

Alice Rawsthorn on design for the unwealthiest 90 percent

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A Q-Drum is used to make the transport of water easier in South Africa. (P.J. Hendrikse)

The numbers seem nutty. There are 6.5 billion people on this planet, 90 percent of whom can't afford basic products and services. Half of them, nearly three billion people, don't have regular access to food, shelter or clean water. Yet whenever we think, or talk, about design, it's invariably about something that's intended to be sold to one of the privileged minority - the richest 10 percent.

The \$1 million chaise longue. The fast car. The sleek computer. The beautiful book. The super-legible typeface. The toothbrush, power drill or MP3 player that's ingenious enough to be priced a little higher than its competitors. Museums, books, magazines, and blogs are stuffed with such things. Tens of thousands of designers devote their working lives to producing more.

It's not that there's anything wrong with designing things like that. But when you look at the bigger picture, doesn't it seem strange that so much time, energy and resources should be consumed by creating luxuries for relatively few people, when so many essentials are needed urgently by so many more? Why are designers so focussed on designing for the wealthiest 10 percent?

"That question always reminds me of the quote attributed to the bank robber, Willie Sutton, when someone asked him why he robbed banks," said Paul Polak, president of International Development Enterprises, a nonprofit organization that encourages innovation among poor farmers in developing countries. "His answer was: 'Because that's where the money is.' "

Fair enough. Designers are entitled to earn a living. But if you flick back through design history, they haven't all focused on the privileged minority. Think of R. Buckminster Fuller's emergency housing, or the sustainable products devised by Victor Papanek for use in developing countries. Their work has already had tremendous impact. Fuller's geodesic domes have provided shelter for hundreds of thousands of people in desperate circumstances; and Papanek is lauded as a pioneer of socially responsible design. Yet both have been treated as bit-part players in design history, as have other designers with similar goals.

That's changing. Designers, like so many other people, have become increasingly concerned about the plight of the needy majority, and many of them are now using their skills to address it. Some do so by devoting part of their time to voluntary work for nonprofit organizations, like

Architecture for Humanity or Engineers Without Borders. Others have chosen to work full time in humanitarian or sustainable design.

The Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York is exploring this phenomenon in "Design for the Other 90%," an exhibition opening Friday. It is hard to think of a more important or inspiring issue for a design museum to address right now. It is equally hard to imagine a more appropriate venue than the Cooper-Hewitt, whose home is the wisteria-clad Carnegie Mansion built on upper Fifth Avenue at the turn of the 20th century by the robber baron, Andrew Carnegie. Having made a fortune in the steel industry, Carnegie gave most of it away to endow schools and libraries. This is the first time the Cooper-Hewitt has devoted an exhibition to humanitarian design. "It's a call to action," Cynthia Smith, the show's curator, explained. "There's a big interest among design students and design professionals in finding socially responsible design solutions to the underpinnings of poverty."

"Design for the Other 90%" analyzes 30 humanitarian design projects, all addressing basic needs in the areas of shelter, health, water, education, energy and transport. As anyone who has dipped into the quagmire of development knows, it is a ferociously political field with diverse, often conflicting opinions. Humanitarian design is no exception, but the Cooper-Hewitt hopes to skate around the schisms by presenting a diverse range of approaches.

Some of the featured projects were invented by their users, others by design professionals, and many were collaborations. There are emergency solutions to disasters, like the biodegradable Global Village Shelters, which have been used as cheap temporary housing after hurricanes in Grenada and the United States, and are now pitched in Andrew Carnegie's garden. There are ingenious responses to ongoing problems, such as the Lifestraw, a drinking straw that helps to prevent the spread of typhoid, cholera and other waterborne diseases by making contaminated water drinkable; and the Ceramic Water Filter, developed by IDE in Cambodia and now manufactured there.

Many humanitarian designers focus on helping the needy to enhance their earning potential by setting up new businesses, or running existing ones more efficiently. The Bamboo Treadle Pump enables poor farmers in countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia and India to pump up groundwater during the dry season. The Big Boda Load-Carrying Bicycle provides cheap transport in Kenya and Uganda to carry hundreds of pounds of cargo or two passengers using pedal-power. And thanks to the KickStart MoneyMaker Block Press, eight workers can produce up to 800 building blocks a day from soil and a small quantity of cement.

The level of technical complexity varies greatly from project to project. "I was stunned by how simple, simple solutions could have a direct impact on people's lives," said Cynthia Smith. The Q Drum helps people to transport water more easily by rolling it along the ground, rather than carrying it. The Pot-in-Pot Cooler preserves fruit and vegetables by cooling them in an earthenware pot, which nestles inside another pot with wet sand filling the space between. And the One Laptop Per Child's XO1 laptop computer is a technologically sophisticated attempt to alleviate poverty by designing a laptop cheap enough - between \$100 and \$150 - to be bought for children throughout the developing world by their governments. The impact on those children's education, and the rest of their lives, will be incalculable.

"This is an incredible project that has the potential to transform the lives of the people in greatest need," said Yves Béhar, the San Francisco-based product designer who has developed the hardware for the XO1. "How could any designer turn down the chance to be part of it?"

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