

Building Care by Michael Murphy
End Well Symposium, December 6, 2018

Start of Transcript

[Crowd Applauding]

Thank you. She's too kind to me. She's amazing. Isn't Courtney Martin amazing? Oh my gosh.

[Crowd Applauding]

I'm so happy to be here. Thank you. You may be asking why an architect is on this stage to talk about death. Well, for me, to be an architect is to think constantly about death. It's to know that we build today will likely outlive us. It will house a community far in the future when we cannot know, and we'll never know. I know that it's always the opinion of architects. Often architecture is talked about as really a non-essential cost, that architects are driven by their own ego and the construction of monuments to themselves. I gave you some examples {Showing Pictures of Architecture} That they wanna build their own dreams, not our **[00:01:00]** dreams. But what is the cost of not having architecture that's built for us for our families? What is the cost our lives today if we fail to consider the impacts of our future-built impacts, the one we can't fully inhabit?

During my first final exams in architecture school, I always turn face first in this very question. I was up for three nights straight so it's the narrative of architecture working all the time. That kind of phonetic work where I don't even need to check my phone. Can you believe it? When I finally did look after three days, I'd seen that I had missed about 30 phone calls. All of them unanswered and all of them from my mother, with increasing frequency. I know it might be fun. It might not be uncommon but actually I realised it was something really problematic. I kind of collapsed down into the school lobby. I knew that something horrible had happened.

You see it's because a year before, my father had been diagnosed with an extreme form of cancer **[00:02:00]**. And he had been fighting it but it had returned and he had now gone into septic shock. My mother was in an ambulance calling frantically en route to New York City to save his life. "You might not see him again," she said in the first voicemail. "Get here as soon as you can," she said on the second. But what was in voicemail number 20? I thought. Had he died while I had been sitting there being humiliated by a senior group of architects? It was a horrifying thought. And just then, as I was sitting there thinking about this, a family friend showed up right in the lobby. She had also been calling me and she was there to drive me to New York City.

He was alive, but barely. So we left that minute even without packing. When we got to this building, we had heard how famous the cancer care was and we had great hope that he would survive. But as we approached, I couldn't help **[00:03:00]** but feel a sense of doom surround me. Was this impenetrable fortress the final resting places for his life? I thought. We lived off of this hallway for the next three weeks. The hallway that you can't see here but it should be there. And we were here through the holidays at this very time a number of years ago. And I saw his hope waiver.

For exercise, he was told to walk around this interior floor-plate in loops a number of times to keep his blood moving. You'll notice there are no windows to look out of. The walls seem designed to protect against medical equipment banging into them and the floors to make insufferable noises even louder. This building may have prolonged his life but it didn't seem to think about nourishing it. It was, I thought, devoid of design. All of the things that we were

taught about the beauty of architecture. Where was the beauty when my father [00:04:00] faced his own demise? It was, I thought, the cost of not having design. It was the price of indignity.

When my father finally did leave, now with a clear expiration date in the future, I had one thought in my head and that was: If I was to become an architect, I had to design a hospital. I found a chance to do that sooner than I may have even dreamed.

At school I had gone to a lecture by this amazing man, Dr. Paul Farmer, a leading health advocate for the global poor. And in his talk, he said something profound. He said buildings are making people sicker. And for the poorest in the world, it is having epidemic-level problems. “In this hospital, in this hallway, that in South Africa, patients who walked in would say a broken leg, left with extremely drug-resistant strand of tuberculosis, simple. Designs for infection control like airflow and windows, had not been considered,” he told me [00:05:00]. And people had died because of it. “Where are the architects?” He told me. If buildings are making people sicker, where are the architects who can come and make buildings that allow us to heal?

That following summer, a few classmates and I moved into a rural village in a mountainous hillside of Rwanda. For the next year we lived in this town called Butaro and we stayed in a dormitory which as you can see here, had been used as a jail during the genocide. We were there to design a new medical facility with Dr. Farmer and his team. We were young and we were outsiders but we apply ourselves to questions that have been neglected. We’re taken for granted and we search for new answers. Like if hallways are making patients sicker, what if we turn the hospital inside out and make people walk in the exterior? If mechanical systems rarely work, what if we could make a facility that could breathe just through natural ventilation? And what the patient’s experience? Evidence shows this [00:06:00] simple view of a window can radically improve health outcomes so what if we could make a hospital where every patient had a window with a view. Simple, size-specific designs can make a building that heals, we thought.

I found something else and it said that designing a medical facility that heals is one thing, but getting it built is quite another. This is me at that time. When we were building the Butaro hospital, I trained with this amazing man, this brilliant engineer, his name was Bruce Nizeye, and he taught me about construction quite differently than I’d learned in school. When we had to excavate a hill, for example, and a bulldozer’s expensive and hard to get to site, Bruce suggested doing it by hand. Using a process in Rwanda called *Ubudehe* which translates roughly to community works for the community. Hundreds of people came to this site with their own shovels and their own hose, and we excavated that hill in half the time and half the cost of that bulldozer.

Instead of importing furniture, Bruce [00:07:00] started a guild. Bringing in master carpenters in training others in how to make furniture by hand. And on this project site, only 15 years after the horrific Rwandan genocide, Bruce insisted that we hire people from all ethnic backgrounds and that half of them be women. If Dr. Farmer had taught me that buildings can heal, Bruce had taught me that building processes can heal. And not just for those who are sick but for us, the entire community — for all of us. Using this local way of building, even formal and aesthetic decisions can transform people’s lives. In Butaro we chose to use this local volcanic rock, often considered a nuisance by Farmer’s and piled them on the side of the road, sometimes for free. We worked with masons to handcut these stones and form them into the walls of the medical facility and when it began at this very corner, you can see... by the time they wrapped around this whole building, it was so good that cutting these stones and putting them together, they asked if they could take down the original wall and rebuild it. We said if you do [00:08:00], do it quickly [Chuckles]

[Crowd Laughing]

But you can see what is possible. It is a thing of beauty. But I think about this, you know the beauty to me comes in the fact that I know that hands cut each and every one of these stones. They formed them into this thick wall, made only in this place, with rocks from this soil. It made me think, what if every building that we encounter, that we inhabit, we ask not just what its environmental footprint was, but what was the human handprint of those who made it?

We took this local fabrication philosophy and we started a practice asking what more can architecture do? MASS which stands for a Model of Architecture that Serves Society, is a collective of like-minded designers who are committed to the idea that our built environment changes who we are and can improve the lives that we have. We tested this around the world., like in the dense urban condition of post-earthquake Haiti.

After the earthquake in **[00:09:00]** 2011 and subsequent cholera outbreak, emergency shelters were necessary to house hundreds of thousands of displaced people. But before long, these tents revealed deep structural issues. Patients needed shelter but they also needed long term permanent healthcare facilities. A doctor had heard about our work in Rwanda and asked if we could design a new medical centre in Port-au-Prince to help reduce patient-to-doctor infection rates with multi-drug resistant tuberculosis that same disease that we had encountered in Rwanda.

In this centre, where all the patients have the disease, our research showed a different risk pathway. This time not to other patients but to nurses and doctors and janitorial staff. We designed a simple layout of rooms and hallways that allow for an open-air consultation between doctors and patients, really a better scenario for protection. And we added a simple extra door to the bathroom from the hallway which protected cleaning staff from the most infectious patients **[00:10:00]** in their rooms. In this facility, we're seeing much better adherence to the intensive drug regimen required to treat TB. Infection rates are down and personal protective equipment adherence is up. But maybe the most striking outcome is this one. When the clinic was in — was still in these fabric tents, behind barbed wire, patients who took these drugs would often have terrible psychotic reactions like extreme anxiety and even hallucinations. Attempted suicide in this camp was incredibly common. In our new facility, doctors told us how much the design has calmed these patients and how attempted suicide rates had dropped to zero.

Our bodies and our minds are so influenced by the spaces that we design, that we inhabit. If we strive to design for dignity of all individuals, we may find outcomes that we had never dreamed of. And this is the case in Port-au-Prince.

There's another **[00:11:00]** way that architecture can heal and that is in creating spaces for our traumas to find a resting place. Rwanda as a country has committed to this. They have built hundreds of memorials around their country in over 20 years and they tracked genocide ideology and it is radically down, creating more resilience in their communities, reducing the conversations around ethnic difference. But these successful lessons of Rwanda are not shared by all. And of course today, intolerance and ideological divisions are on the rise around our world and our country, dividing our communities making us adversaries.

In London, a new project speaks directly to the need for architecture to fight intolerance to commission for a national new memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The architect Joe McCaslin and landscape architect Lily Jencks, we have designed a memorial that seeks to think about a more tolerant future and reveal the invisible **[00:12:00]** strands that keep us apart.

Our idea begins with the stone. In Jewish tradition, when someone dies, family members will come and put these pebbles, stones, on top of their gravesites. This honours their loved ones. It binds generations together. The word for stone in Hebrew also has rich meaning. Pronounced *eben*, when you split the words, it actually makes up two words: off and bend, which translate to father... and son. The stone's name carries within it one for the most beautiful thoughts and that is continuity between one generation and the next. The centerpiece our project then is a pile of six million stones at the centre of London. One each for the six million Jews murdered during the holocaust. But instead of merely reflecting upon this enormous pile of stone, we actually invite visitors to take a stone [00:13:00], take it home with them. This act and choice to take allows them to participate in the fight against intolerance in all its forms. In this way each stone begins a new journey, its own diaspora into homes and schools, into families, education, and act as a physical reminder of that very pledge. And then eventually after ten years, the pile would diminish, proof, evidence that six million hands have chosen to join this fight and when it disappears, what remains is the space of healing in the centre of London. Inscribed with the traces of these very stones, these traces of very lives.

In America of course we have not committed to be spaces and there's much trauma to overcome. Recently at an opening, two women came up to me, and they shared with me the stories of their own sons who were taken by gun violence. They expressed the need for a space to commemorate [00:14:00] their lives and all those dying of this national epidemic.

I came back completely transformed by this idea. The artist Hank Willis Thomas, a good friend of ours joined us in this venture and we have proposed our newest project. A national memorial for gun violence to gun violence... which seeks to pay tribute to the lives lost and give space for us as a nation to change our narrative around this epidemic. So to begin this memorial, actually begins with the grassroots campaign which we will start in the coming year. We'd create a national conversation asking any victim to reach out to us and if they do, we'll send them a glass box. And in that box, it would contribute an artifact, a token, memory of their loved ones. We would gather those artifacts, and then we will cast them into a permanent single glass brick. The result, then, so we can use those bricks and [00:15:00] and construct these glass houses. These haunting structures of our hopes and our nightmares, structures of vulnerability and fragility, but standing as beacons of memory and as transformation.

In this work, I'm not naive to imagine that memorials will end gun violence, but I have been convinced that without spatializing these figures, without giving them name and location and physical dimension, we cannot fully lay our burdens down. We cannot fully heal from these traumas and without healing, more injustice is certainly in our future.

My father did eventually succumbed to cancer but was a three-month death sentence that become a gift of two and a half years together. Here he's seen a month before his death, he says goodbyes to his closest friends in our home and he spoke about his lifetime's work in civil service... and all of the unfinished projects he was proud to advance into [00:16:00] and to fight for. I felt, standing there, that he was passing the baton; handing me a stone.

Buildings make us think about legacy and future. Our lives, some day we would like to see. In this way, buildings are not simply expressive sculptures, they make visible our personal and our collective aspirations as a society. Architecture is just one remnant we leave behind, it can give us fuel, it can give us hope... that can help us overcome loss and lay our burdens to rest. We can pass the baton. It is architecture that has opened up a way for me to see the world anew. Not as sculptors to genius but as many batons left for us from generation before. It is architecture that everyday allows me to heal from loss.

Thank you very much.

[Crowd Applauding]
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