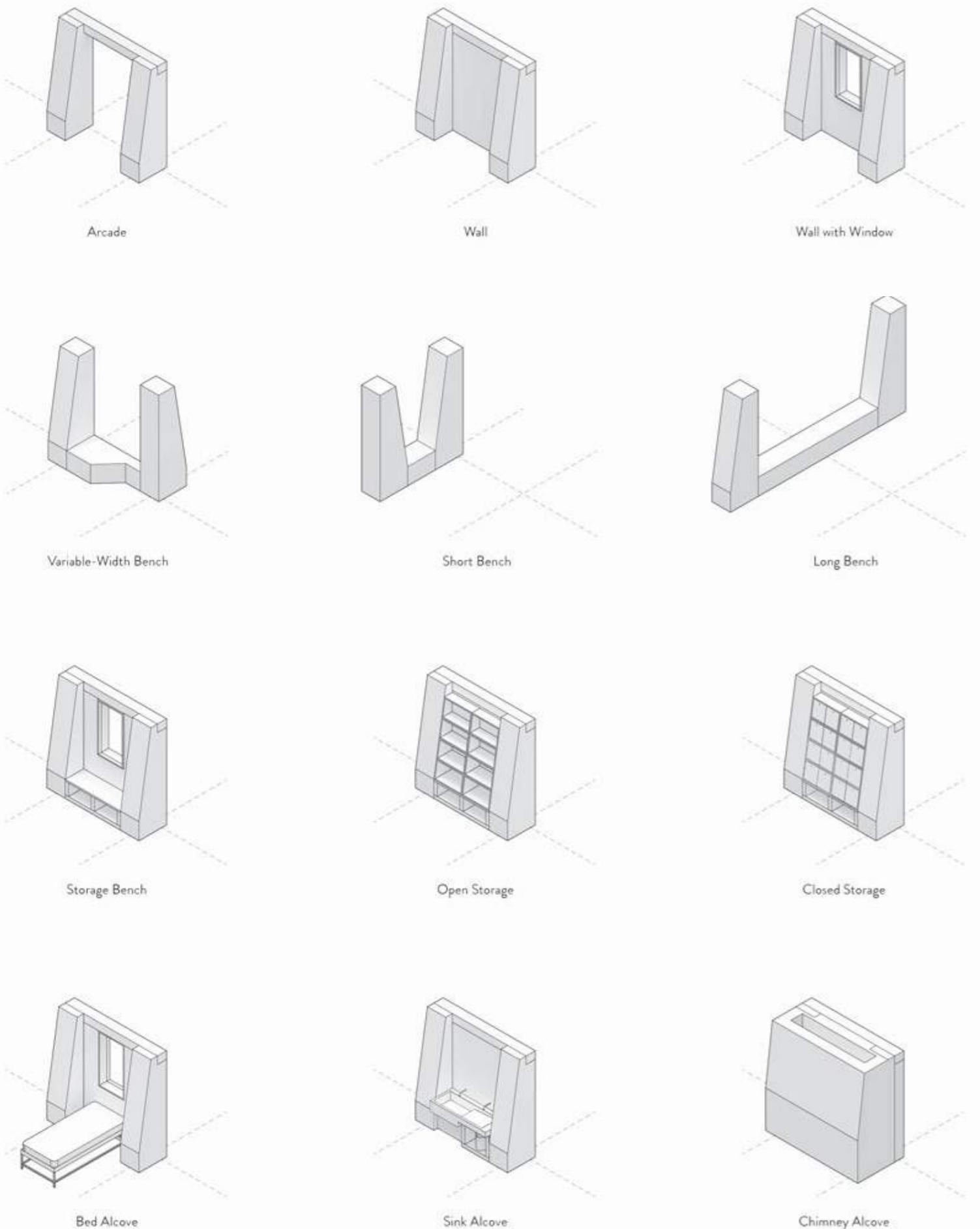


Building in Malawi



Tomà Berlanda

The call from the editors of Viceversa was fairly loose and quite unexpected, an invitation to select works that would be of significance for me.

My personal trajectory over the last 5 years has brought me in contact with many different realities in Sub-Saharan Africa, and for this reason I chose to talk about this project I have recently come across, because it allows me to situate it within a larger conversation on what is design and the understanding of “home” in a context which is culturally foreign to me, but with a sensibility that I feel drawn to.

The systemic taxonomy that Christian Benimana and Jean Paul Sebutayi, two Rwandan architects working for MASS Design Group, have developed for the Maternity Waiting Village in Kasungu, Malawi, is at first glance not a particularly innovative approach. It in fact shows the intrinsic potential of a system to deploy — and be deployed as — a framework for different usages, something that from Habraken’s studies onwards has become familiar to (too) many contexts.

In this particular instance, for the programmatic nature of the brief, the Maternity complex can be conceived of as a response to an ontological necessity for humanity: how to assist mothers in labour? how to address the dramatic rate of maternal mortality given that so few deliveries are attended by skilled professionals?

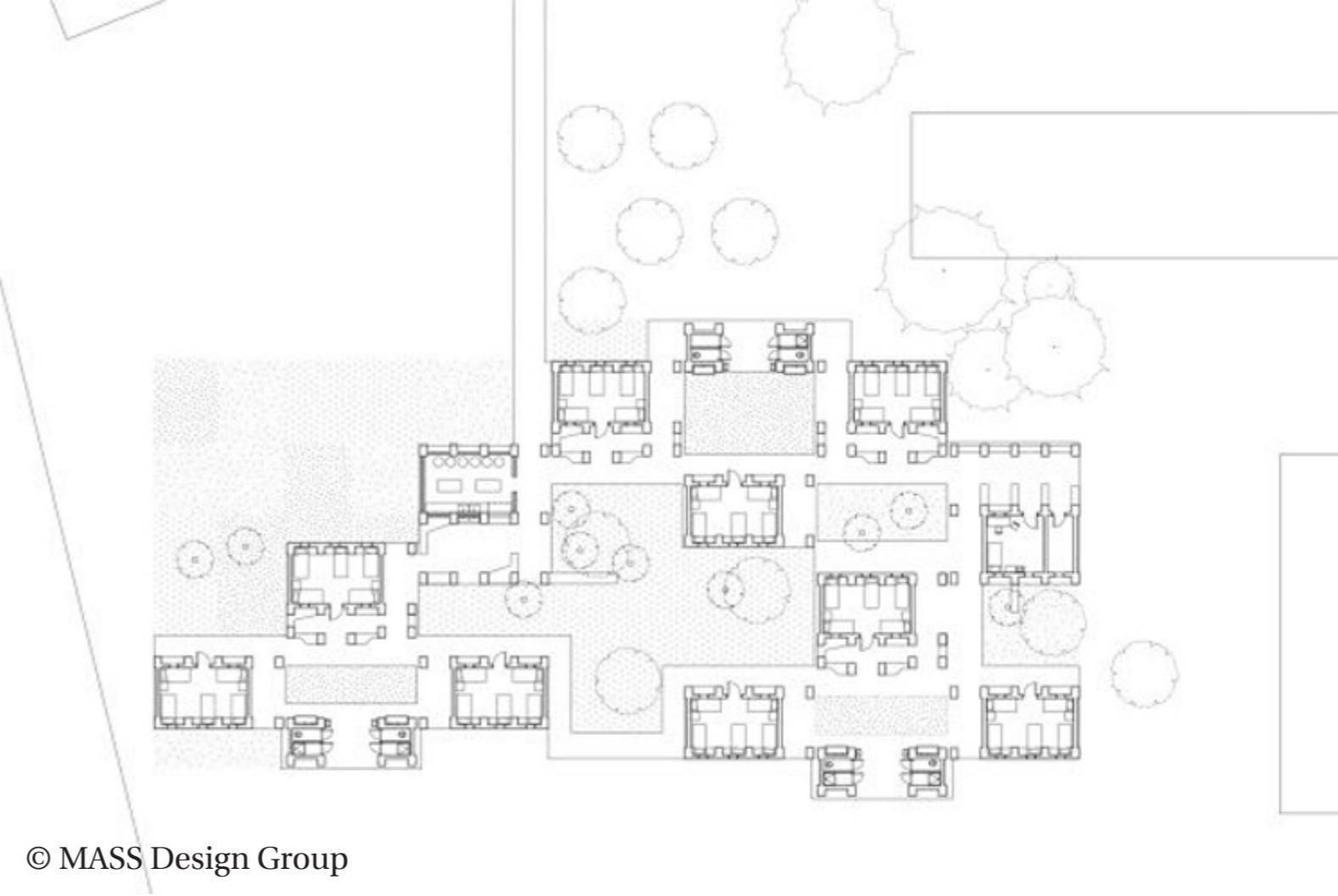
Hence the project goes some way in applying the creative mind to

setting up an enclosed, but open space, to provide expectant mothers with places to sleep, adequate ventilation, and sanitation. Basic human needs and fundamental rights that too often than not, are simply not available to large portions of the world's population. This is no abstract description of reality, and no imagined complexity for its own sake. It's a real, tangible, concern where there is little use for abstract conceptual discussions, but instead a urgent need for intelligent, practical, replicable solutions.

MASS's project is an attempt to do just that. It's not perfect, and the set up of the firm has some critical elements to it, most notably its claim to operate as a non-for-profit agency in the US, in order to be able to receive donor funding, but then transform its operations in a normal business venture in Rwanda, from where it directs its African operations. But still the concern with engaging in patient driven health care infrastructure, and uncomfortable contextual challenges, make the project we're looking at relevant. Whereas modular prototypes such as this have been tried out before, the designers' ability to operate in collaboration with the Malawi Ministry of Health, together with the decision of using *Compressed Stabilised Earth Blocks* (CESB) made on site, make the scheme a believable attempt at delivering a replicable system, that can be re-iterated without complex expertise and supervision from foreign based architects.

Further the concern with the design and delivery of health care facilities is unequivocally interwoven with MASS Design Group. The office was set up in 2009 specifically in order to design a hospital in Butaro, northern Rwanda, and from the completion of it, it has engaged with multiple research and evidence based projects in partnership with both governmental and non-governmental organisation, with the declared intention of evaluation the impact of design in improving living conditions.

Particularly from a Global South perspective, Modernism was for too long complicit in the colonial rule and in the establishment of a



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unilateral dogmatic response of Architecture with a capital A to the challenges of development. Today, finally, the discourse has shifted, and the understanding of the 'other' has been brought to the centre of attention. It is therefore significant that this particular project has been led by Christian Benimana, the Manager of Rwanda operations for MASS, and Jean Paul Sebutayi, who — full disclosure — I had the pleasure of having as a colleague and student respectively, at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology. The ambition and resourcefulness that these two young Rwandan architects bring to the occasion is refreshing. The pictures from the building site — the project has only been recently completed and even though Iwan Baan has already been there to take some of his famous "socially good" pictures, but we're only showing process images —, show buildings which have a dignity and sense of belonging to the place. There is a clear articulation of permanent solid ground structure that supports a ventilated roofwork. The large overhangs allow for shade and water protection. The masonry buttresses are used for a variety of purposes,



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niches, alleyways, storage, benches, chimneys. It is a clear pedagogical handbook for constructing both the space and its use. Not a socially engineered and micromanaged “home”, but — in the words of the architects — a «maternal village [resulting from] the aggregation of smaller sleeping units».

The success of the project lies in its potential to be replicated elsewhere. In fact it simply has to. It will be the only way for the stories about places, people and their houses to be woven with threads of heterogeneous origins, and become process of dissemination. The movement of expectant mothers away from their homes to these “waiting villages”, and the necessary family support and accompaniment that will go together with it, will locate the abstract structure to their context.

One can think of it as a translation process that inscribes the movement towards home as a movement always away from home, and

hence, finds the individual never quite at home. It takes the form of a detour through unfamiliar places that always need to be present. By resorting to the familiar, it is a return that constantly invites and problematizes difference rather than settle on a dualistic relation between self and other. It's some form of hybrid space, where the imported grid, a Western canon, leaves space and place for the other, and hopefully allows it to take over and subvert the system.