

Cameron Sinclair: Eternal Optimist

By Tracy Metz

“Building is a political act.”
Cameron Sinclair, Architecture for Humanity

“We’re the *happy puppy story*,” says Cameron Sinclair, co-founder of the design world’s largest non-profit organization, Architecture for Humanity. He’s referring to the news on TV: after 28 minutes of trouble and distress, they want to end on a happy - generally trivial - note. Architecture for Humanity is good news, and anything but trivial.



Architecture for Humanity is a nonprofit that seeks architecture solutions to global crises and acts as a go-between to put the design community at the service of world's humanitarian needs. That is often after natural disasters or conflicts, but increasingly for people living day-to-day in poverty, including in the U.S. By “services” Sinclair means both designs – AfH organizes competitions regularly, often with a theme – and hands-on work on site. Architects, engineers, city planners sign up and go live in the country, on site where help is needed, in exchange for minimal pay and maximum discomfort. And by “helping” he means



not just sending money and Range Rovers and shoddy tents, but helping people rebuild their homes and their villages or cities themselves. Sinclair, an architect himself, describes the purpose of the profession succinctly: “If you don’t build it, it doesn’t count”.

Sinclair was in Amsterdam recently to speak at the two-day conference *What Design Can Do*. He stole the show, pacing back and forth on the stage like a tiger

with a sense of humor and proving with his projects and his personal dedication that design can do a lot. His business card states his job as *Chief Eternal Optimist*. “Cameron Sinclair is doing his best to save the world, one emergency shelter and mobile AIDS clinic at a time,” wrote the *Washington Post*.

Twelve years ago Sinclair, originally English and now San Francisco-based, was what he calls a “CAD monkey.” (That’s “computer aided design,” for those who don’t use it.) There had to be something more meaningful, he thought, and AfH was born: a one-man, one-woman two-laptop startup, together with co-founder Kate Stohr. By now it has realized almost 4000 projects by 2000 architects in 48 countries. It’s grown to 115 staff members, spread over six offices in cities

ranging from San Francisco to Port-au-Prince in Haiti. The budget has gone from \$700 in 1999 to \$1 million in 2007 to \$10 million in 2012. Says Sinclair, "85 percent of that is spent on designing and building." Most of the money comes from business and private individuals. "One of the statistics I'm proudest of," he says, "is the 1000 dollars that came in after the earthquake in Haiti from children in Bangladesh."



Haiti Rebuilding Center

Partly thanks to his [TED prize and talk](#) in 2006, Sinclair has now reached a kind of do-gooder rock star status – not up there with Bono yet, but on his way. Sinclair used his TED prize to set up the [Open Architecture Network](#), a global open-source network where architects, governments and NGOs can share and implement design plans to house the world. Architects now come to him: "Renzo Piano recently called to offer his services."



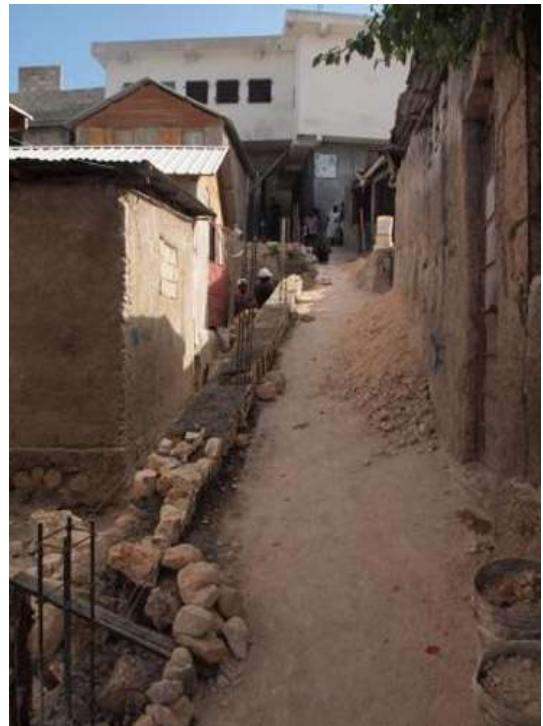
Skateistan

In late 2011 Obama appointed Sinclair advisor to USAID – a courageous act, given that Sinclair is highly critical of government-organized emergency aid. "The 'aid cowboys' are every bit as much an occupying force as an army. The war in Iraq was the best thing that happened to Afghanistan, because then the aid

caravan pulled out and moved on to the next thing. Finally there was room in Afghanistan again for local initiatives.”

Isn't he being co-opted by this appointment as an advisor to USAID? "Absolutely not", he says firmly. "I can be more effective as a pirate on the inside than as an activist on the outside. If I can show an enormous organization like USAID what they can attain with local labor, local materials and sustainable energy, then that is really a game changer."

Sinclair does not believe in "sweat equity," in letting people work for nothing. "We are not only helping to reconstruct buildings, but also the social ties and the economy. I can make sure that people from Swat Valley in northern Pakistan can build houses of bamboo for \$800 that will stay standing, rather than tents that cost \$1200 dollars and that blow away after a year. Crappy structures are a waste of money. And this way people earn something and are rebuilding their own community and their economy."



Villa Rosa, Haiti

Architecture for Humanity provided help in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, in Pakistan after the earthquake of 2005, in Southeast Asia after the tsunami in 2006, in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, in Fukushima after the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. They also work in war-torn areas such as Kabul, Afghanistan, where they built a skate park – [Skateistan](#) - for young people in 2007. There is even an exchange program between the student skateboarders from Kabul who went to the U.S. to visit a group of Lakota Native Americans on the Pine Ridge reservation, where the kids decorated each other's skateboards with their own designs.



Skateistan

More and more areas in the U.S. are regarded as in need of help: in the Dakotas AfH built libraries of straw bales, and in Chicago they set up old school buses as riding fruit and vegetable vendors to bring fresh produce from the farm to the food deserts.

A large part of Sinclair's work is now travelling the world to get the message out, to visit projects and find sponsors. With true marketing flair, he succeeds in keeping his organization in the public eye. Under his own motto, *Design Like You*

Give a Damn, Architecture for Humanity has produced two books, the second of which was launched in New York this spring. This spring AfH organized an auction of seventy original prints and drawings donated by famous architects and artists. Every two years they organize a major design competition. This year's



Community focus group, Villa Rosa, Haiti

theme was [Un]Restricted Access, to gather new uses for decommissioned military sites; 510 teams from 71 countries responded. The work of the 13 finalists will be on show at this year's Architecture Biennale at Palazzo Bembo in Venice.

"Building is a political act," says Sinclair. "Even the question what you build and for whom is a political question. Do you build in Dubai or in Afghanistan? Do you build the world's highest skyscraper or a mobile clinic

on the back of a camel?" He has little pity for architects in the rich West who are groaning under the economic crisis. "Architecture has become irrelevant as a profession. You can stay on the New York-Rome axis and keep hoping for work, but under the equator there are three billion clients waiting for you who will respect you and be grateful to you."

