Conversations in Socially Responsible Architecture

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

In our ever-shrinking world, we often hear the call to donate to noble causes, such as feeding the starving children or fighting disease. Our Western culture often allows us to feel sympathetic for our fellow suffering humans. While these are noble causes, how can we ensure that our motives are pure? How do we help others without glorifying ourselves? This project serves as an examination of the field of socially responsible architecture to help the author gain a better personal understanding of her interest in using her architecture degree to help people. Through researching twenty-one individuals, design-focused non-profit organizations, and non-design organizations that work in a socially responsible manner, the author developed a critical sensibility and learned to challenge the intentions of others and herself. This paper serves as an explanation of the research, reflection on the process, and an exploration of the thinking that likewise evolved.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you goes to my advisor, Wes Janz. Without his probing questions, incredible insight, and seemingly infinite references, I would have gotten myself stuck very early in this process.

Thank you to my parents for always challenging me to be a good person, and for supporting all of my crazy ideas.
Introduction.

When I began this thesis, I thought that it would be a straightforward project – investigating architectural organizations that focused on humanitarian endeavors. The project became something more complex – a questioning of not just these organizations, but of myself, my interest in humanitarian work, and my underlying intentions in this interest. The process of research and thinking has itself been my thesis. This paper serves as a narrative of the process and a personal reflection. Because the most significant aspect of the process has been questioning, this paper is organized through a series of questions. Additionally, I composed a list of questions that encompass the major themes that I dealt with through this investigation. These questions are juxtaposed in a sidebar of this paper to create a parallel dialogue between the two elements.

Process of investigation

There is no "good" way to start research in a field as diverse as humanitarian design. I found myself going back and forth between researching a variety of organizations, and reflecting upon what I was learning. As a result, I kept sequentially organized notes in a sketchbook. The notes themselves became secondary in importance to the questions that I had scribbled next to them. These questions represent my immediate reaction to what I was learning, and the evolution of my understanding as a whole.

Most of my research was conducted through perusing the websites of organizations and individuals. Major organizations directed my attention to smaller organizations, with which they have forged partnerships. I also watched many TED talks, given by individuals who are involved in humanitarian-focused endeavors. These talks gave me personal perspective and insight into the thinking of other people, versus the formal missions of their respective organizations.

Another important facet of my investigation was discussing my ideas with my advisor, Wes Janz. Wes challenged my thinking with reflections of his own experiences in the field, and suggested a diverse range

What is the architect's role in society?

What does society want or need from an architect?

Why does society need to be "changed"?

Why do we feel the need to "help" the poor?

Why not the rich?

Why does "Help" mean "Change"?

Why do we need to change others?

Why are those "others" the poor?

Why is the Western way of life the only "humane" way of life?

Why is it easier to change cultures far away from us than help in our own communities?

Why are we hesitant to change ourselves?

Who decides that a certain practice or behavior is "wrong"?

Is it better to understand and learn than impose?

Should design be a learning process for the designer?

Should design only be pursued on a local scale?

How does a global approach compare to a local approach?

Why does change have to be "massive"?
of individuals and organizations that should be subjects of research. These discussions helped me to flesh out my ideas and encourage me to challenge my thinking. They also helped me to find my next step and move me through the process of research.

Additionally, I was able to contact several people who are involved in this field. One of my favorite conversations was with Andy, a volunteer with the Atlanta-based organization, Mad Housers. Through our conversation, Andy discussed the joys and challenges of working in a non-profit, and helped me to imagine ways that I can get involved in the field.

**Language**

Language is one of the most important aspects of the process of investigation. Language encompasses how an organization presents itself, and how I present my own thinking. Through the past few years, I have been struggling in trying to explain to others the type of design work in which I am interested, and how to simplify this interest into a short phrase. I have decided upon the term “socially responsible,” versus my earlier idea of “humanitarian,” though it may seem futile to attempt to simplify a concept that will require a lifetime of exploration.

**What is a socially responsible architectural organization?**

Though these two terms are, at heart, equivalent, the term “humanitarian” is one that is loaded with meaning. The implication of this term is “aid giving,” and can be too easily associated with philanthropic organizations. Mostly, this applies to organizations and actions that take place outside of the Western (wealthy) culture. I am not interested in giving poor people architecture. I am interested in giving equal access to architectural services, no matter a person’s economic status or geographic location.

Thus, the term “socially responsible” is appropriate. This phrase implies making design choices and being involved in a project in a manner that is of benefit to a community, and promotes a community’s ability to sustain itself. The term encompasses the importance of working on local issues in one’s home community, as well as issues in other regions. Most importantly, the designer is held accountable to the community in which he or she is working, and is therefore responsible for the final impact of his or her work. It is important to avoid a “design and drop” sensibility.

**Why am I interested in socially responsible architectural work?**

Since I was a child, I have been volunteering. As a young college student, I wanted to take volunteering to the next level, and break myself out of my comfort zone. I travelled to Haiti with colleagues from my high school, and we assisted with daily tasks at an orphanage in Port-au-Prince. This experience allowed me to see a different part of the world than suburban Indiana.

I have been very fortunate in my opportunity to pursue an education and career in architecture. The trip to Haiti left me with the challenge of using my education to help
communities and individuals who do not have access to formal architecture services. I do not seek to change the world through design, but to make myself of service to others. While I would thoroughly appreciate the opportunity to help those in third world countries, I do not want to forget about those in my home community.

One of the first organizations that I became familiar with after my trip to Haiti was Architecture for Humanity. AFH is a rather extensive organization, an aggregate of chapters that are located throughout the world. Individual chapters are able to mobilize immediately in the case of local disasters, with external help contributing as needed. AFH’s immediate response to the 2010 earthquake impressed me, and I wanted to take part in the rebuilding process. Unfortunately, I lacked the required construction skills to be able to help their effort. Over the past two years, though, I have been a part of two academic courses devoted to rebuilding Haiti. Though these were theoretical in the sense that they will most likely not have a direct effect on the rebuilding process, they helped me to form my thinking about creating site-specific designs for a resource-lacking community. These reaffirmed my desire to use my architectural knowledge to help people.

**What did I expect to learn through this process?**

I thought that I was going to find a plethora of organizations similar in scale and scope to Architecture for Humanity. My actions were motivated by selfish intentions, having previously applied for an unpaid internship with AFH. This internship would not have allowed me to receive the professional credit that is required for me to become a licensed architect. Yet, through this internship, I would have gained valuable experience in the humanitarian field, practical work experience, and the opportunity to work with the community to which I feel a great connection, Haiti. I hoped to find several organizations that work in a similar capacity to AFH, but that would offer the opportunity for a paid internship.

I thought that I was going to learn about organizations that build schools and orphanages on the African

**Is incremental change better than massive change?**

**How can we approach humanitarian design at a level that is appropriate for the end user?**

**Does a designer have to be immersed in a community to properly design for the community?**

**How does a designer become immersed in the community?**

**How can we provide our services for people without imposing our own personal will?**

**Why should “poor” clients be treated any differently than “rich” clients?**

**What is the essential difference between poor and rich clients?**

**How can we teach clients to be able to think like designers?**

**How can we teach designers to think like clients?**

**Why does the world need architects?**

**Does the world need architects?**

**Are architects innately self-interested?**

**How do we stop being self-interested?**

**How does the role of designer remain relevant in the global society?**

**What is the relevance of the designer in a “developing” community?**
continent, in India, and in Latin America. I thought these would be well-established, well-respected organizations.

Also, I felt that I needed to gain more perspective into this line of work. It's not healthy to hold one organization in such a good light, without knowing about the work of others. I sought to gain a critical understanding of non-profits and individuals, as well as a general understanding of who is doing what.

**What did I learn through this process?**

One of my primary resources in this investigation has been Architecture for Humanity's publication, Design Like You Give a Damn. This book profiled some of AFH's work, but mostly innovations in building technology, such as multiple concepts for a redesigned disaster relief/refugee tent. Instead of the large, established organizations that I expected to learn about, I found many individuals who pursued single, personally funded ventures.

My initial intention was to analyze at least fifteen organizations to understand the breadth of the field of socially responsible design. An index of research has been expanded to include twenty-one design organizations, individuals, and non-design-based organizations that work in a socially responsible manner. Each organization or individual is listed because it somehow influenced my thinking throughout the semester. The list is organized into several different topics [see Appendix].

**Built Environment**

This section includes organizations that are closest to the ones that I first imagined that I would be researching. These organizations, including AFH, Scale Africa, Project H, MASS Design Group, and Building Tomorrow support architectural pursuits in communities around the world. Of these, I am particularly interested in the work of Project H and MASS. Project H’s dedication to teaching design thinking to high school students in rural North Carolina is an inventive way to teach tomorrow’s leaders to think outside of the box. MASS is close to my initial imagining of a non-profit that functions like a firm, and produces high-quality design work that is focused in the poorer regions of the world.

**Economic Ventures**

These organizations do not necessarily relate to architecture, but they contribute to a general mindset of humanitarian thinking. CHF and the Grameen Bank support microfinancing ventures, helping to support local development in poor communities. The Barefoot College supports job training in technological and practical trades, so that even those who are illiterate are qualified to find well paying jobs.

**Design Process**

Though IDEO.org does great work in helping alleviate poverty, I was most affected by their approach to working in communities. By outlining a three-part process (Hear, Create, Deliver), IDEO.org allows any designer to work appropriately with a community.
The design process involves forging trust between the designer and community members, gauging the wants and needs of that community, designing appropriate solutions, and working with the community to produce the end result. Though IDEO.org is not dealing with architecture specifically, I think that the process is useful for architects working in a community with which they are not intimately familiar.

Small-Scale Interventions

These organizations might be doing small-scale projects, but their work has a large impact on the communities in which they are working. For each organization, the projects that had the biggest impact on my thinking pertain to drawing the attention of the community to a certain issue, and challenging the community to rethink that issue. The Ugly Indian draws attention to the poor standards of public cleanliness in India by simply clearing sidewalks of litter and repainting dirty walls. On a similar scale, the buildingcommunityWORKSHOP points attention to vacant buildings and lots, and asking the community to devise creative solutions.

The Mad Housers began in a likewise manner, by building small huts for the homeless and placing them in public locations. Though initially intended to be a political statement of drawing the public eye to the issue of homelessness, the group transitioned into making subtle, hidden huts for individual homeless clients. Through personal discussions with Andy, a Mad Houser volunteer, I was able to gain insight into the urban homeless community of Atlanta. Though the huts are small, each makes a significant impact on the life of its resident. The simple ability to secure one’s belongings or self allows a higher level of peace of mind than a tent.

The manner in which the Mad Housers build their huts is of interest. Volunteers from existing community organizations, such as church groups, are asked to help assemble the structures through a panelized system of construction. In this aspect, the process is community driven.

Positive Thinking

This group of organizations and individuals seems loosely arranged, but each had some impact on the development of my thinking throughout this process. I have watched many TED talks in order to try to understand why individuals become involved in humanitarian work, and what they are trying to accomplish. Among these individuals are Majora Carter, Cameron Sinclair, and Amy Smith. Majora’s talk opened my eyes to the implication...
of environmental degradation to economic degradation and social injustice. Cameron’s reminded me that there are just as valid issues of poverty in our own country as in a foreign country. Amy’s taught me that low-tech solutions to problems can be more effective than high-tech responses.

Several organizations helped form a single facet of my design thinking. Public Architecture contributed the concept of donating one percent of a traditional firm’s work time to pro bono work. John Morefield, of Architecture 5 Cents, started a non-traditional “office,” by working from a lemonade stand in his local Farmers Market. AtFab challenged me to think about how to allow people to access and take ownership of a buildable furniture design through a free online platform.

The Design Altruism Project, a compendium of writings about socially relevant design, helped me to learn to think critically about those who design in the name of “doing good.” I have begun to challenge the intentions and motives of those who seem too proud of their work, and to question the effects of organizations that stand for global change.

**What did this make me think?**

One of the most important lessons that I have learned is to be critical of my own work and intentions. I need to make sure that my actions and designs are truly for the benefit of others, and are not to bring glory to myself, the Designer. I also need to make sure that my decisions are not biased in favor of my own agenda.

When you look at all of the world’s problems at once, the effect can be overwhelming. Many people feel the need to try to help solve these problems, but few have the financial resources or knowledge to do so. What I’ve come to realize is that I don’t need to solve all of the world’s problems. There are problems in my own community, and I am capable of helping to alleviate them in some way or another.

In this regard, I see the Mad Housers as a good role model. That they focus exclusively on building huts for the homeless is important. Some individuals disagree with this tactic, and would prefer to see an organization help with every aspect of getting a homeless person back on his or her feet. I believe that it is a better idea to concentrate attention on one aspect of one issue, rather than try to fix every problem with a catch-all solution. I have difficulty believing that these solutions are globally applicable, to every person or community.

Though much of my research turned out to not be exclusively about architectural organizations, they are all facets of larger issues that go into working in the realm of socially responsible design. I think that it’s necessary to have a well-rounded, balanced view of any field to which one is devoted. For me, learning about microfinancing and lowbrow technological developments lends insight into my pursuits in the built environment. All of the people and organizations that exist in this realm have a common thread of trying to help people in small ways, and so much can be learned from their successes and failures.
On this note, there does not seem to be an existing forum for socially interested individuals to come together and discuss their work. Interaction seems to happen only on a personal level, in addition to a handful of selective conferences. No “professional organization” exists as for conventional architects or accountants, most likely because many of the people who are involved in these issues are working underground, on the side of a day job, or on a very local level. It’s easy for me to assess that more interaction is needed, because I have not directly been involved in many formal socially related discourses. Nor have I experienced any of the very real challenges of working with economically disadvantaged communities.

As a student volunteer with the 2011 RIMMEA [Research in Materials and Methodology for Extreme Affordability] Conference hosted at Ball State, I was able to witness and partake in great discussions with seasoned veterans of socially responsible work. These people were not just architects, but engineers, inventors, and educators. Yet, I kept thinking, What is going to come from all of this talk? What happens when everyone goes home? To my knowledge, no tangible results have evolved. I have a feeling that each individual left the conference with new ideas and reassurance in his or her work, to which extent the conference served its function.

Another lesson that I have learned is to be conscious of the language that I am using. The difference between “humanitarian” and “socially-responsible” is subtle, but it remains important to distinguish between the two. Through talking about one’s work, it is easy to come across as boastful, self-important, or to put others down. For example, I think that it is important to call the person with whom I am working the “client,” regardless of whether or not this person is able to pay me or not. This establishes in any person a sense of dignity and power.

What would I do if I were to endeavor into this field myself?

It has become important for me to try to understand how to take the traditional relationship between the paying client and the architect, and translate this for those clients who cannot afford to pay. I do not know exactly what services these clients have need for; this can only come with experience. It might be something as simple as fixing a porch, remodeling a bathroom, or installing ramps. It might be more complex, such as repairing a crumbling foundation or creating an addition for a growing family. It might be a project that serves the community as a whole. A major concern is how I, as the architect, can become an integrated member of the community, in order to make my services available to the community members.
One option that I have explored is setting up a lemonade stand-style consulting booth in a public area within the community. This would allow the designer to exist on a pedestrian level, and encourage conversation with community members. A similar scheme was explored by John Morefield, of Architecture 5 Cents [see Appendix], though his stand was based in a Farmers Market, and therefore geared towards the hip urbanites that frequent Farmers Markets. At the very least, this approach sparks discussion within the community.

Another simple method to encourage dialogue within the community was suggested to me in my discussion with Andy from the Mad Housers. At a soup kitchen or other public gathering place, I can hand out fliers with information about my work. This is similar to, but less formal than, handing out business cards. Individuals are able to ask me questions or completely ignore me.

A public way to exist as a professional who serves the community would be to operate from a storefront in a neglected urban area, such as in the Over-The-Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati. This neighborhood is full of forgotten storefronts, and would offer the ability of any neighborhood individual to stop in for a quick chat.

In order to minimize costs, the overhead of a socially responsible firm needs to be reduced. This can be done by working from one’s own home, from a client’s home, or from an office on wheels. Perhaps a community business center could be created in which local entrepreneurs rent offices for lowered rent and share office supplies and support staff. This business center would serve as a forum to bring together community-minded thinkers.

I do not necessarily propose a non-profit organization that focuses in socially responsible design. I believe that there is room to serve clients who can compensate for full design fees, some fees, or no fees. There should not be a prejudice. I think that a balance can be forged between how much work raises a profit, and how much is pro bono. Public Architecture proposes that architecture firms donate one percent of their time to pro bono projects. I am curious about the extent to which this percentage can be pushed to the limit. Is five, fifteen, forty percent feasible?

Above all, the most important aspect of socially responsible design is the relationship between the client and the architect. In order to ensure that the client is not being taken advantage of, the relationship needs to be collaborative. The client should be able to help develop their design by expressing his or her needs and wants; the client should not be handed a generic solution.

Where do I go from here?

Next year, I will be attending graduate school at Tulane University’s School of Architecture. I have selected this program for a variety of reasons, but the reason the program first piqued my interest was their active response to the crisis situation of Post-Katrina New Orleans through the built environment. I believe that I can learn from the programs that
the school has instilled to integrate their students into the New Orleans community, the Tulane City Center program, and URBANbuild. Participating in these two programs will allow me to get first-hand experience in working with communities; I will be able to use this experience to frame the rest of my career.

Ideally, after graduation, I will find a firm that focuses on socially responsible design. The problem with that is I have not yet found any firms that meet this goal. Several options are available. I can work with a non-profit organization, such as Architecture for Humanity; yet, this work is often short-term and unpaid. I can start my own firm or organization that is dedicated to working in the humanitarian sector; yet, I do not have a business or complete architectural knowledge to feel confident in this endeavor. I can work at a conventional architecture firm, and dedicate my personal time to volunteering locally. At this point, I don’t know exactly what my future holds, and do not have a specific plan laid out for myself. I’m excited to be able to take opportunities as they present themselves, and see where the path of life leads me.
Bibliography


### Architecture for Humanity

**What is their mission?**
Architecture for Humanity is a nonprofit design services firm founded in 1999. We are building a more sustainable future through the power of professional design. By tapping a network of more than 50,000 professionals willing to lend time and expertise to help those who would not otherwise be able to afford their services, we bring design, construction and development services where they are most critically needed.

**What did I take away from this group?**
This is the initial organization that sparked my interest in humanitarian design. They offer a diverse range of building services to a variety of communities around the world, but I have been particularly interested in their work in Haiti. Much of their strength is helping communities rebuild after natural disasters.

**Where can you learn more?**
http://www.architectureforhumanity.org/, Design Like You Give A Damn

### Scale Africa

**What is their mission?**
SCALEAfrica is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to the design and construction of vital school infrastructure projects in rural sub-Saharan Africa. Through culturally-responsive, sustainable architecture and an active community participation model, SCALEAfrica seeks to increase educational access and effectiveness, as a means of alleviating poverty and diminishing the impact of the major public health threats that plague rural African communities.

**What did I take away from this group?**
I was initially drawn to SCALEAfrica's mission of building schools. They see education as a right, not a privilege. Education is the primary step towards alleviating global issues, by giving students knowledge to prevent diseases. I agree with their approach of involving the community in every process of building the school, which gives the community ownership and responsibility over its school. Yet, the name of the organization itself seems too global for their mission.

**Where can you learn more?**
http://www.scaleafrica.org

### Project H

**What is their mission?**
Project H uses the power of design and hands-on building to catalyze communities and public education from within. We are a team of designers, builders, and teachers engaging in our own backyards to improve the quality of life for all. Our six-tenet design process (There is no design without (critical) action; We design WITH, not FOR; We document, share and measure; We start locally and scale globally; We design systems, not stuff; We build) results in simple and effective design solutions that empower communities and build collective creative capital. Our specific focus is the transformation of curricula, environments, and experiences for K-12 educational institutions in the US, centering around our cornerstone initiative: our Studio H design/build high school program within the Bertie County School District, North Carolina. Project H is a tax exempt 501c3 nonprofit originally incorporated in California, and now based in Bertie County, North Carolina. We design, build, teach, and transform.

**What did I take away from this group?**
Project H is exciting because the founders are young and enthusiastic about invigorating communities with design. They focus on how to integrate design within the curriculum of a public school system. By teaching students design and building skills, they are empowering future leaders of the community.

**Where can you learn more?**
http://www.projecthdesign.org/
# MASS Design Group

**What is their mission?**
We design, build, and advocate for buildings that improve health and strengthen communities. MASS Design Group (MASS) is a 501(c)(3) pending, not-for-profit firm, which currently operates under the fiscal sponsorship of Partners In Health. MASS works to deliver the highest possible impact at the lowest possible cost to the groups we serve. With our partners, we develop each project as an engine for economic growth, capacity building, and ultimately for the reduction of poverty and improvement of living standards. We accomplish this through 3 sectors that form the core of our practice: **APPROPRIATE DESIGN > LOCAL INVESTMENT > INNOVATION.**

**What did I take away from this group?**
MASS Design Group is one of the only non-profit organizations that functions as firm. They are set up with similar hierarchy to a firm, produces the same caliber of projects, and have several “firm” locations in the North America and Africa. Unlike traditional firms, MASS focuses on projects in disadvantaged areas, and do not seek a profit. They are able to offer nontraditional jobs through design fellowships and internships that are externally funded.

**Where can you learn more?**
http://www.massdesigngroup.org

# Building Tomorrow

**What is their mission?**
Building Tomorrow (BT) empowers young people to invest their resources, time & talents in providing students in sub-Saharan Africa with access to an education. We engage students in service-learning, fundraising, awareness and design activities to generate support for the construction of primary-level academies in sub-Saharan Africa. We are currently building in Uganda where our partner communities match the students’ support by donating land for each academy and volunteering approximately 20,000 hours of self-labor to construct it.

**What did I take away from this group?**
The focus of Building Tomorrow is education, both in the US and Uganda. They have an interesting approach to involving project partners in the US by hosting a rigorous program. Students are actively involved in building each school by designing the structure, within a set of parameters, as well as raising funding for the construction. The recipient community provides the labor required to build the school. I have one major problem with this approach: the school is designed without a specific site in mind. The site is only chosen once the design is finalized. This does not seem like it would be able to appropriately respond to either the environment or the community. Along with this, the structure is treated as a sacred gift to the host community, and does not involve their input in the process.

I do, however, appreciate the efforts of BT to involve American students in global issues, and to open their minds to humanitarian design. Yet, they could benefit from creating a more collaborative process.

**Where can you learn more?**
http://www.buildingtomorrow.org/

# ECONOMIC VENTURES

## CHF

**What is their mission?**
CHF brings people together. We bring together communities, government bodies, local organizations and the private sector to design and implement our programs. We bring international technical experts and local knowledge and expertise from each community together to ensure we address needs in the most effective, integrated way.
Appendix 3

possible. We effectively leverage funds from governments, foundations, local groups and the private sector to maximize impact and get the most value for our development dollars. We build the capacity of local partners, organizations, government and communities to be economically, socially and environmentally self-sufficient and able to withstand crises. In so doing, we leave behind legacy organizations that can continue our work once we are gone. We are accountable to our donors and the communities we work with around the world.

What did I take away from this group?  
CHF has such a diverse range of work. Only a small component of what they do relates to architecture and the built environment. One facet of their programs that interests me is their microfinance program. By providing small loans to local entrepreneurs, CHF enables women and those of low economic status to take an active role in society.

Where can you learn more?  
http://www.chfinternational.org/

Grameen Bank

What is their mission?  
Grameen Bank (GB) has reversed conventional banking practice by removing the need for collateral and created a banking system based on mutual trust, accountability, participation and creativity. GB provides credit to the poorest of the poor in rural Bangladesh, without any collateral. At GB, credit is a cost effective weapon to fight poverty and it serves as a catalyst in the over all development of socio-economic conditions of the poor who have been kept outside the banking orbit on the ground that they are poor and hence not bankable. Professor Muhammad Yunus, the founder of "Grameen Bank" and its Managing Director, reasoned that if financial resources can be made available to the poor people on terms and conditions that are appropriate and reasonable, "these millions of small people with their millions of small pursuits can add up to create the biggest development wonder."

What did I take away from this group?  
The simple mission of Grameen Bank is inspiring. I like that they have decided to focus on one specific area, versus trying to fix all of the world’s problems at once. By providing small loans to the poor, Grameen is providing them with the same opportunity to become entrepreneurs as everyone else. This allows people to overcome poverty through their own terms.

Where can you learn more?  
http://www.grameen.com/

Barefoot College

What is their mission?  
Established in 1972, the Barefoot College is a non-government organisation that has been providing basic services and solutions to problems in rural communities, with the objective of making them self-sufficient and sustainable. These ‘Barefoot solutions’ can be broadly categorised into solar energy, water, education, health care, rural handicrafts, people’s action, communication, women’s empowerment and wasteland development.

What did I take away from this group?  
Barefoot College is very unique. The technology that they introduce into rural communities in India is created and maintained by locally trained people. This systemic approach is self-sustaining. The educate people of low-economic status through job training, instead of books. The practical knowledge that these people gain is valuable as it allows them to find jobs as “school teachers, doctors, midwives, dentists, health workers, balsevikas, solar engineers, solar cooker engineers, water drillers, hand pump mechanics, architects, artisans, designers, masons…” and more.

Where can you learn more?  
http://www.barefootcollege.org/
Catapult Design

What is their mission?  
The majority of our world’s population lacks access to life’s basic needs. We develop and implement human-centered products to help them thrive. Technology can empower and liberate. A single, effective product has more potential for worldwide impact – by providing clean water, food, shelter, or income – than any other existing development approach. Through the introduction of inexpensive and simple yet life-altering products the lives of more than 2 billion poverty-stricken people around the globe can be dramatically improved. Catapult Design is a non-profit design firm providing engineering and implementation support to the thousands of organizations in need of technologies or products capable of igniting social change. We are engineers, designers, implementers, and educators – we design products, introduce technologies, and foster trends that are appropriate, self-sustaining, environmentally friendly, socially responsible and culturally sensitive.

What did I take away from this group?  
Catapult Design holds that technology has the ability to alleviate global problems. I do not agree that a single product should be held on the pedestal of creating “change,” and I am skeptical of products that claim to do so. A systemic approach is often more effective. Yet, Catapult identifies this issue with technology, and focuses more on creating locally feasible solutions.

Where can you learn more?  
http://www.catapultdesign.org/

DESIGN PROCESS

IDEO.org

What is their mission?  
IDEO.org’s mission is to bring human-centered design to the people who need it most — those facing poverty every day. We’re teaming up with nonprofits, social enterprises and foundations to create solutions to the world’s most dire poverty-related challenges. Imagine a world without poverty. Now let’s create it. Through Human-Centered Design projects, we’re bringing stability, hope, and dignity to communities around the world that are wrestling with poverty. Along the way, we’re sharing what we learn and accomplish with everyone—so we’re all learning together. And through the IDEO.org Fellowship Program, we’re fostering a community of future leaders with expertise in design thinking, then letting them loose on the world.

What did I take away from this group?  
One of the most interesting components of IDEO.org’s work in their process. This is so important to them that they have made public a “ToolKit” to help anyone through the process of working with a client. There are three steps to the process of Human-Centered Design: Hear, Create, and Deliver. The category of “Hear” is given the most attention, showing that it is most important to listen to the client, and understand their needs. The Toolkit provides many examples of processes and projects, and of course, it’s well designed.

Where can you learn more?  
http://www.IDEO.org/  
http://www.IDEO.org/projects/human-centered-design-toolkit/completed

SMALL SCALE INTERVENTIONS

building community WORKSHOP

What is their mission?  
The buildingcommunityWORKSHOP is a Dallas based nonprofit community design center seeking to improve the livability and viability of communities through the practice of thoughtful design and making. We enrich the lives of citizens by bringing design thinking to areas of our city where resources are most scarce. To do so, the bcWORKSHOP recognizes that it must first understand the social, economic, and
| What did I take away from this group? | The bcWORKSHOP is very locally based. They work in the community in which they live, not ignoring local issues. Their projects are centered around the built environment, but are not limited to architecture. One of their projects that stuck with me the most involved identifying an abandoned building or piece of land, marking it off with bright tape, and creating a drop box for community members to share their responses and dreams for that land. The project was brash, but not abrasive. It caused people to question what their community was becoming, and think critically about its future. |
| Where can you learn more? | http://www.bcworkshop.org/ |

**Mad Housers**

| What is their mission? | MAD HOUSES Inc. is an Atlanta-based non-profit corporation engaged in charitable work, research and education. Our charter outlines our goals and purposes: To provide shelter for homeless individuals and families regardless of race, creed, national origin, gender, religion, or age; To develop low income housing for people in need of housing; To help people develop the skills and knowledge for constructing and rehabilitating housing and shelter; To increase the quantity and to improve the quality of housing in the world; To act, if necessary as an advocate for the homeless, to ensure that their moral and civil rights are protected. The Mad Housers believe that if a person has a secure space from which to operate, they are much more capable of finding the resources to help themselves. |
| What did I take away from this group? | When I first learned of this organization, it did not stick out. After several months, though, I kept coming back to the Mad Housers' simple solution of building huts for the homeless of Atlanta. The most interesting factor of their practice is that they don't ask for permission or for affirmation. They know what they are good at doing, and they do it. They are not stingy with their hut designs; the construction documents are posted online for any person to access. The organization itself acts as a forum, with unofficial "chapters" throughout the country. |
| Where can you learn more? | http://www.madhousers.org/ |

**The Ugly Indian**

| What is their mission? | To learn what it takes to keep a street clean. And do it. Our motto: Kaam Chalu Mooh Bandh. No activism, no lectures, no awareness drives, no moralising. Just go out and do it. |
| What did I take away from this group? | The people at The Ugly Indian are very critical of themselves and their peers in terms of cleanliness. They identify major behavioral norms that are unique to India, such as public urination and littering. They make small-scale public improvements that discourage these behaviors. Simple acts, such as clearing a sidewalk of litter, and painting a urine-stained wall with clean colors are effective measures to help people realize their behaviors. Their attitude of "We've all done it" keeps their mission and acts humble. |
| Where can you learn more? | http://www.theuglyindian.com/ |
POSITIVE THINKING

Public Architecture

What is their mission? Public Architecture puts the resources of architecture in the service of the public interest. We identify and solve practical problems of human interaction in the built environment and act as a catalyst for public discourse through education, advocacy, and the design of public spaces and amenities.

What did I take away from this group? Public Architecture focuses on reinvigorating the public environment through design. One of their ideas is very profound, and has influenced much of my thinking. They have started the “One Percent” program; the notion of this is that any architecture firm should be able to donate 1% of its time and efforts to pro bono projects. This caused me to question, why stop at one percent? What is the maximum amount of time that could be dedicated to pro bono while maintaining a sustainable balance? Five, twenty, forty percent?

Where can you learn more? http://www.publicarchitecture.com/

Architecture 5 Cents

Who are they? John Morefield, fed up with the lack of job prospects in architecture, set up a lemonade stand-style “office” in his local Farmers Market.

What did I take away from this person? I had been considering alternatives to the traditional architecture office when I repeatedly came to the idea of working out of a lemonade stand. This approach would allow the architect to be immersed in the community on a pedestrian, very local scale. Any person would be able to discuss building ideas or issues without the pretense of a formal office. John’s approach is similar, except he based his stand from a Farmers Market. By default, his clientele would be limited to those who peruse these markets. Also, he primarily used this method as a way to get his name out there, in order to pursue paid work.


Design Altruism Project

What is this? The Design Altruism Project is an online collection of writings and posts that relate to design and its effects on people. Many of the posts that I have read with interest are critical of the well-intentioned, but poorly-executed, work of others.

What did I take away from this project? D-A-P helped me to think critically about the intentions of those who are working in the humanitarian field. Yet, I may have simply become a skeptic.

Where can you learn more? http://www.design-altruism-project.org/

Acumen Fund

What is their mission? Our mission is to create a world beyond poverty by investing in social enterprises, emerging leaders, and breakthrough ideas. Our vision is that one day every human being will have access to the critical goods and services they need — including affordable health, water, housing, energy, agricultural inputs and services — so that they can make decisions and choices for themselves and unleash their full human potential. This is where dignity starts — not just for the poor but for everyone on earth.

What did I take away from this group? Their method isn’t directly about architecture or the built environment, but their general purposes encompasses this. I was at first skeptical of their work, because it seemed that they were trying to push Big Solutions to local problems. Yet, I was
struck by a section on their website that was dedicated to lessons that they have learned. Among these are, “Poverty is a description of someone’s economic situation; it does not describe who someone is,” and “We won’t succeed in the long term without cultivating local leaders, local money, and strong local communities.” I believe that these concepts are important for designers to remember.

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### atFab

**What do they do?**

Filson and Rohrbacher is an architecture, design and research firm. We take our experience in building award winning architecture for institutional, cultural and residential clients and bring it into the scenarios that require design the most, but usually receive it the least. Our firm pursues design in these contexts by redefining how we practice, by finding affordances with digital tools and techniques, and by expanding design scope to consider the interrelated conditions, which surround spatial concerns. We believe that by rethinking how we work as architects, we will have the capacity to create potent design that is capable of addressing significant challenges.

**What did I take away from this group?**

atFab has created a great platform for interactive, customizable furniture design. By allowing anyone with access to CNC milling machinery to download their designs, they are working in the realm of open-source design. atFab poses the problem of when to walk away from one’s design, and how much responsibility to give the client. I think that their method holds possibilities for sharing larger-scale designs between an architect and a community.

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### Majora Carter

**What does she do?**

Majora Carter is a pioneer in the field of environmental justice, primarily supporting her home neighborhood of South Bronx. She is currently president of Majora Carter Group, an economic consulting firm.

**What did I take away from her talk?**

Majora has given two great TED talks, which I watched with interest. Her idea of reclaiming a community’s immediate environment from industrial use is necessary to allow residents to feel pride in their neighborhood, and take ownership over it. One of my favorite quotes from her talk: “Economic degradation begets environmental degradation which begets social degradation.” I had not previously thought about the impact of the environment on social issues, but I think that it plays a major role.

|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### Cameron Sinclair

**Who is he?**

Cameron Sinclair is the co-founder of Architecture for Humanity, and the organization's public face.

**What did I take away from his talk?**

Like Majora Carter, Cameron has given two TED talks. While I was familiar with the practices of Architecture for Humanity, Cameron's talks helped me to understand why they do things the way they do them. They have instilled an open-source business model that informs not just the technology they use but the manner in which they organize. By having local, self-organized chapters throughout the world, AFH is able to create local, on the ground solutions to disasters and other design issues. I appreciate his outlook that "we have the opportunity, not the responsibility, to get involved and make change."

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Amy Smith

**What is her mission?**

Amy Smith is the founder of D-Lab. D-Lab is a program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) that fosters the development of appropriate technologies and sustainable solutions within the framework of international development. D-Lab’s mission is to improve the quality of life of low-income households through the creation and implementation of low cost technologies. D-Lab’s portfolio of technologies also serves as an educational vehicle that allows students to gain an optimistic and practical understanding of their roles in alleviating poverty.

**What did I take away from her talk?**

Amy approaches humanitarian design from the perspective of technology, but she reaches solutions as a human. Amy and her students have reached a simple solution to a major problem by rethinking the fuel used for cooking fires in the third world. This kind of technology is appropriate in the third world because it does not require lifetime maintenance. A quote from her TED talk, “We need to rethink our development strategies, so that we’re not promoting educational campaigns to get people to stop being farmers, but rather to stop being poor farmers,” reminds me of one of the lessons described by Acumen. It is important for me to remember the difference between a person’s economic status and the person themselves.

**Where can you learn more?**