**Beyond the big bang**

**Inspirational architect**

Esther Charlesworth has dared to dream outside the grand design model, writes SARAH MARINOS

*Esther Charlesworth*

![Esther Charlesworth](Image 246x178 to 1236x856)

M*omart 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 almost totally destroyed city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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

*“The Bosnian war was still going on, so a group of us nat Stradbroke Island. A lawyer working with the indigenous community was building the home of an indigenous elder—Uncle Garry Ormston and Beau Beza—Charlesworth began humanitarian work,” says Charlesworth, who now lectures at the University of Melbourne. During this time she took a group of design students to Mostar.*

*“We were discussing humanitarian projects and how to get involved in development work,” she says. “I'd been interested in connections between social justice and architecture, but looking at Mostar I thought, There are lots of terrific and interested people working here, are the architects and the planners working with them?’“*

*The planners?’*

*“I'd been interested in connections between social justice and architecture, but looking at Mostar I thought, ‘Are there interesting connections between the professions involved here and the local communities?’“*

While in the US when she was given a scholarship to travel to Rome to discuss Mostar's future, Charlesworth was building the home of an indigenous elder—Uncle Garry Ormston and Beau Beza—Charlesworth began humanitarian work. Charlesworth was in the US when she was given a scholarship to travel to Rome to discuss Mostar's future.

In 1997, 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. As the core of AWF's work is Esther Charlesworth's vision of ‘humanitarian architecture.’

Two of those students 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.

Charlesworth returned home to Australia in 1997, having completed a disability day centre in Dien Ban, Vietnam. The disability 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 Vietnam War. That project was completed by RMIT University.

*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 and building 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 putting in prefab structures. Unless you are providing something that has some economic livelihood, you are failing. So we are working in areas that have no planning and building regulations and we are also trying to develop projects that have some economic livelihood.”*

Charlesworth returned home to Australia in 1997, having completed a disability day centre in Dien Ban, Vietnam. The disability 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 Vietnam War. That project was completed by RMIT University.

*“At mostart we were thinking about how the project can get involved in development and there are so many examples in Sri Lanka where there is no planning or building regulations. Unless you are providing something that has some economic livelihood, you are failing. So we are working in areas that have no planning and building regulations and we are also trying to develop projects that have some economic livelihood.”*

Confronted with an indigenous elder—Uncle 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. As the core of AWF’s work is Esther Charlesworth’s vision of ‘humanitarian architecture.’

A different world is from this right*

*“We co-ordinated the design development, and the contractors 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 that getting permission to build a road to the centre and building that road took 18 months.”*

*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 Vietnam War. That project was completed by RMIT University.*

*Esther Charlesworth 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 begins to establish a framework in disaster management, resilience and reintegration 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 architecture, landscape architects and planners, construction project managers and engineers to get involved in this sector,” she says. “The idealistic program Grand Design 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 humanitarian work we see.”*

*smarinos@theweeklyreview.com.au*