Project Future
An interview with the architect Anna Heringer, Laufen, Germany

Background: Contact to Anna Heringer was initially made during the speaker preparations for the Forum Architecture-Windows-Facades, which was organized by the editors of xia Intelligente Architektur in March in Nuremberg. The theme of the 2016 series was: EINFACH BAUEN – Striving for Simplicity in Architecture and Technology. Ms. Heringer recommended the Indian architect Anupama Kundoo as a speaker to us, who ultimately held a wonderfully informative lecture about her work. A report detailing a permaculture kindergarten in Zimbabwe that was designed by Studio Anna Heringer appeared in xia 94, 01-03/16 under the title “EIGENLEISTUNG”, which refers to the empowerment and intrinsic advantages of utilizing the existing potentials and resources of communities. Since then, both Anna Heringer and Anupama Kundoo were invited to participate in “Reporting from the Front”, the central exhibition of this year’s Architecture Biennale in Venice. The idea to re-engage Ms. Heringer was sparked by an interview with Transsolar’s communications director Monika Lauster that appeared in xia issue 88 under the title “SAVE THE WORLD...WHAT ELSE”. In this piece, Ms. Lauster argued that virtually no effect on climate change can come about merely from architectural showpieces saving energy or reducing CO2 emissions in industrialized countries. From the xia’s point of view, Ms. Heringer’s work in developing countries, her involvement in the international architectural debate and the views and concerns expressed by Ms. Lauster in her interview interlock seamlessly. Thus, Ms. Lauster was invited to be part of this conversation with Ms. Heringer and the xia editor. Ms. Heringer has just come back from the Architecture Biennale in Venice, where she presented a mud-construction project in the main exhibition. The similarities between the Biennale theme to ours are also opportune. As this year’s Biennale director Alejandro Aravena says, there must be substantive alternatives to the capitalistic architecture of star architects (in order to still possibly save the world). With these thoughts in mind, we begin our conversation. FD
INTERVIEW Anna Heringer

Friedrich Dassler: Anna, you have just returned from Venice where you have presented a mud work in the Biennale Exhibition “Reporting from the Front”. How was it?

Anna Heringer: The best thing was, as always, the building process itself – the building of our mud house in the middle of the main exhibition space with at least 40 participants. Everything around us was marked by speed and hustle; meanwhile, we were moving very slowly. For three months we built up our sculpture layer by layer with our hands. Over time, you develop an intimate relationship to what you are doing. Our own energy is contained in the work and it is noticeable from the reactions of people around that it was perceptible. Whoever came over, suddenly paused, breathed in, and then everything seemed to settle down for them, just for a moment. At this stage I would also like to have significantly more exchanges with the other exhibitors. We engaged a lot with our immediate neighbors, a bamboo project, and you could really learn a lot from each other. But not much more than that was possible, as everyone was fairly preoccupied with themselves. And during the cocktail parties after the set-up has been completed, no really good ideas can be generated.

Monika Lauster: The events in the preview phase, before opening the doors to the public, are indeed bizarre. It is a showcase of the international architectural celebrities and those who consider themselves important. After the opening, they all disappear and I ask myself, who is interested in the opinions of ordinary visitors? The actual Biennale is taking place now and runs until November, so throughout the summer. The people who are going there now are the actual target group: interested laypeople, students and so on...

FD: This year’s Biennale director and freshly-minted Pritzker Prize winner Alejandro Aravena has through his extensive exhibition on “Reporting from the Front” equated the world to a “battlefield of architecture” in which the star architect is the “the big bad animal” – that ultimately serves the world of economic capitalism. As a star architect yourself, what are you doing, Anna Heringer, to avoid becoming part of the system itself?

AH: (laughs)... always keep my feet on the ground- staying grounded! The crucial question is why do you do something. My focus is on the needs of the people for whom I work, with who I work and of course, my own. We must not let the trappings of an event such as the Biennale have too much influence upon us - and it can be quite exhausting. In these opening days, egotism and the desire to be recognized is everywhere; it is about ego, who is invited where and so on. Our idea was also that you can implement remarkable architecture using these materials and unskilled labor. That means, architecture can tap into human capital. One of the greatest resources of all. A key moment for me was when we were talking about the importance of participation and in particular, the participation of the people in the building process, which has quite a different meaning for people in industrialized countries and for people in developing countries. People in our society suffer under feelings of apathy or lack of connection just as they do in the poorer countries, but with very different preconditions. And participation is exhausting. But the result is worth the effort. A lot can go wrong, however. We have found, for example, that participation in construction is worth a lot more than participation in the design or planning. As architects and engineers, we have studied design and project planning and for landscape it is often difficult enough just to determine what is they really want or what will be a benefit or not. This is the real value of our education, identification occurs most genuinely through hands-on experience within the construction process. And here people in the developing countries have much more knowledge about their living environment. Moreover, building with earth is a global strategy for sustainability. The economical use of embodied energy and primary energy are crucial questions.

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One problem with such events, however, is the possibility of being pigeonholed as you can barely find the opportunity to really express yourself. Our “Lehmprojekt” is a mud project, does run this risk of simply going down as a “nice topic for developing countries”. “Work in Bangladesh” is indeed such an example. But we actually want to show that soil is available everywhere, that it is somewhat of a common interest that binds us together. It is available here in Europe and throughout the world. In developing countries, the building material integrates the existing abundance of workers and here it improves the health of the living environment. Moreover, building with earth is a global strategy for sustainability. The economical use of embodied energy and primary energy are strategies equally in focus here. There is no waste. For us it is about healthy living spaces and cities made for humans.

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And that also applies to architects. Even architects are consumers of construction products, and they should be as simple, reliable and cost effective as possible to manage.

AH: True enough, the system is sick. As mud has no industrial lobby, we see this as an acupuncture project whereby palliative treatments are implemented in the hope for a lasting effect. With our sculpture for the GSD at Harvard, we observed that people want to interact with it, both consciously and unconsciously – people stand there using a mobile phone and touch the mud with their free hand. That's great and will surely have an effect. There is not only visual but also a tactile, human perception appeal. The fact that by the end of the Biennale in Venice, over 250,000 people will have seen and felt the mud will have an impact. Mud is not the building material of poverty, but rather of quality of life, as beautiful as it is durable. And the people of the world who live in mud houses do not have to ashamed of it.

The example of mud also shows us that the building material is indeed not only ubiquitous, but is also different everywhere. One can react structurally to very different climatic conditions with mud. This creates very different designs that are shaped by local conditions. A house made of mud in Germany or Austria is quite different than a house made of mud in Bangladesh, precisely because of the different local influences and not because you want to showcase the local style. Imitations can be, at best, as good as the original. But if you do your own thing, you can hold your chin up.

For example, for the Biennale sculpture, we actually used mud directly from Venice. We initially thought, wait… Venice and mud? These things do not necessarily go together. But the city is essentially built of brick, which is made of, yes, fed clay. So building with mud is the CO2 emissions-free version of traditional architecture in Venice.

FD: When is a building for you good architecture, or should I ask, when is a building thought about and this required carrying out fire tests because of possible terrorist issues? We already do with concrete and steel. Mud possesses its own unique and even unique approach involves innovation, not the adaptation of building with mud to what we do not want. The sustainability and the chances lie elsewhere, namely in the local influences and not because you want to showcase the local style. MUD Works in touch

ML: Our office was involved in the Swiss project for Ricola (Ricola-Kräuterzentrum, architecture Herzog & de Meuron with Martin Rauch; see article “Intelligent einfach” in sax 90, p 52 ff. We were asked to calculate the effects of mud on the indoor climate. We also had to prove to the Swiss building authorities that all the relevant strict local requirements could be met. So mud works also for us, but it is just not part of the normative guidelines, so it must be tested and approved in individual cases.

AH: Probably everything would be easier if mud were to be chemically upgraded, to industrialise it in some way. That would be innovative. But that's precisely what we do not want. The sustainability and the chances lie elsewhere, namely in developing a material-oriented architectural language. The material-specific approach involves innovation, not the adaptation of building with mud to what we want to deliver. Coordinating ten different projects and dealing with operations and office management would not be enjoyable. Above all, I am also very happy to go to construction sites and get involved.

In my view, it is about the quality of the processes, that is the key. If you only do things that you can stand behind and that you really want to do, then you won’t really want an office where you have to roll out 10 projects simultaneously. I’m not interested in that. Nor am I interested to work through the weekend or to push night shifts on projects that I find to have questionable content. One must act, and this requires a lot of clear thinking and a lot of determination. A larger office requires certain work style that I do not want to develop. Coordinating ten different projects and dealing with operations and office management would not be enjoyable. Above all, I am also very happy to go to construction sites and get involved.

FD: When is a building for you good architecture, or should I ask, when is a home beautiful for you?

AH: A building is beautiful for me when I feel a certain harmony. If I see that it is not arbitrary or not easily replaceable, if the place and the people with the building are in accord. You can see that when the people who have to interact with the building enjoy it or are proud of it. These may be school children, a family or an employee of a company. Of course, proportions and such things do play a role, but beauty is found not only in the splendor of the form. Something is really beautiful only if it fulfills a positive purpose. One I believe can be seen and felt.

But it is also clear, that this kind of beauty cannot be forced or bought. As an architect, one has to step back sometimes. You have to hand. That’s great and will surely have an effect.
minimum terms and conditions to participate, then you do not even win very often, and when you do, as has already happened to me, the project is never built.

I find it much more exciting to seek a project myself, develop it, and then negotiate only the financing or feasibility of the project. This is of course only possible on a small scale and with employees who also share your ideals and needs. In this area I’m lucky. And now that I have a daughter, I can’t be on a construction site in Africa for months at a time. My Italian staff Stefano Mori has taken over these tasks on my behalf.

ML: I think that’s a very remarkable and one should definitely share this with young architects. Using this kind of project development model, traditional arrangements get turned on their heads. Usually, there is money and then a building task is generated, which in turn will provide economic benefits. But in your case, you convince potential donors to finance a project only because they really want it. In our work, it is often the case that the client initially defines ambitious goals in terms of the comfort and ecology, but then these goals get clipped away bit by bit during the project lifetime due to costs. This is extremely debilitating and frustrating for us as consulting engineers, but also for the architects who integrated these ideas into their design.

AH: That’s right. It shifts the weights and the responsibilities, which is a very important point.

In our projects, it is also often the case that we have no money, but then we go on working for two weeks anyway. Material such as mud and simple designs make this possible. Of course, this means we are working in advance without receiving payment. You have to develop a strategy and a design, and get people behind it.

FD: This is similar to a competition with respect to the effort where you have to convince jury of representatives. However, you are not convincing representatives, but the actual people who have a direct interest in your project. This is a qualitative difference.

AH: And in a competition, you have to comply with a given program. We create our tasks for ourselves. It may be that until now, no one had come up with the possibility, but the actual people who have a direct interest in your project. This is a qualitative difference.

ML: I also see that in our Academy work at Thunsalier. A young architect from Dhaka in Bangladesh told us western-looking designs often win architectural competitions there. Then we asked, why don’t you develop houses that speak more to your own building culture? Your local construction technology is much more well-suited to your climatic conditions. Our environmental engineers even study things like natural ventilation, shading, cooling that are typical of your traditional construction. She laughed and said: yes, but your architecture of glass and style seems chic and modern to us, progressive even, and we also want to be chic, modern and progressive. In this sense, architecture is also a status symbol.

Before this interview, I showed her your METI School in Rudrapur, so in her home country, and of course she found it absolutely gorgeous and wonderful. But she also said if she were to propose something like this to her boss in Bangladesh, it would not be approved.

AH: I know to propose is simply not enough, you must advocate. First you need self-confidence, maybe you need a reputation, for example through publications, and of course, you need allies. Ultimately you need someone who is in the position to award the western-style glass and steel design. If we show the Ricola project in Switzerland (via 92) in Bangladesh, people say: “Hey, that’s a form of luxury that we can also afford.” Because they have exactly the right resources there – the workers and material – that are needed. Examples always have a great importance, especially in a cross-border exchanges of information.

There are already efforts by local architects, the Architecture Institute, and regional government in Bangladesh to promote new mud building techniques. So there is already a fundamental interest in modern architecture with mud, especially as this building material is perfect for a hot and humid climate. That’s why a workshop on earth building techniques together with Martin Rauch garnered a lot of interest.

But of course, the fact that concrete is very cheap in Africa and that this work is done by machinery also plays a role. The labor-intensive building materials such as mud, and also materials such as bamboo and wood, open up untapped resources that create jobs, and are CO2 neutral and much healthier. These are social issues and related appropriate policy is needed. Fundamental changes, such as new paradigms in thinking that carry numerous and serious consequences, always begin very slowly. But I believe that the acceleration comes a bit later, like a learning curve.

FD: We are moving towards a fundamental paradigm shift, both with respect to our industry lobby-controlled society as well societies where corruption largely dominates from above and dictatorial structures rule the economy. The model of success on the world market was and is, unfortunately, still the combination of both. It is not for nothing that nothing happens unless someone can sell something to someone.

ML: For more than 20 years now we have been trying as an engineering company to reduce energy consumption and associated CO2 emissions through the development and use of natural and intelligent concepts. We have had some success, but it is not enough. The more that industrialisation and awareness of its associated comforts grew within the Majority World, the greater extent to which our efforts are questioned. We continue to work on it and are getting better, but pollution and energy consumption continue to outpace our efforts worldwide.

In addition, these people are now willing to come to us – to a world that is perceived as better and where everything they lack can be found in abundance. I am not referring to victims of war, such as the refugees from Syria.

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Within these countries themselves, there are many larger fluxes and movements of people internally, in the form of rural abandonment and mass urbanization. These factors often occur in the formation of slums where catastrophic social and hygienic conditions prevail. It seems to me that new dependencies are emerging from the industrialized countries, which are trying to make business models here. Since the West is mostly built out and our markets are largely saturated, with respect for example to the consumption of steel, concrete and glass, they are looking for new markets instead of helping find and create solutions.

AH: Things like mud must construction promote the independence of these countries and work against phenomena such as rural migration. You see, most of the workers who build skyscrapers of steel and glass in Riyadh or Dubai are from Bangladesh. When come home, they recount how high-rise buildings are the greatest thing ever. Now there is a prominent project of Shantanta architects in Riyadh with rammed earth. These same workers come to this site and stomp clay and think “Hey, we can do this at home, too.” This also has implications. If this independence were established, this would be a step towards countering the disparity between the different countries and systems.

FD: Can we not expect the world market to resist such a development? I’m assuming that it has been doing that for a long time. Market forces love to control and make customers dependent. The new economic giants of the internet illustrate this in such a perfect way never seen before. They hardly differentiate between us and the Majority World.

AH: These forces react, that’s for sure. But these systems are changing. And at some point there is no other way, because climate change affects us all and doesn’t differentiate either.

ML: At the moment it does seem as if there are some differential impacts, for example, severe weather attributable to climate change, especially floods, often wreak the greatest damage in the poorer countries. While it is cynical, global warming also destroys future markets for multinationals. Perhaps it brings them to their senses.

FD: It would be better, of course, when people would just stop participating both in the Majority World and in industrialised countries. One can also observe these changes amongst the more intelligent youth. They no longer automatically buy to their senses. It would be better, of course, when people would just stop participating both in the Majority World and in industrialised countries. One can also observe these changes amongst the more intelligent youth. They no longer automatically buy to their senses. What I have learned today is that the mud is not only ideally suited to be used worldwide and in different contexts, but it also ideally represents and illustrates a new model. Its processing technology and its availability allow diverse energy resource potentials to be reconciled.

AH: Everything that we know about in the West can be integrated into mud construction – the research field has not yet received much attention. Everything that people have in the poorer countries of the world and what they can contribute can also be incorporated. This potential can begin to help diminish some of the vulnerability of these countries and free them from dependency while sustainably improving our environmental conditions. Of course, I also try to bring my Western skills when I, for example, simulate the indoor climate of my mud buildings in Bangladesh on the computer. But it is mainly a matter of investing time and passion in these projects. One of the most important human abilities is to be able to build secure dwellings from the materials that can be found locally. This consideration is, however, no longer the subject of architecture today. We look rather for the best views or ask ourselves who else lives there and what can I afford…

But that is by no means always the best place for a house, given the existing natural conditions of the place and the natural needs of the people. You do not have to define any political goals, such as energy saving, CO2 reduction or sustainably improving our environmental conditions. This research has the influencing factors are holistically coherent. In this sense, we are almost on a level playing field with poorer countries and that makes me happy because it is only fair…

FD: Do I ask myself now, how can we come together positively in this sense, the character of a project in your work, Anna Heringer, clearly plays a very crucial role.

AH: It’s an archaic basic human need to want to be needed. This applies to all people. Every child wants to be useful and helps immediately when there is an opportunity. If you can make architectural act in this sense, then you have a very, very strong power on your side.

ML: One has the impression that a situation has arisen in which humanity is being used to artificially keep the current economic system alive. The inter-relationships are opaque. But you develop your projects to a large extent, beyond market-oriented structures in order to allow the benefits to reach 100% of the participants, and not just flow to any anonymous investor. This principle should be more widely disseminated so people can learn from it.

FD: Accordingly, the modulation of the relationship between the industrialized nations and the developing countries is the key to a future-oriented global society. This acknowledgement is not new, of course, but architecture has thus far failed to the extent its Star Architect System serves the “big, bad beast” of financial power. Relevant discussions are held again and again on this topic throughout the architectural community.

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