

“Ashanti Domino”

Public Art Installation in Ghana

Junko Yamamoto

5/1/19

In summer 2018, I was in Ghana for about three weeks to install public art. Since executing this project raised so many questions, from general ones to the more personal ones, I would like to share some of these questions and challenges we had, rather than merely reporting the day-to-day journey.

Before I get started, I should give you the overall picture of what this project was about. It was a land art competition which two of my friends and I won when we were students at Harvard Graduate School of Design. [Image 1] The competition was organized by Nka Foundation, a non-profit organization based in the US, who has been providing a series of competitions to bring art and architecture projects into small villages in Africa, as part of a larger initiative to enrich rural communities. The prize for the winners was permission to realize their projects in a rural village in Ghana, only if you can find funding. This, I thought, was very clever. More and more non-profit organizations are providing self-funding building opportunities to artists and architects around the world these days, attracting younger practitioners, who see the value in self-funding projects in exchange for the chance to test and realize their ideas. Of course, there are more layers to this kind of opportunity, such as cultural and language exchange, community engagement, fulfillment on a goodwill mission, and so on, which are all truly valuable collectively as well as individually. However you frame your story, each of us brings back our own observations and seeds for thoughts that may well benefit growing designers in the future. So here you go -- although this article is based mostly on my subjective observations and interpretations of things that we did and saw in our yearlong journey, I certainly see the value in sharing the story.

First of all, when I say “we,” it includes many people, which I shall acknowledge because I truly appreciated everyone’s contributions in various stages of this project. Although it was only four of us, myself, my teaching assistant and two students from Boston Architectural College (BAC) who traveled to Ghana and built the project, from the start to the completion of the construction there were a number of people who helped us make it happen. In order to move the project forward, I approached as many people as I could to answer the fundamental questions: What is Ghana like? — the culture, the people, the art and architectural practice, the construction and labor costs, available tools and materials — How can we build our project in a few weeks in a remote village in Ghana we have never been? How much money would we need? How can we fund the whole thing? How can our thin earth walls stand? What kind of materials do we need and do they have in Ghana? What and how can we prepare here in Boston?

To overcome this overwhelmingly unclear situation, we needed time and resource. My endless questions connected me to people in various areas including professors, engineers, curators, researchers, community leaders, political activists, musicians, students, colleagues, family, and friends. It was when I spoke to Len Charney, the Dean of Practice at the BAC, I was able to begin picturing how we could actually realize this project. Huge thanks to the BAC, where I received my B.Arch and I taught afterward, I could set up a year-long program that would allow me to teach and work on the project with students. This took place under the umbrella of the school's Gateway Initiative. This is a unique platform offered to students where they could participate in community-based projects and receive "practice credits" that are required for graduation. Utilizing this opportunity we could further develop the design and construction details, and create mockups to test the construction methods and materials before traveling to Ghana. In addition, the BAC's EDCO Grant, a faculty grant that I received, as well as the donations that I personally fundraised through crowdfunding, made it financially possible to execute the project. I hope my sincere appreciation reaches these supporters, not only for the monetary support but also for their words of encouragement. I am truly grateful also for my friends and colleagues who took the time to give me advice and share their knowledge, ideas and opinions, and gave us hands when we needed; my classmates who participated in the competition together, from which I learned a great deal; a group of BAC students who worked collaboratively to research and build multiple mockups at school; the local coordinator, the professor from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), the village chief, sub-chiefs, and all the villagers who were very accommodating and engaged, and supported us without any doubts or hesitation to complete the installation; and my team who traveled to Ghana, so well demonstrated their physical and mental strength and openness while we worked in the new environment with such time pressure, and in the hot-humid climate we could never imagine what it would be like.

[So, what was our project exactly?]

Our land art project is somewhere between art and architecture - It is an artwork outdoor, but somewhat architectural as it is comprised of three walls made of concrete and earth mixture, which define space and help create a sense of place. The largest wall of the three has three openings: one is a threshold you can walk through; another is an opening you can look through; and the third is a recessed shelf. The two smaller walls are placed in a specific position that provide a perspective of the smaller walls fitting in the openings of the largest wall, completing a picture with the painted shapes on three walls. The picture is a silhouette of Maison Dom-Ino designed by Le Corbusier [Image 2], which symbolizes modernization. In recent history, Ghana has undergone social and economic modernization since the country became independent in 1957. This project represents the notion of modernization embedded into the local soil, which I felt was very relevant to this particular village, experiencing its transformation by gaining independence through community development.

[Our biggest challenge — Not knowing anything.]

We knew nothing about the country, about the village, or about the people. In architecture, I believe every project has something new to us, even repeat projects. But what if everything was new up until you actually start construction?

Nonetheless, we tried to research as much as we could, about the culture, the village, the site, the climatic conditions, the people, and available tools and materials, although it always felt that we were developing design and planning construction in complete darkness.

To further worsen this nebulous state, our project site was never clear. Initially the site was supposed to be in the Abetenim Arts Village, however, not long before we flew to Ghana, we were told that our project would likely be relocated to another village due to ongoing political issues. Since the substituting village, called Korase, had no postal address yet, all we had was an image from the Google Map the local coordinator sent to us. How could we design something site-specific without knowing the site?

When four of us arrived in Korase, we were invited to an Ancestral Prayer Ceremony, which nobody, even the local coordinator, expected that we were going to participate. The ceremony took place the next day when we were left alone with a village chief and sub-chiefs wrapped in the white traditional robes. [Image 3] We were escorted to their palace, which was rather humble and simple semi-exterior space surrounding a small patio. The chief and sub-chiefs sat on a covered stage-like space facing the patio, and we were directed to sit along the sidewall perpendicular to the stage facing the patio. The prayer ritual went on through several steps in multiple locations. While the question of how and where to construct our project in this village in two weeks kept coming back in my mind, I was letting myself absorb everything I could in these dream-like, almost surreal moments of intense cultural exposure. That being said, the word “surreal” is probably too dramatic. In fact, walking through the village I had a strange sense of nostalgia from this place, a somewhat familiar atmosphere I experienced in my childhood in Japan. Also, things were very real in a sense that we were there talking, touching, smelling, tasting, conversing with the people in the village we have long been merely attempting to imagine in Boston. Villagers were very welcoming, showing us around with genuine hospitality and kindness. [Image 4] This was all educational to us. We visited farms growing cacao, bananas, plantains, oranges, palm, corn, and medicinal plants, which were to be harvested, processed and exported to various countries in Europe, as well as the village’s only hospital and their water supply that was managed and distributed under the control of the village chief. We greeted a woman who was processing palm oil in a large heating pan outdoor, a couple who were weaving buckets for exporting overseas, and passersby who were walking with large buckets of water or 10-foot long bamboo-like posts on their heads as if they had nothing they could not carry. After all this fabulous tour of the village, the chief pointed the empty ground and said, “I give to you this area for your project.” -- This was the very first time we learned where our project site was. [Image 5]

[Working with the unknown, the unpredictable, and endless uncertainties]

So, we were starting over, studying the site and the surroundings, deciding the project's position and orientation, confirming the materials that we ordered in advance, checking the tools available in the village, learning where to buy more tools and materials and how much they would cost and how we could get to these places, clarifying whom in the village we could hire for the construction, planning the sequence, creating the two-week schedule with approximate day-to-day progress to be achieved, and calculating how many hours we could work a day and per week.

Standing on the project site, we tried to orient ourselves in the village on the Google map and confirmed the position in relation to other buildings in the immediate context. Our site was adjacent to the central plaza, which was simply an open space functioning as an entrance to the village. There were existing school buildings with a new classroom building being constructed. With these existing elements as our guide to determine the exact locations of our three walls and their orientation, we decided that our project should face the central plaza, oriented on an axis connecting the plaza and the new classroom building as if it was welcoming and celebrating a new change. The positioning of all walls took a full day, measuring and marking on the uneven ground using the bright orange strings that I bought at HomeDepot last minute before traveling not knowing what exactly they were going to be useful for. This first step using these strings was very critical, however, as the exact position of each wall would determine whether or not the two walls would fit into the openings of the main wall in perspective.

From the start of the construction, unpredictable events continued to delay the process. For example, ground digging, which was done manually, took much longer than we expected as we hit the rock underground. [Image 6] Although we avoided the rainy season, it rained sporadically, causing the concrete mixer to cease. The rebar I ordered a month earlier were cut incorrectly. 2x4s and 2x6s came in various dimensions, necessitating shaving the pieces manually to make them more or less workable with our planned dimensions. The formwork required many more braces than we expected, as the earth-concrete mixture pushed the formwork at a greater pressure than we anticipated. Furthermore, being constantly active in the 85 degree Fahrenheit with 85% humidity, our physical and mental exhaustion was accumulating. Bustling with the construction I could not think of anything but our project, but a question was brought up on a whim in the conversation with my teammate.

[Why are we installing art in a rural village in Ghana, where providing fundamental services might be more important? What is public art anyways?]

Stepping back a bit, I wondered, "Why were we taking such risk and stress, spending money and energy, striving to install art in a remote village in Africa?"

This question is almost the same as "why do you do art?" I have been practicing as an architect for 13 years while producing art for a longer time, oscillating between architecture and art, if you were to distinguish them with labels.

I truly believe in the power of art, both in architecture and art. In architecture, it is the power of art as opposed to the problem-solving aspect of the practice, which may be the power that enriches the spatial experience, connects people in an emotional level, alters and challenges your perception, or sensitizes you to notice and appreciate designers' visions. Needless to say, there are obvious differences between the two, such as the level of responsibilities, the purpose, the meaning and the process of production, contextual responses, functional and regulatory requirements, and so on. Regardless of these differences, the act of imagination that takes place in artistic production and comprehension and that in architectural ones, to me, are very closely related. Of course, everyone works differently, but the role of imagination in these fields became a fascinating inquiry that lingered in my mind for a long time, which led me to explore in my solo exhibition in Tokyo, juxtaposing the works of art and architecture with the theme, "Abstraction of Essence." Investigating this rather vague, not-easy-to-grasp inquiry about the role of imagination has continued, and very much resonated in this question about producing our land art.

The proposed three red-earth walls challenge your perception as you move, shifting the views between three-dimensional objects and a two-dimensional image. The composed image that delineates the shape of Maison Dom-Ino, which then triggers questions and imagination about what it may connote — the symbolized message about modernization, or the architectural and structural conception of the Maison Dom-Ino, and the like. The thinness of the walls challenges your understanding of red-earth walls that you might otherwise think of the common, almost 2-foot deep walls in rammed-earth construction. The project altered the experience of the site, making the passersby question and be curious about the three purposelessly-standing walls, and attracted people in the spot where all of a sudden the seemingly unrelated shapes of colors merge into a single abstracted image. [Images 7 and 8]

So, back to the question, "why in a rural village in Africa?" From the perspective of our modern convenience, there seemed to be many infrastructural improvements that the village could use instead of receiving land art. Moreover, the level of appreciation and self-consciousness in art, in general, tends to appear not as high or visible compared to that in other cultures. Then, why do we produce art for them and with them?

While these questions stayed in the back of my mind, it is true that there were many aspects that I could think of in which the project was not only valuable to the artists and architects themselves but also a positive experience for the village and villagers. Despite the short period of time, the whole production generated jobs and stimulated the local economy by hiring the local people and utilizing the local materials even though it was on a small scale. There was also a degree of emotional bonding with the villagers through the collaboration, which was an extremely valuable experience. I will never forget how thankful the village chief was, shaking his hands very tightly with mine and with his warm, caring smile. There was also a memorable cultural exchange between the Boston team and the Korase team during the construction, teaching and practicing each other's language, and eating their

local meal they cooked for us right at the project site. Our two weeks were fully packed with new experiences. The big part of installing public art, in our case at least, was that it connected people and bonded the community by working together towards the same goal of finishing the construction. This whole process was absolutely meaningful and worthwhile. [Image 9 and 10] The warmth, hard work, collaboration, kindness, openness, supportiveness, curiosity... all these positive words seem to describe the experience of executing the project, overriding the negatives of worries, concerns, mistakes and failures. Although the level at which artists want the public to be involved in the production of their projects varies, I was very happy that our project was built with such collaboration with the villagers, and am very happy to call this Public Art.

But I understand that the question is not only about what Public Art might be, but also why we worked in this particular village in this particular country. It is true that, in our case, it was due the opportunity the competition provided to us, however, there were certain aspects in such rural development as this that made me mull over what impact a community could have on individuals.

[Community development]

Having done some community-based projects before, the Korase's development, in particular, made me wonder what might really be important when building a community. This is not something you can clearly identify, as there are so many variables that may determine the success of a development. There are also various factors need to be considered in meeting the community-specific needs and wants, therefore, I am limiting my discussion to the Korase's case in relation to my own experience.

Our project landed in an interesting timing as the village had just started to receive new art and architectural projects. There was a classroom-building project that preceded us, being constructed by a team of Spanish architects who brought a group of volunteers from Europe. The village is going to have three more classrooms in the near future, which would be used not only for children but also for adults to develop vocational skills. Providing such educational opportunities alone is beneficial for the community, but the added value in this transformational process was that it coincided with increased exposure to diverse perspectives through the interactions with the people from various countries. Whether or not such globalization of rural development is desirable from the standpoint of cultural conservation is subject to debate, but I truly believe that exposure to various opportunities and possibilities, in whatever form it might be, has an enormous impact on human development. A community can certainly take the role of providing such exposure.

Growing up in a rural area of Japan, there were not many opportunities for intellectual stimuli that cities might provide. There was, however, an abacus training place in our neighborhood, to which my sister and I started going after school. When I was 12, after several years of practicing abacus, I was very fortunate to be chosen as a member of the national team to go to the US and perform abacus calculations in

public schools in Los Angeles. This was the very first time I saw the world outside Japan, which completely broadened the possibilities I could dream of for my future. Being raised by a hard-working, avant-garde single mother was undeniably a tremendous influence on my life, but if we did not have this abacus training place in our neighborhood and if I did not meet the aspiring abacus teacher who introduced me to the expeditionary opportunity, I would not have seen the possibility of dreaming bigger and exploring the world overseas altogether.

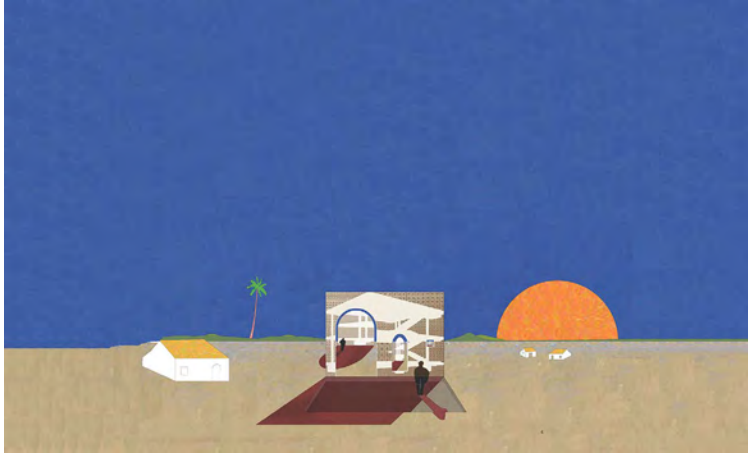
The Korase's case is successful in involving the villagers in the construction, which helps foster in them the sense of ownership for the new changes. Emi Kiyota, who was one of the Loeb Fellows at Harvard when I was studying at GSD, taught me the importance of developing a sense of community ownership when creating a place for them. Her company, Ibasho, helps build socially-integrated, sustainable communities while tackling with the aging society in various countries in Asia. If bringing art and architecture projects results in increasing the exposure to education and opportunities, while allowing them to feel the sense of ownership, it seems to be a successful development for the Korase Village.

[Will it be ego]

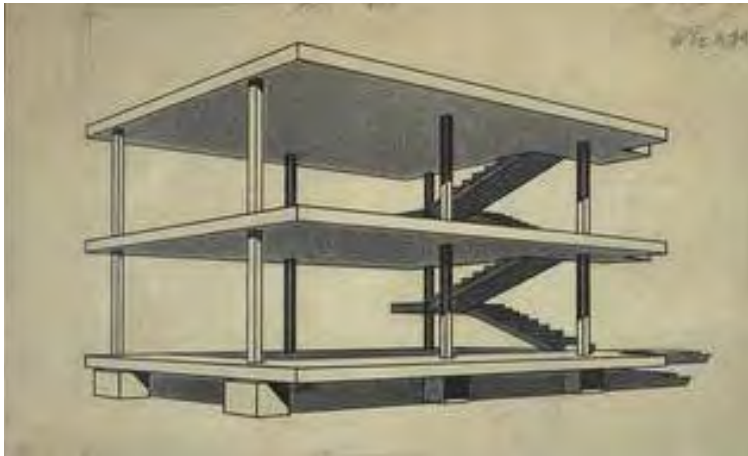
For a few months after I came back to Boston, I have given lots of thoughts as to whether or not we keep the installation. I decided, however, to have the two larger walls be demolished, because the largest wall was failing after a series of heavy downpours as the rainy season had started. Aside from the climatic influence, I could think of several factors led to the walls starting to fail. The walls were very thin for the earth walls, being 5.5 inches with reinforcement. In reflection, the earth-cement-water ratio as well as the curing time needed further testing with enough time. We respected the local worker's empirical knowledge for the wall-ingredient ratio, however, it would have been ideal if we had the time to create a mockup using the actual materials to test and evaluate the advised mixture to see whether or not it was suitable for our thin, reinforced earth walls. The high water ratio contributed to the walls being weaker, although it made it much easier to work with, especially since we were manually mixing, carrying and pouring. [Image 11] It also helped us pour the mixture into the narrow space in the formwork and maneuver around the reinforcing bars and meshes. Due to the limited amount of time and budget, we were rushing to complete the construction. The largest wall, which was built last, in fact, never dried enough when we removed the formwork. As a result, the wall was moving, requiring extra supporting braces. [Image 12]

In my mind, we were not necessarily aiming for permanent installation or having a clear idea about the duration of the installation. It was all experimental after all. There was, however, a choice of rebuilding. The chief and the villagers wanted it to be rebuilt and keep the project there if they could. I was told that the villagers who worked with us were all available and ready to start construction. An architect from Italy, who was on another project in the village at that time, kindly offered supervision for the construction if we wanted to rebuild the walls.

On the other hand, there were lots of other concerns: We would need to re-evaluate and re-design to make sure that the structure and the wall ingredients would be appropriate for the proportion and scale, and the climatic conditions, which would require a good amount of time; It seemed almost impossible to remotely give direction for positioning the walls and wall openings, as well as the painting on each wall. The result needs to allow the smaller walls to fit into the openings of the largest wall, while enabling the painting on each wall to merge into a single image in perspective; Without direct supervision of the construction, it would be difficult to incorporate the lessons learned from the first installation; Since it is a place for school children, it is too much risk to build something that may generate safety concerns. The risk is inevitable as there is no legal protection for us if something of danger does happen in the future. Of course, as a designer, I cannot deny my strong desire to rebuild the better version of it, especially because it was well appreciated by the people for whom we produced the work. While at the same time, isn't it egotistic of me forcing everything I can to rebuild the work while leaving all the hard-to-address safety concerns unresolved. Considering all this, I concluded that my decision was not unreasonable. I decided that I call it a temporary, experimental installation. With the smallest wall remaining on site, I decided to embrace the imperfection.



Competition proposal by JZ, SA and JY.
[Image 1]



Maison Dom-Ino by Le Corbusier
Source: Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dom-Ino_House)
[Image 2]



Korase Village chief and subchiefs.
[Image 3]



Walking tour of Korase Village
[Image 4]



Project site
[Image 5]



Construction site -- digging.
[Image 6]



"Ashanti Domino" - side view
[Image 7]



"Ashanti Domino" - front view
[Image 8]



Collaboration with Korase villagers
[Image 9]



Painting on walls
[Image 10]



Construction site -- pouring red-earth wall mixture
[Image 11]



Removing the largest formwork and supporting the wall with extra braces
[Image 12]