METROPOLISMAG.COM

June 2005 • Perspective

The Ethics of Brick

Giving priority to social equity can lead to surprising conclusions that subvert some of the widely accepted principles of green design.

By Lance Hosey

Posted May 16, 2005

When Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize last fall, it signaled a new direction for environmentalists. As leader of Africa's Green Belt Movement, Maathai has fought tirelessly to empower women and better the environment for three decades, so by any standard she deserves the award. But her win was also historic. As the Nobel committee's chair observed, "This is the first time the environment sets the agenda for the Nobel Peace Prize, and we have added a new dimension to peace."

For many designers this "new dimension" is not new, since the primary aim of sustainability—its so-called "triple bottom line"—is to maximize ecological, economic, and social value. Yet despite this goal, the building industry's green standards typically emphasize the first two values over the third. So how can designers champion social justice? One way is to reorient architects' traditional focus on wealthy clientele by embracing neglected or disadvantaged communities, a group Bryan Bell of Design Corps calls "the 98 percent": people who rarely commission or even encounter good design. Another method is through advocacy, which Cameron Sinclair and Architecture for Humanity support by sponsoring design competitions for housing and health clinics in Africa and other developing regions. Earlier this year, architects rushed to provide temporary shelter for survivors of the Asian tsunami.

A third way for construction to promote humanitarian causes is to concentrate on materials and products. The production, selection, and installation of concrete, steel, wood, masonry, and other materials can have a profound effect on social equity. Max Bond of Davis Brody Bond has illustrated this for years in his work with African-American communities and organizations. Researching the membership of construction unions in New York City, his team learned that masonry unions include a relatively large percentage of minorities from Harlem. Accordingly the architects specified brick for projects such as Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Bond says, "I have tried to make it as likely as possible that people of color would work on the construction of our buildings." The project reaches out to its constituent community not

just through the end product but also through the acts of specification and construction. Call it material justice.

Giving priority to social concerns when choosing materials can lead to conclusions that subvert some of the most basic and widely accepted principles of sustainable design. For instance, the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED rating system recommends that building materials and components be produced and obtained within a 500-mile radius of the construction site to reduce the energy used for transportation and support the regional economy. These are laudable ecological and economic goals, but they may not be completely effective for certain social concerns.

Many philanthropists and social activists believe in giving priority to those most in need. But a 500-mile radius anywhere in the United States will encircle some of the wealthiest communities on the planet—in other words, those least in need. On average, annual incomes here are more than 50 times higher than those in places like Ethiopia and Burundi, where people typically earn the equivalent of $600 or $700 per year. UNICEF recently reported that half the world's children—a billion people, more than three times the population of the United States—live with extreme deprivation. In sub-Saharan Africa, more people go hungry now than ten years ago. To help these most disadvantaged peoples of the world, should we not cast a wider net than LEED suggests? There are strong reasons to focus on regional sources, but not all green design need be local.

Using demographic rather than geographic standards, the American building industry can have a significant global impact. The total value of domestic construction has neared a trillion dollars annually in recent years. Imagine the buying power if some of these resources were applied toward alleviating poverty around the world. We can do just that by purchasing more materials and products from developing countries rather than only staying close to home. To qualify for certain LEED credits, 20 percent of a building's materials must come from regional sources. If two percent of the remainder originated in "Third World" markets, the funds sent abroad could almost match the annual U.S. foreign aid totals. The construction industry can help honor existing commitments—through trade rather than through charity.

As it is, we will not be able to avoid huge increases of foreign imports in the near future because the aging population of "First World" countries will force more international trade and an increasingly global sense of community. The only question will be how we apply and monitor the money we send abroad. Already many of the materials and systems used in American buildings are imported: for example, about one-quarter of all steel and cement used here is made abroad. Yet at the moment we have no way to observe or control the conditions under which these products are made. Who is making them, and what is their standard of living? LEED does not address these crucial questions.

To illustrate this, consider an extreme example: I am designing the African-American burial ground memorial at Monticello, the historic home of Thomas Jefferson, in Charlottesville, Virginia. If we retroactively evaluate Monticello using LEED guidelines, it fares quite well: good solar orientation and daylighting, effective siting and drainage, excellent natural ventilation, and "innovation credits" galore (e.g., customized triple-hung windows that adjust to

varying breezes). Regarding its materials, Monticello is built mostly from brick fabricated entirely on site. LEED emphasizes local materials, and you can't get any more "local" than the immediate site.

There's just one problem: the bricks (and the entire house) were made by slaves. While we might dismiss this as a regrettable social ill confined to its era (much as we accept the fact that the writer of the Declaration of Independence owned slaves), the example calls attention to the limitations of our customary evaluation methods. Green standards tend to focus more on end users than on producers of buildings, and as a result we have no means of knowing who makes what and how. The familiar product label "Made in China" says nothing about the makers. These materials could be produced under any circumstances by anyone—even slaves.

As it turns out, this possibility is not so far-fetched. *National Geographic* recently reported that worldwide there are an estimated 27 million people living in bondage today—more than at any other time in human history. A great many work in construction-related fields—stone breakers in Africa, cane cutters in the Dominican Republic, carpet weavers in Pakistan, and brick makers in India. There are hundreds of thousands of forced workers (nearly 10 percent of the population) in Mauritania, where a chief export is iron ore for steel. Again, although slavery may be an extreme example, it underscores our inability to monitor human rights in the building industry.

This is not just a problem abroad. I know from firsthand experience working on construction sites in the United States that many laborers are undocumented immigrants making much less than the minimum wage. And the Bush Administration's unprecedented relaxation of Occupational Safety & Health Administration standards to benefit company owners has had a particularly detrimental effect on construction workers, whose jobs are more hazardous than most.

To call attention to these issues, the building industry needs new standards of evaluation that more thoroughly consider the circumstances of production. Like the fair-trade coffee movement, we can ensure a humane environment and equitable wages for workers by monitoring the entire stream of production, from procurement of raw materials to fabrication of building components to on-site installation. Unfortunately, the Fair Trade Federation's official list of member organizations currently includes no construction-related companies. The Forest Stewardship Council's "Chain of Custody" program is a good model, but it deals with only one material and in reality focuses more on the treatment of wood than on the treatment of its handlers. It's time we embrace the people who produce buildings, not just the people who design and occupy them.

http://www.metropolismag.com/story/20050516/the-ethics-of-brick

*** * ***

Original Story Can Be Found At:
http://www.metropolismag.com/cda/story.php?artid=1321