

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

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THEORY

“Building” is a verb; it refers to an activity that requires the mobilization of immense effort and resources directed towards achieving a common goal. It is necessarily a political act. The creation of architecture is a critical process of resolving the structures of power and negotiating its exercise.

“Mutual support” is a mechanism of self-organization and collaboration done by communities to support each other through periods of adversity or crisis, such as the changing seasons, natural disasters, and armed conflicts. It exists in multiple forms around the world and its principles are rooted in empathy, care, and seeing ourselves in one another. The Irish Meithal, Norwegian Dugnad, Brazilian Mutirão, Indonesian Gotong-royong, and the Filipino Bayanihan are all contextual expressions of mutual support systems.

When mutual support is required, people come together for collective work to achieve a common goal. It is a process that builds social relationships, reciprocity and community cohesion. However, these traditions are fading away in modern day society where the currency of wealth is measured by money rather than relationships built in a community. Thus, re-evaluating and reviving mutual support traditions provides an alternative way to consider the values, resources, and knowledge that shape our built environment.

PROCESS

“Structures of Mutual Support” is conceived as a critical exploration and implementation of the structures of mutual support as a method of architectural praxis that actively engages issues of resilience, climate change, and power structures. It is a framework for an alternative method of “building” that challenges the current mode of architectural production.

We engaged with a Gawad Kalinga community based in Angat, Bulacan, and formed Framework Collaborative, where we collectively designed and built a structure that was, at the time we began the process, undefined. Through a series of workshops done on site, according to a fixed schedule, the Collaborative created the space to negotiate and discover what it is that we needed to be built according to the values and knowledge that were meaningful to us. The output of these workshops were two structures that were sited close to the community’s homes and adjacent to a basketball court as well as an open field where the residents sometimes hold celebrations or sports activities. One was conceived as a more private and safe community library which would also double as a conflict-mediation space. The second one was developed as a more open and lively “tambayan” or space where the youth could relax and hang out with friends, while the parents would have the security of knowing where they were. After determining what, where, who, when, and how the structure should be built, we collectively built the community library structure in place. The materials were all sourced locally, and the workers were all from the community and nearby villages. After getting the primary structure up,

the library was dismantled and then shipped to Venice, Italy to become the centerpiece of the exhibition where the secondary elements were finished.

All the workshops, designs, and construction processes were documented using photography, mock-ups, scale models, videos, and interviews with the participants. This documentation, along with literature on the framework and mutual support systems are to be presented alongside the community- built structure. After the biennale, the structure will be dismantled and will return home to the community to be reconstructed permanently on site. It is hoped that it will contribute to the fabric of the community's life and that of its future generations.

FRAMEWORK

The framework is a series of focused workshops designed to actively engage members of the community in the mutual sharing of ideas through the creation of objects that carry meaning. A common understanding becomes the starting point from which we can begin to design and create something together.

Considering the standard phases of design of a typical project, from planning, conceptualization, design, and construction, we aim to synthesize a method of working which allows for a greater integration of the values, knowledge, and resources of a community at the inception of a project. As such, the framework is structured as a series of three to five-day topic-based workshops culminating in a group building activity, which lasted for two months. The workshop topics correspond to a 6-step process that we have developed from our experience with community-based projects. These steps are: learning, questioning, making, concept, design, construction.

It is necessary to begin the planning stage with a mindset of humility, openness, and empathy in order to collectively learn about a community's culture and context. Next we stimulate discussions that collectively question their values and try to find ways of clarifying intentions so that they may become shared visions. From these shared visions we make objects that distill these new understandings into something tangible. The goal of these first three steps is to form a common language that becomes a framework for meaningful engagement between all members of the project team.

EXHIBITION DESIGN

The community library that was built on site in Bulacan was dismantled, then shipped to Venice, Italy and reconstructed as the centerpiece for the Philippine Pavilion in the Artigliere Arsenale. Beside the library is a raised platform that takes people inside where there is a small exhibition about stories of mutual support. Surrounding the pavilion, there are four exhibition walls where the curatorial concept and theories behind the pavilion are laid out along with video and photo documentation of the workshop and construction process. The ledges surrounding the perimeter of the library as well as a larger portion towards the entrance are kept open for people to sit on and view the materials, as well as to allow for small events to take place.

In another sense, the process of building something in Bulacan and shipping it to Venice and back home to the original site is a way of questioning and expanding the purpose that the Biennale, and exhibitions in general, can serve. We aim to achieve two goals at once: to work within the structure on the exhibition; and also to reach beyond it. Since most of the materials will be produced locally, it is a given that containers will be shipped from the Philippines to Venice and back as this is the requirement of the shipping industry and for tax purposes. However, as the library is both the exhibition piece and also something that will be used by the community that produced it, the library has a life far beyond the biennale.

HOW WE LIVE TOGETHER

The question of how we live together is also a question of how we build together. The exhibition offers an opportunity to look at bayanihan and dugnad in relation to the larger context of mutual support globally. Its principles serve as a critique of our current modes of architectural and cultural production. As such, it deserves consideration so that it may contribute to the architectural discourse and praxis.

The essence of architecture is not space but instead the meaning ascribed to space. Architecture becomes more than an object when it becomes a symbol of values, knowledge, and relationships built in the process of its creation. It is hoped that applying the principles of mutual support will improve the diversity of values that architecture represents by involving people directly in the determination of values that are embedded in it.

Mutual support has been a way for communities to live together throughout history. In some cases, it is still the way communities organize themselves today. Considering the economic, political, and ecological crises that we confront, mutual support structures become the framework upon which we can build anew.