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# Hands-on in Haiti

How BAR Architects took a proactive approach to pro bono work

BY YUKI BOWMAN

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

In a remote, hilly region southeast of Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince, a new school is slowly taking shape. When complete, the Children's Academy will culminate the efforts of dozens of collaborators, community participants and visionaries who have come together to contribute to the country's recovery efforts from the January 2010 earthquake, which destroyed some 280,000 buildings, 4,000 of them schools. The blow to the country's already-taxed education system was substantial.

Haiti Partners, founded in 2007 and led by co-director John Engle, has been working to redress the country's education shortage through collaborations with seven local partner schools, which the organization provides with strategic planning, seed capital, teacher training and funds for building improvement. The Children's Academy will serve as the headquarters and model school for Haiti Partner's sister schools, providing elementary education for 250 students while acting as a full-time community resource with an auditorium, gardens, and computer and teacher training facilities.

Engle has extensive experience in Haitian education, but this was the first time he was building a school from scratch. Seeking guidance, Engle contacted Architecture for Humanity in late 2010. The global humanitarian

organization had been on the ground since the earthquake, working from its Haiti Rebuilding Center in nearby Pétionville. From here, staff, design fellows and volunteers coordinated long-term reconstruction efforts, providing training for local professionals, referrals for construction projects and support in establishing a construction financing system—with the goal to transfer ownership and operation to Haitian stakeholders by 2015.

## PASSION

Meanwhile at BAR Architects in San Francisco, senior associate Lisa Victor was mobilizing. Victor had been unsettled ever since news of the earthquake had reached her. "The earthquake really touched me," she explains. "I've always wanted to know more about Haiti; I had lived in Paris for awhile, where my daughter was born, and felt connected to French-speaking countries. With our economy down and everyone reevaluating their priorities, I found myself wanting to contribute."

Rather than striking out as a solo volunteer, Victor knew that BAR's resources could benefit the rebuilding effort, so she contacted Architecture for Humanity to gauge their interest in collaborating. The Children's Academy project was just seeding, making for a perfect storm of opportunity. With work to be done, and a place—the Rebuilding



LEFT: The San Francisco-based firm BAR Architects devised an on-the-ground strategy for building a school in Haiti after the January 2010 earthquake. Principal Chris Haeggglund points the way from the building site. ABOVE: Senior associate Lisa Victor, who spearheaded the project, talks with future students.





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— LISA VICTOR

Center—from which to do it, Victor presented BAR's management principals with a proposal: send half a dozen employees to Haiti for a rotating design fellowship. "I knew there was hope when the principals didn't ask, 'Are you crazy?' but 'How will we ensure everyone's safety?'" she recalls.

#### FLEXIBILITY

The proposal succeeded because the financial and logistical details made it viable for BAR. Of the time that each fellow would spend in Haiti, one week would draw from personal vacation time, and the difference would come from a vacation pool of donated time from the firm's other 75 employees. What remained—in addition to administrative support, airfare and a shared laptop computer—would be covered by the firm and supplemented by funds from BAR's annual art show. In turn, each fellow would pay \$25/week for lodging at Architecture for Humanity's "maison" in Haiti.

Between January and August 2011, nine BAR fellows traveled to Haiti for three weeks each, with one week of download in between, while three volunteers provided project support from BAR's San Francisco office. Cumulatively, the effort amounted to 1.25% of the firm's annual labor hours, or the equivalent of 24 hours from each employee. "When you think of distributing pro bono work in this way, it's more manageable, especially when you realize how large the payback is," Victor points out.

Working in Haiti was not always easy, and Architecture for Humanity's support—for transportation, safety, and community contacts—was critical. The experience demanded constant flexibility: "We went in there with a project schedule and milestones," says Chris Haeggglund, BAR principal and one of the first fellows, "but from day one, when the site survey wasn't yet finished, we had to adjust." Another challenge was the lack of hierarchy. "Everyone had to be their own boss," adds Victor. "Coordination was tricky, but the inefficiency was also the learning opportunity."

#### COMMITMENT

Ultimately, the flexible design process facilitated client and community involvement. "We weren't there just to throw up some boxes, but to create something uplifting that could anchor the community," says Haeggglund. This meant participating in numerous community design meetings and site visits with Haiti Partners to better understand its pedagogy and use of a collaborative communication tool, known as Circles of Change, to foster participatory leadership.

The school's master plan and building design reflects this ideal. Eight classroom buildings employ a 2,500-square-foot module wrapped in a broad arcade, which connects to the central courtyards forming the heart of the school. The modules provide architectural continuity, while louvers and local *crepisage* create color and variation to playfully

distinguish between grades. MEP solutions are simple and sustainable by necessity, incorporating composting toilets, solar panels and a site water strategy donated by Sherwood Design Engineers.

Perusing the firm's Haiti blog, *BAR Rebuilds*, each fellow's unique learning experience comes through clearly. Many returned with an invigorated belief in architecture's potential, and the fellowship has bolstered BAR's firm-wide culture of giving. "Everyone is proud of this project, and we've had new employees join us precisely because of it," says Victor.

Is the model transferable? BAR had some advantages, but the key elements—passion, flexibility, and commitment, along with Architecture for Humanity's involvement—are extendable, and the organization is hoping for a repeat. "There are a few improvements we could make, in terms of overlapping volunteers for an easier transition, but there are no major roadblocks to future partnerships," believes associate Karl Johnson. And firms don't have to travel to Haiti to contribute; backyard opportunities abound.

The Children's Academy broke ground on September 25, 2011, and Phase 1A—four classrooms for fifty children—is scheduled to open in September 2012. "The energy is incredible," reports Engle from Haiti. "We've employed 30 to 40 local citizens for construction, and another 54 community members participate in weekly Circles of Change training, in anticipation of the school's opening." Lisa Victor watches the project unfold from her San Francisco office with a renewed sense of possibility. "It's been amazing to watch this crazy idea become a reality. We're so lucky that everything aligned." Victor is humble, but other firms who take BAR's lead can be grateful for her vision. ■



OPPOSITE: Haeggglund and Victor review plans with a local architect. TOP LEFT: Construction began in September 2011. TOP RIGHT: The site plan illustrates the eight classroom buildings framing a central courtyard. ABOVE: Louvers and *crepisage*, plaster, will define the classrooms. BELOW: Construction on the first phase is scheduled to be completed in September 2012.



## PROJECT FACTS

PROJECT: Haiti Partner's Children's Academy

CLIENT: Haiti Partners, John Engle

LOCATION: Rue Borno Prolonge #32B, Bawosya, Haiti

START DATE: January 17, 2011

COST: Building 1, \$200,000 (est.); entire project \$2.5-\$3M (est.)

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER: Micanol Gracious

SURVEYOR: Erlich Jaques, Geometrix

ENGINEERING: Michael Magnier, Geotechnical Engineer

CIVIL ENGINEER: John Leys & Tina Stimpson, Sherwood Design Engineers

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Laura Jerrard and Tori Johnson, Lutsko Associates, Landscape Architects

CONTRACTOR: M+L Construction

#### DESIGN TEAM (IN SEQUENCE OF PARTICIPATION):

##### BAR ARCHITECTS

##### IN HAITI

Lisa Victor + Chris Haeggglund

Douglas Oliver

Jonathan Hradecky

Lisa Majchrzak

Jeremy Butler-Pinkham

Stephanie Amend

Thomas Crowley+ Will Spurzem

##### FROM SAN FRANCISCO:

Ying Ying Yong

Mirba Estrellas

##### SUPPORT:

Shelley Young

Linda Crouse

##### ARCHITECTURE FOR HUMANITY:

Stacey McMahan (USGBC design fellow)

Kate Evarts (design fellow)

Rick Ehler (structural engineer)