

From Africa to Alaska: A case study of culturally-sensitive and environmentally friendly designs in polar-opposite regions of the world.

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ABSTRACT: The paper describes and discusses projects in Fairbanks, Alaska, and Gulu, Uganda in relation to local cultures and environments.

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INTRODUCTION

From Research Journal, February 8, 2008:

“While sitting in the terminal, awaiting a free breakfast compensating for my delayed connection to Kampala, I sat next to a downtrodden and lonely looking woman from Kampala who was just going home. I saw this sad case as an opportunity to spread joy with some interesting dialogue and a pleasant smile. My smile came naturally. The dialogue was very forced. How do I connect? How do I serve? As I pulled out an old neon-blue-colored Uni-Ball pen to mark whether I wanted tea or tea, ink began exploding from the tip all over my hand and the table. The light blue couldn’t have fit less cohesively with the rugged look I had hoped to have upon finally entering the beautiful Ugandan country. But it had an effect.

The woman began giggling as I continued to discover all the places my beautiful pen had decided to leave its mark. I told her that if she ever needed to write anything she could just use my ink-dipped fingers.

‘Truly? Can you try it?’ she asked

What do I write? How do I connect? ‘What is your name?’, I asked her.

‘Carol,’ she replied, basking slightly.

I wrote the whole name on my napkin, exhausting all the ink on my index and middle finger. She smiled and said, ‘Very good.’

Very good indeed. How often do we see socially aware, peacemaking, spirited, missionary people attempt to offer their service by doing things their own way? How many weeklong youth group or church mission trips raise thousands of dollars to send foreigners to the 3rd World to construct one new house or one fence while ignoring the local craftsmen and architects who could give them a better sense of what the community really needs? How long do we spend exploring the local culture of these impoverished places, to not only give those cultures the dignity they deserve, but to much better understand how we *should* be helping them back onto their feet with chins held high?

Just as a budding architect can decipher and comprehend architecture more thoroughly by taking the time to carefully sketch the fine details instead of simply taking a couple of photographs, so can a sociologist understand a culture more completely by immersing and observing all the fine details down to the lowest cripple on the street corner. With the study of architecture and social trends so similar in this regard, it seems only appropriate that they be combined. Simultaneous study of social trends and the architecture that surrounds them *has* proven and will forever continue to prove to be a powerful tool for restoring pride and self-sufficiency to our poor brothers and sisters who’ve been exiled from their culture by increasing industry and westernization. *Knowing how* to serve the poor is the first step towards actually doing so.

Sometimes all it takes is a little patience and an exploded pen. Peace everyone. Kuc Obed Kedi.”

1. ALASKA AND NORTHERN UGANDA—POLAR OPPOSITE SITUATIONS

1.1. The New Face of Northern Uganda (Latitude 3°)

The original goal of my research during the summer of 2009 was to investigate how architecture was being practiced in the camps for Internally Displaced People (IDP) from the war in Northern Uganda. I hoped to witness work being done by charitable organizations, as well as local grass roots movements, in order to improve life for the IDPs. Upon first arriving, I was pleased to hear that nearly two thirds of all IDPs had managed to move out of the camps and back to their home villages. This, however, left me confused about where to take my research, since architectural practice seemed unnecessary in the deserted camps. Through several interviews with employees of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), I was introduced to the difficulties inherent in the return process for IDPs, and what measures were being taken to ensure security—through paving and maintenance of roads, repairing of wells and boreholes, and reconstruction of destroyed classrooms. I also learned about the situations for those still exiled in the camps, those Extremely Vulnerable Individuals (EVIs) whose circumstances have left them without the capacity to return home on their own. Like the boy picked last during physical education class, though, I was struggling to find a way for an architectural perspective to weave itself into the game. With so much work being done to improve infrastructure, it didn't seem that the war-torn areas of Northern Uganda were ready for an architect.

In the Acoli language, the words “design” and “plan” (at least in their architectural connotations) don't exist. Large urban centers have never been a part of Acoli culture (The demographic of the largest town—Gulu—is mostly foreigners), which leads to confusion about the need for physical planning (Ochola 2009). Houses in rural villages were typically constructed in neat circles surrounding a central firepit, and new huts were built only as families grew. Small trading centers didn't require much planning, since they usually just mushroomed along highways. It was during the war, when trading centers became IDP camps and swelled well beyond capacity, that people began to realize the importance of planning for the prevention of fires and the distribution of resources [In the case of Pabo, in Amuru District, the population grew from 3,080 people to 63,000 over the course of the war (Richard 2009)].



Source: Original Photo 2007

Figure 1.1.1: Overcrowding and Density of Pagak Camp

The camps had no prior planning whatsoever. In the chaos of fleeing their villages, nobody was given direction about where to build a home. Families that had always lived together were separated by the chaos—their particular rules and customs lost in the mix. Whole generations then grew up in this environment. (See Figure 1.1.1 for visual of camp density and activity) When the war ended in 2006 and 2007, people further began to realize the importance of planning for quelling disputes over land ownership and preparing their towns for future growth. Young adults were returning to lands that they couldn't remember, and if any elders had died, the exact location of the family's land became difficult to locate. This has led to disputes unprecedented in Northern Uganda's history (Emmanuel 2009). Also, trading centers that played host to IDPs aren't likely to return to their original size, necessitating serious development and reinforcement of infrastructure in order to sustain the population. It was after an interview with the District Physical Planner of Gulu, and subsequently with members of NGOs like the Northern Ugandan Transition Initiative (NUTI), that I discovered how the nation was addressing this.

The Gulu District Physical Planning Office experimented in a town called Opit—located on the border between two sub-counties, and where the seat of the local government was to be constructed. They first sensitized the local people to the importance of creating development plans. After 20 years of war, and seeing the chaos that ensued when their town became an IDP camp, the people of Opit were very aware of the plans' implications. The office, with the help of Makerere University architecture students, proceeded to survey every aspect of the town, speaking to all people—from sub-county chiefs to simple villagers—and produced 4 unique plans. These plans featured roundabouts and innovative courtyards appreciative of traditionally concentric Acoli housing. They also included parks, community centers, and beautiful shop fronts that brought Opit to life. The community received the plans so positively that they couldn't eliminate any of them. The planners had paid attention to detail and shown reverence to culture while still developing the town to meet the 21st century. News of the overwhelming success in Opit inspired a wave of new planning for growing towns and former IDP camps in Gulu, Amuru, and Kitgum Districts (see Figure 2 for proposed development of Opit).

Makerere University architecture students spent several more weeks surveying the towns of Namokora and Kitgum Matibi in Kitgum District in order to create new master plans. They interviewed villagers and chiefs, as well as government officials and district planners. The plans (which were being drawn at the time of the research), in order to fit with the local society, strongly emphasize agriculture (agro-culture) and the marketplace. With a curvilinear layout they introduce focal points, and by using clustered settlements they remain true to traditional Acoli planning (Ochola 2009).

The Physical Planning office also showed me how 11 towns in Gulu District have gained the status of “Sub-County Headquarters,” and are in need of new development plans. All of these towns had once played host to thousands of IDPs, and many of the IDPs have settled permanently—creating businesses and integrating into the town structure. With this new “sub-county HQ” status, there will be a natural influx of services that attract commerce and population growth—such as wider roads, amenities like hotels and restaurants, teachers’ housing for the schools, and larger facilities for health centers. With a larger population in a developing town, there are needs for even more services, like taxi/bus parks, community centers, movie theaters, recreational areas, etc.

Perhaps the single most important development though, after the school and health center, would be a permanent marketplace. Even after spending years in a near-urban environment, the Acoli people are returning to their land and growing again. The most sustainable way for them to recover (economically, spiritually, culturally, etc.) is for them to return to their most essential form of livelihood, agriculture. Although a drought was plaguing the North at the time of this research, the people were going to need a venue to restore their agro-economy when the drought subsided. This is where the marketplace plays such a crucial role. The marketplace acts not only as a means for an agro-culture to revitalize itself, but within the context of Acoliland, it acts as an economic and social center for the entire town. Public marketplaces throughout Uganda, selling agriculture, meat products, spices, tools, electronics, and clothing, are natural magnets for commercial and social activity. While Gulu Town might have deserted streets, its decrepit concrete marketplace remains bustling with activity from dawn until nightfall (see figure 1.1.2).



Source: Original Photo 2009

Figure 1.1.2: Current Gulu Marketplace

In more rural areas of Northern Uganda, one can see the architecture better reflecting the poverty of the region. Simultaneously, though, use of local materials and building techniques reflect the culture and history of the Acoli people. Marketplaces are often built simply of mud, timbers, bamboo, and grass thatch—all beautiful local materials. In their quick and haphazard assembly, these public buildings rarely create a sense of pride or empowerment for the community; and juxtaposing their image and that of glass skyscrapers in Europe and the United States deepens feelings of humiliation and shame in Acoli culture.

Utilizing local materials, though, has the capability of producing very beautiful architecture. Before the arrival of Arabs and Italian missionaries in the region, Acoli kings were very content to live in mud huts covered by grass thatch roofs (Okumu 2009). If they had many children, they simply built more homes with mud and grass, not larger ones with more expensive materials. In modern architectural practice, though, the grass-thatch style of building has been abandoned as primitive and unnecessary. While nearly every poor home still utilizes mud and grass, businesses and other urban buildings are made purely with brick or concrete and corrugated iron roofing.

I propose that a contemporary, but genuinely Ugandan style of architecture can be crafted using local labor and materials. Traditional forms can dictate new structures that serve modern Ugandan society. Rather than constructing them in a quick, haphazard manner, they can be crafted with a more knowledgeable sense of thermal properties, engineering, and technology. Architects have the ability to create a vernacular style of building that meets modern standards. This will create a greater sense of pride in the local community, and serve the purpose of developing without accidentally “westernizing.”

Towards the very end of my stay, I had the fortune of spending the night under a grass-thatch roof in the town of Awach in Gulu District. The District Physical Planner of Gulu, as well as the Chief of Awach Sub-County, asked

me to design a new marketplace to fit within the existing context of their development plan for the town. I also attempted to design the adjacent taxi/bus park. In Gulu, I recreated the site of the current marketplace using the true topography. In both cases, I creatively utilized local materials and traditional forms to create centers of social and economic activity that truly dignify the character of the Acoli people.

1.2. A New Home for the Tanana Chiefs Conference in Fairbanks, Alaska (Latitude 65°)

I moved to Fairbanks in October of 2010, and winter had already come. The first snow had fallen before I arrived, and I never saw grass until the following April. That winter saw temperatures dip below -50°F (-46°C), and several weeks remained below -40°F (-40°C). My initial impression was: *Why would anyone choose to live here?* This question was compounded by an even more bizarre and frustrating question: *How can somebody who is homeless survive here?*

It's an unfortunate stereotype for a modern Alaskan native in Fairbanks to be either homeless, alcoholic, or both. While there are certainly members of every nationality that fit into the impoverished demographic of Fairbanks, the stigma remains most harshly on the native Alaskan population. Each time this stigma arises in conversation, however, I am reminded of the western attitudes (in this connotation, the term western refers to American capitalistic society) that are creating and perpetuating it. Such attitudes degrade the traditional lifestyles of the native population as inferior or primitive.

The native lifestyle revolves significantly around the observation of natural processes. Their worldview is very *cyclical*, following the movement of animals, the changing of seasons, and death and birth. Even their style of education follows suit:

Their traditional education processes were carefully constructed around mythology, history, the observation of natural processes and animals' and plants' styles of survival and obtaining food, and use of natural materials to make their tools and implements, all of which was made understandable through thoughtful stories and illustrative examples. (Kawagley 2006:2) (See Figure 1.2.1)



Source: Jones and Jones (2011)

Figure 1.2.1: Students Learning to Cut Moose Meat

Western society tends to manipulate the same natural processes for social or economical gain. Western education also reinforces a *linear* worldview: a perpetual progression of human society through systems like technology and politics. Western languages and cultures tend to be funneled and streamlined through social media, which can erode diversity. While the assimilation of western culture into indigenous lifestyles has brought some advantages in physical health (namely an decrease in infant mortality), transportation, access to consistent food supplies, and communications, it has created many more, significantly more troublesome psychological, economical, and social issues. Traditional homes and villages were inexpensive to build and maintain, and could be constructed from resources harvested in the surrounding wilderness. A cost-effective modern home in the villages tends to be manufactured from imported materials that are difficult to replace and maintain. It also tends to be less energy efficient, requiring significantly more fuel for heating. With children entering western schools, the traditional system of storytelling is lost, leaving behind much of the language and mythology that came from oral tradition. Family groups are separated as individuals move between villages and cities. A culture which once provided hope and fulfillment is left behind for a much vaster culture that strands individuals who can't keep up.

The Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) is a tribal consortium of 42 native villages that cover nearly 235,000 square miles of interior Alaska. The TCC was tasked with providing health and social services for its nearly 10,000 indigenous members, but since its inception in 1962, it has struggled to find facilities to house such programs. The Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center was opened in 2009 as a joint home for the Fairbanks Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Alaska Public Lands Information Center, and the Tanana Chiefs Conference. This center, located in downtown Fairbanks, provided classroom, conference, and exhibit space for the TCC to teach native art, language, and culture, and to promote these aspects among the urban native population (particularly youth). It became an example for how all Alaskans can live and work synergistically. As Alaska Native business leader and member of the fundraising team Byron Mallott stated early in the project planning, "If we can get it right in the Morris Thompson Center, it can be an example to others of how we can work together for the benefit of all Alaskans." (*Mission and History* 2009)

The TCC used the success of the Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center as an example of what could be accomplished with the collective strength of the native population, across all of the villages, towns, and cities of interior Alaska. They set their minds on an even grander and more urgent goal of healthcare. The interior Alaska native population has had a healthcare facility as nomadic as its people. Moving from the village of Tanana to a bowling alley in Fairbanks, and ultimately to the 3rd and 4th floors of Fairbanks Memorial Hospital. Eye and dental care are also conducted in the Chief Peter John Tribal Building downtown. These services have rapidly outgrown their facilities, making the waiting list for ambulatory health care impossibly long for those commuting from the villages in the bush, which are accessible only by plane or sled dogs.

In 2009, the TCC gained approval from all of the interior Alaska native tribes to apply to the Indian Health Services (IHS) for a joint-venture construction project of a new healthcare facility. The tribes would have to come up with the capital to construct the facility, after which the IHS would provide the staff and equipment for operation (Erickson 2009). When the grant was approved by IHS, the TCC agreed to name the new *superclinic* after their inspirational leader Chief Andrew Isaac (after whom the current facility in Fairbanks Memorial Hospital is named). In the spirit of Andrew Isaac, the facility would not just be built by the native population, but would be designed in such a way as to create pride and provide truly holistic physical and spiritual healing. It would be designed not only to display native arts and crafts, but to be a work of native-inspired artwork in itself.

A cultural advisory group was established to assess the level and appropriateness of specific design features in the building. Their assessment became a guideline for the integrated design team to follow throughout the design of the building. The Chief Andrew Isaac Health Clinic is currently under construction, and is scheduled for occupation at the beginning of 2013. It is on track to achieve LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environment Design) Gold from the U.S. Green Building Council, and many of its most sustainable features were inspired directly by the native population.

2. THE DESIGNS

2.1. Features of the proposed Northern Ugandan Marketplaces:

The two marketplaces of Northern Uganda (Awach and Gulu) were designed with a practical approach to material selection and site planning. They utilize locally-harvested and manufactured materials that are recognizable and easy to replace and maintain. They use passive cooling measures that replace modern mechanical systems and incorporate traditional forms and functions to create pride in unique Ugandan building styles. Ultimately, they provide spaces for simultaneous economic and cultural growth for Northern Ugandans.

Hydrafoam bricks make up the primary building block, greatly involving the local community. Youth being rehabilitated from war are trained in Hydrafoam brick construction, and can be employed by building projects that utilize the material (Joseph, DED 2009). The floor and roof framing consist of bamboo and/or eucalyptus poles that are lashed, rather than nailed, so as to prevent larger trees from being harvested for boards. The formwork for the concrete floor slabs is a locally-produced reed mat that will leave its unique texture impressed on the underside of the concrete when it ultimately is removed or rots away. (See Figure 2.1.1)



Source: Original Rendering (2010)

Figure 2.1.1: Perspective of Awach Marketplace Entry with Bamboo Framing Above

The marketplaces are organized with a primary focus on natural ventilation. With the elongated buildings and aisles angled parallel to prevailing wind currents, the markets can be vented appropriately without mechanical assistance. Open towers above stairs and other vertical circulation allow for vertical movement of air to meet the prevailing higher-elevation winds (See Figure 2.1.2 for elevation). Dry and wet goods, as well as food products and non-food products are separated appropriately, with dry goods uphill for easier cleaning and maintenance of the downhill wet goods.

Many simple Acoli forms are utilized in the site plans, including, but not limited to circular huts and round theater-like spaces. These theater spaces are reminiscent of village huts that surround the central firepit and *abila* (sacred center where all of the placentas are buried), where stories, music, dancing, and oral tradition are passed down. A system of ramps has been devised so that all areas of both sites can be accessed via a wheelchair (maximum 1:12 slope), particularly suitable for those recovering physically from war.

Finally, several artistic elements were incorporated, such as lighting with dried-pumpkin (a traditional instrument in Acoli music) lampshades and chandeliers that provide warm light, and have a cultural connection. By exposing structural materials like bamboo and eucalyptus, the marketplace provides a similar indoor aura to the simple mud huts which expose the wood and bamboo roof frame beneath the grass-thatch. Even the dark sepia and yellow ochre plaster colors are taken directly from the sand and cow-dung plasters used on the majority of Northern Ugandan homes.



Source: Original Renderings (2010)

Figure 2.1.2: Awach Marketplace Partial Plan and Elevation

The sum of all these design elements is a cost-effective, locally harvested and manufactured, and culturally-sensitive template for future marketplace designs in Northern Uganda. The District Planning Office is incorporating those elements of the Awach marketplace plan that were in the current budget framework. The Gulu Marketplace was designed without request from the local government. It was a personal challenge to remake the downtown area of Gulu in response to its larger urban population and increased demand for space within the decrepit existing market.



Source: Original Rendering (2010)

Figure 2.1.3: Gulu Marketplace Main Building Perspective

2.2. Features of the Chief Andrew Isaac Health Clinic (CAIHC) to be opened January 2013

The CAIHC was designed with two major integrated team approaches for sustainability and culture. The first integrated design process to take place was the cultural report produced by Jones and Jones Architects out of Seattle, WA, USA. The second approach was the integrated LEED design, which featured all of the architects, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, structural, and civil engineers, as well as landscape and interior architects. In order to achieve higher levels of LEED-certification, an integrated design approach must be taken to include synergistic elements.

The cultural report became a template for the cultural and artistic elements of the building. The site contained a birch grove, which was to be protected through construction to provide an outdoor space for rehabilitation. A medicinal garden, with specific plants prescribed for traditional native medicines would be planted in sight of large

windows directly from waiting areas. This garden could be accessed and visited from several locations in the building. Additional landscaping forms resembled the many branching river systems throughout interior Alaska, along which the majority of the native population lives.

The building itself takes on many forms reminiscent of traditional Athabascan houses. The main entrance is through a single-story portion of building, covered with a green roof, which enters into a grand two-story waiting area. This resembles a traditional winter home, which was accessed by passing under the adjacent hill. The walls themselves bend and curve in a river-form to move with the landscaping.

The materials on the interior of the building very dramatically and literally reflect the life of the Alaska native. Upon entering the building, one is greeted with a wall of stones with inscriptions of each of the villages. The reception desk is created with birch rounds to resemble a stack of freshly-chopped wood. The two-story, conical waiting area is finished with a woven birch-plank that resembles a basket (see figure 2.2.1). The floor in that space is covered with steel moose and bear tracks, as well as a room-size seasonal calendar. The calendar follows major events in the area, but also the more traditional and natural events, such as the beginning of each animal's hunting season, berry-picking, the thaw of the river, the bloom of the fireweed plants, etc. The paint colors of each portion of the exam area reflect a particular season of the Athabascan calendar. Finally, graphics on glazing and artwork in cases are displayed throughout the building, providing a very tangible example of true native crafts.



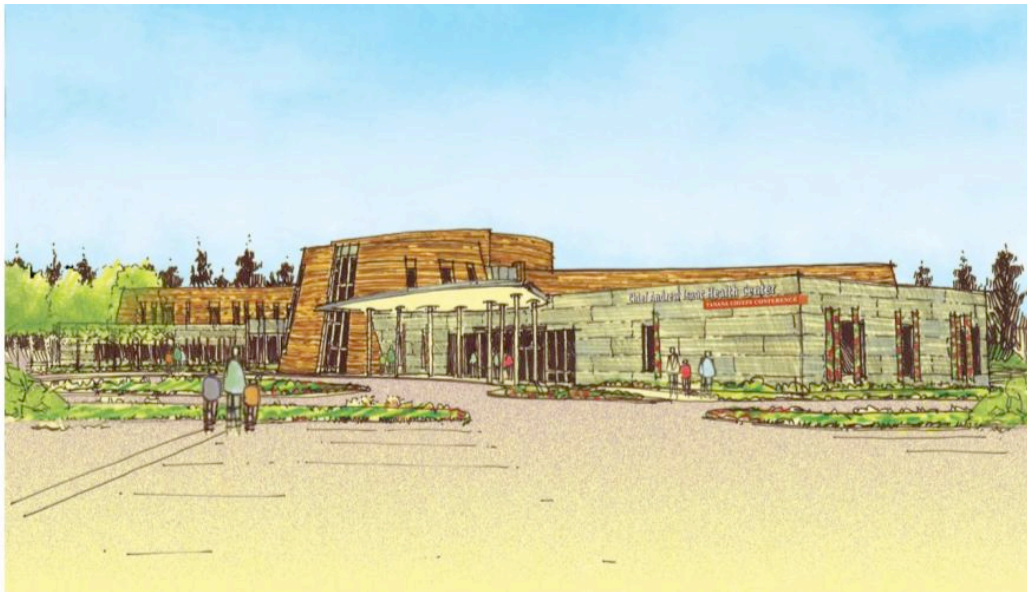
Source: NBBJ 2011

Figure 3.2.1: Basket Weave with Birch Plank

The building is arranged to provide practical healthcare to the native population, much of which is commuting from the villages. Talking exam rooms are used in order for patients to speak openly about their issues before being consulted by the appropriate medical discipline. Large conference rooms provide education on first-aid, diet, and domestic issues. Finally, all medical disciplines are under one roof: dental, optical, gynecology, pharmaceuticals, pediatrics, radiography, etc.

The building's sustainable features include an extremely efficient building envelope (including triple-glazed windows and nearly 7 inches of total rigid insulation), efficient mechanical and plumbing systems, recycled materials, and more. However, many of the more traditional native elements, such as the medicinal garden, the green roof, and the rescued birch grove, were among the most sustainable elements in the project.

The sum of all these design elements is a landmark for excellent healthcare design, native Alaskan culture, and sustainable building practice. The TCC finally has a building of its own to call home, and one that will provide spiritual and physical healing to tribes throughout interior Alaska (See Figure 2.2.2)



Source: Bettisworth North Architects and Planners 2011

Figure 2.2.2: Exterior Perspective Rendering of CAIHC

CONCLUSION

In the current US Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system, a new building can receive points towards certification for using salvaged, reused, or regionally-developed building materials. A building can receive further points for maintaining the original native vegetation on the site, or restoring the site to its original state by using regional plants that require minimal artificial watering. The rating system affirms that these are sustainable building practices because they reduce the carbon footprint of the building from the embodied energy of materials, and they reduce the potable water usage by the landscaping. What the LEED-rating system does not consider is that in seeking these particular points, a building can simultaneously reveal the identity of the people who own it.

When designing a marketplace for Northern Uganda, one can use rapidly-renewable materials such as bamboo, and regionally-identifiable materials such as dried pumpkin shells to create architecture that appears uniquely Luo-Acoli. By shading the site with mango trees, one can very easily integrate passive cooling and natural elements in a familiar way. Similarly, by using birch-finishes and a floor-calendar that circles a drum-shaped atrium, one can create a health clinic that feels like home for the native peoples of interior Alaska. By preserving birch groves on site and planting medicinal gardens, one can create spaces for healing of both body and spirit.

The LEED and other similar programs are helping to turn the design industry in a very intelligent and necessary direction towards sustainability. They seek holistic approaches to preserving the environment and creating quality architecture that works synergistically with healthy community development. Occasionally, though, more is required of a building than just its energy-savings and relationship to the surrounding area. Design elements must be incorporated that preserve one more aspect—the pride of the local people. The Gulu and Awach Marketplaces and the Chief Andrew Isaac Health Clinic are perfect examples of architecture that can preserve the environment, the community, and the culture of a people. When designers work together with the local people remarkable places can be built, and beautiful cultures can be cherished for generations to come.

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