



Sustain
Volume 8, Issue 5
C. 30,000



Listening Aid

► **MICHAEL FERREIRA**, Head of Field Operations for Architects for Aid, discusses how communication can be the key to sustainable design



Everybody has a view about architecture. So, as a reader of *sustain'*, which would you choose to influence the design of a building: aesthetics – or ethics?

As a subjective audience, I imagine you may choose the latter – and, of course, they are by no means mutually exclusive. The debate about more environmentally-sound design and construction and the creation of sustainable communities has been running for enough time now for us to recognise one certainty, it has as many sides as a prism.

But while architects and other interested parties in the UK and Europe continue to discuss this multi-faceted topic – elsewhere, others in the profession, have no alternative but to make decisions and get on with it. At Architects for Aid (A4A), we are focused solely on the development of adequate, dignified shelter as a human right – but for this to be long term, it needs to be economically and environmentally sustainable.

DILEMMAS AND DISCUSSIONS

Nobody with any integrity could argue with the cause. However, this doesn't mean that we don't get involved in some rigorous dilemmas and discussions – often around sustainability and the complete lifecycle expectations of a building.

For example, in some areas residents may wish to get back to nature; others see a home as a separation and refuge from nature. Most people are quite happy to use local materials and other resources. Our projects in Thailand often involve mud-brick housing, banana-leaf roofs and approved timber. Everything is originally from the ground and will go back to the ground.

However, this type of construction demands a symbiotic

relationship between the building and user who needs to proactively help sustain it with constant maintenance.

Yet, other people equate sustainability with longevity. They want concrete, fired bricks and tiled roofs. Often these are ex-colonial countries where there are still buildings dating from that period around. They admire their permanence and see an ideal building as one that will be around longer than they will be.

LOOKING AT THE WHOLE PICTURE

A4A works with local, national and international aid organisations, charities and NGOs, taking on post-disaster reconstruction and development. Consequently, we agree with Bill Clinton's comments in the NGO Impact Initiative (published at the end of last year) that: "NGOs should accelerate and expend efforts to recognise and promote leadership of local communities, local aid groups and, where appropriate, affected government in recovery from major disasters."

We've learnt to look at the whole picture. Naturally, we are concerned about saving energy and conserving water and so on. But, we also consider creating a sustainable programme around the design itself. What are the plans for the community? Can we try and link the NGO with those with whom we are working, with other NGOs that could also use the building?

Of course, the key to this is communication. We always talk to local leaders to identify their expectations for the long term. We don't want to build a community centre, be there for a few years and then say – "there, our programme is finished" and they have a white elephant on their hands.

ORPHANAGE: GHANA

This is the way we are going about one of our current projects – the construction of a new orphanage in central Ghana, where we are working with the Dutch organisation, Let Kids Smile. Here, a plot of land has been bought to construct a new building for approximately 25 – 30 children, as well as four live-in carers. The site is large enough for the children and carers to grow crops and keep animals such as goats and chickens and to play their favourite game – football.

Stefanie van den Brandt of A4A who undertook the first feasibility and research trip to the site told me: "We spent a lot of time with the children, observing and participating in their activities. Working on projects such as this one, you realise how important it is to visit a site and meet the future users."

"Working with our hosts and orphanage co-ordinators Ellen and Morocco and combining their knowledge of the people and the area, together with our creative and technical skills, we have come up with a design that suits the requirements of the future users and fits in very well with the environment. Having visited the local workmen and businesses, we have ensured that all materials and labour used will be benefiting the local community."

In fact, the new orphanage will include many green features, including a greywater soakaway and reed bed, solar lamps, handmade roof tiles and palm-tree trunks as posts. But the main point is that future users have been involved and feel part of the building's development – as well as its future. Then we use our design, construction, engineering and project-management knowledge to create the most cost-effective, workable and useable solution we can.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF ARCHITECTURE

By providing expertise rather than cash we can maximise the benefit of charitable funds of organisations who need best value and best information when deploying every penny of funding.

At the same time, both our student and fully professional volunteers learn much about the human side of architecture. They don't come back and start advocating that we build semis with banana-leaf roofs in Surrey. But they do learn to value the importance of looking at a building project holistically – which includes using the needs of future users to influence the design.

These methods certainly don't exclude aesthetics but they do ensure that function influences form and buildings are fit for purpose. As one of our student volunteers put it: "It's eco-architecture – not ego-architecture." □