

## Globally Local Design Networks

I would like to propose a variation of the “network of learning centers” suggested in Victor Papneck’s chapter “Design for Survival and Survival through Design: A Summation” in *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Changes*.<sup>1</sup> I would like to explore the idea of a consortium of schools/design centers that are located in neighborhoods around the world that are focused on local design initiatives. The students and designers must live abroad and learn about the local culture, history, and state of affairs and improve the standards of living through designing and co-designing with the locals and stakeholders of the local design initiative.

The significance of design education has “developed naturally from a growing awareness of the importance of design in the daily life of the culture,”<sup>2</sup> however, in order to efficiently benefit culture through design there needs to be a culture education as well. Sure it is possible to learn about the different cultures you’re designing for in a book, or nowadays on the internet or television, but you cannot truly know a culture until you have lived as they live and have walked many miles in their shoes. This is why I am proposing a network of design centers located in neighborhoods and villages around the world to first learn about and partake in the local culture and then respond to the design needs of that area, be it in product,

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<sup>1</sup> Papneck, Victor, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Changes*. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1985: 346

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/cal/art-design.html>, accessed May 7, 2011

service, environmental, architectural, systems, or visual design and partner with existing organizations and charities.

Today most local design efforts have been mostly focused on immediate disaster relief and quick fixes but our design schools have had little involvement. In our present day most people's idea of humanitarian design for local initiative is to throw money at organizations such as UNICEF, The Red Cross, FEMA, etc. to arrive at the solution and pay little more attention to what does not affect their lives directly. Not to say donating to these organizations for disaster relief is a negative gesture, because they do help in times of need, yet their methods and the way people think about design for the Third World must change. There needs to be a paradigm shift from local design initiatives being seen as a quick fix from outsiders to permanent local movement where designers work with local communities to make a lasting difference and not for them making temporary solutions.

As a whole the network of schools I am proposing will focus on homelessness, clean water, disaster relief, poverty, entrepreneurial kick-starters, waste management and environmental enhancing initiatives; they will focus on the issue most pressing in the area where the school is located. Students will be fulfilling humanitarian design characteristics of working locally; meaning living there, working with the local communities, professors would be people who share similar thoughts to Emily Pilloton, who stresses living locally in her book *Design Revolution: 100 Products that Empower People*, as well as her article "Depth Over Breadth: Designing for Impact Locally, and for the Long Hail."

As part of the design curriculum for the local design initiative students will conduct firsthand research organizations that are both for and not-for-profit and compare what works best overall in terms of humanitarian design and also what works best with the different demographics that they will be encountering. They will need to not only be immersed in the local culture, but also need to familiarize themselves with the different materials and natural resources available in their local communities.

It is extremely important for students to be familiar with and to research the products that have been commissioned by organizations like UNICEF and The Red Cross that were not designed locally and why they worked or did not work in order to understand the larger picture of the importance of designing locally and to have locals involved in the process. Great sources of information are the catalogues from the MoMA 2006 SAFE DESIGN TAKES A RISK exhibition as well as the Design for the Other 90% exhibition. Victor Papneck's book Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change will also serve well for my research of how the consortium of schools should operate. Objects found in catalogues like these such as the Solar Hearing Aid<sup>3</sup> would be among the successful design initiatives studied by the network of schools.

The Solar Hearing Aid was a great design concept. It took into account the culture of African villages and allowed them many different opportunities with this product. It allowed them to purchase their hearing aid outright but also allowed for emergence of entrepreneurship where one person could purchase and rent out the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://inhabitat.com/solar-ear-hearing-aids>, accessed May 7, 2011

device or establish per-use or weekly fees for charging hearing aids for everyone in the village. It allows the hearing impaired to work or go to school and participate in society and the economy, bringing about economic growth both personally and to their countries

There are three types of approaches that I chose to look to in terms of humanitarian design approaches. The first is the charity Love for Haiti, which was established as a volunteer based disaster relief organization after the 2010 earthquake left the city in ruin. They catered to the eminent needs of a lack of medical services, dental services, shelter, and a source of clean water. Through the organization volunteers including practicing medical personnel travel from the US to provide the locals with free and necessary check-ups, and dental work. They have also had a team of psychologists who have held workshops to help the locals deal with grief and to train them to help each other to learn how to respond to their own mental health in the face of disaster. With Love for Haiti, architects have also gone over to volunteer and have designed earthquake resistant dome homes and have given building plans shown locals how to construct them. They have also installed water treatment systems in orphanages and schools.<sup>4</sup>

What works with the organization Love for Haiti is that they are providing the locals with services basic to all humans in a time of need and desperation. However, they are comprised of a team of people who go over with ideas of what the locals need in advance and only stay for short periods of time. They are not training or working with trained Haitian medical persons and they do not participate much

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.love-for-haiti.com/blog/?p=64>, accessed May 7, 2011

in the local culture. They are essentially tourists who are providing disaster relief. On the upside, they do have long term goals to partner volunteering architectural students with Haitian students to build more earthquake resistant homes and facilities.<sup>5</sup>

Another humanitarian design organization I looked at was RIPPLE Africa, who believes in “providing a hand UP, not a hand out!”<sup>6</sup> This organization, based in Mwaya, Malawi, has proved to be successful by Emily Pilloton’s and John Kenneth Galbraith’s standards in that “we must design with communities, rather than for clients, and rethink what we’re designing in the first place,”<sup>7</sup> and that “the only sound way to solve the problem of poverty is to help people help themselves.”<sup>8</sup> RIPPLE Africa was established in 2003<sup>9</sup> to help eradicate issues in Malawi such as deforestation due to over population and a shift in cultivation. Because of a lack of electricity and other sources of energy and materials, about 90% of the population uses firewood to cook as well as build homes and over the years, with a drastic increase in population, has led to mass deforestation. RIPPLE Africa has taken an initiative in the local humanitarian and environmental efforts to improve the way of life for residents long-term.

Working with locals, RIPPLE Africa has developed a more efficient wood burning stove that cooks faster, uses 1/3 of the wood it used to take to prepare an

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rippleafrica.org/index.html>, accessed May 7, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Pilloton, Emily. Design Revolution: 100 Products that Empower People. New York: Metropolis Books, 2009: 10

<sup>8</sup> Galbraith, John Kenneth. The Affluent Society. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958: 240.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.rippleafrica.org/ripple\\_charity\\_story.htm](http://www.rippleafrica.org/ripple_charity_story.htm), accessed May 7, 2011.

average meal, produce less smoke, and are portable. They use local labor and materials to produce which helps to sustain the local economy.<sup>10</sup> RIPPLE Africa introduced micro-loans for local businesses and helped to establish fish farming, beekeeping, and vegetable growing programs so that the locals could be more independent as a community and rely less on charity and learn how to help and feed themselves. They introduced community tree nursery programs in order to repopulate the forests and also helped the community to construct a local healthcare center, school and community library.<sup>11</sup>

Schools that already focus on design such as Parsons, SCAD, Pratt, RISD have a curriculum that lends itself too much to opportunities abroad that consist of quick intensive design solutions for local communities and focus more on conceptual design.<sup>12</sup> However, in my proposal for the globally local design network, design institutes like these will not become obsolete. The consortium I propose will also partner with these schools providing students with an opportunity to experience what it really means to live and design locally with communities. They will be exposed firsthand and may eventually choose later in their career to become apart of the network.

One school that is already invested in a lasting local humanitarian design initiative is Rural Studio. The founder Samuel Mockbee designed this branch of the architectural program at Auburn University in Alabama in line with the principal

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.rippleafrica.org/ripple\\_charity\\_environ3.htm](http://www.rippleafrica.org/ripple_charity_environ3.htm) accessed May 7, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.rippleafrica.org/ripple\\_charity\\_story.htm](http://www.rippleafrica.org/ripple_charity_story.htm), accessed May 7, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.newschool.edu/parsons/news.aspx?id=63454>, accessed May 7, 2011

that “to make design more relevant, is to consider what design issues are” – Bryan Bell. The initial objective Mockbee had when designing this program in 1993 was to improve the living conditions in rural Alabama and in doing so “inspire a community [of architects] to challenge the status quo into making responsible changes...[and to] take the subversive leadership of academics and practitioners who keep reminding students of the profession's responsibilities.”<sup>13</sup> Although their initial focus was on designing homes for families in and around the local community “[the focus] has since shifted to include larger community projects.”<sup>14</sup> Over the last 17 years Rural Studio has completed over 100 projects in Hale County including playgrounds, pavilions, churches, recreational centers & fields, parks, senior centers, a fire station, the town hall, schools, animal shelters and museums. One tradition they have kept with in terms of designing small affordable homes for the rural county is their annual project of designing the \$20K House.

“The \$20K House project aims to establish a market-rate model house to be built by a contractor under a USDA rural housing loan program. A loan of \$20,000 is considered to be the lowest amount someone living on Social Security could afford to repay, which translates to approximately \$10,000 in materials and \$10,000 for labor and contractor profit.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/Default.aspx?path=Gallery%2fPurpose%2fObjective%2f>, accessed May 7, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/Default.aspx?path=Gallery%2fPurpose%2fHistory%2f>, accessed May 7, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/Default.aspx?path=Gallery%2fProjects%2f2005%2f20kversion1%2f>, accessed May 7, 2011.

The Rural Studio is so far the closest successful design curriculum being implemented today that aligns with my proposal. However I would change the way the community is involved. Although the designers are resident of the town and personally invested in the welfare, they are still architects mostly designing for not with. They assess which needs are to be met through consulting with the local community regarding design but in rarely involve them in the entire process including choosing materials and the actual construction.

The globally local design network that I am proposing will be just that, a network with locations in rural communities all around the world. It will be comprised of designers obliged to make a 2-3 year commitment per community. They will design anything the community may need from products and buildings, to spaces, systems and landscapes. They will strive to design not for, but with the local population being as environmentally and economically sustainable as possible by using primarily using local and native resources. The curriculum will empower designers and locals in the community to think and be united globally, while acting locally through an online platform where they will post anything from ideas and insights, to prototypes and final projects. They will give feedback to other fellow designers in similar programs around the world and will also be able to exchange locations with another designer after their 2-3 year commitment.

In conclusion I believe that education and dedication can improve humanitarian design efforts and the best possible way will be to implement these globally local design centers in every community in need.

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