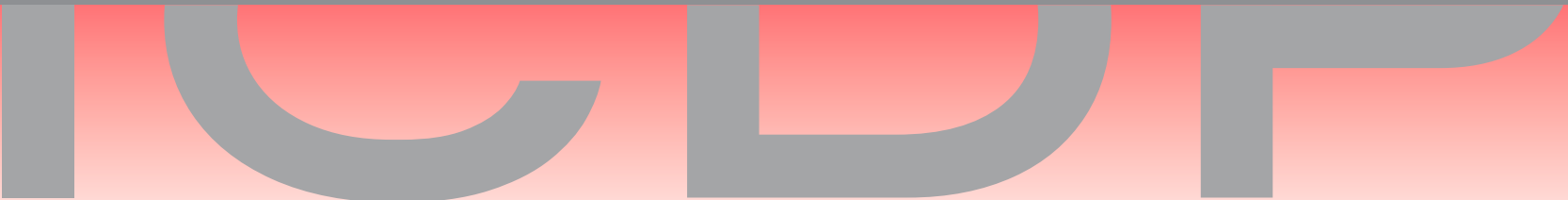


TOMORROW – HOW DO WE SHAPE THE FUTURE?

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INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY
DESIGN PRACTICES

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN



In the spotlight:
Design in the cradle of humankind
Stephanie Ringel

In this interview, Stella Mutegi, co-founder of the Nairobi-based architecture studio Cave_bureau, talks about the studio’s approach to design and architecture, their concept of ‘reverse futurism’, and the tensions between rural and urban environments. During International Workshop Week, she also presented their projects on the geological and indigenous heritage in and around Nairobi. This year Cave_bureau is co-curating the British Pavilion of the 2025 International Architecture Exhibition in Venice.

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Stella, you and Kabage Karanja co-run Cave_bureau, a traditional architectural studio that was born in a crisis situation. What’s on your agenda right now?

That’s true. Cave_bureau started in 2014, when we had just been fired from a big architectural office and decided to set up our own studio together. We wanted to run a conventional architectural practice where we would design buildings and be on construction sites and all that – but along the way we got into research. We titled our research the ‘Anthropocene Museum’. We started out small, without a definite plan, but then it organically grew into what it is right now: a living, roaming institution of imagination and community-based action. Through the research, we also find ourselves in the teaching space – as we were in Basel during International Workshop Week, for example. This spring we are at the Yale School of Architecture.

What sort of building projects are you leading?

It’s a very mixed bag. We’re not specialised in one architectural field. If a client comes to us and we find the project interesting, then we go for it. At the moment, we are completing an institution, based in the army barracks, where they train both local and international soldiers. Before that there was a mixed-used building with commercial, retail and residential space. We have worked on office blocks, housing projects and institutions.

Speaking of architecture, the ‘cave’ is not just a part of your studio’s name, it’s a theoretical approach and a model for your thinking. Please tell me about it.

The cave – when you really think about it – is the original architecture. When we started out and we thought what the name of our practice could be, we decided to go back to the original shelter: the cave. We are geographically located in the Great Rift Valley, a place that is often referred to as the ‘cradle of humankind’. The earliest human remains ever found were in Kenya. We developed a strong interest in the forgotten knowledge held in the caves in and around Nairobi. So, when we talk about geology, colonialism, climate change and so on, we go back to the caves to understand these complex issues.

Looking at this heritage, both indigenous and geological, means looking into the past to understand what you call rural urbanity. How does an understanding for modern living come from there?

That’s an interesting question, because we have a phrase for that: it’s called ‘reverse futurism’. And reverse futurism means going back to the past so we are better informed today about what we decide for the future. When we started out, we asked ourselves what an African city really was. We started by looking more closely at our own city of Nairobi. Nairobi’s urban planning was done by the British colonial administration. We looked at the different areas and ways the city had been planned. We found three distinct categories and named them: the ‘origin’, the ‘made’, and the ‘void’. The ‘origin’ is what Nairobi was before the British came: grazing land for the Maasai. Nairobi was ancestral Maasai land, and the word Nairobi means ‘the place of cool waters’. The ‘made’ is a place within the city that is developed,

and was largely the territory of the colonialists. It’s higher in altitude, so it’s cooler and has lush vegetation. Today these are the affluent areas of Nairobi. The ‘void’ are the more informal settlements that are located in lower altitudes and that have a more savannah-like climate. It’s densely populated and lacks the infrastructure that the ‘made’ part has. We studied how all these spaces work together in the city. These thoughts led us into the caves. We were searching for origins – going back helped us to understand more about social issues and rural-urban frictions.

How is that?

Caves are geological forms and were used over time in different ways, for example as shelter for early humans, and more recently during the colonial era by the freedom fighters as hideouts. And when you see them today, on the outskirts of Nairobi, you will see school trips, teenage and young adult expeditions as well as lovers using these caves for recreational purposes.

These are very old places, natural settings, used in different ways over time. What do you learn from that past for our future?

That the information needs to come out. The majority of the children who go to the caves do not really understand what freedom is. They do not know the struggles of the Mau Mau freedom fighters. We hope for and are working towards a future in which people are well informed. In which they know the why’s: why certain things are the way they are and why certain things have to be changed. A lot of our history here in Kenya is very skewed. The history of the Mau Mau, the freedom fighters, is not told as it truly was: they are portrayed as a violent vigilante group rather than a group that fought for what was forcefully and violently taken away by the British, but that truly belongs to the Kenyan people. We want people to actually know our history.

Are you advocating for knowing more about pre-colonial heritage and reframing it?

It’s unfortunately something that’s being lost. The cultural heritage of people in Kenya, and people in Africa at large. Here is an example that I always give: I’m from a community that is called the Meru. I speak Kimeru. But my daughter does not speak my mother tongue. I am the last person in my ancestral lineage to speak Kimeru and I am not passing it on to my child. Something as big as the language we speak, a huge cultural heritage, will not be there for her generation. I worry for that time, when my daughter will only speak English.

That is a big crisis?

Yes, and I don’t know if people actually realise that it is a crisis. This stems from the colonial era, when people were told that speaking their mother tongue and practising their cultural way of life was backwards. So to fit in, you do what is being introduced to you. This is what happened in my great grandmother’s generation. To ensure their children would be equipped for the modern world, they were given a western education. By the time I was born – three generations later – a lot of my indigenous culture had been erased from our memory. Western culture is an alien way of life but has become very normal. And with that, the culture is dying.



Stella Mutegi

What role can designers take in our current world, which seems to change in rapid and unpredictable cycles?

In these times of artificial intelligence, we should be more human oriented. Anyone in the future will be able to do almost anything. Brain surgery? Hang on, I'll give the AI a prompt and get a step-by-step guide. People are creating designs with AI. So what is the role of an architect or a designer? My advice would be to think more about human interactions without technology.

That takes us back to what we said earlier. Understanding who we are as humans and thus what we need goes back to our ancestors who were living in a more connected way with their environment.

Most definitively, yes. If you think about our area 200 years ago, humans were living in harmony with nature, they respected it. You take what you need to build a house, use it, and at some point it goes back to the earth. Building was not detrimental to the environment and therefore had no impact on the climate. Our government has a big appetite for areas that are rich in geothermal power so we can become a green nation. But how green is green? When you look at what happens in order to make the transition to green energy – people get displaced from their ancestral homeland; animal and plant species that have adapted to the area suffer and in some cases go extinct; ecosystems get completely decimated. It makes me wish we had a pause button for human beings where we could take time to reflect on the things we do and the impact they will have on future generations. That is one reason for us as architects to move into research. So the Anthropocene Museum (a.museum) gives us a chance to step back and take a different perspective.

The a.museum has ten instalments now. You explored how systems and structures are influenced by people. Did you discuss this important part of your work with the students?

I think to some extent I did because the principle of reverse futurism that we use at Cave_bureau was used in their projects. I did a presentation on what we do with the a.museum and I forecast what we dream about on Mount Suswa. For this rural-urban research project, we take a decentralised approach, looking outside the city to examine and address the myriad of ways that its anthropogenic pressures are negatively affecting a resilient Maasai people, who are now struggling, in the face of climate change, to adapt their ingenious ways of living that have sustained them for thousands of years. The Maasai community of Suswa are facing the consequences of the worst drought on record in the last 40 years, with their livelihood of rearing cows and goats decimated and their ability to earn a living drastically affected.

Because weather patterns have changed?

Several years back they would know when the rainy season would start, when to plant, when to move to another pasture so that the one they had been using could regenerate. But they are not able to plan anymore because the climatic conditions have changed and are no longer predictable. By fusing the ancestral knowledge of the Maasai with our knowledge as architects as well as the knowledge of other specialists like geol-

ogists, anthropologists, ecologists, engineers and more, we hold consultative meetings together, and do on-site visits and research in a bid to reverse the negative effects of climate change, while using the natural resources rich in the Suswa area to reverse and protect the ecosystem.

How did the students deal with their task?

They worked in pairs but one group had four students. It has been very interesting to see how they think. I can tell that they are still very young. Their focus is on their peer groups. For example, they design games to be able to interact with their friends.

Could you gain insights from the students' way of thinking?

Yes, most definitely. They are very practical and don't stress about solutions because they interact a lot and use the internet. When I was their age, I had to figure out a lot of things on my own – I grew up when print encyclopaedias were the 'google search'. I find that sometimes when I have a question, I will try to solve it and when I ask the young people in the office, they quickly ask ChatGPT and give me several solutions!

Where do you find inspiration?

A lot of it comes from interactions we have in the communities we work with. In any cave that we visit, we always connect with the community that lives around the cave. We want to find out a lot more than the physicality of the cave. We want to know how they were and are used and what makes them special. Really listening is great. We come from a place of privilege. If I run out of milk, I jump into my car, drive to the supermarket and buy some or just open my supermarket app and have it delivered. But this one lady that we met, if she runs out of something, it requires a lot planning just to get that item. Those are some of the things that make me sit back and think – and inspire us.

Your work is sustained by other ways of living. I realise how present the ideas from the a.museum are in your thinking.

Will there be another project in the series?

We said that 'am 10.0' would be the last iteration. While all the other a.museums have been roaming around the world, 'am 10.0' is a project that will generate a site-specific design intervention on the outer crater of the Maasai community in the Suswa Conservancy. It is a project about respect and restorative justice, working closely with the Maasai to co-design solutions that bolster their agency and indigenous structures of governance, with a view to helping both human and more-than-human life on the mountain flourish. From there we will grow tentacles. a.museum serves as our new ground base to launch similar activities elsewhere.

You are curating the British Pavilion for the 2025 International Architecture Exhibition in Venice. Will one of the tentacles grow all the way into the Giardini?

You could almost say that is one tentacle, yes. The exhibition will map architectures from across the world defined by an embedded relationship to the ground, which are resilient in the face of climate breakdown, social, economic and political upheaval; and that offer refuge and empowerment for the most climate-exposed

communities. We are participating in the Biennale for the third time. Even though after the first one we said we'd never prepare another exhibition for it again.

Why?

The first time we participated with the 'Obsidian Rain' exhibition. We realised how much work it was and we had no budget. The second time, Lesley Lokko (author's note: Ghanaian-Scottish architect and educator, curator of the 18th International Architecture Biennale) called us, so we couldn't really say no. But then we found ourselves in the same hamster wheel. However, we did get some funding from the AFI. And then we won an open call by the British Council to co-curate the British pavilion... and here we are today! I think the Anthropocene Museum would never have grown into what it is were it not for those opportunities that were given to us by the various people and institutions we met along the way. So today we know: Never say never!

I find what you say very interesting, because language is as much part of indigenous heritage as the built environment, social communities or nature; because how we speak and what we say is how we give things meaning. Language is part of the evolution of generations. Can you explain to me why you can name the loss of culture but didn't take the chance yourself to make the difference – especially given that you work in the educational field?

Tough question. I think I can bring it down to procrastination. I do not have a reason. When I am on the phone speaking to my mum, we speak in English intertwined with Kimeru. When I am using Kimeru phrases, for example to finish up a conversation, my daughter picks up these words and repeats them to her grandmother. I might take our conversation as a key to actually just go and teach her.

Please do! Language is a powerful tool to connect with each other.

You know, I asked the students to think about the lockdown during the covid pandemic when the whole world was stuck at home. I asked each and every one of them: What was one object that gave you comfort, that you used a lot? And how would you transform it to improve it? I was interested to know what they would want in another lockdown and what would serve them. Their projects have a lot to do with interactions! They are designing for interaction and connection.

