

CULTURE



Francis Kéré in the shade of Xylem, the pavilion he built at the Tippet Rise Art Center in Montana.

Back to the Land Architect Francis Kéré has earned global renown for projects in his native Burkina Faso. Now he's brought his vision for hyperlocal, low-tech buildings to America.

by Justin Davidson. Photographs by Benjamin Rasmussen

MOST CELEBRITY ARCHITECTS get that way by designing buildings in populous cities where millions can see and touch them. Francis Kéré has become famous for a cluster of schools and social centers in the Burkina Faso village of Gando, population 5,000, where he grew up. His innovative use of basic materials and the local workforce earned him international attention. Now he has built his first permanent structure in the United States, a serene wooden pavilion nestled on a 12,000-acre ranch in Montana, almost 70 miles from Billings.

It's not just any ranch, though: Opened in 2016 by the arts-besotted philanthropists Peter and Cathy Halstead, Tippet Rise is a big-sky sculpture park, where each house-sized work occupies its own ridge or coulee, out of sight of all the others. The park also has a classical music performance center with a staggering collection of Steinways. It draws a roster

of world-class chamber musicians, and tickets are notoriously hard to score.

Early one morning this summer, Kéré sat in the pavilion's dappled shade, beneath bundles of upright lodgepole and ponderosa pine logs that had been suspended overhead like organ pipes—an upside-down topography reminiscent of the hills all around. Running his hand along an undulating bench, fashioned from the same kind of logs, he explained how he achieved such rare and exquisite roughness. He had sent drawings from his studio in Berlin. To fulfill the design, woodworkers figured out how to cut, sort, and secure standing dead trees from the slopes near Yellowstone National Park. Kéré flew in from time to time to meet with Chris Gunn, a laconic builder in Cody, Wyoming. The two had hit it off instantly. "The chemistry was great because I was trained as a carpenter, so we could just talk," Kéré says.

At 54, Kéré darts about like a perpetual optimism machine, charming cowboys and billionaires, wearing down skeptics, and accumulating awards. Spend an hour talking to him, and you'll see the mixture of talent, relentlessness, and effervescence that lifted him to the top of his profession. He has applied those qualities to promote the beauties of low-tech architecture, built by hand and ventilated by nature.

The new pavilion, called Xylem, is a sort of sheltering tree, like the one that anchored social life in Gando when he was growing up—or like the steel-and-wood arbor he designed in 2017 for the temporary Serpentine Pavilion in London's Hyde Park. For Kéré, architecture is an extension of the natural world, best expressed in local resources like earth and wood.

Kéré's life story has an almost mythological arc. He grew up in a village with no power, running water, roads, or schools.

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The canopy and benches of Xylem were fashioned out of standing dead trees in Yellowstone National Park.

Two of Kéré's buildings in Burkina Faso: The Lycée Schorge secondary school in Koudougou (top) and the Surgical Clinic and Health Center in Léo.



(CONTINUED FROM P. 96) His face bears a pattern of ritual scarring he received at age five. When he was seven, his illiterate father, the village chief, sent him off to school—an unheard-of eccentricity in 1970s Gando. A decade later, Kéré won a German government scholarship to train in Berlin as a development aid worker. He took advantage of the state's largesse to get a high school diploma. "I would wake up very early to deliver newspapers, work as a carpenter during the day, go to school at 6 P.M., and stay until ten," he says. "It was a funny time."

Later, he studied architecture at Berlin's Technical University, where his final project was a primary school in Gando that he financed by begging his friends for a few deutsche marks here and there. (Fundraising has gotten easier: The Halsteads, who commissioned Xylem for

Tippet Rise, volunteered to pay for a new Gando high school, which will be named for Kéré's father.)

At first, his plans for the primary school disappointed the villagers back home. He wanted to build with clay bricks—the same material used in their own meager huts—but they were hoping for something modern, clean, and permanent. Kéré showed them that mixing local clay with 7 percent cement and compressing the compound would create indestructible blocks.

One morning after a torrential rainstorm, villagers converged to console him for what they assumed would be a muddy mess. They were thunderstruck to find the site unharmed. Such vindication turned him from a prodigal son to a kind of wizard.

Kéré has been lionized for leveraging his designs to strengthen community

and for valuing traditional practices. He employs only a dozen architects in his Berlin office, but relies on a diffuse web of workshops in Burkina Faso, where a seemingly unlimited supply of low-cost laborers can acquire marketable construction skills through his trainee program.

In a 2013 TED Talk, he described how workers finish a floor made of a composite of clay and stones: First a platoon of men thump it with heavy mallets to even the surface, then a wave of women, bent at the waist, sprinkle it with water and beat it with wooden paddles. Finally, a third crew rubs the floor with rocks until they get a surface that, as Kéré puts it, is "very fine, like a baby's bottom."

It's an approach that doesn't travel well to the urbanized global north. "It's a romantic idea to put something like this in a city," he acknowledges. "However much mud I use, architecture is still expensive." He's not one to let a little dreaminess get in the way of results, however, even in the pragmatic country he now calls home. At the moment he's designing a high-rise alumni welcome center for the Munich Technical University, where he teaches. The project is in the early stages, so he's short on technical details. But he knows exactly the kind of personality he wants it to have, and he could practically be describing himself.

"I want it to be open, warm, and generous," he says. "It's not tall, but you will see it from very far away."

