

PRACTICE GOES INTERNATIONAL

Cultures of construction: an arts village in Ghana

Working with faculty advisor Junko Yamamoto, BAC students researched local construction options, refined the design of an art installation, raised money for their travel, and then went to Ghana to help build the installation.

The original winning design for this installation, developed by Yamamoto and two of her classmates from her time at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, was based on three walls painted with the silhouette of Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino. "Our plan for the walls, the negative spaces where the walls' earth was extracted, and the cutouts from the walls," says Yamamoto, "would create both a pleasing place for the community to gather and evoke a classic icon of modernity, the Maison Dom-ino, painted onto Africa."

In the first phase of this project, ten BAC students worked on the design and preparation for the installation. In their construction analysis, the students concluded that building the walls of rammed earth would not be possible in the time allowed. They recommended that the locally harvested red earth be mixed with concrete for the rammed-earth walls. This would allow the installation to be constructed quickly, while still keeping to the original design intent.

In the second phase of the project, Yamamoto took a teaching assistant, M.Arch student Cenxue Wang, and Qiren Zhao, MLA '18 to Ghana where they worked with community members to construct the three walls. Zhao, who helped with construction, was impressed by the team's ability to build the installation by hand. "In Boston, the work was theoretical—we designed and did simulations on computers," he says. "In Ghana, we dealt with the reality of turning earth, gravel, and concrete into free-standing structures." Gloria Asaba Kiiza an MIA student who helped with the materials analysis but didn't go to Ghana, was excited to see pictures of the wall when first completed. "I'm from Uganda," says Kiiza, "and I believe this kind of hybrid material could be very effective in rural construction in my country." The project has inspired her to think about how she can combine design and nonprofit work in her career.

"This was much more than a design and construction project," says Yamamoto. "It was an opportunity for BAC students to share methods and techniques with the community, experience their customs and rituals, and see how diverse cultures could come together to create one work of art."

