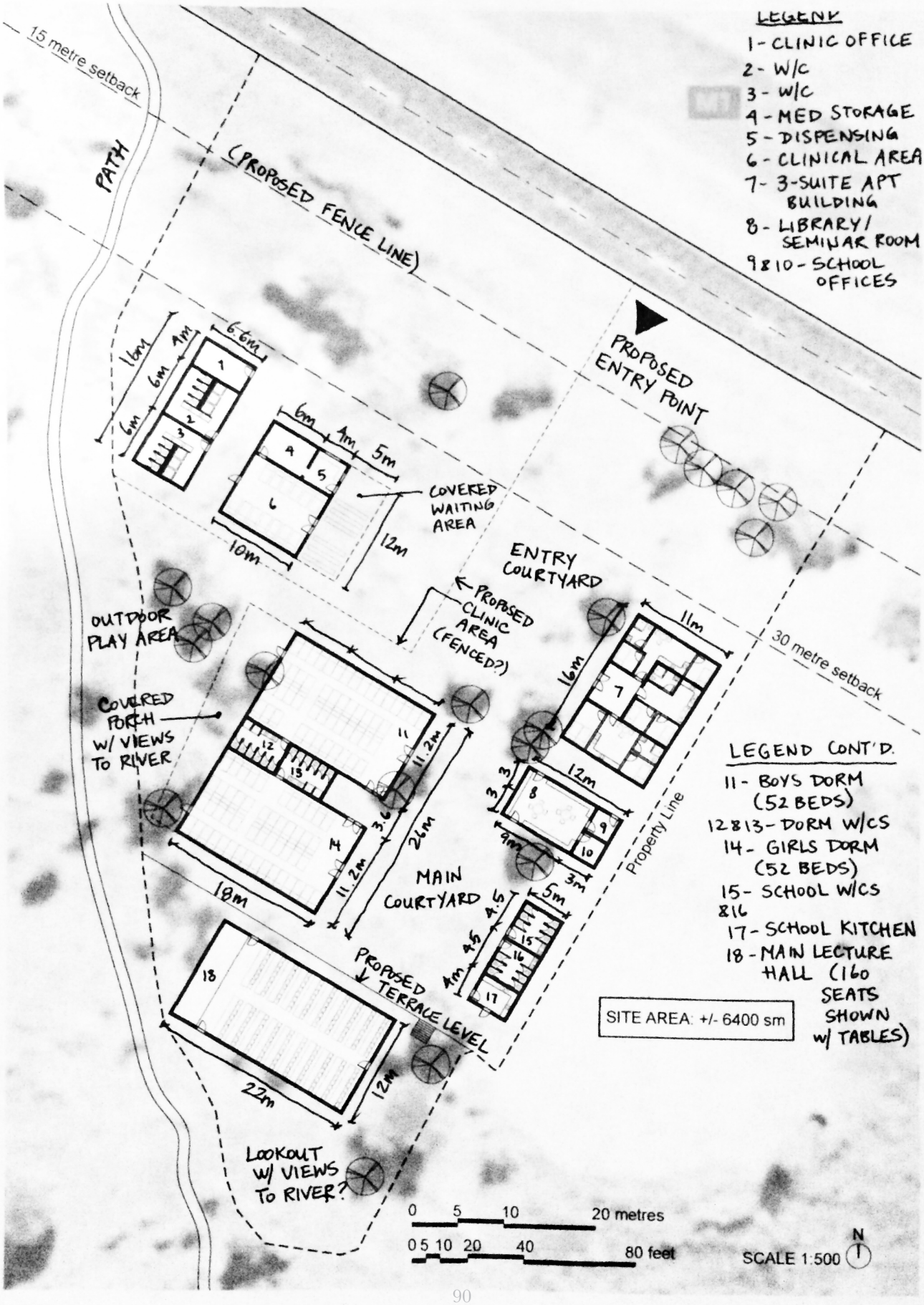
is tremendously difficult for agogos to raise so many children, especially when their own health is very unstable. Each day is a matter of pure survival not just for herself but also for these extra mouths to feed. For this reason, instead of a typical orphanage that uproots children from their homes, the proposed orphan care centre will strive to provide secondary support and relief for struggling families with orphans.

Focusing on newborns in particular, this space will consist of playrooms, nursing rooms, and sleeping rooms. The care centre will partner with an existing business owned by Abusa Phiri called 2ndMilk which provides milk formula for orphaned infants. Its program consists of a sleeping room, room for infant care, washroom and cleaning room, storage room, small staff kitchen, staff washroom, medical care room, and sheltered outdoor patio for play space.

MEDICAL CENTRE

In the same manner as the Orphan Care Centre, the Medical Centre will support families who need basic health services such as routine check-ups and dispensing of over-the-counter type medication. Healthcare in Malawi is a tiered system with different types of hospitals, health clinics, and outposts. The Medical Centre provided here leans more toward the latter the simplest and smallest type of facility that should support the nearest district hospital, Ntcheu District Hospital. The need for decentralization of services to improve healthcare access for more remote villages is severe, with normal walking times of two to three hours one way for someone to obtain regular medicine. The clinic program consists of four check-up rooms, two offices, one medication dispensing room, one medical storage room, and one staff washroom.

Other design considerations include the location of infrastructure such as a water tower, septic tank, borehole, and guard house. Because the property borders the M1 highway, it is governed by certain laws such as a minimum building setback of thirty metres from the centreline of the roadway, and a boundary setback of fifteen metres to the highway centreline (at which point a fence may be erected).


LEGENDS
1 - CLINIC OFFICE
2 - W/C
3 - W/C
4 - MED STORAGE
5 - DISPENSING
6 - CLINICAL AREA
7 - 3-SUITE APT BUILDING
8 - LIBRARY/ SEMINAR ROOM
9 & 10 - SCHOOL OFFICES
15 metre setback
PATH
(PROPOSED FENCE LINE)
PROPOSED ENTRY POINT
16m
4m
6.6m
6m
6m
6m
4m
5m
10m
12m
COVERED WAITING AREA
ENTRY COURTYARD
PROPOSED CLINIC AREA (FENCED?)
OUTDOOR PLAY AREA
COVERED PORCH W/ VIEWS TO RIVER
11m
16m
30 metre setback
11.2m
26m
3.6
11.2m
18m
12m
3
3
9m
3m
5m
4.5
4.5
4m
MAIN COURTYARD
Property Line
PROPOSED TERRACE LEVEL
22m
12m
LOOKOUT W/ VIEWS TO RIVER?
LEGEND CONT'D.
11 - BOYS DORM (52 BEDS)
12 & 13 - DORM W/CS
14 - GIRLS DORM (52 BEDS)
15 - SCHOOL W/CS
& 16
17 - SCHOOL KITCHEN
18 - MAIN LECTURE HALL (160 SEATS SHOWN W/ TABLES)
SITE AREA: +/- 6400 sm
0 5 10 20 metres
0 5 10 20 40 80 feet
SCALE 1:500
N

June 11, 2016

Normally, today I would accompany Sarah to her class as her assistant teacher. I could even join Mama's trek to the village of Kachimanga where she is meeting local women and thanking them for their work in partnership with ACTION Malawi Trust over the past year. However, I must stay at home and work on the plan in time for the board meeting on Saturday.

It is another beautiful day bursting with sunshine. I cannot bear to work within the tiny confines of my small, dark room with iron bars across the window, so I take my fully charged laptop and position myself to work outside on a wooden picnic table in the backyard that seems to be abandoned on most days. Ever since my arrival, I have noticed this worn, stranded piece of furniture – a relic of a bygone era hand-built by previous owners – sitting awkwardly in a corner. Determined to finally bring back its usefulness, I attempt to relocate it to a much more welcoming spot to work – under the shade of a large fruit tree, rotated to face the only unobstructed view of the valley beyond. Nkhata, the guard, notices me struggling slightly to shuffle this solid table across the earth, and quickly jumps to my aid with a dose of curiosity as to what this strange new girl is trying to accomplish.

Within a few hours, I discover that I am lacking several supplies that would make the task easier. In my packing, I have neglected to bring sufficient trace paper with me. I decide that this calls for a trip into town to browse the products offered in the stationery stores, mostly an excuse for me to walk from the house all the way to the big market on my own to explore. Distance-wise, it is not that far. The journey takes approximately half an hour by foot, excluding the extra time required to navigate unpaved roads, greet others on the street, avoid being run over by speeding minibuses, and evade drunk men catcalling. These aspects of venturing beyond the house increase the time and energy of walking by a surprising amount.

This time, I inch my way down the road, craning my neck to read every store sign that I pass. Knowing that I will not find trace paper in this remote area, I am on the hunt for sheet protectors to act as a more likely alternate. I stop into each of the four stationery (more like "copy and print") stores that I encounter on the way, a surprising number considering the short stretch of commercial businesses found in a town like this. After I have greeted each of the shopowners, I am unsuccessful in describing and finding sheet protectors. Instead, forming new relationships with all the salespeople, I take my time perusing their products (as if in a general store in a rural area), and leave with overhead projector transparencies (to serve the role of trace paper), cardstock, permanent pens, and even some Staedler markers. Each store carries a slightly different selection of goods. It is fascinating to see what supplies can (and cannot) be bought in rural Malawi.

By the time I return home, it is late afternoon, yet I am pleased with myself and the productive excursion I have completed – part errand, part survey. I proceed onwards with my design exercise, first calculating areas required for each program and then sketching building masses and laying them out on the site. I work steadily as the sun sets and the temperature rapidly cools, until the mosquitoes begin to appear in the dark and I retreat back inside to my room.

Figure 46: *(opposite) Hand-drawn Mudzi Owala site plan – first iteration*

LEGENDY
1 - CLINIC OFFICE
2 - W/C
3 - W/C
4 - MED STORAGE
5 - DISPENSING
6 - CLINICAL AREA
7 - 3-SUITE APT BUILDING
8 - LIBRARY/ SEMINAR ROOM
9 & 10 - SCHOOL OFFICES
15 metre setback
30 metre setback
PATH
ROAD
STORAGE BOREHOLE WATER TANK.
(PROPOSED FENCE LINE)
PROPOSED ENTRY POINT
COVERED WAITING AREA
ENTRY COURTYARD
PROPOSED CLINIC AREA (FENCED?)
OUTDOOR PLAY AREA
COVERED PORCH W/ VIEWS TO RIVER
MAIN COURTYARD
PROPOSED TERRACE LEVEL
Property Line
3 OFFICES: PRES VP
12 & 13 - DORM W/CS
14 - GIRLS DORM
15 - SCHOOL W/CS & 16
17 - SCHOOL KITCHEN
18 - MAIN LECTURE HALL (160 SEATS SHOWN W/ TABLES)
SITE AREA: +/- 6400 sm
KITCHEN (SEE PAGE 6) & WCS. OPEN AIR CAFE
LATRINE (UNDER GROUND).
LOOKOUT W/ VIEWS TO RIVER?
0 5 10 20 metres
0 5 10 20 40 80 feet
SCALE 1:500

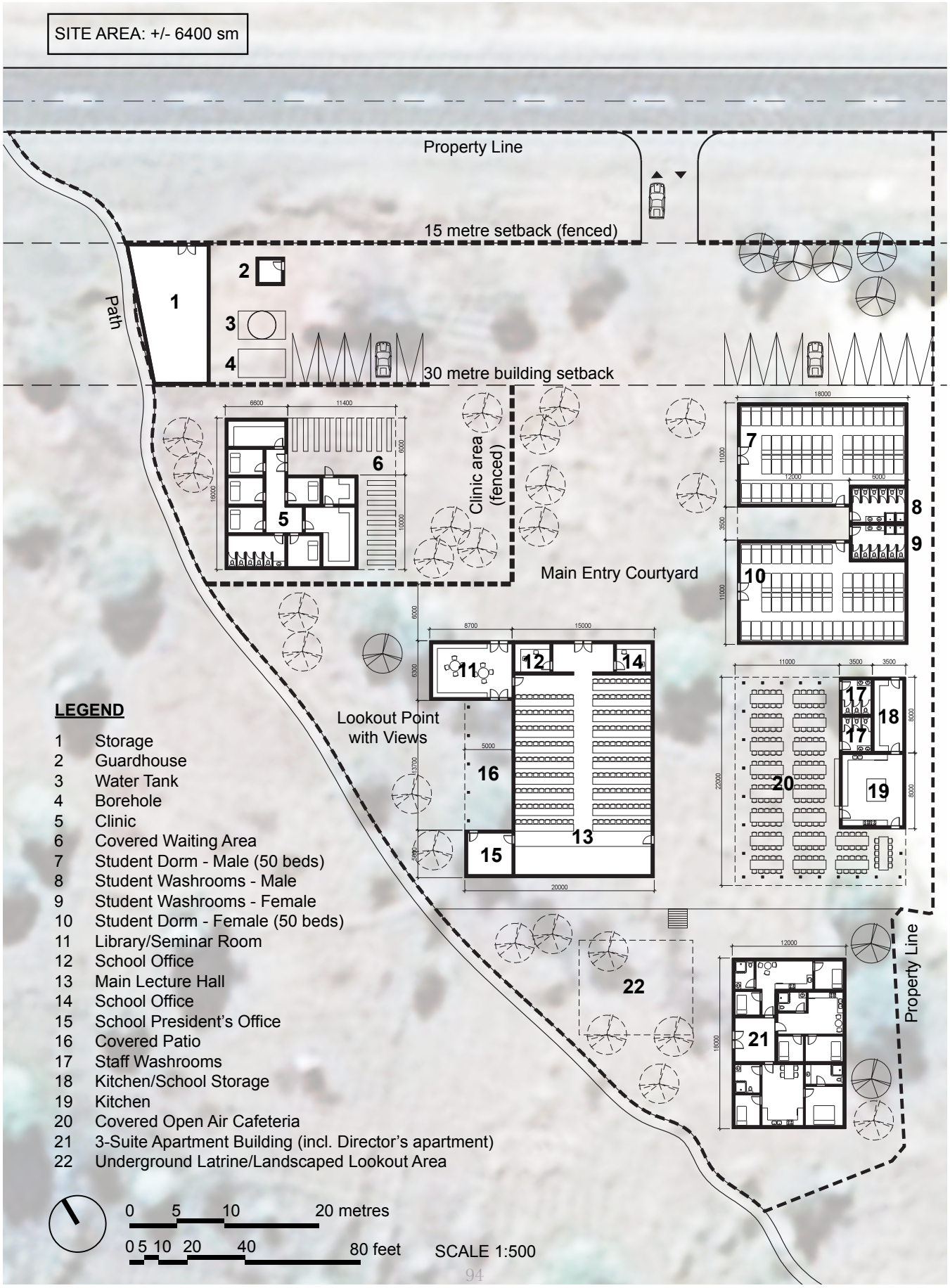
June 18, 2016

This morning, I present the first iteration of the site plan design to Papa and Mama at the dining table in preparation for the ACTION board meeting a few hours later, where they, in turn, will present the design to the board members for approval to purchase the land for the project. Papa, Mama, and I debrief together, brainstorming ideas and design options.

As the ACTION board meeting takes place, I return to my room to continue working on the suggested design options as discussed earlier. A while later, Papa joyfully comes to inform me that the presentation went very well at the meeting, and that the Board has decided to move forward with the land purchase!

I continue to redraw a second version of the site plan based on feedback from the rest of the Board.

Figure 47: *(opposite) The schematic design of Mudzi Owala continues with feedback from Papa and Mama*
At the meeting, design options are sketched over the original drawing on overhead projector transparency film in the absence of trace paper.


SITE AREA: +/- 6400 sm
Property Line
15 metre setback (fenced)
30 metre building setback
Path
Clinic area (fenced)
Main Entry Courtyard
Lookout Point with Views
Property Line
LEGEND
1 Storage
2 Guardhouse
3 Water Tank
4 Borehole
5 Clinic
6 Covered Waiting Area
7 Student Dorm - Male (50 beds)
8 Student Washrooms - Male
9 Student Washrooms - Female
10 Student Dorm - Female (50 beds)
11 Library/Seminar Room
12 School Office
13 Main Lecture Hall
14 School Office
15 School President's Office
16 Covered Patio
17 Staff Washrooms
18 Kitchen/School Storage
19 Kitchen
20 Covered Open Air Cafeteria
21 3-Suite Apartment Building (incl. Director's apartment)
22 Underground Latrine/Landscaped Lookout Area
0 5 10 20 metres
0 5 10 20 40 80 feet
SCALE 1:500

June 20, 2016

I wake up extremely late today. Late as in eight in the morning. Of all days, what a terrible day to wake up late! Today is the land sign-off meeting for the property! I regret missing the chance to attend with Papa, Mama, and Abusa Phiri due to my own fault – an undying regret – and must be content with hearing their accounts of how the event proceeds.

It is an unexpectedly huge ceremony. Expecting to see five or six people, Papa is surprised to find approximately fifteen to twenty men show up, including several village chiefs, the village head chief, and all of Jeremiah's extended family members who are supposed to receive a share of the profit. Mama, the face of generosity, complies with Abusa Phiri's instructions to pay each of the village chiefs the customary 1000 kwacha fee (just over a dollar) for attending the ceremony, for their cooperation and participation, and for their signatures.

A traditional component of the ceremony involves everyone walking along the property boundaries together, as an act of acknowledgement and communal accord. Instead of lines and contracts drafted with pen and paper, the ritual of walking together across the land serves as a binding exercise that is far better understood. Unlike pen and paper, there is no black and white record provided; however, for the Malawians, memory is etched not by this abstract representation but by the physical passing of every tree, every rock, every field.

At the end of the ceremony, in front of the large group of attendees gathered around, Jeremiah makes sure to issue a clear declaration to everyone that he has gone straight to the bank with the payment, with no money stored in his house. In other words, "Do not try to rob me or my family!"

After the land has been ceremonially transferred to us from Jeremiah, we still need to apply to the District Commissioner of Ntcheu to officially change the land use from "private land" to "public land," since the new property will be open to the public as opposed to private residence or agricultural land. The District Commissioner, a role that dates back to Malawi's colonial legacy, remains one who is appointed by the president to be a governor and chief executive of each of Malawi's twenty-eight districts, managing district finances and acting as the point of contact, including serving as first respondents of emergency relief. Together with traditional chiefs, local officials, party representatives, local Members of Parliament and several other appointed representatives, they form the District Development Committee. In particular, the president works with this group to oversee and support the rural areas of the country.

We are also expecting the town of Ntcheu to provide us with their official survey drawing of the purchased plot from their office within two weeks. It is a fascinating opportunity to be co-operating with different levels of government – from traditional chiefs to municipal administrators, from ceremonial rituals to bureaucratic processes – and to catch a glimpse of how the country is run.

Figure 48: *(opposite) Computer-drafted Mudzi Owala site plan – second iteration*

June 21, 2016

Apparently, after yesterday's ceremony, Jeremiah's family is now willing to sell a small adjacent piece of property as an addition to our new aquisition. We are interested, as the extra space will allow us more flexibility and potential to expand our plans. This afternoon, Papa and Mama return to the site to negotiate the terms with Jeremiah. His family wants to sell the land for 700,000 kwacha, which Papa counters with an offer of 500,000 kwacha. Jeremiah remains resolute, to which Papa responds with a reduction to 600,000 kwacha, but Jeremiah still demands full price. Unwilling to pay that amount, Papa decides to walk away from the deal. However, a few hours later, Jeremiah calls back, ready to settle at 600,000 kwacha.

The second signing ceremony is a much smaller affair. This time, only the village chiefs, not the head chiefs, make an appearance.

We also discover that the property now lies, in fact, within newly incorporated Ntcheu town limits, as the town plans to expand further and further outwards. It appears that this will work in our favour, since this means that the land is now government-regulated, as opposed to simply under the authority of village chiefs, whose decisions can often be more unpredictable and arbitrary.

June 24, 2016

There is still no power throughout the day.

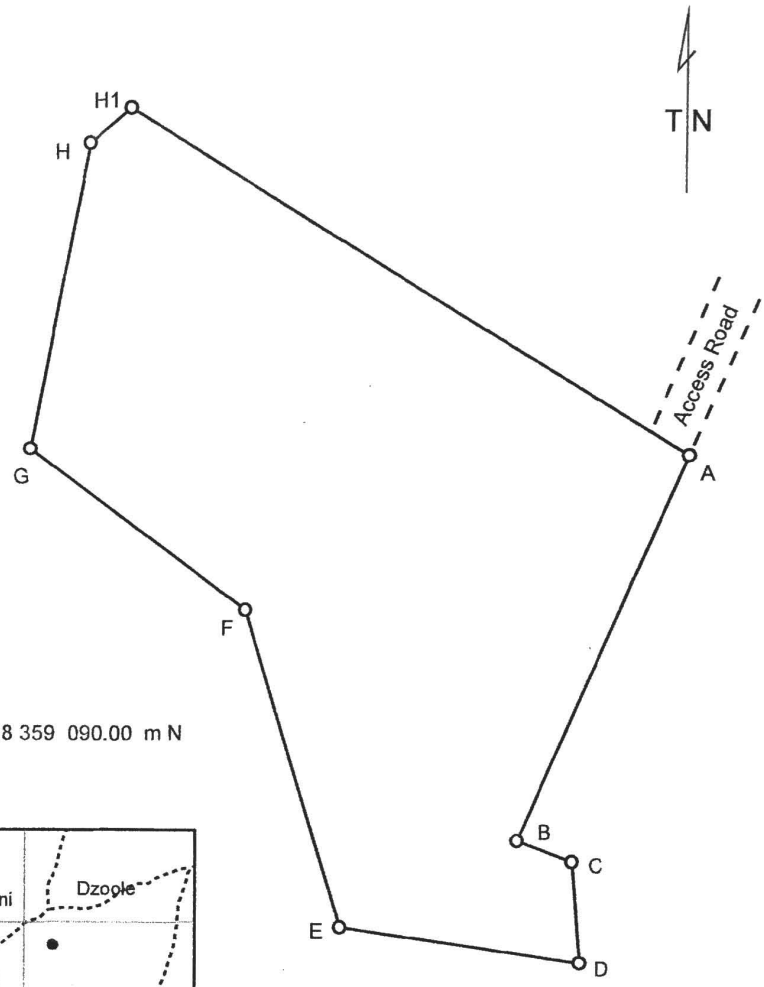
June 25, 2016

It is a quiet day. There are no workers around. The power continues to be missing. Andreas, a well-rounded Renaissance man with an extreme talent for problem-solving, comes over to try to fix the electrical wiring of the house. He crawls into the access panel of the suspended ceiling with a headlamp and his new metal ladder, drawing diagrams to try to map and understand the existing circuitry. A trained paramedic from Germany, he has been living and working across the street for over a year running a program in the local villages called Action For Natural Medicine in The Tropics (ANAMED), focused on harnessing local plants and developing local knowledge of natural medicine to address common health issues that remain untreated due to lack of access and resources. Today, his ANAMED program is cancelled because of a death in the village. This is extremely common, and countless programs with which I have been involved have been suddenly cancelled for the same reason. Every time that someone passes away, a funeral is held in his or her home village the following day, automatically cancelling all normal activity as everyone from the village must return home to attend.

Midway through the day, we also run out of water again. This may be due to local workers who stayed overnight in the guesthouse yesterday. Unfamiliar with the use of toilets found in the building (which were installed primarily for Western visitors), it is a common problem that someone accidentally leaves the toilet running.

LAND APPLIED FOR LEASE BY:	LOCATION	PURPOSE
Action Ministries Trust PO Box 12 Ntcheu	Ntcheu Boma	Institutional

SCALE: 1 : 1 000 | AREA (Ha) : 0.6311

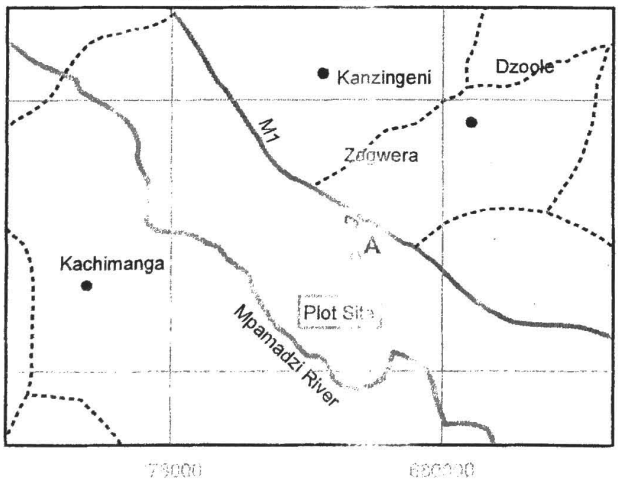


LINE	DISTANCE	BEARING
A		
B	62.24 m	203° 41' 00"
C	8.54 m	110° 33' 20"
D	15.03 m	176° 11' 10"
E	35.36 m	278° 7' 50"
F	49.04 m	343° 24' 50"
G	40.00 m	306° 52' 10"
H	45.89 m	11° 18' 40"
H1	7.81 m	50° 11' 40"
A	96.57 m	121° 52' 50"

Grid Ref. at A 679 377.00 m E 8 359 090.00 m N

Map Sheet No. 1434D4

Inset Scale 1 : 50 000



Surveyed by: Phillip Msawanga Drawn by : HHL Mandoya Checked by: Dan Tsonga Date : June, 2016	LEASE DETAILS Commissioner for Lands' Ref: Deed Plan No.: Deed No.:	Drawing Plan No.: Ntcheu District Lands Office P/Bag 1 Ntcheu

July 25, 2016

I will be leaving Malawi in four days. It has been an absolute roller coaster of an experience, and I am dreading my departure. We have just received the land survey from the municipal office, which confirms the extended property boundaries. I have yet to update the site plan to reflect this area enlargement, and I will not have time to complete this before I leave, so I plan to stay in contact with Papa and send him a new drawing after I have returned home to Canada. With the revised boundaries, there will be inevitable changes to the layout as program and massing shift to better suit the site. The setback from the centreline of the M1 Highway to the construction of a perimetre fence has also changed to be 20 metres.

I embark on one final visit to the site to document its state with photographs and to view firsthand the ongoing brick-making progress that has been achieved since the last time I was there. Three days ago, one of the massive brick kilns that had slowly been assembled with rows upon rows of stacked clay bricks was finally ready to be set on fire to burn the bricks. The bricks burned ceaselessly from within, starting from 6 PM on Friday evening until 12 PM on Saturday afternoon for a total of 18 hours. Over this sleepless period, Abusa Phiri supervised the workers all night long in order to ensure that they kept continuously feeding the fire and never let it go out, otherwise the brick quality would suffer. Ever since the completion of the burning, Abusa Phiri has visited the site every day to monitor the bricks. Today, he asks his son, Chifu, and me if we would like to accompany him as he shows us what freshly burnt bricks are like. Chifu and I jump at the opportunity and enter Abusa Phiri's old, beat-up, white car which slowly rattles its way down the M1 to the site.

Upon arriving to the site, I can immediately see a wisp of smoke still emanating from the top of the clay mountain. The entire kiln is covered in a layer of clay, so the individual bricks are not visible from the outside. Abusa Phiri walks up to the kiln with a stick, prodding one side until a hole is formed, as if inspecting an anthill. He breaks a little piece of the kiln off with the stick and runs his hands over the brick. I am not sure what he can determine from this exercise. Standing next to the kiln, I can still feel the intense heat radiating from this massive oven. I am very surprised at the amount of heat still trapped inside and so palpable even from a distance, two whole days after the fire has been put out!

Soon, it is time to leave. Abusa Phiri is a busy man in the community, and he must head off to his next appointment. I quickly walk around before getting back into his car, taking pictures and trying to commit the site to memory. The next time I see it, whether in photographs sent from afar or in person (will there even be a next time in person?!), much will have changed again.

Figure 49: *(opposite) Official land survey of the Mudzi Owala property provided by the town of Ntcheu, Municipal Office*

Figure 50: *Brick kiln after 18 hours of continuous burning*
Figure 51: *Abusa Phiri creates a hole within the kiln to check the bricks inside*

Figure 52: *Final glimpse of site before my departure from Malawi*
Figure 53: *(following page) A sea of bricks drying in the sun creates its own unique landscape on the Mudzi Owala property*
Figure 54: *(pages 94-95) Undulating landscape of bricks*

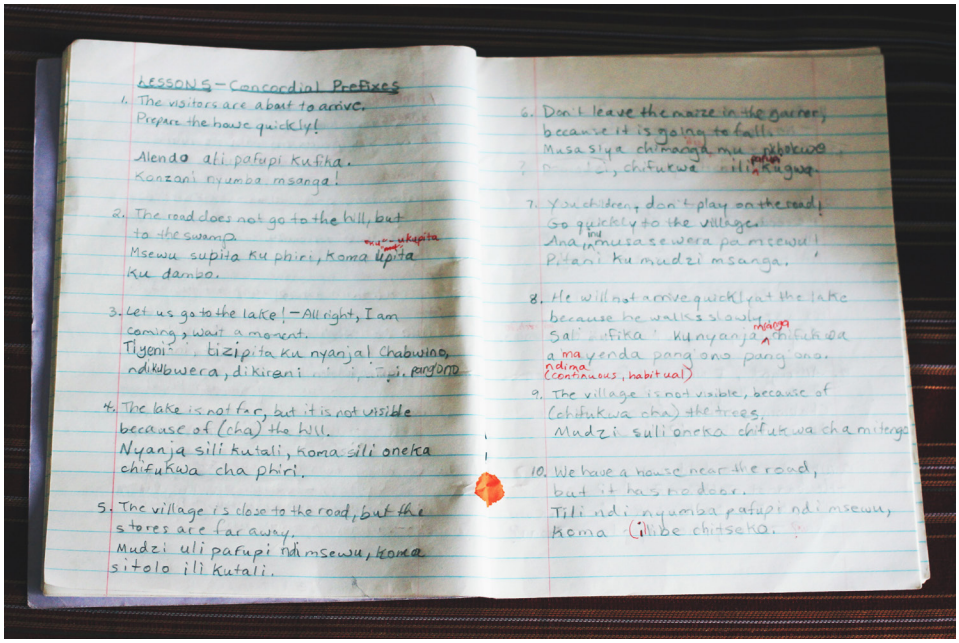
THE ART OF FIELDWORK

Lessons Part Two

ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

With the mind, heart, and soul prepared to be in Malawi, what follows is authentic engagement with local people. As I attempt to express a genuine not arrogant nor condescending interest in others' lives, my interactions deepen from first impressions into more nuanced capability for cross-cultural relations. The following series of narratives illustrates my ongoing experience in learning and engagement.



LESSON 5 – Concordial Prefixes

1. The visitors are about to arrive.
Prepare the house quickly!

Alendo ali pafupi kufika.
Konzani nyumba msanga!

2. The road does not go to the hill, but to the swamp
Msewu supita ku phiri, koma upita ku dambo.

3. Let us go to the lake! – All right, I am coming, wait a moment.
Tiyeni tizipita ku nyanja! Chabwino, ndikubwera, dikireni ... pang'ono

4. The lake is not far, but it is not visible because of (cha) the hill.
Nyanja sili kutali, koma sili oneka chifukwa cha phiri.

5. The village is close to the road, but the stores are far away.
Mudzi uli pafupi ndi msewu, koma sitolo ili kutali.

6. Don't leave the maize in the garden, because it is going to fall.
Musasiya chimanga mu munda, chifukwa ... ili kugwa.

7. You children, don't play on the road! Go quickly to the village!
Ana musasewera pa msewu! Pitani ku mudzi msanga.

8. He will not arrive quickly at the lake because he walks slowly.
Sat' ufika ku nyanja chifukwa a ma yenda pang'ono pang'ono.

9. The village is not visible, because of (chifukwa cha) the trees.
Mudzi sili oneka chifukwa cha mitengo

10. We have a house near the road, but it has no door.
Tili ndi nyumba pafupi ndi msewu, koma ilibe chitseko.

Figure 55: *(above) Sarah and Rose during their weekly Chichewa lesson*
Figure 56: *(below) Notebook of Sarah's translation exercises*

ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE

MULI BWANJI? *PEOPLE OVER PROGRAM*

One of the very first things I learn from Sarah in Malawi is how to interact with others.

"Never, ever, EVER engage in a conversation or conduct business with others without a proper greeting," she explains with utmost seriousness.

This exercise is so important that during my first Chichewa language lesson with my tutor, Rose, she insists that we role-play various scenarios to practice my greetings. Rose, a Standard 4 class schoolteacher, arrives at nine in the morning to give Sarah her weekly Chichewa lesson which consists of reviewing and correcting homework (translating phrases from English into Chichewa such as "the village is on the hill"). At ten in the morning, it is my turn. The agenda for the lesson includes basic greetings and introductory sentences to present myself to the community. Rose ushers me onto my feet, so we can throw our whole bodies into the required actions that accompany the verbal exchange.

The greetings are nuanced and innately spatial. Whether one is inside his home talking to someone outside the house, or whether both people are talking outside one's house, or whether two people are passing each other in the public sphere, all result in specific nuances as to which person speaks first and what is said.

When I visit someone else's home or village, I always loudly announce my presence as I approach the house with a joyful and energetic, "*Odi*!"

If (and only if) the host is inside the home, he or she responds with "*Lowani,*" ushering me to enter. "Feel free, feel free." (If he or she were working outside the house proper, as is often the case, one would not typically say "*Lowani*").

After the visitor has been properly brought inside, the host continues with, "*Muli bwanji*?" (How are you?) as he extends his hand for a handshake. If the host is female, she may also simultaneously bend slightly at the waist. The lower she bows, the more respect she gives. Often, women will fall flat on their knees and direct their eyes to the ground to demonstrate the greatest reverence.

As a young female, I show respect by mirroring this curtsy with a gentle bow and bending of the knees, holding my elbow with my left hand while shaking the host with my right. I reply, "*Ndili bwino, kaya inu*?"

"*Ndili bwino*."

Once more, I bow slightly again, "*Zikomo*."

"*Zikomo.*"

"*Muli bwanji*" is spoken only after "*Lowani*" if the houseowner is inviting someone inside, but if two people are meeting outside the house or together on the street, "*Muli bwanji*" would be exchanged immediately, before anything else. "*Muli bwanji*" is often replaced with "*Mwadzuka bwanji*" in the mornings and "*Mwaswera bwanji*" in the afternoons, along with their respective responses of "*Ndadzuka*" and "*Ndaswera*."

With Rose, I practice playing the host, and then the visitor, as we repeat this routine several times. In my excitement and eagerness to initiate friendly conversation and greet the other, I exclaim, "*Muli bwanji*," imagining myself calling out to a friend standing at her doorstep as I pass by along the street.

Rose chides me, explaining, "No, you do not say '*Muli bwanji*' first. You are too far from the house, and you are the visitor. You must approach closer and wait for the host to greet you first."

Soon enough, I grasp the subtleties and it is time to put what I have learned to practice. This simple routine is performed to every single individual one encounters during the course of the day; greeting a group of people one by one may seem unnecessarily repetitive and inefficient, but cannot be condensed into one general salutation.

One day, Sarah and I are running horribly late as we make our way to the village church where we are leading a youth leadership program. The minibus had taken longer than expected to fill and start its journey; we were then kicked off and "sold to another bus" at a stop midway. We finally arrive at the roadside entrance to the village, yet there is another fifteen-minute walk ahead of us through the main footpath before reaching our final destination. However, seeing us arrive, all the villagers begin to step outside each of their homes and come out to greet us as we pass. Sarah does not hesitate to greet each one in the typical manner, stopping to converse with each family on our way to the church.

"It has been so long since we have seen you!"

"*Muli bwanji*? How is your family? *Agogo, ali bwino*? Is your grandmother well?"

This process slows our journey even further. Five minutes later, we have barely moved five feet down the road. I start looking at my watch and trying to rush Sarah along. I am worried about arriving so incredibly late to the class we have been scheduled to teach. Most of her students walk for hours one way simply to reach this location, and it is unfair to make them walk home for hours in the dark after the sun sets at five in the evening. That leaves us with very little time for the class – in the end, would it even have been worth the arduous trip for her students? Their time is valuable, too. Far more valuable than ours. Their survival depends on it. In the

Figure 57: *Sarah respectfully greeting a local woman with a customary handshake*

Figure 58: *Women carrying firewood by foot many kilometres back to their homes The long journeys and arduous tasks are made easier with the company of others, sharing the load and building trusting relationships with one another.*

middle of this socializing marathon, I wonder if Sarah is really taking her program seriously.

However, the more I observe Sarah's interactions with the villagers, the more I realize that these greetings are not merely small talk. They symbolize something critical for the Malawians:

> "Dear visitor, who has come such a long distance to work with us, we would like to show you that we respect you and even if nothing else happens during these two days besides getting to know each other at a deeper level and developing a personal connection and trust, we will have made very good use of our time together."[1]

Trust must always be established prior to being able to work effectively with one another. Here, trust is built through sharing meals, home visits, time spent waiting in line together to fetch water at the borehole. Work-related relationships build up slowly over the long term: "I've seen who you are at a deep level, I've shared personal time with you, I know your family, I know others well who trust you, I trust you."[2] Malawian culture, as with most cultures in South America, Africa, and the Middle East, is heavily relationship-based, not task-based. Fostering connection with others and simply valuing each others' presence is far more important than following a schedule and completing tasks.

Time, too, is flexible here. As we react to the chaos that life inevitably throws our way, it is expected that delays will happen. In this context, 9:15 is no different from 9:45; everybody accepts that.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall was one of the first researchers to explore differences in societal approaches toward time. In *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*, Hall refers to monochromic (M-time) cultures and polychromic (P-time) cultures.[3] M-time cultures view time as tangible and concrete. By contrast, P-time cultures take a flexible approach to time, involvement of people, and completion of transactions.[4]

In the wake of Hall's work, psychologist Robert Levine began meticulously observing and analyzing various cultural approaches to clocks. He noted that some cultures measure time in five-minute intervals, while other cultures barely use clocks and instead schedule their day on what Levine calls "event time": before lunch, after sunrise, or in the case of the locals in Burundi, "when the cows come home."[5]

This is profoundly affected by a number of factors that shape the ways people live, work, think, and interact with one another. Perhaps the biggest influence is how fixed and reliable, versus dynamic and unpredictable, daily life is in a particular place.[6] In North America, life is extremely planned. Transit is more or less reliable; traffic

Figure 59: *Mothers of the village of Kanyimbo 2 gather together contentedly atop the main hill while their children attend a program taught by Sarah. They have just finished the local women's choir practice together.*

is manageable; systems are dependable; government rules are clear and enforced fairly consistently. An entire year can be scheduled based on the assumption that the environment is predictable and not likely to interfere greatly with one's plans.[7] On the other hand, in Malawi, as with much of the Majority World, life centres around the fact of constant change. As political systems shift and financial systems alter, as currency inflates or deflates with unstable regularity, as floods or droughts bring unforeseeable challenges, the successful — in fact, the survivors — are those who have developed the ability to adapt to these changes with ease and flexibility. Here, scheduling in advance is only possible if the time horizon is forty-eight hours or less.[8]

For example, for the Malawian farmer who survives on subsistence farming, it does not matter significantly if his day starts at 7:00 or 7:10. What matters is that his work structure is flexible enough to respond to changes in the natural environment, and that he has invested in the critical relationships needed to keep his workers loyal in times of drought or flooding, erosion or insect infestation. In this environment, productivity and profit are directly linked to the adaptability and the relationships of the person in charge.[9] Indeed, the importance of relationships seems to be the key. Thus if relationships are a priority, they come before the clock.

Similarly, the nature of the architectural profession is generally very project-based, task-focused, and results-driven. From this experience, however, it is clear that the "time is money" mentality of Western, capitalist society must expand in order to adapt to the various cultures and contexts of global practice.

ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE

YENDANI BWINO *TRAVEL WELL, TRAVEL TOGETHER*

Saying goodbye in Chichewa involves two phrases. The one leaving bids, "*Tsalani bwino*" (Stay well). In response, the one staying behind salutes, "*Yendani bwino*" (Travel well). Whether the journey's distance constitutes a few metres or several thousand kilometres of travel, or whether the length of time conveyed by the farewell is a few hours' apart or an indefinite sendoff, the same exchange of words is given. "*Yendani bwino*" resembles a blessing imparted from one Malawian to another, wishing the other safety on a potentially long, difficult, and dangerous journey as is common for many who have no other means of transport than to walk by foot, often for hours and in pitch blackness.

One of the factors creating such tight-knit communities in Malawi is the fact that they are, quite literally, communities that *move together*. Far more than the average North American, Malawians rely on walking by foot to accomplish their daily activities. When one must spend the majority of waking hours of the day on the road, walking becomes a social activity. Perhaps nothing makes it clearer that travel is a communal activity than the public transit system itself, which acts like a country-wide hitchhiking procedure.

My first time taking Malawi's public transit occurs on my second day in the country, as I prepare to visit the newborn baby of one of Sarah's closest Malawian friends, Esimy, who is still resting at the "hospital" in a nearby village. We hop on an old Japanese minibus — discarded and recycled for use on another continent — through town along the M1 highway to the Mlangeni Clinic. From our house in the southern part of the town of Ntcheu, it takes around ten minutes by foot to reach the town's bus depot, where all the minibuses are gathered in a bustling parking lot and preparing for their trips. There I join the crowd at the curbside and find shade from the sun beneath the awning of an adjacent market stall.

Calls and shouts from the minibuses ring on all sides. Everyone is a potential passenger, the prey of aggressive minibus operators.

"Lilongwe! Blantyre! Tsangano! Come here, come here! Where you going?"

The minibuses do not depart until the operators maximize their profit by squeezing in as many people and as much cargo as they can, so each driver also hires a type of scout, who works to get bodies in seats as quickly as possible. With pleading shouts, the scouts yank urgently at the elbows of potential passengers, coaxing them inside. Once the cars are full, they surge along the two-lane M1 highway

Figure 60: *(above) Locals of all ages in Chikuli village walking down the main road together*
Figure 61: *(below) Families travelling together through Chikuli village*

Figure 62: *Sitting in the front seat of a minibus heading to Ntcheu (and eventually Blantyre) from Lilongwe*

Figure 63: *Sitting in the back seat of a minibus, sandwiched among over a dozen other villagers and their goods*

to their destinations at the major cities of either Lilongwe to the north or Blantyre to the south, then refill all over again. There are no established route names or numbers; each minibus only displays the name of its final destination painted on a rough wooden board propped against the dashboard. I quickly realize that if I want to get around the country with ease, I need to learn my geography rather well, in order to know which villages the bus will pass and stop en route to the various final destinations. The more trips the minibus operators can make, the more money they earn. Each fare depends on the distance travelled, but my typical route to nearby villages costs 500 *kwacha* one way, just under a dollar.

As I wait for the minibus to Mlangeni, I hear calls from vendors nearby. Small kiosks are set up next to the bus depot, where young men and women sell soft drinks, bottled water, popsicles, and fried snacks of all kinds to those waiting.

"Chipsies, 50 *kwacha*!" one boy calls. "Only 50 *kwacha*!"

With its engine revving and honks blasting like bullhorns, the minibus pulls up, trailing dirty exhaust. Men and women gather at the door, preparing to board. I am pretty sure this is my route, but amid the chaos I cannot know for sure. The noise is overpowering. Several more minibuses pull up, each fighting to cut off the other, blasting music to attract customers. Brightly painted signs and advertisements with strange English slogans cover the minibuses, ranging from "Jesus Saves All" to "Baby Got Back." Lost in this disorienting scene, I allow myself to be ushered by the scout into a minibus emblazoned with the slogan "We Be Jammin." My feet are barely inside before the minibus pulls away.

The minibus is jammed beyond capacity. As with all minibuses, what would be typically a nine-seat vehicle has been refitted with benches for eighteen, though often more bodies spill from open doors and windows. I hold my breath against the thick scent of body odour as I climb toward the back, toppling onto people as the minibus jerks, switches gears, and hurtles off. People give way the best they can, and I seem to be the only one struggling and offering clumsy apologies for my uncoordinated navigation through the seats. I do not realize until much later during the day that at some point during my entrance or exit from the bus, my leg has scraped against the sharp metal of the seats and left a large cut. The experience is a far cry from Toronto's subway service, where passengers leave an empty seat between each other.

I squeeze into the back row, squished among three adults and two children. It is the day before market, so everybody is transporting their produce into town. Enormous sacks full of maize and beans are squeezed into the crevices of the sides and trunk of the bus. There is a pile of live (but stunned and stationary) chickens lying in front of the first row of seats. A stranger hands me a bag full of cabbage to hold on my lap, though I can't tell to whom it belongs. Despite my best attempts to brace myself, hunched among these bodies and bags, my head slams over and over

against the unpadded roof as we weave from side to side, hitting rough patches of road. To my amazement, no one seems the least bit inclined to open a window to relieve the stagnant, pungent air inside.

With bodies pressing against me on all sides, even if everyone is a stranger and speaking an unfamiliar tongue, I instantly feel like a member of the community. With total chaos surrounding me, pounding music playing so loud the entire minibus vibrates with pumping bass, a small girl absentmindedly clutching my leg here I am truly alive. I am riding with local people, not sheltered in the clean, private vans of NGO teams and foreign visitors. This is what I wanted! *This is what I came for!*

The minibus hits a pothole and all of us are bounced from our seats, once again smacking our heads against the roof. The girl clutching my leg and I exchange smiles and she takes my hand. I inhale deeply, breathing in the smell of burning garbage, diesel fumes…and belonging.

Another benefit to riding public transit along with the locals is the access it brings to local news and gossip. Malawian culture relies very much on the oral tradition for passing on information, and nowhere else is there more opportunity for word-of-mouth exchanges than in the minibuses an ever-moving, ever-spreading network of "watering holes" for the community.

Conversations fly in all directions as we barrel down the M1 Highway, voices raised over the blaring radio music. Immediately, everyone's attention is drawn to the two *azungu* women in their midst. However, Sarah's friendly "*Muli bwanji*" greeting to each and every face instantly releases any apprehension, and all the villagers giggle and howl unabashedly in delight at the sight and sound of a *mzungu* conversing in Chichewa. The rarity of this cannot be emphasized enough. Older men, cynical of Sarah's ability, interrogate her with many questions in an attempt to test her language fluency. Without batting an eye, she responds with charm and sociability.

"Can she really speak Chichewa?" one man whispers to another.

Overhearing their musings, Sarah amusedly answers him directly, "*Eya! Zaona!*" (Yes, truly!)

Her incorporation of expressions and slang eventually convinces them, and before long we have been integrated into the villagers' conversations with each other.

Not only is travelling among the people an important way of connecting with the locals' daily preoccupations, but it also provides opportunity to gain insight into significant cultural events and practices that may not otherwise have appeared on my radar. One day, I am on my way to the village of Mlangeni with Sarah to teach a youth leadership class, and there seems to be an unusual amount of bustling at the bus depot. I see more men gathered there than ever before, their importance distinguishable by their formal dress and traditional Ngoni hats of animal fur,

feathers, and twine representing their native tribe. Each minibus is unusually full of these obviously well-respected leaders, and more and more are found waiting along the roadside, hoping there is enough space to be added onto the minibus at each stop of the journey.

"What is happening?" Sarah asks one of them in Chichewa.

Again, as usual, there is the initial shock of a *mzungu* speaking Chichewa; however, this time, it is especially uplifting to see the respect that Sarah automatically earns from this highest rank of Malawian society simply due to the fact that she has invested the time and effort to learn their language. As the elders embrace our immersion in the community, they explain to her that they are all travelling to attend the funeral of the highest Chief of Chiefs of one of the most important districts.

From these encounters, it becomes clear that communities which move together share a deep level of connectivity. In the West, similar goals of achieving this social connection can be found in the design of "crush spaces": grand lobbies, atriums, community centres, public squares, and the like. The livability of cities is often evaluated based on the experience of the pedestrian, with city planners encouraging walkability as opposed to car-oriented suburban sprawl.

In places such as Malawi, however, societies do not necessarily need built space in order to congregate; much socialization occurs informally, en route, in open-air. Thus, Robert Chambers advises against having a "roadside bias" when evaluating the needs of a community.[10] He notes the importance of infrastructural decentralization when working with rural communities as opposed to the current trend of centralization in urbanization:

> Reversals in space concern the present concentration of skills, wealth and power in the cores, draining and depriving the peripheries...Decentralisation is one key to these spatial reversals. Many forces centralise power, professionals and resources in the urban cores...The pointers are in the same direction: towards priority for more and better rural livelihoods to support larger populations and to provide rural solutions to urban problems.[11]

For example, decentralized locations of health clinics allow people to walk shorter distances from their home to the nearest facility, increasing access to timely care. Localized infrastructure better serves and provides resources for those who are extremely remote. The ideal neighbourhood corner grocery store, for instance, also fosters better relationships than the big box Walmart in the region. A project's site is always much larger than the property itself; any design should be considered as simply one node within a much larger network, with the overarching goal of improving human interaction and connection. These concepts have become critical to my own development as a designer.

ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE

COMMUNICATION

> Outsiders are people concerned with rural development who are themselves neither rural nor poor. Many are headquarters and field staff of government organisations in the Third World. They also include academic researchers, aid agency personnel, bankers, businessmen, consultants, doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, politicians, priests, school teachers, staff of training institutes, workers in voluntary agencies, and other professionals. Outsiders underperceive rural poverty. They are attracted to and trapped in urban 'cores' which generate and communicate their own sort of knowledge while rural 'peripheries' are isolated and neglected. The direct rural experience of most urban-based outsiders is limited to the brief and hurried visits, from urban centres, of rural development tourism. These exhibit six biases against contact with and learning from the poorer people…As a result, the poorer rural people are little seen and even less is the nature of their poverty understood.[12]
>
> Robert Chambers

Architects who are involved in humanitarian efforts often fall into the trap of many of the outsider biases against contact with and learning from the correct people that Chambers describes in his book *Rural Development.*[13] The author invites outsiders concerned with rural development to analyze the ways that they learn, think, feel, and act, and to see how these can be changed to improve the relevance and usefulness of their work among the more deprived of those who are rural and poor.

One of the concepts Chambers describes rural development tourism, for the purposes of 'Rapid Rural Appraisal' can be compared to the brief site visits conducted by architects.[14] It is through this brief field trip, if at all, that 'core' (urban-based, professional, powerful) visitors see and meet those who are 'peripheral' (rural, less-educated, powerless).[15] The site visit is often the sole source of information that

influences an architect's understanding of people and place. The brief visits by 'core' personnel can scarcely suffice to play a key part in forming their impressions and beliefs and influencing their decisions and actions.[16]

Consider the phenomenon. The visits may be for one day or several at most. The visiting architect may come from a foreign country, a capital city, a corporate or organizational headquarters, often accompanied by government officials or consultants. Wherever the background, these visitors nevertheless usually have three things in common: they come from urban areas, they want to find something out, and they are short of time.[17] Often the older, the more senior, the more important, and the more involved in the project the visitor is, the larger the urban centre from which he comes, and the more likely his visit is to be selective and formally structured. The more powerful professionals are, the less chance they have of informal learning.

A narrative can illustrate the problems of such visits by the powerful, the important, the distinguished. Inevitably, the visitor sets out late delayed by last minute business, by colleagues, by subordinates, by superiors anxious for decisions or actions before his departure, by a phone call, by administrative problems, by urban traffic jams, by mechanical or technological failure, or by any one of a hundred factors. The program always runs behind schedule. The visitor is isolated, first in a private vehicle, and later in a moving entourage of officials and local notables headmen, chairmen of village committees, and the like. Whatever their genuine feelings, the rural people put on their best face and receive the visitor well. He is given goats, garlands, coconut milk, Coca-Cola, coffee, tea, or milk. Speeches are made. Schoolchildren sing or clap. Photographs are taken. Buildings, machines, construction works, new crops, exotic animals, the clinic, the school, the new road, are all inspected. Dressed in their best clothes, prepared groups of people are seen and spoken to. They nervously respond in ways that they hope will bring benefits. There are tensions between the visiting architect's questions and curiosity, the officials' desire to select what is to be seen, and the mixed motives of different local groups and individuals who have to live with the officials and with each other after the visitor has left. As the day wears on and heats up, lack of time and an overloaded program start to take its toll. The visitor becomes less inquisitive, asks fewer questions, and is finally glad to retire, exhausted and overwhelmed, to the guest house, or the host official's residence, or back to an urban home or hotel. The village returns to normal, no longer wearing its special face. When darkness falls and people talk more freely, the visitor is not there.

Shortage of time, the importance of the visitor, and the desire for information together all influence what is perceived. Lack of time drives out the open-ended questions; the visitor imposes meanings through what is asked. Returning to check or confirm observations is impossible, and first impressions become accepted as facts. People are neglected, while formal actions and physical objects receive attention. Refugees in a rural camp in Tanzania said of UN and government officials that "they come, and they sign the book, and they go," and "they only talk with the buildings."[18]

A villager in Senegal said to Adrian Adams concerning visitors: "Ils ne savent pas qu'il y a ici des gens vivants."[19] Above all, on such visits, it is the poorer people who tend not to be seen, far less to be met.

Of course, despite all this, the site visit remains an absolutely critical component of the architect's design process. As good architecture is site specific, design must depend on connections to site. The experience of site informs the ideas in the design, whether intentionally or inadvertently. For this reason, connections of these kinds must be shaped.

In contrast to the brief site visit described previously, the method by which one learns and connects to "site" is of utmost importance. Without participating in personal exchanges with people, animals, and environments, balance in architectural work is difficult to achieve. This is especially important to remember when designing in a cultural framework outside of the architect's own. If those relationships are not privileged above all else, the architect risks creating a fetishized product or an unethical solution, one founded on a simplified and skewed image of a place a two-dimensional shape on a plan drawing.

Throughout my education, this idea of establishing a connection to a site has been presented as a central responsibility of the architect. We celebrate those whose work depends on this intimate connection to site: Scarpa, Zumthor, Wright. Each project fits its site and situation like a glove. I am more inspired by these designers than by those who repeatedly explore a singular vision. However, I continue to see a single vision imposed on the "underdeveloped," whether by "design cowboys" who enter communities with drafted plans of impractical, cost-ineffective emergency shelters, or by architects using the romanticized qualities and distant nature of the "Global South" to propel their own public relations agendas: to be published and noticed with what can be described as the singular "PR project." These architects want monologues, not dialogues. This is not to say that the work has no value, but to me, it is site-less. I see this practiced in academia and professional work. I see it taught to students and encouraged in the very nature of many architectural competitions. I have experienced it in my own education. What distinguishes us from those who colonized Africa in the 1970s? Have we really changed?

If I am committed to understanding my site, the first requirement is to live there. My plan to move to Malawi hovered for eight months before it became a reality. During that time, I vacillated between excitement and despair. It was unclear if it would even happen, and I worried my graduate studies were for naught. Unwilling to base my research from a distance, I believed my ideas needed to be founded on an "authentic" experience. I strove to demonstrate my dedication to the community before going there by persistently making attempts at communication and articulating what I, as an architecture student, could offer. Together, the community and I tried to discern what my place would be if there was a place for me at all.

As I now journey across the Atlantic Ocean, I recognize that I still share the same characteristics of the typical visitor: I come from an urban area; I want to come away having found out something; and time is a valuable resource. I am, nevertheless, committed to changing the ways I learn. I neither demand nor expect any potential outcomes. Beyond the courtesies, beyond a planned program, beyond the period when the tourist is a novelty, genuine relationship becomes feasible. The sole visitor who comes simply, on foot, fits more easily and disturbs and distracts less. Unscheduled visits, walking and asking about things that are observed, planning not to have a special program, and avoiding the impression of having influence over the benefits which a community might receive, all reduce the dangers of misleading responses and impressions.[20]

All of these efforts focus on the goal of learning to communicate with people in a different context, founded on genuine relationships built over time. One cannot act without first learning to relate. Indeed, as the days pass, I learn more and more about what it means to engage and communicate with others.

Consider how children in Western society are raised and educated. Often as soon as babies are born, long before they are able to talk, parents are eager to introduce them to the world and fill their sponge-like brains with knowledge. Many hours are spent poring over illustrated children's books, pointing out "dog" and "cat" and "apple" and "tree." In order to simplify the information, images are abstracted from photo-realistic objects to stylized representations appropriate for a child's understanding. As the child grows older, the abundance and accessibility of photographs in books and online allows him or her to make the connection between the stylized representation they initially learned and the actual object. Nevertheless, there are many objects that a child "knows," yet has never encountered in real life. Thus almost any five-year-old child who has been exposed to books can identify that this picture represents an elephant:

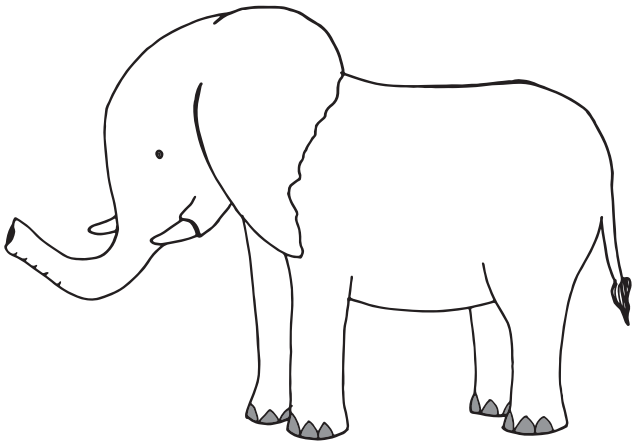
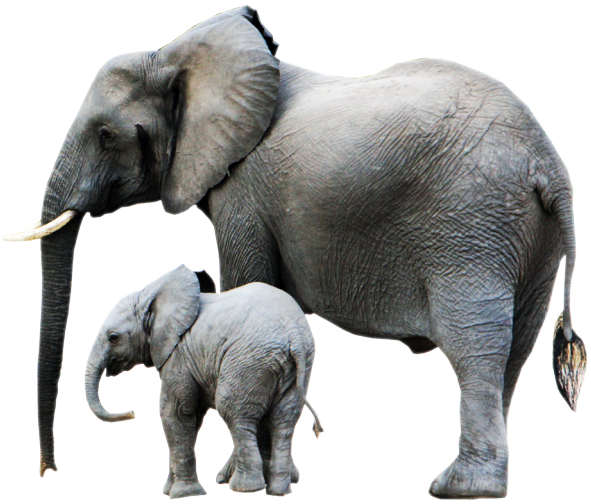


Figure 64: *Hand-drawn sketch of an elephant*

And that this is a photograph of what an elephant looks like in reality:



Regardless of the fact that the child has never "seen" a real elephant.

Now let us enter a different realm – that of rural Malawi. To my great surprise, and with much irony, I discover that children in the rural villages of Malawi have no idea what an elephant is. I watch as a foreign team of visitors trying to interact with the local children introduces themselves as follows: "Hello, my name is Anna, and my favourite animal is the elephant. What is yours?" "Hello, my name is David, and my favourite animal is the zebra. What is yours?" Undoubtedly, they are trying to form a connection with the children by relating to things, or animals, that they assume the children are familiar with in their native contexts. After all, it is common knowledge that elephants and zebras are found in Africa, as opposed to raccoons and squirrels, right? However, while elephants and zebras may exist within the national parks and nature reserves of Malawi – already a large assumption, as the wildlife across Africa is vastly diverse – I soon realize that these animals no longer freely roam across the country. In fact, the average rural Malawian child has never seen, nor perhaps will ever see in his or her lifetime, a real elephant or zebra. And what they have not seen, they do not know. Show a Malawian child a picture of an elephant, and he or she has even less of an understanding of what the image represents. Similarly, the people of Gourma in Burkina Faso have a saying, "A yaa nua, a ba bandi." (How can you know if you have not seen?)[21]

Figure 65: *Photograph of a real elephant*

In a similar vein, one must realize that the ability to imagine, visualize the abstract, and think outside the box – so treasured and eagerly developed in Western culture – is not always as fostered and celebrated in other societies. Different education systems influence the development of imagination, innovation, and critical thinking skills. These qualities with which I am familiar are found in the character of the Little Prince in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic novel, *Le Petit Prince*. When provided with an image of what appears to be a peculiarly-shaped top hat, the Little Prince explains to the narrator with much impatience and even condescension that it is most definitely not a picture of a hat, but rather that of an elephant being eaten by a boa constrictor.[22] This childlike imagination to interpret images is applauded and appreciated by Saint-Exupéry as a precious ability and quality of childhood that must not be lost due to age, cynicism, or maturity.

However, as I interact with children in Malawi and try to engage similar creativity through free drawing exercises and play building activities (using garbage to act as building blocks), I recognize that a blank piece of paper is a foreign concept. Colouring pages are more familiar; the children know how to colour within the pre-determined lines, even if they do not understand the picture they are colouring in the first place. But a blank page of possibility? What does it mean to draw?

As an architect, how does one communicate with people who are unfamiliar with his or her trained standards of graphic representation? A two-dimensional line drawing is absolutely useless if one has not been previously taught to read information as such. How does one encourage ideas from those who have spent their entire lives colouring within the lines instead of drawing on blank pages?

For the architect who has been trained to think, express, and communicate visually, it requires a fundamental shift in his way of working. Illustrations and photographs confuse; stories bring to life. When working outside of one's own context, one must learn to step away from abstract drawing and representation, and to instead embrace communicating through shared knowledge and experience. Site is not simply a two-dimensional shape on a plan drawing. The potential and possibilities of a site cannot be discovered on a topographic map. Site is made of people, stories, conversations, and experiences, not expressed by illustrations or photographs, measurements or maps. Site is the large, natural clearing where all the village children gather for regular games of football under the shade of a baobab tree. Site is sitting atop a twelve-metre-long, open-top cabbage truck squished between burlap sacks of produce and dozens of other villagers, racing down the highway on its way to town. Site is the open courtyard in front of a house where laundry is washed, where maize is dried and peeled, where *nsima* is cooked and eaten. Site is in the church, where exuberant women drag you around, trying to teach you to dance. Site is the space between rows of maize in the field. Site is in the sunrise, accompanied by crowing roosters and the realization that the day has already started long ago for most people.

Returning to Chambers' advice regarding an outsider's bias during "Rapid Rural Appraisal," if it is to be authentic and fruitful, the architect's "site visit" must become agenda-free. One cannot discover the stories of site coming in with a hard set of questions and a tight timeframe of observational note-taking from a distance. The "every-minute-must-count" pressure of seeking answers and being in constant conversation in order to walk away with the maximum possible amount of information leaves no room for the slow peeling back of layers that is required to gain a deeper understanding of people and place. Over the weeks, my conversations with people evolve as I attempt to articulate my thoughts through stories that use relevant imagery and analogies. The opportunities to connect with community members through conversations about farming, food, and music are invaluable. They build the foundations for many strong friendships that grow during my stay. Combatting the problematic tendencies of the visitor's brief visit demands the exercises of gentle listening and humble adoption of local practice.

In academic or professional life, particularly in the field of architecture, one who knows how to efficiently navigate and distill an over-saturation of visual imagery and information is lauded as proficient. However, while this type of architect might leave a brief site visit with more informed ideas of the site and how to proceed, he has missed the opportunity to learn how the people of that place converse, and with it, the chance to practice in this mode of conversation. Through the process of learning to tell stories that are understood and appreciated instead of simply flashing images as reflected in the personal narratives documented in this book my understanding and awareness has deepened. My personal connection to Malawi is not simply fostered while I am there it has increased every day since.

Figure 66: *Olipa, baby Trinity, Gloria, and I enjoying a break together Olipa and Gloria work at the ACTION house, helping with housework. These two cheerful ladies have become dear friends of mine, never failing to greet me with a big hug after their arrival every morning.*

LISTENING AND OBSERVING

PAPA'S POINT *A CONSTRUCTION JOURNAL*

> In order to understand the social impact of the built environment, the best place to start is to explore the user experience. By interviewing and observing users, you get a feel of the architecture and how it affects the users' physiological comfort and psychological well-being. In other words, it is essential to study the built environment through an anthropological lens if you strive to grasp and further improve the social performance of architecture.[1]
>
> AART Architects

Running simultaneously to the *Mudzi Owala* project, another building assignment suddenly presents itself. Unlike *Mudzi Owala*, however, my involvement in this much smaller-scale project is minimal, even though it takes place, quite literally, in my own backyard. Instead, I use this opportunity as an exercise in daily listening and observation over the course of several months. The following journal documents this process, the insight gained, and the relationships developed through the experience.

Figure 67: *View of sunrise from the backyard, where Papa spends his mornings in meditation*

June 9, 2016

"It's time to make my pavilion," declares Papa one afternoon, reclining backwards in his chair as everyone is gathered at the dining table after lunch.

"What pavilion?" I interrupt with great interest.

"Oh, for a long time Papa has dreamt of having his own small pavilion in the backyard for daily meditation, reading, and prayer in the mornings," Mama explains. "He wants a little outdoor space to be able to work while watching the sunrise."

With a twinkle in his eye, Papa eagerly describes his dream "outdoor room." As director of ACTION Malawi Trust, his current, humble workspace is less than desirable, a closet-like niche in the wall that has been haphazardly converted into an office with a desk and bookshelf. It opens directly into the communal dining room with no privacy or barrier against noise, which makes it impossibly distracting to work around mealtimes.

Andreas, our resident handyman-project manager, begins to work out the resources required to build such a pavilion. He suggests that Papa and himself head outside to the backyard right then and there, to map the location and size of the desired shelter. Of course, I follow, greatly intrigued by this side project.

It is decided that the pavilion will be named "Papa's Point." It is Papa's "primitive hut," a concept foundational to the origins of architecture itself. For thousands of years, people have tried to imagine the genesis of architecture in such terms: a wooden hut and the creative spark that initiated the history of building. Many artists and writers have worked in similarly basic structures, and the popularity of beach huts, tree houses, and garden sheds suggests that the idea has wide appeal. There is a comfort in the purity of origins for artists, holidaymakers, and historians alike a narrative neatness in going back to the start. Inspiration for some seems to depend on solitude and on going back to the beginning, to the most elemental building on wiping the slate clean before the act of creation. Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, Dylan Thomas, Roald Dahl, and George Bernard Shaw all wrote in huts; Heidegger and Wittgenstein philosophised in shacks; Gustav Mahler and Gauguin died in their respective cabins.[2]

June 10, 2016

Using Abusa Phiri's network of contacts, we have hired a local man to be the primary construction worker and foreman. An older gentleman with a thin, small frame, he has worked for Abusa Phiri in the past and proven to be a meticulous, diligent, and honest worker – traits that are surprisingly difficult to come by here. Working with him as apprentices are a rotating cycle of hired workers that I have come to befriend – Sam, Promise, Daniel and John – four young men in their early twenties who normally work shifts as round-the-clock house guards and spend the rest of their time completing "piecework," or what we call a variety of other odds and ends, such as this construction job.

The master builder and Daniel arrive at the house for a preliminary site visit, to survey the land and review the project demands. Based on the rough outline that Papa and Andreas have marked on the ground using scraps and string, along with their project design description, the master builder estimates the number of bricks required, which Papa will need to purchase before building can proceed.

Figure 68: *(above) Andreas, Mama, Daniel, and the master builder discuss the future location and design of Papa's Point*
Figure 69: *(below) Daniel and the master builder clarify their task*

Figure 70: *(above) The master builder manually digs the foundation cavity*
Figure 71: *(below) The foundation cavity is fully excavated*

June 13, 2016

This morning, I wake to find an unusual number of people at the house. As usual, Gloria and Olipa, our house staff, are busy working in the kitchen and filling the empty air with their distinctive and energetic giggling. Mtinga knocks on the door, ready to begin a day's work of translation. I also notice a new presence in the backyard – two workers who have begun the job of digging the foundation for the pavilion! Today, it is Daniel who is assisting with the foundation work. I am happy to see him, as he is the most sociable one of the four, the one to whom I have become the closest. I hurry out to the back in order to greet him and the master builder.

"Muli bwanji!"

Daniel already knows me, so I shyly introduce myself to the master builder, "Ine ndine Adrienne, dzina lanu ndani?" (I am Adrienne; what is your name?)

Surprised to see (and hear) this greeting from a strange girl, the master builder (whose name I unfortunately could not catch) breaks into an enormous smile and introduces himself without taking a break from digging.

I walk around with my camera, asking the builder if it is okay for me to take some pictures of him working. He looks completely befuddled, without a clue as to why I would be interested in observing his tedious, manual labour. It is understandable, since I am sure it is unusual for a young woman to be interested in construction and building. Moreover, it must be unusual for a foreigner to pay any attention to such a mundane, insignificant task.

I attempt to explain the reason for my unusual interest due to my field of study and work back at home in the realm of architecture, but the world of academia and even the concept of architecture as something to be studied and practiced separate from the act of construction is so far-removed a concept from their everyday reality that understanding is impossible. Thus, here, I am not viewed as an architecture student. I am by no means an expert who has gained any respect or authority. I am not taught nor consulted about any of these aspects of construction that I would like to learn from them. Instead, I am a young girl who is interested in watching these men work and build. I am simply a spectator, viewed as a clueless tourist. It is a humbling realization.

By the end of the day, Daniel and the builder finish excavating the foundation for the pavilion, which is about 200mm wide and 300mm deep. Tomorrow, they will begin to build the foundation walls.

June 14, 2016

Every day at ten in the morning, I am assigned to make breakfast for the workers and guards at the house to coincide with their morning break. A day's work usually begins at six in the morning since everyone in the house is awake by five thirty, so by ten o'clock, the workers are more than tired, hungry, and ready for a brief repose and some refreshment. Their breakfast consists of two slices of bread each one with peanut butter, the other with margarine plus a cup of very weak tea with the usual three heaping spoonfuls of sugar. I enjoy the daily ritual of preparing this and stepping out into the welcoming sunshine to make my rounds around the property, greeting everyone with a "Muli bwanji" and a cup of tea.

Today, Daniel and the builder are laying bricks at the corners of the excavated foundation perimetre. I am surprised to see this, as I was expecting a poured concrete mixture in the excavated cavity with brick laid on top, instead of brick being laid at the very bottom. Curious, I ask Daniel to show me how to make the mortar. He explains that the mixture consists of five "wheelbarrows" of sand (the only unit of measurement he knows) plus one bag of cement, and an unspecified amount of water.

I suppose they will pour remaining mortar into the cavity of the foundation wall in order to strengthen it; I will have to take another look tomorrow to clarify what exactly it is they do to the foundation. It is difficult to get clear answers, since the builder does not speak English, and Daniel is not really a builder himself but a manual labourer who simply does what he is told. I have to try and piece together the process from what I observe, which requires very regular visits to the site to monitor progress and catch every step as it is completed (rather quickly!).

Because of all the water used to make the mortar for the pavilion, we run out of water at the house again today just before I am about to cook dinner. The guards bring us a few buckets of water from the Dietrichs' house across the street to supply our manual dishwashing and bathroom needs, to be sparingly rationed. Apparently the property next to the Dietrichs is owned by Mr. Loga, one of the richest men in Ntcheu and the previous Minister of Education before he resigned after Malawi entered under Banda's rule. He is so wealthy that he owns his own borehole on his property, which costs around five thousand dollars to set up. In this society where established relationships are key to survival, Andreas knows how beneficial it is to become friends with Mr. Loga, a potential ally if he should ever want to ask to use some of his water supply or a variety of other favours. He says he is working on building this relationship, but is not yet at the point where he feels comfortable approaching this powerful man for water.

Using nails staked at the corners to which string is tied to keep the walls plumb, the four corners of the foundation walls are finished by the end of the day.

Figure 72: *(above) The master builder ensures right angles and lines that are plumb as he begins to lay bricks at the corners of the pavilion*

Figure 73: *(below) The master builder and Daniel begin laying bricks in the foundation cavity*

Figure 74: *The master builder begins by laying bricks at the corners of the foundation cavity*

June 15, 2016

Today, the entire foundation has been laid in bricks – five rows of bricks around the perimetre until flush with grade. It is Sam's turn to make mortar, so I ask him about his methods to compare with Daniel's description. Varying slightly from Daniel, Sam's recipe for mortar is four wheelbarrows of sand plus one bag of cement and seventy-five litres of water (measured using three twenty-five-litre reused gasoline jugs).

Figure 75: *Sam mixes mortar with cement, sand, and water filled in gasoline tanks*

Figure 76: *(above) After the foundation perimetre has been laid, the corners are again built up first*

Figure 77: *(below) The master builder and Daniel fill in the walls between the corners of the pavilion*

June 11, 2016

The half walls are beginning to go up. The master builder begins laying bricks at each of the four corners in a pyramid shape and moves outwards, making sure the wall is plumb by aligning it against a taut piece of string tied to each of the corners. Space for an eventual door is left open in the west wall.

Figure 78: *The master builder continues to lay bricks to form the rest of the walls*

Figure 79: *(above) The pit of mortar surrounded by piles of sand and bags of cement*
Figure 80: *(below) The master builder continues to build the walls*

June 18, 2016

Construction of the half brick walls continues, leaving holes at the top for the wood framing above to be inserted and installed. The creation of mortar requires so much water taken from the house supply, that the house has been out of water quite frequently. Funds for this emergency water supply, which costs five thousand kwacha per tank, comes out of our monthly food budget. It requires someone to make trips to the local boreholes in town to find and collect extra water. Often, the closest boreholes to us are completely dry, and we must drive further and further out to find a supply of water. Observing these "water runs," the local villagers comment, "Somebody really wants water!" Our house ladies, Gloria and Olipa, may be small in stature, but they are as strong as oxen. (Instead of "How are you?", their animated morning greeting is, "Are you as strong as a horse today?!") They refuse to let me help them carry these exceedingly heavy full water tanks off the jeep, because they do not want me to hurt myself, as I surely would.

Every day, the master builder and his apprentice eat lunch together a few metres from the construction site, cooked by the apprentice over a simple rocket stove. Knowing that I am not disturbing any construction work at this time, I take this opportunity to go over and chat with Daniel as he makes nsima, tomatoes, and "soya pieces," fueling the rocket stove with branches and twigs he has gathered. With delight and fascination at the girl who does not know how to cook the national staple food, he shows me how to make nsima the ratio of how much maize flour and how much water he mixes to create the proper consistency and introduces me to "soya pieces" by trying to describe its taste. Aware that it is unusual for men to cook in this culture, I ask him what will happen after he gets married.

"Oh I will not cook anymore, it is my wife who will do all the cooking."

"But why?" I prod teasingly, knowing full well that this is simply the culture. "I see right now that you can cook well. Why do you have no problems cooking for yourself now, but you will stop when you get married? Why can't you help your wife to cook?"

Daniel bursts into a fit of giggles, as if the idea is simply absurd. "But this is…this is…what is the word…this is the 'bachelor' way! If other men in the village see me cooking for my wife, they will mock me for being a weak man!"

"Do you know what?" I continue teasing. "You need to keep cooking if you want a mzungu wife! We like men who cook!"

Daniel laughs and laughs as he continues to stir the nsima. Finally it is ready, having reached a thick porridge-like texture, and he scoops piping hot handfuls into a red plastic bowl. He takes the metal pot containing fried soya pieces and tomatoes off the stove and places both dishes on the ground. Calling the master builder over for lunch, the two men sit on the ground around the dishes and begin grabbing handfuls of nsima out of the communal bowl with their bare hands, using it as a natural utensil to pick up the rest of the food before bringing it straight to their mouths. Quickly, the nsima disappears, handfuls at a time, devoured with ease. Their lunch break is full of lively chatter jokes, laughs, and conversation that I unfortunately cannot understand. This scene of social bonding is one that I sadly must observe from a distance.

Figure 81: *Daniel shows me how to make nsima of the proper consistency*

Figure 82: *Daniel cooks nsima over a rocket stove in the backyard*

June 20, 2016

Today, the apprentice is Sam instead of Daniel, who has guard duty at the Dietrich house. In the afternoon, Promise comes over to relieve Sam from his work, because Sam has night shift guard duty that night and needs to nap during the afternoon to ensure that he is awake and alert throughout the night. Promise, a hardworking orphan, is in the process of applying to medical school with funding from ACTION Malawi Trust, and has an upcoming entrance test on Tuesday. I ask if he is ready for the test, which will be held at the school campus in the northern tip of the country, many many kilometres further than he has ever travelled before in his lifetime. With confidence and seriousness, he says that he has been studying all week. The walls are finished by the end of the day. The floor of the pavilion is filled with rough, bright red earth.

Figure 83: *(above) The master builder and Sam complete the pavilion walls*
Figure 84: *(below) The master builder cleans up the mortar joints of the walls*

Figure 85: *(above) Daniel lifts his stick to pound the dirt floor*
Figure 86: *(below) The earth shakes each time Daniel's stick hits the ground*

June 21, 2016

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

This morning I awake to shaking and a thundering sound. The whole earth trembles, and I can feel my bed shift with each thud. Boom, boom, boom. The rhythm is steady, like a ticking clock, and there is no way that I can keep sleeping any longer. I race out of the house to see what is going on outside, where I find the master builder and Daniel pounding the dirt floor using a concrete block attached to a wooden stick in preparation for the pouring of the concrete floor. The thuds are heard and felt throughout the entire house all day long, making it extremely difficult to focus and complete any work. I am amazed I do not have a headache from the incessant pounding. Noticing me standing and watching him pound away, Daniel grins and asks if I want to try and help him out. I suspect he wants me to take over so that he can take a break from working. However, as much as I desperately want to take up his offer and give it a shot, I politely decline. The point of the exercise this time is not for me to get involved. It is an exercise in humility, in recognizing that I am here to watch and learn how the locals build, not to interfere and distract with my own sorry attempts to "help." Inevitably, the story comes to mind of the young, well-meaning yet incompetent high schoolers who travel abroad to help build a house only to have the locals tear down their work at the end of each day and rebuild it overnight in order to ensure structural integrity. Besides, I would make an absolute fool of myself, with my weak and inexperienced arms. I am no builder. Instead, I spend the afternoon sitting in a hanging basket chair, appreciating and soaking in the breathtaking view over the valley for the last few precious hours before the assembly of the grass fence will cover the view forever.

We are out of water again, due to construction. The borehole at the top of the hill is empty, and only yields one extra tank of water for us. Simultaneously, the power is out for a portion of the house – including the entry, hallway, bathroom, and office – due to a circuit issue.

In the evening, long after Daniel and the master builder have left for the day, I cannot help myself. My curiosity gets the better of me. Alone and under the cover of the dark of dusk, I sneak out to the pavilion and pick up one of the concrete pounding tools. I just want to try myself! The floor has already been half ground into fine dirt, so I tell myself that there's nothing that I can do that would harm or interfere with their work. Boom, boom, boom. I can feel the earth shake beneath my feet; it is a strange sensation. I spend five minutes trying to pound the floor myself, lifting and dropping the concrete-on-a-stick for ten seconds at a time until my arms ache and I must take a few seconds' break. It is fun for five minutes, but as expected, the manual labour takes an enormous amount of strength and stamina. My curiosity quickly satisfied, I leave the tool exactly where I found it, and run back into the house.

Figure 87: *The floor remains one-third stamped at the end of the day*

Figure 88: *The pounding tool lies unused, tempting me to give it a try*

June 22, 2016

This morning when I go out to see the building, the master builder isn't there, but Daniel continues to pound away. When he notices me, he asks, "Where is Sarah?"

"I am not sure, I think she is still inside. Why?"

"I heard she was pounding the floor last night!"

Completely taken aback, I am speechless for a second. Then I sheepishly confess, "That wasn't Sarah! That was me! How did you know?! Nobody was here at the time!"

Daniel points his finger to several men working by the fence of the property, explaining that they had told him earlier that morning.

Later, I relay the story to Sarah, who warns, "Yes, they see everything you do here. You have to be careful what you do, they notice everything about you!"

She jokes that we must be more careful about going outside, about what we are seen wearing, about whether we have bathed before leaving the house, because you never know what the locals will notice and say about you amongst themselves behind your back!

Again, Daniel offers me the stick to help him pound the floor. This time, I give in. I work alongside him for a few minutes to demonstrate my interest and to avoid the impression that I am scorning his work or superior to him in any way.

"Wow, you are strong!" he comments.

Embarrassed at his polite but completely false flattery, I stop and hand him back the pounding tool.

The teaching of skills goes both ways. Having agreed to pound the floor with him, Daniel suddenly asks me to teach him how to play the guitar. Every morning, I spend half an hour sitting outside and playing the guitar, surrounded by nature and singing joyfully to myself. Of course, he has noticed this morning ritual of mine (as with so many other things, I have just come to realize!) I gladly agree and schedule a lesson time with him later that morning.

At the scheduled time, Daniel punctually sits on the laundry block waiting for me to come outside with the guitar. However, I am running late with my chores and tell him that he must wait for a few more minutes until I am free. Eventually, just before lunch, I bring my guitar outside and find him sitting in great anticipation, just like a child waiting for someone to come out and play with him. We sit together on the laundry block, and he joyfully takes the guitar from me with gleaming eyes and an impish grin, like a child on Christmas morning. Immediately, he starts to strum (fairly well!) and sing along softly to a song which I faintly recognize as an old hymn, "The Love of God." He tells me that he is fortunate to have learned a little guitar at school, but has no opportunity to play when he is not in music class. I can tell that music is his passion from the look of longing and delight in his eyes as he practices with my guitar. He lists the songs that he has learned both at church and

Figure 89: *Daniel continues pounding the floor, urging me to join him*

Figure 90: *Promise proudly shows me the local newspaper, where the official admission results to Ekwendeni College of Health Sciences have been published, with his name on it!*

at school, including some in English. Flipping through the sheet music that I own, he recognizes a few songs (even naming the singer, to my surprise). I start to play myself, and we both sing along together. Seemingly able to read the sheet music, he follows along very well. Rhythm and harmony come so naturally to him. It is a beautiful, wonderful moment, sharing this passion with him. Music overcomes language barriers, overcomes differences in culture. In this moment, we are better connected than ever before.

An hour later, it is time for him to go. Asking me to print out more sheet music for him, I know that he is dying to have another music session together. I hope to make it happen.

The house is still half without power and without water, so the boys fetch a few buckets of water for us from the Dietrich house. As they enter the house to drop off the pails in various rooms including our washroom, Mama yells out, "Men in the hall!" to warn me and Sarah in case we are improperly dressed (in trousers!).

Promise telephones the house this evening to let Mama know that he has passed his entrance test for medical school! He is staying overnight at the school campus because he is waiting to be called for the next step in the admissions process, an oral interview which will likely happen tomorrow. This is amazing and exciting news! We are all rooting for Promise. This could be his ticket to a brighter future.

Figure 91: *The floor is covered with a layer of crushed red brick and coarse gravel*

June 23, 2016

The floor has been stamped flat. Today, Sam is out working on the floor while the master builder cleans up the walls and fills in the foundation cavity.

I go outside to play the guitar for a while. Nkhata the guard comes over to listen for a bit, asking if I am singing "spiritual hymns." Eventually, Sam also wanders over to tell me, "It sounds good!" He wants me to teach him some songs as well.

June 24, 2016

Today is a very cold day. Sam is working on the floor, adding a second layer of crushed red brick, coarse gravel, and small rocks, while the master builder adds a final top course to finish the brick half walls and cleans up the reveals of mortar. There is still no power throughout the day.

June 28, 2016

At this point I should be accustomed to the lack of water due to construction, but somehow I manage to forget, and run out of water halfway through my shower. Thankfully, I had just finished rinsing my hair before wondering why all of a sudden the water turned scalding hot – it was because we had run out of cold water. I finish my shower by soaping my entire body and then pouring a cup of boiling hot water over myself in quick spurts so as not to burn myself and to conserve the remaining hot water in the system.

Sam is working in the back, pounding the second layer of vibrantly red bricks mixed with rough gravel on the floor.

Figure 92: *(above) Before: crushed red bricks and coarse gravel*
Figure 93: *(below) After: the floor has been partially stamped flat*

Figure 94: *(above) The master builder pours and smoothes down a layer of rough concrete over the floor of crushed brick and gravel with a trowel*
Figure 95: *(below) The work is manual, dirty, and labour-intensive*

June 29, 2016

In the morning, I find Sam pouring rough concrete over the levelled floor. But by the time I return to the house after facilitating a youth leadership class in the afternoon, the builder is finished! Liquid concrete has been poured and smoothed down with a "shine" tool.

As I enter the house, Gloria exclaims, "Where is your camera?! Did you take a picture today?! The work is finished now! You missed it!!" Having observed me taking pictures of the work every day for the past few weeks, I am thoroughly amused that she has become equally invested in my endeavour and seems to be even more disappointed than me in my failure to catch today's progression of activity.

Figure 96: *The concrete floor is smoothed with a flattening tool*

Figure 97: *(above) Andreas demonstrates how the current cross-bracing design would obstruct the view for Papa sitting inside his pavilion*

Figure 98: *(below) Andreas discusses alternative cross-bracing plans with the wood framing workers*

July 6, 2016

Today is Malawi's Independence Day, a national holiday. When I ask Gloria and Olipa what that means, they gleefully explain, "Oh it's when we were free from the azungu!"

The concrete floor has finally dried, and the wooden framing is installed above the half brick walls, attached using steel plates. The master builder has brought some extra workers to help with this task. After the wooden posts have gone up, it is time to add cross-bracing. However, just before the workers are about to nail a horizontal beam at the midway point of the height of the wooden posts, Andreas, the ever-alert site supervisor, runs outside to stop them.

"Wait!" he cries. "Don't put the beam there!"

He drags a lawn chair into the pavilion and takes a seat, looking north at the glorious view of the valley and hills beyond.

"See, that beam is right at eye level when I am sitting in this chair! It will block my view! That is not what we want! Is there some other way to add the cross-bracing so that we can preserve more of the view?" he discusses with the workers, trying to help them understand the design issue.

The workers seem perplexed and bewildered. They do not usually come across such requests. This design thinking and critical problem-solving is not part of their job description.

"I am the builder; you are the one with the idea!" the main worker exclaims.

Together, Andreas and the workers discuss alternative options and come to an agreement with new instructions for the cross-bracing. I find this encounter very insightful. Does the worker's statement illuminate the difference between an architect and a builder?

Daniel comes over to play the guitar with me in the backyard, sitting in our usual spot on the laundry block under the shade of a large fruit tree while the sun sets around us, from four to five-thirty in the afternoon. I ask him to teach me songs in Chichewa. He calls John the guard over to sing in Chichewa with him, and John is more than glad to join in. Immediately, they jump into a hearty rendition of a song I recognize and have named "Sindhi Munthu," but without teaching me the words, as usual. I have the hardest time learning songs here, because everyone expects me to just hear and know what they are saying! Still, I try my best. I join in where I can, happy to share a piece of their culture with them.

Figure 99: *Daniel and I making music together inside the pavilion – a party at Papa's Point!*

July 7, 2016

Today is the last day before a team of visitors arrives to stay for the next three weeks. I know it is the calm before the storm. Starting tomorrow, the house will be taken over by eight more people until it is bursting at the seams, and I will miss the peace and quiet and space that I have come to love over the past few weeks.

To commemorate this last day of enjoying the house to myself, I decide that it is officially time to inaugurate Papa's Point with a special dedication ceremony. I invite Daniel via Facebook Messenger for his final guitar practice to be held for the first time not on the laundry block, but within the still-unfinished pavilion. He appears at the house around eleven thirty in the morning, right as I start to cook lunch for the household. I explain that I am currently busy, and ask him to return in the afternoon.

At three in the afternoon, Daniel returns with a smile and a spring in his step. Standing on the new concrete floor within the half brick walls of the pavilion, we completely lose track of time as we find ourselves immersed in the world of music. As with many of our recent lessons, I lend Daniel my guitar and borrow Sarah's mini guitar (called a guitarelli, different from a ukulele!) so that we both have instruments to play simultaneously. Daniel is a fast, determined, and enthusiastic learner, picking up new songs very quickly and practicing over and over again until he can get it right. Shy about singing while playing at the same time, I encourage him to sing louder. For a while, during his break from work, Sam enters the pavilion to join us in learning a few new songs.

The mood is festive; it's a party at Papa's Point! Before we know it, two hours have swiftly passed and darkness is about to set in. We all agree that it has been an afternoon well spent. The magic of Papa's Point has already begun.

Figure 100: *(following page) The partially completed pavilion at sunrise – a perfect haven for quiet, early morning meditation*

EMPOWERING OTHERS

INTRODUCTION

> I would say that it's not about us going and building things. I know it's a term that's used a lot, and especially in international development it can become quite meaningless - but I think capacity development is critical.[1]
>
> Rubbina Karruna,
> Chair of *Architecture Sans Frontières UK*

The spectrum of socially engaged design is mapped here from what Esther Charlesworth terms the "design cowboy" who helicopters in hoping to save the victims of the latest disaster to the "one-time PR Project," to the "activist architect," to the final aspiration of an activated community empowered to address its own conditions.[2] Several precedent projects have been roughly categorized based on factors including the project's aspiration, scope, timescale, and context within the architect's overall body of work. The "one-time PR project" represents the single socially-themed project that many architects use to boost their otherwise commercial portfolio, while the "activist architect" reflects an ongoing and consistent theme of work that addresses the broader spectrum of society. It is clear that time the amount of time the architect spends not only designing but preparing, researching, and being involved in the community is a major differentiator. Not surprisingly, the amount of work in the contemporary field of architecture drops significantly from "design cowboy" to "activist architect." Five emergency shelter designs are submitted onto the world wide web per week, but true investment is rare.[3]

One of the biggest required shifts in thinking is that of architecture as a process, not an object or a single built project a different model of architecture, a different relationship to the client.[4] Unlike other professions such as medicine or engineering, which can work toward finding universal solutions to address issues such as a cure for a disease, these universal solutions do not exist in architecture.[5] Perhaps this is part of the reason why it appears that doctors and engineers currently

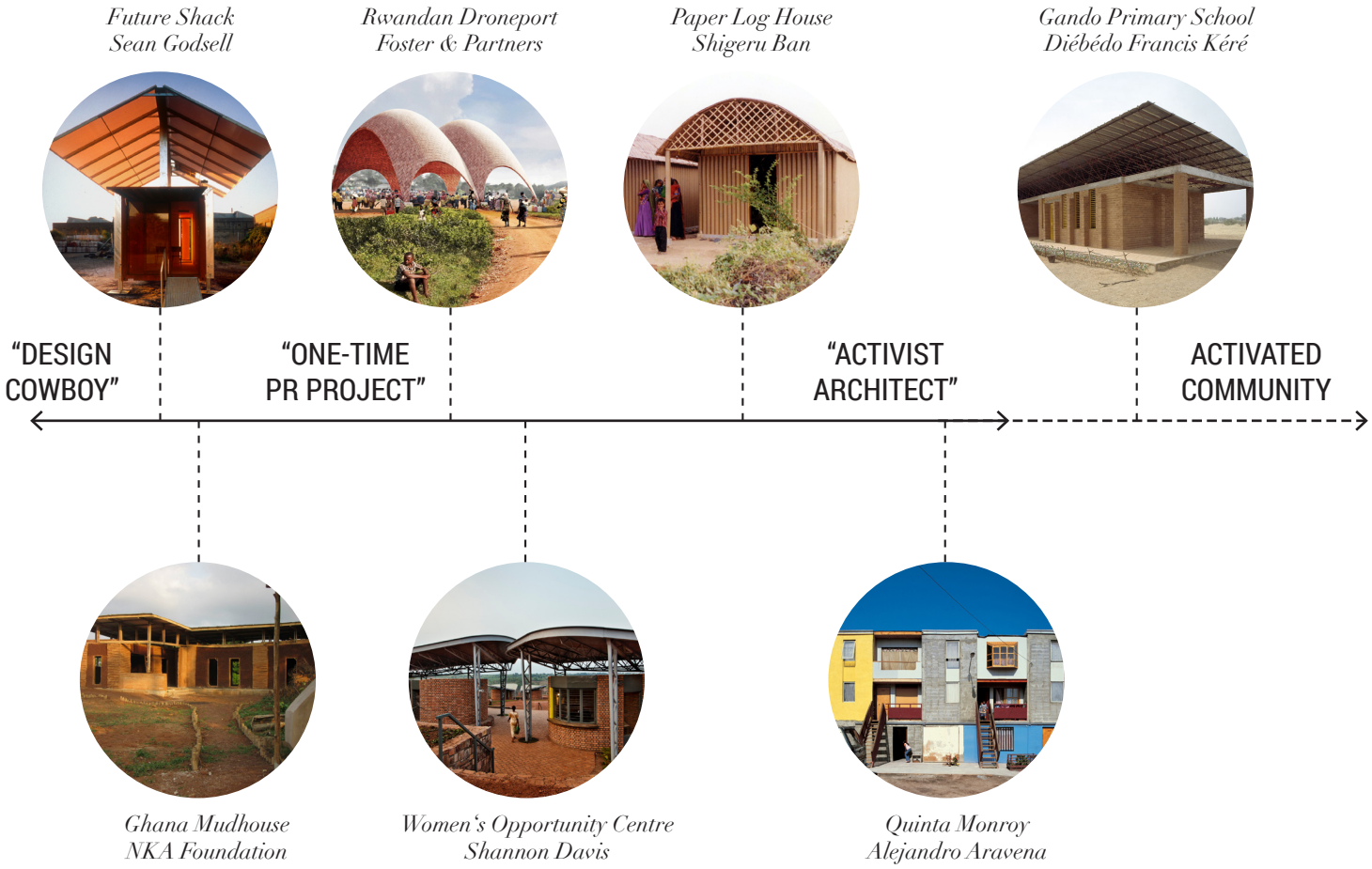


Figure 101: *Spectrum of socially engaged design projects mapped from the "design cowboy" (least involved) to an "activated community" (longest lasting)*

1 "DESIGN COWBOY"

Future Shack
Sean Godsell

"Weaving a Home"
Abeer Seikaly

Emergency Shelter
Nic Gonsalves + Nic Martoo

Emergency Shelter
Carterwilliamson Architects

2 "ONE-TIME PUBLIC RELATIONS PROJECT"

Rwandan Droneport
Foster & Partners

Women's Opportunity Centre
Shannon Davis

Artists' Residence
& Cultural Centre
Toshiko Mori Architect

Education Centre Nyanza
Dominikus Stark Architekten

3 "ACTIVIST ARCHITECT"

Paper Log House
Shigeru Ban

Butaro Hospital
MASS Design Group

Quinta Monroy
Alejandro Aravena

Gando Primary School
Diébédo Francis Kéré

Figure 102: *Precedent projects organized into three categories: Design Cowboy, One-time PR Project, and Activist Architect*

have such robust involvement in social work, whereas architects are relatively absent:

> We cannot make a universal prototype for temporary shelter like the universal solutions that the medical profession has for different diseases. That's why I think it's easier to send a doctor over there to help the people, but in architecture there is no universal solution. You must have the local people working, local architects.[6]

It is interesting to compare the two most well-known architectural non-profit organizations, *Architecture for Humanity* and *Architecture sans frontières* (*Architecture Without Borders*). While the former focused on sending teams of volunteers on global building projects yet filed for bankruptcy last year, the latter – which was, in fact, founded earlier and is still active – focuses instead on creating networks of knowledge, both between themselves and the other branches that make up ASF-International, and also with the local governmental departments, NGOs, smaller humanitarian charities, and local people that can benefit from their help and expertise.[7] When one-size-fits-all resolutions do not exist, local empowerment becomes all the more critical.

The authors of *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* define the empowerment of others as "allowing them to engage in their spatial environments in ways previously unknown or unavailable to them, opening up new freedoms and potentials as a result of reconfigured social space."[8] Spatial agents, therefore, are those who effect change through the empowerment of others.

One fairly successful example of the attempt toward empowerment through capacity development is the Gando Primary School by Diébédo Francis Kéré, recipient of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2004.[9] This project is unique in the fact that its architect, Diébédo Kéré, is a native of the same small village of Gando for which the school was built.[10] Kéré was thus acutely aware of that particular community's needs, and the demand came from the village itself. His engagement as an architect was simultaneously intimate and modest. A focus on capacity development allowed local villagers to gain skills used in subsequent projects. The involvement of the community in the project's development and execution inspired bottom-up initiatives in neighbouring villages to build their own schools:

> All the people involved in the project management were native to the village, and the skills learned here will be applied to further initiatives in the village and elsewhere. The way the community organized itself has set an example for two neighbouring villages, which subsequently built their own schools as a cooperative effort. The local authorities have also recognized the project's worth: not only have they provided and paid for the teaching staff, but they have also endeavoured to employ the young people trained there

in the town's public projects, using the same techniques.[11]

Most importantly, the project's overall aspiration was not to be a standalone building but to act as a catalyst for the community's potential growth, ultimately without the presence of an architect at all. With multiple projects organized following this initial primary school, such as a library and housing for teachers, this precedent seems to demonstrate the closest anyone has ever gotten to reaching that goal.[12]

Figure 103: *(above) Gando-native Diébédo Francis Kéré*
Figure 104: *(below) Classroom of the Gando Primary School in Gando, Burkina Faso*

Figure 105: *(above) Gando Primary School, long elevation*
Figure 106: *(below) Gando Primary School, short elevation*

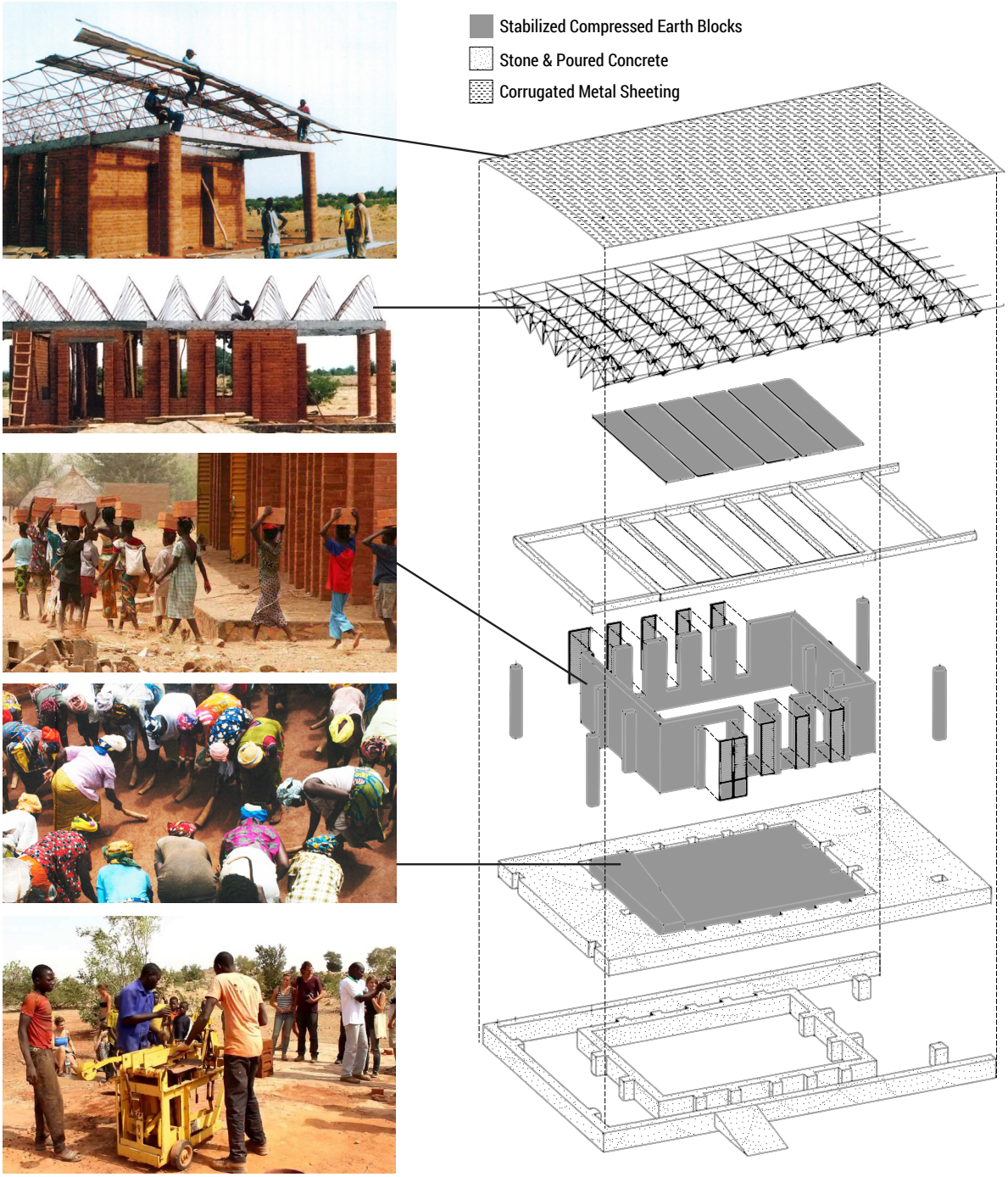


Figure 107: *(above) Construction process of Gando Primary School Widespread community involvement was critical during all stages of the construction process.*

EMPOWERING OTHERS

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

"How tall should this building be?"
"What should be the ratio of ingredients in this concrete mixture?"
"How should we design the stairs?"

A million questions are brought to Papa over the course of the day – from site workers, the foreman, Abusa Phiri, and even the local architects hired to carry out the work. In theory, the importance of empowering the local people to initiate and carry out their own projects is well acknowledged and agreed upon. However, over the course of the *Mudzi Owala* project, one difficulty in making this happen has surfaced.

In North American practice, these questions being directed to Papa would rarely be directed to the "client," but rather managed by the lead architect in collaboration with the general contractor. That is indeed their defined role! However, here in Ntcheu, all concerns – however minor and however outside his expected realm of understanding – must be brought forward before Papa for official approval before it is conducted. Why? It appears to be an issue of finance and liability. From the very beginning, the traditional model of architecture sets out a specific power relationship between the client – the person that has the money – and the architect – the person who will provide a service and will be paid for providing this service.[13] However, in Canada, the architects and other involved professionals are supported by insurance to help cover the potential financial damages caused by any mishap in the project due to their decision-making and/or execution of the work.[14] Thus, fully liable yet equipped, they maintain control and authority over their work. There remains a factor of risk, of course, but one must trust in the expertise and professional capabilities of the team to uphold the company. This risk, however, is much more real and more serious in impoverished communities, where often the architects are not covered by insurance and simply do not possess the finances to be liable for potential damage. Therefore, with all of the funding coming from the client – whether one benefactor or a partnership of non-governmental organizations – all liability becomes shifted onto the client and they remain fully in command. Struggling local architects may feel paralyzed, unable to innovate or think critically under the hand of the one who pays. "Power to the people" may be the goal, but not always achieved.

EMPOWERING OTHERS

METHODS OF EMPOWERMENT

The previously described observation from *Mudzi Owala* has led to questions of how to enable true empowerment. In rare circumstances, such as in the case of the Gando Primary School, the client and the architect are the same entity. In this situation, Kéré initiated the project as his own client, raised his own funds, and led and managed the design and construction of the project.[15] A similar scenario can be found in the METI School in Bangladesh led by Anna Heringer, which won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2007.[16]

In fact, initiating and raising funds for one's own projects comprises one of the techniques advocated by the authors of *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* in operating within an expanded idea of architecture.[17] Here, the project starts even before the writing of a brief, with architects and others as proactive initiators working through negotiation with others to get a project started.[18] In the work of Rural Studio, for example, as much effort is placed in identifying potential opportunities, raising funds, negotiating permissions, and procuring materials as it is in the design of the buildings themselves.[19]

Another method is to ensure that the community itself funds its own grassroots operations and relies as little as possible on outside sources for resources in order to be fully self-reliant and self-sustainable. Methods of community fundraising and raising extra income to support community projects have been attempted in many different contexts.

Often, however, these two strategies are combined, with roles played by both the architect and the community. A group may start a project by initially raising their own money, and later supplement these with sweat equity, governmental or other private funding, such as in the case of many small projects within the Ecovillages network.[20] Alternatively, groups of activists, architects, or planners, often backed through governmental funding, can help to obtain financial support from outside agencies on behalf of others such as community groups. The funding obtained is often used for a variety of purposes, including the delivery of professional support, a feasibility study, the building of a prototype, or raising finance.[21] In these cases, conducting work is not necessarily about generating income, but about advocating common agendas that would not otherwise be addressed.[22]

An example of the joint effort of an architect working with the community is found in the work of architecture firm, Elemental, led by Alejandro Aravena, whose semi-built, low-income housing projects in the towns of Iquique and Constitución,

Chile, provide an innovative and successful approach to contribute to society using architectural tools to address non-architectural questions, such as how to overcome poverty.[23] The "Half a House" project in Iquique maximizes the $7,500 US government subsidy provided to pay for the land, the infrastructure, and the architecture, by designing a masterplan that uses the subsidy to build only half of an eventual two-storey house, with the other fifty percent of each unit's volume to be eventually self-built by the owner as resources allow.[24] The initial structure provides a supporting framework to facilitate the expansion process. Thus, with only adequate financial resources to build thirty square metres of space per unit, families can still attain the final scenario of a seventy-two square-metre house, and the social housing becomes an investment whose value increases over time, which can be a key turning point to fight poverty.[25]

Similarly, in Constitución, half of the two-storey houses are identical while the other halves are completely unique. Components that families would not have an easy time building alone, such as concrete foundations, plumbing, and electricity, have been finished for them.[26] The Chilean government pays for roads, drainage, sewage, garbage collection, buses, and any other necessary infrastructure to focus on building a good community. Residents simply have to provide their time, labour, and any extra materials.[27] Thus the role of the architect providing amenities that individuals would find difficult to achieve on their own despite having the energy or time is combined here with governmental funding and sweat equity by community members to achieve much more than would be possible by one party alone.

While one path to empowerment involves exploring alternative methods of finance and structuring the roles of the parties involved, another promotes improving accessibility to education in order to train and provide local actors with an increased ability to address architectural issues within their own communities. Across the world, even in North America, entry into the study of architecture is typically reserved for academic "high achievers" and is only the first hurdle into a still rather elitist and male-dominated profession.[28] In many parts of the world, established architectural programs remain few and far between.

One of the newest initiatives in empowerment through design education is found in the African Design Centre (ADC), which offers a new educational program that seeks to address the current dearth of professional designers across the African continent.[29] The ADC, which opened its doors in Kigali, Rwanda in the autumn of 2016, aims to be a fellowship-based hub of creativity, innovation, and education that will be integral in building the houses, schools, and healthcare clinics needed to preserve the integrity of ever-changing, ever-growing African communities.[30]

According to a 2013 report published by the United Nations Development Programme in conjunction with UNESCO, Africa is due to see globally unprecedented population growth and urbanization in the next several decades.[31] The same report

Figure 108: *(above) "Half a House" incremental housing project at Quinta Monroy*
Figure 109: *(below) Villa Verde incremental housing project*

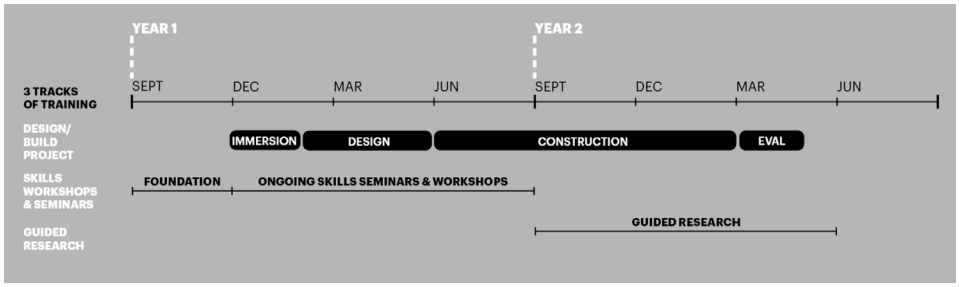
cites that by the year 2030, more than half of Africa's population will be urban residents.[32] This, in combination with a population that is expected to grow to include as many as 1.2 billion people by 2050, means that current and future generations of African architects, designers, and engineers will need to devise creative strategies to cope with the shifting needs that such a population boom will create.[33]

Christian Benimana, the Rwandan-born architect and programme director who is leading the implementation of the ADC, highlights the massive lack of homegrown training and education that exists on the continent in the fields most relevant to the building of infrastructure.[34] The existence of the ADC hopes to tackle this: to mold the next generation of architects and designers whose perspectives and skills can bridge these current gaps.[35]

The Centre is built under the stewardship of MASS Design Group, a pioneering, human-centred, non-profit design firm with offices in the United States and connections to Rwanda.[36] The ADC's multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary approach referred to as Design-Build Education strives to create sustainable, project-based educational opportunities for young Africans with degrees in fields such as Urbanism, Landscape Architecture, Industrial Design, and Engineering, among others.[37] Fellows and apprentices of the ADC will be trained in impact-driven, sustainable approaches to architecture and construction through the design of much-needed houses, schools, and hospitals. This pedagogical model involves site and context analysis, design, construction, evaluation, and research in techniques, materials, and elements of craft to lead to design innovations that truly and appropriately serve the public good.[38]

As the increasing demands of the continent will require great investment in infrastructure and human capital, the ADC aims to change the landscape of architectural and design education, and in so doing, help Africa adapt swiftly and skillfully to the complexities of exponential population growth and urbanization. This mission of facilitating training and education for young creative Africans hopes to encourage them to feel better equipped and able to engage their own communities. More confident in their knowledge and capabilities, they are then able to make their own decisions and take on liability for their work without feeling obliged to constantly consult the foreign client or abide by his rules.

In many contexts, architecture is already being "done" without "architects." Mutual knowledge means abandoning the hierarchies embedded in most professional relationships ("I know more than you do"), and instead welcoming contributions from everyone in the spirit of a shared enterprise.[39] We do not act as professionals in the protective sense of the word, nor pay attention to this alleged status, but instead "engage with the world as expert citizens, working with others, the citizen experts, on equal terms."[40]



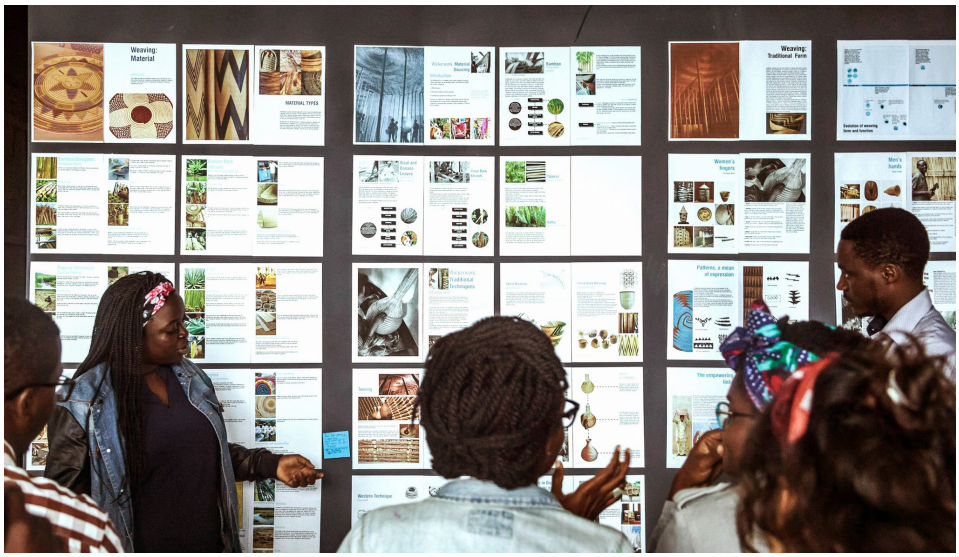


Figure 110: *(above) Inaugural African Design Centre in Kigali, Rwanda*
Figure 111: *(middle) 2-year curriculum of African Design Centre fellowship*
Figure 112: *(below) Student work at the African Design Centre*

EMPOWERING OTHERS

ABUSA PHIRI

Returning to the case of *Mudzi Owala*, this project would be nothing without Abusa Phiri. He is the one born and raised in the community, the one with the most passion and personal investment in the project. Apart from an ability to raise funds and possession of architectural training, he is the "Diébédo Francis Kéré" of Ntcheu. When Papa, Mama, Sarah, Andreas, and I are inevitably gone one day, he is the one who will remain to keep things running. It is my hope that the collaborative process of *Mudzi Owala* and my role as a spatial agent will help to train and equip Abusa Phiri and other local citizens such as himself with the ability to engage in his environment with new potential and capacity in our absence, with the support of his community.

In the end, I acknowledge my limitations as an outsider to the community in Malawi with which I have attempted to engage. Does this imply that projects are only successful or appropriate when executed by a local architect? Am I always to be excluded from this territory of work despite my genuine wishes to understand and be of service? Although I know that I cannot emulate Kéré that closely within the scope of the thesis, it nevertheless represents my investigation of potential frameworks of practice in this context. This endeavour potentially marks only the first step in a more prolonged relationship with the community.

Figure 113: *(above) Some of the 25 village chiefs and headmen/ headwomen (traditional local authorities) who have been involved in the work, development, and use of Mudzi Owala (Abusa Phiri stands in the back row, far right.)*

Figure 114: *(below) Local village women working on site at Mudzi Owala, collecting water and transporting materials*

Figure 115: *A group of men and women from the community church volunteer to cut down the long grasses that spring up during the rains*

MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

> Even in its failures and there are aspects of this in Dr. Fathy's work much may be learned. One thing is clear. There is no substitute even in the world of speed, mass, and abstraction for the gifted individual who cares.[1]
>
> William R. Polk, on Dr. Hassan Fathy's work

Ping! My cellphone chimes to notify me that I have received a new Whatsapp message. To my surprise, as I glance down at the screen, I see that it is from Papa; he has sent me photographs of the property that I once walked, no longer lush and full of unnavigable weeds and thorns, but newly cleared and ready for construction. My mouth drops in shock. The view is almost unrecognizable, save for the unchanged backdrop of the valley below, the carefully saved mango trees sporadically dotting the landscape, and the familiar mountains against a bright blue sky. My heart skips a beat at the realization that the visionary planning we had worked on together only a few months ago was not simply a studio exercise nor a quickly shelved feasibility study as so often happens to design charrettes in the North American corporate world. Instead, it is moving forward and coming to life! The prospect of being able to follow along this journey from afar, via ongoing relationships with the people there and the magic of online communication, is extremely exciting.

In this day and age of technological advances and online communication, maintaining relationships is much easier than before. I message, email, and skype Papa, Sarah, Andreas, and his wife Debby as much as our schedules (and their availability of electrical power to charge their electronic devices) allow. Hearing their stories of life in Malawi as it continues after I have left, and the anecdotes that I can finally fully understand and to which I can laugh along, helps to ease the reverse culture shock as I settle back into Cambridge. I miss life there dearly. I miss the people, most of whom do not have access to an online presence and cannot

communicate with me except face-to-face. Were it not for Papa and his crew acting as the link between myself and the world I entered for a brief period, I would have lost all contact with that community as soon as I boarded the plane leaving Blantyre.

Fortunately, as the months pass and I continue to work on this thesis, I receive rolling updates from Papa mostly in the form of site photographs and short captions of the progress of the work being carried out at *Mudzi Owala*.

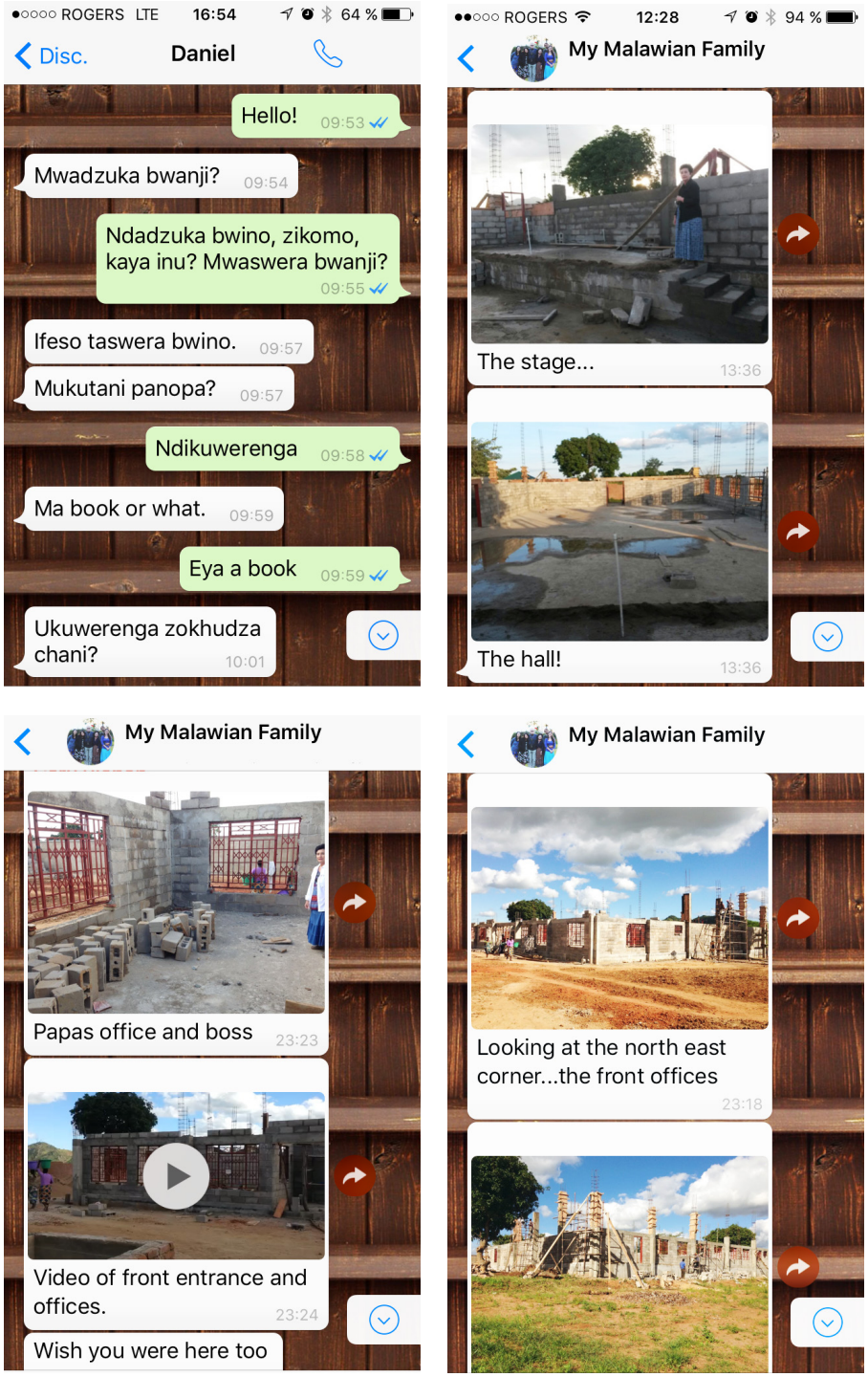


Figure 116: *Snapshots from my ongoing Whatsapp conversation with friends in Malawi*

MUDZI OWALA

Figure 117: *Snapshots sent via Whatsapp of the ongoing construction at Mudzi Owala, September 2016 – Present*

MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

PEOPLE OVER PROGRAM, REPRISE

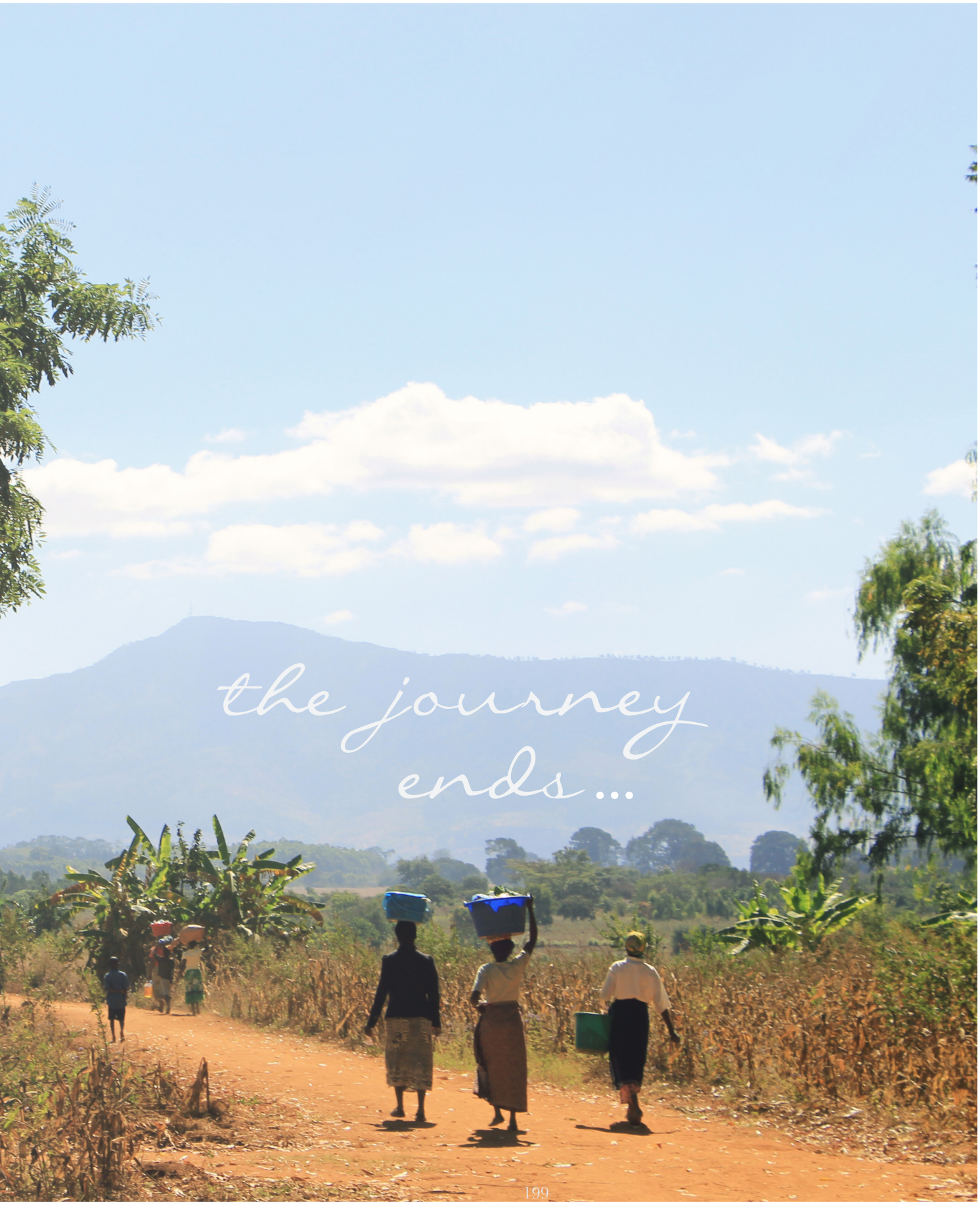
> Do we meet each person curious about the miracle of a human being that we are about to connect with? Or do we meet a poor person that we are about to help? [2]
>
> Peter M. Senge

Peter Senge's thought-provoking question probes into the heart and motivation of those particularly working among more vulnerable communities. Do I view others as needy victims to be helped with my "expertise," or do I treat each opportunity as a collaboration between equal partners? Am I a design cowboy, swooping in to save the day and just as quickly riding away when the job is "done," with no intention of keeping in contact with those I have met?

No matter where one is working or the context in which one is found, the most important aspect of the endeavour is not the finished product, but the relationships formed whether with teammates, clients, authorities, or communities and hopefully maintained for future possibilities of collaboration.

The well-known and ever-true African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," also rings true when adapted as, "It takes a village to make things happen." Networks of knowledge can only be shared if relationships are upheld and developed.

Figure 118: *Mudzi Owala – March 14, 2017*
Figure 119: *(following page) Three women walking along a major path in Thondwe, Zomba*


the journey
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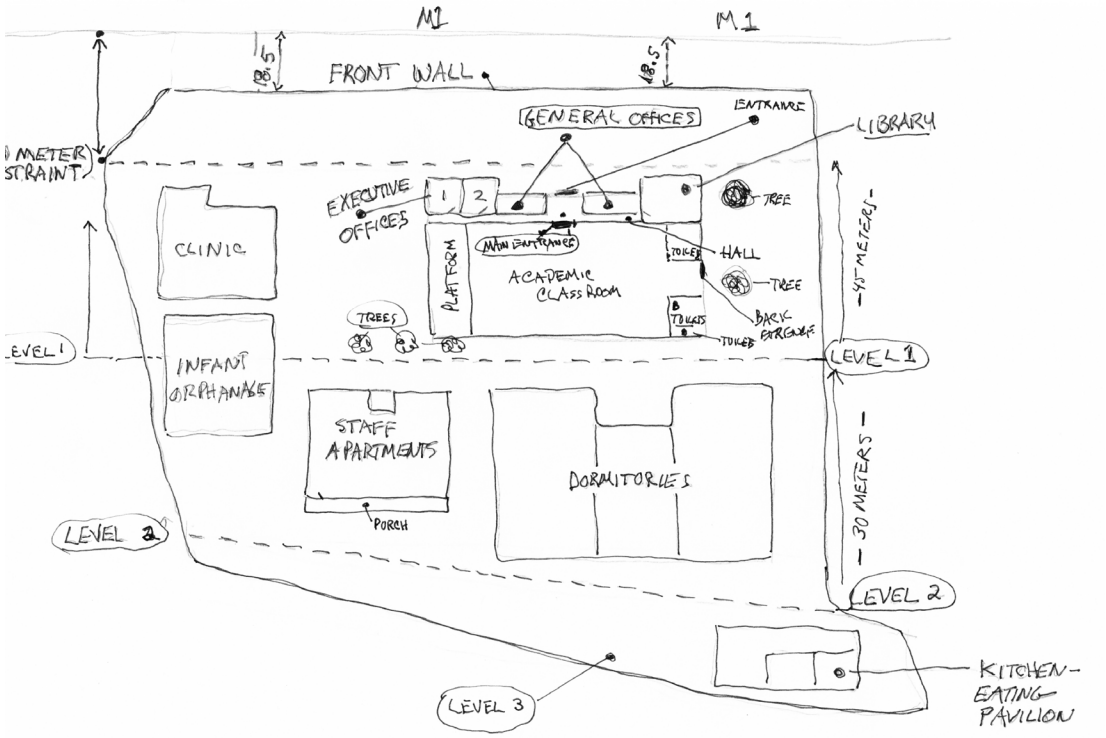

Figure 120: *Hand sketch of updated Mudzi Owala site plan, emailed to me by Papa – August 15, 2016*

Figure 121: *(following page) Revised Mudzi Owala site plan – September 1, 2016*

September 1, 2016

It has been over a month since I returned back to Canada, back to life in Cambridge, Ontario. The reverse culture shock is intense. Ironically, the wild dogs that kept me awake when I first arrived in Malawi, barking unceasingly in the early morning, are now so noticeably absent that I cannot sleep because it is too quiet outside. Where are the rooster's crows?! Where are the roaring trucks speeding past the house at ten o'clock in the evening with booming megaphones advertising tomorrow's market deals?! There are so many little things that I miss. It is so difficult not to be judgemental of everyone's first-world lifestyles after having been immersed in such poverty.

Papa emails me to let me know that he is preparing to leave Malawi soon for a trip home to the United States to present the project of Mudzi Owala and raise support from various sponsors and donors. For this purpose, he asks if I would be able to send him an updated site plan to accompany his presentation. He provides me with the latest information in terms of required setbacks, and a sketch of how he envisions the land terracing to be developed in order to accommodate the program. The land grader is scheduled to come sometime next week to level the site into three separate planes and to clear any remaining wild bush, so an updated design would assist in determining where the terracing should occur.

On my laptop back at home, I continue working where I last left off and aim to send a drawing back to Papa within a few days. I draw a project that, although I know is real and ongoing, I have not seen past the initial stages. I know that the design I propose will undoubtedly evolve and change drastically as site conditions arise, as local architects and builders take over, as costs run over budget and decreasing funds require cost-cutting, as mistakes and adjustments are made. The true Malawian spirit of impermanence and adaptability will shine through.

Even if the final result is unrecognizably different from its initial vision, I simply hope to return one day to find a thriving community, to find the school filled with a new generation of eager students, to find the medical clinic stocked and running, to find agogos supported by the orphan care centre. May Mudzi Owala truly become a Village of Light, providing hope and a brighter future for the people of Ntcheu and beyond.

DR. GARY L. RIEBEN
SEPTEMBER 2016

A 0.87-hectare property has been recently purchased by ACTION Ministries Trust for the purpose of building a new Bible School with lecture hall, library, offices, student dormitories, on-site staff accommodation, medical clinic, and orphan's nursery. This preliminary drawing portrays what the potential future campus might look like in supporting AMT's goal of reaching the communities surrounding the Ntcheu district of Malawi and beyond.

LEGEND

1 Storage
2 Guardhouse
3 Water Tank
4 Borehole
5 Clinic
6 Covered Waiting Area
7 Orphan's Nursery
8 Main Lecture Hall (200 seats)
9 Library/Seminar Room
10 School Executive Office
11 School General Office
12 School Washroom
13 Student Dorm - Male (50 beds)
14 Student Washrooms - Male
15 Student Washrooms - Female
16 Student Dorm - Female (50 beds)
17 Staff Washrooms
18 Kitchen/School Storage
19 Kitchen
20 Covered Open Air Cafeteria
21 3-Suite Apartment Building (incl. Director's apt)
22 Underground Latrine

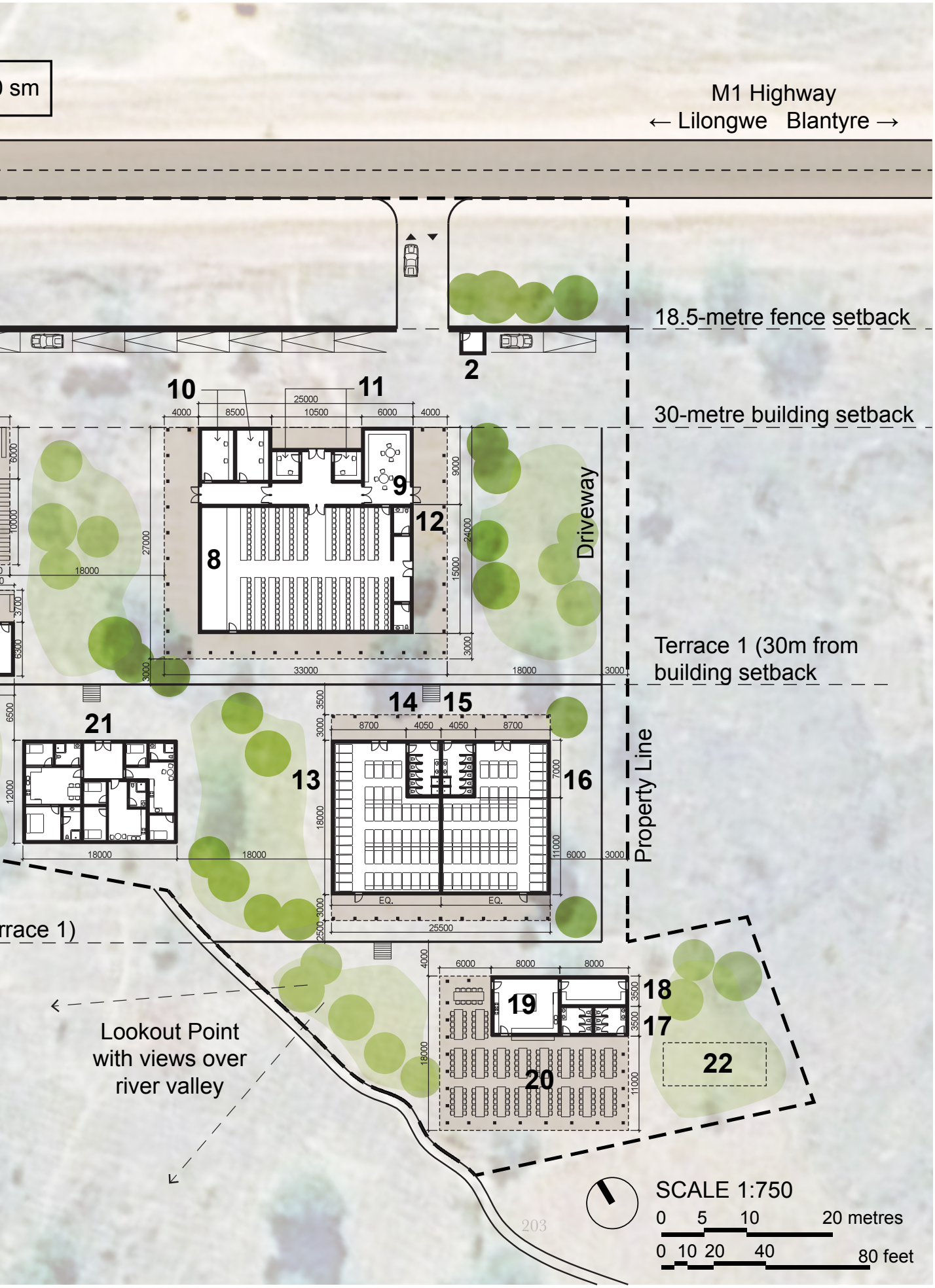
0 sm
M1 Highway
← Lilongwe Blantyre →
18.5-metre fence setback
30-metre building setback
Terrace 1 (30m from building setback
Driveway
Property Line
Lookout Point with views over river valley
2
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
SCALE 1:750
0 5 10 20 metres
0 10 20 40 80 feet

Figure 122: *Mudzi Owala site before grading – September 2016*

Figure 123: *Mudzi Owala site after grading – December 2016*
Figure 124: *(following page) Mudzi Owala site*

CONCLUSION

"You are an architect? What is that? What is architecture?"

I can tell by the blank stares from the Malawian villagers to whom I introduce myself that this is not a common topic of conversation.

What is this profession? What is the role of an architect?

The architecture of the 20th century was characterized by numerous attempts to assume responsibility for the welfare of all levels of society. The modernism of the period after World War I, in particular, aspired to create a new and better society through the medium of architectural planning.[1] Yet the ethos of design as responsible for the totality of society has faded lately, as public perception of architecture is increasingly defined by the eye-catching creations of "starchitects" luxury designers whose skyscrapers and museums in economically successful centres of the world reach only a very small segment of global society.[2] The architectural discipline, working in its traditional mode of "meet client and receive brief draw up design scheme get necessary approvals get project built and then hopefully get it published and awarded," does not adequately deal with the complex challenges that the contemporary world presents.[3] Thus the lessons from Malawi presented in this thesis highlight other priorities and ways of thinking as part of a toolkit to challenge the norms of architectural practice.

According to Andres Lepik, pioneering approaches in contemporary architecture intended to facilitate social change do not arise from a single overarching theory or a specific group of architects, but share a number of basic criteria: they are located in regions and places with ongoing social problems; they are based on intensive, on-site research by the architects; they are designed with specific local conditions in mind; they integrate the building's future users into various phases of its planning, whether in design or execution; they were initiated for the most part by the architects themselves; they aim to produce exemplary, comprehensive, holistic, highly collaborative solutions; and their goal, above and beyond the project's basic function, is to positively transform local communities in lasting and multifaceted ways.[4] The architects of projects such as these conceive of themselves not as omnipotent designers, but as moderators of a process that gradually often (but not always) leads to a form and a built result.[5] In most cases, the architect must work with small budgets, demonstrating that good design is not first and foremost a matter of money. Socially engaged architecture is not concerned merely with fulfilling functional demands, but equally aspires to a high aesthetic standard. From the greatest levels of affluence to the deepest levels of poverty, beautiful design is a value that is positively received by

all human beings and contributes to lasting improvement in self-esteem.[6]

I am particularly inspired by the actions of Michael Murphy. He was only in his second year of architecture school at the Harvard Graduate School of Design when he attended a lecture by physician and Partners in Health (PIH) cofounder, Dr. Paul Farmer. Farmer talked about the global work of PIH, the many groups fighting AIDS, and the need for better delivery of healthcare programs worldwide. After the lecture, Murphy approached Farmer and asked, "How can I get involved? Can I help?"[7]

After establishing a relationship, Farmer eventually commissioned Murphy to plan and build the Butaro District Hospital in Rwanda; not long afterwards, Murphy went on to found the non-profit architectural firm, MASS (*Model of Architecture Serving Society*) Design Group, which continues to undertake projects of similar scope and mission today.[8]

Not every architecture student receives such an opportunity, but the period of education is a time when the social relevance of architecture can be grasped through practical experience. A number of architecture schools have established programs for this purpose; perhaps the internationally best known is Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio, a design-build program established in 1993 in Newbern, Alabama.[9] In this type of educational process, students learn to work in teams and are thus not limited to the influence of a single teacher. Similar educational concepts have been employed at other universities as well: the Design Corps founded by Bryan Bell in Raleigh, North Carolina, which constructed housing for migrant farm workers; Hank Louis' DesignBuildBLUFF at the University of Utah, which undertook projects for inhabitants of the Navajo reservation; Peter Fattinger's Design-Build-Workshops at the Technische Universiät in Vienna; the BASEhabitat initiative at the Kunstuniversität in Linz; and the Design.Develop.Build initiative at the RWTH in Aachen.[10] The opportunity for students to plan and build self-directed projects for economically disadvantaged regions teaches them how significant results can be rapidly, directly, and cost-effectively achieved.[11] As many of these initiatives operate not in areas close to the corresponding architecture school but often in countries halfway around the world, students are further challenged to acquaint themselves with local conditions far from familiar comforts. A more altruistic social consciousness in architectural education and policy-making is required to actively promote these directions in architecture and support them on a larger scale.

Mirroring the aims of the educational programs above, perhaps the most significant lesson learned through my time in Malawi is the importance of proactively becoming involved in projects based on real-world engagement and experience. The biggest, most daring, and yet most rewarding decision I made was to arrive in Malawi without a preconceived project idea or intention. Despite others' concerns that my ambitions were too vague and open-ended, and that I would come away from the

trip without much upon which to base a thesis, I refused to impose ideas without first understanding my place. If a project were to develop, the idea had to stem not from my desires and analysis but solely from the needs of the community. Though my visit and offer to contribute were self-initiated, my work was not. Because of this approach, my ideas of what was most needed and appropriate in this particular context were redirected and refined. Instead of jumping to the conclusion that more orphanages are necessary to address the staggering amount of orphans struggling to survive in the country, I learned through observing relational ties within the community that orphanages are, in fact, destructive to this core aspect of Malawian society. A much more contextually appropriate solution is to support existing family structures in caring for orphans within their own extended circles, as is the goal of *Mudzi Owala*'s Orphan Care Centre. The very fact that the *Mudzi Owala* project came to my attention during my stay completely independently of my own plans clearly demonstrated to me that the role of the architect must include stepping out into the community with dedication, humility, and awareness, concerned with the needs of greater society. As Alejandro Aravena explains,

> What our practice has been trying to do is maybe two main things. One is to have a starting point as far away from architecture as possible. The starting point is problems that every single citizen understands; I mean insecurity in the city, pollution, segregation, congestion, the kind of things where your daily life is affected. Then you contribute with design to try to offer a possibility...I was kind of skeptical of architects trying to deal with problems that only interested other architects. The jargon, the way we talk about our issues, nobody except an architect understands. I guess that sense of irrelevance and isolation has always worried me.[12]

Another skill practiced in Malawi is the critical ability for architects to deal with unpredictable and contingent aspects over which they have limited power, as opposed to static properties over which they retain nominal control, such as the ability to manipulate form and technique. Life in Malawi demonstrated that a level of indeterminacy must be embraced, and that a loss of control must not be seen as a threat to professional credibility, but as an inevitable condition to be worked with in a positive light:

> There is [a fear] that if you go with bare hands and empty eyes into a given problem that you will lose somehow the control over the final quality of your design. But that is only a problem if you are judging your design from the artistic side. There's more than that. There are other forces at play – functional, environmental, political, social – and from that point of view the lack of control might be a good thing…The beauty is that if there's any power in architecture, that's the power of synthesis. All those forces at

> play eventually can be synthesized in a design. We do not have to become policy makers or economists. Our contribution to a problem is as designers. The training and the specific knowledge allows you to go through more complex issues.[13]

Similarly, the focus in design education must be placed less on a polished, finished, highly resolved project marketed using enticing visual images, and more on an ongoing process of research acknowledging a variety of potential solutions that can be adapted and used by others as part of an open, flexible building process.[14] Continuous technological and material development are as essential as the singular built object. A more well-rounded evaluation of a project's success must take into account its full life cycle, requiring not only the presentation of architectural drawings but also metrics for post-occupancy evaluation and ways to facilitate community engagement and appropriation in the longer term.

While new technological advances such as 3D modelling and fabrication, animated facades, and parametric form-making are important, they tend to be overvalued at the expense of less technologically-centred approaches to architecture. The expertise required to solve deep problems and make critical decisions is not as explicitly developed. Exercises in how to engage the community through interviews and surveys, hold public consultation meetings and participatory workshops, work predominantly in teams, and opportunities to conduct multi-disciplinary research to inform design decisions (such as consulting real doctors, teachers, or social workers as appropriate) are all ways to enhance architectural education to better equip the architects of the future.

More than ever before, today's architect must learn how to understand and work with communities from backgrounds different than his own. What can be gleaned from my stories of Malawi are the skills and strategies that truly matter: developing emotional and social intelligence; exercising a capacity to relate and process what is unsaid; working with a spirit of inclusiveness and belonging; and learning the importance of and ability to work well in groups of different interdependent players.

The goal is not to transform the Majority World into our world, but to see our world through another lens. Simply because a project has been developed among rural areas in poverty does not mean that its lessons and ethics cannot be adapted to a more familiar context. These are ways of thinking and behaving that are relevant, and applicable, in a multitude of design contexts, from the commercial office tower to the infrastructure of a newly developed neighbourhood. These lessons are testimony to the possibility of how, by looking at the world in a different way, one is able to find other ways of doing architecture.[15]

Mutual knowledge requires expanding the means by which knowledge is distributed and developed. Thus stories – which can be shared – are equally as, if not more, productive as drawings (which often exclude the non-expert), and ongoing

actions are privileged as much as final deliverables.[16] Above all else, living in Malawi among the oral-based traditions of most African cultures has taught me that narrative can be used as a means of engaging with a place. As the Dutch firm, Crimson, notes, "Being able to tell a good story, a gripping story, a touching, exciting, spectacular story, is the core of designing and planning."[17]

Figure 125: *Entrance of Mudzi Owala with new road sign – December 26, 2016*

EPILOGUE

Somewhere thirteen thousand kilometres away from my current homebase of Toronto, Canada, in between the cities of Lilongwe and Blantyre, just beyond the town of Ntcheu, stands a newly erected sign along the roadside of the M1 highway. It proudly declares the beginnings of a new project in the area – Mudzi Owala, or Village of Light. The freshly painted letters on the clean, concrete pedestal mark the future home of the ACTION Malawi School of the Bible campus, the Kloehn Medical Clinic, and Infant Orphanage Care Centre. Dozens of curious villagers' eyes peer through the open windows of every packed minibus that roars past. News spreads like wildfire across the rural villages, and it is not long before everyone is aware of this slated addition to the community. The sign, built far preceding the first foundations of any building on the property, is significant. It is a celebratory symbol, offering a future vision that allows villagers to react and respond within their communities.

There is a common expression I hear frequently in Chichewa all across Malawi. Used as a response to a multitude of questions, anyone who has spent any amount of time among the local people will have come across the words pang'ono pang'ono, "little by little."

"Mwaswera bwanji?" (How are you this afternoon?)
"Ndaswera bwino pang'ono."
The spirit of this response in English would be, "It's going (little by little)."

"Moyo ukuyenda bwanji?" (How is your life walking?) "Pang'ono pang'ono."
"How's school going?" Pang'ono pang'ono.
"How is your recovery?" Pang'ono pang'ono.
These words are always delivered with an inner sense of optimism, not despair or resignation.

"Sindikudziwa Chichewa kwambiri," (I don't speak very much Chichewa) I often lament during attempts to converse with my Malawian friends. With a giant, gentle, friendly smile and an uplifting boost of encouragement, they reply, "Pang'ono pang'ono!"

The expression exemplifies the long-suffering but cheerful spirit of the Malawian people. They persevere in hoping, working, and trying to reach their goals, and they know most things only come little by little.

Figure 126: *A new borehole being drilled at Mudzi Owala – December 28, 2016*

Houses in Malawi are built in stages as families generate enough income to purchase materials and supplies. Driving across the country, one can spot numerous half-built, half-abandoned empty houses waiting for the next layer of bricks, or a roof, or a component to be repaired. Sometimes, in times of higher prosperity, things move fairly quickly and much work can be accomplished. Other times, when resources are scarce, lesser priorities grind to a halt and are left to be tackled another day.

"How is your house coming along, Mtinga?" I ask one day.

"Oh it is still not finished. The walls are only as high as my knee but I have run out of bricks. Hopefully I can continue soon," he replies with typical unfazed determination.

Pang'ono pang'ono. *And so this attitude of perseverance and patience permeates all aspects of life in Malawi. There is always a goal, but no definitive completion date. Work that needs to be done continues to evolve as resources become more or less available. Mudzi Owala will be completed, pang'ono pang'ono.*

I have adopted this philosophy over the course of the thesis. The concept of continuous process, of iterative evolution, and the acknowledgement that nothing happens instantaneously is universally applicable to the designer's mindset.

Life moves on, pang'ono pang'ono! I hope to return once again to Malawi, for this adventure continues. The character of Mudzi Owala continues to develop in the story of my search for community engagement and subsequent development as an architect. This time, when I step off the minibus feeling a welcoming sense of familiarity, I will be greeted by the sign at the gates of Mudzi Owala, forever acting as a reminder of the lessons learned in this place.

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