

# Success from the Bottom-Up: Lessons Learned in Haiti's Archaie Region

Professional engagements in foreign territories can be complicated. In unknown terrains, preconceived notions of goodness and beauty, predetermined outcomes, and a pervasive sense of otherness infiltrate almost every professional action. Our work in the Archaie region of Haiti was not exempt from any of these complications. This paper summarizes the results of our mission to draw a regional “roadmap for change” after the devastating earthquake of 2010, and highlights lessons learned to advance the work of professionals involved in the physical design of cities and architecture as well as new methodologies for scholarship and research in foreign territories.

## INTRODUCTION

A thorny Haitian history of political and social struggle compounded upon the sudden arrival of the tragic events of 2010. For the citizens of Haiti, the earthquake was just a symbol of the inevitable wreckage of a country in the process of self-destruction; for the rest of the world, images of debris and desperation generated a type of collective human empathy without precedents. Portrayed by the global media as nation of helpless people, Haiti became the preferred “NGO Nation”; donations arrived in dollars and cents as well as in the form of prefabricated infrastructure solutions for quick fix-uppers. Local politicians used every gift and every piece of financial help as an opportunity to point fingers, show administrative mismanagement, and increase even further the amount of infrastructural waste already in the ground. To make things even worse, a few mythical stories of mismanaged donations collected by the Red Cross and other humanitarian groups, whether truthful or not, became mainstream and part of the overall curse. Haiti, as a nation, seemed to be destined to fail.

According to the World Bank, Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere;<sup>1</sup> its GDP is approximately \$1,700 per capita. In the region of Archaie, located in the north-west side of the Isla of Espanola and the focus of this paper, the economic situation was almost a textbook case-study of every financial report. Our professional group, comprised of a team of architects and urban designers assembled by the director of the University of Miami's Center for Urban and Community Design—an outreach arm of the School of Architecture, was charged with the production of a so-called “roadmap for change”. With the help of our project funders, the Kellogg Foundation and the Barr Foundation, we embarked in this quest. This paper is a summary of the results of that mission; it highlights lessons learned to advance the work of professionals involved in the physical design of cities and architecture and provides alternative methods for scholarship and research in foreign territories.

JAIME CORREA

University of Miami

STEVEN FETT

University of Miami



1

The devastation of the Haitian landscape is not a secret; Arcahaie, however, is one of the very few regions in the country where fertile land can still be found. Known for its relative agricultural prosperity, Arcahaie is the country's largest producer of plantains and sugar cane. Despite its potential for wealth, the region still suffers from abject poverty. Infrastructure is sorely lacking: two roads, one paved and one not, are the solitary link to a chain of small towns at the foot of a near-barren mountain range. Runoff from the mountains is collected and channeled to the settlements via gutters adjacent to the roads. The water in the gutters is polluted with oil, trash, and human waste. Despite its polluted state, this water is used for everything—from bathing (on site) to drinking. Private wellsprings located on private properties supply potable water to the masses; but, the wells are often located below the grade of latrines thereby contaminating the water even more. To make matters even worse, approximately one in three towns have electricity; the rest of the region stays dark past nightfall—save for the private resorts running on generators and self-funded electrical programs. This is a region of patchwork infrastructure where a bunch of good spirited NGO's find themselves at the mercy of a country without a reliable top-down organizational system where they can plug into.

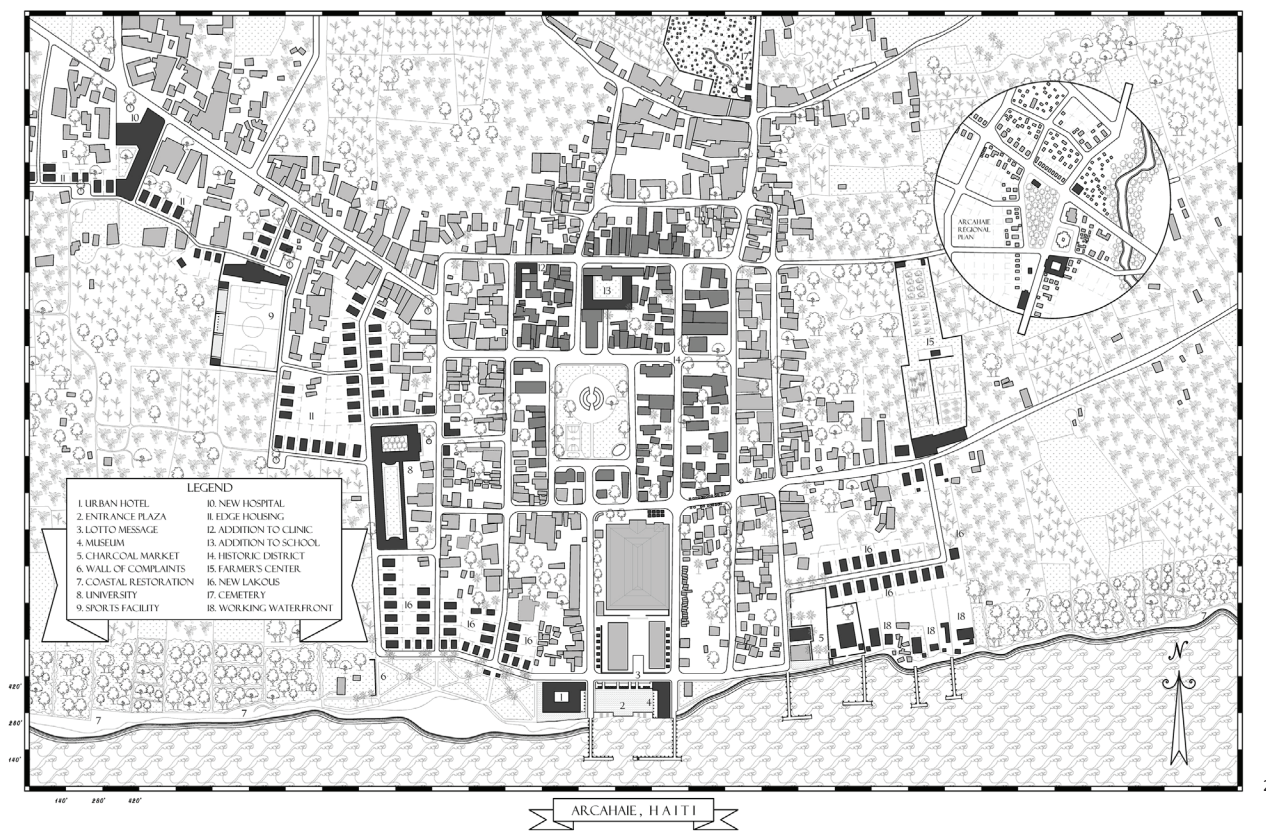
Upon further investigation, the community in the Arcahaie region strayed away from the stereotype. After approximately ten team visits during two years of intense community work, what initially appeared chaotic to us, seemed to be gaining its own state of intrinsic order. The smoke spitting motorcycles carrying up to five passengers at a time proved to be an affordable form of mass transit—running fairly standard routes. Road side “Lotto” huts, decorated with improvised typography, were really third-place depots where phone charging, wire transfers, and localized social interaction became the locational rule; they were in fact, micro scaled civic structures for the generation of community gathering and informational dissemination. If Haiti was really in the depths of poverty, one would never be able to know it by looking at the dignified dress of its people or at the relatively pristine condition of their traditional homes and personal spaces. In time we recognized that there was a symphony of cultural bottom-up informalities which we didn't understand and that our pre-determined biases only served to miscalculate the ingenuity and potential for the production of real growth. The challenge, we realized, was not to try and establish order or to invent a new

Figure 1: “Lotto Hut” Photograph by Steven Fett

method for change; instead, it was better to engage the existing patterns of settlement and civic engagement through the forms associated with them; it was time to expand the role of the subconscious mind of the collective and, in this process, foster a greater pride of place.

### PRIMITIVISM AS A TOOL

In his Harvard dissertation, “Primitivism in Modern Art”, Robert Goldwater classified the use of “primitivism” in modern re-presentation into three categories: tribal art, the art of children, and the art of the insane. By 1937, he was able to explain the application of tribal art in the cubist work of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque; the childish approach of the Surrealists or Paul Klee in their diagrammatic paintings; and, the insane expressionism—almost mad-like work, of Jean Dubuffet and his cohorts. Deeply influenced by the emblematic writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, all of these artists were searching for the holy grail of the human subconscious at the very source of the universe. Native art provided the soul, psyche, and unique uncompromised identity of the culture in which it was produced. Looking for the common cultural subconscious, the spine of our work in Haiti was also embedded within these three primitive traditions. Despite our appetite for technical surveys and sophisticated digital productions, our work was grounded on the appropriation of the tribal, childish, and insane public art forms that, in our estimation, were generating the collective sub-conscious of the Arcahaie region. The citizens of Arcahaie had no one to watch their back, except us; as a consequence, our cultural radar needed to move away from the imperialistic sense of otherness and strangeness characterizing the contemporary production of buildings and cit-



ies, and back into an approach illustrated by a deep sense of cultural appropriateness. Our only obvious choice was to accept the existing emergent conditions as our new normal; the corollary was the production of what we identified as another type of unprecedented realism with greater phenomenological and metaphysical dimensions.

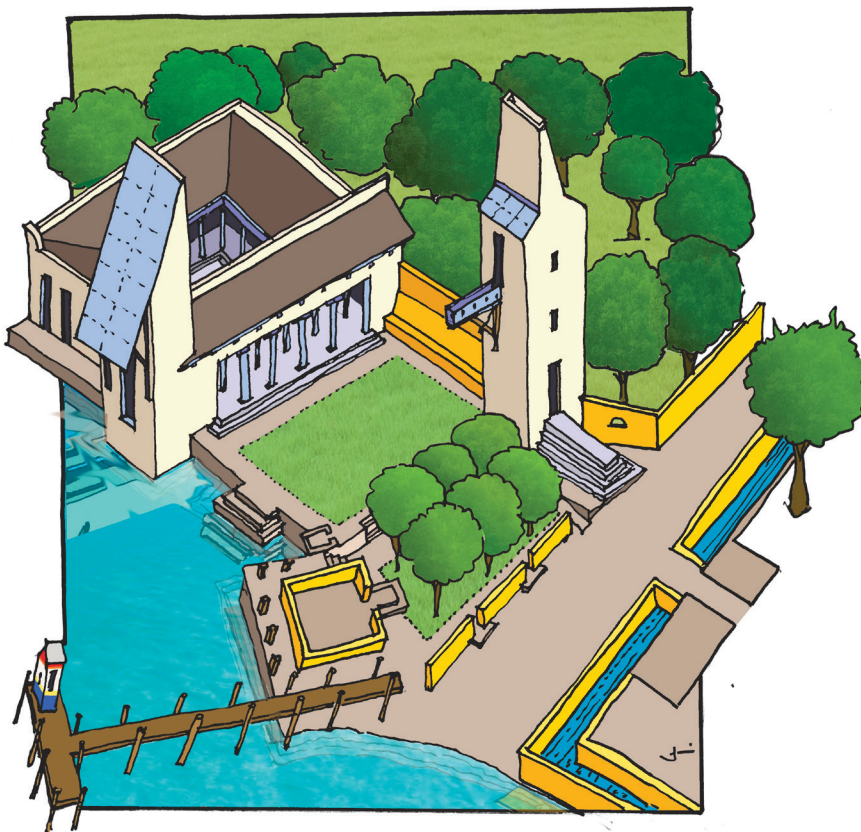
Figure 2: Town Plan of Arcahaie (by: Jaime Correa, Steven Fett, Ana Luiza Leite)

In this context, the design challenge was no longer paternalistic—or a mere question of how to bring modern means for the generation of urban/rural development, but a matter of engagement in the everyday life of the communities within this region. What was initially perceived as chaotic and disorderly turned into a hidden opportunity to understand the local macro-emergent expressions of art, architecture, and urbanism—resulting from the accumulation of micro-individual decisions over time. Expressions of primitive culture, popular art, and local representation became the means for a new type of urban design and architectural production; most importantly, this approach yielded a new design intent and a deep understanding of the internal cultural pressures embedded in the various localities i.e.: race tension, class struggles, poverty, illiteracy, etc.

Our new design intent required the sublimation of seven precious conventional contemporary methods of production and representation as well as the renaissance of some other, which, in our previous experience, were considered informal, crude, and rudimentary. These seven areas of contention could be summarized as follows:

1. Digital photo-realistic drawings substitution: in conditions where the use of electricity was restricted and where basic Wi-Fi connections were lacking, the use of digital media became more and more difficult as a potential means of production and presentation. Our team was forced to substitute any type of digital aspirations with primitive hand-made drawings produced in-situ. Architects and urban designers carefully selected typological elements within the representation of Haitian folklore, informal buildings and urbanism, and local everyday conditions. For the common citizen, the childish-like approach of our illustrations—embedded in the local artistic folklore, clarified the meaning and scope of the proposed interventions while becoming viable means for the correct implementation of general policies and physical projects.
2. Death of authorship: the typical contemporary project involves pre-determined top-down outcomes as well as the celebration of authorship as a sign of professionalism. The projects in the Arcahaie region were approached from a bottom-up perspective by means of public workshops, crowd sourcing, and design thinking methods where the assumption was that the smartest person in the room was the room itself. The community, an authorless group of individuals, determined the ideal location of public buildings, the scope of infrastructure projects, and the most complete land-use combinations for the production of authentic towns, villages, and settlements—places where everything needed for their daily living could be found at walking distance, including food production.
3. Public place emphasis: rather than establishing a discourse about space structure (grammar), the public discussions were geared towards the development of a common collective meaning and its application to place-making strategies (syntax). The results were not focused on the supply of basic necessities but on the creation of livable places where monumental pieces of architecture or city making would serve as a means for common citizens to perform their daily rituals in the company of people with diverse goals and objectives.
4. Deliberate professional amnesia: our goal was to avoid top-down deliveries of information while capitalizing on the strengths of each community. Citizens with any design training and great common sense challenged our professional opinions to the core. As a result, we seceded and deliberately acted on the assumption of absolute professional amnesia—allowing us to have a true ubiquitous Haitian experience and a point of view of greater tolerance and cultural value. This experience increased our repertoire of creative options and gave us a more accurate understanding of the potential future effects of every proposal.

5. Rebirth of incrementalism: huge promises of public and private driven enterprises were abundant in Haiti after the earthquake events; promises which were dependent on foreign capital and professional networks and which, at the end of the day, would not develop a sense of authorship on the communities. As a result, tremendous physical scars were placed on important urban and rural places with a subsequent failure as a corollary. Our community proposals did not involve massive housing strategies but the development of incremental units on the basis of the traditional housing typology (Lakou) nor did we advocate huge infrastructure and civic facilities but small incremental development in the form of clinics, parochial schools, small markets, etc.—places where the community could develop local controls and a greater sense of ownership.
6. Avoidance of prep-packed solutions: along with the re-birth of incrementalism came the idea of community empowerment. Since the outcome of the earthquake, Haitians witnessed the presence of “Drop-in and Drop-out” solutions by all kinds of international NGO’s. Although well-intentioned, the community members were not amiable to the



3

establishment of temporary or circumstantial international partnerships; they preferred the engagement of locals in permanent training and on the production of their own buildings and city places.

7. The necessity of branding: every proposal was drawn with a branding strategy in mind. Our professional team, in conjunction with community leaders, developed resonating names for every intervention. This is how we came up with projects such as: the longest Haitian flag in the world, the wall of struggling faces, wall of sights and complaints, the Lotto market-place, the coal market, the fishing tower, etc. Every project had its

Figure 3: Luly Fish Market and Tower  
(by: Jaime Correa & Ana Luiza Leite)

essential “logos” with a particular meaning that only made sense for the communities where they were placed. Projects were no longer understood as standardized interventions but as deep reflections of the everyday life conditions in every place in this region.

The intricate relationship between local primitivism and professional sophistication was cautiously balanced. The design intent was to generate the empowerment of local communities, from the bottom-up, by allowing them to define in their own terms the nature of every potential future outcome.

#### **CONVENTIONAL VS. RHETORIC REPRESENTATION**

James Ackerman, the prominent American architectural historian describes, in his 2002 book “Origins, Imitation, and Conventions”<sup>2</sup>, two methods of drawing: conventional and rhetorical; according to Ackerman, both methods are distinct and carry fundamental consequences in architectural representation. Conventional drawings, such as plans and elevations, are used to relate information between an observer and the maker using a well established shared set of abstract drawing symbols; precise and almost universally understood, conventional drawings are important tools of communication. Conversely, rhetorical drawings are not intended to faithfully represent an architectural design; instead, in the case of rhetorical drawings, their goal is to emphasize and highlight architectural intent and meaning.

In the case of Arcahaie, we quickly understood that conventional drawing methods were limited forms of communication for sharing information with other design professionals, but they were generally not an effective means of explanation and inspiration for citizens without a sophisticated training in architecture or design. As a consequence, we shifted our focus from the conventional to the rhetorical. From that point on, our team was deliberately exploring new and aboriginal ways of graphic communication as means of cultural propriety and project accuracy.

Diverse art expressions can be found almost anywhere in Haiti. Lavishly decorated taxis and busses, referred to as tap-taps, feature bold colors, portrait religious icons, and depict images of everyday life in intricately carved wooden window screens; local businesses use murals as the primary means of product or service advertisement; folkloric arts and crafts are bartered or sold in markets throughout the region. Therefore, art in Haiti is not just for the privileged nor is it an aesthetic frivolity. In a country where the rates of analphabetism are higher than the global average, art and all its potential folk expressions become the preferred form of communication. For basic ideas to be understood, we soon realized that our team needed to adjust the conventional approach to architectural representation and match the omnipresence of the vernacular.

Equipped with a growing knowledge of primitive Haitian art, its artistic physical expressions, and the use of art as a communication device, we set forth to produce the so-called “road-map for change”. The towns of Arcahaie, Luly, and Corrail, served as case studies for typical interventions in large, medium, and small settlements. As part of the process, the team mapped existing conditions and proposed strategic infill public and private interventions—to foster growth and socio-economic repair.

Our urban mapping processes began in a relatively conventional way. We utilized sophisticated satellite databases developed after the earthquake. Our original base maps consisted of accurate superimpositions on digital high-resolution photographs. The original maps showed basic property divisions, building footprints, and street right-of-ways. As could be expected, when initially presented, this base information was generally misunderstood, ineffective, and promptly ignored. As a consequence, the team’s representational method changed from conventional to rhetoric and verbal communication, especially story-telling,

began to guide the design process and the scope of our interventions; in time, and in the context of representational means which could be managed locally and understood clearly, community based ideas began to surface: the rework of the town plans had begun.

The master plans depicted building footprints with traditional landscapes and community landmarks in imperfectly scaled elevations—adding a sense of human perception. In the same manner than G.B. Nolli’s plan of Rome differentiated between public and private spaces, the new master plans contrasted existing and proposed conditions. This was our first attempt to layer precise documents with an aesthetic that appeared more primitive and, clearly, more understandable and memorable to the citizens of the region. The “roadmap for change” was now on its way to completion. In this process, the three towns of focus were understood as potential repositories for no less than ten new projects per town. Some of the projects would be built by the private sector, some by the public sector, and some by



4

NGOs; but, most of the projects, through a careful process of community empowerment, were meant to be built by the locals themselves. The ideas were firmly rooted during ongoing conversations and workshops with the public. If the plan was going to be successful, it needed to be a mirror of what the team had heard.

The new master plans became a gateway into the exploration of Haitian folkloric art. The deep interest of team members for means of concrete communication encourage every member to look for opportunities at the local and global levels. This is how we became aware of the numerous artists selling their work, and the work of others, under shady tree canopies.

Figure 4: Corrail Clinic (by: Steven Fett & Jessica Tsisiris)

Their art was vibrant and generally two-dimensional. Most objects were drawn in elevation and had a surprisingly strong compositional intent. These were not the works of novices. They were abstract interpretations of Haitian everyday social life set within lush and bountiful natural environments. They too had a persuasive intent—a message to broadcast.

The discovery of this new symbolically charged, and intentionally primitive child-like drawing rhetoric ultimately affected our architectural approach as well. The team wanted to bring back something pure, emblematic of the simple, platonic forms that scattered the Haitian landscape. We were also acutely aware of past failures by NGO's and starchitects attempting to introduce new materials and building systems into the region. Whatever we were going to build needed enough resiliency to be maintained, adapted, enlarged, and transformed. Our exploration of primary forms allowed us to locate primitive building systems prevailing in the region: concrete block walls, rubble stone foundations, and tin roofing with wood details and screening. With this palette, we set forth to design key projects that, if built, could have a widespread effect on the social strength and solidarity of the region.

### PROJECTS IN THE MAKING

Presently, Arcahaie lacks universal and cost effective access to health care and advanced education. The University of Miami team members had previous experiences in Haiti—while designing a school in the country's central plateau for the Boston-based and Haitian rooted NGO, Partners in Health. Team members learned from this experience that building medical and educational facilities, in Haiti, had immediate transformational effects on the physical environments surrounding them. Six years ago, when the LaColline clinic opened its doors in



5

a seemingly remote and uninhabited part of the country, it was surprising (to us) that over 300 people showed up seeking care. Within days, an informal segregation of make-shift shacks selling goods encircled the clinic; in time, more and more appeared and, eventually, they became permanent structures. Years later, what used to be a remote piece of land in the middle of nowhere is now a distinct and intentional settlement.

This experience was an eye-opener for the kind of projects that this community desperately

Figure 5: Youth Build Lully Vocational School (by: Steven Fett & Rhys Gilbertson)



needed. In the town of Corrail, our team designed a clinic with a “citrus planted forecourt” intended to be a free source of nutrition for the community. In the small settlement of Luly, a proposed fish market acquired a sophisticated “stoa” configuration—long and slender with open bays and refrigeration for vendors; unexpectedly, however, the market area featured an adjacent plaza with a solar-collection tower as a new regional icon from land and sea.

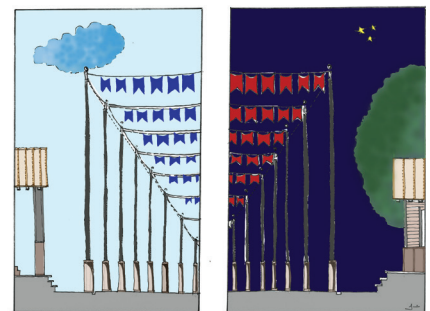
Although our experience in Haiti gave us confidence that “if you build it, they will come,” we were troubled by the conditions of existing public spaces and their lack of direct connection to civic uses such as schools, clinics, and markets. Without a national trash collection program, or an apparent responsibility assigned to any entity—public and private community spaces were riddled with trash. Moreover, much of the waste was non-combustible in the form of plastic bottles and bags. Therefore, what could be the pride of a community was simply seen as a pragmatic dumping area. Public space was in fact that: a public dumpster. An extreme example of this was found in the center of the waterfront town of Arcahaie. As we approached the town by sea, we were frankly anchoring our boat a few yards from a broken down rubble seawall while avoiding broken bottles or the remnants of a polluting charcoal market. What could be a great waterfront plaza was now a polluted area inappropriately placed at the gateway into town. Recognizing the potential the land and adjacent sea offered, the community, almost universally, advocated the market’s relocation (which has since happened) but, nevertheless, we remained uneasy about the possibility of whatever would follow could meet the same fate as its predecessors and quickly fall into decay. At this point, we needed to find a way to foster a sense of ownership and community pride in order to help shift a mindset that focused on the family, but not the common good.

#### UNITY IS STRENGTH

The Arcahaie region in Haiti is famous for being the birthplace of the first Haiti flag. When Haiti gained independence from France, in 1804, a local seamstress called Catherine Flon removed the white stripe from the center of the French flag and stitched the upper blue and lower red stripes together. Her house, located near the center of Arcahaie, is now a museum, and yearly, a presidential parade comes through town to commemorate this historic act.

The special importance of the flag in the region generated two ideas intended to empower the community to take better care of its public spaces. The first was to collect and gather all useable plastic bottles, color them blue and red, densely string them together like ribbons and attach them to posts lining the parade route between Arcahaie and Corrail—effectively creating what we branded as “the longest Haitian flag in the world”. The second idea came from the motto imprinted on the current iteration of the Nation’s flag: “L’Union Fait La Force”—roughly translated as “unity is strength”; to the team, the flag message was a true source of irony. Simultaneously, intrigued by the countless identical “Lotto” huts and their informal typographic messages, we devised a combination of the two forms into one. As a result, the team proposed aligning a row of huts adjacent to the old coal market plaza, each imprinted with a colossal letter, and collectively spelling out the national motto of unity and strength. This new entrance plaza would create a unique moment of pride which, in our estimation, would inspire citizens to take care of their common spaces with the same pride they had for the seamstress from Arcahaie.

As strong as we felt our ideas were, we knew we were not going to be around to advocate for each one of them. Therefore, simplicity and collective empowerment were essential means for the implementation of our proposals. Shaped by our new and adapted knowledge of art as communication, we avoided a predetermined conventional approach to drawing and instead focused on persuasive, memorable artistic methods that were intentionally naïve and primitive. These drawings were dimensionally vague, allowing for flexibility in location and form, but icon-rich, inventively composing recognizable forms and arranging them in

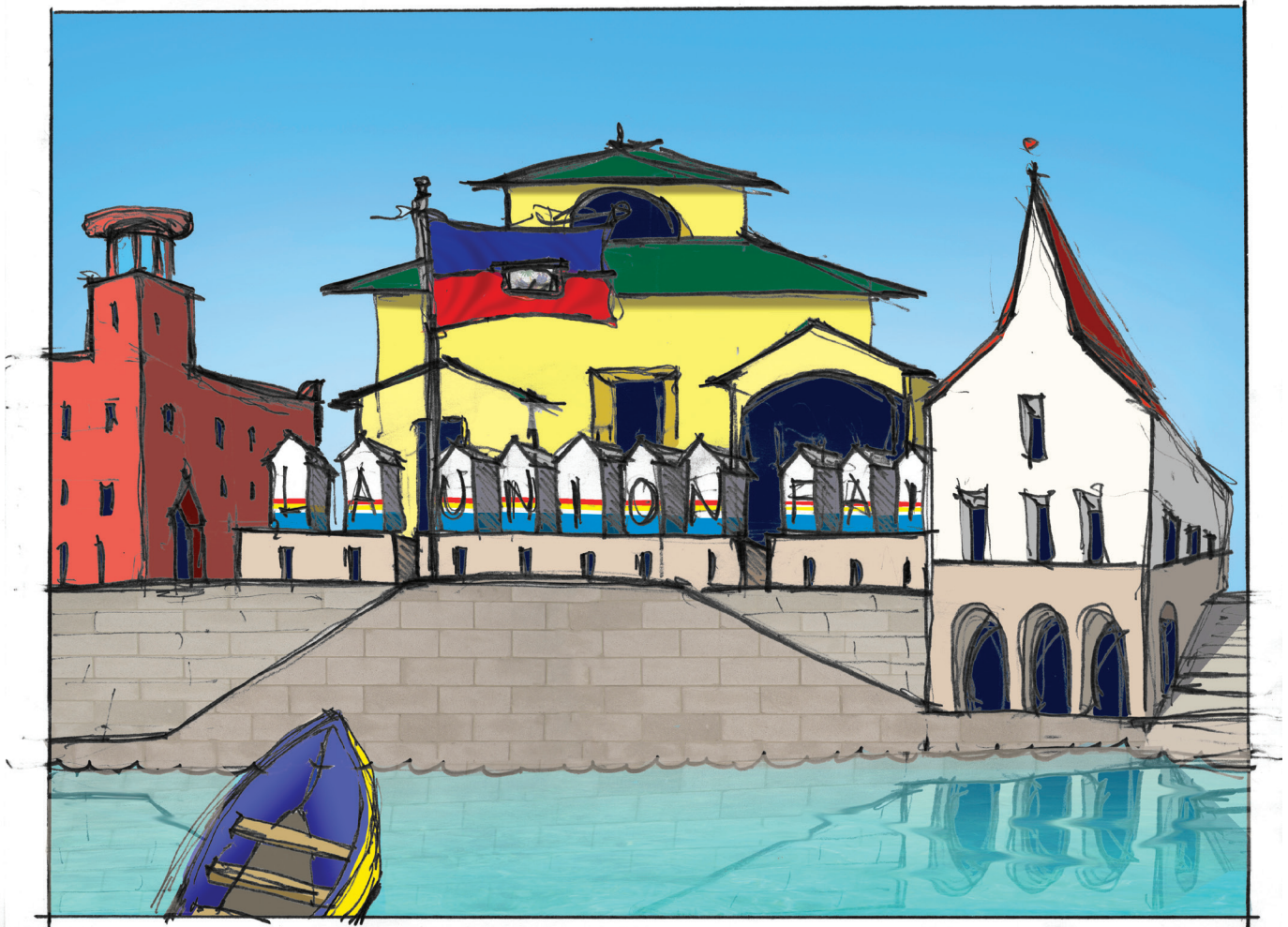


6

Figure 6: Longest Haitian Flag (by: Jaime Correa)

refreshingly simple ways, full of architectural meaning and power. Pragmatically, these forms were easy to build by locals, and easy to be maintained—a problem that has historically plagued “high-design” in its attempts to engage the developing world.

The team has continued to foster relationships with local leaders and organizations in an effort to help realize some of the projects. Our biggest success has come from a partnership with another Boston based NGO: Youth Build International. As they participated with us in multiple workshops in Haiti, they began to realize the power of our ideas and committed to build a vocational school in Luly—a location which we had originally specified as a strategic location for a school. Keeping true to our graphic methodology, we designed a building to suit a specified program, but developed drawings rich in color, inspired by the Haitian painter Henri Robert Bresil. The forms of the school are both bold and ordinary, and originate with

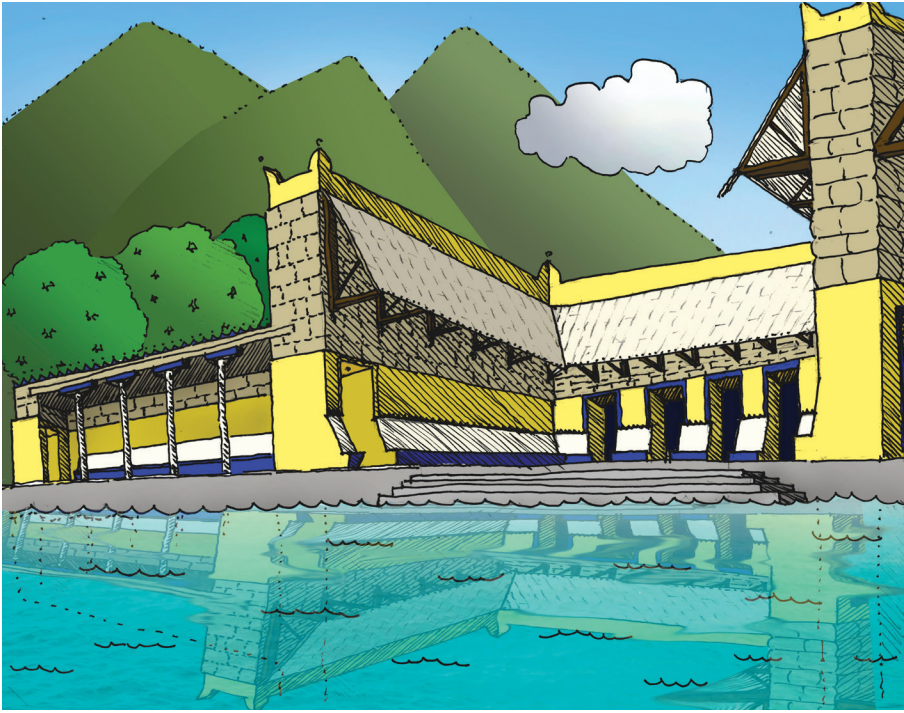


7

Figure 7: Waterfront Plaza With Lotto Huts (by: Jaime Correa & Ana Luiza Leite)

the most common childhood schoolhouse sketch. Most recently, discussions suggest we may have found another local partner in Arcahaie: the Hero Academy; this group has its sights on building an educational and athletic facility in the region and will target Corrail as per our plan. These are important projects as their construction should validate our investment in the planning process; projects like this will establish the kind of community trust that is necessary once a foreign design team is gone.

The Arcahaie projects belong to the community and so should they be championed. We hope that in time, they can continue to attract and funnel humanitarian investment into specific



## ENDNOTES

1. The World Bank. (2014). GDP per capita. Retrieved September 22, 2015, from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD>
2. James Ackerman, *Origins, Imitation, Convention: Representation in the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: MIT, 2002)

8

locations identified through our community outreach process. We also hope these projects will take formal clues from the memorable imagery our team produced while working with funders and local leaders to foster civic mindedness. However, despite all our good intentions and the temptation to declare the process a success, our approach, unfortunately, shares the same characteristics of so many other humanitarian missions in Haiti: we were outsiders and despite our attempts to communicate and broadcast community generated ideas to the masses, the Haitian people are still not totally empowered. Ultimately, most of the projects we proposed relied on resources not readily available and still require, for the most part, technical foreign aid.

Despite the generous donations from individuals and nations around the world, Haiti remains impoverished and, paradoxically, the negative effect of projects “helicoptered in” have left Haitians feeling even less in control of their own destiny. The feeling of being given what others believe is needed doesn’t allow much room for participation and growth. There is a Haitian proverb that says “there are mountains beyond mountains”, which means that if you solve one problem there is another that presents itself. Without empowerment and partnership, there can be no pride in collective ownership. Successes in this region will not be measured by projects but by capacity building.

Figure 8: Fishing Market (by: Jaime Correa & Ana Luiza Leite)