

# On why a project is not an ending



Architect Sumayya Vally discusses how a layered architectural practice can challenge political narratives and deepen the beauty of this world.

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As told to Somnath Bhatt, 2917 words.

Tags: [Architecture](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Collaboration](#).

## **What is usually your starting point when you begin making?**

We often start with the physical place itself, and with stories about that place. Deepen that research. I'm really interested in how places are constructed beyond a parochial idea of local, like what kind of stories, and what kind of movements, and what kind of trajectories are tied to a particular place. Then, once we start looking at a story of place, it somehow very often becomes a story about migration.

When we start to look into stories of migration, we become interested in mythologies, and belief systems of that place, or otherwise notable, interesting stories of migration, or movements associated with that place. It's different with each project-sometimes it's related to agricultural mythologies, to music, to architectural forms, or vernaculars that were part of these migrations, and movements. Because of the way the world has been constructed, and drawn, thinking of one place always implicates other places. My practice is really preoccupied with these complex and beautiful relationships between territories and places.

## **A place is like a knot that is tied and leads you to another place.**

Exactly.

## **What excited you most recently about a new place?**

I've been spending time on an olive farm in Gabes, Tunisia, working on a project for a private museum and artist residency with programming tied to the olive harvest. I've learned so much about olive trees, and the intelligences that they have. We know that trees communicate, and speak to each other. We were told that leaves on olive trees become bitter when they're under threat by an animal. Not only do they secrete a substance that makes their own leaves bitter, but they transmit that information about the threat to all of the surrounding trees and they start to become bitter too. It's been making me really think about what that means for all of the biodiversity loss that we're seeing across Palestine and Lebanon. I wonder what they are saying to each other now, through their supremely sophisticated communication systems, are they shedding the most bitter of bitter silent tears?



*French-Tunisian artist eL Seed on his olive farm in Gabes, Tunisia during the harvest season*



*A troglodyte structure in Matmata, southern Tunisia, which Sumayya visited on a recent trip. Image: Sumayya Vally*

For another upcoming project we just started looking more at the history of Sylhet, and what happened when the border was drawn between east and west Bengal. The project is for a performance space in a town in Sylhet. This specific town was divided in two when partition was drawn. People became estranged from their agricultural land. We started looking at Hindu and Muslim rituals to inspire this performance space, cultural practices from both sides of the borders. The project takes the form of a really large scale sundial with performance spaces that are marked along different times of the agricultural year related to both Hindu, and Muslim rituals. Each demarcation of land is also where indigenous flora will be grown. There's something symbolic in that series of demarcations for allotments for crops—allotments will be in collaboration with farmers who were displaced by the partition.

**Would they use the allotments, and grow seasonal crops based on different phases of the sun?**

Exactly. To engage with people in the town. We think about agriculture as something that's functional only, but it's also so cultural, because cultural practices developed out of and alongside agricultural practices. So, the mythologies that are tied to the seasons mirror the ways that people's agricultural rituals developed and how the land is directly enmeshed to people and their stories.

**What was the process of setting up an independent architecture studio like?**

Counterspace was started when I was a student with a group of friends who were very much engaged and in love with Johannesburg. I also was very aware that when I was studying, the canon and the curriculum we were taught was handed down from elsewhere. It was an inherited curriculum, which perpetuated the image of architecture in the West. And it was not an architecture that was made of and for this incredible city that we were living and studying in, and so Counterspace was born to be able to imagine other spaces. I really wanted to be able to see architecture that's made from the unique conditions of this city.

**What stories of Architecture are often understudied, undervalued, and under-examined?**

I think architecture is the expression of people's stories. Mainstream architecture often reflects political and economic ideologies that have historically overlooked or dismissed other perspectives and systems of thinking. For instance, regions like South Asia, Latin America, and Africa have produced remarkable architectural traditions deeply intertwined with their unique belief systems. These rich cultural achievements are often neglected or undervalued in dominant narratives shaped by limited ideological viewpoints.

Fractal settlements in Ba-ila, Zambia and Mokoulek, Cameroon have their large-scale conception down to the smallest detail of someone's intimate quarters, so sophisticatedly thought out mathematically.

Conventional architecture often teaches us to keep out the seasons and the natural environment rather than being in tune with them. However, there are many architectural systems designed to embrace the rhythms of nature. In hot climates, for example, nomadic architectural traditions like those practiced by the Bedouins or in Central Asia, evolved with remarkable sophistication. These portable settlements could be easily packed onto animals, transported to cooler locations, and reconstructed within hours. Such designs highlight a profound understanding of adaptability and harmony with the environment, offering lessons often overlooked in mainstream architectural education.

I'm fascinated by architecture that not only tells stories of the past but also weaves contemporary narratives about belonging, identity, and who we are. Architectures with their own distinct mythologies, forms and ornamentations. It's about creating spaces that situate our stories within a lineage. This approach isn't about nostalgia but about seeing these legacies as living, evolving inspirations.



*Roadside mosque, Lagos, Photo by Sumayya*

**Built spaces are so tied to values, what kind of socio-political values do you try to bring forth when you build something?**

To value developing, deepening and understanding forms of beauty from diverse bodies of knowledge, and expanding the way that we think about that. I am really interested in inserting that back into the canon, or honoring it in, and amplifying it where it already is.

For example, the story of Paul Panda Farnana we wanted to tell for the ASIAT-DARSE BRIDGE. Our story about Farnana was focused on his cultural production. He studied and worked in horticulture, and planted gardens all over Belgium, and the Congo. We also looked at these vernacular Congolese forms of boat making which are valid contributions to the architectural canon. I think it's about where we position the mouthpiece of the story, and what design language we are drawing from in the body of knowledge that we've found, or we're engaging with.



*Paul Panda Farnana was a relatively unknown figure despite his significant contributions to Belgian society and Pan Africanism. The practice's research unveiled his impact, and today he is part of the Belgian canon. Wikimedia Commons*

Because of the subject matter that I'm interested in, the work becomes extremely political, by centering stories, and by centering subject matter that is not centered usually, or it has been kind of ravaged, or stopped historically. I also find it conceptually very interesting to think about things like dialect, spoken language, or sounds, forms of music, forms of dress—all forms of cultural production that lend themselves to architectural translation and architectural expression.

I'm really interested in forms of cultural production from different geographies, and when that is centered, then it means that the politics is about centering the people, and centering the totality of ways of being, and those

forms of expression.





*Asiat-Darse Bridge, Vilvoorde, Belgium. Courtesy Counterspace*

**What are some architectural rules worth breaking?**

What are any architectural rules? [laughs] I don't think there are any rules, especially not now.

**Why not now?**

I do think that technologically so much is possible.

However, there are things that we all just accept about architecture, that we could look at, again.

The way that we think about what space is private, and what space is public, and what space is semi-private, what space is intimate, those constructions, in most cities is very, I want to say, boring, but let's say so default. The way that porches or "stoeps" function in so many communities for example. In Johannesburg, neighborhoods like Hillbrow, and Yeoville help us rethink our conceptions of private and public that are very binary, and there are much more interesting ways to think about that. The way a porch space becomes a public space. The way in which balconies and porches function as part of the street, a place to work from and advertise, reconfigure the idea of public and private.

Another way to rethink the inside/outside binary is by blurring where the man-made ends and natural starts. The weather is something that we have just normatively thought about keeping out, and ignoring, and building against. Someone who was really good at showing that was Geoffrey Bawa. The way that we think about our imposition on the landscape without any real consideration of what we are building on is not working, and in fact is highly dangerous. It just produces more, and more unhealthy and uninteresting ways of living. In many cultures there are



really interesting ways to think about how the season is part of our lives, how some spaces allow in rain, and how the weather is revered through architecture.

Rethinking aging is closely tied to how architecture shapes our lives, especially in cultures like those in rural Japan or rural India, where elderly people remain active by sitting and working close to the floor, maintaining strong lower body strength. In contrast, modern Western architecture often confines people to sedentary, desk-based spaces that cater to capitalist structures of time, which restricts the natural movement and development of the body. This design disconnect reflects broader societal myths about aging and isolation, as many cultures traditionally integrate the elderly into community life, unlike the isolated, normative approach in present societies.

**Is there a kind of project that you would never work on?**

Any project that promotes apartheid is a very glaring, and obvious example. During the apartheid in South Africa, architecture design, and planning was so much a part of the apartheid project. Architecture affirmed what our place in society was. It told us what we deserved. So, the ways that schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods were designed, communicated to us what we deserved in the world. On an urban level, people were kept separated by design.

But in terms of a building typology, a project can become anything. I think any project and a brief can always be deepened, transformed and expanded into something else I would want to work on. Just like the Sylhet performance center project. The brief was to build a performance center but it ended up unfolding into becoming a garden or an agricultural space. Or, the brief was just a pedestrian bridge in Vilvoorde that crosses over this body of water, and it became a cultural project with a series of memorial parks.

**I know you worked on a lot of public-facing commissions. What's that process like usually?**

Usually you get invited by email to make a submission, and then there is a process of shortlisting, and interviewing. And often that is the process with a lot of these public-facing projects. Sometimes it's a direct commission.

I think, conceptually, to work on a public project also means thinking about who that "public" is, how we view them, who makes up that public. I often think about what stories we want to tell the generation that is coming, and how can that be memorialized, or expressed in our work?

With my project in Jeddah which was the Islamic Arts Biennale, we were thinking about a local Jeddah audience, but then also an audience of pilgrims because the Biennale happened in an extension of the Hajj terminal where pilgrims would land. Then thinking about those present audiences, I was also thinking how are we honoring these bodies of knowledge that we come from, and how are we creating a different definition of Islamic art that is going to make a contribution in this canon?



*Work in progress on one of the pieces for the Islamic Arts Biennale 2023 - 'City as a Mosque' by Studio Bound. Image by Sumayya Vally*



*Islamic Arts Biennale. Scenography by OMA. Artistically directed by Sumayya Vally. Copyright Marco Cappalletti, courtesy of OMA*



Clockwise from left: *anywhere can be a place of worship* by Sun Architects; *Sun Path, Rajab ro Shawwal 1444* by Civil Architecture; *Maintaining the Sacred* by Dima Srouji; *The Dig* by Studio Bound. Images courtesy Diriyah Biennale Foundation.

The Serpentine Pavilion project, for me as an architect, was about honoring hubs of cultural production for migrant communities in London—places where they found home, heard music, watched films in their mother tongue, or sourced traditional ingredients. It was about learning from these spaces and their architectural gestures of generosity. Architects have a responsibility to preserve and interpret these bodies of knowledge. Architecture, like music or textiles, is an abstract language—though tangible in some ways—and we hope it carries something meaningful and beautiful for people.



*Sumayya Vally's Serpentine Pavilion, 2021, which exemplifies her practice's interest in themes of identity, community, belonging and gathering. By Iwan Baan*

**Speaking about the public, you have a Lexicon on your website. How much of it is for the public and how much is it for you?**

I think it is for the audience first, but for myself it is a reflection tool. It's something that stems from the very early days of our practice when I was very immersed, and in love with Johannesburg, and understanding that there are so many architectural futures possible from this incredible city. But never seeing them reflected in the architectural canon or the profession. The lexicon was a way for me to start to articulate and expand what constitutes architecture.

**How do you ensure seamless collaboration between architects, engineers, and contractors during complex projects? Especially when dealing with unconventional materials and forms?**

From the outset, my practice was built on the idea of collective work and collaboration. It is messy, and it's complex, and it's magical. But it's also difficult. And I think just the way that I see collaboration now is that we enter into it intentionally and conscientiously each time with the intent of a project, and then we do it again for the next project. So we're continuously renewing our intent to collaborate, why we're doing it, what we're bringing and how we're honoring each other, so that we don't fall into patterns and dependencies.

**What do you think future architects should nurture in their practice?**

Imagination.

Architecture today is burdened by the mistakes of the past—capitalist practices that harmed the planet and silenced many voices. While young architects are resisting these systems, this has created an apprehension toward

form-making. Instead of viewing these challenges as a burden, we should embrace the infinite possibilities for creating new ways of being, grounded in imagination.



*'They who brings rain, brings life' activated at the Dhaka Art Summit 2023. Shadman Sakib, 2023*

#### **What do you do when a project ends?**

It's very difficult to think about endings. I don't think any of my projects end. For example, the Serpentine pavilion project ended up having roots in spaces of cultural production in communities across London, and in community art spaces in London. And that kind of catalyzed relationships between myself, the Serpentine, and these other institutions that still continue. I hope it doesn't sound cheesy, but it isn't really an ending. It's an evolution of the project into something else. These ideas continue to evolve, intertwine, overlap, and extend into one another, with collaborations carrying forward its dim lights. A project is not an ending, but a point from which the work picks up and develops further.

#### **Sumayya Vally recommends:**

Thabo Mbeki's "[I am an African](#)" speech

These films: *The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived* (Heiny Srour, 1974), *Battle of the Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), *Touki Bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, 1973), *Dreams* (Akira Kurosawa, 1990)

These places: Troglodyte structures in [Matmata](#) (Tunisia), Rachid Koraichi's [Jardin d'Afrique](#) (Zarzis), Mughal forts in [Nagaur](#) (Rajasthan), [Ogamién House](#) (Benin City), [Necropolis of Makli](#) (Sindh), [Soviet Modernist buildings](#) of Tashkent and The city of [Bukhara](#)

The supreme [intelligence of olive trees](#)

Style archives: Miriam Makeba, Fairuz, Grace Jones, Umm Kulthum, *Drum magazine*

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