

## DEVELOPING OUR CITY

\ Inspirational architect  
Esther Charlesworth has  
dared to dream outside the  
'grand design' model,  
writes SARAH MARINOS

“Mostar was the light-bulb moment,” says Dr Esther Charlesworth. It was the mid-1990s and Charlesworth was taking part in a summer workshop focused on how to reconstruct the bitterly divided city in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Born in Melbourne, where she studied architecture at RMIT University, she then worked in corporate architectural firms before moving to the US to study urban design at Harvard University. Charlesworth was in the US when she was given a scholarship to travel to Europe to discuss Mostar's future.

“The Bosnian war was still going on, so a group of us met in Istanbul and it was the first time I'd ever thought about issues of war and architecture,” she says.

“I'd been interested in connections between social justice and architecture, but looking at Mostar I thought, ‘There are lots of lawyers, doctors and health professionals working here, where are the architects and the planners?’”

A few years later, Charlesworth returned home to lecture at the University of Melbourne. During this time she took a group of design students to Mostar.

“We were discussing architecture projects and how to bring the city back together,” recalls Charlesworth.

“I saw how architects could play a viable role in the process of reconciliation and I realised architects had valuable skills that could be applied to an extreme global setting. If I hadn't made the trip to Mostar, I doubt I'd be trying to develop this emerging stream of humanitarian architecture.”

With two of those students who travelled to Mostar – Garry Ormston and Beau Beza – Charlesworth began Architects Without Frontiers (AWF). In the 15 years since, AWF's volunteer experts in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture have developed and built projects in Australia, Sri Lanka, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal and China.

At the core of AWF's work is Charlesworth's vision of “humanitarian architecture”.

“I don't think building a 90-storey tower in the city is humanitarian. Nor do I think all architects should



(DARRIAN TRAYNOR)

ESTHER CHARLESWORTH

# BEYOND THE BIG BANG

be involved in humanitarian work,” says Charlesworth, an associate professor in the School of Architecture & Design at RMIT University.

“Humanitarian architecture is working within the field of development, helping to improve the economic livelihood of marginalised communities, and working in natural disaster and emergency settings. You can effect a profound difference to a person or community's quality of life.”

One of the first successful AWF projects was building the home of an indigenous elder at Stradbroke Island. A lawyer working with the elder approached Charlesworth after hearing her speak about AWF at a conference. “Basically the elder – Uncle Dennis – had been squatting on his own land as he hadn't been given native title,” says Charlesworth. “So a

team of volunteers went to Stradbroke Island over long weekends and we rebuilt his house, made him furniture and put in a self-composting toilet. It was a small project but it had an immense impact on Uncle Dennis' life.

“The first Christmas after his home was built, 300 members of his extended family had lunch there,” Charlesworth says. “Through our projects I've met many exceptional people like him. I've met people who live in a war-torn environment, whose houses are destroyed and who have virtually nothing left, but they have incredible resilience.”

AWF brings together a client, community donors and key stakeholders who can take a project from an idea to bricks and mortar. The organisation is building a women's resource centre in Fiji and it recently completed a disability day centre in Dien Ban, Vietnam.

The disability centre is for child victims of Agent Orange, used by the US military as part of its chemical warfare program during the Vietnam War. That project was largely paid for by RMIT.

“Students worked on initial designs, we got Melbourne architects to do the detailed design, RMIT substantially funded the project and we managed the relationships between the donor, the client, the community and local contractors,” says Charlesworth.

“The centre is for 80 profoundly intellectually and physically disabled children aged from five to 17. In that area there was heavy use of Agent Orange during the war and it's still in the soil. The disabilities experienced by the children are largely attributed to the after-effects of the chemical.

“These kids often have no future but in the centre they can be educated, their physical and intellectual

development improves and they are treated with respect.”

But Charlesworth explains that projects often face challenges.

“Quite often the client doesn't know exactly what they want or need. So we have to listen, assess the needs and what is possible and come up with a design that is cost effective and that can be built quickly. Often we are working in areas that have no planning regulations and we are also trying to develop projects that have some economic livelihood,” she says.

“So after the natural disasters in Sri Lanka and in New Orleans, for example, there's no point in just dropping in prefab structures. Unless you are providing economic livelihood through the act of designing and building, you are failing.

“So we always think about how the project can get taken over by the local community in three or four years' time, when the donor is no longer around. We learnt that through our mobile library project in southern Sri Lanka. That project needed recurrent

funding built into it so someone could replace the tyres on the bus a few years down the track.

“We are a trigger point for getting these communities up on their feet again and projects are a catalyst for better education and health and for better infrastructure.”

Most recently, Charlesworth has made several trips to Uganda for AWF to facilitate the development of a new healthcare precinct in the village of Mannyva. The Cotton On Foundation is supporting the work and the centre will be finished this year.

“We provided the design concept, and the detailed documentation is done by local architects or engineers on the ground who deliver the project,” she says.

Other projects Charlesworth cites as the essence of AWF's work are the women's resource centre in Fiji and a series of schools being built in India. The Fiji project will be completed this year.

“A young architect who became a member of AWF is Fijian and he raised this project and we secured AusAID funding a few years ago,” says Charlesworth.



**A different vision:** (clockwise from top right) An anganwadi project; the Dien Ban Disability Centre; Esther Charlesworth working in Sri Lanka after the tsunami in 2005. (SUPPLIED)

“We co-ordinated the design development, and the consultants on the ground and we engaged local contractors to build it. The centre was really initiated, though, by a group of local women who wanted a space to gather and do their crafts. But it has been challenging. Just getting permission to build a road to the centre and building that road took 18 months.”

The schools in India – the anganwadis – are being built by volunteers who spend two- or three-month blocks on the ground. When complete, the project will deliver 66 preschools in slum areas of the country.

“The model in which we are generally taught to think about architecture is that it's the grand design model, it's the big bang and architecture for the rich. But apart from doing large fancy buildings and lovely beach houses, we architects and designers have a much broader suite of skills,” says Charlesworth.

To further the cause of humanitarian architecture, she has developed a program for students who want to get involved in the sector. The two-day course – Pathways to working in the humanitarian sector – features people who work in the emergency and disaster area explaining how they developed their careers. Charlesworth also hopes to establish a masters degree in disaster management, resilience and reconstruction at RMIT University.

“So many students ask me how they can get involved in development and disaster work and there is no pathway. I want to inspire architects, landscape architects, planners, construction project managers and engineers to get involved in this sector,” she says.

“The television program *Grand Designs* sells the message of how a well-designed house can improve your relationships, sense of being and sense of purpose. It's exactly the same with the communities we work with.” \

smarinos@theweeklyreview.com.au