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# Outside

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## FLORENCE WILLIAMS

A longtime *Outside* contributing editor, Williams writes frequently about environmental issues and design. She was the perfect choice to report on Kenya's forthcoming Lobolo Ecolodge, a state-of-the-art example of clean, low-impact architecture set in the middle of wildlife heaven ("**A BLUEPRINT THAT BREATHES,**" page 90.) Williams loved the buildings but was especially impressed by the "soulfulness of the Lobolo project and the sensitivity to the place and the people."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JOSHUA PAUL (2);  
ERIK BROWN; JOSHUA PAUL; ROB CLAYTON.



# A BLUEPRINT THAT BREATHES

[THE WORLD'S LEADING ECO-ARCHITECT ON HOW TO BUILD GREEN]

**MOST OF US IMAGINE** that a stay at an eco-lodge means eyeballing howler monkeys from the deck of a tree house with a cup of shade-grown espresso. But beyond a remote location and a few solar panels, what makes a lodge "eco"? We asked internationally renowned eco-architect and planner **HITESH MEHTA** to walk us through the creation of a sustainable retreat that mixes the eco, the exotic, and the luxe.

Drawing up plans for the proposed **LOBOLO ECOLODGE**, on the western edge of Kenya's Lake Turkana, Mehta began where all good design should: with the neighbors. "The local people are seldom included in the initial planning or in the assessment of a lodge's potential impacts," says Mehta, a Kenyan-born Indian working for the Florida landscape architecture firm EDSA. "Yet they are the ones who know the resources and whose culture needs to be respected."

The pastoral Turkana tribe, whose cattle still graze the arid moonscape surrounding the lake, hold two things sacred: water and grass. So Mehta incorporated, for example, a path for cows, and gutterless buildings that speed rain back to the soil.

Although construction has been on hold due to regional strife, Kenya's political situation has cleared, and Mehta's client, the Kenyan outfitter Jade Sea Safaris, is already using

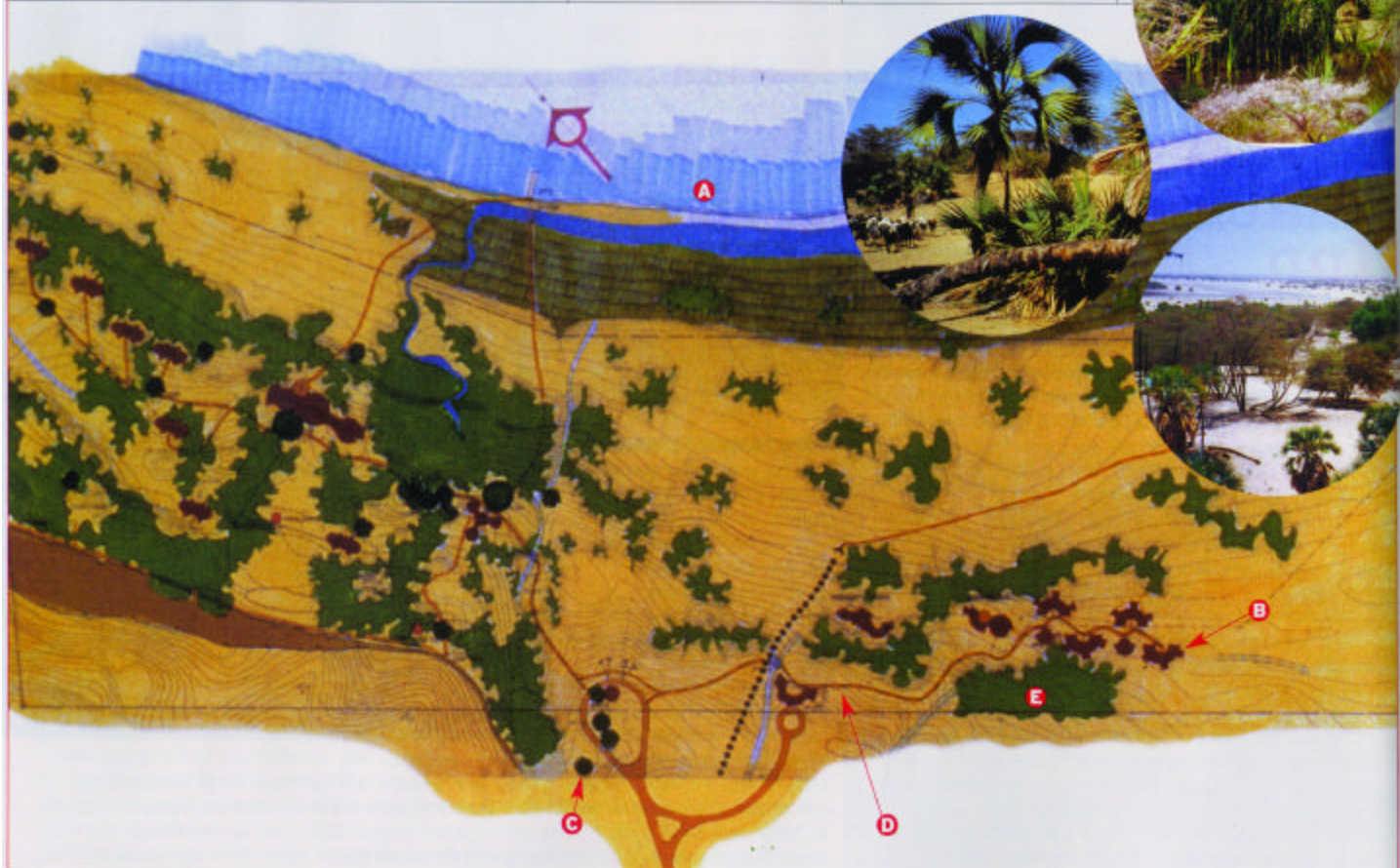
the site as a tent camp for birders, cultural tourists, and fossil-seekers headed across the lake to the Koobi Fora archaeological sites made famous by the Leakeys. When completed, Lobolo Ecolodge will be luxurious—\$300 a night for bush convenience—but its footprint will be decidedly low-key: Eco-architecture often means reining in grand plans—forget the gold-plated faucets if the metal was mined by exploited workers—in favor of local supplies. Mehta's team studied native plants, searched out sustainably harvested timber, and found the best outdoor lighting that still allows for power stargazing.



Will Lobolo's guests appreciate Mehta's hard work? Yes, if it's done right. "The lodge will feel timeless," he says. "Its main feature is the natural world. If we cannot create an almost spiritual connection to nature, we have failed."

—FLORENCE WILLIAMS

**ECO-SUMMIT:** Mehta (holding stick), his client, and Turkana elders discuss plans.



**A. AERIAL VIEW OF SITE:** "The whole landscape around Lobolo Ecolodge is a desert, and the site of the lodge is actually an oasis," explains Mehta. "We wanted to make sure that we did not overdesign and therefore violate the limits of acceptable change to the site." Mehta's team calculated the carrying capacity of the spring-fed oasis, then subtracted the water needed to keep the cattle pasture green and to replenish groundwater sources. The final tally: enough water for only 16 guest units, eight campsites, and 12 units of staff housing—roughly 85 people in all. Structures are set far enough from the lake to make it accessible to cattle, goats, and shorebirds.

**A. LAKE TURKANA** is home to huge flocks of flamingos, and serves as a nesting site or flyway for 350 other bird species. It's also a fine swimming hole (albeit one shared with crocodiles and hippos), so there's no need for an energy- and water-hogging pool.

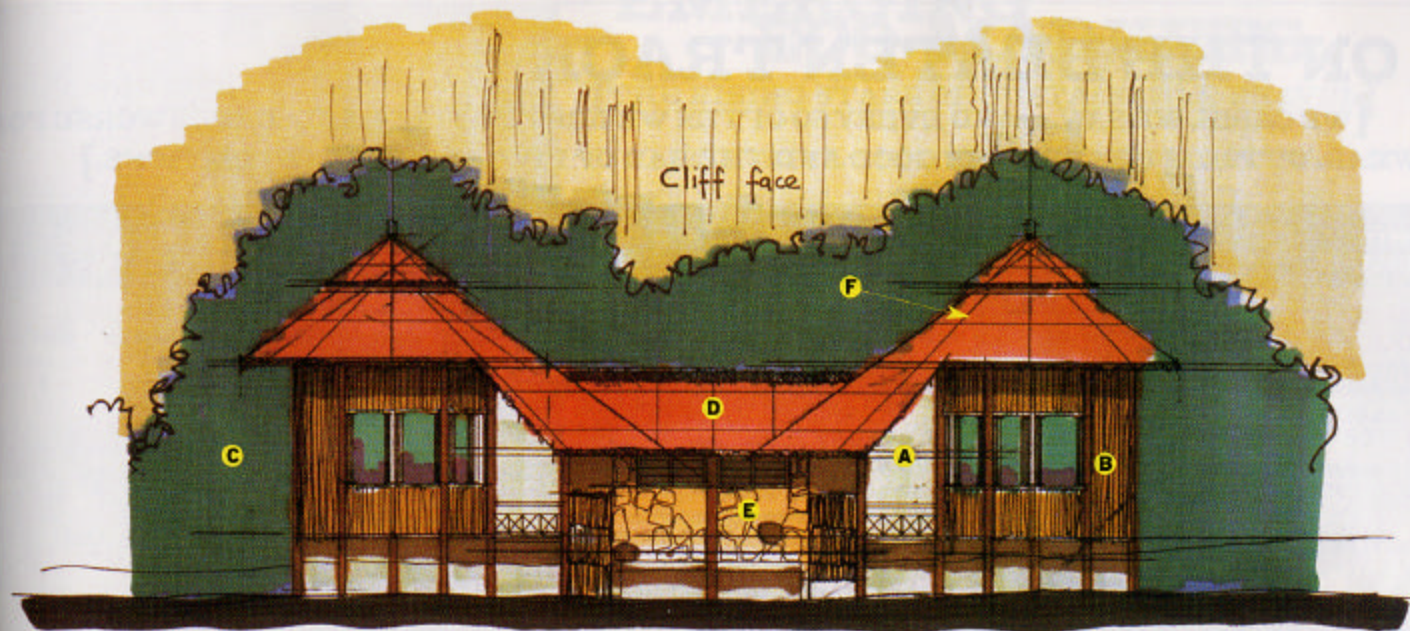
**C. A small GROCERY STORE** and medical dispensary for use by locals and guests will be staffed by members of the Turkana tribe.

**D. The tribe helped identify the best route for this CATTLE PATH** to nearby grass pastures. "We want the Turkana to feel pride in this design," says Mehta.

**B. STAFF HOUSING:** 12 to 15 employees (80 percent of the 20- to 30-person staff will be locals) will live on the grounds with their families.

**E. DOUM PALMS AND LEAFLESS ACACIAS** are indigenous to the area but have been damaged by El Niño storms. Reestablishing these will attract native birds and insects.





**SIDE VIEW OF GUEST UNIT:** Each of the two-unit guest villas—framed out of local pine—will be built on stilts to protect them from flash floods in the brief monsoon season and to allow the natural flow of surface water into the lake. The Turkana helped identify the best cabin spots for viewing sunrises over the water and for spotting the occasional oryx or gazelle.

**C. GARDEN:** Recycled gray water will irrigate the grounds and the organic vegetable garden. The lodge will eventually have two "constructed wetlands" to purify septic waste naturally. The camping area will use water-free composting toilets.

**A. LIGHTS:** Outside, movement-sensitive lights will point downward to maximize stargazing and reduce light pollution. Inside, you'll find only low-wattage bulbs.

**D. PORCH AWNINGS** will be woven by the Turkana out of reeds from nearby wetlands and fast-growing bamboo.

**B. CONSTRUCTION:** No nails will be used, because of their "high energy embodiment"—steel is made by burning fossil fuels, and the folks at Lobolo prefer their fossils in the ground. Tongue-and-groove construction will hold timber flooring and ceiling boards in place, and sisal ropes and palm strings will be used to secure the rafters to the roof frame.

**E. BATHROOMS:** Low-flush toilets will use only 1.6 gallons per flush, instead of the standard commercial 3.5. Even better, the shower heads will use a half-gallon per minute at high pressure, compared with the normal 2.5. Only biodegradable, non-phosphate shampoo and soap may be used.

**INTERIOR:** Floors will be made of local slate from the town of Loiyangalani, and furniture, floor mats, and recycling baskets will be locally constructed from palm fronds. Mosquito nets will keep the odd bug away, and ceiling fans and roof vents will serve as air-conditioning. You might sweat a little when summer temps reach 104 degrees, but just think: No noise to drown out the songs of the African skimmers, wagtails, and stints.

**F. ROOFS** will be fashioned out of sisal-fiber-reinforced cement tiles, which will be made on-site. Energy will be supplied by photovoltaic panels.

