



**ANNE FEENSTRA
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The Global Award has been presented several times to architects from emerging countries with a deep understanding of globalisation (Wang Shu, B. Jain, F. Kéré...). “We are globalisation!” wrote the US analyst Thomas Friedman in 2005 in a book¹ which was brilliant but western-centred to the point of being *friendly* towards the talents emerging from the South. These architects from the “new New World” are showing us that globalisation is far more complex than 20th century westernisation. Examine how the African Kéré lines up western ecology, a very real local experience of dwindling resources, European architecture and African economic solidarity on the sands of Gando² before adapting the act of combining this know-how to each project. Such critical synthesis is new – a unique skill for architects with two cultures. And it creates an architecture which is as rooted as it is universal.

Could the future belong to these architects with more than one culture, even if those architects with a single culture own the dominant one? Perhaps Anne Feenstra’s story is a sign of the times. Like Laurie Baker, he is a western architect who turned towards another culture, leaving Europe in order to question the very basis of his vocation. A Dutchman, he opened his office AFIR in Kabul in 2004 and since 2009 he has also been working in Delhi where he established Arch i, a platform for design research, architecture and debate.

London - Kabul, a one-way ticket?

“After my Masters studies at Delft, I wanted to build and join a ‘design & build firm’ to understand the building process better. When William Alsop asked me in 1999 to come to London, his practice had nearly 40 people. I enjoyed the work: Will is a great expressive, sculptural architect. We won the Stirling Prize for the Peckham Library and the competition for the Rotterdam Central Station Masterplan, we grew to over 100 people. Bigger, but I was not sure if it was better. I became an

Associate and accepted a post at the Academy of Architecture in Groningen. I liked that. But many architects were becoming stars; more and more exclusive. Like a luxury brand. I did not like that. Time to start something completely new; try to bring design closer to people, work with them and realise architecture together. After my first visit to Kabul in August 2004, I wanted to see more of the country, its people, to discover this ancient culture. I committed myself to teaching at Kabul University. Working on small residential projects, slowly I built up a team that not only could design, but could also get it built.”³

With his 10-p team in India, he just completed a Learning Centre in Kashmir on 4200 m. altitude and construction work of a community based project is going on in Sikkim. AFIR now has a team of 17, three of whom are based in Kholm, in the far North. The conditions are challenging: “Afghanistan is re-defining itself in a search for its own cultural identity. After 30 years of invasions, wars and conflicts, architecture is an important part of the reflection of that identity. The people, the children, the different communities are the most valuable stakeholders in this process. They have to be part of the re-definition of the culture. They need to be involved and in this way ownership of the physical output is being created from ‘the inside’. Not via one guru master architect.”³

AFIR were asked in 2006 to design the Visitor Centre and Gate House within a holistic vision for the first National Park. More projects of national importance followed. And other projects of national importance which, despite having no more resources than others, are central to the reconstruction process. Faced with such expectations, “we practice an open design process in which listening and the sharing of ideas becomes the starting point, instead of dictatorial commercial clients who are more interested in a ‘marketing-leaflet-billboard-building’. The open process continues during the execution and does not end with the handing over of the final design drawings to a randomly selected mediocre construction company. In this intense process, space for the use of traditional organic building materials, passive solar energy principles and contemporary graphics (to name a few) becomes available and it will be possible to include these in a new sustainable architecture”³

Emergency architecture / slow architecture

The European architect in Kabul came to the notice of Unicef in 2008 for its programme of Maternity Waiting Homes. Feenstra's approach was to become an anthropologist: "It is an amazing project that started with workshops to actually define the idea, concept and typology. It was commissioned by the Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan and Unicef as the maternal and child mortality rates are shockingly high. As the typology of MWH did not exist for Afghanistan, we developed it first with a large group of midwives, specialists etc. After that we worked for 5 MWH's⁴. Each design is different as the climates of the places are very different. Bamyan has an altitude of 2,500m and a metre of snow, while Kandahar and Mehtar Lam are very hot in summer. For Herat we used yellow bricks, in Bamyan we used a local stone and a special plaster pattern."³

Faced with such urgency, Anne Feenstra explains his step-by-step approach: "Working a lot with communities and people, we do about 70% of our projects in Afghanistan and all our work in India is without a building contractor. Just client, architect, crafts people and skilled and unskilled labour. Good for the result, local ownership, quality of the work and good fun. I believe that one can see in a building if the architect and builders enjoyed building it. Definitely SLOW architecture works well and lasts longer."³

"How long are you going to stay?"

Anne Feenstra has heard this question countless times in the villages of Afghanistan. It highlights the huge scepticism about western experts who come and build hastily and not particularly well attempting to neither use the know-how nor embed the skills and experience from the local population.

He is still working on renovations – of the National Museum in Kabul and also the Bagh-e Jahan Nama Palace at Kholm which has been awaiting repair since the Russians left. AFIR is busy rediscovering Pakhsa techniques and training local craftsmen in situ. This is a long-term approach which embodies Feenstra's vision of sustainable architecture: local people have the best understanding of their climate and resources so there is no substitute for working with them.

MH Contal

Born in Holland in 1967, Anne Feenstra graduated from the T.U. Delft in 1993. He divided his time between office and the building site and built a dozen projects. In 1999, he joined William Alsop in London. In 2004, he left to live in Kabul in Afghanistan, teaching architecture at the University and establishing the office AFIR in 2004. In 2008, he opened a second office in Kholm, to work on the restoration of Bagh-e-Jehaan Nama palace and its gardens, in the North of Afghanistan. Feenstra was recruited in 2009 by the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi (India) where he teaches to this day. In 2009 he established Arch i -exploring design-, a platform and design centre for research, architecture and debate in an attempt to realign the urban and architectural debates on the sub-continent. DELHi2050 a brainchild of his and is an unique process to envisage more sustainable urban environments for the capital of India.



1. In *The World is Flat, A Brief History of the Twentieth Century* Thomas Friedman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005

2. Francis Diébédo Kéré, Global Award 2009, lives in Berlin but his principal country of activity is Burkina Faso, where he builds facilities financed by the NGO Schulbausteine für Gando. The village of Gando is the focus of his experiments; see *Sustainable Design II - Portrait of Francis Kéré*, MH Contal and J. Revedin, Éditions Actes Sud, 2011

3. Interview of Anne Feenstra by MH Contal, 21-2-2012

4. Bamyan, Herat, Faizabad, Mehtar Lam and Kandahar