

shadows & MOVEMENT

A conversation with Nadir Tharani



Art and Architecture set off by an idea at conceptual stage
Crab tables (left) and Sea shells on building

Comfort Badaru: As an artist and an architect, how would you describe the discipline of art and that of architecture? Would you say that they are similar?

Nadir Tharani: I think they are similar and dissimilar though they are very specific practices. The product is very different and responds to different conditions. The artwork is usually contained within a built environment or a controlled environment (I am here thinking of sculpture set in landscape). A building, the product of architectural design, responds to the sun, the prevailing breeze, the site, and the sense of a 'place' – the immediate environment and culture. In painting, the kind of painting that I do, there is a need for constant decision making in a short span of time. As I wrote in the Positions of Power catalogue:

"All the preparation, the thought, the sketching, all this fades into the background.

The organisation or composition, the mark here or there, burnt sienna or

sepia, coarse stroke or the blending, gestural or reticent, all this has its intrinsic logic which requires much effort to discern during the act of marking; & this inevitability can only be revealed during the act of making." Even painting a palm requires much concentration; it's tiring. On the other hand, the architectural design process can be drawn out, though when it comes to sculpture or installations, there are similarities with the architectural process. Perhaps there are also similarities in perception; one moves round a sculpture and often one views a building from different sides.

The design process can also be set off at the conceptual stage by an idea eg sand crabs, or a bird or a sea shell – at least that's how I work sometimes; art does the same.

CB: Do you think art can be manipulated to create architecture? And is the reverse possible?

NT: Some artists like James Turrell create space using light. The reverse is difficult but architects also manipulate

space using light or creating shadows to manipulate the built form. With our strong sunlight, shadows are an essential design element, a layer that moves with the sun, creating angular or curved shadows depending on the surface.

Movement is also an essential element of how to building is perceived – just as in sculpture. I find it hard to do a building that looks the same on all sides. The facades of the apartments at UN Road in Dar es salaam responds to different external conditions and intentions and so it changes as one moves down the road. The TCAA building looks slim as you approach it and then it has a formal, symmetrical, wide frontage when you get to the front.

CB: How do people in the East African context relate to art and/or architecture? Is there any particular reason for this eg historical, cultural background?

NT: I think they treat them as separate practices, like most people around the world. They probably

Apartments on UN road in Dar es Salaam



change gear, their perceptible matrix, when they approach art or architecture through the boundaries between art and architecture are often blurred when it comes to installations.

CB: In practice, how is your approach as an artist reflected in your architectural profession? With reference to some projects that you have done, how would you translate the topic of art as part of architecture?

NT: As I said before, they are different practices but I am sure that there are crossovers that I am unaware of. I mean I can be loose with the design – and this is a similarity with art. I am fond of the thick yellow light when the sun sets – so the west façade of a house was manipulated to have a clerestory, the light was then bounced within the building so that the wall below lit up



for a few minutes with this light. Or the shape of openings in a wall that stem from birds and butterflies. The roundabout structure, 'The Sun also Moves', could be considered both architecture and an art installation: the wall spiraled down to reveal a void contrary to the common tendency to insert an object in the centre. One could see to the other side when the slits coincided as one moved round. The act of moving round a circle was essential to the manifestation of this structure. The boundary wall (which slits for the sentry to ensure the mirrors stay) for the Aga Khan Primary school, is an architectural element but it is playful... The installations for the Commonwealth Institute for two consecutive music festivals where painted poles defined the entry and the festival area could be also loosely defined as both. The client

had wanted a temporary 'building', but the budget restricted it to a minimal 'structure'.

I thought of them as a response to a context and the budget and did not really decide from the outset whether it was architecture or art.

CB: Many architects truly get to realize their first buildings after many many years of practice. This is something that often comes with experience and the building reflects what the architect really aims at achieving through his profession. Le Corbusier realized his first at aged 40, with his 1923 villa la roche in Paris. Your thesis was "Towards National Architecture", do you think you have managed to achieve what you wanted after many years of practice?

NT: I do not think there is a 'National Architecture' anymore; it was a product of its time, of the 70s – most countries saw and even critics had categories such as 'Brazilian Architecture'.

Now, I would say there is an architecture of the place, and if one responds to the context appropriately (and there are many ways), it will belong there.

The thesis looked at shaping the building form to minimise solar gain and increase air movement, the form(s) having a relation to the various building traditions of Tanzania. It also posited the way we move, walk, as being an integral part of the design. These thoughts still underpin

Movement aviation house



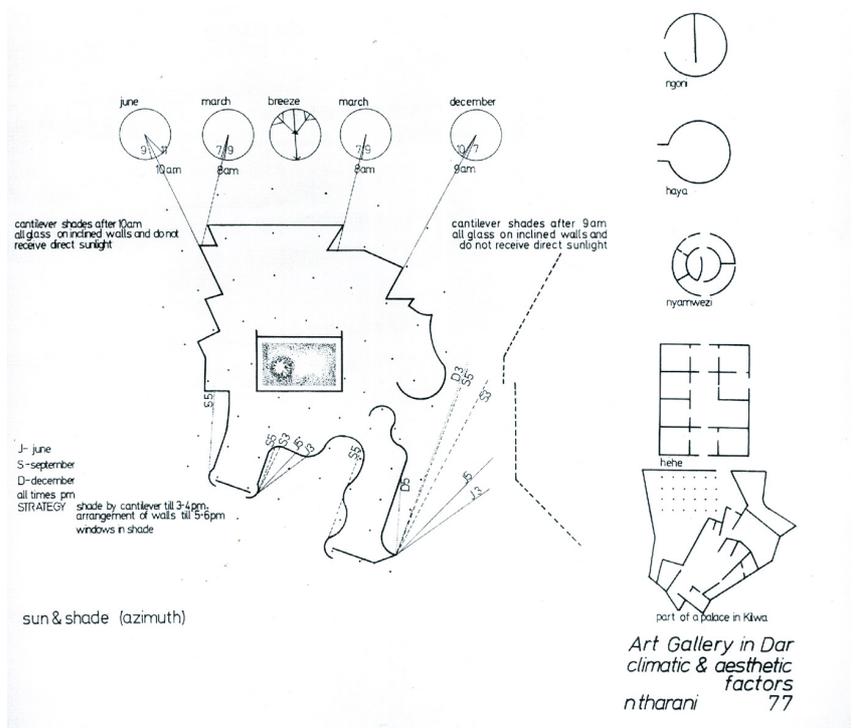


Shadows : Residential house and the MTU building in Mwanza

most of the architectural design; the corridor outside the Aga Khan Primary School expands in front of the library door to allow for the class to gather before entering. Or the 'bites' or the 'cut outs' in a facade which allow the breeze not only to penetrate deeper within a building but, at the same time, increase the air velocity.

...there is an architecture of the place...

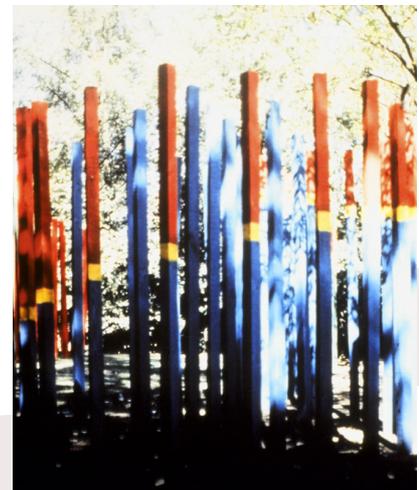
The laboratory at NIMR in Mwanza (and the MITU building on the same time) acknowledge Sukuma architecture and the people there did see this affinity. The curves of the house in Msasani Village, which have a functional purpose, also stem from similar engagement with our historical forms. In a sense its ingrained now so I design without explicitly rationalizing the form.▲



This is project: art gallery in Dar es Salaam



Shadows house



Roundabout structure, Aga Khan primary school boundary wall & Commonwealth institute