Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement

The Museum of Modern Art

This exhibition presents eleven architectural projects on five continents that respond to localized needs in underserved communities. These innovative designs signal a renewed sense of commitment, shared by many of today’s practitioners, to the social responsibilities of architecture. Though this stance echoes socially engaged movements of the past, the architects highlighted here are not interested in grand manifestos or utopian theories. Instead, their commitment to a radical pragmatism can be seen in the projects they have realized, from a handmade school in Bangladesh to a reconsideration of a modernist housing project in Paris, from an apartheid museum in South Africa to a cable car that connects a single hillside barrio in Caracas to the city at large. These works reveal an exciting shift in the longstanding dialogue between architecture and society, in which the architect’s methods and approaches are being dramatically reevaluated. They also propose an expanded definition of sustainability that moves beyond experimentation with new materials and technologies to include such concepts as social and economic stewardship. Together, these undertakings not only offer practical solutions to known needs, but also aim to have a broader effect on the communities in which they work, using design as a tool.

Small Scale, Big Change explores the following projects in depth: Primary School, Gando, Burkina Faso (Diébédo Francis Kéré, 1999–2001); Quinta Monroy Housing, Iquique, Chile (Elemental, 2003–05); Red Location Museum of Struggle, Port Elizabeth, South Africa (Noero Wolff Architects, 1998–2005); METI – Handmade School, Rudrapur, Bangladesh (Anna Heringer, 2004–06); Inner-City Arts, Los Angeles, California (Michael Maltzan Architecture, 1993–2008); Housing for the Fishermen, Tyre, Lebanon (Hashim Sarkis A.L.U.D., 1998–2008); $20K House VIII (Dave’s House), Hale County, Alabama (Rural Studio, 2009); Metro Cable, Caracas, Venezuela (Urban Think Tank, 2007–10); Manguinhos Complex, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Jorge Mario Jáuregui, 2005–10); Transformation of Tour Bois le Prêtre, Paris, France (Frédéric Druet, Anne Lacaton, and Jean Philippe Vassal, 2006–11); and Casa Familiar: Living Rooms at the Border and Senior Housing with Childcare in San Ysidro, California (Estudio Teddy Cruz, 2001–present).

Three Internet-based networks, The 1%, Open Architecture Network, and Urbaninform, extend this survey beyond individual projects to the architecture community. These forums connect community leaders, architects, and nongovernmental organizations to share information and experience.

Organized by Andres Lepik, Curator, and Margot Weller, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Architecture and Design.