



Like doctors and reporters, architects now go beyond their comfort zones to help, reports **Pollyanna Sutton.**

## Architects wake to frontier needs

**R**ETHINKING technology and design in communities ravaged by natural and man-made disasters has given some Australian architects opportunities they would never have in urban development.

Through the volunteer organisation Architects Without Frontiers (AWF), architects, designers and engineers have faced challenges as diverse as designing biodegradable waste pits in Nepal, a monastery in Tibet, mobile library buses for Sri Lankan children after the 2004 tsunami, and an orphanage and school in Afghanistan.

Their experiences and solutions will be chronicled in an exhibition *Without Frontiers*, at the Atrium, Federation Square, until February 17.

*Without Frontiers* uses drawings, photographs, models and audio diaries to tell the stories of the projects, including an HIV Aids orphan training centre in Malawi. Managing director of AWF, Professor Esther Charlesworth, said the organisation empowers smaller communities through ideas, not just bricks and mortar.

It was committed to long term development rather than emergency architecture, she said.

"Since September 11 we have seen an awakening of design and social responsibility and a look at the

role people from differing design disciplines can offer," she said.

AWF does not go into areas unless asked, and part of its contribution is to look at the capacity of locals, helping them through the design process and suggesting sustainable materials.

In the Malawi orphanage project, one of the solutions was introducing sun dried bricks to a rural community that had relied on kiln dried bricks, a simple but powerful idea that saved time and resources.

Projects are not just about building a structure.

"We can kick start a project but unless there is local input to keep it running it can become deeply unsustainable," Ms Charlesworth said.

AWF has attracted support for its work from organisations as diverse as the Lonely Planet Foundation, which is interested in projects that use sustainable building materials, to the City of Melbourne, which gave funds from several events to buy two mobile library buses in Sri Lanka.

Ms Charlesworth said once the buses were designed, the Athenaeum Library donated books to replace those lost by the children in Galle and Hambantota when their schools were destroyed by the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004.

Another project in development is a cultural centre in Arnhem Land.

AWF volunteers will hold a design workshop to assess the size, scope and appropriate building for the natural setting, producing a document for the local communities to take to the funding bodies.

Ms Charlesworth said: "It is a consequence of globalisation that there is a proliferation of urban conflict and surging ethnic violence. These projects give us the opportunity to rethink what role we might play in the sustainable reconstruction process."

She said that AWF volunteers work on projects with little resources.

While they may earn a living on high-end development projects, there are many who want to spend time on other projects.

"I am increasingly aware of young architects and engineers who want more from their work and want to contribute to the sustainability debate," she said.

AWF was established by Ms Charlesworth, Dr Beau Beza and Gary Ornston eight years ago.

It has 140 members across Australia and is working on 12 projects in 10 countries.

*Without Frontiers*, Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne. Until February 17.



Orphans at Hope House in Kabul, Afghanistan



Beau Beza (front left) and Garry Ormston (rear left) directors of Architects Without Frontiers, with villagers from Pangkarma, Nepal