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Gray

in bloom

architecture
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CULTURAL
EXCHANGE:

**ARCHITECT
FRANCIS KÉRÉ**
BRINGS
WEST AFRICA
TO MONTANA

PLUS:

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community centers

Through a shared belief in the importance of community, West African architect Francis Kéré and philanthropists Peter and Cathy Halstead connect two towns nearly 7,000 miles apart.

By RACHEL GALLAHER



Beartooth Portal (2015), designed by
Ensamble Studio at Tippet Rise Art Center. »



IN APRIL, I MADE A TRIP TO A TINY MONTANA TOWN TO VISIT THE TIPPET RISE ART CENTER.

Located on a working 12,000-acre ranch, it is home to some of the most significant monumental sculptures in the contemporary art world, and, as of this summer, a pavilion by the Burkina Faso-born architect Francis Kéré, whose socially driven buildings are designed with the aim to reconnect our increasingly disconnected world.

“At this moment, everywhere around the globe, people have a tendency to cut themselves off from one another,” Kéré says on the phone from Berlin, where his office is based. “The point of the [Tippet Rise] project is to create a space where people can open up to one another.”

Envisioned as a sun-shielding gathering space for visitors (there is very little shade on the grounds at Tippet Rise), the structure is an intellectual and creative collaboration between Kéré and the art center’s founders, Cathy and Peter Halstead. Named *Xylem*, the scientific term for the vascular tissue in a plant that conveys water and dissolved minerals from the roots to the rest of the organism, the structure’s design features a roof inspired by *toguna*, traditional sacred structures in Kéré’s native village of Gando. The project provides an aesthetic and, in a way, spiritual link between rural Montana and rural West Africa, where, with support from the Halsteads, Kéré is simultaneously building a project in his hometown: the Naaba Belem Goumma Secondary School. It is named for the architect’s father and is slated for completion in early 2020. Like almost everything Tippet Rise does, the dual-site project has many layers. At its core is a remarkable partnership between Kéré and the Halsteads, who have chosen to use design not as a means to an end, but as a means for cultural exchange.

To understand the magnitude of what Kéré and the Halsteads are creating together, I had to first understand Tippet Rise. Located near the one-block town of Fishtail (population: fewer than 500), Tippet Rise is a vast swath

I can talk about the blue gradient of the sky and the subtle roll of the landscape surrounding Tippet Rise, but there are no easy words to describe actually being there. Pete Hinmon, Tippet Rise’s managing director of operations and my day-at-the-ranch guide, tells me that first-time visitors are often overcome with emotion. “It’s a place you *feel* as much as you see,” he says during our hour-long drive north from my hotel in Red Lodge. “As easy as it is to put feelings into words, they lose some of their magic if you can’t experience them for yourself.”

As we drive onto the property and crunch up a dusty gravel driveway, the sharp points of Alexander Calder’s *Two Discs* (1965) emerge from the brown, winter-dry hills. The animalistic form of the painted steel sculpture (on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, where it once held pride of place in the institution’s entrance plaza) seems both at home and foreign in this desolate landscape. Hinmon stops the car so I can snap some pictures. I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that I’m in what seems to be the middle of nowhere, viewing work by a 20th-century icon. Five minutes earlier, I’d seen my first marmot, which I somehow mistook for a rabbit. This isn’t your standard art-viewing experience—but it’s exactly what the Halsteads, who spent decades envisioning Tippet Rise before it opened in 2016, want it to be.


Cathy and Peter Halstead have known each other since their teens. Both grew up in New York, with families that were deeply involved in the arts both nationally and abroad.

(Cathy’s father was the late Sidney Frank, who obtained the importing rights to Jägermeister in the 1980s and developed Grey Goose vodka in the late 1990s. Peter’s family has roots in oil and banking.) The two are artists in their own right: Cathy is an abstract painter; Peter has published several volumes of poetry and is an accomplished pianist. They share a passion for all forms of creative expression and a deep curiosity about the human experience. They believe that art is vitally important to life and that everyone should have access to it, not just those who write the big checks. But rather than go the easy route—opening their own white-walled gallery

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of hill-and-valley terrain in south-central Montana. Nine monumental art installations are scattered across the property, along with a dining hall, housing for musicians and artists in residence, and a barn (with a recording studio) that doubles as an indoor performance venue.

or pouring money into another wing at an established institution—the Halsteads dug into their colorful past and realized that some of their most meaningful experiences have occurred in places where art and nature collide. From there, the seeds of Tippet Rise began to sprout. »

A group of four people are standing in front of a large, dark, textured rock formation. From left to right: an older man with a white beard and a tan hat, a man in a blue shirt, a woman in a maroon top, and a woman in a white shirt over a red top. They are all smiling and posing for a photo. The ground is dry and rocky.

FROM LEFT: Peter Halstead, Francis Kéré, Cathy Halstead, and *Xylem* design team member Nina Tescari stand at the base of *Inverted Portal* (2015), designed by Ensamble Studio.



Renderings of *Xylem*, the Kéré-designed pavilion slated for completion this summer at Tippet Rise.

In 2007, the couple started searching for the land that would become Tippet Rise. “We looked in California, Hawaii, France, New Mexico, Colorado—so many places,” Cathy says by phone from Oahu of the three-year-long search. “We nearly bought a place in Colorado, but then one day Peter woke up and said, ‘Before we buy this land, we should look in Montana.’” The couple had heard about the little resort town of Red Lodge from an acquaintance and decided it was worth checking out. Peter flew in first, looked at every ranch in every corner of the state, and two weeks later called Cathy and said, “I think we found it.”

Today the land around Tippet Rise remains mostly untouched, and the ranch itself is partly in conservation, which means that they couldn’t even put in asphalt roads (all roads are gravel). The rest of the property is protected by the ethos of the Halsteads themselves. Aside from the nine artworks (in addition to Calder, there are pieces by Mark di Suvero, Ensemble Studio, Stephen Talasnik, and Patrick Dougherty—and yes, I noted the dearth of female sculptors in the mix), the Olivier Music Barn is the most-visited spot on the ranch. A 150-seat concert hall designed by Wyoming-based architect Laura Viklund, the space is meant to give visitors (each of whom procures \$15 tickets through a lottery system months in advance) close-up access to musicians from around the world. On certain days, guests are treated to live performances outdoors at the foot of a sculpture, an endeavor that can involve several staffers hauling a grand piano up a gravel trail on a padded dolly.

“There are no marked seats, no stage. The musicians are on the same level as you,” Peter says of the concerts. “One of our goals [with Tippet Rise] was to do everything right that we thought was being done wrong with classical music, and a lot of that has to do with access.” They took a similar approach with the sculptures, which are reachable via bike, hiking trails, and, until recently, the ranch’s two zero-emission passenger vans, which took visitors on tours. (According to Cathy, they had to retire the vans in favor of vehicles with all-wheel drive). Tippet Rise caps visitor numbers at around 200 per day (an additional 450 join for weekend concerts) to give each guest the most meaningful experience possible.

After leaving the ranch, I decide the Halsteads are right: something powerful *does* happen when you take art out of the gallery. The juxtaposition of highbrow art and natural landscape (especially the “ugly” parts, such as dirt, dead grass, and deer excrement) forces you to look at the work differently than you might while standing at an opening with a glass of champagne. The deep silence, the whip of the wind—these elements remind us of the fragility of humanity in the face of nature. The experience is different for each person who looks up at the sculptures, but a sense of community ties together the thousands of visitors who travel to Tippet Rise each year.

It was a temporary installation at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark that first drew the Halsteads to Francis Kéré’s work. For the 2015 exhibition *AFRICA: Architecture, Culture and Identity*, Kéré created a canopy and sitting area using bundles of logs, drawing upon the traditional architectural forms and practices of West Africa. The bundles, each between 2 and 2.5 feet across, hung at slightly different heights, bringing a sense of texture to the installation and creating varying patterns of light throughout the day. The Halsteads envisioned a similar pavilion at Tippet Rise: a spot that would provide shade on the hottest summer days and serve as a place for guests to gather after tours and concerts to talk about what they had seen and heard.

They contacted Kéré in mid-2017, and the architect made his first trip to Tippet Rise in July of that year. He returned four times over the next two years in order to understand the ranch in all its seasons, and to see how the landscape and light around the pavilion’s site—situated between the Olivier Music Barn and Dougherty’s *Daydreams* installation—change with the weather. When

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—FRANCIS KÉRÉ, ARCHITECT

complete, *Xylem*, located slightly downhill from the main road, campus, and walking path, will be partially visible to approaching visitors from the path, revealing itself gradually as they move toward the structure. The first glimpse is of its roof, made of large bundles of lodgepole pine and ponderosa pine that were standing dead, most likely killed by the mountain pine beetle. “There is a hide-and-seek element,” Kéré says of the pavilion. “Approaching it will be a little experience in itself because the perspective changes as you get closer.”

“I was inspired by *toguna*,” the architect continues, “which is an important landmark in my village. It is a gathering space where people will join together to hold a meeting or celebration. It’s a place that you can go and you know you will always find other people there.” In addition to *toguna*, Kéré’s pavilion was informed by a decades-old drawing of Cathy’s he had seen during an early visit. It depicted abstract organic forms similar to microbes or paramecia, shapes the architect used not only in the undulating oval roof of the pavilion, but also in the individual bundles of logs that make up the entire »



Villagers building the Naaba Belem
Goumma Secondary School in Gando,
Burkina Faso.



structure. With a view of the Beartooth Mountains and the background babble of the nearby South Grove Creek, *Xylem* will be the ideal place for a contemplative stop at the end of a day spent out on the ranch.

Early in the design process, as the Halsteads and their architect were getting to know each other, the couple flipped the script and asked Kéré what *they* could do for *him*. The architect told them about the Kéré Foundation, which is dedicated to improving the lives of people in Gando. A grant from the Tippet Rise Fund of the Sidney E. Frank Foundation will fund the completion of the seven classrooms remaining of the Naaba Belem Goumma school complex, a project underway since 2010 that currently consists of two completed buildings used by around 300 students. Once the supplementary buildings are complete, the school will serve 1,000 children.

An important aspect for both Kéré and the Halsteads is that both projects are being created for and by the communities in which they're located—an effort that links two towns that share more than just remote locations and minimal populations. “In Gando, the villagers are part of the building process, and we got the locals in Fishtail involved as well,” Kéré says. “Both buildings are spaces where people can access knowledge, music, art, and poetry, and both communities are so enthusiastic about helping and learning more about each other.” Kéré brings pictures from Montana (and other parts of the United States) back to Gando, sharing them with the village by projecting the images on a screen in one of the school buildings. “You can see the excitement in the children’s eyes when they see pictures from America,” he says. “It’s opening a new world to them.”

The idea of community is at the heart of Kéré’s work. Growing up, he was the first son of the head of his village, and his father allowed him the rare opportunity to attend school—mainly so the young Francis could translate his letters. No school existed in Gando at the time, so Kéré was sent to live with his uncle in the eastern city of Tenkodogo to pursue an education. After secondary school, he became a carpenter and received a scholarship for an apprenticeship that brought him to Germany, where he eventually studied architecture at the Technische Universität in Berlin.

Driven by a hunger to give back to both his family and his village, Kéré set up what is now the aforementioned Kéré Foundation (formerly Schulbausteine für Gando e.V., or School Building Blocks for Gando) while still a student. The first project it undertook was fundraising for construction of the Gando Primary School, which opened in 2001. By making the privilege of education Kéré received as a child accessible and equitable for others, the architect is setting up future generations with the knowledge they need to thrive in an ever more competitive world. “My work always comes back to people,” he says. “My school in Gando is more than just

a school. It’s become a place where people from the village gather and talk and exchange ideas. It’s wonderful to think that a building can have that kind of power.”

Kéré founded his eponymous firm, Kéré Architecture, in 2005 in Berlin, and over the past 15 years, he’s gained attention for a range of projects, including the Burkina Faso National Assembly, a 2017 installation at the Serpentine Pavilion in London’s Kensington Gardens, and this year’s much-Instagrammed *Sarbalé Ke* installation at Coachella. The latter, a cluster of hollow conical towers made from multicolored triangular wooden panels, was a popular gathering spot during the two-weekend April music festival.

On the day of my visit, *Xylem* was still under construction, and staff members were waiting for a crane to arrive and lift the hexagonal steel framework of the roof into place. Even in its nascent stage, though, surrounded by bare birch trees and mounds of displaced dirt, the site holds a sense of promise, and not just in anticipation of a Kéré-designed structure.

Over in Gando, the remaining seven classrooms are expected to be completed in January 2020. The next steps will be an extensive reforestation and landscaping effort around the campus, introducing trees and vegetation that, in time, will make the surrounding soil more resilient against desertification. Instead of building the school brick by brick, Kéré—who notably reverse-engineered much of his architectural education, as the building techniques he’d learned at university were optimal only for northern climates and assumed practitioners had access to complex machinery—developed an efficient construction technique tailored to the area. Both the existing and the forthcoming schools are being constructed using clay and a small amount of cement, which are poured directly into molds to create the buildings’ walls. The process and the materials are well suited to the West African climate.

“Francis cares so much about Gando, and we feel the same way about Fishtail,” Peter says. “The world is polarized right now, but there are so many good people who share the same values—family, community, friendship, art—regardless of where they are living.”

Perhaps that’s the reason so many people are eager to make the pilgrimage to Tippet Rise. They can’t help but feel connected to a larger sense of humanity while looking out at a landscape that hasn’t changed much in thousands of years, viewing breathtaking manmade work that suggests a progression of culture amid the unknowable, untamable forces of nature. This sense of connection—to both the land and one another—becomes infinitely more meaningful in the face of increasing political and environmental turmoil. It is an idea that is perfectly suited to discussion in the shade of *Xylem*’s log-bundled roof as the sun sinks low behind the peaks of the Beartooth Mountains. ✱