

## Building hope: global network tackles humanitarian problems

**An increasing number of organisations are using skilled volunteers to provide practical help for humanitarian problems. Chris Medland introduces one such organisation, in the field of design: Architecture for Humanity.**

The wealthy philanthropist George Peabody built houses for the poor of Victorian London. In the 1880s, brothers George and Richard Cadbury built the village of Bourneville for workers at their chocolate factory, also providing green spaces, schools, free medical care and, in 1901, an old age pension scheme.

Today, many people support charitable causes by donating money, but the age of practical philanthropy is far from over: there is a growing trend for people to offer their expertise and skills to practical projects. One organisation harnessing such contributions in the field of design is Architecture for Humanity (AfH), a winner at last year's Observer Ethical Awards.

AfH was founded in New York in 1999 with the aim of promoting architectural and design solutions to global, social and humanitarian crises. It brings together the expertise of individuals, groups and agencies alongside local experts to deliver quality practical solutions to communities in need. AfH makes sure that the local people are equal partners in the process and that they take ultimate control of rebuilding their homes and their lives. This means that projects use local, sustainable materials, and local expertise and labour. AfH made its name quickly with projects such as the design for transitional housing in response to the Kosovo refugee crisis and temporary shelters for the victims of the earthquake in Bam, Iran.

These projects, along with widely publicised design competitions, meant that AfH gained worldwide support from students, architects and designers alike. Small groups of these supporters, or advocates as they are known, began to meet and eventually took on projects of their own. By 2003 there were more than a dozen AfH chapters around the world, the largest of which outside the USA was, and still is, in London.

The UK chapter, AfH UK, has itself attracted attention for innovative projects such as the Crisis Open Christmas shelters in London. For this, fifty people in

five teams worked with Crisis on its Open Christmas shelters, improving the layout of the spaces both through design and by helping with the build (see small photo below).



Photo: Architecture for Humanity ©

AfH helped design Crisis shelters

Another notable project implemented by AfH UK was a facility for drying arnica that was built in Girda de Sus, Romania (see large photo below). Working with the World Wildlife Fund, the team completed the installation on site in summer 2006. Arnica has potent medicinal qualities and is highly valued in its dried state; the facility enables the local community, which is one of the poorest in Europe, to add value on site to its harvest while also reducing the quantum of arnica cut.

These are just two of more than a dozen projects underway or completed in the last few years, all of which were achieved thus far by volunteers in their spare time (and the occasional surreptitious use of the office equipment of their employers!) – a group of like minded people pooling their skills to carry out work that otherwise would not be done, or at least not to the same professional standards. The work gives people the opportunity to be socially responsible while maintaining their everyday lives and professional careers. Volunteers gain satisfaction both from making a difference and from the

recognition they gain through that process. For many the 'feel good factor' is a valuable offset to the work they do in their day-to-day jobs.

The catastrophic tsunami in East Asia in 2004 doubled the organisation's volunteer base within a week. In the years since the disaster, AfH has initiated, designed and built a number of community structures including schools, community halls, medical clinics and livelihood centres. All projects have been designed and developed under the Creative Commons Developing Nations License, which means that other NGOs and community groups can replicate and adapt the projects for use elsewhere without infringing intellectual property rights.

Also along open access lines, AfH has built an online space for collaboration. The Open Architecture Network is a gathering place for community designers and all those interested in improving the built environment.

In that same period, AfH UK has consolidated its own position by developing an administrative structure and registering as a charity. It now has a network of some 600 advocates.

**Chris Medland, RIBA, is a Trustee of AfH UK and Associate of the Building Design Partnership, London.**

### Further information

Architecture for Humanity (AfH):

<http://www.architectureforhumanity.org/>

AfH UK: <http://afhuk.org/>

Open Architecture Network:

<http://www.openarchitecturenetwork.org/>



Photo: Architecture for Humanity ©

AfH volunteers helped design this arnica drying facility used by a farming co-operative in Romania