

# GENIUS BY DESIGN

EARLIER THIS YEAR, DIÉBÉDO FRANCIS KÉRÉ FROM BURKINA FASO BECAME THE FIRST AFRICAN TO WIN THE PRESTIGIOUS PRITZKER ARCHITECTURE PRIZE. IN OUR EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WE ASK THE PIONEERING

ARCHITECT ABOUT HIS INSPIRATION AND HOW SUSTAINABILITY PLAYS A ROLE IN HIS DESIGNS.



Gando Primary School in Burkina Faso marks Kéré's inaugural built work. His advocacy for a child's right to a comfortable classroom stems from his own experiences, sitting in crowded, stifling facilities that were poorly ventilated and lit. Here, indigenous clay was fortified with cement to form bricks with high thermal mass, retaining cooler air inside while allowing heat to escape through an elevated roof, resulting in ventilation without the need for air conditioning.

INTERVIEW: TABITHA MWANGI

ERIK-JAN OUIWERKERK

**Diébédo Francis Kéré's** humble beginnings have kept him firmly rooted, even when scaling heights of success that he hadn't imagined possible. Born in Gando, a small rural town in Burkina Faso, he left home at the age of seven to live with relatives in the city so that he could attend school. Read on to discover how this experience became a source of inspiration in his extraordinary career...



**CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR VERY FIRST CLASSROOM?**

It was a dark box – not at all suitable as a study environment. It was made from corrugated iron sheets. It got really hot during the day, yet very little sunlight came through. The furniture was very wobbly and not well assembled. If you moved around on it, the nails would come loose and poke your behind.

**AT 20, YOU LEFT BURKINA FASO FOR BERLIN, GERMANY. HOW DID YOU COPE WITH THAT BIG MOVE?**

Similar to my first move when I was just a boy, I knew that I was being handed an unbelievable opportunity that very few people with my origin got. I had to stay strong and face the challenges of Germany in the 1980s, not just for my own well-being but also for the people back home who were depending on me. I moved to Berlin when the Wall was still in place, so that was a very curious urban setting to navigate.

**WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO STUDY CARPENTRY IN BERLIN?**

Remember those school chairs I talked about earlier? I believed that learning how to make furniture would give me the tools I needed to make furniture that worked well.

**WHILE STUDYING IN GERMANY, YOU SHIFTED FROM CARPENTRY TO ARCHITECTURE – WHAT LED TO THAT DECISION?**

I did not just want to improve the furniture in schools, but the conditions of the school itself. I wanted to build a school in Gando, where I grew up, so that children would not have to leave their parents to go to school like I had. I decided to study architecture, so that I could do exactly that.

**YOUR VERY FIRST BIG PROJECT WAS GANDO PRIMARY SCHOOL – HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO GET THE LOCAL COMMUNITY TO BUY INTO THIS PROJECT AND WHAT LESSONS CAN OTHERS LEARN FROM THIS?**

In Gando, the younger generation learn how to build from the elders. However, what I wanted to propose had never been done before. I wanted to build using material that was locally well known but not valued. I could easily

1: Surgical Clinic and Health Centre, 2014. Léo, Burkina Faso  
 2: Lycée Schorge Secondary School, 2016. Koudougou, Burkina Faso  
 3 & 5: Benin National Assembly, In Progress. Porto-Novo, Republic of Benin  
 4: Lycée Schorge Secondary School, 2016. Koudougou, Burkina Faso



**Left and below:** After the Burkinabé uprising in 2014 destroyed the former parliament building, the new Burkina Faso National Assembly will enable new views, physically and metaphorically. The focal point is a stepped and latticed pyramidal building, housing a 127-person assembly hall on the interior, while encouraging informal congregation of its citizens on the exterior. This building is one piece of a greater master plan, envisioned to include indigenous flora, exhibition spaces, courtyards, retail and a monument to those who lost their lives in protest against the old regime.

have gone ahead and done it, but I decided to do a trial together with the community so that I could showcase my ideas. I wanted it to be very clear that it would be something that was for them.

I think there are many lessons here. One is the use of material. If you want to build in a place with few resources, you should not just throw your hands up and say, "It cannot be done" or "We need to bring things from elsewhere". Rather, let scarcity be your driver for innovation.

The other lesson is spending time to really include people. Do not make the mistake of imagining that because you come bearing gifts, those who did not ask for them need to be immediately grateful. Trust comes from inclusion and participation, not just from rational explaining. Solutions come this way too – solutions you could not have thought of.

**YOU WENT FOR LOCAL MATERIALS AT A TIME WHEN THIS WAS NOT IN VOGUE. WHAT MADE YOU SO CERTAIN ABOUT YOUR CHOICE OF MATERIAL?** I am a material opportunist. The most important thing is to work with materials that are locally available and have been proven to work. In this way, there is local expertise to maintain what is constructed. That may include concrete, depending on the location. I was lucky to be conducting my trial in a location where contemporary architects had little interest. I had the opportunity to try and test my methods and prove that they could work before bringing them to the wider context.

**WHAT IS THE MAIN INSPIRATION FOR YOUR WORK?**

My love for architecture and my belief in its transformative powers.

**WHAT ARE THE GREATEST CHALLENGES FACING ARCHITECTS IN AFRICA?**

There are too many to list. Some are specific to the various African contexts while others are due to global challenges that architects face across the world. Resource scarcity, population growth and rapid urbanisation, high speed real estate development and, of course, the climate crisis are major topics. The loss and historical devaluing of local building knowledge that can offer solutions is something African architects need to work hard to reroute.

**HOW MUCH DOES SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE PLAY A ROLE IN YOUR DESIGNS?**

For me it is such an essential aspect of what architecture needs to do today that it goes without saying that my designs are shaped by considerations of it. What is important for me, though, is that this is done with care. It is not about hopping on the newest trend or paying lip service to these topics without taking into consideration their immense complexity. ➔

**Too much designing now happens in front of a screen. It is important to know what materials feel like, how light can change a space and to understand what skills are needed on a construction site!**

182: Serpentine Pavilion, 2017, London, United Kingdom  
3: Centre for Health and Social Welfare, 2014, Laongo, Burkina Faso



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**Lycée Schorge Secondary School**

Located in one of the more populated cities of Burkina Faso, Koudougou, Lycée Schorge Secondary School serves as a local landmark for its aesthetic qualities. Nine modular buildings are arranged radially, establishing a centre ring of flexible community space for performance, celebration and gathering. Local laterite stone, yielding high thermal mass, was formed into bricks to build the modules. A detached and overhanging corrugated metal roof protects the exterior materials from the rain while shielding the building's inhabitants from natural elements. From within, vaulted ceilings of white perforated plaster distribute favourable lighting under direct sun, while heat escapes through wind towers. From the periphery, vertical eucalyptus wood forms a border, offering shady intermediary spaces for students and teachers. ➡

IWAN BAAH



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**Xylem, 2019. Montana, United States**  
 Inspired by the tuguna, a sacred wood and straw community gathering space located in many small Burkinabé villages, Xylem at Tippet Rise Art Center is constructed almost entirely of raw, local, sustainable pinewood. Clusters of logs are seemingly suspended overhead, "grouped in circular bundles within a modular hexagonal structure in weathering steel, supported by seven steel columns". Subtle rays of light filter into the pavilion, while curvilinear seating at varying heights offers spaces to stand, lounge and lie, so users may experience sprawling views from different vantage points. Visitors may converse, meditate or contemplate in the shelter, while immersed in the natural environment of this art centre, located on a 12,000-acre cattle ranch with a backdrop of the Beartooth Mountains

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**WHAT EXCITES YOU MOST ABOUT MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN AFRICA?** That it is such an open playing field! There is so much to do, so much possibility for innovation. We can get creative!

**HOW DO YOU THINK AFRICAN CITIES OF THE FUTURE SHOULD BE DESIGNED?** That is a very big question that I cannot answer on my own! It concerns me a lot. It needs to take so many things into consideration, like how and where to house all the people pressing into the cities.

**HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT WINNING THE AWARD?** It was an incredible surprise and, even though it has been some months now since the announcement, I simply still cannot believe it. The prize has made my voice a lot louder. I feel it is both an opportunity and a responsibility.


**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE ASPIRING YOUNG AFRICAN ARCHITECTS?** Believe in what you do! Look for local solutions and keep at it. Architecture is a challenging, difficult and long road, so you need to stay strong.

**HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT FOLLOWING A CAREER IN ARCHITECTURE?** Develop a love for the field. Study and then be prepared to work hard. Also, experience buildings in real life! Too much designing now happens in front of a screen. It is important to know what materials feel like, how light can change a space and to understand what skills are needed on a construction site!

**WHAT TIPS CAN WE ALL TAKE FROM YOUR DESIGNS TO IMPROVE OUR OWN HOMES?** Where possible try to interplay with nature, not against it. Try to surround yourself with materials that feel like they come from nature. Explore how your spaces at home can be multifunctional and create rooms where people feel comfortable and like to spend time in. 

**ABOUT THE PRITZKER ARCHITECTURE PRIZE**

The prize was founded by the late Jay Pritzker and his wife Cindy in 1978, with the first laureate selected in 1979. The prize is often referred to as the 'Nobel Prize for Architects'. A living architect or architects, from anywhere in the world, must have a portfolio of built work to be nominated for the award. The jury for the Pritzker Architecture Prize accepts work from diverse fields and are not attached to a specific type of architecture or building. The award ceremony takes place annually at a selected location in any part of the world with an 'architecturally significant site'. Each laureate receives a \$100,000 grant, a formal citation certificate and a bronze medallion. Jay and Cindy Pritzker created what they believed was "a meaningful award that would encourage and stimulate not only a greater public awareness of buildings but also inspire greater creativity within the architectural profession". Since its inception, 45 architects have been honoured with the award, but it was not until 2022 that the first African, Diébédo Francis Kéré, received this prize.

 Find out more at [pritzkerprize.com](https://pritzkerprize.com)