

Eternal Optimists *of the Architectural heart*



During the first decade of the twenty-first century, **Architecture for Humanity** pioneered a new type of architectural NGO, smart use of the web to bring together architects and designers with far flung communities across the world. Distributed, autonomous **AfH** chapters across the planet, open source architecture, and a stream of projects worldwide are only part of what has followed

One January evening not long into 2005 a small group of architects and designers met in a London pub. There had been an open invitation on their website, but the regular group consisted of the same half dozen who turned up for each monthly meeting. That night though, these steadfasts were shocked to find the pub room brimming with around fifty people eager to be involved in the group's activities. The people who had been meeting were the London 'chapter' of *Architecture for Humanity*, and their numbers had suddenly swelled, because a few days earlier, on Boxing Day 2004, the Pacific Tsunami had wreaked its deadly and calamitous toll all around the Pacific. With 225 000 dead and many coastal parts of the region flattened and otherwise destroyed the need for emergency relief, not just in food and medicine, but in immediate shelter was acute. And thanks to the reach of global media, television and the Internet, many across different parts of the world knew about it.

Over the next few years *A4H-UK*, as London group called themselves, grew into a permanent, grassroots social organisation, collaborating with *Crisis at Christmas*, 'degrunging' some of the charities"

Christmas shelters, and *Crash*, another Charity, which pools donated resources from the construction industry for building projects that wouldn't otherwise receive them. This may not have been direct involvement in the Pacific tsunami relief effort, but it was a step-up for the group. They began working on outreach projects, including an effective early involvement helping design a herb and plant drying shed for Romanian farmers growing the plants from which arnica is extracted. The shed, at first glance a small gesture, was especially useful so that the arnica plant materials produced in Romania for sale in Germany, arrived in good enough shape to sell. Working with Romanian communities who used local materials and labour made it possible for farmers to make money and released them from having to sell the arnica at unsustainable prices.

"After the Pacific tsunami there were 4000 emails and half were asking for help," says Cameron Sinclair, co-founder, alongside partner and writer, Kate Stohr, of *Architecture for Humanity (AfH)*. At the time the Pacific Ocean tsunami was, according to Sinclair – whom I had talked with for an earlier article over the phone in 2007 – was the turning point for the network organisation. The 2005 Pacific tsunami, followed in the same year by Hurricane Katrina have been superseded in the roll-call of natural disasters by the Haiti earthquake, the Japanese tsunami and most recently, Hurricane Sandy, but it was the first two events a half decade ago, that propelled the small activist organisation into a new phase. "AfH has simply been a conduit for finding architects for clients" Sinclair said early into the phone conversation, when I asked for a coverall to their work. Founded in 1999 in response to the plight of refugee's in Kosovo, AfH has grown quickly in its short life,