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Structures For Inclusion

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Increasingly, architects are being conditioned to act more like window dressers, believes Lawrence Scarpa, Principal of Pugh + Scarpa, of Santa Monica. But in his presentation to this year's Structures for Inclusion conference, Scarpa also pointed out that few enter the profession with the goal of designing pretty display cases. Rather, architects typically conceive the challenge of their profession as being to design buildings and places that meet people's real long-term needs.

Under conventional circumstances, this task can be difficult enough. But it can be even more difficult in the wake of a natural disaster, following the aban-

donment of an urban neighborhood, or when faced with explosive population growth. Nevertheless, such circumstances may be just when an architect's vision may be most important to recovering, rebuilding and repurposing buildings and public spaces.

Architects from across the country shared their thoughts and work on these themes at the sixth Structures for Inclusion conference, held at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco March 24-26. The conference, sponsored by Design Corps, annually celebrates public-service architecture and community design. Design Corps is a South Carolina nonprofit which provides architectural services to traditionally underserved communities. This year's event was held in association with Bay Area nonprofits Public Architecture and Urban Ecology. Public Architecture is the originator of a national program

through which design firms pledge one percent of their billable hours to pro bono public-interest work. Urban Ecology has long been involved in neighborhood revitalization and regional sustainability initiatives in Northern California.

Officially, the theme of this year's conference was "Expanding Design." Organizers noted that architecture has begun to expand its scope into other disciplines. And Scarpa, the keynote speaker, said architects can learn much from engaging with ecological, social or economic perspectives. For example, they can then use this knowledge to rethink and challenge traditional design approaches, and superimpose new concerns on top of existing practices, he said.

However, with the recent run of natural disasters—including Hur-

Above: Design Corps' proposal for sturdy new Florida farmworker housing in the wake of Hurricane Andrew. Rendering by James Sweeney, courtesy of Design Corps. Inset: In many cases, existing housing had been blown away.

ricanes Katrina and Rita, the Pakistan earthquake, and the Southeast Asian tsunami—disaster relief and temporary shelter were also on the minds of many of the mostly young architects attending the conference. During one panel, Harry van Burik, vice president of Shelter for Life International, said that even during the dire scramble to meet people's basic needs after a disaster, architects can help most by designing temporary solutions that will help set the stage for long-term recovery.

Van Burik explained how he came face-to-face with this reality when he visited northern Afghanistan in 1998 following a round of deadly earthquakes there. In a mountainous landscape, amid a civil war, logistics prohibited responding with manufactured solutions, and most modern materials would have had to have been imported. Instead, using local designs, materials and labor, Shelter for Life was able to help families build small, earthquake-proof starter homes at an average cost of \$610, almost half the cost of a winterized tent. These mud-brick houses were simple, yet sturdy. They were also designed so that families could add additional rooms as their recovery efforts progressed.

"Give a family shelter," van Burik said, "and they have a tool to survive. Give a family a home, and they have a tool with which to build stable communities and foster hope for the future."

Also on the panel, Laura Shipman, a Design Corps Advisory Board member, explained how similar difficulties emerged after Hurricane Andrew devastated south Florida in 1994. Until then most of the estimated 300,000 migrant laborers either lived in trailer homes, took up temporary residence in damp cement-block houses, or paid low rents for decrepit homes, she said. Following Andrew, however, Florida's housing market

changed dramatically, as the storm destroyed the decaying old homes, left the block houses water-logged and moldy, and blew away (or blew apart) many of the trailers. Yet the migrants' struggle to find affordable alternatives went relatively unrecognized until an advocate with Florida Legal Services enlisted Design Corps' help.

Shipman explained how new housing for the migrant population had to be "durable to withstand hurricane forces, pleasant and sensitive to the needs of farm workers, flexible for adaptability and longevity, as well as produced in a way that could be duplicated on multiple sites throughout Florida's agricultural regions to address the widespread shortage." Design Corps worked with the area's growers, nonprofits, and the farm workers themselves to design a manufactured unit that would be cheap, sturdy, and meet the needs of this transitory community. The result: a light, airy living space with room for five people and an exterior porch that can double as a hurricane barrier.

The key to both projects was flexibility, based on a foundation of good design, that would allow the affected communities to grow over time. Perhaps the ultimate test of this principle will come with the redesign and rebuilding of New Orleans, other conference presenters pointed out. Through meetings that have brought together neighborhood organizations, residents and professionals, said Alan Lewis, interim director of the Tulane City Center, the process is already underway.

Speakers on other panels raised the same principle with regard to more permanent housing. "Good communities hold the capacity to change themselves as they sustain the overall character of the city," said Renee Chow, principal of Studio Urbis

and a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Chow cited San Francisco as a classic case of how good design has enabled a city to remain vibrant as its housing needs have changed. For example, load-bearing walls that are perpendicular to the street have allowed builders to transform Victorian residences into multi-level apartment buildings. Street-level storefronts have further given San Francisco neighborhoods the ability to adapt to changing populations and economic patterns.

Santa Cruz, CA, provides a more recent example of how communities can use adaptable structures left by previous generations, said Carol Berg, that city's Housing and Community Development Manager. Surrounded by a greenbelt on three sides and the ocean on the other, Santa Cruz has almost reached its built capacity, while the demand for housing continues to grow. One solution has been the "granny flat." Using the large lots characteristic of local homes, the city has promoted a program of affordable accessory dwelling units (ADUs), alongside established homes. By changing the city's regulatory structure, eliminating obstacles like parking requirements, and developing the city's extensive alley system, Berg said the hope is that continued population growth can be accommodated by better developing the empty space designed into the original city plan.

While considerations outside the realm of design have long concerned architects, the professional's ultimate responsibility is to good design, said Scarpa. While flexibility, environmental sustainability, and the use of new technologies can be used to challenge old ideas, he cautioned that the desire to recognize expanded concerns cannot be effectively realized without a foundation of good design.