

Economy Of Local Life

GODELIEVE SPAAS

As a professor at a university for applied science, I increasingly see myself as a freedom fighter. I aim to liberate what I value from the clutches of an all-consuming economic system centered on profit maximization, endless growth, and competition. By freeing elements from this system and exploring how they might integrate into society in new ways, I hope to discover how an economy that genuinely cares for all life on Earth can take shape. Currently, I am exploring how to liberate small pieces of land and what alternative ways of working with and on the land might emerge.

About a year ago I bought an artwork. It is a brick made of clay from the Jatiwangi area in Indonesia. The stone represents a certificate for a piece of land measuring 4 by 4 meters. An official certificate is also included. By buying this work of art I de-own a piece of land. This artistic project is called Perhutana project: let's find a way to liberate land for the forests.

Every time I see the brick on the shelf, I think: I've liberated a tiny piece of land. This project is one of many by the artist collective Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF), who explore through their work what a local, solidarity-driven,

and compassionate economy could be like. In June 2024, they organized the Terra Cotta Triennale, a retrospective exhibition. Gingga Syarif Hasyim (artists and one of the founders of JaF) and Arie Syarifuddin (artist and director of the artist in residency program at JaF) invited Olga Mink (artistic director of Future of Work), Peter Zuiderwijk (designer/artist), and me to participate. We've worked together before through Future of Work, an artistic platform focused on a collective economy. JaF also participated in the *Who is the Economy?* festival (see the article with the same name in this magazine).

We spent a little over a week with the JaF community. I was curious about their projects, ideas, and perspectives on alternative economies in the context of a new colonial era emerging in the region. In Jatiwangi, Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese factories are rapidly sprouting up—massive

Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF) was established in 2005 and is a community that embraces contemporary arts and cultural practices as part of the local life discourse in a rural area. Their manifold activities, always involving the local public, include a video festival, a music festival, a residency program, a discussion series, and a TV and radio station.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, its clay industry made Jatiwangi the biggest roof-tile producing region in Southeast Asia. A hundred years later, in 2005, using the same clay, JaF encouraged the people of Jatiwangi to create a collective awareness and identity for their region through arts and cultural activity. In doing so, JaF tries to cultivate clay with more dignity and to raise the collective happiness of the community. Their project Kota Terakota marks the beginning of a new clay culture for Jatiwangi, remodelling the city based on its people's desires and their collective agreement. In this sense, Kota Terakota speaks to 'terra' not only as a material, but also as land, territory, or idea.



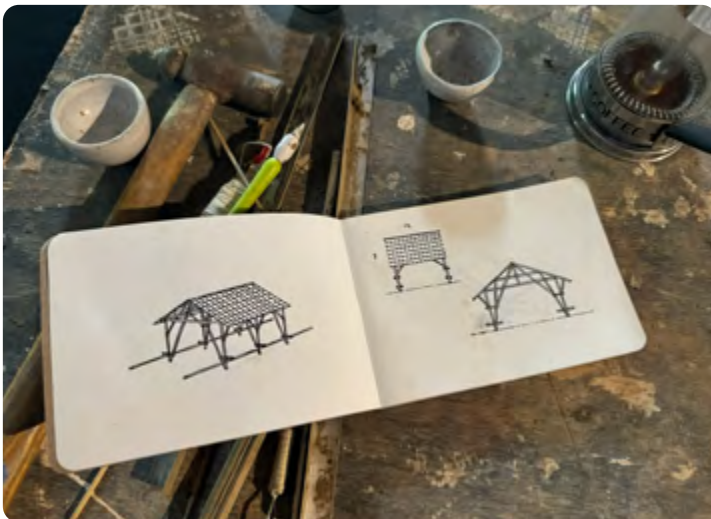
The brick on the shelf.

facilities where brands like Gucci, Nike, and H&M produce clothing at low costs, fundamentally altering people's lives. Until recently, Jatiwangi had around 5,000 residents. Now, the Nike factory alone employs 10,000 people, rapidly transforming Jatiwangi from a small rural village into an industrial town. JaF's work is situated within these developments, exploring and experimenting with ways to adapt to and mitigate their consequences.

For me, the journey began as an exploration of alternative economies but gradually became a self-reflection on what I can do or contribute from my position as a maker, researcher and Dutch woman who is part of an economic system that exploits and destroys. I found myself caught up in the parallels between the Dutch colonial occupation of Indonesia and the current economic takeover by Korean and Chinese companies. I didn't find any answers yet, but I can share glimpses of what I saw, experienced, and the questions it raised within me.

Peter and I travelled together. Before we left, we discussed our potential contribution to the community and exhibition. Peter envisions creating a mobile space for dialogue about land—a shed made from local tiles, under which we can sit on the same soil from which the tiles are made. On the plane, he sketches the first designs. We plan to take this shed to contested areas where developers are planning textile factories, housing, and hotels, hoping to invite people to discuss the impact of these developments and how to address them.

During the journey from Jakarta to Jatiwangi, we spot the sheds we envisioned scattered across the landscape. They are called Gardu, which roughly translates to 'Shelter.' Originally made of bamboo and cloth, these structures were built and used by migrant workers for sleeping. Now, they stand on the land, serving as resting spots, lunch areas, and storage spaces. Peter continually photographs one roof after another.



First sketches of the sheds.



Peter in a gardu in the field.

When we arrive in Jatiwangi, we discover that the exhibition opening is set to begin just as we get there. It starts with a series of speeches from the organizers and dignitaries. The mayor talks about his batik shirt, made by his wife, which is adorned with symbols referring to Jatiwangi's ceramics traditions. After the speeches, there is music. A band plays on roof tiles and invites us to sing along to a song about the steps of grinding, shaping, and heating in the process of making roof tiles.



Opening Terra Cotta Triennale.

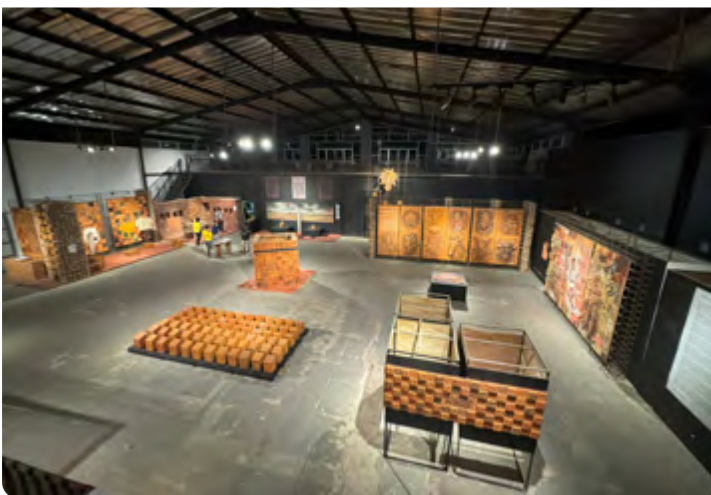
The exhibition features terracotta works, clothing, wild bee-keeping methods with clay pots as hives, honey, political statements, indigenous motifs, and a design for JaF's socially impactful stock exchange listing, along with a beauty salon. The unifying theme is the earth: how we create with it, work with it, and its role in the economy.

I'm lying awake in bed because of the jet lag. The opening keeps running through my mind, my body, and my heart. I am deeply moved by it—the sense of wholeness, and the way in which a diverse range of artworks, activities, stories, and people from various disciplines naturally

come together. It's a convergence of elements I rarely see come together in the Netherlands. I think about the struggle I face in convincing the university of the importance of integrating art and science. It's challenging and can make us rigid. Yet, during the opening, I don't feel that rigidity but a sense of space.

I dream of a workspace in the Netherlands that connects various perspectives on how we relate to and live with the soil, the land, the earth. A place where the physical, emotional, and sacred aspects of the earth, people and other species, are simultaneous and equal. The experience of the opening of the Terra Cotta Triennale makes me feel that it's possible, and it gives me ideas on how it could take shape in the Netherlands. I imagine a place where structure and money serve the relationship, where community means sometimes participating, sometimes not, sometimes leading, and sometimes just being present. A space where observing and participating merge seamlessly. A space where art science and the sacred come together.

The next day, Peter and I are having a meal at the large kitchen table in the JaF house when Wawan comes in. Wawan is a performer, an elder, and a member of the WAF community. We start a conversation, and I ask Wawan how he views land ownership. He begins a sentence, stops, lets



Terra Cotta exhibition.



Wawan at the kitchen table at JaF.

a silence fall, and then starts to sing. Through his voice, the earth speaks.

Later that day, Arie, Wawan, Peter and I go to a restaurant called Saung Eurih, where we meet Eman Kurdiman. He is the architect of this restaurant, designed using recycled and repurposed materials. The building is a collection of open sheds where you can dine, built against a slope. The view is breathtaking. The night is so dark that we can see countless stars and even the occasional galaxy.

One of the spaces is shaped like a traditional Saung barn, a place where historically the surplus of the harvest is stored as a common resource. It's also a place where people gather to discuss matters important to the community. I wonder if, with our version of a traditional Gardu, we are appropriating something that has been part of a local tradition for so long. Do we have anything to add to it? Is it our place to do so? Peter and I discuss it but can't reach a clear conclusion.

At Saung Eurih we eat and drink coffee. Local coffee, thin, watery, and flavorful. The coffee culture is rich. I ask Eman Kurdiman how he views the ownership of found or used materials. He sees himself as someone who gives new meaning to these materials for the community. The community helps shape what emerges.

I ask him how he views the ownership of land and soil. Is it also the community's, his, or no one's? Wawan who serves as a translator takes over answers himself. Again, he sings a song, this time in the Saung language. Later, he explains that he did this because the question I asked is perennial: a question that remains relevant over time. There are old answers, contemporary answers, and future answers. He sings the old answer that warns against lust and desire.

The following day Peter is working on the Gardu. The idea grows: what materials? Bamboo, wood, teak, steel? Peter sketches a wide variation of ideas. Arie and Ginggi like them. After two days things take a turn. Ginggi wants Peter to create something for the long term that aligns with an idea JaF is exploring. He envisions using the Gardu at a festival on land next to the old Dutch sugar factory ruin. That building is now a crumbling structure surrounded by rampant weeds, thistles, prickly bushes, and occasional bright pink flowers. Among the overgrowth are scattered plastic bottles, a lost slipper, and other debris rustling in the wind. This land is soon to be purchased by developers for hotels and housing.



Saung Barn (left) and Saung Eurih (right).



Peter Zuiderwijk at work.

The Gardu should differ from the existing shelters scattered across the land. It needs to be more of an artwork and constructed from materials that can withstand the elements. Ginggi wants to leave several Gardu's on site after the festival as a landmark. They would serve as a reminder that the factories emerging everywhere will eventually disappear, just as the Dutch sugar factories did. It's an invitation to continue the conversation about the time after the factories are gone, and to explore how traditional crafts, skills, and ways of living might be key to rebuilding society on the ruins of the textile factories.

Peter and I question what it means for a Dutch person to design a symbol to be left on a former colonial Dutch factory site. This object represents the devastating impact of a colonial economy on the community—a Gardu under which plans can be made to build resilience and prepare for when the new factories have moved on. Could this be the role we are meant to play? Maybe it is up to us to address our own history and prevent its repetition. Or are we interfering in something that isn't ours to influence?

This reminds me of a conversation I had years ago with an African elder, where I became aware of the role white women played during apartheid. The wives of plantation owners and other powerholders often watched and soothed their husbands' consciences, despite knowing what was happening was wrong. In that conversation, I realized that women, including myself, are still often spectators in a destructive economy. How often do we turn away from the consequences, thereby soothing the consciences of those who run businesses that harm people, non-humans, and the earth? As I engage in dialogue, brainstorming, and seek to understand what is right and wrong, I find myself entangled in both old and new colonial dynamics. Am I just a spectator? Am I part of the problem? How can I make a difference? When should I speak up, and when should I remain silent?

I am staying in the hotel that was built to facilitate new colonial movements. Chinese factories are springing up like mushrooms. A quick Google search already shows thirteen in and around Jatiwangi. None of them are owned by Indonesians. The workers, mostly women (who are disciplined and cheap), work in shifts of 8 or 10 hours a day. Girls do not pursue further education because there is enough work. They barely talk about their work when we ask. Trade unions can hardly gain a foothold. They earn around 2 million rupiah per month. That is about 120 euros.

One evening around 7 pm, we drive past the PUMA factory, officially PT Diamond International Indonesia, a Taiwanese company primarily producing for PUMA. About 2,000 people work there. As we pass, the shift change



The Sugar Factory land.



Achiera Hotel & Convention Jatiwangi.

occurs, with hundreds of motorbikes arriving and departing. We stop to observe, noting the food carts set up near the entrance and across the street.

In front of the factory, integrated into the fence, stands a sculpture titled ‘HOPE,’ inspired by Robert Indiana’s 1964 work ‘LOVE.’ I wonder what it signifies—does it imply that the factory brings hope to its workers or that it hopes for its own financial gain? Hope is about the future and anticipating positive outcomes. What future do the workers envision for themselves? How do the factories contribute to that?

Hope always involves uncertainty and a follow-up, for better or worse. Many come to Jatiwangi for factory jobs, hoping for a better life. This might be true in the short term, but I wonder how we will view this sculpture in 10 years, when the factories have moved on, leaving empty buildings as silent witnesses to better times or as reminders of an economic system that ultimately proved colonial, leaving the people and area vulnerable once more.

It’s Sunday, and the JaF team suggests that Peter and I take a day off, so they bring us to Kaputnen, a village known for its creativity and collaboration. Artists often stay here, and the village hosts cultural activities where local and regional collectives gather.

Kaputnen is picturesque, but almost no young women are present; they work as domestic helpers in UAN and Kuwait, earning high salaries by Indonesian standards to support their families.

The afternoon turns leisurely as we relax sitting on hard, uncomfortable bamboo chairs and enjoy snacks. One of the team members works with a group of First Nation Canadians. They exchange ceremonies that express their relationship with the earth. He explains some indigenous practices, such as always asking the earth for permission when harvesting materials, plants, or fruits. I ask if the earth ever says no. The answer is straightforward: yes, you can definitely feel when something doesn’t want to be taken.



Kaputnen



HOPE sign and food carts in front of the PUMA factory

Ana, Ginggi’s wife, invites me to her house. They have four children and live in a house Ginggi built with friends, using locally made bricks and roof tiles. Ginggi and I talk about a piece of land just down the street. It was bought by someone from the city. Someone with money. Currently, much government-owned land is being sold. It’s too expensive for the local population, so it mostly ends up in the hands of South Koreans, Chinese, Taiwanese, and wealthy city dwellers. They build factories, large houses, apartment buildings, hotels, and maybe even a mall. Jatiwangi is rapidly transforming from a rural town into a city. Previously, the nomadic factories, as Ginggi calls them, moved from central Jakarta to areas just north of Jakarta, then to Tangran, and further inland. Since 2015/2018, they have been settling in Jatiwangi in large numbers. Ginggi predicts they’ll move to Kalimantan within 10 years and then to Africa. He calculated that a factory relocation pays for itself within seven months.

Interestingly, foreign individuals and organizations can't legally own land in Indonesia, but this is circumvented through various legal constructions and fake ownership certificates. Locals are often paid just to hold these titles, without any real benefit or control over the land.

Ginggi is concerned about the impact of this development on the area. Will people lose their craftsmanship and local knowledge of the land, clay, and ceramics due to the arrival of these factories? This is why JaF advocates for 30% of the new buildings to be made from locally produced materials and designed in harmony with local architecture. The 30% limit aims to conserve local clay and prevent landscape disruption. It's also substantial enough to help preserve and develop local knowledge, laying a foundation for when the factories eventually move on to cheaper lands and labour.

During the festival at the old sugar factory, JaF plans to create Terra Cotta City. Ginggi explains that the festival isn't about reclaiming specific sites but about fostering bottom-up influence on the city's development. It's about being ready for when the factories leave in a few years, ensuring the community isn't left empty-handed. It also hints at reviving traditional building styles and materials on a larger scale. The goal is to leverage the temporary economic boom for long-term benefits, rather than just being exploited in the short term. By recognizing the nomadic nature of the current economy, the community can use it to their advantage and potentially benefit in the future.

When I return to JaF, Olga has arrived and Peter is still working on the Gardu design. I sit down to write. A little later, Peter comes by and says, 'Next phase. I have a new



Ginggi at his house.

assignment. The open house is done, and they're going to produce it. Now I need to make an eagle mask to hang on either side of the frame.'

'Why an eagle?' I ask. Peter shows me pictures of the new government building design in Indonesia's new capital on Kalimantan, shaped like a massive eagle with outspread wings.

I mention it to Ginggi, and he chuckles, 'Yes, we'll hang it on the open houses—that will be our government, from Terra Cotta City.'

I ask Ginggi how he sees the role of entrepreneurs in the current and future development of the region. He describes



Ginggi and Ana.



Design for the Gardu.

a shift: ‘Businessmen, who once were levers for peace, are now drivers of war. War has become an economy.’

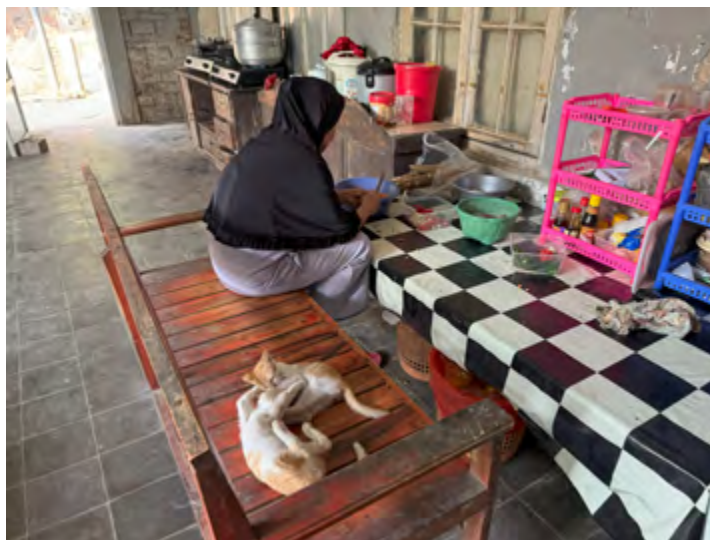
He explains, ‘I used to see businessmen working to prevent war because they benefited from good relations and cooperation between governments, ensuring the free flow of goods and services. But now, more and more, they profit from exclusion and even the push towards conflict, which strengthens their own companies.’

Ginggi places his hope in communities, viewing the work of artists and JaF as a means to rediscover how we can live together. He believes we need to learn quickly, as knowledge, success, and cleverness are increasingly defined by economic terms rather than human ones. He worries we are losing sight of what truly matters: the earth, our food, materials, and bricks—what we can hold onto.

Our conversation highlights how we increasingly live in abstractions rather than the real world. JaF believes decisions should be made with feet firmly in the clay, grounded in reality, with all those affected involved side by side. That’s why JaF holds monthly meetings open to everyone—from the mayor to artists, from businesspeople to neighbors. These gatherings can last an hour or an entire night, fostering equal footing discussions.

Ginggi reflects on how, about a decade ago, high-ranking officials in Indonesia could be engaged as equals, but that time has passed. Now, it’s even more vital to have these conversations locally, creating a culture where community collectives engage as equals.

We imagine inviting Putin and Zelensky to such a meeting. Ginggi says, ‘They would just be members of the community. That would change everything. They’d realize their war isn’t an abstraction but a harsh reality. Their struggle isn’t about people and communities; it’s an economic dispute disconnected from daily life.’



People at JaF

At the JaF house, people are always around. Deaf children have Quran lessons in the prayer room, others cook and clean in the kitchen, an elderly man prepares clay, and many are busy with clay projects. Children play with kittens wandering everywhere. Then there's Juna, who calls himself an intern. He studied art and is unsure of his next steps. He arrived at JaF a few days ago, hangs out, talks to people, and helps where he can. No one questioned his presence; everyone is welcome, and if you're here, you belong. Because Juna speaks a bit of English, Arie asked him to help Peter with the conversation with the man who is coming to weld the frame of the open house. Dutifully, he stays by the welder's side.

I've asked several people about my role concerning the Dutch colonial past in Indonesia. The common response has been, 'Between you and me, it doesn't matter. It's the system that matters.' Juna is the first to address the colonial past on a personal level.

He tells me I resemble his grandmother, who raised him after his mother's death in 2009. His great-great-grandmother married a Dutch man, and while he values these Dutch roots, his search for family history in Indonesia has only yielded a few inherited items like wine glasses and a teapot.



Juna.

He nostalgically reflects on the colonial era, even though neither he nor his mother directly experienced it. Many people he knows resist discussing the colonial past and hold negative views about it. Juna hopes to find a photo of his great-great-grandparents, who married in the early 20th century, in one of the World Museums in the Netherlands.

Gamma Metrix is a consultancy specializing in data management. They have created a prototype of a stock exchange based on social values. At the exhibition, they demonstrate how JaF would perform on this exchange. You can buy a fictional share to support their project. I buy two shares and give one to Peter.

The concept is straightforward: they monitor social entrepreneurs' contributions to the SDGs across nine indicators, such as energy, water, soil, and poverty. The shares are held by JaF, which manages a trust fund to support and encourage entrepreneurs in improving their sustainability scores. This initiative fosters a local community that collaborates with businesses to enhance life for people and the planet.

JaF aims to become the hub of a network that collectively works towards regional improvement, preparing for the time when industries relocate elsewhere.

The approach is inspired by Michael Porter's concept of Corporate Social Value, which posits that companies can drive well-being. Porter, like Ginggi, doubts that governments will manage this effectively.

A few days later, when I meet the Gamma Metrix team again, we discuss their project. I ask if they truly believe it's possible to contribute to people's and the planet's well-being while also making substantial profits, as Porter suggests. Porter claims that striving for ever-increasing profits is the only way to improve the world. I also mention Ginggi's observation that businessmen often profit more from conflicts than from peace. We don't reach a clear conclusion, as they struggle to envision a business that doesn't generate profit.

Later, I think that trying to limit profit might not be the best way to drive change in this economy. Perhaps the key lies in how the JaF community operates. Everything they do is in close collaboration with the community, with their voices constantly heard. What if businesses, along with their owners and managers, were deeply involved in the communities where they operate? If the community had a stake in and influence over local businesses, could profit still outweigh the well-being of that community? Relationships might ultimately surpass profit.

In Jatiwangi and surrounding areas, agriculture traditionally focused on local food supply. As factory expansion continues, many in Jatiwangi may become reliant on food products from outside the region and from multinationals, reducing local food security. Once factories take over farmland, the land degrades as vegetation disappears and barren soil and concrete take over. When the factories move on to new fertile areas, the abandoned land takes



Agricultural land: a local rice field.



JAFs listing on a social stock exchange.

years to recover. Meanwhile, skills in local food production are diminishing, much like the skills once used for making ceramics. This shift increases dependence on a colonial style economy.

This brings me back to my brick. How can we liberate land from the dominant economic market paradigm. How

can we free land from speculation? How can we restore our relationship with land, soil and food. How can we decolonise our agriculture? The Perhutana project tries exactly that.

On one of my last days at JaF, I discover that the Perhutana land is within walking distance from the JaF site. I'm very curious about the land where I hold a tiny share. Land that's freed from the market. Olga, Peter and I walk down the street, through a small forest, over a stream, through the rice fields, and finally arrive at the Perhutana land. There are trees, a food forest in the process of being planted, and some rice fields. The rice fields are dug up piece by piece after being used for several years, so that the fertile layer underneath becomes available. The excavated soil is used as clay for the ceramics made at JaF. Just like at JaF, it's a miniature version of how the world could be. It is a minimal viable system of forest, food, agriculture, and building materials in balance with each other and the people who work there and make use of it. After a week, I experience again what I felt at the opening: a collection of small experiments that together show that a different economy is possible. An economy



The Perhutana food forest.

based on craftsmanship, relationships, in harmony with the earth, and in kinship with the non-human.

When we return to JaF, the production of the Gardu prototype is in full swing. The welding is nearly complete, and the roof tiles are ready to be installed. The structure is extremely heavy, designed to fit perfectly on the small pickup trucks commonly used here. Soon, it will be transported to the site of the old sugar factory—its weight alone might justify ‘accidentally’ leaving it there. In six months, five open shelters will stand among the bushes, where the Terra Cotta City government being the Jatiwangi residents will gather to secure Jatiwangi’s future as a ceramics city and ensure it can provide its own food. The shelters will become a Gardu Palace, a place where the people govern through dialogue and community.

Meanwhile, Peter is putting the finishing touches on the plaque for the Gardu Palace. Over time, the image evolved from an eagle to a rooster—a creature with its feet on the ground. Interestingly, in Indonesian, the words for ‘rooster’ and ‘shelter’ stem from the same root.



RIGHT: *designing the Gardu Palace plaque.*



Producing the Gardu Palace.

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