

Designing and Building for the Long-term

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Designing and building in the context of a developing nation offers unique opportunities and challenges, both for students and faculty. Drawing on the experience of a design-build project conducted at the epicenter of the 2010 Haitian Earthquake, the question is posed: "How can an intervention in a community provide long lasting benefits beyond the construction of just one building?"

It is estimated that over 3,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were in operation in Haiti soon after the 2010 Earthquake. That led some to refer to Haiti as a "Republic of NGOs". With access to financial resources and infrastructural support away from the affected region, International NGO's often wittingly, or unwittingly set the agenda of a recovery effort. The contracts they secure determine who benefits and what needs are met. In that process, numerous small indigenous organizations, and fragile government agencies, are sidelined in the need to complete certain goals and objectives prescribed by board members and donors who have never received endorsement from the people of Haiti. In such a climate, how should a Professor from an American University engage in a rebuilding effort?

By observing some of the common failures in collapsed buildings it was clear to a trained building professional that additional resources would be required to ensure that what is reconstructed, performs better than what was destroyed. In some cases those resources would need to be material, however the knowledge in how to design and construct connections would also be something faculty and students could contribute. Drawing on the experiences, the project lead, building a small midwifery training facility, on a Hospital campus in the town of Leogane, suggestions are made as to what can be addressed and what improvements could be made if appropriate collaborations are established early in the process. It is hoped that the work will spur a frank and honest conversation about how big the scope of a design build project abroad should be, and what issues beyond the construction of a single building should be addressed. The project lead felt compelled to address the poor quality of locally produced CMU blocks, to mix results. This called him to question if he had focused solely on one critical component of an assembly would the benefits been greater to the wider community.

The designing and construction of the 1000 sq/ft facility was a great learning experience for all involved. However, it is questionable as to whether the endeavor orchestrated significant long-term change beyond those intimately involved in the project. This opens the question of how can the knowledge gained in a design build project conducted abroad, be more widely distributed amongst the community that needs information, as opposed to back in the Academy where its value is scrutinized.



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