



**Tamara's House<sup>i</sup>:  
Research into a [hi]Story of African Dwelling**

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**Introduction**

*“The problem is this: mankind as a whole is on the brink of a single world civilisation representing at once a gigantic progress for everyone and an overwhelming task of survival and adapting our cultural heritage to this new setting. To some extent, and in varying ways, everyone experiences the tension between the necessity for the free access to progress and, on the other hand, the exigency of safeguarding our heritage.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Along with the present pressures of globalisation numerous developing/recovering African nations are struggling with the remnants of a recent release from colonial occupation. In the case of Zambia in southern Africa after a successful (and bloodless) revolution (1962), this struggle includes an attempt to secure political and economic self-determination along with reviving a fragmented cultural identity. The term “recovering nation”



is perhaps more appropriate to Zambia’s situation than the more commonly used term “developing nation”. With the later comes the biased perception of incremental progress and gradual accumulation of techniques, tools, and knowledge whether applied to politics, economics or science and engineering. Following Paul Ricoeur’s assessment of the conflict between universal development pressures and the need to re-establish cultural identity, I would propose that Zambia as a recovering nation defines her identity from the deepest roots of cultural history. One example of this rooted stance is demonstrated by the co-existence of seventy-two tribal languages officially recognised by Zambia’s constitution (English being one of them). This is not to say that Zambia, as she lays claim to her cultural origins, does not recognise the necessity of access to an international modern civilisation. In fact, Zambia’s future depends on her ability to engage in a complete dialogue and exchange with the international community.

*“Whence the paradox: on the one hand, [a society] has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural re-vindication before the colonialist’s personality. But in order to take part in modern civilisation, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past”<sup>iii</sup>*

**The House as Human Right**

Architects throughout the Northern Hemisphere are beginning to respond to an urgent call - to build millions of houses for communities lacking in the most basic of human comforts. Architecture in the context of international aid and development is seen as a generous act of helping less privileged societies attain a basic standard of living. From the point of view of international aid agencies this represents a significant part of the foundations of basic human rights which include health, education, freedom of speech, access to income, etc. Numerous architectural interventions however, while based on noble intentions, often present concepts and techniques foreign to the

international aid agencies this represents a significant part of the foundations of basic human rights which include health, education, freedom of speech, access to income, etc. Numerous architectural interventions however, while based on noble intentions, often present concepts and techniques foreign to the

cultures within which they operate. Inevitably, along with the architectural project comes the western (northern) bias of practise over theory driven by definitions of progress as cumulative betterment. Practical questions of technique and 'how-to' often override



theoretical concerns of cultural perception, tradition and world-view. Herein a balance must be stricken. Development history is "littered with shelter interventions based on the wrong assumptions, i.e. that materials and approaches are what are important - they almost never are."<sup>iv</sup> More important issues revolve around land ownership and a sense of identity and stability. Also, it is all too often assumed that a shelter has the same function in different contexts. "John Turner (Ex Prime Minister of Canada) was right when he coined the phrase that 'housing is a verb', i.e. it's what it does for you (brings an income, provides a stake in the city, becomes an asset, etc.) that counts".

This is not to say that innovation in the *practise* of affordable housing has no merits. Architectural experiments going back to the 1960's and 70's raised international awareness on issues of ecology, traditional methods, indigenous materials along with promises of affordability through mass production and economy generating labour participation. The complexity of the problem lies in the adaptability of a given culture to a system which is applied from 'without' as opposed to possible engagements with a host country where systems are allowed to evolve from *within*.

*"... throughout the world an equally universal way of living unfolds. This way of living is manifested by the unavoidable standardisation of housing and clothing. These phenomena derive from the fact that ways of living are themselves rationalised by techniques which concern not only production but also transportation, human relationships, comfort, leisure and news programming as well. ... There is a culture of consumption of world-wide dimensions, displaying a way of living which has a universal character"*<sup>v</sup>.

International Non-Governmental Organisations (N.G.O.), such as *Habitat for Humanity*, *Builders Without Borders*, and *Food for the Poor*, are already mak-

ing significant inroads in developing low-cost quality housing alternatives with improved design characteristics. Private-sector Canadian development firms also have highly developed programming and technical skills in this area. From a critical standpoint based on direct experience however, projects

like these operate at a distance from the community's full potential. Standardised plans and community layouts using 'efficient' materials and methods make it possible for numerous shelters to sprout-up instantly while personalisation, family adaptation and specific programmatic needs are left wanting. More importantly, the potential of community based management to ensure the gradual evolution of houses and neighbourhoods along with culturally defined expression are rarely components within the design process. On the other hand, universal practises as defined by Ricoeur are 'good' because they promote the availability of elementary possessions to the masses of humanity. In his words, "no kind of criticism of techniques will be able to counterbalance the absolutely positive benefit of the freedom from want and of the massive access to comfort."<sup>vi</sup>

### The House as Subject of Cultural Research

*"... we should have to be prepared to conduct our research up to the stable images and the permanent dreams which make up a nation's cultural resources ... Images and symbols constitute what might be called the awakened dream of a historical group"*<sup>vii</sup>.



In order to more thoroughly investigate the Africa housing crisis *CARE Canada* has initiated a working relationship with *Carleton University's School of Architecture* and the *CARE International* centre for urban development (*INSAKA* in Zambia). The primary objective of this collaboration is in researching and developing practical skills and knowledge that would contribute directly to the collective's competitive advantage in obtaining and implementing large-scale donor-funded urban housing projects. More importantly however, in seeking out an academic centre for its housing research, *CARE* anticipated a 'cultural exchange' that would

reciprocally benefit both the host country and the research team. *CARE* representatives understood that students of architecture, our future international architects, could afford a more profound research extending beyond the 'real-life' limitations of normal architectural practise.

'In-the-field' investigations culminating in architectural proposals would benefit from a prolonged contact with Zambian communities with the likelihood of personal experiences with deeper meaning. Indeed, students were quick to observe the superficial evidence of internationalisation. Strewn amongst the fabric of a 'culture not their own' the young architects could discern the all-too-familiar discarded remnants of a universal consumer society as they walked past the smouldering garbage heaps of plastic *Coca-Cola* bottles and package wrappers.



*"Yes I believe it is possible to understand those different from me by means of sympathy and imagination, just as I understand a character in a novel or at the theatre or a real friend who is different from me. Moreover, I understand without repeating, portray without reliving, make myself different while remaining myself. To be a man is to be capable of this projection into another centre of perspective".<sup>ix</sup>*

But with a deeper, penetrating glance and intense inter-personal exchanges the research team would eventually begin to appreciate that below the superficial signs lay the creative nucleus of a traditional culture. This realisation would not be possible until the displaced Canadians entered the very fabric of everyday life in an attempt to decipher the hidden stories. After spending hours with individual families in their modest homes and conversing repeatedly with merchants and craftsmen in the local markets each and every student would return with unique fragments of a cultural puzzle.

### The Structure of Exchange

Students participating in the *Directed Studies Abroad* (DSA) program were enrolled in three required courses including a materials application workshop, a full design studio and a history/theory elective (culture). Distinct lines were not drawn between these courses. Instead, the research based program aimed at unifying the various modes of investigation in an attempt to deliver a wider range of critical output. Students were able to align their observations with multi-

*"A threat [to the great civilisations of the past] is expressed, among other disturbing effects, by the spreading before our eyes of a mediocre civilisation which is the absurd counterpart of elementary culture. Everywhere throughout the world, one finds the same bad movie, the same plastic or aluminium atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc. It seems as if mankind, by approaching en masse a basic consumer culture, were also stopped en masse at a sub-cultural level"<sup>viii</sup>.*



ple input ranging from on-site interviews, presentations by local experts, drawing exercises, 1:1 material and methods experimentation, lectures in cultural studies and studio based design. While each course would ultimately revolve around similar issues, the mode of research and therefore the resulting assignments differed in scale, medium and focus. Each course included a survey/research component which took place in Zambia over a one month period, and was followed-up by design based assignments upon the group's return to Canada.



For the first four weeks of the term (while in Zambia) participants in this course ventured into the field of community work as defined by numerous national and international programs. This first phase was one of gathering and documentation as well as a research which required dialogue and the exchange of ideas with members of host communities. Students sought to know about the aspirations and the frustrations; the desires and the concerns of people who they met in the underprivileged neighbourhoods - in short, students engaged in the exchange of stories.



Etymologically, the words story and history have evolved from the same root - *historia* (L.). This is made evident in Latin based languages such as French and Italian wherein the same word, *histoire* and *historia*, are undifferentiated. While much has been discussed with respect

to the role of History in the understanding of architectural theory and practise, this research aimed at shifting the focus to the source of meaning imbedded in a people's stories. The act of narrative story telling is a

creative endeavour that bears two faces. Stories rely on a recollection of the past as well as a creative projection into the *very-present* (*present as lived*). Furthermore, in contrast to other modes of interpersonal exchange (such as music perform-

ance), storytelling oscillates between speaker and listener in a moment of observation/reflection/response. It is with this reciprocity in mind that the course structure for the Directed Studies was established. In addition, it became clear from the outset that the student group would experience urban Zambia in a near-nomadic way. With the exception of rudimentary sleeping accommodations, all participants made their homes within the fabric of Lusaka's urban settlements (compounds) and their inhabitants.

In lieu of a permanent studio space in Zambia, students were asked to create for themselves, a nomadic portable 'studio' and to continually evaluate and transform it during their stay in Zambia. All aspects of the *Studio* and *Workshop* courses including 'desk reviews', public presentations and seminars were conducted in full mobility. Further to this, the theme of 'storytelling as documentation' was set as the foundation to most



course exercises. This concept stems from the *Tjuringa* from the novel: *The Songlines* - by Bruce Chatwin. While Chatwin's book is based on observations made during travel in another continent (Australia's Outback), his observations on the importance of storytelling and dreaming were deemed appropriate to our adventures into the ancient cultures of Africa. The *Tjuringa*, an ancient Australian-Aboriginal object of recording, ensured the survival of cultural identity and ritual by engraving narrative content on a physical artefact. Similarly, the students' nomadic studio in effect became their personal *Tjuringa*. Its definition was to ensure that their experience in Zambia became a physical as well as a narrative record. More importantly, the reconciliation of our presence in what is a "culture-not-our-own" could only be made by the communication of our personal stories alongside the stories of the culture that welcomed us. The *Tjuringas* were conceived to promote this reconciliation and to give it an abstract physical form.

*"The Tjuringa is usually an oval-ended plaque carved from stone or wood and covered with patterns which represent the wanderings of its owner's Dreamtime Ancestor"*<sup>x</sup>

## Workshop

The Workshop course was concerned primarily with the teaching of the architect's fundamental tools: i.e. drawing (*drawing from*) and documenting the experience of a place. It was equally a drawing course and a course that focused on making. Both modes of representation were important components able to formalise the abstract and represent (*re-present*) the lived experience of new and foreign places. The architect's diary or sketchbook is often a juxtaposition of sketches, text and images which help to inform and recollect existing buildings, cities, landscapes and artefacts. In addition to this, through this workshop (and the studio that ran in parallel), additional media investigations were encouraged: i.e. sound samplings, music, photography, video, material investigations and constructions, and eventually - upon our return to Canada - computer based media. All of these were to support the ideas found in the *Tjuringa* - that layered traces of recording reflect the collage-narrative of the nomadic experience.

## The Table/*Tjuringa*

The actual construction and development of the Table/*Tjuringa* was reviewed during the travel component of the workshop. In preparation for the table's design and construction, the Workshop projects ex-



plored issues of making, documenting and transportation. This was to include consideration for wear and tear, weight, weather, instructions for use, programmatic transformation, etc.

Every architect will express different preferences for tools, layout, materials, instruments, etc. It therefore became possible for each student to reflect carefully on the program for his/her portable workspace. This course asked of each student to speculate on the inter-relationships between program and architectonics, use and construction, by developing a program outline in narrative form while critically challenging conventions within the tradition of representation in architecture. The three parts to this project addressed separate yet similar issues all geared to an overall questions, namely: How does the place, the objects and the inten-





tions of making (process) affect the product and work of an architect? Can drawing conventions be challenged by questioning, not their 'style' but their 'making'? Does a re-interpreted drawing board lead to a re-interpreted drawing? The response to these questions (if not the answer) can most clearly be demonstrated by the personal and interpersonal qualities in each of the Table/*Tjuringas*.

It is in the integrated 'log-books' displaying sketches and text that personal intentions are best understood. Meanwhile the individual *Tjuringa* which incorporate all aspects of observation/reflection/response demonstrate the exchange between the students and the local trades who would help them resolve their personal constructions while giving insight into local traditions and contemporary craft.<sup>xi</sup>

*"Unlike a set of tools which accumulates, sediments, and becomes deposited, a cultural tradition stays alive only if it constantly creates itself anew. Here we have two ways for mankind to pass through time: civilisation fosters a certain sense of time which is composed of accumulation and progress, whereas the way in which a nation develops its culture is based upon a law of fidelity and creation; a culture dies as soon as it is no longer renewed and recreated".<sup>xii</sup>*

After numerous iterations and critical 'renovations' the individual logbooks, now merged with the *Tjuringa* can be read, can be touched, and can be interpreted. The logbook/Table/*Tjuringa* are at once a studio space, a personal diary, a 'cabinet of curiosities', and a graphic novel with physical attributes.

### The 'Drawing-From' Exercises

Both workshop assignments start from historical traditions and artefacts that have influenced architects and artists throughout the centuries. This was to enable students of architecture to 'ground' themselves in a tradition which they have inherited in order to more completely understand the potency of precedents that they are so eager to observe. These exercises were constructed as vehicles for the analysis and comprehension of historical representations in order to spring from their origins into contemporary speculations. One exercise examined medieval triptychs as a model for



the representation of a narrative (in space/place and time). The other, based on *Cubist* paintings, sought to complete the gathering of experience into its final form based on the song-lines of the *Tjuringa*; hence reinforcing the representation of space-time while reconciling the physical juxtaposition of numerous found conditions.

*"Only a living culture, at once faithful to its origins and ready for creativity on the levels of art, literature, philosophy and spirituality, is capable of sustaining the encounter of other cultures - not merely capable of sustaining but also of giving meaning to that encounter... In order to confront a self other than one's own self, one must first have a self".<sup>xiii</sup>*

All courses in the DSA Zambia line-up (Theories Elective, Workshop elective and Studio) were conceived as inter-related and complimentary - the product of one influencing the outcome of the others. For this reason students were asked to formulate relationships between them to satisfy their personal interpretations of the course objectives.

### Design Studio

The studio course, in direct parallel with the workshop component, was structured around the articulation of discovery through *Recording, Sampling and Replay* leading to a proposal for an architectural speculation in the city of Lusaka. The building pro-



posals, as outlined in the Studio assignments were *urban* interventions. While these are interventions of opposite scales (one is modest - a market vendor's stall, while the other is of a public/urban scale - neighbourhood and house design) they speak of similar issues and concerns. How does architecture respond to complex urban issues which have more to do with cultural anthropology and tradition than with issues of form? With this we find ourselves in a situation where our actions, whatever they are, demand of us ethical contemplation and ethical action. Furthermore, the very idea of urban intervention is put to question when we as outsiders 'intervene' upon a physical condition with hidden underlying orders.

*"The phenomenon of universalisation, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, which might not be an irreparable wrong, but also of ... the creative nucleus of great civilisations and great cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life, ... the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind".xiv*

### History/Theory (Culture)

A significant portion of our involvement in Zambia revolved around the existing efforts of CARE Canada, CARE Zambia, Urban Insaka and other national and international groups. As part of our investigation into urban and peri-urban living conditions and our eventual proposals for housing we were introduced to relief efforts which are more structural (in a social sense) than physical. This is to admit at the outset that housing issues are not specifically architectural issues and rarely does architecture resolve the problematic of economic, political or social struggle. We can nonetheless hope that the process of community building and the direct involvement



of a community in the process of architectural delineation can lead to the successful implementation of community structure - including buildings.

sism and a denial of the necessary reciprocity in the creative process of thoughtful-making. As Ricoeur points out, it is through an 'engaged creativity' that a

culture survives as it continues to invest in its present. Our involvement in a reciprocal exchange was and continues to be crucial to a successful speculation.

### In Canada

Upon our return to Ottawa, the Zambia group set up a studio bay devoted to the continued explorations of the Africa experience. In the Workshop component this meant a laboratory-like setting for materials and media exploration aiming at the 'complete' documentation of each participant's *story-line*. These experiments, in turn, were to supplement/compliment the *Tjuringa* whereby exercises took on the "pure and applied" aspects of construction

projects as well as the more illusive qualities of interpretative narrative. From the experience in constructing the *Tjuringa* in Zambia completed with significant input from local crafts (wo)men, students had gained significant insight into the ever-evolving traditions of *making*. It is with this knowledge that the group set out to experiment with indigenous materials and traditional methods of construction. The specific location



and program for the house proposals suggests that material application experiments and constructions were to consider the many facets of material inquiry including: Availability, structural integrity, workability, import vs. export potential, local construction means and conventions, technological adaptability - workmanship and appropriateness. In considering appropriateness, “design” issues in response to traditional and adapted ways of life figured prominently. These were derived from an open dialogue with the community in question.



In the Design Studio component, students were to propose a public Architecture by responding to their gathered research. The contents of their *Tjuringa* which now included notes, sketches, sound-bites, video, photographs and artefacts would suggest a point of departure in defining an architectural program which would develop a speculative architecture focusing on urban living and large-scale housing projects for *Chepata Compound*, Lusaka. In some instances and in response to individual research, community infrastructure (architectural) programs relating to health, culture and education (or hybrid versions of these) were encouraged.

The focus has been on developing demonstrated capacity to create affordable low-cost quality housing units and well-designed communities for the benefit of poorer urban families in countries faced with rapid urbanisation needs. While the central ‘topic’ of such research can be signified by the term ‘housing’, greater issues of urban development, urban anthropology, urban economics, employment generation, social and cultural contexts, materials development, housing and urban design, appropriate applications technology, community management, government relations, institutional and financial sustainability, cost structure, and potential donor interest also figure significantly.

Projects from the Design Studio were submitted using traditional and non-traditional representational techniques and depicted an elaborated architectural program (use) as well as a specification/speculation on eventual implementation (process). Each student was expected to propose an architectural program or a hybrid program of their own. While housing was the central focus of the studio, community infrastructure (architectural) programs relating to community, health, culture and education (or hybrid versions of these) were encouraged. The course pedagogy focused on research, observation, documentation, and especially process.



The long-term expectations of the *CARE Canada/Carleton University* partnership aim at the implementation of housing projects. At *Carleton University* Design/Build Studios have, for a number of years been structured such that students are encouraged to find alternative methods of design based on the context of the problem and with the most limited of means. While good solutions rarely come down to materials and methods, we remain optimistic that architectural solutions can be found from within the communities in which they are set. In this way architects and future architects can find their role as members of a community (universal or national) focused on the specific and inherent problems at hand.



“... [Cross-cultural] encounter has not yet taken place at the level of an authentic dialogue. That is why we are in a kind of lull in which we can no longer practise the dogmatism of a single truth and in which we are not yet capable of conquering the scepticism into which we have stepped. We are in a tunnel, at the twilight of dogmatism and the dawn of real dialogues”.<sup>xv</sup>



**Endnotes:**

- i Tamara’s House is the working title of a program for affordable housing in Zambia, Africa signifying: “Toward a Modest, Appropriate, & Responsive African House” and was inspired by a young Zambian mother interviewed by architecture student Andrea Macecek. This housing project is a collaborative effort between Carleton University School of Architecture and CARE Canada begun in 2001.
- ii Paul Ricoeur: “*Universal Civilizations and National Cultures*” in History and Truth; - p. 271.
- iii. Ibid., p. 277.
- iv. David Sanderson, CARE U.K.
- v. Paul Ricoeur “*Universal Civilisation and National Cultures*” in History and Truth. - p. 274.
- vi. Ibid., p. 275.
- vii. Ibid., p. 280.
- viii Ibid., p. 276.
- ix Ibid., p. 274
- x. Bruce Chatwin, The Songlines - p. 43.
- xi. By ‘local tradition’ one will instantly make associations to the historical crafts of African wood and bone carvings, basket weaving, fabric printing, drum making, etc. Today’s Zambia displays a truly ‘honest’ creativity in the way that craftspeople transform discarded materials such as wire, tin cans and plastics in the making of toys, functional objects and works of art.
- xii. Paul Ricoeur “*Universal Civilisation and National Cultures*” in History and Truth. - p. 280-81.
- xiii Ibid., p. 283.
- xiv Ibid., p. 276.
- xv. Ibid., p. 283.

**Appendix**

**Country Description**

Zambia is a southeastern African nation with five distinct topographical regions: the central highlands; the western plains, swamps and semiarid deserts; the Rift Valley of the Zambezi Lowlands; the Muchinga Uplands; and the swamps and lakes of the northeast. Despite progress in privatisation and budget reform, Zambia’s economy is struggling. With the drop in copper prices, Zambia’s copper mining sector, which accounts for over 80 percent of the nation’s foreign currency intake, is struggling. Meanwhile, inflation continues to be a serious concern. Adding to economic woes, many of Zambia’s donors withdrew aid after political instability in the elections of 1996.

**COUNTRY FACTS**

*Location:* southern Africa  
*Climate:* tropical  
*Population:* 9,508,200  
*Economy:* agriculture, brewing, cement, chemicals, mining (cobalt, copper, lead, zinc)  
*Government:* republic  
*Religion:* predominantly Christian with some Muslim/Hindu  
*Literacy:* 72 percent  
*Language:* English; 70 indigenous dialects

### Community Description

The original capital city of Lusaka, in south central Zambia is home to approximately 300,000 people. Surrounding the city are numerous squatting neighbourhoods termed “compounds” with colourful names such as Kamwala, Freedom, Chiesa, Linda, etc. These dense communities, ranging from 30,000 to 80,000 souls add to Lusaka’s growing urban population of 1.3 million and have recently been included in the official delineation of Lusaka proper. For the purposes of our design exercise, Chipata Compound, located in the northwestern extension of the city, was selected as the site for our housing proposals. The CARE/Carleton Group had grown fond of this neighbourhood where they had witnessed evidence of gradual growth and increasing stability. Through their numerous interviews and social contacts, students had also made friends in this friendly and open community. The group recognised the potential for community involvement, labour and craft input as well as the visible desire for community betterment. Precedents for community building and housing initiatives were documented from numerous visits to surrounding compounds including “Linda” where the Africa Housing Fund proudly exhibits its housing program.

### Family Unit Description - Program

The implementation of the housing prototype was conceived with urban implementation and community development in mind. This ‘house-type’, a construction of approximately 24 m<sup>2</sup>, was designed based on the basic programmatic needs of an extended family living in the high-density peri-urban area. In order to identify potential user families, students spent numerous hours in difficult conditions interviewing family members of the most diverse make-ups. A life of poverty and struggle is impacted by myriad social and economic factors. The search for work drives young Africans from their villages in search for work and a better life in the city creating a continuous influx into already crowded squatting neighbourhoods. High unemployment limits dreams of success and gradually affects a family’s earning potential and education access while squalid living conditions invite disease and health complications. A family member’s good fortune, as rare as this may be, promotes additional influx of families coming to benefit from their relative’s tenuous stability. The impact of HIV/AIDS especially has transformed the African family unit. It is not uncommon to meet a grandmother caring for 5 or 6 grandchildren whose parents have recently been taken by the disease. We met a great number of young adults who were caring for the children of their siblings along with their own all the while struggling to make a better life for their extended family. These harsh realities have a profound effect on what would be considered a straightforward house program. Hence, built into the exercise of program definition was the requirement for direct contact and an exchange by storytelling. With this direct contact, students could more readily focus their designs on a real clientele while pondering the necessary flexibility of architectural programming. The house therefore was to accommodate the most basic of a family’s needs while responding to cultural traditions, changing lifestyle and eventual physical or financial growth/change within the family unit.



### Participants in Carleton University DSA Zambia:

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Andrea Macecek  
Mariam Shaker  
Sarah Colven  
Ryan McLennan  
Steve Kenyon  
Matt Galvin  
Yvan P. Cazabon  
John Scoggan (CARE Canada)  
Yannick Muriel Noah  
Chris Davis  
Dan Smith  
Jin Feng