

Pritzker Prize Winner Francis Kéré Designs Mausoleum for Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso

February 21, 2025



Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso - Acclaimed architect Francis Kéré, the first African to win the prestigious Pritzker Prize, has returned to his home country of Burkina Faso to undertake a deeply personal project: the design of a mausoleum honoring the late pan-Africanist leader and former president, Thomas Sankara. Kéré, whose previous work includes commissions such as the new parliament building in Benin, the Goethe Institute Dakar, and the Las Vegas Museum of Art, sees this project as a profound responsibility. “My God, what a project, what a challenge!” Kéré recalled thinking upon receiving the proposal. “This is the first time I’ve been asked to take on the responsibility of constructing a building in memory of such a great figure.”

Thomas Sankara, often called “Africa’s Che Guevara,” served as president of Burkina Faso from 1983 to 1987, transforming the nation through his anti-corruption efforts and focus on education, health, gender equality, and infrastructure development. He was assassinated at the age of 37 in a 1987 coup. The mausoleum, commemorating Sankara and twelve of his aides who were killed alongside him, forms the initial phase of the larger Thomas Sankara Memorial, a project conceived by Burkina Faso’s president, Ibrahim Traoré.

Kéré envisions the 14-hectare memorial site not as a place of death and suffering, but rather as a vibrant space for life and gathering. The design incorporates green spaces for students, areas for celebrations, and exhibits showcasing Sankara’s revolutionary ideals. The building where Sankara was assassinated will be preserved at the memorial’s heart, encircled by water. An 87-meter tower will serve as an urban landmark,

and the site will also include an amphitheater, restaurants, and conference rooms. “After all, we want this to belong to the people,” Kéré emphasizes.

A key design element of the mausoleum is its use of laterite and earth, a traditional building material in Burkina Faso. This choice, according to civil engineer Nataniel Sawadogo, creates a naturally cool interior environment, similar to the traditional earthen cooling jars used in the region. Kéré’s commitment to using locally sourced materials extends beyond environmental sustainability. “If we extract the earth from a village, the villagers will benefit from the work, rather than a big company,” he explains. The mausoleum’s domed structure features small openings that allow light to filter in during the day and shine outward at night. Luc Damiba, secretary general of the International Thomas Sankara Memorial committee, describes the visitor experience: “Visitors will enter from one side and exit from the other, like in Egyptian mausoleums.” Kéré’s design philosophy for the mausoleum centers on simplicity, interplay of light and shadow, and the use of traditional techniques to achieve modern comfort. “I want people to come in and wonder where the air conditioning is, only to realize there isn’t any,” Kéré says. “That’s my mission – to show that with traditional techniques, we can also stay cool.”

