Maisha Film Lab Headquarters, Kampala, Uganda

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Project data
Project group: Architecture, building and civil engineering
Client: Maisha Foundation
Project background: Private commission
Planned start: January 2018

Summary and appraisal of the project by the jury
The film training center in Kampala aims to empower a new generation of East African filmmakers, enabling them to see and narrate African experiences for a global audience. Maisha – meaning ‘life’ in Kiswahili – is a non-profit organization dedicated to further the as-yet-unknown East African film industry. Grounded in this mission, the building is designed as a series of open classrooms in a natural setting to foster discussion, learning, and contemplation. The building’s reduced material palette, consisting almost entirely of bricks produced from high-quality local clay, establishes an appropriate cinematic framework for a range of spatial sequences – an architecture with cinematic properties.

The jury found the project an impressive gesture of cultural empowerment that is also contextual, well positioned within the landscape and aesthetically inspiring. The program of a film lab was commended for its aspirational objective, namely, to encourage a next generation of East African filmmakers engaged in promoting the moving image as a regional art form in its own right. Though the stepped building and its pictorial series of views and spaces appeared convincing, the jury argued that the proposed brick technology might need to be partially reconsidered in view of more sustainable alternatives, which would be more compatible with the project’s primary objectives. This said, the design brilliantly foregrounds possible forms of interaction between the art of filmmaking and the art of building.

Statements on the sustainability of the project by the author
Ethical standards and social inclusion
Mira Nair created a non-profit organization, the Maisha Foundation, in 2004 to address the absence of a globally viable film industry in East Africa. Mira Nair says, “If we don’t tell our stories, no one else will”, this is the reason why her mission is to empower visionary artists by giving them the tools to tell their stories in a global discourse, and establish the roots of a self-sustaining film industry in East Africa. Currently, all selected participants attend Mabola’s programs free of charge. Maisha Film Lab headquarters is a cultural, environmental and architectural project to see and narrate African experiences for a global audience. It is intended to set a film school and architecture. The project is conceived as a film sequence inspired by the evolution of life, as Maisha means ‘life’ in Kiswahili.

Contextual and aesthetic impact
The Maisha Film Lab headquarters lies on a hill in Kampala. Its proximity to Lake Victoria endows the area with an eye-catching panoramic view. The walking path, which develops in the garden, begins in childhood and unfold throughout different stations in the evolution of the human being until the final transition, from which one can start again. It includes several functional activities of the school and reveals sights of cultural relevance, such as a cinema/theater, created using the slope of the land. The Maisha Film Labs headquarters is the heart of the project. It is a building made entirely of bricks and has a theater/terrace overlooking the landscape. It is the first and last stage of the walking path. Symbolically, it represents the beginning and end of the human adventure.

Resource and environmental performance
In the area of Kampala there is an excellent production of bricks due to the presence of large amounts of clay and to the ease of finding combustible fuel for kilns. The bricks are hand made using kilns made on site. The project is inspired by the shape of the kilns and by the technology of brick. Material produced locally by local craftsmen. Particular attention was paid to environmental sustainability by beginning with the choice of the building materials: bricks. Material produced locally by local craftsmen. A special study has been done on the topic of natural ventilation of the building of Maisha School.

Acknowledgement prize 2017
The new headquarters of Maisha Film Lab wants to synthesize film in cinema and architecture. Maisha is a non-profit training initiative for emerging African filmmakers, founded by Mira Nair in Kampala, Uganda. Maisha Film Gardens is a cultural, environmental and architectural project to see and narrate African experiences for a global audience. It is intended to set a film school and architecture. The project is conceived as a film sequence inspired by the evolution of life, as Maisha means ‘life’ in Kiswahili.