

A Practice Beyond Environmental Responsiveness

Critical reflection on *relational, architectural ecologies* of Anna Heringer's work in Rudrapur.

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History Thesis
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17.04.2025

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Word count: 5061

Abstract

This thesis critically examines Anna Heringer's architectural practice as a form of ecological design that moves beyond conventional notions of environmental responsiveness. Through the lens of posthumanist, ecofeminist, and poststructuralist theory, drawing primarily on the work of Peg Rawes, it explores how Heringer's Rudrapur trilogy in Bangladesh engages with the relational entanglements of material, social, and environmental ecologies. Rather than viewing sustainability through a technocratic or performance-based lens, Heringer's architecture foregrounds local materials, collective authorship, and socio-political empowerment. Her use of mud and bamboo is framed as both a practical and political act: resisting the high-carbon logic of global construction and reviving Indigenous knowledge systems. This analysis incorporates Foucauldian perspectives on power, revealing how materials embody and contest socio-economic hierarchies, and builds on Karen Barad's agential realism to show how materials co-produce architectural meaning. Heringer's work also reflects feminist relational theories of Rosi Braidotti, especially in her inclusive design processes and attention to marginalised users, including women and disabled individuals. However, the thesis also discusses the contradictions within her practice, particularly the postcolonial tensions tied to Western recognition as a figure, donations, and problems of authorship. Although her process's collective and participatory character is clear, along with the collaboration with a local NGO, her practice still works within the frames of Western privilege, which raises questions about the representational equity. Overall, this thesis argues that the theory of relational ecologies enriches the discussion on the emerging methodologies, helping to assess their potentials but also limitations (Open AI, n.d.).

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Introduction

The third millennium is the era for architecture when the challenges of climate change, economic disparity, and the legacies of colonisation reveal their deeply engrained entanglements. Consequently, the discipline can no longer operate in isolation, but is urged to become more intercontextual than ever in history. Sustainability, which since the Brundtland Report 1987 has been the ultimate guide for the ethical practice, is no longer the solution, as it often overlooks the cultural and social dimensions inherent in environmental transformation (Rawes, 2013). Without a radical redefinition of architectural methodology, no practice can address the complexities of today's ecological crises.

Within this context, Anna Heringer's practice offers an alternative to technocratic sustainability models. Her work emphasises local materials and collective processes, merging environmental responsibility with social justice. Heringer's architecture becomes a space where human and non-human agencies intersect, challenging dominant narratives and pushing the boundaries of what sustainable design can mean.

Internationally recognised for her use of earthen construction and participatory methods, Heringer centres her approach on community empowerment and local craftsmanship. While her projects span Europe and Asia, her most influential work unfolds in Rudrapur, Bangladesh. Since 2004, she has led a trilogy of projects there, the METI Handmade School, the DESI Electrical Training School, and the Anandaloy Centre, which together collectively embody her philosophy. Central to her approach is the use of mud: a low-carbon, locally sourced material that enables community-led building while resisting the dominant high-tech paradigm (Heringer, 2022). Through this, Heringer demonstrates how traditional techniques can support both ecological and economic resilience.

Despite international awards and recognition from leading academic institutions, Heringer's work remains under theorised. While she is acknowledged for her multidimensional material philosophy (Heringer, 2018), academic literature tends to frame her practice primarily within the technological context of vernacular-inspired construction (Rauch et al., 2019).

Contributing to this is the fact that Heringer does not clearly align herself with established architectural movements and resists being formally labelled as a feminist or humanitarian architect. These gaps underscore the value of continental philosophy as a lens, studied by theorists including Peg Rawes (2013), to examine the relational and ecological character of her practice. Within this framework, a posthuman perspective is especially helpful in evaluating Heringer's activity in the Global South. Her commitment to development work and activism inevitably brings up questions around white saviorism and Western gatekeeping, topics usually overlooked by Heringer's own literature and media coverage of her projects.

To support this critical exploration, the thesis draws primarily on Peg Rawes's *Relational Architectural Ecologies* (2013), a key work that translates theories of posthumanism,

ecofeminism, and new materialism into architectural discourse and provides the thesis with the definition of what *architecture beyond environmental responsiveness* means.

Additionally, the study engages with the writings of poststructuralist thinkers such as Guattari and Foucault, as well as posthuman feminist scholars, including Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Greta Gaard. This theoretical framework is paired with an analysis of Heringer's methodology, using primary sources such as her own publications and books, and is supported by academic lectures, interviews, and media coverage.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to answer the central question: *Does Anna Heringer's architecture transcend environmental responsiveness to engage with social and material ecologies?* By situating her work within these theoretical contexts, this study unpacks the meaning behind her motto, "*Architecture is a tool to improve lives*," (Heringer, 2018) and seeks to contribute a critical perspective to the discourse on ecological architecture, questioning whether such practices can function as instruments of environmental and social justice, or merely continue to perpetuate outdated definitions of sustainability.

Chapter 1: Defining Architecture Beyond Environmental Responsiveness – A Theoretical Framework

1.1 Poststructuralism and Posthumanism: Decentring the Human in Architecture

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework used to examine Heringer's architecture as a practice that goes beyond environmental responsiveness. It is based on the work of Peg Rawes (2013), particularly her ideas around feminist relational ecologies. Rawes (2013) argues that, over the last 30 to 40 years, architecture has often been understood mainly in terms of environmental performance, especially apparent with the rise of high-tech sustainability design. She highlights the fact that this narrow view tends to ignore the social and cultural impacts of practices that harm the environment. Her approach encourages a more comprehensive understanding of environmental issues, which will be used in this thesis to analyse Heringer's work.

Rawes (2013) draws on theoretical discussion mainly on poststructuralist thought, where figures like Derrida and Foucault challenged the idea of the human as the central source of meaning, emphasising instead the fluid, context-driven nature of identity. This decentering of the human paved the way for posthuman philosophy, which critiques Western anthropocentrism and promotes a more distributed understanding of knowledge. Building on this, Rawes calls for an architectural approach that embraces complexity and recognises that meaning shifts with each perspective.

This posthuman turn also informed anti-hierarchical theories that favour horizontal structures of power and becoming. Central to this is the concept of *ecosophy*, developed by Felix Guattari (2000), who rejected the idea of a separate, 'non-human' nature as a product of anthropocentric thinking. Especially relevant today, in the context of the climate crisis, colonial legacies, and global instability, Guattari proposed a view where nature, culture, and technology are deeply entangled. He reframed ecology as a philosophical condition that defines the interconnected structures sustaining all forms of existence. Rawes (2013) uses this framework to critique Western architecture's neglect of the cultural and social dimensions of environmental destruction, arguing that sustainability alone cannot achieve truly ecological design.

To expand on architecture's political and power-related dimensions, Peg Rawes draws on Foucauldian theories of power and knowledge. Following Foucault's writings, she presents architecture not as an objective or neutral discipline but as an inevitable expression of the power structures embedded within society (Rawes, 2020). This is understood beyond the traditionally symbolic role of the architectural form, but instead goes further into its material

scale. From the Foucauldian perspective, political beliefs do not function only as thoughts but are all embodied in physical matter. Consequently, architectural materials, such as brick, glass, and concrete, can be seen not only as products shaped by societal power structures but also as active agents in shaping society itself, echoing Lefebvre's well-known quote that space is both produced by and productive of social relations (Lefebvre, 1974).

1.2 New Materialism and Indigenous Knowledge: Reclaiming Material Agency

To explore material power, Rawes draws on new materialism, particularly Karen Barad's theory of agential realism. Barad argues that entities are not fixed or separate but come into being through intra-actions, which are mutual processes where bodies, materials, and discourses co-constitute one another. Knowledge, in this view, is not passively received but actively produced within these entanglements, making it a material-discursive force in shaping reality (Barad, 2007).

In light of this, Rawes brings back the Indigenous knowledge systems as a powerful counterpoint to Western, market-driven architectural practices. Unlike green architecture shaped by neoliberal values, vernacular and Indigenous methods align more closely with posthumanist and ecofeminist thinking (Rawes, 2013). These approaches treat materials as active participants rather than neutral resources, resisting the Western divide between nature, science, and culture. Drawing on G. Gaard's and L. Gruen's (1993) ecofeminist work, Rawes points to Indigenous ecologies as vital alternatives to colonial, extraction-based systems, offering relational, place-based practices that foreground ecological interdependence.

1.3 Feminist Relational Ecologies: Designing for Interdependence

Speaking of the rights and learnings from the Indigenous cultures, Peg Rawes (2013) directs the conversation to feminism as the ideology that safeguards the rights of the marginalised. Therefore, a significant part of Rawes's posthuman analysis was dedicated to the feminist relational thinking. Drawing from the posthuman feminism of Rosi Braidotti (2022), Peg Rawes explains how feminism in architecture advocates not only for women but for anyone living on the verge of inequality. She argued that typical feminist practices of collaboration and participation have the power to dismantle not only the gender based biases but also the nature, cultural or racial oppressive structures embedded in architecture. Following Rosi Braidotti's (2022) notion of unity through diversity, Rawes presents how feminist design shows the potential to address the needs of all members of the environment and empower beyond just women.

1.4 Summary: Toward an Ecologically and Socially Responsive Architecture

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this thesis is grounded in poststructuralist and posthumanist philosophies, as articulated through the work of Peg Rawes (2013). Her integration of thinkers such as Foucault, Guattari, Barad, Gaard, Gruen and Braidotti offers a multidimensional lens to critique and reimagine contemporary architectural methodologies. Moving beyond the limitations of market-driven sustainability models, Rawes (2013) emphasises the importance of relationality, material agency, inclusivity and decolonial perspectives. This framework not only challenges the anthropocentric and neoliberal paradigms embedded in contemporary architecture but also advocates for an ecologically, socially, and politically responsive practice that recognises the entangled nature of all beings and systems. Together, it serves as a theoretically grounded definition of the architecture beyond mere environmental responsiveness, which is essential for the critical analysis of Heringer's work.

Chapter 2: Relational Ecologies in Heringer's Architecture: A Methodological Analysis

2.1 Introduction: Scope and Focus of Analysis

Anna Heringer has been active in the architectural field for over 20 years, with numerous projects emerging from her small, three-person studio in Linz. She entered the international architectural scene in 2004 with her graduation project, the METI School in Rudrapur, which, since winning the 2005 Aga Khan Award, has remained her most recognisable building (Heringer, 2025).



Figure 1: METI school building (Heringer, n.d)

Deeply rooted in her background in development work, the METI School has shaped the trajectory of her career, setting a precedent for subsequent projects such as the DESI Electrical School (2007) and the Anandaloy Therapy Centre, which Dezeen later recognised as the “Building of 2020.” These projects share a common location, community, and stakeholders (Rauch et al., 2019). Thanks to this, they form a cohesive design trilogy that defines the essence of Heringer’s architectural methodology, and they are used in this thesis as the primary examples for analysis.

2.2 Architecture Beyond Environmental Responsiveness at the Territorial Scale

Drawing on Rawes's poststructuralist architectural thought, Anna Heringer's projects expand the meaning of sustainable architecture through situating it within broader ecological and socio-political frameworks. This approach emphasises the relationality of land, politics, and community, positioning these elements as central to the Rudrapur project series.

Each of the three buildings is embedded within a long-term development program initiated by the local Bangladeshi NGO Dipshikha, founded in the 1980s by local development workers, some with indigenous aborigine tribe roots. Dipshikha was established to support the development of rural areas in the Dinajpur district. The organisation prioritises financial, educational, and cultural resources for local youth and farmers, situating its work within a broader resistance to capitalist-driven urbanisation and desertification of the rural areas (Shanti, n.d.).



Figure 2: Rudrapur map with METI school and DESI building highlighted (Heringer, n.d.)

Heringer first joined Dipshikha in the 1990s as a development worker volunteer and later returned to contribute to its educational programs, which aim “to give the rural population perspectives and to help people learn about the value of the village in all its complexity” (Heringer, n.d.). These efforts respond to the structural pressures of

Bangladesh's overpopulation, a challenge typical for the country among the most densely populated in the world. With urban centres offering better job and educational opportunities, rural populations often migrate to cities, sacrificing a higher quality of life for overcrowded, less hygienic, and highly polluted environments (Rauch et al., 2019). In the mission to address these issues, Dipshikha's activity considers rural masterplanning, seeking to regulate migration patterns and counteract the capitalist market's destructive influence on local cultures and practices (Dipshikha, n.d.).

As part of this broader mission, Dipshikha commissioned the METI school in Rudrapur, a project designed to foster local children's sense of rural identity and instil independence through context-sensitive educational spaces (Heringer & Gauzin-Müller, 2024). This initiative was then followed by the establishment of the DESI Electrical School, a vocational training centre designed to address the region's lack of professional certification opportunities and to reduce the need for individuals to migrate to larger urban centres, which is costly and inaccessible for many individuals (Dipshikha, n.d.).

Together, these projects present an understanding of the architecture's socio-political dimensions and its power to shape the communities. Aligned with the Foucauldian perspective, they respond to the issues of overpopulation and urban migration, the problems that are closely tied to the political pressures of capitalist urbanisation. By embedding architecture within localised socio-environmental contexts, Heringer's work reflects Rawes's integrated ecological approach, which connects environmental (in this context, land), social, and political ecologies.

2.3 Material Agency: Mud and Bamboo as Political Acts

After examining Heringer's ecological approach at the territorial scale, it is equally important to consider how this logic extends to materiality. For Heringer, architecture is a political act, and those involved in construction have a responsibility to build a fairer society (Herzberger et al., 2014). Aligned with Foucauldian and new materialist thought, in Heringer's architecture, material choices are not neutral, but they are expressions of power, governance, and social intent.

The METI School exemplifies this material philosophy across multiple scales; Globally, the use of local mud and bamboo resists capitalist, high-carbon construction norms and reduces environmental impact; Regionally, these materials support the local economy by employing artisans and keeping investments within the community; At the micro scale, bio-based materials improve indoor comfort, while community involvement in construction fosters local resilience.

Building on Karen Barad's (2003) theory of agential realism, Heringer sees materials not as static elements, but as active participants in social and ecological processes. As she noted in her Harvard GSD (2018) lecture:

"From a socio-technical perspective, Earth is not just a material; it is a process and can be a catalyst for development."

In METI, mud and bamboo catalysed both the environmental and social transformation, providing jobs, honouring tradition, and engaging the community. Heringer (2018) frames these materials as "potentials," embodying cultural, ecological, and historical dimensions that can effect meaningful change when activated through design.

This dynamic play between local craft and global knowledge is further demonstrated in the DESI Electrical Centre, where traditional bamboo construction was combined with techniques introduced by German engineer Martin Rauch. This collaboration reflects Barad's (2003) notion that knowledge is not universal but emerges through specific material-discursive intra-actions between people, tools, and environments.

Heringer's work also subverts the capitalist logic of extractive material economies by embracing vernacular, low-carbon construction over industrial, high-embodied-energy alternatives. This approach reflects a new materialist ethic of decentralised agency and ecological care (Rawes, 2013). By rejecting concrete and steel in favour of earth and bamboo, her projects challenge Western-dominated models that perpetuate dependency and environmental harm, while fostering local autonomy and sustainability.

Through the lens of *agential realism* (Barad, 2003), Heringer's architecture becomes a site of material-discursive entanglement, where matter, knowledge, and social structures co-emerge. By bridging Indigenous knowledge with global expertise manifests the importance of care and collaboration. Refusing to treat the architecture as a passive backdrop, she presents it as an active, feminist, posthumanist agent shaping socio-political and ecological realities.

2.4 Reclaiming Vernacular Knowledge: Ecofeminist Perspectives in Heringer's Work

Heringer's practice signifies a radical shift in architectural thinking by emphasising the agency of materials. The vernacular building techniques, which she relies on in all the Rudrapur projects, play an essential role in this notion and align with the ecofeminist and posthuman feminist goals.

Her mission to revive the ancient Bangladeshi tradition of earthen architecture began with her first project, the METI School (Heringer & Gauzin-Müller, 2024). Mud construction is deeply rooted in rural Bangladeshi traditions, particularly in the north, where clay-rich soils are abundant and ideal for this form of building. Historically, communities built thatched mud

houses using materials sourced directly from the surrounding landscape, such as straw and soil, which reflects both the cultural embeddedness of the complex craftsmanship and ecological wisdom (Islam, 2016). Pointing out the natural benefits of cooling during high temperatures and thermal insulation in cooler seasons, Heringer is convinced that these methods are well-suited to Rudrapur's context of the tropical monsoon climate.

Equally important in Heringer's vernacular practice is her emphasis on its social dimensions. Unlike mainstream sustainability architecture, which often prioritises environmental performance (Rawes, 2013), Heringer foregrounds the profound social and cultural impacts of traditional building methods. In the case of mud construction in Rudrapur, she demonstrates how engaging local craftsmanship revitalises human capital, fosters economic resilience, and strengthens community identity, all while preserving living traditions. Through this approach, Heringer reveals how indigenous value systems, rooted in collaboration, care, and continuity, offer a more holistic and context-sensitive alternative to capitalist, profit-driven models that often overlook the intertwined needs of people, culture, and nature (Gaard & Gruen, 1993).



Figure 3: Mud construction workers on METI school project site (Heringer, n.d.)

These aspects of Heringer's vernacular methodologies resonate strongly with ecofeminist and posthuman feminist thought, particularly with Gaard's and Gruen's (1993) call to reactivate indigenous knowledge as a tool for cultural and environmental sustainability. In prioritising the social impact of vernacular techniques, Heringer also calls for a more holistic approach to architecture, one that stands in direct opposition to concrete, which is often produced in isolation from local context, people, and economies.

In doing so, her work contributes to the posthuman feminist mission of challenging the binary between nature and culture, advocating instead for a 'natureculture continuum' that recognises the mutual interdependence of human and non-human actors (Braidotti, 2022).

Chapter 3: The Rudrapur Trilogy through Feminist Perspectives

3.1 Feminist Foundations and the Architecture of Care

Nearly all of the key theorists referenced in this thesis, including Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Peg Rawes, have a common foundation: they are all feminist thinkers. As such, when examining Heringer's work through the posthuman lens of their theories, it is essential to foreground the feminist dimensions that underpin the intention and impact of their architectural interventions.

Firstly, the user groups prioritised in Heringer's Rudrapur trilogy reveal a clear focus on women. In both the METI and Anandaloy projects, she addressed women's needs by initiating a textile craft cooperative, *Dipdii Textiles*, which provided formal employment opportunities (Heringer, 2018). This focus is justified by the argument that supporting women helps ensure that invested funds remain within the local economy, as women, due to their care responsibilities, are more likely to spend earnings in local businesses and markets.



Figure 4: *Dipdii Textiles space in Anandaloy Centre (Heringer, n.d.)*



Figure 5: Woman working on the construction site of Anandaloy building (Heringer, n.d.)

More significantly, in *Anandaloy Centre*, Heringer moves even beyond traditional gender binaries to address structural inequalities affecting also people with disabilities. As Braidotti (2022, p. 3) asserts, “Feminism is the struggle to empower those who live along multiple axes of inequality.” In rural Bangladesh, disability is often stigmatised and interpreted through religious or superstitious narratives (Heringer, 2018). Heringer challenges this through architecture that offers both therapy and inclusion. As she noted in her Harvard GSD lecture (2018), “Places for therapy are rare in the country and altogether nonexistent in that zone. Often viewed as an outcome of bad karma from past lives (Heringer, n.d.), disabilities in Bangladesh are more hidden than accepted. However, architecture can shed light on issues and communities that are ordinarily overlooked, and can thus help raise awareness”.

The *Anandaloy Centre* also takes the notion of inclusivity even further as it also integrates the celebration of difference in its symbolic elements. One of the building’s most important form features is the gently spiralling ramp that wraps around the entire curved structure. This feature not only enhances accessibility but also communicates a celebration of bodily diversity, transforming functional design into an embodied gesture of care. Similarly, in the *METI School*, Heringer introduced mud cave spaces that offer children alternative environments for movement and play, spaces that intentionally blur the boundaries of accessibility and challenge normative spatial hierarchies (Rauch et al., 2019). These design choices resist the architectural norms that often exclude differently abled bodies.

This move from gender-centred design to an intersectional architectural practice that actively includes disabled individuals reflects what Braidotti (2013) describes as a “transformative, (...), and radical struggle to affirm positively the differences among marginalised people(s).” Aligned with this quote, Heringer centres the least represented groups in her work and consequently engages with the spatial politics rooted in care and justice, reinforcing Rawes’ idea that ethical architecture must prioritise the striving for equality.

3.2 Participation and Collectiveness in the Design Process

Heringer’s architecture not only presents an inclusive design in spatial terms but also an inclusive method of making. She prioritises the *process* over the architectural *product*, which underscores the feminist ethics of relationality and collective agency (Barad, 2007).

A great example of such action is the *METI School*, which was not only built *for* children but also *with* them. Emphasising participatory processes, Heringer invited Montessori-trained educators, Christine Karl and Clemens Bernhard, to guide children through hands-on construction tasks (Rauch et al., 2019).

Similarly, in the DESI School project, she reflects on the iterative, on-site nature of the design process, describing how the building got erected from sketches, not elaborated computational drawings, allowing this way wider collaboration and bigger engagement of the construction workers. In the memory of the building process, she tells a story about how the curved window edges in the final version of the building came from the initiative of one of the builders. Heringer embraced the change, ultimately adopting the curved form throughout the building (Heringer, 2018). This anecdote illustrates how authorship becomes collaborative and fluid, shaped by a dialogue between designer, builder, and material.

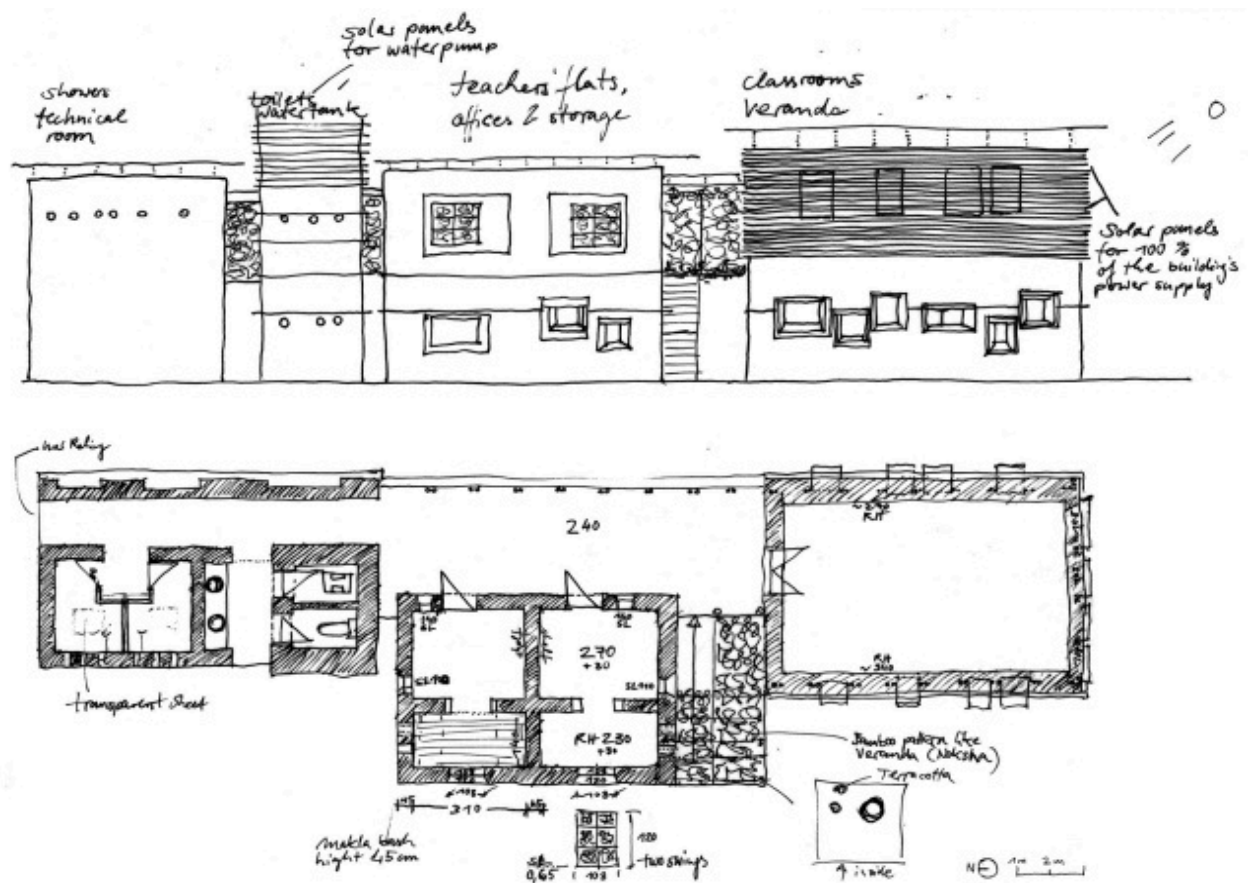


Figure 6: Building sketches of the DESI building (Heringer, n.d.)

In the newest project from the trilogy, the Anandaloy Centre, Heringer took this approach further by deliberately reducing foreign intervention. Local craftspeople and contractors assumed primary roles in construction, without reliance on international experts and funding (Rauch et al., 2019).

This ethical stance repositions architecture within broader ecologies of responsibility and relational processes. For Heringer, architecture is not a static object but a continuous process of becoming, presenting this way in practice Rawes' stance that the designer should play the role of the mediator and facilitator of the collective action.

Chapter 4: Postcolonial Power Tensions in Heringer's Practice: A Critical Reflection

4.1 Postcolonial Tensions in Heringer's Practice

Anna Heringer's architectural practice is most recognised for her work in the Global South, particularly her trilogy of projects in rural Bangladesh. While collective and participatory design are central to her approach, analysing her work through the lenses of posthumanism, ecofeminism, and poststructuralism reveals certain contradictions. These frameworks expose how colonial power dynamics persist in architecture, especially when European designers engage in postcolonial contexts (Rawes, 2013).

As a German architect working in Bangladesh, Heringer's position inevitably intersects with the complexities of *white saviorism*, a critique of Western-led development in the Global South (Cammarota, 2011). Posthumanist and postcolonial theories challenge the Eurocentric narratives that cast Western actors as agents of progress, urging a more critical view of humanitarian design (Braidotti, 2013). Ecofeminism further highlights how global crises are rooted in intersecting systems of patriarchy, racism, classism, and imperialism (Gaard & Gruen, 2011). Given architecture's historical ties to colonialism and its role in shaping land, culture, and power (Gutting, 1989), it is vital to ask whether Heringer's participatory and material strategies support decolonisation or risk reproducing "*soft colonialism*" under the guise of development (Standard, 2018).

This tension becomes clearer when examining the networks behind her projects. The METI School, DESI Centre, and Anandaloy Centre were all developed with Dipshikha, an NGO Heringer describes as locally grounded (Heringer, 2022). However, the organisation has long depended on Western support, particularly through international volunteer programs and donors. Founded in the 1980s, Dipshikha partnered early on with German philanthropist Fr. Klaus, who initiated volunteer exchanges and helped attract funding from organisations like Caritas and UNICEF (Dipshikha, n.d.). This, together, shows how, despite the Dipshikha's local base, the resources continue to flow predominantly from the West to the South (Andreotti, 2011), raising questions about where power truly lies within such collaborations.

4.2 Hidden Knowledge Hierarchies in Participatory Design

The idea of participatory design as inherently horizontal becomes more complex in practice. In the METI School, Heringer introduces the notion of "*archaic needs*", which are universal spatial desires like corners, quietness, and sensory engagement, shaped in part by her own childhood memories. These needs informed the design of the mud caves in both the METI and Anandaloy Centres, which she portrays as co-created with local teachers (Heringer, 2020). In the aspects of collective creation, this aligns with feminist and posthumanist

principles that value embodied experience; nevertheless, the reliance on personal, rather than culturally rooted, references risks the dangers of essentialism. This contrasts with posthumanist perspectives that emphasise hybridity and contextual multiplicity (Barad, 2007).



Figure 7: Mud caves in Anandaloy Centre (Heringer, n.d.)

Her blend of vernacular and modern building methods further reveals poststructural tensions. Though she promotes the fusion of traditional techniques with “*global know-how*” (Rauch et al., 2019), the term itself, rooted in capitalist ideas of intellectual property, implies a hierarchy of knowledge. Its repeated use in lectures and publications reflects how architectural language can subtly reinforce Western epistemological dominance (Rawes, 2013). In development contexts, this especially calls for greater awareness of the power structures embedded in both design processes and discourse (Escobar, 1995).

4.3 Material Perceptions and the Paradox of Postcolonial Practice

Heringer directly addresses postcolonial tensions in *Upscaling Earth*, where she reflects on the resistance to using mud as a building material in the METI School project. In rural Bangladesh, she observed that materials like concrete, shaped by colonial histories and development aid, are often associated with modernity and progress, while mud is seen as primitive and poor (Rauch et al., 2019). In this text, she acknowledges the discussion of whether her design was “imposed,” given that local preference initially leaned toward

Western construction styles. However, she ultimately argues that the project's social value, particularly its role in community cohesion and the revival of local building skills, justifies the approach.

This paradox is echoed by a Bangladeshi architect and professor, who draws a parallel to Hassan Fathy:

“Embedded, like Fathy in the village of Gourn, Heringer and her companions basically arrived from the cosmopolis to renew the art of building from a somewhat atrophied tradition. While they may have started with an architectural upper hand (which might incite some postcolonial harm), they also learned a few things along the way—about humility and humanity, and about the larger social impact of modest building.” (Ashraf, 2007, p. 116)

Heringer’s case is not unique. Architects like Jane Drew in the mid-20th century also applied participatory design in colonial and postcolonial contexts. While their work was praised in feminist circles for engaging local communities, it often relied on modernist frameworks that ignored local spatial traditions and the cultural significance of materials, ultimately disconnecting design from lived realities (Nunes, 2023).

4.4 Decentring Western Recognition and Reclaiming Local Authority

In contrast to Anna Heringer, Marina Tabassum, who is a Bangladeshi architect working within her own cultural context, demonstrates a deeply rooted, community-based approach using vernacular materials and techniques (Fratino, 2022). While both architects employ participatory methods and sustainable strategies, Tabassum’s work is grounded in local traditions and shaped by community needs without the mediation of Western development agendas. Yet, despite this, she receives far less international recognition, although she also won the Aga Khan Award. Heringer, as a Western architect, has been widely celebrated and featured in platforms like Dezeen, exposing how global architecture continues to favour Western figures even when applying similar or less culturally embedded practices.

Such imbalance presents the ongoing problem of the Western gatekeeping within architectural discourse and underlines the need to value not only alternative knowledge systems but also their local creators, who are more contextually grounded in the cultures and histories. Genuine decolonisation must go beyond collaboration; it demands a rethinking of who holds authority, who tells the story, and whose work gets acknowledged. While Heringer’s projects helped bring attention to earthen and participatory architecture during the high-tech sustainability era, most narratives remain influenced by her own German perspective. As her activity in Bangladesh reaches its conclusion, it opens a necessary space for local architects like Tabassum to lead and reshape the narrative on their own terms.

Conclusion

Anna Heringer's architectural practice transcends conventional models of environmental responsiveness by engaging with philosophical theories of material and relational ecologies. Through her Rudrapur trilogy, she challenges dominant paradigms of sustainable architecture, though her work remains inevitably entangled in Western frameworks of power and influence.

Drawing on Peg Rawes' conception of ecologies, this thesis demonstrates how Heringer's architecture acknowledges the deep interconnections between social, cultural, and environmental issues (Rawes, 2013). Her collaboration with the local Bangladeshi NGO illustrates how her architecture functions not only as a design but as long-term social schemes (Dipshikha, n.d.). Expanding on this relational aspect, Heringer's material choices, specifically her use of earth and bamboo, are not only practical but also play a political role in her projects. By opting for locally sourced, low-tech materials, Heringer subverts these power structures in an ecofeminist gesture, repositioning Indigenous knowledge systems as central to architectural innovation (Gaard & Gruen, 1993).

This material agency also aligns with Karen Barad's (2003) *agential realism*, which recognises materials as active participants in socio-environmental relations. By blurring the boundaries between human and non-human agency, Heringer also contributes to the posthuman notion of anthropocentrism critique. Moreover, her emphasis on care, inclusivity, and collective agency, especially in projects like the Anandaloy Centre, embodies feminist relational ecologies and reflects Rawes' vision of architecture as a transformative and ethical collective practice (Rawes, 2013).

Nonetheless, Heringer's role as a Western architect operating in a postcolonial context raises inevitable tensions around power, representation, and authorship (Andreotti, 2011). While her partnerships with local communities and her revival of vernacular techniques are commendable, her reliance on Western funding and the disproportionate global recognition she receives highlight enduring structural inequalities, especially in contrast to local architects like Marina Tabassum (Fratino, 2022). Her work, while progressive, cannot be fully classified as posthuman or poststructuralist, as it still reflects Western dominance dynamics in its methodologies and reception.

This thesis, therefore, underscores the importance of theorising currently emerging design methodologies, not only to illuminate the innovations of practices like Heringer's but also to examine their contradictions critically. As Rawes and others have argued, applying posthumanist and poststructuralist frameworks to architecture enables a deeper understanding of such collective methodologies, helping in this way to recognise both their advancements and their limitations (Rawes, 2013; Barad, 2003). In doing so, architecture is

reimagined not as a “*tool to improve lives*” (Heringer, 2018) but rather as a critical practice capable of shaping more just, inclusive, and interconnected futures.

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