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## Sandra D'Urzo

is an architect whose aim is to improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable. She began her career in the international office of Mecanoo in the Netherlands and has since worked with the NGO Architecture and Development, in Salvador, East Timor, the Philippines, Afghanistan and Palestine, and with Oxfam GB in post-tsunami housing reconstruction in Sri Lanka. Sandra D'Urzo is now a Senior Officer in the Shelter and Settlements Division at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Geneva, where she is the focal person for shelter risk reduction and recovery and post-disaster operations and shelter programmes in the Americas.





As architects, what is our value add? Should we focus on technical expertise or strategic advice on risk reduction? What is the impact of our work?

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**Sandra, please tell me about your journey in the development on disaster field before joining the IFRC.** ▶ My architectural studies were in Rome. It's not a 'must' for an architecture student, but it was such a privilege to study architecture in Rome! I grew up in Brussels and, for me, going to Italy, and especially Rome, to study was inspirational, a dream come true.

Whether that equipped me for international work I don't know. I'm talking about the early 1990s, and heritage architecture was my passion. Architectural studies in Italy are quite conventional, focused more on the past than the future, but I don't regret it.

I think that I actually learnt a lot of things as a student that prepared me for international work. I learnt the self-determination and flexibility that you need to work in challenging environments. And its not being very internationally oriented gave me a hunger for new experiences.

At the end of my studies, I'm talking about 1995 or 1996, I

went to an Aga Khan workshop in Istanbul where you and I first met. It was on post-conflict reconstruction and, after that, I did my thesis work on Mostar, the divided city in Bosnia. For more than four years, I had witnessed the terrible conflict that tore a country apart, just across the Adriatic Sea. So near and yet so far! It was somehow time for me to 'take action', and invest time in an architecture thesis that had real purpose and social meaning. It was that experience that led me to decide that international work was what I wanted to pursue.

I went to work as an intern for a year with Mecanoo in Holland. Mecanoo was doing a lot of social architecture, a lot of public work, a lot of interesting cross-sectoral work. It was an eye-opener to see that an architectural firm could actually be made up not only of architects and engineers, but also sociologists, economists, biologists and so on. So, when the task, for example, was to build a school, we worked with an educational psychologist and a paediatrician. It was very interesting to be in a big office

of over eighty people where there were only twenty or thirty architects. That was around 1999 or 2000.

I then went back to Rome to work for a private firm. I wanted to get my hands dirty, working 'on the ground' on building sites. This small firm was also building schools and convents in Central Africa and Tanzania. This work was quite new for me but, even then, I found it strange to be designing things in Rome to be built in a small village in Tanzania. I saw a big discrepancy between what we were doing and how I thought we should be designing and building.

It was sobering to have to challenge myself with such questions. It made me start to really think about the work I wanted to do even if it meant first finding out what I did not want to do. I knew very well by then that I didn't want to design kitchens in Paris or put the heads back on ancient monuments in Rome.

So I started to travel. I visited the project in Tanzania and then some projects in South America that I was aware of. When I came back I knew that I wanted to do socially engaged design work for the vulnerable.

At that point, the opportunity to work with the small French NGO, Architecture and Development, came up and I got a job as a Project Officer. My job was to hop from one emergency to another, recruit teams, work with local architects and set up joint programmes with bigger French NGOs. Architecture and Development was good because it not only did emergency relief after a disaster but worked with

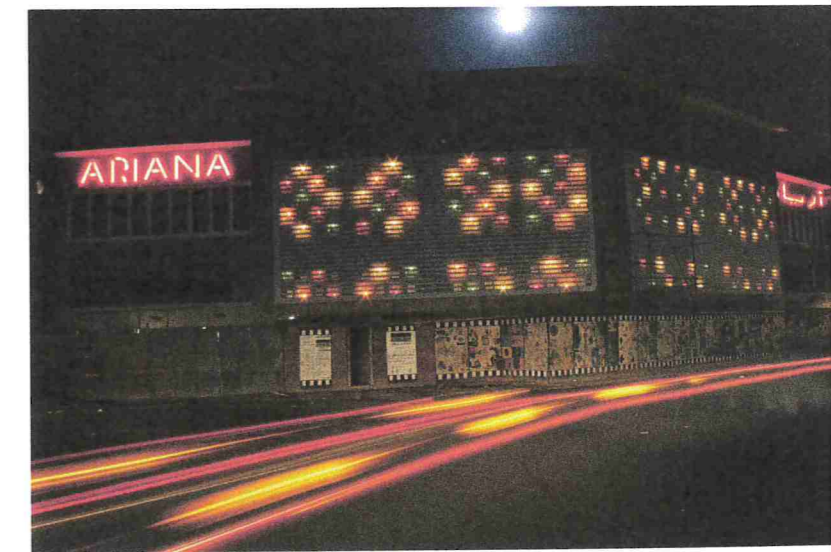
other NGOs in longer-term reconstruction. It became evident to me that there was a real need for skills like ours in those disaster situations.

One project I worked on was to rebuild an orthopaedic centre and prosthesis workshop in the Philippines. It had literally been blown away by a typhoon. I did not have any experience with health facilities but the architect that I was working with was handicapped himself and was familiar with the centre because it had provided him with an artificial limb. I learnt so much from him and other people. They opened my mind and showed me how I could work out the real needs and workable solutions together, and then do the architectural design to make them happen.

Those years in the early 2000s were amazing because I was getting to know so many different sorts of emergency contexts. It

was the Philippines and then it was Salvador after the earthquake in 2001. Then, it was the Middle East and then Afghanistan where we were rebuilding a cinema in Kabul. I saw so many of these different contexts but was only spending three or four weeks at a time in each place and, no matter how hard I tried, it was never enough to properly understand what was needed. I wanted to stay longer in one place, perhaps starting in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and set up a programme aimed at having a sustainable long-term impact and see whether people had really recovered or not.

The Indian Ocean tsunami shocked the world at the end of December 2004. It was a catalysing experience. I went from a very small, five-person NGO based inside a university to work with Oxfam as the national shelter advisor in Sri Lanka. It felt like I was growing up and now



△ A Cinema for Kabul, 2002–2003, with Architecture and Development (photo: Agostino Pacciani).



needed to learn to play in the big schoolyard, you know, with the big people. It was probably too big for me but it was an immense challenge. This was different from anything I had ever seen, the most major disaster I had experienced. I started two months after the tsunami in February 2005 and was supposed to stay six months. I ended up staying nearly three years.

First, we had to help house people in the aftermath of the tsunami. Many people had to be relocated away from the coast because of government policy to allow rebuilding only in safe zones. I was an advocate for Oxfam in making sure that the construction efforts would be equitable for the most vulnerable. I was going from coast to coast around Sri Lanka, one office to the other to make sure that we were implementing the transitional shelter programme properly: meeting the needs of the poorest, checking different technical aspects and helping decide what materials to use. We learnt about the differences in working in an urban context and in the rural east and between working in the Tamil north and the Sinhalese south.

We also had to try to make sure that our work was consistent with what all the NGOs, international agencies and the Sri Lankan government were doing. So, I set up a forum in Colombo for the many shelter experts and, every Monday evening from six to ten, after office hours, we would sit together and share our different approaches to deal with the huge task of rebuilding after the tsunami.

**Sandra, through all these experiences in Asia, Africa and Bosnia, what were you thinking about the connections between architecture, development and social justice?** ▶ Reducing inequalities by reducing vulnerability is the key for me. If people are more resilient to natural risks they will be able to live in safer environments, to invest in their livelihoods and improve their children's education: get out of the poverty cycle they are often caught in.

Right now in my shelter department team at the IFRC, we are using our background as architects and the training we've had and the field experience we've had to support national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies that are working directly with the most vulnerable communities. Of course, the word architecture doesn't come up on a daily basis. We're talking about 'sheltering' people – sheltering as a verb, not the noun 'shelter'. Sheltering is a process; it looks at designs, at the way people might use resources, at the way people could progressively build up from what they get just after the disaster to what they're able to build over time.

Thinking about shelter as a process does make us reflect a lot about what our contribution should be. Should it be technical, focusing on the way things can be built? Or should it be more strategic, focusing on issues of risk reduction, for instance? We have to connect with the research base, at least what research there is. What do we know about what might be working best in different post-disaster contexts and why? We're looking to learn about local

materials and Indigenous building practices, looking into energy efficiency and planning adaptable guidelines into the different options available.

**And where does social justice come into this?** ▶ When you mention social justice, this has everything to do with a more equitable approach to the issue of housing. We know that the post-disaster moment accelerates normal processes of building. If that goes in the wrong direction it can become very inequitable. We have a duty to make sure that there is more equitable access to those resources.

Think of people who never had access to a decent house before a disaster or who may have never had land of their own. What sort of reconstruction is best for them? For me, social justice is about equity.

**What skills from your architecture training do you bring to the post-disaster work that you do now?** ▶ Definitely not the design parts so much; but we know that the skill sets of architects are much wider than that. First of all, architecture helped my ability to listen and be flexible.

Disasters present as very complex scenarios but there are ways of unravelling the complexity. As architects, we are very good at connecting initiatives, making sure that the right synergies are made at the appropriate time. Connecting means putting people and knowledge together. At the IFRC, I coordinate 186 individual national societies, each working in their countries. I sometimes think I am a little like those old telephone

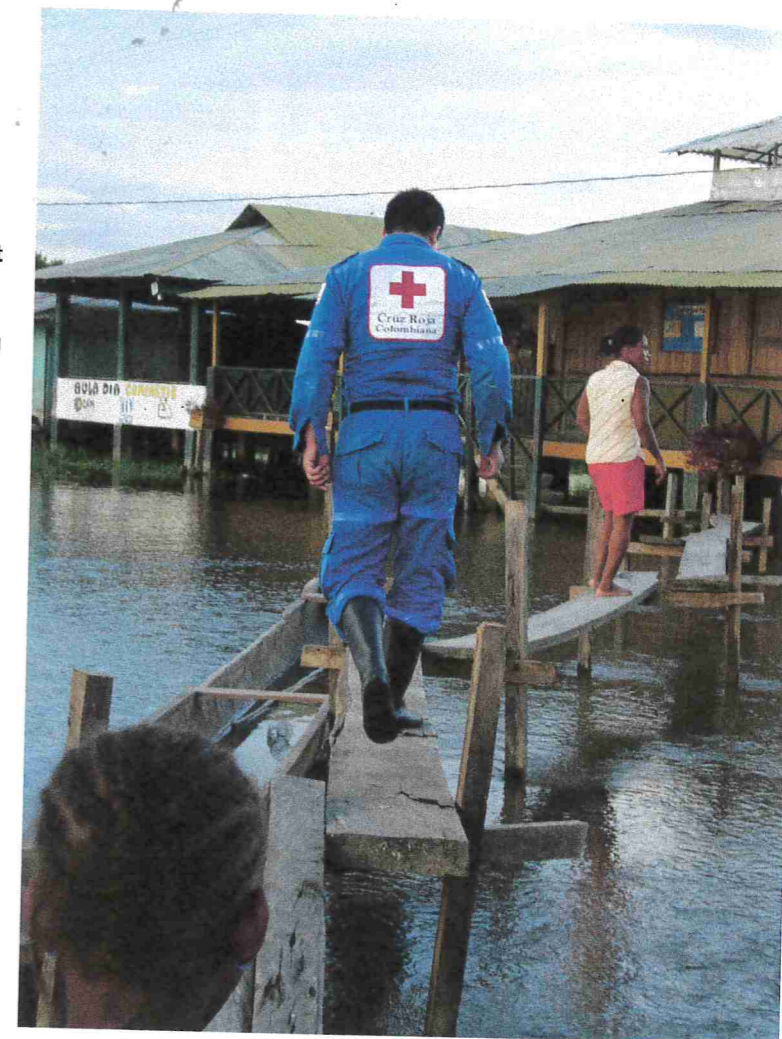
switchboard operators, you know, who had to listen in carefully to what everyone was saying and then plugging people in to the right conversation.

**Back to your personal background, Sandra, was there anything about your parents that inspired you to get involved in this kind of work? Did you grow up knowing what was happening in developing countries?**

▶ Oh, yes. My parents were always very curious about other cultures. I grew up in Brussels, an international city, and went to an international school with children from all the nationalities of the European Union. But, as a school, it felt too narrow because people were all coming from an *elite* background.

My father was a pioneer of the EU. He was part of the dream of 'building up Europe'. And our house would always be very open to refugees, to people finding out about their status and whether they could stay or move on. My parents were always helping others out. My mother was an activist in Amnesty International. One eye-opener for me, when I was six or eight years old, was the Pinochet coup in Chile. The widow of one of the victims and her three children stayed at our house for six months. It was quite an experience! So, the love of sharing and being open to others, especially those who are less fortunate, is in my DNA.

**Are you still in touch with the friends you studied with in Rome? What do they make of your work?** ▶ They all set up their own private architectural firms. They've travelled, of course; but they think I'm kind of weird.



△ The IFRC assist a community in a flood-risk mitigation project (photo: Diego Alfaro, Netherlands Red Cross).

They think I am doing something which sounds very appealing, but they don't really understand exactly what I'm doing.

**And why is it that it is only in the last decade or so that architects are working in the humanitarian and emergency fields? What do you make of that? Is it because the skills of architects weren't**

**recognized as being all that useful in the post-disaster space?** ▶ I've been asking myself the same questions for years. Maybe, architecture is still associated with the elitist view that you only need architects for the rich and wealthy, for the top 1 per cent. What about the 99 per cent? There's such huge potential for more work in this direction. Think





△ Community members paint new infrastructure.

about climate change and other urban risks, about slum upgrading, about post-disaster work, about retrofitting homes and schools! I still struggle to understand why there are not more design professionals involved in this field.

Universities, of both the North and the South, are not equipping us well enough to be able to say, 'Yes, I want to go into development. Architecture is needed even more by the needy than the rich.' It's still very conventional the way we're taught architecture for rich and wealthy clients and socialized into wanting to be one of the 'top ten' star architects.

The humanitarian and development sector is poorly understood, and probably not as appealing to architects. Yet, at a time when architectural firms are struggling to get business, there is a whole world out there that we could all contribute to. In India there are NGOs made of 200 architects working on housing alternatives for slum dwellers; and there are other Indian NGOs just as massive.

emergencies'. Today there's a flood in Colombia and, tomorrow, a very high tide in Peru; they need a response, and the provision of safer solutions.

For example, in Colombia we work with environmental specialists to raise risk awareness, with carpenters to elevate houses and infrastructure and with local municipalities to ensure that pilot projects can be replicated. Last year, our team in Port-au-Prince in Haiti needed urban planners. Two days later they needed legal advisors on land tenure issues. Then, two days after that, they needed an engineer who could do structural damage assessments. We can't even start the controlled demolition of damaged buildings, let alone build new ones, without constructional damage assessment. We had to find someone to process the rubble, in fact any kind of solid waste, to be able to recycle or reuse every available resource we have. There are so many different professions that we need to connect with in order to even get started with the programme.

**What's been your experience of architects working for small design not-for-profits in countries like Sri Lanka or Haiti?** ▶ Apart from what I said before about mainstream architectural education, there

So there is certainly a huge potential and demand out there for architects working in an NGO and in humanitarian development.

**When you're in the field after a disaster, what are the professions you are typically working with on shelter projects? Is it mostly engineers and logisticians?** ▶ Quite a range of people, actually. It isn't always large-scale. The IFRC is the largest provider of humanitarian shelter solutions in the world, whether it's for small 'everyday' emergencies that never make the international news, or the ones that make the headlines worldwide. Much of our work is around the 'everyday

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are design initiatives linked to universities. And the number of small-scale design-based NGOs is growing. What they are doing is very interesting. Some of it is very 'pilot', innovative and very small-scale. Often, they are doing prototype designs, especially looking at environmentally conscious aspects of construction. If they get their messages out, I think they can become an inspiration. If they are well thought through, any kind of initiative can be beneficial.

But, sometimes we do get cowboys or, at least, a cowboy approach. People flying in with very limited experience or professional qualified skills. We get people who are on vacation and think they could do some work and go home with nice stories to tell. Well, I don't see much of interest in them; they are not much of benefit to disaster-affected communities.

**How would you advise new architects who want to get started in this field?** ▶ First of all, I advise them to look at what is around them in their own country, in the South or the North. There are always small-scale organizations doing interesting social work that might engage an architect. So, my advice, first of all, is not to go international but to look domestically. For example, on the outskirts of Barcelona, there are really interesting initiatives with what some are calling the 'Fourth World'. They're providing homes for vulnerable urban communities, for migrants, for urban slum dwellers, for gypsies, for those communities that you might not even see in your daily life but who are really living just next door to you.

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△ The IFRC assist in the construction of a new bridge using recycled materials.

I ask people not to apply to positions in Haiti or Pakistan as first visits. You would get hurt, shocked, disappointed. The risk is just too high because the complexities are too great. I think you should start humbly and say 'This is something that I really want to do but I recognize that I am not equipped to do it immediately.'

When people really want to work overseas, I tell them to look for opportunities in countries that are not conflict zones or where there are not particularly big emergencies. I suggest that they look to where there's long-term developmental work to be done; there are many interesting

initiatives that 'make a difference'. It can be really beneficial working or volunteering with a bigger NGO. They need people to do specific research work, desktop and analytical work. That's another way. And then you can start not by going out in the field on your own, but in a team of people, starting to understand what it is all about and learn. That can help you decide if you might be suited in the emergency field.

**So what is the one thing you have found is needed to work in the disaster field?** ▶ I think you need to be competent. What is a competent architect? Someone who can make an outstanding



design? No. It is simply a designer who can put aside a little bit of the ego and listen to others. Meaningful solutions don't come out of the head of the architect. They are the fruits of good collaboration between individuals.

**Weren't you taught during your original architecture degree that there is a universal design solution to every human problem?** ▶ There is no universal solution to things. There are a lot of clever, creative people in universities. Many are researching prototype solutions but very, very few are ever tested in the field. We should be open to their innovation and research, but after a disaster is not the time to experiment on people.

**Sandra, you've worked in some very traumatic zones. Do you become immune to these disasters? How do you deal with this as a human being?** ▶ I don't think you ever become immune to disasters. I certainly hope I don't. I think it's very important to feel, to listen, to have your eyes wide open, to understand every new disaster for what it is, for what has happened. I think I have changed a lot as a human being after having kids. Being a mother, I think I am much more aware of the loss you can experience. Ten years ago I might not have had the kind of empathy I do now for a young mother who has lost a child. It becomes exponential, the understanding of what that loss really means. It's only something I can really see now.

The project encapsulates all that we do at the Red Cross – in this case helping to assist communities with improved flood-resistant designs.

How do you overcome these feelings? Basically to humbly go on with your own work. You have to empathize with the loss and grief, the conscious part and the unconscious part too. Then you have to try to put that aside, and make the best use of the resources you have and make everything you do an act of being in the 'here and now' and to do something meaningful, and with love.

**Sandra, why did you choose the project in Choco' to illustrate some of your views about working in the humanitarian sector?** ▶ It's a very special project. I have not been directly involved in implementing it but am monitoring it and visited it in October 2012.

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The community is a very vulnerable one of about eighty families, living along the river banks of a huge tropical forest. The project is raising the houses and rebuilding dwellings on stilts about 2.5 metres above the river. There is also a 1 kilometre long footbridge made of recycled plastic bottles and an elevated school and environmental area.

It's a significant project not just in terms of shelter risk reduction but also for community resilience and environmental awareness. The design and improved building techniques and typologies are allowing the community to adapt to floods and, equally importantly, the people are now completely capable of replicating this 'model village'.