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THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF DESIGN

OCTOBER 2010

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Many of the world's most innovative architects are now working in Africa.

# Ground Breaking

Madonna's Raising Malawi Academy for Girls Sets a New Standard in Africa

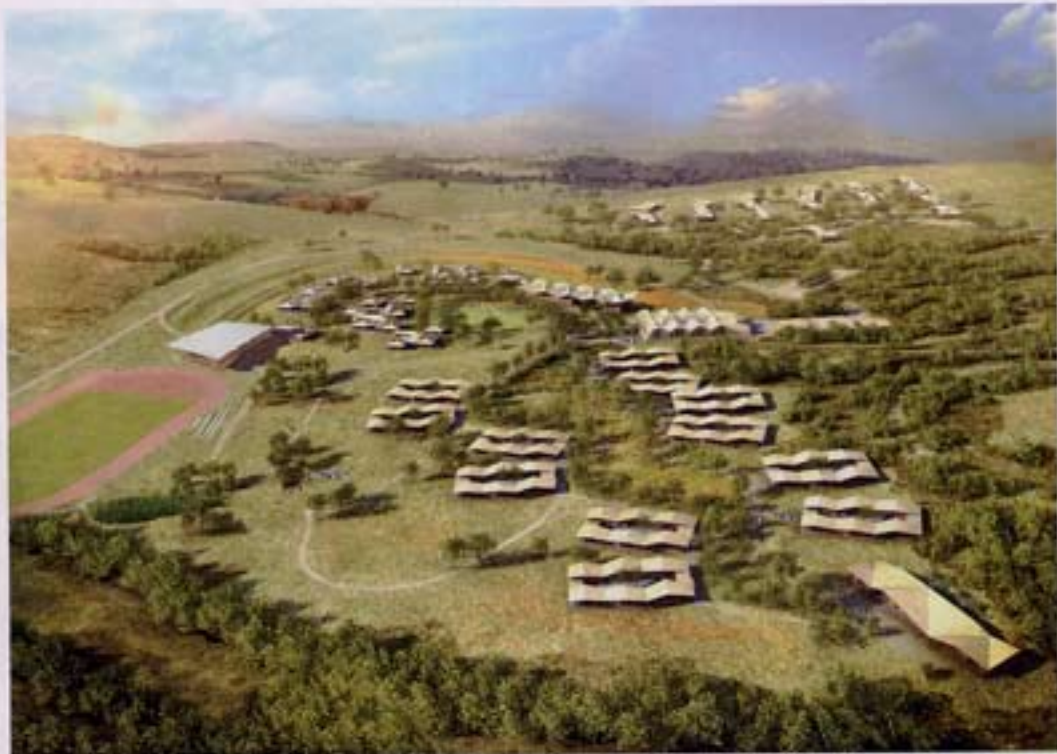
Architecture by Markus Dochantschi of studioMDA | Text by Joseph Giovannini

**S**HE FAMOUSLY ADOPTED two children from Malawi. She has helped fund orphanages in the southeast African country. And last March, shovel in hand, pop star Madonna broke ground and laid the first brick in the construction of a boarding school, Raising Malawi Academy for Girls. The school is part of the organization, Raising Malawi, that she cofounded to help eliminate poverty and alleviate the hardships of the one million orphans in this poor nation of 12 million. Madonna's shovel was inscribed with the words "dare to dream."

Why Malawi? "Madonna always says Malawi found her—she fell in love with the country when she first traveled there and discovered it was in a state of emergency," says Markus Dochantschi, the New York architect who signed on to design the school pro bono. "But it is not the Madonna Academy, a vanity project with her name over the door. We were asked to design a prototype boarding school replicable by others even in different countries, without repeating the typical British-style school that you see in former British colonies."

Madonna found Dochantschi by serendipity. "An employee in my office, Jessica Wilpon, while doing her masters thesis in Malawi, met the

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Architect Markus Dochantschi donated his services to Madonna's Raising Malawi Academy for Girls in Lilongwe, Malawi. ABOVE: A rendering of the campus. LEFT: Madonna and Dochantschi flank headmistress Anjimile Oponyo.

RENDERING COURTESY OF STUDIO MDA; PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF FLORENCE PRESS

The administration and library building.



“Madonna was very passionate about the project. She focused on the details.”

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director of Raising Malawi, Philippe van den Bossche, and recommended me for the project,” says Dochantschi, a young German-born architect. “I’d always had an interest in Africa and wanted to build there. It was a natural fit.”

Before even sketching, the architects started by doing research. “The design is not just about aesthetics and materials but about helping to understand the society you’re building for,” he says. “For example, in Africa, you realize the importance of outdoor space, of being outside and understanding nature. So we designed a very open pedestrian campus without cars.”

The 450 students will range in age from 13 to 18 and come from all over the country. “Traditionally, a lot of girls drop out in eighth grade, shortly before they get married, so it’s a vulnerable age,” says the architect. “Madonna hopes that the school will instill pride in their homeland, and that educated young women will understand

the importance of remaining in Malawi, supporting their own communities.”

Architect and patron, along with her advisers on the project, met whenever Madonna was in Malawi. On the first visit the site was still vacant, and the architect walked her through the design of every single building, explaining the master plan. “She was a very good listener,” he recalls, “and very passionate about the project. She focused on the details, including how we make the bricks, which is very important because of the deforestation of Africa. Traditional burnt bricks consume a lot of wood.

“She was happy with the design, because it addressed all her concerns—sustainability, cultural sensitivity, national pride—and it was an architectural roadmap for future schools. After the long presentation, she asked my favorite question: ‘When do we start?’” □

For more information, visit [www.raisingmalawi.org](http://www.raisingmalawi.org).

The open-air corridors of the classrooms.



The dining hall.

