

# Architects Without Borders-Oregon marks a decade of changing lives, here and abroad

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, which devastated Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and several other countries in the region, a call to action rippled through the architecture and construction community in Oregon.

"It quickly grew into a large number of people connecting online and having a meeting that Sunday morning at the AIA office, and that led to sending a small group over to Sri Lanka after the earthquake," said John Blumthal, FAIA, a retired Portland architect and Center for Architecture board member.

That response gave rise to Architects Without Borders-Oregon, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Blumthal, Rod Merrick, AIA, and other founding members experienced an inaugural year that not only initiated the design of a grade school in Bata Atha, Sri Lanka, but also damage assessments for homeowners living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005.

"For me, what was really energizing about it was the coming together in this community, and it wasn't just architects but builders, contractors, engineers and others," Blumthal said. "I've always felt strongly about the things we can do as a profession, and this was really an opportunity to capitalize on the energy of that moment and to keep it going."

Over the last decade, AWB-Oregon's all-volunteer projects have broadened from disaster response to collaborating with international partners to address chronic problems, such as a lack of schools that are safe and welcoming for students.

"We learned after our first couple of projects that disaster response wasn't the most productive use of our time and energy. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, architects and engineers aren't quite as equipped to help with



Architects Without Borders-Oregon's work over the last decade has included designing schools in Nepal and Haiti, as well as disaster response and a diverse array of local projects.

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— John Blumthal, FAIA, founding member of Architects Without Borders-Oregon



Photos courtesy of Architects Without Borders-Oregon

immediate needs. We are more useful during the recovery phase," Blumthal said.

AWB-Oregon joined the effort to build an orphanage and education center in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake that devastated that country. It also participated in an education project in Tanzania, a hospital in Malawi and a solar-power project in Congo.

Blumthal credited Craig Totten, principal at KPFF and a member of AWB-Oregon and Engineers Without Borders, with leading a successful partnership with the nonprofit buildOn to add more schools in Haiti and Nepal. AWB-Oregon designed a prototype elementary school that has three classrooms,

each of which can accommodate as many as 50 children. The design emphasizes structural integrity, natural light and natural ventilation. AWB-Oregon also is helping buildOn develop seismic upgrades for existing schools.

Chandra Robinson, Assoc. AIA, and an architectural designer with Hennebery Eddy Architects, joined AWB-Oregon in 2010 as it was working on the Haiti orphanage and education center. As AWB-Oregon's vice president, volunteer coordinator and Steering Committee member, Robinson has seen impacts of the group's work locally as well as internationally.

"I think people think of AWB-Oregon working in Haiti or Africa and we have had a lot of projects there, but it's great for the community to see us working on local projects and talking to people in the neighborhood about what they want," she said.

Similar to the work it did in the Gulf Coast following Katrina, AWB-Oregon volunteers have provided assessments and guidance for people in Vernonia whose homes were repeatedly damaged by flooding.

"In order for people to get FEMA money they had to either rebuild in a new location or put their homes higher, so we went through and gave the community some design ideas about what they could do if they wanted to stay in their homes," Robinson said.

AWB-Oregon's local work also includes a pocket park in the Sabin neighborhood, a tattoo removal station at Outside In and improved public areas in St. Andre Bessette Catholic Church. It is working with the nonprofit JOIN to design a facility where homeless people can store their possessions.

In addition, AWB-Oregon is working with the King neighborhood in Northeast Portland to improve an

area adjoining King School. The Green King project includes elements such as a bioswale, community garden, depaving, landscaping, signage and lighting. AWB-Oregon also provided design graphics for the neighborhood association so it could approach the Portland Timbers' charitable foundation with a request for funding for tennis courts.

"They've been great to work with," Robinson said. "I feel like this is the first time we've worked with a client who already has so much knowledge and is able to get out there and make things happen for themselves."

She noted that AWB-Oregon's volunteer base also has diversified over the years and now ranges beyond design, construction and engineering professionals to encompass students, a journalist, a grant writing and research specialist, and project managers.

"We found that by branching out and including people who weren't typically on our mailing list before, we've found a lot of skills that we didn't know we needed," Robinson said.

Blumthal said the chapter's energy and sustainability stems from volunteers' desire to help other people.

"What motivates everybody is the projects and the work, so we've grown steadily," he said. "We're as steadily busy now as we've ever been and with a diverse array of project types that can provide anyone who wants to volunteer with something interesting to do."

Blumthal emphasized that AIA Oregon and AIA Portland have played a significant role in AWB-Oregon's success over the last decade. AIA Oregon provided funding for an AWB-Oregon delegation to travel to the Gulf Coast after Katrina. And AIA Portland has invited the group to meet in the Center for Architecture at no cost, among other forms of support. ■

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