

Rebuilding Haiti So It's Better Than Before

A San Francisco–based group of architects helps communities hit by hurricanes and earthquakes come back stronger.



(Photo: Courtesy Architecture for Humanity)

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Northern California–based Barbara Tannenbaum has written for *The New York Times*, *Edutopia*, *Salon*, *San Francisco* magazine, and others.

Natural disasters have different footprints. Architect Eric Cesal remembers arriving in Haiti two months after the powerful earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince in January 2010. Almost five years later, he still finds the scene hard to describe.

“Port-au-Prince was all rubble, like the aftermath of a war,” he says. “How you’d imagine the bombing of Dresden would look.”

Typhoon Haiyan was a different story. The strongest tropical depression ever recorded cut a swath across the Philippines in 2013. Cesal toured areas hit by the storm. Unlike in Haiti, buildings remained standing—but most of their roofs were missing.

Assessing and responding to local needs that are unique to each disaster—whether natural or man-made—is a key element of Cesal's work. That fits with the trend in international aid of the last several years, which is to ask local communities what they need and help provide it in a way that enables them to become self-sufficient.

Talking to architects in Manila [after Haiyan](#), Cesal recalls, "As always, we asked, 'What do you need? Help us understand the local landscape.'"

He had come to coordinate the efforts of the nonprofit he directs, Architecture for Humanity, to help rebuild the city.

Architecture for Humanity was founded in 1999 by New York-based architects Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr to provide transitional housing for refugees from the war in Kosovo. Since then, the San Francisco-based group has brought design and construction expertise to 40 nations recovering from man-made or natural disasters, the majority of them in the developing world. It has launched its first project in the Philippines—rebuilding the Picas Elementary School—and continues rebuilding in Japan three years after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, as well as in areas of the U.S. still recovering from hurricanes Sandy and Katrina. With 55,000 members in 59 chapters around the world, Architecture for Humanity has worked with foundations, United Nations agencies, and other NGOs. Details of more than 7,000 of its international projects are made public through its [Open Architecture Network](#).

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Michael Steiner, senior program manager, Reconstructing Haiti

With climate change, extreme weather events are likely to grow more frequent and more extreme, scientists say. That gnaws at Cesal, he says, because the worst effects of disasters are avoidable. "They strike where cities aren't well planned and buildings aren't well built. Structures, unable to withstand the shock, turn into weapons of mass destruction," he says. "But if architects do their part, the world is going to be a lot safer."

Architecture for Humanity is a reconstruction organization, not a disaster response organization. "We're not beyond providing immediate, quick solutions if we can do them," adds Cesal. "But our overriding concern is the long-term redevelopment of a community in the wake of a humanitarian crisis."

In Port-au-Prince, his organization has helped to rebuild after the destruction of 4,000 schools, 18 government buildings, and the homes of 1.1 million people. It evaluated the safety of every school

building using a nationwide assessment program. Sixteen school [reconstruction and redesign projects](#) encompassing more than 80 new classrooms enabled 18,000 students and educators to get back to their routines.

Wherever Cesal and AFH go, schools are the first priority. In many places, they function as meeting places for community leaders, and after disaster strikes, schools often serve as distribution centers for food aid or as makeshift clinics. As education centers, Cesal says, schools represent “the fast track to helping the adults’ lives get back to normal. Parents know their children are safe for eight hours and can focus on rebuilding.” He knows too that resuming the routine of school also helps children, who experience a disaster’s disruption more severely than adults do. Adults tend to cope better with, say, a six-month disruption; for children though, that time period represents a much longer percentage of their lives, and long disruptions can delay the acquisition of basic life skills.

In Haiti, tasks after getting the schools up and running and assessing housing and settlement needs included mapping roadways and watersheds and documenting historical uses of buildings.

“Each project can take three to five years,” says Michael Steiner, senior program manager for Reconstructing Haiti. “Often the real work doesn’t begin until nine months after the disaster.”

The organization discovered, early in the process, that Haiti’s oral culture was a barrier impeding the tracking of, transfer of, and changes in land title and ownership. Architecture for Humanity and Habitat for Humanity together developed the [Haiti Property Working Group](#), hosting forums, creating a website, and distributing manuals to guide the sale and transfer of property. Today an online system tracking [land titles](#) and ownership transfers is in place.

“We use an investigative process to avoid any preconceived notions of what the community needs,” says Steiner. “The community is the client. The best solutions are local solutions.”

In all its projects, Architecture for Humanity’s Haiti Rebuilding Center hires only local building contractors and laborers. At [École La Dignité](#), a primary school that reopened in 2011, the team worked with local craftspeople and laborers to replace concrete block walls with ones built from carved stones taken from a nearby dry riverbed and engineered to California seismic building codes. Over the course of the project, the center will have employed 21 full-time [staff members](#), aided over the years by dozens of international volunteers.

“To me, that’s innovation,” says Cesal. “It’s not about inventing widgets or gadgets. It’s a process. We want communities to become self-reliant. If another earthquake strikes, they won’t need to depend on the international aid community.”

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