

ANNA

HERINGGER

Essential Beauty

Project Texts

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MUSEO
ICO

METI SCHOOL

Rudrapur (Bangladesh), 2005-2006

Rudrapur lies in the north of the most densely populated country on Earth, Bangladesh. Poverty and the lack of infrastructures drive many people from the countryside into the cities. The local NGO Dipshikha attempts to follow new paths with its program; the intention is to give the village new perspectives and to teach the people about the value of the rural world in all its complexity. Part of this is a special school concept that instills in the children self-confidence and independence, with the aim of strengthening their sense of identity and enabling them to engage in joyful learning. The teachers help the children develop their own capabilities and to use them in a creative and responsible way. The building reflects these ideas in terms of materials, techniques, and architectural design: further development of existing building techniques with earth and bamboo, in a way that contributes to sustainability by harnessing local potential and strengthening regional identity.

The building techniques were chosen in accordance with their potential to be replicated by the villagers. The schoolchildren were involved in the building process in the hope that they would learn the value of sustainable construction and reflect upon it. Besides that, imagine you are a small boy or girl standing in front of the finished building, knowing that YOU built it with nothing but your hands and the dirt beneath your feet... That gives an enormous boost of confidence in your own capacities.

DIPDII TEXTILES

Rudrapur (Bangladesh), 2012-

This is not a shirt; it is a playground. It is a house, a neighborhood. A haven of freedom. The majority of Bangladeshis live in rural areas. Rudrapur, a typical village of Bangladesh, is a showcase of how people are able to build their habitat with their own resources, using their hands, local mud, and bamboo. They also produce their food and many everyday objects. The communities have developed over generations and the social bonds that form them are strong. Women feel comfortable outdoors; for the children, the village is a fantastic and safe playground. Elderly people keep watch over a goat or chat under a tree. As a result, the village offers a high degree of embedded freedom.

But there is a shortage of jobs. This is why people leave villages like Rudrapur. They move to the urban hubs of textile production. They exchange the homes they own for rented rooms, and pay for childcare, for water, for sanitation, for transportation. Women don't feel safe on the streets. In many cases, the only place one feels free in is that same rented room with a TV set, shared with others in shifts.

But there is another way; an alternative without the pressure caused by the demand for mass-produced clothing. Dipdii Textiles is designed to foster decentralized production in a village where the quality of life and space is both humane and free.

ANANDALOY BUILDING

Rudrapur (Bangladesh), 2017-2020

The Anandaloy building harbors a center for people with disabilities and also the workspace of Dipdii Textiles. It is the accumulation of the learning experiences had in previous Rudrapur projects. But unlike those projects, which were carried out under the supervision of a German financial entity, this one was managed by a Bangladeshi contractor and a team of mud-and-bamboo workers from the village, disabled people among them. As for Studio Anna Heringer, know-how transfer is key, and this project is proof that know-how does take root.

Places for therapy are rare in the country and altogether inexistent in that zone. Often viewed as an outcome of bad karma from past lives, disabilities in Bangladesh are more hidden than accepted. But architecture can shed light on issues and communities that are ordinarily overlooked, and can thus help raise awareness.

In relation to other buildings in the area that present a rectangular layout, Anandaloy breaks out of the mold. It dances in curves, the ramp winding playfully around an inner structure. The building's architecture explores the sculptural potential of a particular mud construction technique that is called 'cob.' No formwork is needed, and curved walls are as easy to obtain as straight ones. On a symbolic level, the building celebrates the fact that we human beings are all different. With its joyful curves it radiates a message: 'Diversity is wonderful!'

DESI ELECTRICAL TRAINING CENTER

Rudrapur (Bangladesh), 2007-2008

The DESI building harbors classrooms, offices, and two residences for the school instructors. Typically, in rural Bangladesh all of the various household activities – eating, sleeping, washing... – are performed in separate structures built around a central courtyard. The DESI building is a new interpretation of the traditional Bangladeshi homestead.

In general, the living conditions of poor families, especially in developing countries, are traditionally sustainable. It's the step from low-income to middle-class status that often causes a major shift in direction. With more income, living styles begin to change – from own production and self-sufficiency towards consumption. The uncommon, imported, and exotic starts to be more attractive than what is locally available. As a result, economic power flows into external markets.

The DESI building reacts to this situation. It provides a model for a new, better, more appropriate way of living in the rural areas of Bangladesh: an improved living standard (for the middle class – in this case teachers) that will preserve the country's traditional level of sustainability. It is not money that makes a difference, but care for good craftsmanship, planning, and design. The objective is a fair architecture and building process that – regardless of social and financial status – encourages technical development of traditional construction methods instead of advertising expensive and imported materials.

HOMEMADE FAMILY HOUSES

Rudrapur, Vishnupur (Bangladesh),
2007-2008

These three single-family dwellings are the result of hands-on workshops for students and young architects that were conducted in the villages of Rudrapur and Vishnupur. Eight students of BRAC University in Dhaka and five from BASEhabitat – a studio in the architecture department of the University of Arts in Linz, Austria – traveled to some remote small villages in the north part of Bangladesh to continue what had been started with the METI School: working hand in hand with local people in creating a model for sustainable, modern architecture.

The ultimate objective of the HOMEmade project is to improve the living conditions of local populations and to strengthen regional identity through the preservation of traditional, vernacular techniques of constructing homes and the maintenance of high levels of sustainability. Here this was accomplished by raising a trio of model, prototype houses for low-income families, designed by young local architects and carried out by craftsmen among the villagers who had for the purpose been given training in contemporary techniques of constructing with rammed earth and bamboo. The HOMEmade project also gave the young architects included in the program the opportunity to directly apply their new know-how in other regions of the country, and the local artisans to use their newly acquired skills in raising more modern mud dwellings elsewhere in the region.

ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS

Kutupalong (Bangladesh), 2019-

The serious conflict between the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group in Myanmar, and the predominantly Buddhist country's military forced the former to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Rohingya villages in Myanmar were burned to the ground and people were murdered, tortured, and raped: crimes against humanity. Kutupalong in the south of Bangladesh has since 2018 been considered the world's largest refugee camp. Around 860,000 people live in an area of 13 square kilometers, exposed to natural calamities like cyclones, landslides, and floods. Kutupalong's original densely forested, hilly landscape was cleared. The emergency shelters made of plastic sheeting and bamboo sit on raw clay. Children tear the last roots out of the earth for firewood. The settlement patterns vary, depending on who or which organization is in charge. Some follow the natural hilly topography. In other areas the original hills were flattened with bulldozers in order to take in more people.

Form follows...? Form follows rules and regulations, fire safety, access to machinery, material resources, money, political interests, personal interests, engineering, time, climate, religion, ethnicities, scale, power, exhaustion, strife, fear... love.

Currently the women in the camp are working on the plans that document the different settlement patterns of encampments in Kutupalong. This exhibition contributes to the project.

THREE BAMBOO HOSTELS

Baoxi (China), 2013-2016

In just three years (2011-2014) China consumed more cement than the United States did in the last century. Most of the people now living in concrete housing blocks used to inhabit dwellings raised with natural materials. This is the trend all over the world and there is a dire need for alternatives.

This project was part of the Longquan International Biennale, which was a celebration of the beauty of bamboo. Our studio was commissioned to build two hostels and one guesthouse. The structure of the hostels presented a core made of stones and rammed earth which contained all the services and the stairs. Attached to it were the rooms where the dwellers sleep, designed like Chinese lampshades gleaming at night. Surrounding them was an expressive structure made of woven bamboo.

We tend to think that sustainability is about scarcity. But what defines nature is abundance. Building materials like bamboo and earth are available in large quantities everywhere. These three structures are a statement that sustainability is a celebration of nature's vast resources.

Meanwhile, the hostels show that traditional and natural materials can be used in contemporary ways. It matters little how old a construction material is; what's important is our creativity in using it.

MAJIAYAO CERAMICS MUSEUM AND MASTERPLAN

Lintao (China), 2014-

On the banks of the Yellow River in Lintao (Didao), back in the 12th century, was an important trade center along the Silk Road. From 3300 to 2000 BC the area was inhabited by the Majiayao culture, representing agricultural communities in the region at large; a culture best known for its painted pottery. Hence the museum quarter of Lintao is designed to host exhibitions about the Silk Road, with a special focus on local ceramics.

Throughout our journey through Gansu province we passed by ancient caves dug into the mountains. This was the inspiration for the design of the ceramic museum. The ancient vessels, which survived over centuries safely buried in the ground, find their place in the open niches set on the outer wall of rammed earth. The second earthen wall, as a middle layer, harbors contemporary ceramic pieces as well as the infrastructures that serve the museum. The third mud wall forms the inner courtyard.

Clay is the material of both the content and the architecture built to contain it: fired for the vessels that were used to store water and preserve other liquids, raw for the roof tiles, walls, and floors.

Our objective was to design the museum not only for display purposes, but also to stimulate visitors through the celebration of creativity; a place for contemplation and ultimately for reconnection with the archaic powers of culture.

TATALE EDUCATIONAL CAMPUS

Tatale (Ghana), 2020-

This project for Tatale community is a sustainable teaching, learning, training, and production complex in the northeast part of Ghana, on the border with Togo. It is run by the Salesians with their Don Bosco mission.

There will be a school for passing on sustainable construction techniques using adobe, rammed earth, and timber structures, in addition to one for agriculture and the production of local agricultural goods and a center for vocational training in electricity, home economics, and healthy nutrition. The project also includes student dorms, a community hall, a library, and teacher accommodations.

It is a pilot project undertaken within the Catholic Church to promote methods of building that fully respect the cultural context and the identity and embedded wisdom of vernacular structures. In this sense it deviates from the tradition – established by many decades of development aid, missionary endeavors, and of course colonialism – of linking educational campuses to the model of a strict rational grid where buildings are erected with industrialized materials like cement bricks. Instead of the grid-based masterplan originally expected by the client, this project builds upon the rich and lively vernacular housing patterns that still exist in the area. The objective is to keep those traditions alive and find ways of bridging the past to the needs of current and future generations.

KINDERGARTEN FOR PERMACULTURE PORET

Chaseyama (Zimbabwe), 2013-2014

The kindergarten is part of a permaculture education center in Zimbabwe and pursues the notions of this self-sufficiency philosophy. Erected with timber, thatch, and stone, this building provides the children with a playground that familiarizes them with the principles of nature by making them implement those concepts in daily life. They learn to take care of plants, to be gentle with the soil they step on, and to understand the needs of nature. In addition, the school fosters the personal development of the villagers at large, as the two structures will be used as a training center and as a hub attracting people from other villages in the vicinity.

As both the thatching and the stonework are labor-intensive, the local workers will be receiving a good share of the building budget. Through vernacular techniques, the project aims to reinforce solidarity and team spirit, skills and know-how, self-confidence and dignity.

Because of the region's climate and other conditions, buildings here – unless they are raised in glass and steel – do not last many decades. Hence the importance of passing on the know-how for maintaining and reconstructing them from one generation to the next, and so it is that we think of this project primarily as an effort to provide the training in applying advanced building techniques with readily existing materials that could one day be the compost for the field that once was a kindergarten.

CAPRICCIO EXPERIMENTAL HOUSE

Edersee (Germany), 2017-

This house is a fruit of Ways of Life, a program in which nineteen architects coming from different countries designed a dwelling encompassed in nature. The aim was to reactivate a rather neglected and depopulating rural settlement through architectures that mixed public and private uses.

Here is a dwelling that sits on the ground lightly in both a physical way and in ecological terms (actual footprint). It is a building that requires the inhabitants to follow the cycle of seasons. Only half of the space is walled-off, so there is a time for reflection and preparation (winter, spring) and a time for action and implementation (summer, autumn). Built with materials taken from the surroundings (timber, limestone, clay, lime-plaster), the house harnesses local resources and plays with local tradition by incorporating the order and the elements of traditional timber-frame structures while treating them in a bias-free, off-beat manner, assembling them in novel ways.

The ground floor is an open, shaded space that can serve as a workshop for dirty tasks, whether private or public. The top floor is a living area reduced to the minimum. In order to make the dwelling as self-sufficient as possible, there is a garden for food cultivation, and the wooden tower containing the staircase is clad in solar collectors and crowned with a small electricity-generating windmill.

ROSANA AYURVEDA GUESTHOUSE

Rosenheim (Germany), 2021

The building is designed for people seeking relief from mental and physical stress, who want to stay healthy and grounded. To build this guesthouse as healthily as possible for people and the planet alike, we based the project on structural timber, claddings of willow wood, and rammed earth, drastically reducing the needed amounts of concrete, steel, foams, glues, and other materials harmful to personal and planetary health.

The guesthouse is proof that quality of life is not a matter of quantity of built square meters, but rather a matter of quality: of well-thought-out room proportions and handcrafted natural construction materials. The site is a sensitive place, next to an alluvial forest. The building contains five guest rooms and an apartment for use by the staff. It is organized around an existing technical room and a parking facility that had to be maintained, but which can be turned into a yoga or meditation space, in a future of fewer cars.

The main volume is raised with glue-free, solid, loadbearing timber panels. The facade is principally executed with untreated larchwood and woven unpeeled, untreated willows brought in from the banks of the river. The building is not stiff, rectangular, but meanders by the water, nestling against the wild growth. From the riverside path, it almost looks more like a large nest than like a house.

CAMPUS FOR SUSTAINABILITY ST. MICHAEL

Traunstein (Germany), 2019-

The project seeks to integrate a new zeitgeist in an existing educational campus of St. Michael, in the German city of Traunstein, and the main focus is on the design of two new buildings: a forum for coworking and sharing resources, and a new student residence hall (to replace the seminary where Pope Benedict XVI once lived).

The objective of the extension is to create a lively place that conveys the idea of the abundance of Creation, and of harmony with nature, through a coherent ecological design and a well-thought-out selection of materials.

The central forum of the campus will be executed with rammed earth; and the dorm, with wood. The material quality of the earthen walls gives the impression that nature reaches out dynamically from the ground to give people a space to work in harmony with Creation. At the same time, the design endeavors to maintain the spiritual character of the place; that is, to avoid creating a hip Silicon Valley atmosphere. Thus the idea of sheltered inner courtyards and of a modern interpretation of the cloister around them: contemplative niches for working, reading, and pondering. The gradually rising staircase transports the inner courtyard into a third dimension and leads all the way to the roof garden, from which visitors will be able to experience the preexisting building from an elevated level.

OMICRON MONOLITH AND ZEPPELIN

Vorarlberg (Austria), 2015

This project was our first commission in Europe. The aim was to create an atmospheric space for the employees of the firm Omicron Electronics, and at the same time to make a social and economic impact by harnessing a large amount of local craftsmanship.

The sculptures, which are part of the project, can be used as lounges for the company staff, providing them with a comfortable, sense-activating atmosphere to retreat to and contemplate, meditate, brainstorm, have a coffee break, chat.

The archaic 'monolith' is an attempt to bring the most basic of earthen building techniques, called 'Zabur,' in compliance with Austrian laws and regulations. The wet mud is shaped only by hand, without any formwork, quite like pottery. The monolith is a two-story structure with pure-clay walls only 15 centimeters thick, unstabilized and crowned with a dome that is also made of clay. The ensemble is held up by a steel ring beam.

The 'zeppelin,' for its part, is a meeting room floating up in the air that gleams and illuminates the space at night. The silky skin creates an indoor atmosphere that is gentle and poetic, touching the senses in a very subtle way. The structure is built with timber and covered by an outer layer of handwoven non-violent silk brought in from a leprosy project in India.

SPACE FOR BIRTH AND SENSES

Vorarlberg (Austria), 2020

Light, smells, colors, temperature, textures, sounds... it must be overwhelming to leave a mother's womb and get born into this world. What should the very first space we ever experience be like? What kind of material should it be made of to make newborn babies and their mothers feel embraced, protected, safe, and curious about one another? Rather than an exterior 'belly,' our answer to this question is a mud cave, one with a welcoming light, acoustics that make one want to break into song, textures of fine clay made of tadelakt (the traditional Moroccan technique of glazed ceramic, which gives spaces a strong sense of warmth, softness, and color), and earthen plasters in shades of warm ocher, as well as a playful dress of clapboards rendered in various red tones.

The construction of this maternal 'cave' was possible thanks to the more than 600 people from all over the region who supported the crowdfunding campaign, not to mention the numerous local volunteers.

The origin of this project lay in IG Birth Culture, an interdisciplinary initiative of seven women, among them midwives and other professionals coming from the fields of medicine, psychology, trauma therapy, architecture, and culture at large who joined forces in the year 2016 with the mission of creating a more holistic, strengthening, and health-promoting child-birthing culture in the Austrian state of Vorarlberg.

ALTAR FOR ST. PETER'S CATHEDRAL

Worms (Germany), 2018

What gift does one give a cathedral for its 1000th birthday?

St. Peter's Cathedral in Worms witnessed important moments of German history, from the songs of the Nibelungs to Martin Luther. It is a truly beautiful building, beloved as much by the emperors of yore as by visitors from around the world. Its altar, designed by the famous Baroque architect Balthasar Neumann, lost its original function after the Second Vatican Council of 1959, and gave way to a temporary wooden altar. The Baroque design was so beautiful that one priest after another dared not commission a permanent solution. Finally, for this 1000th anniversary, a competition was held for the purpose of building an altar below the central dome.

In collaboration with Martin Rauch we drew up a scheme consisting not only of a design but also of a plan for the actual construction process. It was clear to us that, surrounded by so much gold, precious stones, and fine wood, the new altar should not draw attention through sophisticated materials. In our materialistic society there is no lack of opulent materials and attractions. What's lacking is meaning and social ties. So we proposed an altar made of the humblest material there is, earth; an altar, furthermore, to be raised by the community. Young and old, weak and strong: everyone was invited to participate in the task. Happiness is aspiring to something beyond your personal bliss, attaining it with your own effort and means, and sharing the experience with others.

ECO-TOURISM CORTIJO LA DONAIRA

Montecorto (Spain), 2020

La Donaira is a project for permaculture, horse breeding, and tourism in the countryside close to Ronda (Málaga). The clients want to create a haven of harmony between humans and nature. The red soil of this area is a perfect material for walls of rammed earth. The aim in the process is to train local craftspeople to be experts in carrying out earthen structures, and in a way that generates modern reinterpretations of Spain's long tradition of raising earthen structures.

With the world's growing population there is an increasing need to use land not only for building but also for food cultivation. In general we invest money on erecting buildings to then spend further money on tearing them down and recovering the land they stood on. But the earth can give us both habitat and food. Whatever we build, it should be able to biodegrade gradually and eventually once again become soil to farm on.

Compostable architecture is one of the goals of the 'Cortijo' planned for La Donaira, which pursues the principles of permaculture. Besides being designed as a facility for eco-tourism, this settlement is to function as a model for co-housing. The private units are small, the dwellings can be enlarged or shrunk, in accordance with changing needs. There are amenities that can be shared, including a kitchen, a dining room, workspaces, studios, children's halls, and a spa.

CLAY STORMING

Like in most of the projects, the design is based on an intuitive process that was developed by Anna Heringer and Martin Rauch: Clay Storming. Designing is nothing but constant decision making and the best decisions are made while listening to one's inner voice. After an analysis of the site and its potentials, the room program is cut out in clay. This is the volume that needs to be placed on the site. At this moment it is all about putting the ego aside, getting a free mind, yet with an empathic connection to the site and the 'genius loci.' The hands 3D sketch the volumes in clay. There are no discussions or analysis but constant change of positions and perspectives. It is a fast moving process where at one point the hands are able to translate the impulses out of the gut feeling into architecture. And you stop at the moment it feels right.

LESS CONCRETE, MORE EARTH

Earth is one of the most important materials when it comes to house a growing world's population. It is available worldwide, given by nature for free, a waste material from excavations of foundations, underground parking, subways, etc. It can be processed completely low-tech with human labor, or high-tech with machines, or both, depending on the context. Building with earth is by nature climate-neutral and socially fair, especially through the creation of jobs. It is an effective way to respond to two of our most pressing global challenges: climate change and social injustice.

Clay is soluble in water, which is its best quality. Because of this, it can be taken from nature and get recycled without any loss of quality. Or it can be returned to the natural cycle and turn into a garden.

However, clay is also very durable if you follow certain constructive rules. Our centuries old earthen buildings are proof of that.

But it is easier said than done. In Europe it is more expensive to build a mud wall, than a wall out of reinforced concrete. But why if it is the building material of the poor...? It's not the problem of the material per se, the problem is our economic system. The good news is: this system is not a force of nature, so we can change it.

We need truthful prices on materials that include the costs for the environment. There is no lobby for building with earth other than us. We all – as clients, architects, engineers, craftspeople, consumers – need to be lobbyists for the environment.

If we built more with natural materials and particularly with earth our cities and villages, our homes and workplaces would not just be healthier and more sustainable, but also more humane and beautiful.

Less concrete, more EARTH.

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