

# Humanitarian Design

## Notes for a Definition

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### Christian Hubert and Ioanna Theocharopoulou

Christian Hubert and Ioanna Theocharopoulou both ground and destabilise the basic definition and history of what this volume discusses at great length as 'humanitarian design'. Looking at the historical genealogies of appropriate technologies and 'good' design, as well as the contemporary discourse and emerging practices of participatory citizenship, Hubert and Theocharopoulou position humanitarian design within a broader social movement, rooted in late 19th- and 20th-century experimentation but once again emerging at the forefront of professional exploration, and argue it is important to substantively acknowledge the human component of its current manifestation.

We must elevate 'design for the greater good' beyond charity and toward a socially sustainable and economically viable model taught in design schools and executed in design firms, one that defines the ways in which we prototype, relate to clients, distribute, measure, and understand. We must be designers of empowerment and rewrite our own job descriptions. We must design with communities, rather than for clients, and rethink *what we're designing in the first place, not just how we design the same old things*. We must constantly find ways to do things better, through both our designs themselves and the ways in which we operate as designers.

Emily Pilloton<sup>1</sup>

Is there such a thing as *humanitarian design*? Can design thinking that typically only responds to crises help provide new models of more equitable and socially responsible living? To think through these questions, it is important to uncouple the phrase *humanitarian design* from too close an identification with benevolent or charitable interventions on behalf of the poorest and most vulnerable, even if those dimensions must remain a crucial part of the humanitarian project. Instead, we will focus on those features of the humanitarian impulse that extend to all humans qua human beings. If we do in fact live in the geological era of the Anthropocene, in which humans have become the dominant influence on the planet, those humane qualities and universal values must extend not only to humans as a whole, but to all living species and to the environment at large.

By exploring the outlines of a humanitarian design project, our purpose is not to promote a catchphrase or even to define a particular theory of practice. Instead, we hope to indicate some features that any effective definition of this project would require. Even in its broadest sense, design can be only one small part of the humanitarian project, but as it is currently practised, design serves primarily to promote consumption, to materialise

status and to manipulate desire. The humanitarian design project must address the just allocation of wealth and resources, not only in the present but also in the future. It must make plans for rapid global urbanisation and the very real possibilities of massive dislocations of urban populations, particularly in coastal areas. It must be informed by an ethos of sustainability. Most of all, it must be broad enough to address all humanity.

We see two main paths or features, emerging as characteristics of this larger conceptual project that sees design as a humanist activity. The first requires a fresh look at the history of the idea of 'intermediate' or 'appropriate' technology, as it was articulated in the early 1970s, to create a richer background against which to view today's efforts. The second needs 'humanitarian' design to be seen within a broad movement towards participatory citizenship, which is emerging from many different quarters worldwide. In combination, these two paths can inform a concept of humanitarian design that bridges both ethics and aesthetics – a 21st-century definition of *Good Design*.

### **Appropriate Technology and Design for the Other 90 Per Cent**

What are these machines? ... various solar devices, almost all hand tools, bio-gas digesters, wind machines, greenhouses, various pedal-powered machines (including, of course, bicycles), composting toilets, and so on. The origin of these devices is largely either from less developed countries (what used to be called 'village technology') or from the youth culture. The categories are not hard and fast; hand tools are preferred over machines, but small machines are preferred over big machines, and even big machines are viewed more favorably than very large plants.

Witold Rybczynski<sup>2</sup>

The 'Appropriate Technology' movement emerged as a popular cause in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the first moment when designers and other thinkers self-consciously tried to figure out ways to bridge social inequality through design, the Appropriate Technology movement is a crucial precursor to today's *humanitarian design*. We could say that humanitarian design, as we are trying to define it here, is not so much a radical departure but a re-engagement with some of the same issues that have been lost since the 1970s, with a different emphasis and new contexts.

The political events of the late 1960s acted as a trigger for seeing a link between design and society more clearly. Opposition to the Vietnam War, the student protests of 1968, and particularly the 1973 to 1974 energy crisis, were the backdrop to the emergence of an American 'counterculture' that rejected conventional society and uncritical technological 'progress'. Publications such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin, 1962), EF Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (Blond & Briggs, 1973) and Buckminster Fuller's extensive writings, were formative influences on what we now think of as early instances of environmentally conscious design; the most well-known examples of which include the first 'intentional communities', Paolo Soleri's Arcology, the 'droppers' of Drop City, Trinidad, Colorado, and Michael Reynolds's Earthships.<sup>3</sup>



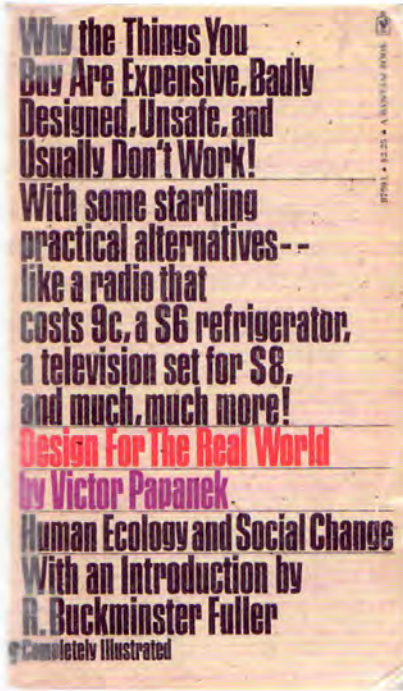
While American counterculture did not invent appropriate technology, its 'environmental pragmatism' promoted 'tinkering' and improvising solutions to design problems. The best illustration of this approach to technology was the *Whole Earth Catalog*, published between 1968 and 1972. Its founder, Stewart Brand, 'hoped to create a service that would blend the liberal social values and technological enthusiasm of the counterculture with the emerging ecological worldview he cultivated as a Stanford University biology student'.<sup>4</sup> Brand provided information on emerging ideas about appropriate technologies, along with common-sense advice for those who wanted to participate in what he saw as a new environmental culture. His innovative idea to provide *access* through a new information system, the *Whole Earth Catalog*, aimed to empower individuals about alternative paths and tools to achieve them:

By reclaiming an amateur tradition of invention and technological development and celebrating an ecological focus to technological research, the *Whole Earth Catalog* provided moral support for young optimists working to map a brighter future free from flaws of technocratic thinking but not free from technology. These appropriate technologists believed a survivable future was still a possibility if technological development could be wedded to insights emerging from ecology and environmentalism while avoiding the political entanglements of Right/Left ideologies...

Andrew G Kirk<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the ideas of the Appropriate Technology movement were varied and diffuse, they shared an approach to technology that was low-tech, inexpensive, simple and ecologically safe. Rather than identifying with either of the two poles of 'tradition' and 'modernisation', the appropriate technology pioneers were interested in establishing an 'intermediate' zone that could use and modify existing technology in simple and inexpensive ways, in order to help human society more broadly. One of these pioneers, British economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1911–1977), had spent a great deal of time in poor parts of Southeast Asia. He saw 'intermediate' technology as a step towards the alleviation of poverty in the so-called developing world. Borrowing from the Buddhist concept of the 'Right Livelihood', in a highly influential essay entitled 'Buddhist Economics', written in 1966, Schumacher argued that appropriate technology can be a third way, a better path *between* tradition and rapid modernisation. Schumacher, who had also been influenced by the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, believed that appropriate technology ought to be small- rather than large-scale, people-centric, labour intensive, environmentally sound and locally controlled.<sup>6</sup>

Another important thinker from the 1970s who deserves attention today is Victor Papanek (1923–1998). A Viennese-born designer, teacher and prolific author, Papanek called for design to take a radically different approach, away from the goal of aesthetically pleasing objects. Papanek's first book, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, was published in 1971. It included an Introduction by Buckminster



The cover of the seminal work by Victor Papanek, first published in 1971, inspired a generation of designers and activists. © Random House LLC.

Fuller and extensive references to Fuller's work. To underscore Papanek's critique of mainstream design practice, on the cover of the first edition, in large fonts, we read that the book is about '*Why the Things You Buy Are Expensive, Badly Designed, Unsafe, and Usually Don't Work! With Some Startling Practical Alternatives – like a radio that costs 9c, a \$6 refrigerator, a television set for \$8, and much, much more!*'<sup>7</sup>

Design historian Victor Margolin notes that Papanek's book, 'came hard on the heels of the student movement of the 1960s and embodied the simultaneous rage and hope of that period'.<sup>8</sup> His design thinking was closely informed by local knowledge and techniques from which he actively sought to learn. In the early 1970s, Papanek suggested working closely with people in developing countries to invent and construct products using simple technology, and he called on designers to counter the growing environmental problems of his time.

Despite the ongoing allure of 'living off the grid', contemporary interests are not so concerned with extolling 'self-sufficiency' or creating a counterculture. They are more resolutely global in intent and local in implementation. New terms, such as 'leapfrogging' and 'crowdsourcing', and a new emphasis on advanced communication networks are enabling these shifts to happen. While a sense of impending crisis and an ethical discomfort in the face of unfair distribution of wealth continues to inform humanitarian design impulses, these are also coloured by a sense of possibility – that there are real possibilities for social, technological and political change.



There have been a plethora of recent initiatives, exhibitions and publications that make a case for such humanitarian design impulses. Examples include the publications by Architecture for Humanity (a United States-based charitable organisation launched in 1999 and closed in January 2015), *Design Like You Give a Damn* (2006) and *Design Like You Give a Damn II* (2012); the exhibition *Design for the Other 90%* (Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, 2007); Katie Wakeford's *Expanding Architecture: Design As Activism* (2008); Emily Pilloton's *Design Revolution: 100 Products that Empower People* (2009) and the exhibition *Small Scale Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* (MoMA, New York, 2010). These initiatives are rooted in the history of 'social' design as already mentioned<sup>9</sup> but with a sidelong glance to the history of the appropriate technology pioneers from the 1970s. At the core of the projects documented in these collections is a renewed shared sense that design must be for the greater good of all human society.<sup>10</sup>

But human society is created through community, and this new hopeful emphasis promotes community, not only in terms of ways of life, but also through scale, means of production and materials. Examples of these community-oriented projects range from immediate responses to crisis like the earthquake emergency housing projects by Shigeru Ban from the early 1990s, using recycled paper tubes; to a variety of projects that deployed unused shipping containers to create housing for earthquake victims in Haiti in 2010; to longer-lasting design solutions that help communities in the daily struggle for existence and cover aspects or sectors, such as health and education.

Some of the most notable examples of the latter may include the Emergency Paediatric Clinic in Darfur by the firm TAMassociati (Massimo Lepore, Raul Pantaleo and Simone Sfriso) from 2011, and the ongoing work of Diébédo Francis Kéré in Gando, Burkina Faso. The Darfur clinic is built around an enormous baobab tree (*tabaldi*), adopting principles of Mediterranean and Arab architecture, such as shading the building facades from the sun, and creating a large courtyard with smaller pavilions. The building combines traditional and modern techniques and technology in new ways.<sup>11</sup>

Diébédo Francis Kéré was awarded the Gold Global Holcim Award in 2012 for the secondary school in Gando, Burkina Faso. Going back to Burkina Faso and working with the local community, Kéré used traditional forms that work with the local climate, using local materials and techniques. Another notable aspect of Kéré's work is his involvement with the whole community: we may think of him more as a master builder than an architect, teaching and disseminating skills to a younger generation.<sup>12</sup>

The Danish-based INDEX Design Awards, created to award 'design to improve life' are another forum for the support and dissemination of design solutions that help whole communities. Looking through the list of INDEX Design Award finalists since 2005, one sees some of the best socially conscious, technically advanced designs, ranging in scale from a city to a small object. Recent examples include Sanergy (2013), a model for viable sanitation infrastructure in the slums of Nairobi,<sup>13</sup> and Mexico City's 'Plan Verde', a 15-year strategy 'to develop new transport, water, waste, land conservation and alternative energy programmes for the city'.<sup>14</sup>

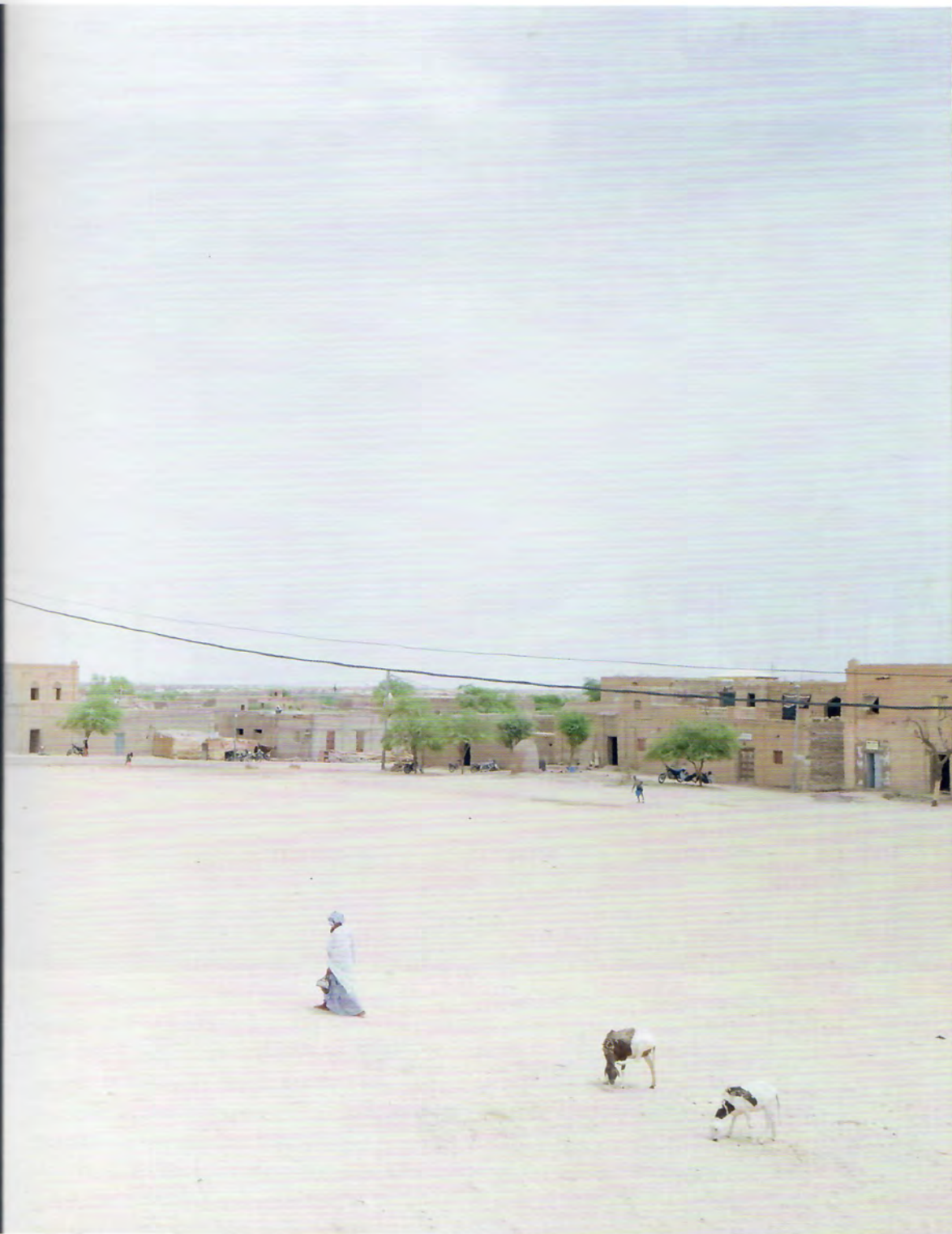
*below:* DHK Architects and Two Think Architecture, Ahmed Baba Centre, Timbuktu, Mali, 2009. © Iwan Baan.

*overleaf:* DHK Architects and Two Think Architecture, Ahmed Baba Centre, Timbuktu, Mali, 2009. Timbuktu's association with 'a place at the end of the world' is ironic considering that the city was once the main intellectual centre of Islam in Africa. Timbuktu is a city in Mali, born in proximity to the Niger River, at the intersection of 10th-century trans-Saharan trade routes. © Iwan Baan.













*above and overleaf:* Peter Rich Architects. Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre, Mapungubwe National Park, Limpopo, South Africa, 2008–10. Mapungubwe, located on South Africa's northern border with Botswana and Zimbabwe, prospered between AD 1200 and 1300 by being one of the first places to produce gold. After its fall it remained uninhabited for over 700 years, until its rediscovery in 1933. The society living in what today is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is thought to have been the most complex in the region, implementing the first class-based social system in southern Africa. © Iwan Baan.



At the scale of the small object, some notable projects have aimed to provide clean drinking water to areas in need, both in the so-called developing world and in regions that have experienced large-scale environmental crises. Today, appropriate technology requires not only technical simplicity, but also economic viability, best served by local production and distribution networks. These are potential points of intersection between economic and social benefits.

## Design and Participatory Citizenship

The environmental crisis is a crisis of society in the fullest sense: It signals the fact that a one-sided development of human productive powers without a commensurate change in the social relations by which we govern society spells social and ecological disaster. ... At issue is the possibility of a radical transformation of society: the creation of a society of equals dedicated to social justice and environmental sustainability.

John Bellamy Foster<sup>15</sup>

The best practices of contemporary design are based on cooperation between rich and poor, north and south, coming together to define and address problems by utilising knowledge and expertise from both educated professionals and local knowledge sources. The quality of these relationships is key.

In a fairly recent shift that gives us great hope and optimism, one can look today to areas of culture as diverse as political science, the production and consumption of food, discussions of copyright, crowdsourcing and the World Wide Web, to see common projects for the development of a global public sphere. One that is democratic in the best sense of the word, where individual freedom, open discussion, dissemination of information and consensual action are achieved both on local and global scales. There is a groundswell of optimistic forward thinking today about the potential for new forms of citizenship, unmoored from nation-states, enabled by global networks and capable of effective scalar organisation through peer production and new forms of communal action.

Optimists point to new spaces of noncommercial discourse, to nonmarket and nonproprietary production, to the global impact of environmentalism (despite some significant hemispheric divisions), to the growing interest in the 'other 90 per cent' of the global populace, and to the proliferation of political 'Springs' as evidence that new spaces of freedom are possible today. The subtitles of three important references for this discussion, Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons* (1990), Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006) and Tina Rosenberg's *Join the Club* (2011), identify some of the basic issues: *The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, *How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* and *How Peer Pressure can Transform the World*.

The latent energies of these movements can be 'crowdsourced' in every sense of the word. The emerging understanding of the power of peer pressure has provided insights into recent developments of the 'citizen sector'. Tina Rosenberg's evocations of 'the social











cure', from the Comprehensive Rural Health Project (CRHP), Jamkhed, India, which trains poor rural women to provide local health care, to her descriptions of OTPOR's nonviolent resistance to Slobodan Milošević in Serbia – which served as a direct lesson for mass action in the Arabic countries of North Africa – illustrate some of the capacities of 'join the club' social movements as enabling social transformation.

An example of a successful crowdsourced project that has now grown to a remarkable organisation is the *Ushahidi* Platform. Swahili for 'testimony', *Ushahidi* began as a website mapping incidents of violence and peace efforts, based on citizens' reports submitted via the web and mobile phones, during the 2008 Kenyan elections. This platform, initially made up of volunteers, has now grown to a large team of individuals with a wide span of experience ranging from human rights work to software development. Together they form a not-for-profit technology company that develops free and open-source software for information collection, visualisation and interactive mapping.<sup>16</sup>

Yochai Benkler's explications of social production in the 'networked information economy' point to the power of collaborative models where the means of cultural production and communication are widely distributed instead of concentrated in a small number of corporate entities, and where cultural production takes place within a 'commons' rather than a proprietary system. The success of the 'Slow Food' movement has shown how a networked organisation that articulates its core values can function as an effective network of local organisations.

This shift has led to the rise of 'public interest design', serving the needs of the billions of people on the planet living in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Promoting 'the emerging practice of designing for social impact', the Social Economic Environmental Design Network (SEED Network) has become a clearinghouse for community-based design projects around the globe. SEED is one of myriad efforts engaged in a public-health version of architectural practice, focused not on the wealthy of the world who can pay design fees, but on the rest of the world who cannot – and yet who need designers' services as much or more than the top one per cent.

### **Humanitarian Design as *Good Design***

Although the expression 'good design' is of fairly recent vintage and carries its own historical baggage, questions regarding both the aesthetic and the social values of design have been asked repeatedly, at least since the second half of the 19th century, with the rise of industrially made objects and goods. The first design reform movements originated in England, where the Industrial Revolution began as a reaction to what was deemed the poor quality of manufacturing, along with the devaluation of craft and craftsmen. Negative reactions towards the 'arts manufacturers' gained strength following *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* at the Crystal Palace, London, popularly known as *The Great Exhibition* of 1851.

A great cultural polemic swirled around the question of what ought to be considered appropriate design for the modern age, led by figures such as Henry Cole (1808–1882), Owen Jones (1809–1874) and Richard Redgrave (1804–1888). These reformers tried to

create formal guidelines, not only for manufacturing but also for design education, in the hope of imbuing the nation with a sense of design principles that would in turn bolster the British economy. They founded government schools of design, published a journal and helped to form what later became the Victoria and Albert Museum.

But the critique of manufactured objects also served as a starting point for an altogether more fundamental questioning of modern industrial society and its values. The Arts and Crafts movement, founded by the British designer William Morris (1834–1896), explicitly addressed these issues, and was already underway by the 1860s. Rooted in the writings of architect August Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852) and art historian John Ruskin (1819–1900), the Arts and Crafts movement rejected the early reformers' more progressive approach and tried to recreate a preindustrial ethos with the emphasis on the relationship between the individual worker and the work produced. The movement advocated that good, moral design could only come from a good and moral society.

Urban industrial society did not qualify exactly. In the late 19th- and early 20th centuries, the injustices of industrial nations towards their workers were highlighted by the early documentary work of photographers Jacob Riis (1849–1914) in New York and Thomas Annan (1829–1887) in Glasgow, who showed the world the squalid living conditions of 'the other half'. These images nourished the growing movement to reform housing conditions for the working class and the poor. We might think of the efforts to reform inner-city tenement housing as the first instance of humanitarian design, at least in aspiration. Later, particularly post-First World War, and continuing through the post-Second World War period, architects and designers tried to implement methods of industrial production, applying innovative lessons in prefabrication, learned during the wars, to low-cost housing.

From the 1920s *Existenzminimum* housing projects in Germany, to attempts at devising inexpensive prefabricated homes throughout the postwar period, some of the most notable examples of modern architecture were the result of socially conscious architects striving to use design to address society's problems and crises. In the postwar American context, the notion of 'good design' was explicitly articulated via a number of important competitions and exhibitions organised by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, literally entitled 'What is Good Design?' (1950–5). The exhibitions were organised by Edgar Kaufmann Jr, working under the very title of *Director of Good Design*.

But this postwar project had lost the critical and social dimension of reform. It served primarily to reconcile modern style with the expansive consumer culture that would produce a 'good life' domestic modernism filled with tasteful and labour-saving objects. As a recent MoMA exhibition revisiting that moment claimed, the values of 'good design' were 'promoted (and disputed) by museums, design councils and department stores'<sup>17</sup> These would later come to define the 'lifestyle' design project that has achieved global hegemony through branding and consumer products.

Today the 'good' in Good Design needs to be redefined. We need to broaden our concerns, perhaps drawing closer to the aspirations of early 20th-century housing reform than to the later, more commercially minded iterations of Good Design, in order



to address 21st-century issues. The subjects of design can no longer be thought of as consuming individuals, responsible only for themselves, but as citizens actively shaping a good society or at least as would-be citizens, since citizenship lacks effective institutions that can scale up from local communities to global issues.

Rather than promoting an essentially hedonistic conception of individual pleasure, the shared or communal benefits of the 'good' need to be design's primary source of satisfaction. For design to be good, it must *do* good. It must address questions of justice, including environmental justice. These goals and values cannot be left to marketeers and their corporate 'messages'. Nor can one expect much from politicians, most of whom – at least in the United States – are too beholden to corporate interests, or too enamoured of pandering to their 'base' to consider the ethical politics of the 'good', especially in long-term or global considerations.

But social good is not just a desirable result or benefit, such as an increase in distributive or environmental justice, as vitally important as this might be. Instead, it is inseparable from particular forms of social activity: those that strengthen the bonds of social solidarity through cooperative work. The strengthening of social solidarity itself enacts a crucial social good at a time when individualistic consumerism and state-sanctioned forms of political activity are clearly inadequate to the tasks of social and environmental change.

In concluding our 'notes towards a definition' of humanitarian design, if new forms of Good Design are to develop, or if they are in fact already emerging, it will be through a new conjunction of social and environmental goals with cooperative social methods. The prime question for the present moment is whether the new networks of civil societies, those 'movements' that are outside the market or state spheres, and which make creative use of both new communication technologies and the strengthening of communities based on civic values, can establish a new and global public sphere, whose values are first and foremost 'humanitarian'.

#### Notes

- 1 Emily Pilloton, *Design Revolution: 100 Products That Empower People*, Metropolis Books (New York), 2009, p 10.
- 2 Witold Rybczynski, *Paper Heroes: Appropriate Technology: Panacea or Pipe Dream?* Penguin Books (London), 1980, reprint edition 1991, p 212. The very title of Rybczynski's book speaks to how the debate has shifted since the 1970s. Contemporary discussion is no longer about 'panacea' or failure, nor either 'modernisation' or 'tradition' or 'anti-modernisation' – all terms from the 1970s – but anticipates a new and updated spectrum of possibilities as we try to argue here.
- 3 Arcosanti, Arizona, a self-contained experimental town begun in 1970 by architect Paolo Soleri (1919–2013), used a concept he called 'arcology' – from 'architecture' and 'ecology' – designed to explore how urban conditions could be improved with a minimal amount of destruction caused to the Earth. For Soleri, an arcology was a hyperdense city designed to maximise human interaction; 'Drop City' in Trinidad, Colorado, was a fluid group of 14 to 20 artists, and functioned from 1965 to 1969, before it was abandoned in 1973. For an analysis of Drop City, see Bill Voyd's essay 'Drop City' in Paul Oliver's *Shelter and Society*, FA Praeger (London), 1969; Simon Sadler's 'Drop City Revisited', in the *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2006, and Felicity Scott's 'Acid Visions' in *Grey Room* no 23, spring 2008. Lastly, since the 1970s architect Michael Reynolds has been experimenting with various forms of building with mud and recycled materials, such as glass bottles, in what he calls 'Earthship Bioteecture'. More recently, he has been involved

in global relief projects, helping to build housing in areas that have suffered environmental disasters, such as the Andaman Islands in India, after the 2004 tsunami, <http://earthship.com/india-andaman-islands-disaster-relief> (accessed 10 January 2015).

- 4 Andrew G Kirk, *Counterculture Green, The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*, University Press of Kansas (Lawrence, KS) reprint edition, 2011, p 1.
- 5 Kirk, *Counterculture Green*, p 9.
- 6 Ernst Friedrich Schumacher: 'The keynote of Buddhist Economics, is simplicity and nonviolence. From an economist's point of view, the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its pattern – amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfactory results ... the aim should be to obtain the maximum of wellbeing with the minimum of consumption. [...] Buddhist economics is the systematic study of how to attain given ends with the minimum means.' 'Small is Beautiful', essay reprinted in Michael Allaby (ed), *Thinking Green: An Anthology of Ecological Writing*, Barrie & Jenkins (London), 1989, pp 184–5.
- 7 Víctor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, c 1971, Academy Chicago Publishers, 2nd revised edition, 2005. Other books by Papanek include *Nomadic Furniture: How to Build and Where to Buy Lightweight Furniture That Folds* (1973); *How Things Don't Work* (1977), both co-written with Jim Hennessey; *Design For Human Scale* (1983) and *The Green Imperative: Natural Design for the Real World* (1995).
- 8 Victor Margolin, 'Design for A Sustainable World', *Design Issues*, vol 14, no 2, summer 1998, pp 83–4. This is an excellent article, still extremely valuable to any thinking about 'sustainability' today.
- 9 See, for example, the very thoughtful and well-presented timeline of socially informed design by Kate Stohr in *Design Like You Give A Damn*, Metropolis Books (New York), 1st edition 2006.
- 10 In 2005 the Danish non-profit, *Index*, began handing out €100,000 cash awards to 'designs that improve life'.
- 11 For a full description, photographs and credits for this project, please see the publication of this project in *Domus* 949, July 2011, [www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/emergency-pediatric-clinic-darfur](http://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/emergency-pediatric-clinic-darfur) (accessed 10 January 2015).
- 12 See Kéré's excellent website for a full list of projects, awards and credits, [www.kerearchitecture.com](http://www.kerearchitecture.com) (accessed 10 January 2015).
- 13 'Worldwide, 2.6 billion people do not have access to adequate sanitation and the resulting diseases and water pollution cause 1.7 million deaths and a loss of US \$84 billion in worker productivity each year. In Kenya's slums, a staggering 8 million people lack access to adequate sanitation, and therefore INDEX Award 2013 finalist, Sanergy has developed a sustainable sanitation cycle to terminate this massive problem in Nairobi', <http://designtoimprovelife.dk/sanergy> (accessed 10 January 2015).
- 14 'Mexico City gets a huge environmental makeover: Plan Verde', INDEX Award 2013 finalist, <http://designtoimprovelife.dk/plan-verde> (accessed 10 January 2015).
- 15 John Bellamy Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet: A Short Economic History of the Environment*, Cornerstone Books (New York), 1994, reprint edition, 1999, p 148.
- 16 See also the 'Open Source Appropriate Technology' (OSAT) that, according to *Wikipedia*, 'refers to technologies that are designed in the same fashion as free and open-source software. These technologies must be 'appropriate technology' – meaning technology that is designed with special consideration to the environmental, ethical, cultural, social, political and economical aspects of the community it is intended for', [www.appropedia.org/Open\\_Source\\_Appropriate\\_Technology](http://www.appropedia.org/Open_Source_Appropriate_Technology) (accessed 10 January 2015).
- 17 *What Was Good Design? MoMA's Message, 1944–56* (2009–11), <http://moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/958> (accessed 10 January 2015).

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# Humanitarian Architecture Is Hip. Now What?

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Eric Cesal

**Working as a volunteer, project manager and executive director of Architecture for Humanity, Eric Cesal's wealth of on-the-ground experience and upper-level organising is both propelled by and informs the point of this essay, a call to designers to stabilise and make responsible in the long term this current surge in the attention given to humanitarian architecture. Cesal argues that the decisions architects make can have a profound impact on the communities and economies they work in – and it is a choice whether to attempt to make a positive or otherwise effect.**

In May 2013, Cameron Sinclair, cofounder of the former Architecture for Humanity, took the stage as a keynote speaker of the 2013 American Institute of Architects Convention. For those within the field of humanitarian design, it had implications. It signalled a shift. Humanitarian design was no longer fringe. It was not something renegade – it was not something that skittered around the periphery of architectural dialogue. It was, literally and figuratively, at centre stage. More remarkable was the fact that at this particular convention, humanitarian design was also at stage left, right, in the orchestra pit and the rafters. A tide had rolled in, and I counted dozens of lectures, seminars and presentations focused on different models of humanitarian design, an issue that had been struggling for years to find an adequate voice.

In full disclosure, Cameron Sinclair happened to be my boss. And many of the other speakers happened to be close friends. But none of that changed the implications of the moment. Humanitarian architecture was once again in vogue.

To anyone with a sense of history, it was also a bit unsettling. Architecture had tried before to balm the world and had failed rather fantastically. The resurgent popularity of humanitarian architecture might be more properly understood as a full revolution of an ongoing cycle. A cycle that will see the profession, within 20 or 30 years, again turn a blind eye to the ills of the world. A discussion was held in several circles: how to make humanitarian principles a lasting component of practice itself. How would you ensure that basic humanitarian concern for one's fellow human beings would be a part of practice, regardless of future evolutions of style, form and technology?

A few weeks prior I had been standing at the window of my spartan apartment in the Tenderloin neighbourhood of San Francisco, as far from humanitarian disaster as my life gets, and I spied a man, obviously affluent, walking a chunky brown dog. The dog stopped, and crouched on its haunches, intending to defecate. The affluent man looked around, as if to make sure no one was looking, let the dog do its business on the pavement, and then carried on hurriedly. Humanity, at its finest.

A few minutes later a building maintenance man emerged from one of the adjacent buildings, dragging a long hose, and started working his way down the pavement. This was

not in response to the recent defecation, this is just what he did every day. He directed his high-pressure stream of water back and forth across the path in a lazy motion, ambling down the street in no particular rush. As he did, the water forced away the cigarette butts, condom wrappers and, after a while, the same large pile of dog poop that had recently captured my attention.

The affluent man's single act of not picking up his dog's poop commanded a chain of causality. The building then had to waste hundreds of gallons of fresh water to clear away the dog's poop. To me, it was a narrative exposing the differences between those who create a problem, those who respond to it, and those who prevent it.

And so goes the story of humanitarian design in the developing world. Laurels are passed around for responding to conditions that shouldn't have existed in the first place. The design profession has, by and large, abdicated its responsibility over day-to-day problems while visibly seeking glory in fixing the gargantuan problems spun out of our own neglect.

I myself have been a part of this problem. I have collected my share of accolades for work done specifically in the aftermath of disaster. I have played the white knight – deliberately and accidentally – by swooping in and rebuilding that which never should have fallen. I don't seek absolution because the work was necessary. But I have learned the error of my ways and hope to shed light on an essential contradiction of humanitarian practice.

The contradiction arises from the mechanics of fame within the profession of architecture itself.

Designers find success in creation, not restoration or remediation. Our moments of success are defined by our ability to create something *new* that transcends or eclipses whatever paradigm the world was used to. Moreover, to do so in a way that's visible and for which we can claim credit. Through that process we establish a tick mark in the continuum of designers and architects. We become *known*. It is not wrong to expect an architect to do this. But we must acknowledge how such a construction biases architects to *responding* to conditions rather than preventing them.

Nobody ever became famous responding to a theoretical disaster in a place no one has ever heard of.

Poor communities and the developing world are no stranger to our good intentions. For over a century, the first world has tried with maddeningly erratic success to cure the problems plaguing the bottom billion. More maddening is the fact that so many of these problems can find their roots in colonial and Cold War policies imposed on these populations but absent of their consent.

While these policies – motivated by economic, political and military concerns – are implemented, a great silence erupts from the profession of architecture. And when the policies bear terrible fruit, the architectural profession stands ready and willing to lend a hand. It's great to wash away the dog poop, but why not just curb the dog in the first place?

An obvious question might be: *where does the responsibility of an architect end?* Isn't it naive to believe that an architect can be an all-powerful social engineer? Didn't we try that before? The answer is certainly yes. Why try again? Because that's the only way



that anything ever gets done. Those that try again define the march of human progress through history.

Following the Nuremberg trials, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the need for a permanent, international court to deal with issues of genocide and other crimes against humanity. However, the International Criminal Court was not convened until 2003. During the two-generation delay, the world endured the Ethiopian Red Terror, the Khmer Rouge, the Iraqi Kurd massacres and the Rwandan genocide. Would it have been appropriate to give up?

In 1863, the United States signed into law the emancipation proclamation abolishing slavery in the United States. And yet it still persists. There are believed to be about 10,000 forced labourers in the United States at this time.<sup>1</sup> Should society abandon the fight? Are 10,000 a satisfactorily low number? At what point does it become acceptable to retreat to the sidelines while injustice persists?

In 1964, the United States declared war on poverty. And yet, poverty still exists. Any reader needs travel for only 15 minutes in his or her own community to see it.

Gratefully, the professions of law, sociology, politics, diplomacy and international relations have never abandoned the fight against genocide, slavery or poverty. Because progress is entitled to only the stubborn.

One could still argue that such broad questions of social justice are the province of the aforementioned professions. And that architecture, even if it does maintain a level of social concern, can rightfully abstain from such pursuits. The trouble is buildings. Buildings touch *everyone*. And are relevant everywhere.

The design and construction of buildings forms the nexus between the profession of architecture and global society. Buildings are either a source of benefit or detriment to every single living person on the planet. Judging by the tenor of the 2013 American Institute of Architects Convention, architects now believe they could be of benefit.

If they intend to be of benefit, they must adopt the naïve and unreasonable optimism that is the hallmark of all crusaders. To fight injustice is to believe that every inch matters, even while acknowledging that the goal is unattainable. The argument, therefore, about whether humanitarian design is effective becomes a red herring. We should try and save the world because it needs saving. And to do less smacks of apathy and cynicism.

Where to begin? How might architecture even begin to wrap its collective head around such gargantuan problems? We begin by understanding where those problems come from.

In a word: poverty.

Genocide and civil war are the symptoms of an economic illness. By some estimates, the probability of conflict increases threefold when inequality among ethnic groups is at the 95th percentile.<sup>2</sup> Religious, ethnic and political groupings often have ancient reasons to hate each other, but economic inequalities regularly provide the spark to ignite pogroms the world over.

Modern slavery also seems to be an expression of an underlying economic condition. Rapid urbanisation and a wide conversion to mechanised agriculture and away from

subsistence farming have created an economic vulnerability that allows millions to easily fall victim to debt bondage – modern slavery.<sup>3</sup> There are now more people in bondage worldwide than all of those that lived and died in the multcentury transatlantic slave trade.

Similarly, with disaster. A recent surge in the frequency and severity of global disasters has spawned a catchphrase for those in the trade: *there's no such thing as a natural disaster*. A bit kitschy, but true nonetheless. And a reality that I have experienced repeatedly first hand. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and tornados are unavoidable aspects of our natural world. But the principal cause of death in any disaster is the built environment – or lack of one. In every modern disaster, we've found that poorly built structures, and poorly planned communities, lack the fortitude to withstand even those disasters that the developed world might consider minor. Without basic structural and community stability, much of the world's population is at risk. The developing world has inferior buildings for the same reason it has inferior healthcare and inferior nutrition. When your day is about survival, you cut every corner that you can. Frequently, that results in constructing buildings with the critical bits missing. Leaving out a little bit of rebar here, and a little bit of cement there, you rapidly erect a building that can't support itself under stress. Buildings fall down. Falling buildings kill people.

By now, the mastermind behind all these crimes should be self-evident; disaster, genocide and slavery all have a common root: poverty and inequality. And a state of poverty is most easily recognised by the absence of homes, and the absence of jobs. Architects have the power to create both. Architects can wait until those things are destroyed, and then try to restore them. Or they can acknowledge the immense responsibility that comes with this power and create these things in their daily work.

What would an architect do if he or she wanted to mitigate poverty through design?

First, we must dispense with the Victorian notion that space itself can reduce poverty. It was in vogue for several centuries – this idea that if spaces were light and airy and clean, they would naturally solve social problems. It must have made sense, at some point. 'Our' spaces – the spaces of the wealthy, the successful and the privileged – were nice. And we didn't have the crime and public health problems in our neighbourhoods. Therefore, we merely needed to make 'their' neighbourhoods more like 'our' neighbourhoods and all the problems would abate. A mutation of this idea was a central theme in Modernism. We no longer sought to reinvent the poor places of the world in our own image, but rather to reinvent them along scientific principles, as if straight lines and right angles could cure things like poverty and its attendant effects.

The humanitarian architect of today must realise that the process is at least as important as the product. As an architect, it is his or her opportunity and responsibility to design both. We can, through our design decisions influence the wide community of builders, buyers, sellers and transporters that participate in the execution of a design. A humanitarian designer cannot consign him or herself to a passive role, and believe that the process of building, or the product of a building, is outside of his purview. He or she must believe that progress lies in his or her hands. The tactics are the easy part:



## Create Jobs

Through material decisions, an architect can greatly influence the jobs created by a project. In our contemporary first-world practice, we are trained to embrace the efficiency of mass production. To increase cost-effectiveness and value in a building, we look for components that are standardised and familiar. For many clients, it's a programme requirement: you must use standardised components to ease in the operations and maintenance of a building. But if your objective is to create jobs, this logic may be inverted. By emphasising materials that are handcrafted and locally sourced, you can create jobs that promote local pride and economic wellness. The decision of whether to use metal studs or wood studs is one that could be driven by code, climatic decisions or local tradition and so on. Another way to consider such a choice is to ask oneself: *which economy do I want to stimulate?* The decision to use metal studs will positively impact all industries associated with the manufacture, transport and installation of metal studs. This might include ore extraction, foundries, fitters, companies that make rivets, companies that make rivet guns, companies that make metal screws (as opposed to those that make nails) and so on. A decision to use wood studs would likely benefit forestry industries, nurserymen, long-haul trucking and many others. Depending on where each material is sourced, it is wholly possible that the benefits would differ by whole countries or continents. It should be part of the designer's process to consider the full economic value chain during the design process.

## Stimulate Local Economies

Every product is part of a value chain. It takes materials and labour to source, assemble, transport and install. Every step, in each value chain, for every product, creates an opportunity to stimulate a local economy. Considerations of sustainability, such as the green building certification programme Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), have prompted us to ask more questions about where our building components come from. The next step is to ask what they do while they're there? Do they create jobs, in sourcing, assembly, transport or installation? Are the jobs dignified and sustainable? Were they produced by an extraction economy (eg mining) or an investment economy (eg forestry)? Asking these questions affords designers an opportunity to positively engineer a local economy by making deliberate design decisions in favour of the local economy. This is not unrelated to our previous discussion on job creation. However, it has broader implications. If we choose products, technologies or processes that have secondary and tertiary economic effects, we amplify our impact. For example, suppose you chose a product that had significant transportation requirements. This would stimulate economies related to trucking, truck sales, shipping, packing, auto parts, road repair and other things. This would be of substantially more benefit in a country that had a well-developed auto industry and no alternative means of transportation (eg rail transport). If you make this design decision in a country with no auto industry, much of the economic stimulus is likely to be transferred outside the country – to the country with the most available imports.

### **Leverage Local Capacities, Don't Overshadow Them.**

Patrimony is perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome when trying to practice humanitarian design. Vanity is a perfectly human tendency. What is an overeducated first-world designer to do when confronted with an illiterate third-world builder? After a decade of education and training, is it possible that the first-world designer still has something to learn? Yes, naturally. Every country, no matter how poor, has its building professionals. They may not bear the name 'architect', 'engineer' or 'builder', but they practice the same trade as we do. If we were to assume the capacities and skills, would we be putting that local professional out of work? To do so would perpetuate the worst aspects of all humanitarian work: the creation and maintenance of a dependent aid state.

These tenants can be woven into any design, any practice, anywhere in the world. They do not require one to leave one's community, one's job or one's task. They merely require a consciousness of the world that exists outside the modelling table or the design studio, and an awareness of the inherent power of choice and design.

Humanitarian architecture is enjoying a bit of a renaissance. It's fashionable again. The question before us is whether we allow this goodwill to become a part of another chapter in the history of architecture, or weave it into the grammar of the text itself. Whether we take steps to address the inhuman conditions created by others, or take steps to prevent those conditions from ever coming into existence.

Over a billion people worldwide are currently living in substandard conditions. The United Nations estimate that climate change will generate over 50 million refugees in the next 25 years. The majority of the world's population lives with threats to water security. Architects possess the technical skill to solve these problems. And to prevent new ones. Do they have the will?

#### Notes

- 1 National Human Rights Center at the University of California at Berkeley.
- 2 G Østby, 'Inequalities, the Political Environment and Civil Conflict: Evidence from 55 Countries', in F Stewart (ed) *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multi-ethnic Societies*, Palgrave MacMillan (Basingstoke), 2010, p 213.
- 3 Kevin Bales, 'Expendable People: Slavery in the Age of Globalization', *Journal of International Affairs*, vol 53, no 2, Spring 2000, pp 461–84.

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