

contradictions in architecture

 By Herman Manson: @marklives

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As riots and revolution rocks the Arab world, the rulers of Abu Dhabi are building yet another offshore island villa complex for the super-rich. Designer Dror Benshetrit, speaking on the first day of the annual Design Indaba conference, currently underway at the Cape Town International Convention Centre in Cape Town, admits he spent several minutes laughing loudly over the phone during the call in which he was told he'd won the design contract (admittedly approved before the current wage of rage swept the region) that he'd designed in only five weeks. [\[view twitterfall\]](#)



[Nurai Island](#) will consist of luxury villas and a hotel built just off the coast of the Emirate, with the entire island and all its buildings (with the exception of a cube-shaped structure camouflaged by water and a spa underneath the ocean) camouflaged by a green blanket of grass so that rooftops become gardens and homes remain private. They threw in a private beach. Anything is possible - in Abu Dhabi, laughs Benshetrit.

According to his website, Benshetrit designs but engineers will later decide if it can be built. Oil money will provide ample financing. The design takes your breath away, as I'm sure does the budget. But can we pretend there is anything not grotesquely excessive and wasteful about this project, thrown together in a matter of weeks, even if it has the financing to proceed?

QuaDror

At the same time, Benshetrit revealed an innovative interlocking frame technology called [QuaDror](#) which is touted for its strength, aesthetic value and potential to provide frames for low-cost housing (locals would fill it in with the material available to them, eg bamboo or wood). It's beautiful, it certainly holds potential; it's also not been costed, which makes calling it a low-cost housing solution premature. Benshetrit spent four years on its development.

Of course, it won't be used only on low-cost housing - though that will be the key point picked out by the media - but also for dividing rooms, trestles, dwellings (across price ranges), window placement and art. The design is based on the form of a chandelier he created for the Swarovski Crystal Palace exhibit. It's nice to punt design solutions for the poor. Getting it financed is another matter altogether.

Burkina Faso architect [Francis Kéré](#) was the undoubted crowd favourite and the only speaker to draw a standing ovation. His work dashes notions of Western design superiority.

Building back to communities

Instead, Kéré draws building back to communities, using local skills and materials, for beautiful, practical and cost effective architectural solutions. The audience reaction was strongly reminiscent of that received by architect [Alejandro Aravena](#) when he wowed the audience with his approach to social housing at last year's indaba.

West Africa has only one school for architecture, Kéré points out, while regional governments draw inspiration from the slick glass and concrete buildings they see on trips to the West or, more likely, China. Towers need electricity to be habitable in a hot and humid region, one where power is not always available, and if it is, not all reliably the time.

Kéré challenges the wholesale import of western ideas about buildings and the people that use them. He notes that African compounds are designed to grow, and sometimes to shrink, as is required. Tell that to a UNESCO official, he points out, who strives for preservation of the structure that exists rather than the preservation of the heartbeat and rhythm of a

compound.

Pupils taking ownership?

The school he built in Gando was built with clay; even the vaulted ceiling is made of clay bricks. It was built using the skills found in the community. Even kids participated. Child labour used to build schools - or pupils taking ownership of the building in which they will learn? I'm betting on the latter.

Kéré is successful because he uses local talent, local material and strives to get the entire community, from the very young to the very old, invested in their architecture. Kéré and the community are already looking ahead and are building a high school to further educate the children of Gando.

Kéré's buildings, and building methods, have a rhythm to them, one you could sense in Kéré onstage, and it served as a reminder of what western design often lacks. Maybe it's time South Africans rediscover that rhythm. Embracing a low-tech community approach to appropriate building projects that addresses the needs on the ground, rather than the fantasies of bureaucrats, might offer an unexpected solution to failing service delivery and housing backlogs.

SA's design solutions will probably be found in Africa - Kéré's success just illustrates the point.

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ABOUT HERMAN MANSON: @MARKLIVES

The inaugural Vodacom Social Media Journalist of the Year in 2011, Herman Manson (@marklives) is a business journalist and media commentator who edits industry news site www.marklives.com. His writing has appeared in newspapers and magazines locally and abroad, including Bizcommunity.com. He also co-founded *Brand* magazine.

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