



The Khayelitsha Football for Hope Centre in South Africa. Photos courtesy of Architecture for Humanity

Hit the ground running

A humanitarian design group is redefining crisis response across the globe, writes **Jo Baker**

Twelve years ago a designer caught in a disaster zone might have been at a loss as to how to pitch in. But when the quakes hit Japan last month, it took very little time for the architects to rally. There were ready-made chapters in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto with access to a global network of nearly 5,000 volunteer design professionals, a template for crisis response and an online bank of designs, all relevant to post-crisis reconstruction and free to download. And joining all these dots was the only international humanitarian-oriented organisation to have pioneered design as a tool to fight disaster – Architecture for Humanity (AFH).

For the past month, AFH has been working to link the Japan Institute of Architects (JIA) and professional building associations with designers and donors across the world as they start the long process of rebuilding safe, sustainable housing and community structures; just as it has done in Christchurch and before that in northern Pakistan, coastal Sri Lanka, New Orleans and many other trouble spots across the globe.

Yet 12 years ago, AFH founder Cameron Sinclair was one of those lost designers. Disillusioned by an industry awash with star-struck developers and slick branding, he wanted to explore the “re-humanising” of architecture, and try to apply good design principles to communities in the tradition of legendary but long-gone modernists, such as Swiss architect Le Corbusier.

By 2005, US-based Sinclair and his wife, journalist Kate Stohr, had managed to persuade hundreds of architects to donate designs for mobile health clinics, transitional houses, and sports centres that doubled as HIV/Aids outreach facilities across the globe, such as the Khayelitsha Football for Hope Centre in South Africa. By 2007, these were uploaded onto an online Open Architecture Network for anyone to use for non-profit work; and designers were devising schools made of bottles, homes out of straw bricks; there was even an “origami homeless shelter” made out of a single sheet by architecture student

Yossi Steinberger for victims of the Sichuan earthquake (as seen on YouTube). It was the realisation of Sinclair’s mission to “design without ego”, and a challenge to the idea that any prefabricated solution can be lumped on people hit by crisis or extreme poverty.

“The idea of using adaptation as opposed to repetition was a really big shift: saying, different neighbourhoods have different issues [so] adapt the building to that,” Sinclair says. “With an architect you can create something the community wants, rather than something they just get given.”

But although AFH’s reach was expanding, with local chapters springing up from Detroit to Dhaka, Sinclair found it had little control over the finished products. “We were doing everything right: the projects would be thoughtful, with integrated stakeholders, [and] used the right materials and technologies,” he recalls. “Then we’d hand it off and they’d just build crap.”

So a few years ago, AFH moved into construction management and started to fund itself. It sets up community advice centres, gives free design advice and creates programmes to boost construction standards by training local designers, masons and metalworkers. Before long, NGOs from Oxfam to Save the Children started asking to partner, as did Oprah Winfrey, the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund, Nike and the International Federation of Association Football (Fifa).

In just over a decade AFH grew from a US\$60,000 design services firm to a roughly US\$6 million global powerhouse.

Yet in a large world with innumerable crises it is still necessary to pick and choose projects. Enter “urban acupuncture” – the rather sick-sounding strategy that directs the AFH focus on small-scale building projects, in a bid to knit torn communities together, and produce a ripple-effect of opportunity and change. Last year, a London-based AFH architect, Susi Jane Platt, was shortlisted for one of the highest honours in the architectural world, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, for just such

a project: a modest little village school in Sri Lanka set between a fishing village and a reservoir. Platt’s Yodakandiya Community Complex had not only moulded itself to the needs of the community around it – including built-in deterrents for rampaging elephants – but had done so via community meetings and training sessions that involved hundreds of villagers in its design and construction; Platt herself spent two years living there. This project also gave Sinclair another good reason to focus on schools: plagiarism.

“The school, in many instances, is a 24-hour building, the heart of the community,” he says. “If we can improve design and construction quality in those schools, people will steal the best ideas locally. It’s like open sourcing!” When designers returned to Yodakandiya after a few years, they found that most of the homes around the facility had been influenced by its design, whether in the roof details or the ventilation and rain-water catchment systems.

These projects also aim to go beyond local communities. According to Sinclair the organisation’s most dedicated core of global support is under 18 years old. The recent Students Rebuild: Haiti campaign rallied students and teachers around the globe in efforts to rebuild safer schools in the country. In one project, the Stiller Foundation (of American comedian Ben Stiller) teamed up with AFH and Save the Children to design and build a school in Artibonite, Haiti. While much of the world may be looking elsewhere now, “high school kids are really the engine that is keeping us in Haiti”, Sinclair says. “We’re a fun organisation: donate 50 bucks and there’s a physical structure that you get out of it.”

Both concepts have influenced the AFH approach in Japan. While its head office has worked to raise funds for reconstruction and assessment efforts with the JIA, before starting to identify small-scale building projects to work on, Students Rebuild and Do Something.org started to secure funding via the Bezos Family Foundation, which pledged US\$2 for every paper crane that was sent

to them. A woven art installation will be created from the first 100,000 cranes, and will be sent to Japan as a symbolic gift from students across the world. Meanwhile, in Christchurch, AFH is doing the same: financially contributing to larger-scale reconstruction while working with local chapters to find those that might have fallen through the cracks, such as indigenous community groups. It has not been as easy to secure funding for such a developed country, Sinclair says, but as he notes, “earthquakes don’t discriminate”, so neither do they.

In between the disaster calls, many AFH projects are attempting to restore dignity or cohesion to struggling communities through design. In China, the Shanghai chapter is working with Compassion for Migrant Children to design educational facilities, while, in the Philippines, an entire school has been made out of discarded glass bottles. Other architects are helping the social enterprise, Lulan Artisans, to create off-the-grid weaving centres in rural communities across Southeast Asia. Nike and Fifa recently became involved in response to AFH’s innovative “sports for social change” facilities, which double as headquarters for local NGOs to tackle issues such as conflict resolution and HIV/Aids, from neighbourhoods in Afghanistan to Brazil.

For architects, the organisation has been a chance to step up in a way rarely associated with the profession. In Pakistan during the floods, designers of a sluggish Karachi chapter woke up, flew into the Swat Valley and had helped clear 1,500 homes using the post-disaster recovery template, before the head office even knew about it. Such professional interludes can be rewarding, but also, importantly, as Sinclair notes, humbling.

“What an architect can’t do is go to a community and think they’re going to impose a solution... When you marry an international designer with a local designer – that’s when real magic happens,” he says. “You’re not only going to learn a new way of working, but learn how to work with a community who’s lost everything. That’s not something you learn at school.”



From top: a school made out of bottles in the Philippines; the origami shelter for victims of the Sichuan earthquake; the Ceverine School in Artibonite, Haiti, built by the Stiller Foundation in partnership with Architecture for Humanity and Save the Children



Winning ways

Since Architecture for Humanity made its mark in 1999 with a competition to design transitional housing for returning refugees in Kosovo, it has used designers’ competitive streaks to its advantage. Its competitions have produced the ultimate mobile health clinic for Aids victims in sub-Saharan Africa, a factory to connect indigenous chocolate producers in the Ecuadorian Amazon with the global marketplace, and many more projects.

Each competition has garnered fame and funding, showing in travelling exhibitions and drawing a range of panellists, from architect Frank Gehry to actress Cameron Diaz. The blueprints are uploaded on the Open Architecture Network (www.openarchitecturenetwork.org) for use across the world, while the winning prototype is funded and built.

This may present an interesting challenge for the 2011 competition, to be launched in September. AFH will be asking architects to repurpose disused military installations for civic use.

“They’re built with taxpayers’ money – really well built – and just end up sitting there,” executive director Cameron Sinclair says. “These buildings can withstand natural disasters and last a long, long time.”

Finding such buildings could prove the first hurdle since, due to national security efforts, they are rarely plotted publicly; the second problem could be securing permission.

Yet Sinclair and his team tend to enjoy a good challenge themselves, even the politically flavoured ones. In Gaza, for example, where Palestinian dwellings are often demolished by Israeli forces, they once agreed to write a manual on how to rebuild one’s house, should “something” happen to it.

“We’re not a faith-based or politically led organisation; we can work with anyone who invites us,” Sinclair says. “We just have to keep our focus on the architecture. But I’m interested to see if anyone picks Guantanamo. The government is aware of this project, so we’ll see.”

Jo Baker