

In Conversation with
Baerbel Mueller.
Baerbel Mueller + Joana Lazarova

IN CONVERSATION WITH BAERBEL MUELLER

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Baerbel Mueller is a practicing architect and an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Architecture (IoA) at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria. She began working on spatial and cultural contexts in the early years of her architectural education, and her projects and teaching eventually grew to encompass a wide scope of work in Africa and the Middle East. Her site-specific approach explores the integration of local knowledge and experience into design, opportunities for improvisation, different methods of problem-solving and the implementation of long-term strategic objectives. Her lab FOREIGN AFFAIRS at die Angewandte deals with social and ecological challenges, planning and design in rural communities, and cultural conservation and regeneration, in which creative dialogue lies at the heart of her methodology. The recently completed stage for the [Haduwa Arts and Culture Centre](#) in Apam, Ghana, built entirely of bamboo, aims to redefine and explore the potential of the man-made environment and the development of culture.

In her new book [FOREIGN AFFAIRS / Investigating spatial phenomena in rural and urban Sub-Saharan Africa](#), Baerbel Mueller opens up a dialogue on the importance of such critical engagement. Here, she shares some insights for urbanNext.

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Baerbel Mueller:

We established the Foreign Affairs lab at the Institute of Architecture of the University of Applied Arts Vienna in 2011. As the title of the book indicates, FA investigates spatial, infrastructural, environmental, and cultural phenomena in rural and urban sub-Saharan Africa. The projects evolving from the lab are based on an interdisciplinary, trans-cultural, and experimental approach and respond very specifically to given locations and situations. The publication documents three of these projects, which took place in Ghana and the DR Congo between 2011 and 2015: *Guabuliga - Well by*

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the Thorn Tree in northern Ghana; *Staging Apam* on Ghana's Atlantic coast; and *Lubungamode* in Kisangani, DRC. These projects cover three different scales and approaches, which we have titled "on other planning", "on other architecture", and "on other artistic research", where "other" refers to alternative methods... The book is also divided into these three chapters graphically and physically. Besides presenting the projects themselves (work), it was of interest to provide insight into how they evolved (process) and to show their impact and what happened afterwards in a critical manner (future). I invited experts from architecture, art, theory, and urban anthropology to write about and discuss the intrinsic topics at hand, and I held recorded conversations with our local partners. These texts are distributed throughout the book on differently coloured paper (wider discourse). The whole publication became quite dense and it might not reveal itself easily, but we have really tried to put an emphasis on the multi-perspective and transdisciplinary, and to communicate how there are always diverse approaches and that there is never only one solution. Today, everything is interrelated or interdependent in some way, and nothing can be taken as a given or fully understood, especially when you are coming from outside – which is what we actually always do as architects, even more so when we are operating in another cultural context. So, it is more about questioning and proposing than stating, and I hope that the book epitomizes and translates this attitude.

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JL: These projects and approaches deal very closely with urban conditions and the social implications of architecture within specific contexts. How do you address such complex issues?

BM: I am always the most interested in a relational approach. I am not so interested in thinking in terms of “object architecture” – even when architectural objects can be part of relationally conceptualized projects. I also think that the term “social” has been overused in architecture over the past years. To me, the works and interventions of artists in cities such as Accra or Lagos, which operate in public space, appropriating it or questioning it (often in a provocative manner), have been most inspiring in regards to urban, social, and economic conditions and challenges. Just as these artists leave their studios and the gallery space, we as architects and urban researchers need to

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develop new tools and working methods in order to read and address current urban issues. We have been trained to analyse the physical urban fabric of a city or an urban situation and to come up with design solutions, but we need to gain a deeper insight into the lived space, the procedural, the networks and timescapes. So I am very interested in the discourse around these topics and in speculative approaches. Therefore, all FA projects are based on a kind of responsive knowledge production and they explore alternative, experimental strategies of intervening.

JL: When a project involves all the phases of design and construction, as well as working closely with communities, there are many factors involved – both physical and emotional – and one can become tightly bound to the spaces one is traversing. It's almost like going into a field, examining the earth, carrying water, and working with such vigour for many seasons in order to harvest a "product" that will be left behind for users to adapt to their needs.

BM: Yes, absolutely! But that is exactly what is of interest to me: these long-term relationships and the evolution of a project over extended timespans. I believe that "context" is the most valuable parameter we have as urbanists, architects, designers, artists; and it takes time to read and understand a context and its environmental, socio-cultural, economic, spatial and infrastructural characteristics. Architecture is a stressful, yet very slow discipline – urban planning even more so. Mapping, designing, and building are always challenging everywhere; the challenges are just different ones. In the remote, sometimes extreme, settings FA operates in, you have to deal with unexpected surprises, flux, fragile and unstable situations. If you work with, not against, these circumstances, they can be freeing and can become a motor for beautiful, dynamic processes. And if you claim to not just come, intervene, and leave again, projects will be evolutionary and therefore require ongoing engagement. I like your analogy of the seasons needed to harvest a 'product' that will be left behind for users to adapt to their needs, even though I would prefer it to be a bit lighter, more playful...

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JL: The project in Guabuliga (FA Guabuliga - Well by the Thorn Tree) has had a fundamental impact on the local community. Climate change and how we address it in architecture can reach across cultures and radically change the way we perceive and operate in our own environment. But that seems to be easier said than done.

BM: I would say that the project in Guabuliga had its greatest impact through creating awareness: awareness of recognizing not only what is already there, both on an environmental and cultural level, but also what is in danger of being lost. And I don't mean that in a romanticizing way, but rather in a very down-to-earth manner and as a strategic approach: starting with trees, vegetation, water resources, the local farming culture, and the annual cycle of dry and rainy seasons, instead of only

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looking at the built fabric or working on climatic enhancements on a building scale... We ended up implementing a greenbelt in the very heart of the village as a first, innocent, affordable, and relevant intervention towards fighting climate change and deforestation. Luckily, the authorities in the village also pushed the project in their own way, and after a planning process, we planted all these trees together. Guabuliga translates into "the well by the thorn tree", and we took that as a kind of guiding parameter. In parallel to focusing on the green, we investigated the water situation, which turned out to be critical. The water from wells located in the settlement itself was highly contaminated according to WHO drinking water guidelines. The Chief was alarmed, and – together with the NGO operating in the village – it was possible to reactivate an existing, inactive water tank with a new solar-powered pumping system to provide clean drinking water for the whole village a year later. Sometimes it is not about static master planning, or housing and architecture, but rather other needs or strategies are identified – such as environmental or infrastructural ones – and you start conceptualizing, designing, and monitoring solutions from there. We also worked on a dynamic growth plan for Guabuliga, which includes a responsive strategy for situating and orienting new housing clusters, based on a set of environmental, infrastructural and geometric parameters, which have been generated according to the analysis of the existent vernacular settlement pattern, but also somehow upgraded and democratized (i.e., made non-hierarchical).

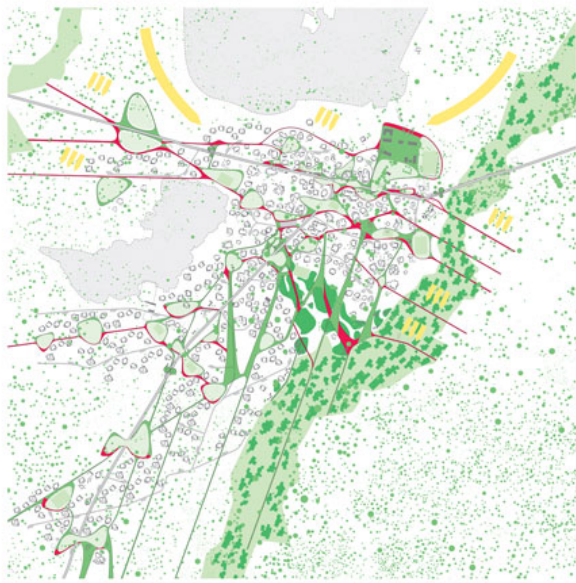
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2032 dry season

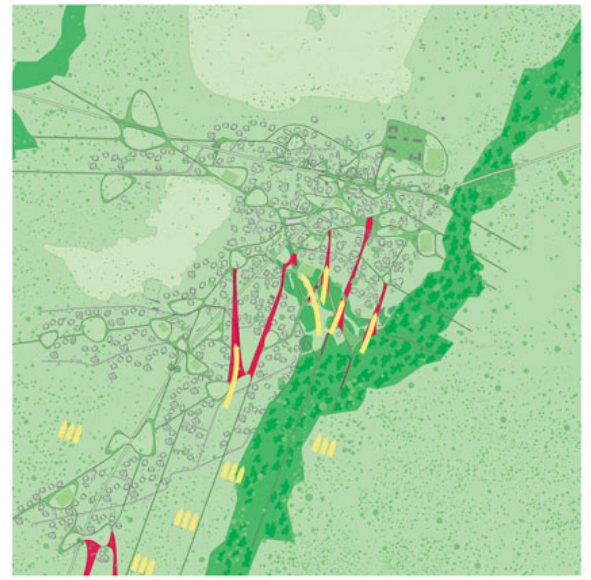


HARMATTAN December - March avg. +32°C

- prevailing harmattan wind
- pathways with wind-blocking vegetation
- dry riverbed
- pathways with low vegetation
- green belt and dry season gardening



2032 rainy season



PREVAILING WIND April - November avg. +26°C

- prevailing wind
- wind aisles
- pathways with vegetation
- green belt and river bed

JL: You are currently working on new projects in Iraq and Lagos?

BM: We have been working on a project in Iraq since May 2016, in collaboration with UNIDO, a UN organization. We were invited to investigate what could be done on an architectural scale in order to positively contribute to the situation of refugees and IDPs living in camps located around the city of Erbil in Northern Kurdish Iraq. We went through an intense process of defining a programmatic and spatial concept, and identifying a site. Based on desk and field research, we decided to focus on women living in camps as our major user group. On a programmatic level, we were interested in creating a hybrid of a recreational and educational space. After coming up with the initial concept and design idea, we went through a process of changes and adaptations, and the project was relocated from inside one camp to the edge of another one. Nevertheless, we are enthusiastic about

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the final location and program, the masterplan, and our architectural design. The project is a kind of agrarian training campus, with a training centre, greenhouses for vegetables and flowers, and a garden. Refugees and IDPs living in the Harsham Camp next door will learn how to plant and process food, to be engaged and recover from trauma, and to generate income in the long term. Through our design, we have tried to respond to the given social, cultural, and climatic situation. It is a modest but ambitious gesture and an attempt to create a recreational and productive space in the context of a humanitarian crisis. Construction will start very soon, actually the beginning of July 2017, after Ramadan.

The project in Lagos is very different, with a very speculative and artistic approach. We have been investigating a large protected terrain within a dense district of mainland Lagos: the Nigerian Railway Compound in Ebute-Metta. Our local partner is Legacy 1995, an association of architects who are concerned about built heritage in Lagos and Nigeria. The intention behind our collaboration has been to identify the potentials of the railway compound in a playful manner, as a kind of enchanted terrain with intriguing abandoned structures. We have mapped the fragility, beauty, and potential of the given site. We have based our investigations on the notions of heritage, scale, and terrain vague. An interdisciplinary team of architecture and art students, young architects, and Lagos-based artists has collaborated on research and ad hoc artistic projects that have been realized in digital and physical forms and were shown to the public at the end of a very intense two-week on-site lab that took place in February 2017. Working on these spatial and ephemeral interventions served as a kind of trial arrangement for experiencing the pure scale of the given space, its potential future programming as a recreational space for diverse user groups without commercially driven or exclusive interests.

JL: How did you begin this exciting journey?

BM: Since I was a child, I have always been most interested in what was not so familiar to me, and I was very receptive to exceptional spaces and buildings ... I vividly remember when I visited a mosque for the first time in my life when I was 8 years old, in Mostar, which was still Yugoslavia at that time. I was so fascinated by the space and just as much by how the space was being used. That fascination for distinct architecture(s) and spaces, and diverse patterns of spatial behaviour somehow never faded. I travelled intensely through India and other Asian countries after finishing school, before studying architecture. I already knew that I wanted to become an architect; therefore, it was a lot about buildings, urban and rural life, movements of people and goods, rituals, modernization and westernization... Studying architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna

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allowed me to take excursions to Bhutan and Yemen and do field research under the guidance of Carl Pruscha. And Michael Sorkin, who was the head of the Urban Institute, held a fantastic studio in and about Cairo. Later, he offered a trip to Ghana, where we worked together with architecture students at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, mapping different neighbourhoods of the city. That's how my fascination for the African city began, which later expanded to rural settings... My thesis project "Listening Kumasi" proposed an urban acupuncture of Kumasi: I designed and conceptualized a number of "spaces of communication", spread throughout the city like acupuncture points. Ever since, I have somehow incorporated these projected proposals into professional commissions or invented projects, as well as within academic settings with students. That is (still) very exciting...

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