

Van Alen Institute presents

PRODUCTIVE PUBLIC SPACE: Exploring Hybridities in Informal Settlements

a project by Van Alen Institute New York Prize Fellows
Chelina Odbert and Jennifer Toy, Kounkuey Design Initiative

RECEPTION AND PRESENTATION

Thurs, April 10, 2008 7:00 – 9:00pm

at Van Alen Institute
30 West 22nd street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10010
212-924-7000

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April 2, 2008, NEW YORK - Van Alen Institute is pleased to announce a reception for New York Prize Fellows **Chelina Odbert** and **Jennifer Toy**. Their project, "Productive Public Space: Exploring Hybridities in Informal Settlements," explores alternative models for poverty alleviation, quality of life improvement, and environmental remediation through the production of public space in slums.

Odbert and Toy, founding members of the **Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI)**, have spent over two years working with community members in the slum of Kibera, Nairobi, to design and implement the concept of productive public space – an open space, created in collaboration with its client community, that links physical improvements to self sustaining micro-enterprise activities. Home to between 700,000 and 1,000,000 residents, Kibera is the largest informal settlement in Sub-Saharan Africa yet it occupies a space just two-thirds the size of New York City's Central Park. KDI's efforts in Kibera include development of youth employment opportunities, trash collection, and flood prevention along the wide, debris covered banks of polluted rivers that cut through the settlement.

A reception will be held on Thursday, April 10, 2008 from 7:00-9:00pm, featuring visual materials about KDI's ongoing work in Kibera and a presentation by Odbert and Toy about the opportunities and challenges facing designers who work in informal settlements or low-income areas. This program is free and open to the public.

During their New York Prize Fellowship term at Van Alen Institute, Odbert and Toy organized a series of roundtables with a wide range of professionals – architects, planners, economists, environmental experts, funders, public health practitioners and policy makers – to critically explore the significance of public space in informal settlements. Among the institutions represented at the discussions were Acumen Fund, the Blacksmith Institute, Buro Happold, the Center for Sustainable Urban Development, Design Trust for Public Space, Great Eastern Ecology, Malkenson Foundation, Metropolis, Peter L. Gluck & Partners, Project for Public Spaces, Sustainable South Bronx, Urban Think Tank, TILL Design, WRT Design and more. The roundtable conversations served to generate a collective definition of 'productive public space' and a working model of its forms, uses and applicable contexts both nationally and internationally.

As a culmination of these conversations, and as a public statement about KDI's community-driven processes of definition and design, Odbert and Toy additionally commissioned a select group of artists and graphic designers to create poster series that illustrate and advance new ways of thinking about public space in informal settlements and low-income areas. Contributing artists include **Jenny Beorkrem** of Ork Posters (Chicago, IL), **Prem Krishnamurthy** and **Adam Michaels** of Project Projects (New York, NY), **Leah Murphy** (Philadelphia, PA) and **Mindy Watts** (Philadelphia, PA). The posters will be reproduced and distributed throughout Nairobi, New York and other major cities as part of an awareness campaign this summer; the originals, which range in media from woodcut to newsprint to silkscreen, will be on view at Van Alen Institute from Thursday, April 10 to Friday, April 25, 2008.

Visit the [Van Alen Institute](#) or [Kounkuey Design Initiative](#) websites for more information about the project.



The New York Prize Fellowship program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency. Van Alen Institute additionally acknowledges The Rockefeller Foundation's generosity in sponsoring "Productive Public Space: Exploring Hybridities in Informal Settlements." KDI wishes to thank the following individuals for their support and collaboration: David Adjaye, Andrew Blum, Meredith Block, Alfredo Brillembourg, Miquela Craytor, Stephen Davies, Bret Ericson, Peter Gluck, Judith Heinz, Mark Laska, Steve Malkenson, Victoria Marshall, Deborah Marton, Joe Mulligan, Helen Ng, Jennifer Peckman, Janice Perlman, Elliot Sclar, Peter Slatin, Byron Stiggie, Sarah Williams, Rosten Woo and Yasmina Zaidman for their participation in the roundtable conversations; Jenny Beorkrem of Ork Posters, Prem Krishnamurthy, Adam Michaels and Molly Sherman of Project Projects, Leah Murphy and Mindy Watts for their contributions to the poster campaign; Gonzalo Cruz, John Gendall, Adam Meagher and Keiko Yamimoto for their assistance with project development.

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About Kounkuey Design Initiative

Chelina Odbert and Jennifer Toy are founding members of the Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI, www.kounkuey.org). Odbert and Toy formed KDI as an alternative to standard client/patron business models in order to address the relevancy of design practice to low income settlements in the developing world. Their goal was to create a vehicle through which to identify socially and environmentally urgent projects, and work with local communities to design and implement solutions. Odbert graduated from Claremont McKenna College and received her MUP from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Toy graduated from Harvard College in the History of Science and has worked as a science journalist. She received her MLA/MUP from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

About Van Alen Institute

Van Alen Institute is an independent nonprofit architectural organization whose mission is to promote inquiry into the processes that shape the design of the public realm. For over a century, the Institute has cultivated a fellowship of architecture and design practitioners and scholars, awarded excellence in design, and fostered dialogue about architecture as a public practice. Today, as conventionally defined fields of knowledge give way to new disciplines and alternative methodologies, Van Alen Institute reclaims its legacy as an architectural institute that is dedicated to critical inquiry surrounding contemporary forms of public space and new configurations of spatial practice. The Van Alen Institute New York Prize Fellowship provides emerging practitioners and scholars the opportunity to pursue advanced research and experimental practice in public architecture. Fellows are based at the Institute, where they generate independent projects on the most significant issues shaping public life and the built environment today. For more information visit www.vanalen.org/nyprize.

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