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REVIEWED BY JIM KENNEDY

Design Like You Give A Damn

Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises
edited by **Architecture for Humanity**

New York: Metropolis Books, 2006

In his introduction to *Design Like You Give a Damn*, Cameron Sinclair, founder of Architecture for Humanity, comments that one of the organization's first competitions to design transitional shelters brought out entries that "ranged from the pragmatic to the provocative." This book, which showcases many of these entries alongside other examples of "architectural responses to humanitarian crises," never manages to jump over the shadow of this false dichotomy, and self-burdened with this choice, the book contains ninety-two different designs, more than thirty of which decidedly veer away from the pragmatic. In doing so, *Design Like You Give a Damn* inadvertently highlights the questions of what an architect's role in a humanitarian crisis should actually be, what "design" might mean in such a context, and fundamentally, what working "like you give a damn" might actually entail.

Architecture for Humanity (AFH) was founded in 1999, at the time of the ethnic conflicts in Kosovo, and since that point it has become for many the public face of architects committed to humanitarian endeavors. The various chapter offices now send members to work with NGOs engaged in reconstruction and fund-raising for construction projects worldwide. But it is for the competitions to design shelters and other structures for use in humanitarian response for which AFH first staked its claim to fame and continues to garner the most attention from the non-humanitarian world, and it is the format of a series of competition entry boards that *Design Like You Give a Damn* most closely resembles — double-page, graphics-heavy spreads, waiting for someone to make a critique and put the little red stickers on to indicate the chosen ones.

At first glance, the sheer variety and ingenuity is dazzling. But how can anyone make a choice about which one might actually save lives in sufficient numbers to make a difference? Which of the many would actually provide a solution (for the back cover blurb makes it clear that AFH "provides architectural *solutions* [italics added] to humanitarian crises") when hundreds

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of thousands of lives and tens of millions of dollars are at stake? A reader might be tempted to gently suggest that the concept of giving a damn might also include a certain amount of drawing a line in the sand and making a commitment of choice.

Over the same period as AFH's existence, roughly from the late 1990s to the present day, the United Nations and many international NGOs have been concentrating their research efforts in the fields of shelter and settlements on prolonged peer-review processes aimed at keeping costs and delivery lag to an absolute minimum through designing and planning on the large scale, while ensuring that the results will be shelters for which the intended beneficiaries can enjoy maximum adaptation to their cultural backgrounds and to the specific circumstances of each disaster. The results have concentrated on the very pragmatic: a framework of minimum standards for material qualities and for physical planning into which localized designs can be placed, a preference for flexible materials over finished structures, and an emphasis on contribution to the ownership by the beneficiaries themselves, all the while insisting that such efforts should come as a systematic program for recovery embedded in a rights-based approach — all this diverges from the methods often applied by AFH and enshrined in *Design Like You Give a Damn*.

The efforts of some of the "major players" are included in Design Like You Give a Damn, and in the book's spirit of equivalency, they are given the same two- or four-page spread as the other players. The reader can stumble across a transitional shelter program implemented by Oxfam, an organization that has deployed thousands of shelters across the world, right after the entry for the prototype *139 Shelter*, a giant unfurling umbrella by Future Systems, which has never been (and probably could never be) deployed in the field. But by arraying projects in this way in a book whose title is imperative and provocative, AFH attempts to co-opt the presentations of the pragmatic efforts of the larger organizations and neglects not only to indicate which of the offerings might work and which might be mere pipe dreams but also makes no effort to indicate a line between those efforts that were actual responses to AFH initiatives and those that have been developed independently from or even oblivious to AFH, but which the AFH editors have decided to include anyway.

By presenting the works of established organizations as just other efforts in a vast array of exciting choices, *Design Like You Give a Damn* almost smothers long-standing and preexisting critiques of many of the less practical designs — but there they are, for anyone who casts an eye beyond the graphic images: The main sections of *Design Like You Give a Damn* are more or less bookended by the entries for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Sphere Project (the most comprehensive and universally accepted of all the inter-organizational forums to produce minimum standards for humanitarian response), and for those who take the time to read and consider, these contain serious challenges to the organizers and entrants to the AFH competitions.

UNHCR kicks things off in the first paragraph of the mini-text accompanying the photo spread for their tents: "Designers have tried to rethink this basic tent for decades. Everything from prefabricated structures to shipping containers to polyurethane yurts has been suggested or attempted. But as the agency politely points out in its guide to emergency materials, to date none of these systems has proven effective in refugee situations. Most fail because other emergency shelter arrangements will have been made before these systems even arrive. . . . Others are difficult or costly to replicate." And at the other end of the book, contained in the history of Sphere Project's own existence, is a critique not only of the methodology of making finished designs from afar, but also of the very impetus which AFH claims as its *raison d'être*, challenging the claim that giving a damn in itself is sufficient: "At the same time [1996] there was a growing sense of unease among field workers and others about varied and sometimes poor response by some aid groups. As one researcher put it, 'The days of accepting the "good work" of humanitarian agencies were over.'"

It might seem churlish to present harsh criticisms of so many of the projects contained in *Design Like You Give a Damn* (including inevitably, yes, prefabricated structures, polyurethane yurts, and the like), especially in light of the obvious sincerity of the motives of many of the designers and of the fact that many of the designs originated in college design studio projects, and there is, after all, a dire shortage of shelter professionals around the world. However, with the stakes so high, judgments need to be made, first because the alternative is to continue to waste money and potentially damage the course of recoveries through inappropriate responses, and second because the editors of *Design Like You Give a Damn* not only claim that the book "brings the best of humanitarian design to the printed page" but also in a number of instances seem to deliberately blur away the problems in which designs could never meet the stark standards by which those judgments *need* to be decided: whether the design is quickly replicable on a mass-scale of hundreds of thousands, whether it is the most cost-effective solution, whether it is appropriate to the general cultural needs of the beneficiaries and adaptable to the specific needs of each family, and whether it is durable enough to provide shelter with dignity until permanent solutions are found.

The *139 Shelter* is a prime example of a failure to meet those needs. The umbrella structure is designed to be deployed at a cost of $30,000 per unit to give shade to up to 200 people. But to deploy just one of these units, a large truck or airdrop would be needed. In contrast, the self-build shelters designed by the major north-American NGO Cooperative Housing Foundation (CHF), shown a few pages earlier in the book, would house more than 1,600 people for the same cost ($90 per shelter), give each family its own privacy, involve the families in the construction, be constructed from immediately available, low-cost, local materials, and be easily movable when

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the time came.

Unfortunately, *139 Shelter* is also a prime example of where *Design Like You Give a Damn* plays fast and loose with the credentials of the design. On the world map in the sidebar of the page is a big orange spot to indicate that the design had to do with Ethiopia, and the main page is taken up with a photo of the shelter in the middle of a desert refugee crisis; the text states that the shelter was "one of the few architectural responses to the famine." But under the magnifying glass, the image of the shelter becomes clear as Photoshopped into the disaster setting, and there, in small, bracketed text, is the giveaway: "Location_Ethiopia [unbuilt]."

In fact, of all the responses collected in *Design Like You Give a Damn*, a surprisingly large number of the designs remain unbuilt: Once the large-scale items from the UN and large NGOs have been set to one side, fewer than 1,000 units of all the other designs combined have actually been constructed, and then often as prototypes or one-off pilot projects — all in a world where there are now an estimated 35,000,000 people who continue to be under the effects of forced displacement.

Other examples of designs that have at least one fatal flaw include the *Pallet House* by I-Beam Design, for which the same Photoshop sin has been committed. The spot on the sidebar map indicates Sri Lanka and the image caption reads, "The design adapted for use in Sri Lanka after the Indian Ocean tsunami," but closer inspection reveals the image itself is a figment of Photoshop and that the real thing may never have moved further east than the Bronx. The designers gamely suggest that the cost per unit would be $200 with donated pallets, or $1700 if the pallets had to be purchased. But as any humanitarian agency logistics manager will tell you: The pallets need to be purchased, and in the early stages of many humanitarian crises, there are actually shortages of them. And if the pallets were seen by the beneficiaries as being surplus or inappropriate as building materials, they would be burned as cooking fuel — so why not spend the money on five shelters' worth of real building materials instead?

The list of misdirected damn-giving goes on: The hemp cloth balloon house ($1800) into which windows couldn't be cut without damaging the integrity of the structure. The house whose engineering is designed to be resistant to once-in-a-thousand-years tsunamis but which makes it vulnerable to once-every-three-years cyclones. The rollable water containers that refugees designed for themselves years ago. The water-pump, dependent on the human energy from a children's playground roundabout. (What happens to the community's water supply on rainy days, or when the kids want to play hide and seek instead?) The shelter built entirely from used FedEx Paks, a Notable Entry in one of the competitions, no less. (But according to the drawing, each shelter would need over eighty of the Paks — and ignoring for a second the fact that FedEx Paks would last less than one morning in most disaster-zone climates, who would be sending hundreds of thousands of FedEx Paks into a disaster zone in the first two weeks anyway?) A temporary cardboard-box toilet that allows the box to be burned afterwards, but with impermeable liner bags for human waste that would quickly become a mountainous environmental hazard. (Sometimes the best answer, pragmatically speaking, really just is to dig a well-placed hole in the ground.)

And then there are the designs slipped in somewhere but that can hardly be said to be in response to a humanitarian crisis. In this category, we have: the tent prototypes for the Burning Man Festival, the agitprop stepladders to let people look over the walls of gated communities in Los Angeles, the rubber tubes that can turn chain link fencing into sunbeds in Hollywood. All in all, for the designs that got anywhere beyond the drawing board, there are eleven for Africa and twenty-one for the U.S.A. — four and three apiece for L.A. and New York, respectively.

Design Like You Give a Damn has more success in the sections that cover one-off permanent structures — with some examples like Auburn University's *Lucy House* offering inspiration for both prolonged involvement with the community and for clever use of recycled goods on a one-time basis — but even these hardly represent viable options for mass scale-up in recognized humanitarian crises for which the book makes its claims.

It's not as if the NGOs have all the answers — if their responses were effortless and flawless, then the impetus to get AFH off the ground would never have arisen in the first place. Part of what affects the AFH-led efforts also affects the established agencies: a desire to hard-line every aspect of the design rather than relinquish control to those working on the ground. The first drafts of the UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies* in 1981 had a scheme for camp design that was in effect just a group of circles into which the refugees would choose where to place their shelters; through the entire section on "Site selection, planning and shelter," there were fewer than ten numeric indicators. Twenty years later, there were indicators for everything from how many footballs to how many sticks of school chalk there should be per camp, and the template design for a camp community in the latest edition states exactly how many meters apart each shelter should be.

Maybe the trade-off of folding in the pragmatic with the provocative is as good as can be realistically achieved, and any book that brings images of the work of Shelter Centre or ITDG / Practical Action onto the coffee tables of the urban North ought to be applauded, no matter what the cost. But for those, particularly architects, who think that there should be better, what then is the answer? Perhaps a relinquishing of the assumed god-like power to damn, an acceptance that the crisis at hand is not the architect's (or the NGO's or the UN's) but the affected community's, and an acceptance that hard-lined design may not be the answer to every problem and that the design that works best in the end may not be the architect's but that of the affected families, for which the architect is merely the custodian of the tools. □

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