

“Participation is not just a Romantic Idea”



Prof. Francis Kéré comes from Burkina Faso and has been shaped by the inherently strong sense of community and engagement that he grew up with. This is also apparent in his works – soon to include the Anniversary Tower he is planning for TUM.

Link

www.ar.tum.de/en/ap/architectural-design-and-participation

The photo captures Francis Kéré (left) atop a sample roof vault for the Gando Primary School with residents in Gando, Burkina Faso. By demonstrating the stability of the built infrastructure, Kéré builds trust and encourages residents' interest in joining the community building effort.



Der Traum vom besseren Bauen

Schon als Schüler im westlichen Afrika träumt Francis Kéré davon, bessere Schulen zu bauen, damit eines Tages andere freier lernen können. Mit einer Reihe ausgezeichneten Lernorte brachte er sein Heimatdorf auf die Landkarte der internationalen Architektur. Heute forscht und baut Kéré in Europa ebenso wie in Afrika. Bei seinen Projekten praktiziert er das einfache Bauen, wobei er jeweils örtlichen Gesetzmäßigkeiten folgt. Kéré ist ein Realist, für den der Traum ein wichtiger Teil des Entwurfsprozesses bleibt. Sein Bauen ist nachhaltig, da es Nutzer frühzeitig mit einbezieht. Sein künftiger Anniversary Tower der TUM soll ein Ort der Wissenschaftsgemeinde sein und zugleich neue, materialsparende Bauweisen erproben. □

Education and learning connect your architectural work with your teaching. Your father, chief of Gando village in Burkina Faso, enabled you to attend school and then to study. So what does education mean to you?

Francis Kéré: My dad went without. He made sacrifices for my education and he was ridiculed. People couldn't understand why he would let his firstborn go to school in town instead of getting his help with the field work. But he said to me: "Go and learn how to read and write. Then you can read me the letters that come from the government." Whether he realized it, I can't say, but he was a visionary.

And what does education mean for society and for architecture as a profession?

FK: Without education, there is no progress. Education empowers people to develop and advance in life. A society without education would have no access to achievements; to the products of science and culture. It would not be in a position to engage with other communities. In colonial times, knowledge was filtered for local citizens. But it is important to have your own access to knowledge. I work in areas where the words "architecture" and "architect" are unknown. Even today, over sixty percent of the population of Burkina Faso cannot read or write. And if you come from a region where specialist knowledge or expertise essentially doesn't exist, then knowledge sharing becomes very important. ▷

Francis Kéré continues to reinvest knowledge back into his home country, Burkina Faso. He has developed innovative construction strategies that combine traditional building techniques and materials with modern engineering methods.



So being an architect also means sharing knowledge? And you realized early on that you have to convince the people around you in order to put your ideas into practice?

FK: You do have to be persuasive. That's how you create the right environment – one where others can step up to certain tasks, so you can progress with new ideas yourself.

Architects today are at the center of a fine balancing act. They need to be familiar with current building standards, but also with the history of architectural forms; with the possibilities and limitations of materials as well as the expectations of investors and users. What role does education play within this multifaceted framework?

FK: Acquiring a broad knowledge base is essential to gain a solid understanding of architecture in its many different forms and styles. Otherwise you run the risk of confining yourself to one narrow facet of the profession and failing to see the big picture. After all, our role is not just to draw; it's not just to work out how to design a building. Nowadays, we are called on to bridge multiple disciplines and the ability to do that is growing in importance all the time. Education means openness; the desire to know more and gain experiences. It opens up opportunities for exchange and helps us practice our profession today. It used to be a bit different: A master builder would come up with a blueprint, and this was then implemented by craftsmen trained to map shapes and styles. Today, though, dialog is essential.

“I am convinced that participation can lead to a happier society.”

Francis Kéré

The radial layout of the Lycée Schorge classroom modules is wrapped around a central public courtyard. This configuration creates privacy from the main public domain, shelters and protects the inner courtyard from wind and dust, and accommodates informal gatherings as well as formal assemblies.





The Opera Village in Burkina Faso (here a model) is based on an idea by film and theater director Christoph Schlingensiefel. After massive flooding damaged the project site and surrounding villages though, the decision was made to pool resources and funds from the opera to introduce additional residential, educational and recreational amenities into the plan.



Picture credit: Kéré Architecture, Hans-Georg Gaul; Graphics: edlundsepp

In your presentations, writings, exhibitions and installations, you repeatedly emphasize the importance of building as a community activity. You show how people come together to produce something worthwhile. Do we embrace this mindset sufficiently in Western society?

FK: That one is not so easy. There are huge differences between society in Germany and in Burkina Faso. The former is an industrialized nation with a highly developed economy, defined by rationalization and the division of labor. In Burkina Faso, communal effort is the key to success – and a prerequisite for survival. Here, you have experts you can consult. But there are examples of teamwork here in Germany – think for instance of the time-honored Bavarian tradition of putting up the maypole. Collectively, the village can achieve something that would not be feasible for an individual acting alone. And once the pole is up, it serves as a meeting hub for the village.

These principles are difficult to implement in construction. It is true that the different trades work together. But questions of individual liability and responsibility make community action more difficult. This makes private building collectives all the more important, where people come together so they themselves can determine to the greatest extent possible how they want to live within the same building. They look for planners who are able to flesh out their ideas, and they articulate their requirements to the expert. But before building begins, they want to talk it through in detail.



Why does that seem so difficult?

FK: A highly organized society is quickly overwhelmed when faced with the challenge of reducing multiple requirements to a common denominator. Financial viability is the big hurdle. In other societies, people are used to talking and allowing everyone to state their case. When I create something in Burkina Faso, the community element is important to me. The sense of togetherness creates positive momentum. The resulting work is a community achievement, and I step back afterwards. This community spirit is very important for a building project. In Germany, community buy-in or engagement tends to be viewed as a cost factor. It takes a lot of hours to move from “I” to “we” – and unfortunately, every hour here comes at a cost and that puts a brake on a great many things. So architects just don’t have the time to invest in building community spirit.

Francis Kéré’s very first building was the Gando Primary School in his home village in Burkina Faso. A clay/cement hybrid was primarily used for the walls, and a dry-stacked brick ceiling allows for maximum ventilation. The walls are protected from damaging rains with a large overhanging tin roof.

Your educational and cultural buildings such as the Opera Village, which you developed with Christoph Schlingensief, and many other of your projects are supported by foundations. And, of course, you have set up a foundation yourself. Is this a prerequisite for simple, people-centric construction?

FK: I think so, yes. Foundations make these projects easier to accomplish. There are funds, clear rules and a certain traction for this type of project. Foundations seek to promote new ideas and do things differently. They have the courage to look for someone who is capable of realizing their own vision. They have the capacity and are committed to approaching projects in this way. I worked with Christoph Schlingensief because he was concerned that he had no knowledge of Africa. He was convinced that he would fail if he only applied Western ideas. He needed someone by his side who came from Africa and understood the local code of conduct. After all, the Opera Village was intended to achieve something special – and something that corresponded to the ideas and visions of Christoph Schlingensief the artist. Wanting to do things differently is also about exploring. These projects are not born of urgent necessity; there is an element of curiosity, as in research, and a moment of surprise.





The design for the Burkina Faso National Assembly & Memorial Park in Ouagadougou, which will be built on the site of the former national Assembly (now destroyed), shows a spirit of transparency and openness. The outer facade of the parliamentary structure is designed to be inhabited by the public. Citizens can climb the stepped pyramidal building and experience an elevated view of the city.

In English we have the saying “necessity is the mother of invention”. Your work in Burkina Faso is based on the situation on the ground. How can upcoming architects at TUM benefit from this type of approach?

FK: It isn't easy, for sure. But TUM encourages students to think outside the box. Some professors are committed to enabling students to travel in parallel to their studies in Europe, so that they can experience construction in other regions and cultures. We could make this a standard part of the curriculum. Students should be able to develop a sharp eye. How can we accomplish an architectural work that serves users while also allowing students to evolve? How can we develop this approach to produce modern buildings – buildings that have form, function and meaning while still being fit for the future? Students need to learn how architecture takes shape. Ultimately, we are trying to serve people. The art of simple construction work based on resources that are available locally could be more firmly anchored at TUM.

You are Professor of Architectural Design and Participation at TUM. You describe curiosity, involvement in the construction process, but also critical observations you made in Burkina Faso. How does this differ from our practice in Germany, and how could we embrace participation more actively?

FK: The potential consequences of insufficient participation were highlighted by the Stuttgart 21 railway and infrastructure project. An architect won a fair competition. The political powers that governed there for a long time tried, quite rightly, to implement the outcome of that competition. So far, so good. But it meant felling old and treasured trees. The protest began slowly at first and then spread far and wide. The fact that residents weren't sufficiently engaged led to a political earthquake that changed the balance of power in the city council.

Thus, participation is not just a romantic idea. It may sound utopian, but I am convinced that participation can lead to a happier society. In Germany, I try to use such words with caution. But I think it would be good for all of us if we could see – as part of the participation process – what is in the pipeline for me and my neighborhood. Ultimately, participation has its limits. And we should use them where possible.

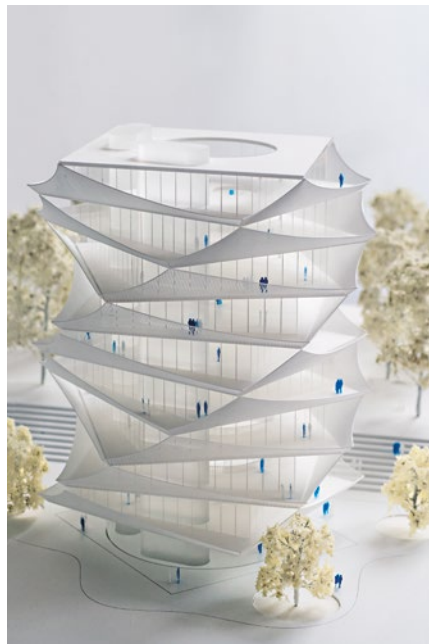


The TUM Anniversary Tower, designed by Francis Kéré, will be erected on the Garching campus to mark 150 years since the university's foundation. The idea is to create an inspiring place that builds a sense of identity.

TUM already has the Oskar von Miller Tower and the Thiersch Tower. Your Anniversary Tower will be erected on the Garching campus to mark 150 years since the university's foundation. What is the underlying vision behind this building?

FK: It will be a heart that beats for TUM. The idea is to create an inviting, inspiring place that builds a sense of identity. The tower is designed to act as a magnet – a place that is always open. It is a place of welcome and a meeting hub that connects people. And all of TUM's faculties and disciplines will feel at home there. At the top there will be a platform – a versatile space for events. Alumni will be able to meet there, and young students can discover what TUM has to offer in terms of study opportunities and partnerships. We will work with warm materials, but also with concrete. This will be a sustainable construction harnessing new processes that use concrete sparingly. And, of course, the facade will be as green as a Bavarian maypole.

■ *Interview by Thomas Edelmann*



The tower is designed to act as a place of welcome and a meeting hub that connects people.



Prof. Diébédo Francis Kéré

The architect who works with what he's got

During his studies at the Technical University of Berlin, Prof. Diébédo Francis Kéré (born 1965) returned to his native village of Gando to build a primary school there, using local materials and techniques and encouraging the community to participate in the project. In 2004, the work won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. It was swiftly followed by further school buildings in Gando and many other places. At the same time, the young architect founded the Kéré Foundation and opened his own architecture office in Berlin, receiving prestigious awards and prizes for sustainable construction that contributes to society. Kéré collaborated with Christoph Schlingensiefel to develop the Opera Village in Burkina Faso. Exhibitions showcase Kéré's buildings and design principles, and he spent time teaching at Harvard (US) and Mendrisio (Switzerland). Kéré took up his role as Professor of Architectural Design and Participation at TUM in October 2017.

Africa Initiative at TUM

The TUM launched an Africa Initiative at the end of 2018. In addition to cooperation in individual projects, long-term partnerships are planned in the key areas of teaching, research and entrepreneurship, which are supported at TUM in a cross-faculty Africa network. The objective is to promote sustainable development of the continent together with local partners.

The symposium “Sustainable Development in Africa” at the Garching campus in November 2018 provided an overview of the planned measures. TUM professors presented the various projects in the fields of health, resources, automotive technologies, architecture and renewable energy systems. The keynote speaker was Prof. Francis Kéré.





Picture credit: Kéré Architecture, Erik-Jan Ouwerkerk; Graphics: edjundsepp

The Lycée Schorge Secondary School sets a new standard for educational excellence in Burkina Faso, and it uses locally sourced building materials in an innovative and modern way.



The masterplan of Kéré's Opera Village at Laongo/Burkina Faso includes classrooms for up to 500 students, a variety of housing types, art and media labs, workshops and dining facilities.

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Francis Kéré