Why choose Nicaragua to build houses?

Reporter's Notebook

By David J. Glenn

1987 has been declared by the United Nations as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. According to the UN, "one quarter of the world's population lacks adequate housing and lives in extremely unhealthy, unsatisfactory conditions."

Every 24 hours more than 30,000 people die from malnutrition and illnesses directly related to the lack of housing, water, and sanitation. The majority of those victims are children.

The UN also estimates that nearly 100 million people have no form of dwelling whatsoever, they "sleep in the street, under bridges, vacant lots and doorways."

The situation is not getting better, it gets worse every year. This year the UN has called upon governments, institutions, universities, church and private citizens to act to improve this desperate situation.

At the end of 1986, I, along with a number of local architects, students, carpenters and artists formed a nonprofit architectural group called Earth Studio with the express purpose of designing innovative solutions to house the homeless.

In this Reporter's Notebook series, I have tried to give some sense of Nicaragua, the country in which we chose to begin our work. But as homelessness is a national and global problem, why did we choose Nicaragua to begin our work?

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One reason is that Nicaragua is a country at war, and war is one of the primary causes of homelessness. The US-financed and organized Contra are responsible for the destruction of homes throughout the country. As Americans, we feel a responsibility to the victims of this aggression. One weekend while in Nicaragua, we went to a celebration marking the completion of a housing project by a US organization, Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua. The project included 20 houses, a water system and a school. It was built by four successes in various up to the last minute. The Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Construction, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Culture serve only to legitimize an otherwise unconcerned government.

The overriding issue in providing housing is not, as it was once believed, the construction of houses. The critical issue is the provision of land.

Another reason we chose Nicaragua is that we wanted to work in a country where the government was seriously interested in building houses for its poor. As I have learned in studying the field of housing, even in the midst of this growing crisis, very few nations in the world are actively building housing or providing land for housing the poorest sectors of society. The only option available to most of the world's poorest people is illegal land seizure or "squatting."

As much as the world's largest cities, including Mexico City and Cairo, the majority of residents are squatters. They live in constant fear of eviction and must have little or no services. And even the world's richest nation, the United States, is spending an increasingly smaller percentage of its Gross National Product on subsidized housing, and public housing has nearly stopped altogether.

One of the biggest challenges confronting international organizations engaged in housing is how to get the government's primary interest in such projects out of the way. In Nicaragua, a comprehensive development effort is underway to provide basic needs for the mass of the population, rather than the image-enhancement potential of the Contra. This development effort has included the development of comprehensive projects throughout the Matagalpa region to provide clean water and sanitation.

Perhaps the most important reason we chose to work in Nicaragua is the Nicaraguan people themselves. The people have an extraordinary sense of hope, resilience and personal empowerment.

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