

{ APPRECIATIONS }

## 'Design Like You Give a Damn'

That's the motto of Architecture for Humanity, whose projects help heal communities devastated by disaster.

By Susan F. Castle



IT IS NOT EVERY DAY THAT ARCHITECTS CONSIDER ELEPHANT migration patterns when they begin work on a new design. But it was a detail London-based architect Susi Jane Platt considered when she led the charge to develop energy efficient outdoor lighting for a remote Sri Lankan village ravaged by the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. How else could the village escape the inevitable, namely, that elephants unable to distinguish mud-roofed homes from trees would choose them as the perfect place to scratch their colossal bodies, the sheer force of which could raze home after home in a series of resonant thuds?

Not just indiscriminating elephants, but lack of electricity and potable water, limited budgets, and site-specific cultural values and environmental issues are among the challenges confronting designers in the service of Architecture for Humanity. Their mission is to provide design, construction and development services to areas of the world suffering after natural disasters or civil wars. "Architects working in developed areas have to worry about cost per square foot and whether the client likes their design," says the organization's co-founder, Cameron Sinclair, "but they don't necessarily pay strict attention to environmental issues except as a nod to being green." But in the case of AFH projects, sustainability is a matter of survival—and a fount from which remarkable solutions flow.

### To Sri, With Love

*Clockwise from top . . .*  
Susi Jane Platt with villagers at the job site; a local mason; a villager-created design detail

The nonprofit, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in April, has more than 80 chapters in 25 countries and what Sinclair calls "a veritable army of design professionals donating their time and talent where they are most urgently needed." AFH acts as a conduit between this army of more than 4,500 volunteer design professionals and its clients, which include community groups, aid organizations, foundations and government agencies. Whether the goal is to provide transitional housing for those displaced by Hurricane Katrina, build schools for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Uganda, design a skateboarding facility in Kabul or devise an integrated rainwater collection system in Kenya, these clients have come to appreciate the value of including AFH in their initiatives early and consistently. Why? As AFH co-founder Kate Stohr explains, "After natural disasters, people need to rebuild their sense of trust and faith as much as their homes and schools. AFH can accomplish that by using design to help everyone think ahead—beyond physical structures to the human infrastructures that bind people together."



“If you are not willing to live in the structure you are designing,” says Architecture for Humanity co-founder Cameron Sinclair, “you shouldn’t be designing it.”

Accordingly, when AFH fellow Susi Platt arrived in Tissamaharama, Sri Lanka, in late 2005, she wasn’t carrying blueprints or preconceived notions about what sort of community complex she thought would be best. On the contrary, along with AFH design partner UN Habitat, the first order of business was to involve as many villagers as possible—hundreds of whom were displaced after the 2004 tsunami—in design development and, later on, the construction process.

It all began with meetings that, Platt recalls, drew hundreds of villagers and generated highly spirited exchanges: “We asked everyone to put their heads together and decide what they needed most. The Sri Lankans are a very spirited people so there was lots of laughter and lots of debate about how best to allocate our very limited budget.” In the end, the villagers agreed on a complex that would include a preschool, a community centre, a library and a medical centre. Then, by democratic vote, they elected a Community Development Council that took on the responsibility of writing the design brief and making ongoing decisions and setting priorities.

Indeed, the word “empowerment” falls short of conveying AFH methods, which don’t so much give or enable power as demand that villagers take control of their future. For those whose homes and livelihoods had been literally washed away, being asked to take part in a process that began with informal colloquy and moved through initial drawings, groundbreaking ceremonies and eventually construction helped transform their residual fears into fire-in-the-belly excitement.

“It was very important to us that the villagers take part in the construction process,” says Platt, who is now an architect with Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners in London. “Happily, that is just what ended up happening.” Among the community were many skilled carpenters, masons and metalworkers, and AFH and UN Habitat organised workshops to train even more. Involving the community in the actual construction gave rise to

## Building Blocks

Cameron Sinclair explores his vision for a better world.



AFH co-founder **Cameron Sinclair**, who grew up in what he describes as “a very rough neighbourhood in London,” recalls walking the streets as a child and feeling sad when he looked at all the dismal buildings. At age 6 when he discovered **Lego building toys**, he transformed that distress into his vision of a better world, complete with schools, homes, sidewalks and health clinics. His parents nurtured the nascent designer by supplying him with even more of the plastic building pieces. It is not hard to see how a youngster—sensitive to the effect the **built environment** can have on one’s spirit—spurred Sinclair, the adult architect, to found AFH. As he says, “If it weren’t for Lego bricks, I probably wouldn’t be doing what I am doing now.” And thousands would not have access to an **army of design professionals** ready, willing and able to answer the call: “Design like you give a damn.” [www.architectureforhumanity.org](http://www.architectureforhumanity.org)

serendipitous design details such as welded window grills in the shape of local wild animals and the carving of the Sri Lankan symbol for prosperity into a restraining wall. Everyone was paid for his or her work and even took turns volunteering services to ensure that the community complex would be completed. No wonder, then, that the opening celebration, which included singing, dancing, hundreds of speeches and a play, began at dawn and went on through the wee hours of the night: The finished Yodakandyia Community Complex is not a cookie-cutter structure delivered by outsiders; it is a symbol that a bespoke sustainable project could be achieved.

In short, AFH projects build spirits along with buildings, which is certainly why they have received awards not just for design, but also for peace and humanity, including a 2008 Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt Design Patron Award and the 2005 Lewis Mumford Award for Peace. That’s all part of the plan. From the outset, AFH has distinguished itself by insisting that sustainability mean more than simply using local materials and building to protect the environment. It means listening carefully so that people everywhere on Earth get homes, schools and medical clinics that reflect their values and ideals—structures they will work hard to maintain, an essential but sometimes overlooked component of sustainability. Sinclair says the most important mandate for AFH designers is, “If you are not willing to live in the structure you are designing, you shouldn’t be designing it.”

Designers involved with AFH have invented a new vernacular—“urban acupuncture”—to describe what they do. The term acupuncture is apt because, like tiny needles perfectly placed, AFH projects create ripples of energy that help communities devastated by disasters regain their equilibrium. **AS**

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