

The Architectural Review

'The Women's Opportunity Centre by Sharon Davis Design is an icon to which foreign aid can attach'

6 January, 2016 By Julian Raxworthy



AR Culture 2015 Winner: As a social ecosystem, this Centre in Kayonza, Rwanda, is a clear success offering sanctuary, income, hope and friendship

AR Culture 2015 Winner

Rwanda is commonly regarded as *the* model for a developing country in Africa and its success is both a blessing and a curse. As a Dutch researcher also staying at the accommodation at the Women's Opportunity Centre told me, 'really, all Rwanda has is genocide and gorillas, and apparently it's better and cheaper to see the gorillas in Uganda'.

It is both predictable and passé to talk about genocide in Rwanda, but if you are talking about the important and effective work of the non-profit Women for Women who funded and run the centre, it is difficult not to.

Discussing the Women for Women project with its communication officer, Chance Tubane, I mention that Rwanda seems pretty religious. She sharply replies, 'Westerners always ask "Rwandans are pretty religious, right?" and I say, "No: if you survived when so many didn't then there must be a god."'



Womens Opportunity Centre Sharon Davis Design 03

Source: Samantha Reinders

She goes on to tell me her story, which demonstrates that, while Rwanda is now a successful African country – the model most cited, after Singapore, for the possible transformation of developing countries – its history is deeply embedded in everything.

She tells me that, like many other Rwandans her age, she is an orphan: she watched her family and many others be killed. She is 33 and drives everywhere, but when she was 11 she walked for two weeks without food or water to get to the border with Uganda. She studied in Belgium, and when I ask her if she had post-traumatic stress disorder and needed counselling, she says many of her friends there asked her that – her attitude was that you just have to get on with it, move on. This is a common refrain of Rwandans and their president Paul Kagame.

With little understanding of Rwanda's history, I ask her if she is a ... 'Yes?', she says prompting me, and I realise I don't know who were the good guys and who were the bad. 'A Tutsi?', I ask. 'Of course!' she says. It is the only time while I am there that anyone identifies an ethnicity.



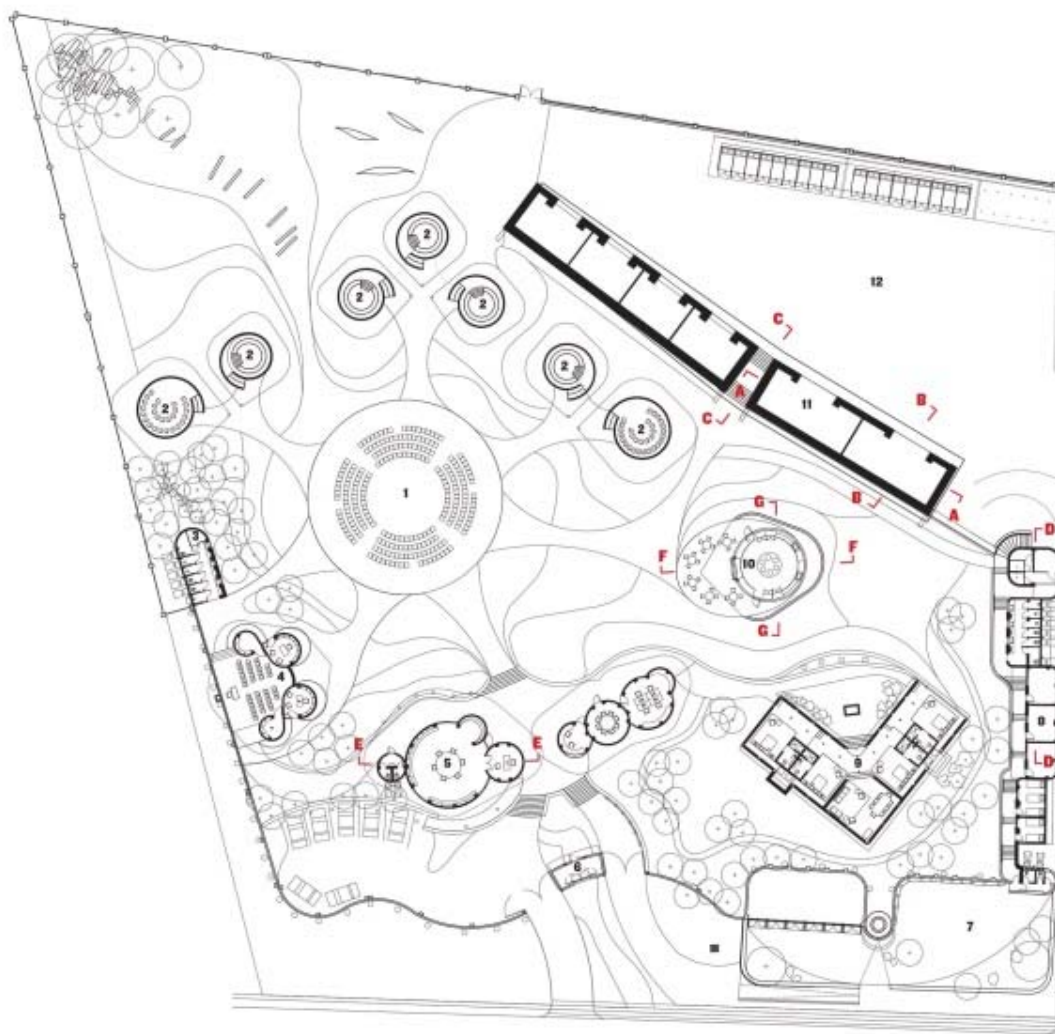
Womens Opportunity Centre Sharon Davis Design 04

Source: Samantha Reinders

The genocide seems far away from the Women's Opportunity Centre but as we talked to the women and asked them about their children, most had lost at least two in the genocide, as well as husbands. This presented a key problem: no man wants to marry a widow – and without being married the women have no economic future.

Cut to the building. It seems incongruous to find a segue to architecture in this situation, but the very bricks and mortar-ness, its very cheerful intensity, makes it a place of hope for the women studying there and those who work there.

In total there are 11 spiral-shaped brick buildings, seven of which are small spiral teaching spaces with staggered brickwork that creates openings for air to circulate and light to penetrate. These pavilions have either flat or stepped floors for seating and a freestanding steel roof overhead. The intimacy of their scale, the quality of light and air created by the brickwork and the way the roof is raised above the walls gives an easy poetry to their occupation. They speak of careful calibration of experience without requiring a defined phenomenology.



Womens opportunity centre floor plan

Site plan - [click to expand](#)

The utility of the space and its scale are perfect: sitting on the floor, leaning against the walls while making baskets, the women studying there laugh and chat across the circle. While the money from the stipend and the friendship of their colleagues is the main reason they give for why they like the programme, they are not ignorant of, or inarticulate regarding, the qualities of the architecture. Asked about the buildings, Mediatrice Mukagagera says she loves the roof, while 78-year-old Veronica Ngirabarera exclaims: 'Can't you see that it is circular?' Mimicking the circular action of weaving with her slender old fingers, she says it inspires them in their work.

As blocks of light cross the room from between the bricks, they settle on the women's bright dresses, the scene like the very picture of Africa. This is both reassuring and disturbing. Reminded of Baudrillard's simulacra, where the simulation is more real than the real thing, the overt 'tribal' organicism of the curved buildings on a circular plan looks like an icon of Africa. Sharon Davis Design claims it drew upon Rwandan vernacular architecture to generate the building form, notably the Royal Palace of the Rwandan monarchy located in the town of Nyanza.

'The value of the project is potentially that of a brand or a flagship, a place that signifies the programme. Ironically, this makes the project potentially a piece of starchitecture'

This is Tubane's first visit to the centre and, even though she does not know the types to which the buildings refer, she says they are appropriate because they are 'African'. When I ask her if she thinks they are successful she says: 'Yes, I wish all our projects had buildings like this!' This response demonstrates that the value of the project is potentially that of a brand or a flagship, a place that signifies the programme. Ironically, this makes the project potentially a piece of starchitecture.

In the book *Dwellings*, Paul Oliver notes that vernacular architecture is built to meet specific needs and 'may be adapted over time as needs and circumstances change'. It is also instructive to see how the buildings have been occupied and modified. In 2011 the Rwandan government enforced an 'anti-thatch' campaign, replacing thatched roofs with galvanised iron as a move to modernise housing. In a comment on the BBC blog where this was reported, a Hutu respondent claimed the outlawing of thatch targeted Hutus as using such housing is their tradition. This demonstrates that being specific about a vernacular for Rwanda is difficult and nuanced by the latent history of the country's ethnicities.



Womens Opportunity Centre Sharon Davis Design 02

Source: Samantha Reinders

We did not see the type of vernacular buildings from which the designers drew inspiration in our travels to and from the site; instead most buildings were rectangular, made of mud brick and with galvanised iron roofs. When I asked the four women with whom we spoke whether they were familiar with circular building forms like this, only one, 80-year-old Rachel Nyirabuseruka, said that she had seen this type of building before. This gives an indication that such a vernacular form may have disappeared in recent years.

It is interesting and ironic that foreign designers are advocating an appropriate typology that has lost its referent. Perhaps the only vernacular thing that takes place on site is the cooking for the women, which is done in a corner of the site on a fire, hidden away from the buildings and excluded from the site plan. Despite the iconic nature of the site and building plan, which may or may not be vernacular, their 'rendering' into architecture is undertaken with finesse and in a simple but careful way that does not seem historicist: they are very much a piece of contemporary architecture.



Womens Opportunity Centre Sharon Davis Design 07

Source: Samantha Reinders

As pieces of construction in Africa they are uncharacteristically well built and robustly detailed. While the steel for the roof structure (which is undoubtedly over-engineered) was sourced in Kenya, it was fabricated on site, as were the bricks – a brickworks was developed nearby for the project, with each brick pressed with the Women for Women logo. Though the brickworks has stopped operating and fallen into disrepair, it did produce another 250,000 bricks for another project.

The initiative to build locally is only one of a number of best-practice principles that permeate the project. It also incorporates numerous sustainability features such as water catchment, solar pumps, composting toilets and solar hot water – all of which are sourced locally. Two years after construction, like the brickworks, some of these are not properly functioning, albeit due to maintenance issues: the toilets stank out the tented lodge and the solar hot water was cold. Sympathetic to an architecture of good intentions, these glitches are informative for future practice in countries where such technologies are novel – they don't undermine the project's undoubted success.

Of the eight smaller circular pavilions, only two have flat floors and these were the ones that were used most. 'Teaching in the round' was a part of the Women for Women brief so a teacher at the centre could make eye contact with the students and there would be no 'back' or 'front'.



Womens Opportunity Centre Sharon Davis Design 06

Source: Samantha Reinders

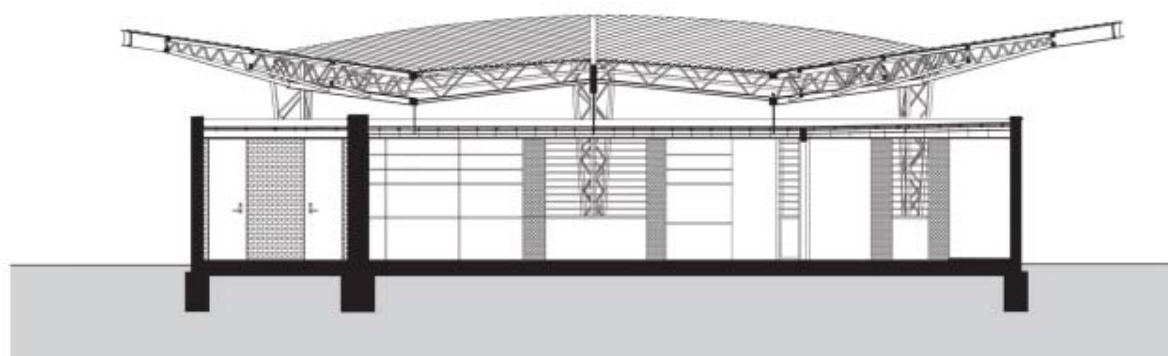
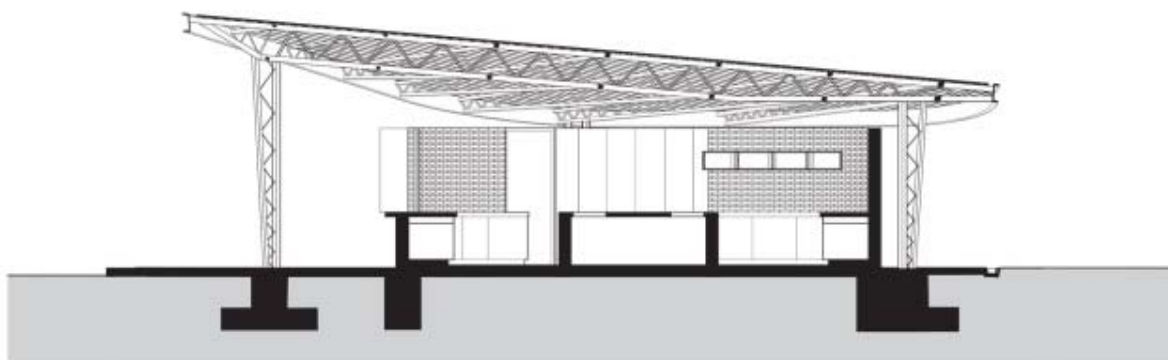
While the intimate spatial quality of the stepped spaces is beautiful, this configuration precludes the use of tables, and emphasises teaching in a conventional sense – flat blackboards have been fixed on curved surfaces. The other large flat space is the conference room; the women beading on its large round table looked uncomfortable and out of place compared with the flat-floored curved pavilion, which worked beautifully.

In terms of customisation, the buildings were designed to allow breezes and keep out the rain with their overhanging roofs. Shade cloth has been added to the back wall on the inside as a filter to prevent water coming in as rain and wind comes up the valley. This demonstrates some lack of understanding of the site and, indeed, this beautiful valley – where the associated farms are located – could have been incorporated into the site plan. By omitting a pavilion, the cluster could address the view out rather than focus on the empty centre, which seems ceremonial but doesn't work as such, despite larger marquees being set up there for bigger functions.

'It is difficult to separate the effectiveness of the buildings from the way in which the programme is being managed because the whole thing works'

A large building at the centre of the site plan was designed and tendered but ultimately did not eventuate. This sense that the buildings are very beautiful, and are appreciated as such, but don't quite work as planned was recognised when a young Rwandan architect who walked around the site with me said, 'I mean, it's 90 per cent for the architects, isn't it? The women really want doors and windows to keep out the rain.'

In an incongruous manner we discuss how the exterior wall is 'a bit Aalto', where the perforated brick language of the pavilions becomes a curvilinear boundary treatment. I ask him whether he knows Aalto. A little offended, he exclaims 'Of course!'.

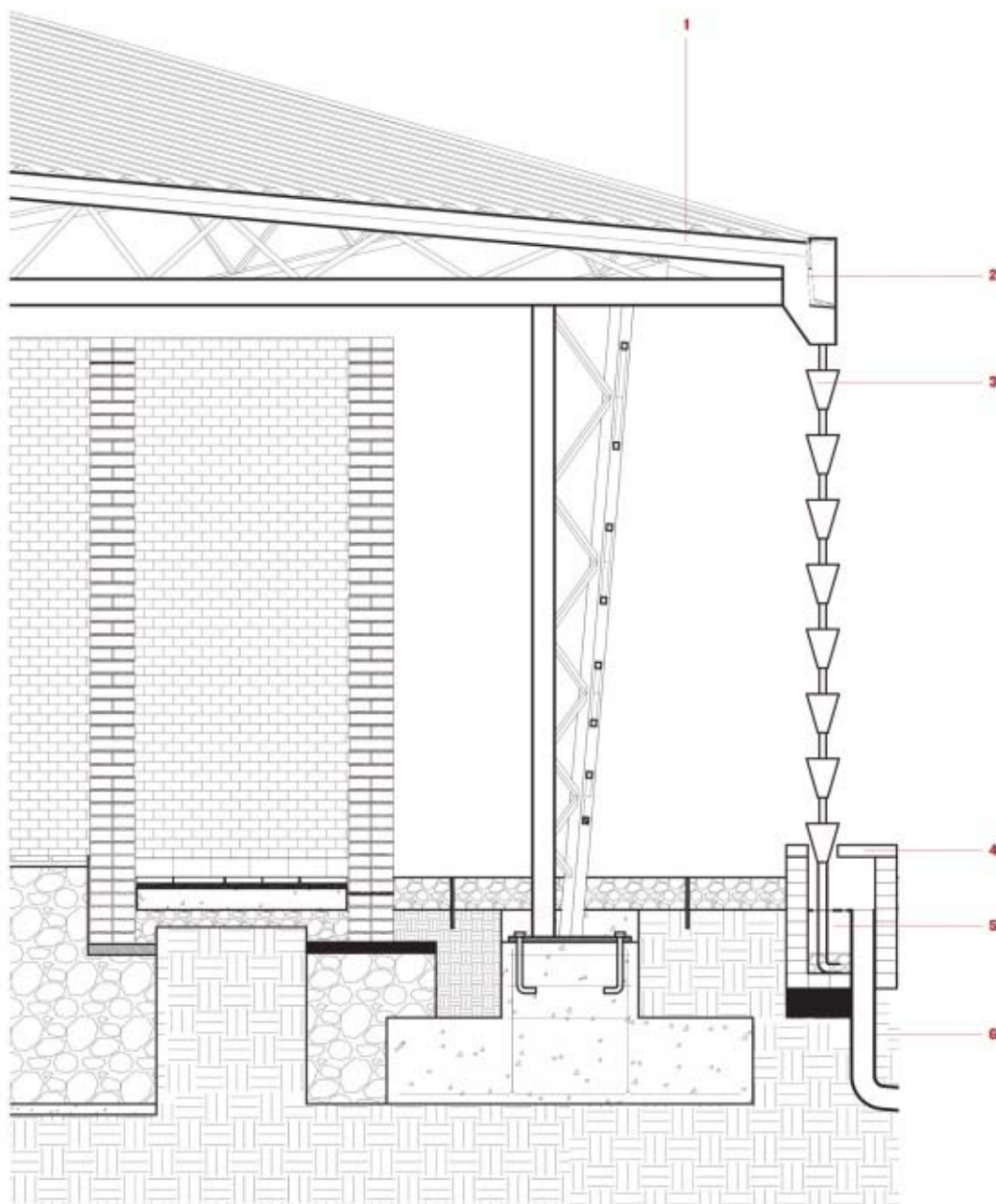


Womens opportunity centre sections

Sections - click to expand

While the architectural discourse on programme has sought to separate it from typology and instead abstract constraints to generate non-typological form, it is difficult to separate the effectiveness of the buildings from the way in which the programme is being managed because the whole thing works.

As the stipend is a central reason why women want to come to the centre, the fact that the pavilions are underutilised cannot be blamed on the architecture *per se*. The number of students is limited by the amount of money available to pay them to attend and the cost of materials, the economics thereby editing the level of utility of the buildings, demonstrating that use is not about capacity.



Womens opportunity centre detail

Detail section - click to expand

A key question arises in trying to understand the success of the project: what is the relationship between the temporal programme and the static building complex? I was asked to consider the site as a social ecosystem, a term that resonated with me positively during my visit. The project *is* a very successful social ecosystem – constantly occupied, clearly loved, with diverse people doing different things there all the time. This is as much as you could want from a project. But did the building cause this, in a *Field of Dreams* fashion?

Women for Women actively programmes the site and manages it very carefully. The success of the project is this activity, which gives the sense of community the women feel being there, the buildings are a home for a programme that has its own unique identity.

Monica Katumwine, who graduated from business school in Uganda, works in the finance sector and sees it as her mission to make the project financially sustainable. This does not involve the circular pavilions, but rather the vaulted barns covered in landscape behind them, structures that are hidden from view of the main complex. This long series of buildings is being fitted out with dairy processing facilities to manufacture cheese and other products from local milk. It is ironic that it is the long linear volume that is hidden – rather than the iconic pavilions – that will form the main economic driver of this project.



Womens Opportunity Centre Sharon Davis Design 08

Source: Samantha Reinders

As we leave the site, Katumwine and I walk past the gift shop overflowing with handcrafts made by the women on the site. While these demonstrate the skills the women are taught, Katumwine acknowledges that they will never pay the costs of the project, which is why she is emphasising the production facility. However, even she acknowledges that this will never pay for the stipends, the cash that women can save with, use as a deposit for loans, and which Chance finds remarkable, the women's ability to use this small amount of money for maximum effect, while she, as a member of the middle class, would let it run through her fingers.

In other words, it is foreign aid that will continue to support the backbone of the Women's Opportunity Centre, where the building is an icon to which that aid can attach itself. The genocide may be 20 years in the past but Women for Women continues to work in war-torn areas. Katumwine worries that, as the genocide fades and Rwanda grows, it may not be able to draw on this history for much longer to attract funding. What then?

Women's Opportunity Centre

Architect: Sharon Davis Design

Photographs: Samantha Reinders