

# OXFORD CONFERENCE 2008

## PROBLEM ADDRESSED

Architectural debate about development is finally starting to mature. Yet, much that is published and taught about poverty habitats is still couched in terms of disaster mitigation, emergency shelter or development planning. Indeed, many in the field consider 'architecture' virtually irrelevant, suggesting that the practical concerns of those in need outweigh the symbolic and aesthetic agenda of spatial culture; development disciplines are often at pains to present their endeavours as 'practice' rather than 'design'. Is there conflict in these interpretations of what architecture can and should be? What wider lessons about ethical practice can development disciplines teach?



ASF-UK's forum at the Oxford Conference considered the intertwining of studies in Human Settlement with the broad theme of Social Responsibility, emphasising international development. Integrating very different strands of professional, academic and independent activity; from planning to ethnography and from global networking to participatory activism: the topic presented challenges to educational debate, blurring the boundaries between practice and research.



## GOAL ACHIEVED

The hands-on workshop at the end of the last session summarised some key challenges and current issues: Future architectural practice must face the realities of urban change, accept that huge sprawling informal cities in the south will be the norm and orderly, compact and controlled cities in the north will be the exception, Architecture must rediscover the value of context. We rely on too many abstractions and we need to reconnect with people in order to make architecture that matters. Climate change is important but raises specific concerns for the world's poorest people who are the most vulnerable to change. There is a conflict of interpretation of architecture's role as either a practical method for meeting basic needs or a cultural vehicle for social and symbolic meaning.

Date:

July 2008

Location:

Oxford, UK

ASF Team:

M. Kinnear & M. Barac

Partners:

Architecture for Humanity UK

Donors:

Arup & Stock Woolstencroft

Project types:

Exhibition & Event

## METHODOLOGY OF WORK

The day was divided into three, with the first session hosting keynote speaker: Vanessa Watson (University of Cape Town, South Africa) and three oral presentations: S Tovovich (Development Planning Unit, University College London), JA Vanegas (Texas A&M University, USA), N Coetzer (University of Cape Town, South Africa). The second session was a panel discussion on "What is the role of architecture in the context of development?" Panel speakers included: Ola Uduku (Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland), Amos Rapoport (University of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA), Paul Oliver (Oxford Brookes University, UK), with Vanessa Watson as a discussant. Each speaker made a position statement followed on by a discussion and questions from the floor. For the third session the keynote speaker was Amos Rapoport (University of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA), which ended in a workshop facilitated by ASF-UK and AfH UK.



## FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

Some key points were presented back to the conference in the hope that they would be taken forward to the new teaching agenda: Design does matter? Design can enhance people's sense of identity, dignity and belonging. Architects can make a difference? Both good and bad. We need to work with other disciplines, more collaboratively. A 'good architect' today needs balance between a variety of skills and must be grounded in reality.