DESIGNING A FUTURE

THE DESIGN WORLD IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF A NEW BREED OF HUMANITARIAN PROJECTS THAT PUT PEOPLE FIRST

WORDS | JESSICA GLIDDON

Bertie County, North Carolina, is about as sleepy as places get. The buildings along the main street of the town of Windsor haven't seen a new coat of paint for a long time. In fact, this sparsely populated county is the poorest in North Carolina.

But at the Bertie County High School, things look a bit different. The computer lab is painted bright blue with tall yellow columns. The playground outside has an obstacle course built with tyres. And the shop class is humming: wood is being cut, painted and shaped. This is no ordinary shop class; this is Studio H, a public high school design/build curriculum that hopes to uplift the children of this impoverished county.

Studio H is part of Project H, a unique non-profit organisation that seeks to use design to benefit communities. Emily Pilloton is the founder and executive director of Project H,

and, along with project architect Matthew Miller, she has moved her whole life to Bertie County.

What is extraordinary about Pilloton's venture is the degree of her own involvement. She has become an instructor at the school she has committed to helping.

"We realised very quickly that there has to be some sort of educational component," Pilloton says. "It wasn't just about the end product, but about what we were leaving through that educational process. Our architectural projects come from the vision and the blood, sweat and tears of our students. Design shifts the ownership: we're just teaching them the skills to make it happen."

Humanitarian design can be defined broadly as any design with a social responsibility element. Projects like Studio H embrace a modern approach to charity, emphasising sustainability and self-sufficiency.

"Design is uniquely positioned to be a form of capital, in a way where you can apply creativity within communities in a far more deeply rooted, empowering way than just a hand-out," explains Pilloton. "Both the process and the product of design can be hugely empowering. Products that come out of a creative design process are far more appropriate when they come out of the democratic design process where the beneficiaries have a stake in creating that solution."

Design Indaba, South Africa's most famous design expo, echoes this ethos on the other side of the world. Indaba provides a forum each February to showcase the most innovative South African designers. But it's also a conference, a trust, has its own magazine and acts as a humanitarian platform. Founded in 1995 by Ravi Naidoo, the project aims to revitalise South Africa using the design skills of its people.

Naidoo feels that design should fundamentally involve a humanitarian aspect. "I grew up inspired by my country and its vexing issues," Naidoo says. "I wanted to find a model that worked. All of our projects ⇒

"This wasn't just a house for poor people: it was personal. There's a sense of belonging; all the families were physically involved. There was job creation."

PREVIOUS PAGE: One of Studio H's community design projects.
THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Studio H encourages students to think about design in a humanitarian way; keeping students on task; design for young minds; the 10x10 project paired communities with architects to build low-cost housing.

have a socio-economic benefit, and work towards leveraging progress. Design is not about consumption, it's not a branding service, it's about people, quality of life, and it serves a higher purpose."

The latest initiative by Design Indaba is their Your Street programme, where designers are challenged to come up with humanitarian design solutions on their own streets. Pedersen + Lennard, a furniture design company based in Woodstock, Cape Town, came up with an interesting solution.

"Pedersen + Lennard's offices are located across from a park where disadvantaged elderly people go," Naidoo explains. "One of them is called Violet George. She, like the other aged people, would walk to the shop daily. For someone in their eighties, going to the convenience store is like a marathon. Pederson + Lennard observed Violet has no place to rest. They made street furniture out of recycled materials and called it Violet's Walk."

The Design Indaba 10x10 Project is another strong example of bringing the larger design community to a very local focus. Ten local architectural beneficiaries were paired with ten international architects in a competition to create low-cost housing in a squatter camp. "We involved some of the world's leading architects," Naidoo says. "They aren't commissioned to do these kinds of projects. But communities like this also need access to the best brains."

Getting architects involved was less challenging than earning the trust of the Cape Town township. "In that community, we had no credibility; we were nobody," Naidoo says. "NGOs were our interlocutors to the 490 families there. We went in with our idea, but we didn't want to offer gifts. We had a process."

While the community had access to government housing, the 10x10 Project proposed to create a better solution: a house that would be built from local materials, be sustainable, and that the community itself could build. The winning project was a house made from sandbags, filled with sand from the township grounds.

"Since 80 percent of resources were on tap, you avoid tapping into commercial industrial complex supply: there's a cost saving right there," Naidoo says. "This wasn't just a house for poor people: it was personal. There's a sense of belonging; all the families were physically involved. There was job creation. People were paid to build their own houses."

Good intentions don't come without consequences. Like any charity project, there is the risk of being seen as imperialistic. And for such a cerebral field as design, the risk is higher. "I've been a bit of lightening rod for some of the criticism around humanitarian design," says Pilloton. "We've done a lot to edit our own practice, to be far more invested and not imperialistic. But that's kind of the Achilles' heel of humanitarian design – we all want to do good, but we want to do good in an honest way and not be missionaries."

Naidoo feels that action through design, rather than just discussing design, is crucial to making it relevant. "Design by doing" could be humanitarian design's mantra. But achieving this emphasises the need for an understanding of the community.

"Our 10x10 project was talk realised in something tangible," Naidoo says. "We think this will be our diffusion – we don't need more talking, we need more doing. Design Indaba is a think-tank five days a year and a do-tank 365 days a year. Most importantly, you need local actors putting up a curriculum and examples for people. In the deeply personal comes the universal. What is relevant elsewhere, you will find in yourself."

Pilloton's outlook is similar. "Humanitarian design can work anywhere, but only if it has very strongly-rooted local support," she says. "Good intentions only take you so far when there's too big a gap between the designers and the beneficiary. That's part of the reason that we live in North Carolina. I wouldn't even think about doing this from afar now."

"I always encourage young designers to not feel the need to fly across globe when there's plenty going on in their own backyard, in a place you know and understand," she says. "Much of it is rooted in just being a good citizen first and a designer second."

It's a balancing act, but speaking to Pilloton and Naidoo, anything seems possible. ●