

# For a School in Nairobi, Furniture That Functions

“Design for Communities” displays beautifully simple furnishings made for a primary school in Kenya’s capital.



A bed designed by Giacomo Moor. Alessandro Treves

By Ray Mark Rinaldi  
April 11, 2023

This article is part of our [Design special report](#) previewing 2023 Milan Design Week.

Giacomo Moor was driven by one basic principle as he created furniture for a children’s school in an impoverished section of Nairobi: simplification.

The benches, tables and beds, he reasoned, needed to be made of local, low-cost materials, to remain durable over time, and to come together in a way that the objects could be replicated easily using only basic tools.

The resulting pieces, a line of furniture made with function top of mind, is stripped down and sturdy and constructed through a system of interlocking wooden parts that fit together without the need for high-tech machinery.

That simplicity is sure to stand out when the furniture goes on display in the exhibition “Design for Communities,” which will open on Tuesday during Milan Design Week in the headquarters of [Assab One](#), a nonprofit that supports artists and designers in the development of experimental projects.

Design Week is a high-end affair known for its refined wares, made from precious materials and polished for pricey consumption. [Mr. Moor's](#) furniture will be displayed in as-is fashion, a plain setting of benches and bunk beds made from unfinished lumber. The sparse wooden elements will also be shown as deconstructed pieces, so visitors can see how the furniture is engineered.

Dressing up the presentation will be an exhibition of photos by four photographers who documented the designer's process of developing the work on location in an area known as Mathare.



One of the oldest “slum” neighborhoods of Nairobi, Mathare is a sprawling and crowded metropolis with densely packed housing, unpaved streets and buildings constructed in exposed concrete block and sheets of tin. [Francesco Giusti](#)

One of the oldest “slum” neighborhoods of Nairobi, Mathare is a sprawling and crowded metropolis with — as those photos in the exhibition will vividly show — densely packed housing, unpaved streets and buildings constructed in exposed concrete block and sheets of tin.

The designer traveled there last fall at the invitation of [Live in Slums](#), a Milan-based nongovernmental organization that backs social enterprises in poor, urban areas around the world. His assignment was to work with local residents in creating the furniture for the Why Not Academy, a primary school that Live in Slums helped develop starting in 2012. The two-story building has classrooms, but also a dining hall and a dormitory to accommodate families who need temporary lodging, Mr. Moor said.

The goal was to produce prototypes that could be copied using limited resources and would allow community members to make them on their own.

Mr. Moor decided the furniture needed to be restrained, without superfluous or decorative touches that would require elaborate milling. The designer, who is known for creating delicate shelving, chairs and lighting out of wood, chose eucalyptus, which is abundant in the area, as his main material.

He made drawings of the objects in his Milan studio and took them to Kenya, where the finished pieces were realized on-site. “It was a very, very complex experience,” he said. “Nairobi is a difficult place.”

No glue is needed, just a few screws to hold the legs steady to the ground, he said. Additionally, the furniture can be disassembled easily, so if one part is damaged by weather or use, that single part can be easily replaced.

Mr. Moor's furnishings are efficient and practical and respond to a real need "without rhetoric and with a great ability to listen to context," said [Davide Fabio Colaci](#), who organized the exhibition that will bring the objects to audiences in Milan. That context is colorfully illustrated in the photos, which were taken by Francesco Giusti, Filippo Romano, Mattia Zoppellaro and Alessandro Treves.

In a video interview last week, Mr. Moor said his plan for the autonomous fabrication of his pieces by people in Mathare was going well. Locals have already finished work on numerous tables and benches, with the immediate needs of the school's 300 students driving their efforts to reproduce his design.

"It is really sleek and simple, but it is still beautiful, which is amazing," he said. "Design for Communities" is on view from April 18 through April 23 at Assab One, Via Privata Assab; [assab-one.org](http://assab-one.org).

A version of this article appears in print on April 13, 2023 in The New York Times International Edition. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)