

Thieving the Present – Building the Future

Mwazulu Diyabanza walked into the Quai Branly Museum, the riverfront institution that houses treasures from France’s former colonies, and . . . began denouncing colonial-era cultural theft while a member of his group filmed the speech and live-streamed it via Facebook . . . he then forcefully removed a slender 19th-century wooden funerary post, from a region that is now in Chad or Sudan, and headed for the exit. Museum guards stopped him before he could leave . . .¹

In their quest for reparations for colonialism, slavery, and cultural expropriation, Diyabanza and other activists have been put on trial for theft after attempting to remove looted African art from museums in Europe. Contestation about looting and repatriation is part of a continuing dialogue about the past, present, and future and draws attention to patterns of involvement of the external in Africa. Resolution of contestation about looted art may be an important path to reconciliation of past wrongs and future possibilities.²

In March 2022, Burkinabè-German architect Diébédo Francis Kéré became the first black architect and first architect from Africa to win the Pritzker Prize, architecture’s highest honor. Kéré’s incorporation of local traditions and local people into his designs provides one potential model for future paths that disrupt the shadows of colonial overhang. Kéré “draws on local building traditions, inviting broad participation while making pragmatic use of vernacular materials and modern engineering methods to shape space in beautiful and thought-provoking ways.”³ For his first building, the Gando Primary School in 2001, Kéré listed the Community of Gando as collaborators.⁴ The Gando Primary School “was built by and for the locals, who crafted every part of the establishment by hand, guided by the architect’s ‘inventive forms of indigenous materials and modern engineering’.”⁵ Kéré attributes the participation of the local community to the success of the Gando Primary School: “[t]he success of the project can be attributed to the close involvement of the local population in the building process.”⁶

Although formal colonialism ended more than half a century ago in much of the world, pervasive colonial hangover continues to shape both international relations and relationships within and among countries. Colonial hangover has led to a far-reaching colonial overhang that continues to cast a shadow over people, places, and events. This has been evident recently in global patterns of Covid-19 vaccine exclusion. In March 2022, a trip by Prince William and Kate Middleton to the Caribbean was disrupted amidst contestation about memory, slavery, colonialism, and reparations.

Although technology is often thought to be a mechanism for disruption, digital era circumstances may offer an elusive promise of different future paths. In the digital era, many countries sit at the crossroads of a potential future that will be shaped by digital-era technologies with existing laws and institutions constructed under conditions of colonial and post-colonial

¹ Farah Nayeri. “To Protest Colonialism, He Takes Artifacts From Museums.” New York Times, September 21, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/arts/design/france-museum-quai-branly.html.

² Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy. 2018. The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics, November 2018, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf.

³ Philadelphia Museum of Art, Architecture of Francis Kéré: Building for Community, <https://press.philamuseum.org/creative-africa-the-architecture-of-francis-kere-building-for-community/>.

⁴ <https://www.kerearchitecture.com/work/building/gando-primary-school-3>.

⁵ Christele Harrouk, “Francis Kéré Receives the 2022 Pritzker Architecture Prize,” archdaily, March 15, 2022, <https://www.archdaily.com/978446/francis-kere-receives-the-2022-pritzker-architecture-prize>.

⁶ <https://www.kerearchitecture.com/work/building/gando-primary-school-3>.

authoritarian rule. Digital era technologies thus spread in contexts defined by a collision of the past, the present, and visions of the future that may be preconditioned by what has come before. Colonial hangovers continue to impact the local in many African contexts, in part because of persistent patterns of indiscriminate borrowing. Such borrowings have often internalized the external, all too often in indiscriminate ways. Cut-and-paste borrowing processes have also often failed to take sufficient account of local considerations and local needs.

This event will discuss Olufunmilayo Arewa's 2021 book *Disrupting Africa: Technology, Law, and Development*, winner of the International Studies Association 2022 STAIR (Science, Technology and Art in International Relations) best book award.