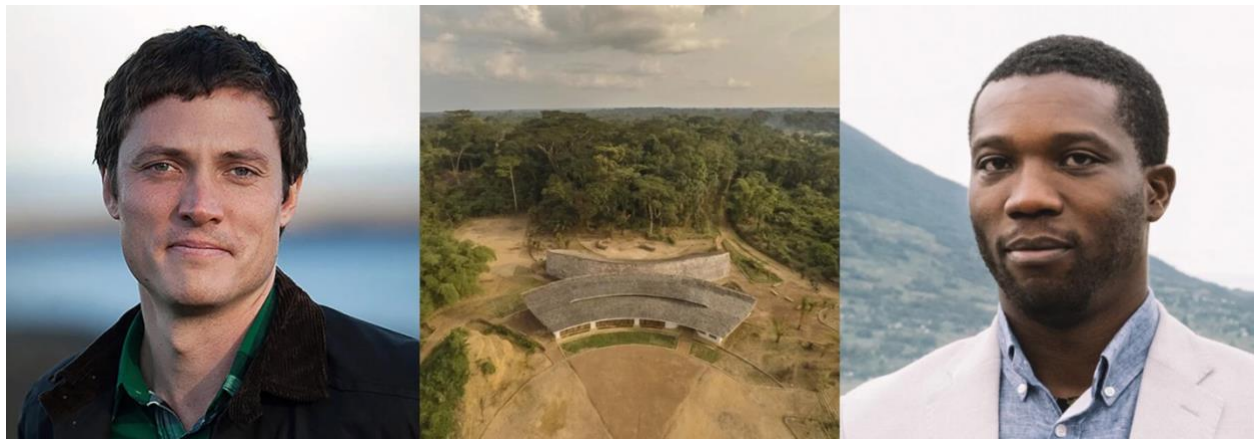


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MASS Design Group on Purposeful, hopeful, and Healing Architecture for Friedman Benda's 'Design in Dialogue'

By Nina Azzarello
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on april 1, 2020, new york gallery **friedman benda** initiated a series of online interviews aimed at connecting individuals across the world with leading voices in the creative field. **design in dialogue** is a conversational program hosted alternately by curator and historian **glenn adamson** and designer **stephen burks** that engages with designers, makers, critics, and curators as they reflect on their careers and creative processes. against the backdrop of COVID-19 and global lockdowns, the conversations are held virtually on zoom for 1 hour for anyone in the world to tune in to, and include a participatory Q&A with the audience in attendance. friedman benda has since presented more than 90 episodes, and will continue with a lineup of future guests, each offering unparalleled insight into the sensibilities, musings, and memories of today's creative protagonists. **see our recent feature of philippe starck's personal profession on democracy and dematerialization, and humberto campana on materials and making.**

on march 3, 2021, *design in dialogue* welcomed **MASS design group**, the non-profit architectural practice founded by michael murphy in 2008 under the

Nina Azzarello, "Philippe Starck's Personal Profession on Democracy + Dematerialization for Friedman Benda's 'Design in Dialogue'," *designboom*, March 2, 2021.

fundamental notion, ‘can buildings heal?’. now a collaborative of more than 140 architects, designers, planners, and strategists, with offices in boston and kigali, rwanda they define their mission as researching, building, and advocating for architecture that promotes justice and human dignity. in a wide-ranging and poignant conversation with stephen burks, michael murphy and managing director christian benimana spoke about how the studio develops and implements a shared vision that is purposeful, hopeful, and healing.

watch the full video interview at the top of the page and stay tuned as designboom continues to share *design in dialogue features*. see all past episodes — and RSVP for upcoming ones — [here](#).



MASS design group worked with *partners in health* on the 'butaro hospital' in rwanda | more on designboom [here](#). image © [iwan baan](#)

MASS design group — an acronym which stands for *model of architecture that serves society* — has defined a practice centered on the notion of service in relationship to the built environment. the team believes that the design of space is inherently a part of conversations related to society, the environment, and justice. *‘we’ve come to this through the philosophy that design decisions aren’t neutral decisions,’* michael murphy, founding principal and executive director of MASS design group, explains. *‘they’re always affecting and shaping our lives. there’s an active debate about this idea within design circles about whether it should, or could. I think that conversation is important to talk about — at what level, at what frame, at what intensity*

is architecture and design hurting or healing us? I think the idea is that it isn't ever neutrally a place where people or an organization can sit and things happen — it's shaping us. I think this was a provocation around 12-15 years ago — not ours alone, we stand on the shoulders of so many others who have made this claim for generations, going all the way back to William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement who would advocate for this — but I think now, in the middle of this pandemic where all of us are in the prisons of our own homes, or closed in our apartments, wondering whether we should open the door to the hallway or the window to the outside, here is a paradigmatic example of how the spaces around us are shaping our daily lives and our ability to get access to what we might call a fundamental human right — the right to breathe. Access to breath, uncontaminated air, is quite possibly the dominant driver of all space decisions.'



MASS design group used materials from Congolese jungle to build 'Ilima School' | more on designboom [here](#). Image courtesy of MASS design group and African Wildlife Foundation

in its mission to research, build, and advocate for architecture that promotes justice and human dignity, MASS design group highlights the importance of working with partners, and the change in dynamics that introduces when working in resource-limited settings. for the 'Butaro Hospital' in Rwanda, MASS design group worked with partners in health to bring high-quality healthcare to the country's poorest regions. *'many challenges faced by our profession — structural challenges to our being that we need to wrestle with to be able to address these challenges — are made worse when we work in resource-limited settings like Rwanda,'* explains Christian Benimana, senior principal and managing director of MASS design group. *'sometimes the relationship develops in situations where we're asked to intervene, and are confronted by the reality that there's not enough. therefore you have to prioritize and choose. the idea of partnerships is that they change things a little bit — if it's a partnership, we need*

to figure out the best thing to do first, and the right partners to be at the table to achieve what we're trying to do. this first project in rwanda, the 'butaro hospital', was a perfect demonstration of what the right partnerships can achieve. it forces us to come up with more inventive solutions to help answer some of these bigger questions — innovation is not limited to where resources are.'



construction of 'ilima school' was carried out by community members | more on designboom [here](#). image courtesy of MASS design group and african wildlife foundation

the development of 'butaro hospital' in rwanda — which went on to form a healthcare campus including doctor's housing — became a starting point for MASS design group's focus on building new spaces and retrofitting existing ones to promote infection control, and provide the best patient care possible. *'that research has driven us to completely rethink all buildings from that point on,' murphy shares. 'and to today, be very present in thinking about COVID response and retrofits to the spaces around us. that very same reach has been a driving philosophy about the way buildings affect our health, our behavior, and how we can make simple calibrations to change that.'*

MASS design group has dedicated resources to form a COVID-19 design response team, responding to partner needs and sharing strategies and rules of thumb to keep in mind when retrofitting different types of spaces for infection control. engagements with key thought leaders and partners in design and healthcare

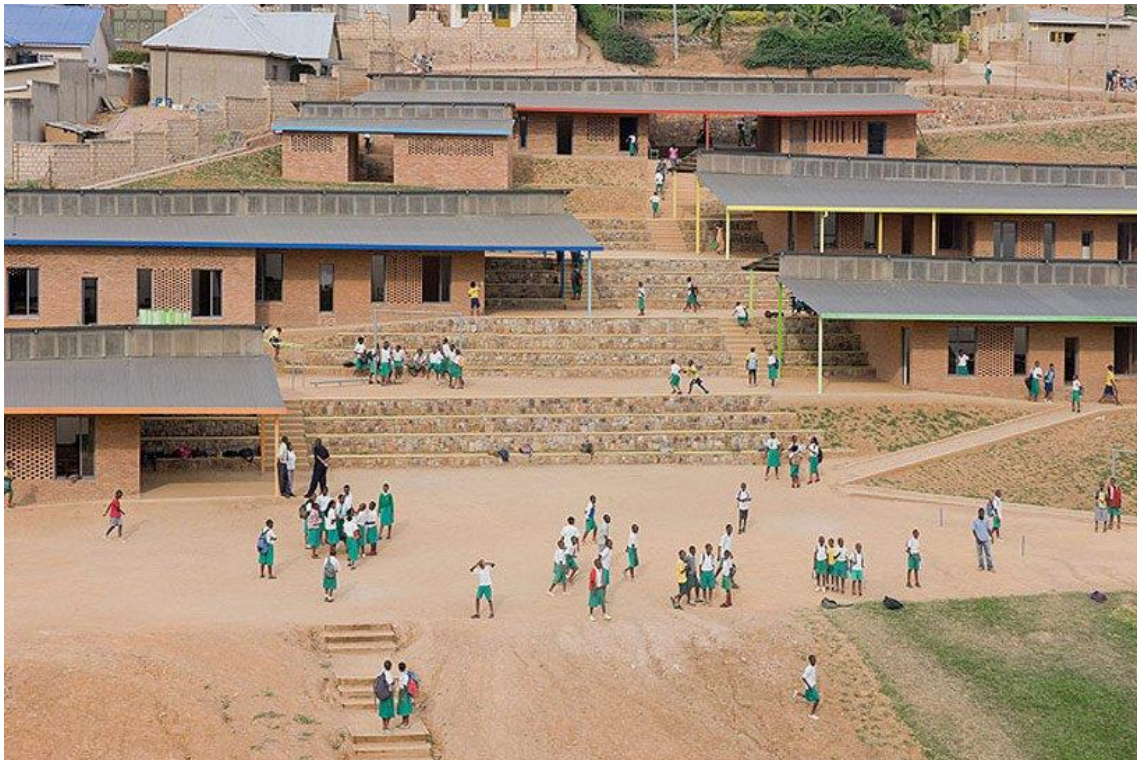
have driven a range of resource materials, made public to the community to discover [here](#).



MASS design group's 'butaro doctor's housing' is embedded in the rwandan hillside | more on [designboom](#) [here](#). image © [iwan baan](#)

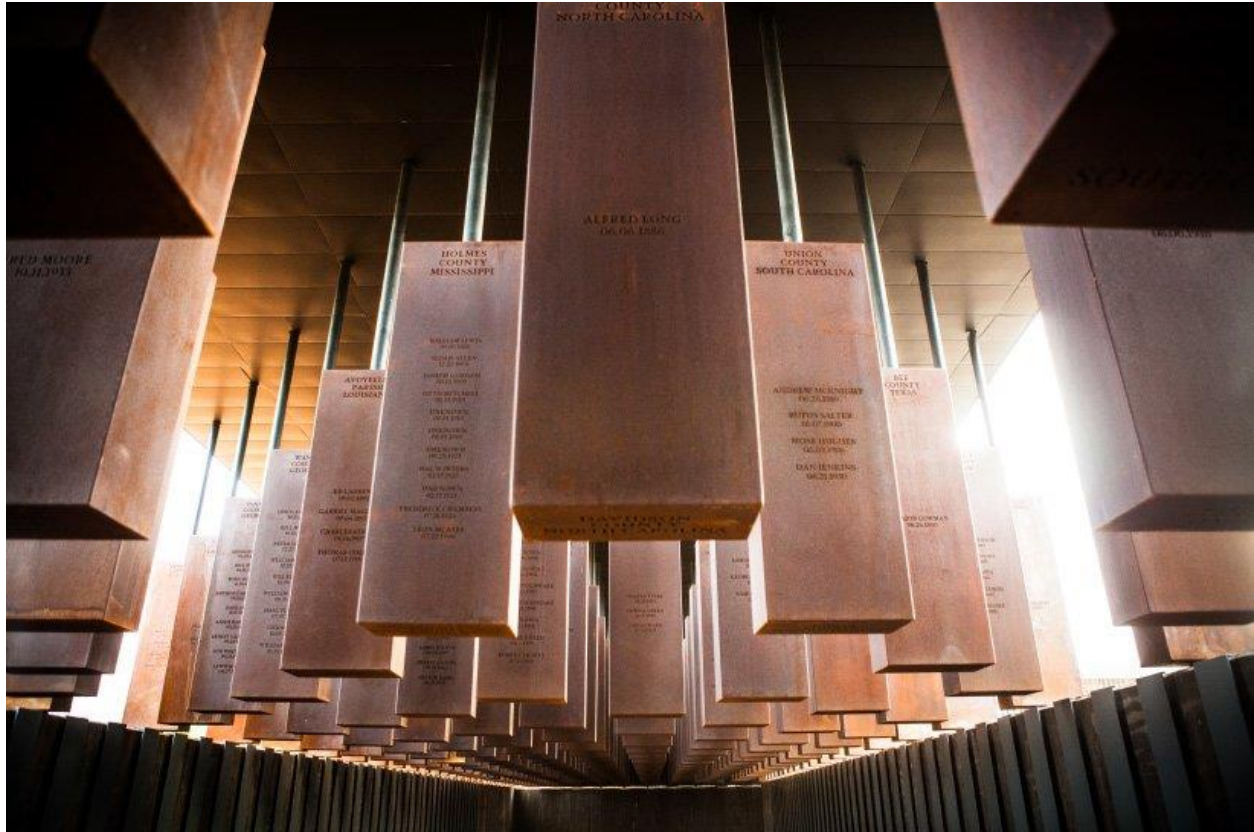


detail of the volcanic rock masonry on 'butaro doctor's housing' | more on designboom [here](#)
image © MASS design group



the 'umubanu primary school', an educational complex by MASS design group in kigali | more on designboom [here](#). image © [iwan baan](#)

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the national memorial for peace and justice in montgomery, alabama | more on designboom [here](#)
image © equal justice initiative / human pictures



MASS design group and hank willis thomas' 'the embrace' for boston's MLK memorial | more on designboom [here](#)

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portraits of MASS design group, courtesy of friedman benda
(left) michael murphy, founding principal and executive director
(right) christian benimana, senior principal and managing director

***design in dialogue* is a series of online interviews presented by new york-based gallery [friedman benda](#) that highlights leading voices from the field — designers, makers, critics, and curators — as they discuss their work and ideas. hosted alternately by curator and historian glenn adamson and designer stephen burks, the conversations are held on zoom for 1 hour and include a participatory Q&A.**

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