

Roofs. Local Materials, Simple Technology, Sophisticated Ideas

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“Housing problems are not restricted to the poor. The solutions we want to put forward concern all societies. But since we have to set priorities, emphasis was put on techniques accessible for the poor members of society. The general problems of housing can be classified into three principal domains: that of social, environmental and technical criteria.”

Written from the 1970s onwards, *Roofs* collects practical information (tested for UNESCO by the author himself) on the construction of roofs and shelters, which were intended to meet the material needs of the poor in the global South. It consists of manuals written independently of each other, and is happily representative of the maturity of Friedman, who in those years had already decided to focus his interventions on how to include the inhabitants in the design of their habitat, because “participation is not spontaneous and cannot be claimed out of the blue.” While *Utopies réalisables* (literally, “Achievable Utopias,” 1975 – no English edition to date) represents the theoretical summa of this intense period, the manuals are the main communicative tool the Franco-Hungarian architect created, which was aimed at making such utopias concrete.

The manuals are composed of essential “blackboard” sketches, which can also be read and interpreted by illiterate people – a feature that convinced Indira Gandhi to print a large number of copies, and also contributed to the establishment of the Museum of Simple Technology founded by Friedman in Madras (currently Chennai), in the mid-eighties. In *Roofs*, the author brings to the attention of his readers the fact that the various problems of modern cities are the result of irresponsible attitudes towards the Earth. This thesis was perfectly in line with the thinking of some architects (including Christopher Alexander, Enzo Mari, Victor Papanek and Bernard Rudofsky), who at the time, and each in his own way, expressed strong criticism of industrial society.

Yona Friedman (Budapest, 1923–Paris, 2020) was an architect. During his formative years, he attended lectures by Werner Heisenberg and Károly Kerényi, among others. After the Second World War, during which he was active in the anti-Nazi resistance, he moved to Haifa, Israel, where he worked for about a decade. He had been living in Paris since 1957. He taught in numerous American universities and collaborated with the UN and UNESCO. His intense output ranges from architecture to physics, from sociology to mathematics. In recent years, Friedman was invited to the eleventh Documenta in Kassel and several editions of La Biennale in Venice. His books available in English include *Pro Domo* (Actar, Barcelona 2006) and interviews by Hans-Ulrich Obrist & Yona Friedman in vol. 7 of *The Conversation Series* (Walther König, Köln 2007). His work is the subject of the recently published Yona Friedman, Manuel Orazi, *The Dilution of Architecture*, edited by Nader Seraj (Park Books, Zurich 2015).

Cover image: sequence from Yona Friedman, *What can you build with and how?*
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