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TRUE CALLING

Architect Mariam Kamara, founder of the Niger-based architecture and research firm atelier masōmī, puts people at the forefront of her practice. She'll be a speaker at Design Indaba 2019.



WE chatted to software-developer-turned-architect Mariam Kamara ahead of her talk at Design Indaba 2019 about how she believes design can make a difference.

Why the move from computer science to architecture? Architecture was actually my original career choice, but I didn't think it was reasonable to pursue a creative field. Computer science was simply a more sensible option. Even after many years as a software developer, I couldn't shake

the feeling that architecture was really my path. I finally took the leap when I came to view architecture as a conduit for positive contributions in the social, economic, cultural and often even political dimensions of a place.

You designed the award-winning Hikma religious and secular complex in Dandaji, Niger, in collaboration with Yasaman Esmaili. What impact did you want to make? It seemed to us that all around the world, religion is coming up against scientific, secular knowledge, with extreme strands of all religions rising everywhere. This is also true in Niger, where more than 90% of the population is Muslim. So for us

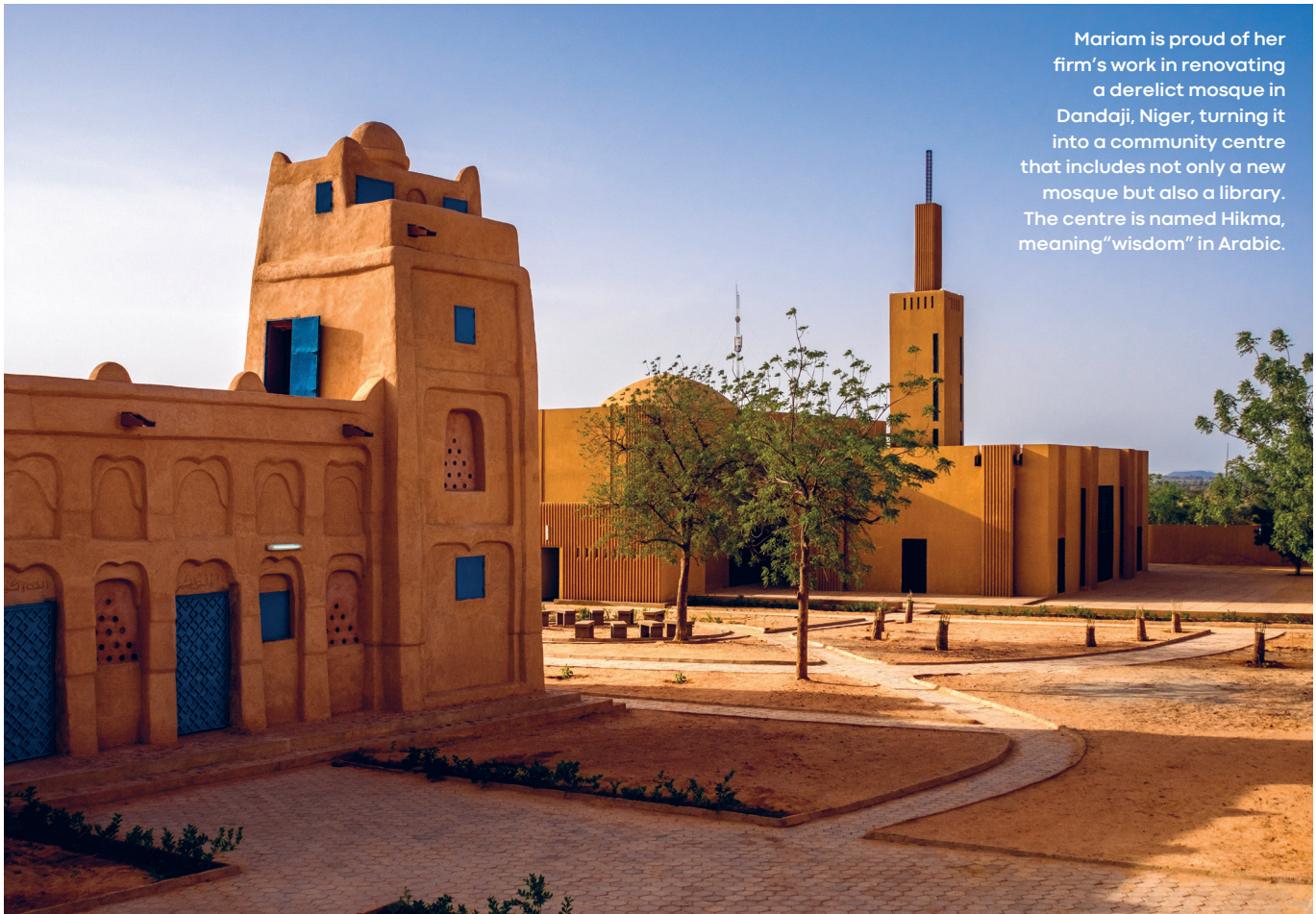
this project was important because it allows us to take part in the discourse, designing a place of peace and harmony that taps into a fundamental precept of Islam: the pursuit of knowledge. It is a learning space that also has a place for worship where everyone in the village is represented and has a way of taking ownership. For the youth of the village, having the very first library where they can have access to literature (and not just textbooks) will be very impactful in helping widen their horizons and improving their language skills and school performance.

Is there a project that stands out for you? They all do! The way we work is so



Before, the mosque was male-centric, whereas now men and women use the complex together to attend literacy courses or workshops.

PHOTOS JAMES WANG INTERVIEW LINDI BROWNELL MEIRING



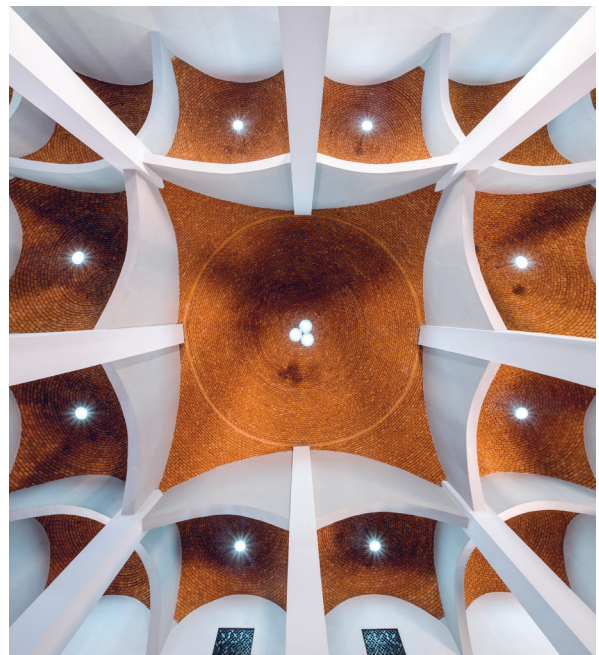
Mariam is proud of her firm's work in renovating a derelict mosque in Dandaji, Niger, turning it into a community centre that includes not only a new mosque but also a library. The centre is named Hikma, meaning "wisdom" in Arabic.

immersive, from the research stage to design and construction, that every project is an intense experience. We have a process that involves working closely with the users of our projects to understand what matters to them. But we also develop strong ties with the builders and craftsmen that make them a reality in order to best use (and stretch) their skills in our designs. Every project where we are able to do this successfully becomes very special for us.

What do you believe are the most important issues that architecture should be tackling in 2019? There are so many

issues that as designers we have to face and take responsibility for. While I am very past-conscious, I am really very future-obsessed in the work that I do. Many issues in the near future are quite alarming and many of them actually have a lot to do with urban planning and architecture. How do we make architecture that respects and manifests the narrative of a place in order to repair or avoid creating fractures? We have to worry about devising new solutions for a decidedly urban tomorrow.

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THIS YEAR'S DESIGN INDABA CONFERENCE, WHICH RUNS FROM 27 FEBRUARY TO 1 MARCH, WILL SEE CREATIVES FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE SHARE THEIR STORIES, INCLUDING ARCHITECTS ANNABELLE SELLDORF, DONG-PING WONG AND JOHN PAWSON.