

“LONGING & BELONGING”

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## Longing & Belonging

DESIGN

Measuring success in community design projects, from Dakar to Newfoundland



Birsell+Seck for Moroso, Bayekou chair, 2010, steel and woven polyethylene, 63 × 58 × 135 cm

You want to save a rural place, or at least help it out. Somewhere impoverished, somewhere suffering depopulation and ageing populations or any other issues of rural blight. So, what do you do? Design and art are often on the agenda. Designers come in, collaborate with local craftspeople or build something – something needed, something that will improve the locals' lives. Intentions are high; liberal values preserved. Often these things smack of some sort of proselytizing, appealing to the improving nature of art and design. Often, too, the projects are tiny interventions that may or may not create a lasting change. They are important, but sometimes they're just enough to make the designers feel good about themselves or to help students learn about ethics and social design.

Recently, a few projects have broken that mould not only in rural areas but also in the developing world, creating possibilities for new local manufacturing that might challenge the IKEA-ization of the world. In Senegal, Bibi Seck did this with his collection Dakar Next. One half of the New York design consultancy Birsell+Seck, he grew up in Dakar and this year returned there with the idea of creating a line of furniture to be made and sold

in the city with the technologies available. The line is bold and modern but also feels true to its place.

Collaborations between international designers and local makers can frequently feel superficial, hueing close to what the Indian-born Netherlands-based designer Satyendra Pakhalé calls ‘the fetish of craft’. Last year, at The Studio Museum in Harlem, Stephen Burks intentionally went to the edge of that extreme with everything in the show, from lighting to seating, things normally considered ‘product design’ – handmade as a kind of dare. ‘It’s OK,’ he says, ‘for your bread basket to look like that, but what about your pendant lamp?’ While Burks dreams of sustainable micro economies, he complains about how his projects along these lines for Capellini and Moroso were doomed because of under-investment and a fetishizing of craft instead of a commitment to making things in a new way.

In North Carolina, a couple of years ago, a design-build programme was launched that taught local high-school kids architecture and construction. The lauded social design group Project H set up Studio H, a curriculum that was truly workshop class as soul craft, showing the kids what they could achieve. They built farmers’ markets in food deserts and mobile chicken huts in a region where masses of battery hens are kept. It was an amazing intervention. Sadly, it ended this year as there wasn’t enough community buy-in. Now, Studio H has been relocated to a school in the more liberal surrounds of Berkeley, California.



Farmers market structure built and designed by Studio H high school students;  
photograph © Brad Feinknopf 2011

On Fogo Island is an antidote to the failures. Here on this tiny speck of land – an island off an island in Newfoundland – a local nonprofit, Shorefast, is using art and design not only to preserve the island’s identity but also to give it a new focus. Four years ago, Shorefast set up the Fogo Island Arts Corporation to establish an international residency programme. Thanks to this initiative, last winter dozens of locals braved the snow to watch Rory Middleton make the sun set. He was projecting sunsets he’d filmed in all their lurid winter glory onto a screen of pond ice. People rode snowmobiles inland to watch. One man said to the guy next to him: ‘Well, we’re not sure what this is all about.’ ‘Maybe,’ the other responded, ‘he’s just trying to get us off the couch.’ ‘Well, we’re all out here watching the sunset.’

Zita Cobb, Shorefast’s founder, related this story recently. Raised on Fogo in a house with no running water, she left and made a fortune and has since returned to the island, a place doomed by Canada’s regulation of the fishing industry. Any chance of self-preservation disappeared with the cod, and now saving the island and its surrounding archipelago has a kind of missionary zeal. For Cobbs, it’s not about proselytizing or ‘educating’ the locals in how to see the world. Neither does she think that those off the island are better or right. As she describes Middleton’s piece, it’s clear that something more subtle is going on. She talks about the layers of meaning the piece created, from the way the men on skidoos saw it to the ice bar Middleton’s wife made and the rum drinks she served – and how these layers worked in different spheres – high and low, local and not. As Cobb puts it, ‘Art is about a way of knowing [...] You invite artists into the community to work and the community will benefit from other points of view and ways of seeing, so too with design.’ The foundation she set up to save the island is creating a give and take between islander and, as the locals prosaically put it, those from ‘away’.

Nikolaus Schafhausen, Fogo Arts’ strategic director, puts it more philosophically. ‘It’s about,’ he says on the phone from Vienna, ‘belonging and longing, that issue that informs so much contemporary art and literature.’ Despite being recently made artistic director of Kunsthalle Wien, he continues to work with Shorefast because he finds the Fogo project intellectually inspiring. It’s a business model built on the idea of international cultural exchange, but also the idea of what is enough, that they don’t have to be everywhere for everyone.

To this end, this autumn Shorefast is also opening an inn. Luxurious and bespoke, it’s the sort of place the well-heeled who long to belong will travel great distances to reach. Designed by Newfoundland-born architect Todd Saunders, it’s been heralded in *The New*

*York Times* and travel magazines; just about every piece of furniture will be made on Fogo through collaborations.

Over the last couple of years, Shorefast has brought dozens of designers out to Fogo to see who might make what. In February 2010, a group of nearly 20 – including an anthropologist – visited the island. There were lunches, hikes and talks, even a mock hotel room set up in a church. London-based furniture designer Donna Wilson took thousands of pictures of everything from chairs made of barrels to houses and boat-building during her 2011 visit. They led to her tongue-and-groove Bertha chair, built like the siding on the houses. Montreal designer Elaine Fortin's Punt Chair is modelled after the island's boats, while Ineke Hans is making turned-wood chairs. She gave local woodworkers open guidelines so they could make each piece as they saw fit and each would be unique. Joe Nunn of the duo Glass Hill was commissioned to design everything from bar stools to the reception desk and dining tables. Now he speaks eloquently about how the entire process inspired their designs. 'People there have an economy of character, a forthrightness that is refreshing, particularly for us, coming as we do from London – a city with arch everything, double-speaking cabbies and over-sophisticated six-year-olds. The island itself is so raspily elemental that their stories need no embellishment, rich as they are in event and natural might. So, too, the furniture shouldn't need any embellishment.'

Not all the collaborations have worked out though. 'It's not necessarily even about the design,' Cobb says. The project is about more than aesthetics – it's about good people because it's about changing hearts and minds.' She alludes to some designers who weren't collaborative enough and prototypes that were too conceptual. There's an openness to the experiment. Now she's not even exactly sure what will happen after the hotel opens. Some pieces will be sold, yes, but she's not certain how or where.

What's happening on Fogo has started to inform a small town in the Northern Catskills destroyed last year by Hurricane Irene. Here Nancy Barton, the head of NYU's art department, cobbled together the Prattsville Art Workshops, a residency programme with that same ethos of exchange. Several artists who came along are gay, and were nervous about what they'd find in such a rural place. Damien Davis – a black artist – was worried about encountering racism and homophobia. Yet, after he worked with a local four-year-old, the child named one of his stuffed animals after him. (There is a profound doubling here; the artist had no idea the boy had named his toy after him, yet his residency project involved making teddy bears.) The artists found that their perceptions of audience, and even why they were creating work, changed. As Barton explained: 'Here

the idea of success that you'd have in New York City falls away. That doesn't mean people here are less successful, or less engaged, or that the work matters less.' Perhaps that is the truth about belonging and longing. Indeed, at the recent open studios, I heard many conversations that sounded like the ones on Fogo about Middleton's sunset.

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