

**MASS DESIGN GROUP**  
**The Monacelli Press**

**JUSTICE**

OR

AND

**IS**

**BEAUTY**

**Michael Murphy**  
**Alan Ricks**

**Foreword by Chelsea Clinton**  
**With photography by Iwan Baan**













**This book is dedicated to Karen Conway.  
Thank you for believing and giving us the  
chance to test this idea we call MASS.**

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## Toward Dignity

**Chelsea Clinton** is the vice chair of the Clinton Foundation and a board member of the Clinton Health Access Initiative. A global health advocate, she works to expand access to education and quality healthcare, and empower women, girls, and the next generation of young leaders with the resources they need to turn their ideas into action. Clinton co-authored *Governing Global Health: Who Runs the World and Why?* with Devi Sridhar and teaches at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health.

In the summer of 2008, I stood in Butaro, Rwanda, on the edge of a dream. Years before, the Rwandan government had mapped out an ecosystem of new district hospitals; the one planned for Butaro, designed by MASS Design Group, would complete the government's commitment for one hospital in each district. This hospital would be distinguished not for being the last built, but rather for the world-class cancer care—including with pediatric patients—it would provide, and for the beauty and dignity with which it would stand.

Four years later, I returned for the hospital's opening. Staffed largely by Rwandan doctors and nurses, it was beautiful inside and out; a place I would have been more than comfortable receiving treatment, even as I hoped I would never need its services. The Butaro District Hospital, including the Butaro Cancer Center of Excellence, isn't a metaphor for what's possible when local communities are empowered to set their own agenda and supported in realizing their priorities. It is so much more than that. It stands as a testament to what is possible when design is based on the concept and practice of dignity, in service to what we all would hope for ourselves and our families, anywhere in the world.

The Butaro campus also proves what is possible when inequality and inequity are addressed ferociously. The majority of the world's cancer burden is in the developing world, while the majority of the world's spending on cancer care is elsewhere, in the developed. Cancers long considered cured in the developed world remain death sentences in the developing, especially—wrenchingly—for children. The Butaro District Hospital partners, including the Rwandan Ministry of Health and Partners In Health, among others, refused to accept that status quo and were determined that a child with leukemia in Rwanda should have the same chance to survive and thrive as one in the United States. That mandate is being realized today as children's lives are being saved in the wards of Butaro.

A few years later, in 2015, I was in Haiti visiting the state-of-the-art cholera treatment center MASS had recently completed in partnership with a local Haitian healthcare provider. Again, MASS had collaborated to respond to a local, urgent need. Cholera had been defeated on the island more than a hundred years before, only to reemerge in Haiti in 2010 and overwhelm an already stressed healthcare system. GHESKIO, an organization started in the early 1980s to combat HIV/AIDS in Haiti, led the effort to respond to this new crisis, and soon knew they needed help to treat their community of patients. For that, they turned to MASS to imagine a cholera treatment center that had never been created, not in Haiti, possibly not anywhere—one where patients would want to come for treatment and where they would leave healthier, stronger, and with their dignity undented.

Approaching the treatment center, I was struck by its beauty, as its spire-like roofs pointed to the sky and light spilled from its windows. From the very first glimpse, it was clear that shame, so often a side effect of diseases like cholera, would not be accommodated here. Haiti's first permanent cholera treatment center, it also was built to treat wastewater on-site and ensure that patients had every chance to get better while meaningfully mitigating the risk of recontamination. This masterful interweaving of effective medical care, galvanized public health, and dignity again sets the example of what is not only possible, but also should be the standard, everywhere in the world.

MASS's innovative healthcare projects are only part of its portfolio. The firm has worked in education (from preschool to the university level), agriculture, housing, libraries, and art centers in projects across Africa, Europe, and North America. Perhaps their most famous work so far is the design and construction of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. More than 4,400 black men, women, and children were known to be lynched between 1877 and 1950. As the first national memorial to acknowledge the horror of those murders and their connection to slavery and its long legacy, it honors the lives lost to racial terror and forces reflection about America's history. It is a place every American should visit and spend meaningful time.

Reflecting back to that day more than a decade ago when I stood in the red dirt of Butaro, surrounded by the community that had helped imagine the hospital and would help build it, I expected something that would begin to close the treatment gap in cancer, and more. I didn't know exactly what closing the dignity gap would look like. That it would look like clean lines outside and open spaces throughout, well-stocked wards and smiling doctors, good housing for the hospital staff and communal spaces for families and friends to gather, and toys for the pediatric patients and safe play areas for their siblings. What was a dream that day was also a prerogative: to envision what was possible for the future and bring it into the present as urgently as possible, without ever sacrificing compassion, dignity, function, or quality. Similarly, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice tells a painful but essential national story, one that every American should know and that white Americans especially need to confront.

MASS understands that sometimes we need to reconceive our past too, and that doing so requires confronting injustice and inequality. All of MASS's work illustrates why its founders believed new approaches were needed and struck out to create a different type of design and architecture venture. It also makes clear why the world continues to need MASS's ethos, talents, and optimism, more than ever.





# OR, AND, IS

Michael Murphy

- In architecture school in 2006, the mood, it was ascendant. We were told that employment rates were the highest they had ever been. The era of stars in architecture was at an apex, and architects sold as brands, named. In the air was invincibility and promise. And for the first time, my future looked secure.

As for buildings, they were described as heroic gestures; what and who we discussed reaffirmed that heroism. Success was a simple formula: work relentlessly, start a practice, build expressive, beautiful structures. Be an architect.

Then, a year into our studies, the market plummeted. The 2008 housing crisis was also an architectural crisis. Building projects across the world were stopped, architects fired along with them—and the most recent inductees were the first to go. But it was that image, that unreachable vision of what an architect should be, that plummeted alongside the Crash.

The profession's crisis entered the existential realm. How could our art be so bound to these fragile economic forces? Who were the victims of this dream sold bundled like so many over-leveraged mortgages? What is the core of our values that is not for sale? How complicit were we in this crash and the dust and smoke and fire that swirled in its aftermath?

The Great Recession arose from the predatory housing marketplace. The American dream of the safety and security of a home—that foundational architecture of property and family—ignited the worst financial crisis since the 1930s. One thing was clear, we were not innocent bystanders in the dreams it wrecked or the havoc and injustice the recession left in its wake.

- It was December of that first year of school, and Dr. Paul Farmer spoke to the college about the injustices of global healthcare access.
 

To Dr. Farmer, healthcare access is also about housing access. “If people don’t have access to housing, and food and work, then healthcare will only stem the bleeding, not address the chronic conditions of why the bleeding started in the first place.” We needed a social structure, not a tourniquet. Whole and just healthcare, as his organization Partners In Health demonstrated, provides not only drugs and care, but also hospitals, and then schools, and roads to them, and houses alongside them. Access is a moral and economic problem, in Dr. Farmer’s telling, but it is also a spatial problem. And buildings play an essential role, then, in the delivery of our rights as citizens.

In all of the lessons in design school, I could not remember anyone framing the value of buildings in such a stark and essential way. Here, architecture was in the realm of rights, but like other rights sold in the open marketplace, it had become accessible only to those who could pay for it.
- Architecture is not agnostic about ethics. As with art, the political is inherent in architectural choices. Architecture points forward, it must consider the environment and the society around it. The utopian impulse is often too intoxicating to ignore. But a building’s full societal impact resists simple description, and misleading ambivalence. The choice between two opposing, distinct, and polarized types of architecture is an attractive shorthand: the architecture of sweeping forms, brand-name auteurs, and beauty; or the architecture that addresses social concerns such as housing, poverty, and economic justice.
 

But why must we make such a choice? Is it even possible to choose? The architect and theorist Giancarlo De Carlo called this the Bread and Roses problem—what we might term the Beauty and Justice dilemma.

The story goes that when De Carlo was a fiery editor at the Italian publication *Casabella Continuità* in the 1950s, his colleague, the architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers, posed a question to him: if you could only choose one, which would you choose: Bread or Roses? Justice OR Beauty?

Provoked, De Carlo realized it was not a choice we can make. We cannot choose one, he concluded: one is an end, the other a means. The two are intertwined in the built world. Instead, we should ask: what is the societal impact of beauty? Or what does a more just society construct?

He called this the False Dichotomy. And once we see it, we cannot unsee it. It appears everywhere. And it appeared to me that night in Dr. Farmer’s lecture.

- Rwanda in 2008 was freshly tilled soil. Streets were swept, lawns manicured, education and healthcare guaranteed. Rwanda had seen the depths of humanity’s fall. The genocide of 1994 stripped a people of human dignity, and a generation of lives.
 

Change is possible, Rwanda shows. After focused investments in health and education, housing, economic reconstruction, and reconciliation, Rwanda was abundant and hopeful in 2008. It was also insulated from the financial collapse in the United States; instead of firing architects, it was hiring.

Bruce Nizeye, the lead engineer for Partners In Health, drove me to a clinic my first weekend in Rwindwavu. He and I went to labor with Dr. Farmer and a collection of volunteers leading an *umuganda*—a shared day of service. The task that morning was to beautify a clinic’s grounds. People were planting trees, marking pathways in brick, and moving boulders. Dr. Farmer was directing the construction of a fish pond—a necessity, he insisted, for any medical facility. “Dignification,” he explained, was as essential to healthcare as delivering medicine.

The construction of dignity. The work and toil and maintenance that creates beauty produces a profound sense of worth. Human dignity, that feeling that we matter, that someone has noticed me for who I am, is found in those processes of beautification, the tending of the garden, the discovery that a building’s design locates us in place, that we are respected for who we are. Dignity navigates the oscillation between me and we. The construction of dignity erodes the false dichotomy.

To be awakened to the false dichotomy is to notice it in other zero-sum scenarios. When one prominent doctor prodded our team with questions, asking “aren’t more drugs and more beds a better investment than fancy buildings,” he was constructing his own opposing binary, that scarce resources require sacrificial choices. But dignity asks the counterfactual: What is sacrificed in lives, in communities, in self worth, when we isolate access to dignity only to those who can pay for it? Dr. Farmer would ask us, What is the cost of not having architecture?

The choice, our choice, was not between a beautiful building or a basic building; the choice was to lower expectations about what was possible, or not to.

Something clicked. To be an architect should be to fight for the beauty and dignity that others have been denied. And there, at the bottom of that fish pond, was the existential argument for architecture’s value. Justice AND Beauty made possible. A choice we couldn’t afford not to make.

- When the Ministry of Health invited Dr. Farmer and his team to start a new hospital, his team asked for it to be in the most remote and underserved sector of the country. Site selection and planning became other methods to right historic injustices, methods that were also spatial. They chose a small, rural town called Butaro.

“We want the best,” Dr. Agnes Binagwaho—who later became the minister of health and then the vice chancellor of the University of Global Health Equity—said to me one late night sketching over plans. Why shouldn’t Butaro have neonatal intensive care, state-of-the-art delivery, and cancer treatment? “We do not want what has been done before.”

- The decision to ask a student to help design a new national hospital might turn some heads. Expertise and experience surely would inspire more confidence and trust. But Dr. Binagwaho meant what she said. Experienced architectural practice might look to precedent and consider context, then calibrate and replicate. We found the same clinic floor plan on repeat throughout the country. Practice can reinforce the rigid frames of process—the competition, the RFP, the ceremony of the professional.

But as a group of young designers, we had no precedents, no experience, no ways to access expertise. We were not experienced enough to confuse design labor with design service. Architecture had collapsed. We were searching for meaning and mentors.

These doctors were our foundation. At each turn, design adages emerged. When faced with limited resources, these doctors, like brilliant designers, summoned resourcefulness. When systems were failing, work-arounds abounded. And when cost bucked against rights, they always fought for rights.

Over the next three years we became a collection of designers who converged to finish this facility, a group that would become MASS: a Model of Architecture Serving Society.

- Bruce Nizeye approached buildings the way these doctors approached medicine—holistically. In the United States, building requires materials sourced from catalogs, furniture assembled by distributors. Nizeye instead assembled tradespeople, bricklayers, weavers, carpenters, and masons. To build was to labor. Working with Nizeye was to unlearn the assembly of buildings as one extended shopping list and instead learn it through the names of the people whose hands would construct the buildings from scratch.

Emmanuel Hakizama (Hakiza), now a master mason, was training when he started on Butaro. Anne Marie Nyiranshimiyimana today leads a guild of other female masons known throughout the region both for audacity and skill, along with the many walls they have built on the growing campus of Butaro.

Digging into earth, testing new configurations, we labored together. And when Hakiza and Anne Marie, among others, built the stone walls of Butaro, carefully setting each stone into place, something else formed in front of them: a definition of beauty I hadn’t encountered before—spaces that transmit purpose and intention through the hands that make them.

A year after its opening, that same doctor who once prodded us with his dichotomy of drugs and beds or fancy buildings, cornered me at an event. “I thought what you were doing was an enormous waste of time and resources,” he admitted to me. “We are doctors looking for proof and evidence; with design, it is hard to quantify its value. But when I saw the stone walls, I realized we needed this too. The unquantifiable, the beautiful, is in the service of our patients and our beliefs.”

Proof need not be numbers alone. What we see persuades. Space persuades.

The stone walls invite touch and, in touching, we consider the hands and chisel that struck each blow. The stone walls speak of weight and prominence and mass. The stone walls speak of the land they were harvested from. They remain for us a symbol that beauty is not some gilded and expensive trend; beauty is transcendent. It transmits dignity. These memories instill deep in our brains the narratives that mend us.

Buildings tell a story, and when a story hasn’t been told before, a new building can emerge, one that is forged without precedent, that offers a salve to the chaotic challenges of our world. One that offers a new direction, a guide, a lighthouse, and with it that hope, without which there cannot be justice.

- “Hopelessness is the enemy of justice,” Bryan Stevenson had stated before and repeated again, standing in the stepped amphitheater of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. In April 2018, fifty thousand people came to inaugurate the work of the Equal Justice Initiative’s new memorial to victims of racial terror, and they crowded in the first morning for a dedication and prayer.

Bryan spoke spatially. The memorial sits on Montgomery’s second-highest hill, he said, where we can see the towers, the statehouse dome, the steeples, the architecture of power across Montgomery. But now, this memorial was orienting us physically, and spiritually, onto higher ground.

He presented another false dichotomy to revise. “The opposite of poverty is not wealth,” Bryan would say. “The opposite of poverty is justice.” To contrast poverty against wealth is to ignore the structural conditions that reinforce that poverty: conditions like poor housing, poor healthcare, poor food, “poor” architecture.

Bryan Stevenson and Dr. Paul Farmer and Dr. Agnes Binagwaho had already identified the false binaries in their fields; in building their architecture, we encountered ours. We might say that the opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it is injustice. Beauty is not a choice if we fight for truth, it is the central artery that delivers it. Beauty IS Justice.

- This book tells the story of how we arrived at this philosophy. It is a collection of projects, conversations, and reflections from our team at MASS Design Group, as well as our partners and friends and mentors, during our first ten years in practice. At the core is a group of people wrestling with the existential crisis we found ourselves in—and trying to mine purpose from the contradictions that the false dichotomy has laid in front of us.

The false dichotomy is not just a mindset problem; it is indicative of all the ways human rights in our society have been commodified and removed from the public domain. It has created an unequal distribution of services and power, reserving both for those who can afford them. Architecture, like healthcare and law, is always of the public’s province—and when commodified, is always threatened by a false dichotomy that undermines its value.

The public has been extracted from architecture. Sold off and outmaneuvered, some feel the architect is no longer necessary. But in working on these projects, our understanding of the essential value of architecture has only been fortified. Our work presented here is not to offer a solution to our existential reflection, but instead to reveal how a few of us have wrestled with that reality. To build, with hope.

- We began confronted with the idea that we had a difficult choice between Justice *OR* Beauty, and came to commit to the hope and belief that we could have both, Justice *AND* Beauty. But in the end, we have learned that the search for Beauty is the search for Justice.

Justice *IS* Beauty.







# Process Is Practice

Alan Ricks

As a profession, you are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I am sure this has not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance. Now, you have a nice, normal escape hatch in your historical ethical code or something that says after all, you are the designers and not the builders; your role is to give people what they want.

**Whitney M. Young Jr.**  
at the 1968 convention of the American Institute of Architects

Our first, largest, and longest-running project is the design of our practice.

When we initially came up with the acronym MASS—Model of Architecture Serving Society—it was aspirational, a lofty hope for what it might become. As a naïve, new practice with no built work, we quickly stopped telling people what the acronym stood for. Reflecting on the first decade of work and the community of now more than 120 collaborators who have completed projects across a dozen countries, I don't feel all that differently. I'm still unsure of what MASS might become, but more optimistic about the possibility of a nonprofit model of practice.

From the start, we struggled with questions that have plagued our profession. Whitney M. Young Jr. called it the “thunderous silence” and the “escape hatch,” which describes the ability for architects to hide behind the client rather than feel compelled to fully represent the public good. But we empathize with our colleagues who put in unusually hard work for modest personal gain, all in the service of constructing a world around us. The lack of action Young referenced is not due to a lack of shared ideals. We aspire, as we believe most architects do, to serve the public. We have pursued a model of practice that by default fights for equity and justice—and one that also fights for architecture.

### What We Do—The Fallacy of “Basic Services”

The current business model of architecture has made it systematically difficult to be in a position to influence the way projects are conceived. As outlined in a representative document published by the American Institute of Architects, an architect’s basic services are defined as schematic design, design development, construction documents, bidding, and contract administration. The very naming of these as “basic services” suggests that they are adequate to deliver a successful project. As a corollary, one might reasonably assume the so-called additional services are just that, additional, inessential, unnecessary. Yet it has become clear over our decade of work that this definition is insufficient and does not reflect the essential services required to reach the quality of design and the result that most of us hope to achieve in our projects.

If we accept that services begin with schematic design—developing form to align with a prescribed cost per square foot—then we have relinquished a critical opportunity to create a vision for the project’s impact. Early choices in what we unfortunately categorize as predesign phases dictate the future for how the project will unfold. What will it be? What will it cost? How long will it take? Whom will it impact?

For a developer these might be readily apparent decisions, driven by pro formas and past experience. But for the majority of the projects we encounter, such questions are more elusive and harder to assess. Within this void there is room to expand the early stages of a project and cocreate the vision. In order to do so, designers must enter the project early, understanding and potentially even shaping the mission. What is the provocation to build? Which is to ask, is a building even necessary? Whom will it serve? And how will it be evaluated?

The last several decades have seen the profession of architecture increasingly narrow the scope of its responsibility, but not so long ago our discipline was driven by the opposite mindset, and little was considered to be outside the domain of the architect. The German term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which translates as “total design” or, more precisely, “total work of art,” implies taking fuller responsibility over a project and owning the integration of multiple disciplines. In the nineteenth century, in response to the rapid rise of industrialization and the threat it presented to labor and to craftspeople, William Morris and others applied a total design approach that became the foundation of the Arts and Crafts movement.

This mindset is also evident in the work of architects like Josef Hoffmann, Alvar Aalto, and Walter Gropius, among many others, who did not see a clear division between the disciplines of drafting, structural engineering, interior design, sculpture, and painting. However, in the wake of modernism’s failure to deliver on a viable vision of social utopia, a kind of industrialization of design services has emerged. The labor of architecture is absorbed by capitalism and becomes a component of the proverbial assembly line, a kit of parts, from which you can select additional features or luxuries à la carte.

### The Idea of Accompaniment

When we began working in Rwanda we were confronted with a scenario where the lines between disciplines were all but invisible. In the hills of Butaro, the people we were collaborating with at Partners In Health introduced us to their approach to healthcare. Called “accompaniment,” this model of healthcare delivery brings medication to people’s doorways and seeks the root causes of why communities become afflicted. If access is a problem, build a bridge. If nutrition is a crisis, invest in agriculture. At every moment, healthcare is defined as widely as possible.

Bruce Nizeye, lead engineer and builder with Partners In Health, used every construction or carpentry project as a way to invest in labor. His view

To accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end...There’s an element of mystery and openness...I’ll share your fate for awhile, and by “awhile” I don’t mean “a little while.” Accompaniment is much more often about sticking with a task until it’s deemed completed, not by the accompagnateur, but by the person being accompanied.

Dr. Paul Farmer



### From left to right

Sarah Mohland, Regina Yiho Yang, Christian Benimana, Sierra Bainbridge, Justin Brown, David Saladik, Kelly Doran, Amie Shao, Alan Ricks, Chris Kroner, Matthew Smith, Yves Iradukunda, Patricia Gruits, and Michael Murphy

of building through a social justice lens gave us the ability to align our work with the principles of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, not as a philosophy, but as a necessity. We learned that each choice, each detail, and material selection could shift the concept of value in the form of local jobs, new technologies, and fabrication methods.

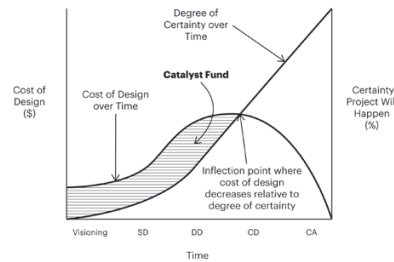
When we observed how Partners In Health incorporated the organization’s mission of a “preferential option for the poor” in all aspects of its work, we imagined trying to approach architectural practice similarly. Our model has been to seek out potential partners who have ideas for social impact, but may never have built before or don’t yet have access to the capital they need. To support this type of initiative and these partnerships, we set up MASS as a nonprofit that could unlock alternative funding. This led to the creation of our Catalyst Fund, which is unrestricted philanthropic capital that we use to seed early-stage ideas. Our team of **fourteen principals and senior directors (above)** approves proposals to support.

In Liberia, we have worked with the Ministry of Health since 2009 and developed the nation’s health infrastructure standards. We also designed a pediatric hospital that stalled because of an inability to raise funds. When the 2014 Ebola outbreak occurred, a new set of challenges was foisted on the nation. Teams on the ground were trying to incorporate long-term responses on top of the emergency needs, but there was neither time nor money available to examine the full scope of the work needed. Rather than having to wait for a project or a request for proposals, we were able to deploy a team to accompany the Ministry of Health by using the Catalyst Fund. For nine months our team worked out of the ministry, assessing its needs and responding to requests from bilateral organizations, all of which helped unlock millions of dollars to build a new tertiary referral hospital.

In another example, after reading about the work of Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative, we reached out and offered Catalyst services to support the development of what would become the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Through workshops and conversations in Alabama, we were able to accompany Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative as their vision evolved and grew from a series of distributed markers into a national memorial.

For cases like these, we don't presume to know all the needs, circumstances, or surroundings of a project. Naïveté or a lack of expertise allows us to ask questions about the status quo. But that is a starting point, from which we must move down the path of immersion. Bryan Stevenson has spoken about this process and what it means to be *proximate*. We've learned from his approach, recognizing that we have a responsibility to invest the time required to gain greater perspective, which only then affords the possibility of meaningfully contributing to a partner's impact.

**The Catalyst Fund (below)** bridges the uncertainty gap. Governments, as we saw in Liberia, and nonprofits like Partners In Health and Equal Justice Initiative wrestle with investing in design services when they face insecurity about the availability of funding for construction. By providing seed investment, we can alleviate some of this pressure. And once fundraising begins there is a tipping point, beyond which our partners can sustainably cover the full costs of seeing the project through.



Over time, our practice has expanded to include a multidisciplinary team that brings together planning, landscape architecture, architecture, engineering, industrial design, construction, and fabrication into our process of accompaniment. By working directly in the means and methods of project delivery, we aim to transform our drawings into living built form, while ensuring the integrity of our principles is sustained through to the completion of the project.

#### The Commodification of Architecture

While the architecture market is typically divided into three broad categories—commercial/industrial, institutional, and residential—another way to differentiate projects is by who they serve, private interests or the public. Generally, 50 percent of the market serves private interests. What this statistic reveals is that another 50 percent serves the public. Although this bifurcation represents very different constituencies, both halves typically follow the same commoditized delivery of architectural services. Architects who aspire to engage in public work are ill-served by the constraints of the private-realm model.

Owners tend to predetermine the cost of design services based on a percentage of construction. While capping fees may appear to inoculate the client, it creates a perverse incentive for architects to work less. The follow-on effect is clear: existing incentives push the profession toward the high end, which garners significantly increased fees. We have created a system in which it is irrational to work on an affordable housing project when compared to projects with higher construction costs.

It's not what is the cost of architecture, it's a question of what is the cost of not having architecture.

Dr. Paul Farmer

The preponderance of this “first-cost approach” suggests we need only evaluate the cost required to cut the ribbon and open the building in order to determine if it is a success. But operating a building over its lifetime costs twenty to fifty times the initial cost of construction, such that the design fees are only a tiny fraction of a percent of the overall building cost.

Since architects are tasked with determining how the overwhelming majority of the project budget is spent, we should be creating incentives for design teams to invest maximal effort to ensure that the capital is deployed thoughtfully and impactfully. While a generous investment in design is hardly discernible in the life-cycle accounting of a project, it can be transformative in determining the benefits the project will provide over time.

As a nonprofit, MASS is governed by a board of directors. This oversight inserts another control on the process, an integrity check, because the directors are stewards of our mission to work for the benefit of communities that otherwise would not have equitable access to design. The board puts mission ahead of profit. In an industry in which so much of the work is intended for public consumption or literally funded by nonprofits, why wouldn't we do more to empower models of practice with business models that better support this mission?

In discussing the value good design can have on public welfare, we must consider the counterfactual. It is revealing to assess the losses resulting from the omission of good design in terms of the economy, public health, and social justice. And when we do, it is clear that the cost of poor design is not neutral, but profoundly negative.

#### Do No Harm

Competing against this ambition, however, is the reputation that architects have acquired for being at odds with the priorities of the end users and the public, privileging design over efficiency and utility. This perception—a concern we often face—has garnered a certain amount of distrust about whether or not architects can act as fiduciaries of their clients, who may feel they have to be vigilant in protecting their interests against the ostensibly superfluous inclinations of the designer.

The problem stems from the idea that “good design” is considered shorthand for beauty or aesthetics, which is thought of as costly and therefore the domain of the wealthy—something nice to have if you can afford it. But we must resist this conflation, beauty is both valuable and necessary when we are committed to maintaining the integrity of the mission of a project. Do no harm is at the core of the Hippocratic oath to which new doctors pledge. If we consider architecture as a fiduciary of the public welfare—and we do indeed believe this—then a similar pledge seems applicable.

Our team at MASS spends a great deal of time debating the concept of mission, to what and whom are we beholden, and what work fits within that categorization. Over time we have come to realize that it is essential to take a wide view. Rather than narrowly defining mission alignment, for example as working for charities in developing economies, we believe it is critical to ensure that the construction of our built environment, writ large, responds to the great challenges we face. The mobilization of capital in construction is vast, and to challenge what we demand from how that distribution of wealth is deployed is to push in a direction that prioritizes the production of social value.

As an industry we have become amnesiac, ambivalent, or acquiescent to a status quo that has relinquished or bestowed greater influence on others in the spatialization of our world. By contrast, when we hold ourselves to this standard of responsibility for the public good, we not only reacquire instrumentality and agency, but perhaps more notably, affect and inspire the decision-making of those in power.

### The Search for Proof

Neither the value of good design nor the cost of poor design is being fully accounted. Because of this shortsightedness, there are rarely allowances in fees or budgets that would encourage research and development. The result is an innovation gap.

Monitoring and evaluation have developed into an entire industry in the fields of medicine and public health, and architecture would benefit from a similar approach. The obvious first steps are to measure against our checklists and identify to what extent our buildings are delivering on their promises. We can track the operating costs of buildings and benchmark them to know whether they are more efficient than the standard. Similar approaches could be taken to measure environments for air quality, thermal comfort, lighting—and such performance objectives could be enshrined in our professional contracts. If architects are to be obligated to such outcomes, they will also need to be incentivized with performance-based financial rewards to deliver.

To build this case is to validate design's capacity to catalyze and amplify the core goals of the users. We must focus on design that is qualified by its ability to improve healthcare, education, transportation, resilience, and social cohesion. We must legitimize these issues as vital rather than noble pursuits by understanding the exorbitant costs we bear as a society—and as individuals—when we do not invest in them.

### Starting a Practice and the Risks of (Some) Speculative Work

The average age of licensure is 32, an achievement that requires 12.5 years to obtain via education (5.9 years), internship (4.7 years), and test-taking (2.1 years). In other words licensure itself is a barrier to entering the profession. These pressures and the limited personal return on investment make architecture an inherently inaccessible—and therefore inequitable—career.

At the beginning of MASS we were seeking a way to overcome the barriers to doing the type of work we believed in. We looked to other designers who came before us and were fighting for social justice. Their efforts were often challenged by the need for either academic partnerships or volunteers, which seemed at odds with the long-term viability of a practice. Our ambition was to uncover a model that could support designers to commit to a career in underserved areas of the public realm.

Being able to pay industry average wages was a milestone for us. We began MASS with compensation in the lowest quartile and fought to create a practice that could fulfill both social purpose and professional opportunity. As a nonprofit our team can use student loan-forgiveness programs as one incentive, which, if it can continue and grow, could help open access to more people to pursue this form of work.

Additionally, it is critical to push the market to incentivize innovative and emerging practices. New practices fight to obtain commissions for relatively modest installations and exhibitions because procuring a building project seems virtually unattainable. The result has been the further entrenchment of large firms that can check the boxes of expertise and experience. In place of this, many young architects moonlight on competitions, and most leading firms engage in this type of speculative practice.

How much intellectual capital went into the competition for the Guggenheim in Helsinki? There were 1,715 entries and nothing resulted—ultimately Helsinki rejected the very idea of putting a Guggenheim in the city at all. Even when there is a winner in a competition, what do we hope for the other thousands of designers who lose? How do they find their way to making a mark in building a better world? How will they ensure their effort has impact?

We cheapen the architectural process when we elevate the conceptual rendering as the paragon of practice. The hard work is in the process of making. And the hardest part is ensuring that the full process of delivering and sustaining architecture abides by a conceptual and ethical paradigm, one that serves us all.

### MASS, a Model of Architecture Serving Society

*Architect Magazine* annually publishes a list of the top fifty firms in the United States. It is split into three categories—business, sustainability, and design—which suggests that these categories can be separated. Should we accept such separation? Why would our profession relinquish the idea of total design across all these areas, an approach that can deliver exceptional quality, be built and operated sustainably, and then lead to reward for those efforts with business success?

New models, new methods of evaluation, and new incentives can bring the best talent to bear on the most pressing issues society faces today. When we started MASS a decade ago in Butaro, there was no concept of “out of scope,” “basic services,” or “bare minimum.” Instead, we were asked a simple question: What more could we do? We have learned to advocate for the true cost of designing well and for essential services instead of basic services. At the same time, we have resisted hypotheticals and prophetic claims, with a renewed commitment to the search for proof. By measuring a project's real impact and outcomes, we can articulate a new value proposition that expects these outcomes and rewards their effective delivery.

In an effort to fast-track innovation, we must empower young designers to work with their communities in ways that lead to real built products rather than accepting the trap of exploitative, speculative work. Ultimately, to expand the opportunity for all designers, we must build the case and honor the value created in terms of impact for the client, user, and society. The only way we can do that is by understanding our mission in the first place, by showing up early, and engaging in accompaniment as Dr. Paul Farmer taught us.

Among our greatest lessons of the last decade has been learning to consider the entire life of the building, including the extraction of raw materials, their molding and manufacture, transportation to our sites, erection into built form by skilled hands, operation by service providers, and the utility to the public that receives, experiences, and engages with it. Total design means looking inward from the building envelope, to include the design of interiors, furniture, fixtures, and hardware, as well as extending outward to the landscape, community, city, ecosystem, and beyond.

Whitney Young alluded to the escape hatch that has caused our profession to miss out on the higher ambition our work has the capacity to achieve. If we collectively work to close the proverbial hatch, we build the case for the very essentiality of architecture to create a world we hope and believe is possible.