

British architect to rebuild Haiti's social housing

By Jay Merrick
Architecture Correspondent

A BRITISH architect has been enlisted to oversee the development of cheap and durable housing in Haiti, which was devastated by an earthquake in January.

The Haitian government, supported by Bill Clinton, the UN special envoy, has launched an international housing design competition and major construction Expo in the capital Port-au-Prince, with the hope of attracting a wide range of reconstruction professionals to address the loss of 200,000 homes, 1,500 schools and the needs of more than one million people living in temporary shelters.

John McAslan, the British architect, has worked closely with Leslie Voltaire, Haiti's project director, to develop the housing sector of the project. "The idea of holding a post-disaster reconstruction Expo is something quite new to humanitarian relief efforts," he said. "It's never been done in such a focused way.

"The Expo, and the design competition feeding ideas into it, will bring architects, engineers, contractors, environmental consultants and NGOs to Port-au-Prince in a highly coordinated way. They'll get directly involved with government officials and local people, and this will begin a dynamic process not just of designing better homes and new communities, but also triggering a real sense of community involvement and job-creation."

Mr Clinton added: "A better future means an improved infrastructure, better homes and schools, cleaner energy, and improved access to health care. A better future especially means creating jobs and economic opportunity for the people of Haiti, so they can emerge from this devastation a stronger, more secure nation that can stand on its own two feet."

Mr McAslan, who became involved via the Clinton Foundation, has made a central contribution to the development of Haiti's Building Back Better Communities scheme. He has collaborated with the British engineering firm Arup to kick-start the development of cheap housing on behalf of the Haitian government, producing benchmark designs for rapidly buildable and environmentally responsive homes costing only £3,000 each.

The work has been done on a pro-

bono basis, and Expo participants are expected to cover their own costs, with the potential of becoming involved in internationally-funded projects once the Haitian government finalises its reconstruction plans.

Malcolm Reading, the London-based design competition organiser, added: "The Expo will channel the many ad hoc offers the government of Haiti have received from the architectural and construction community worldwide. These fall broadly into two areas - new design solutions, and prefab mass-housing solutions. It was felt that an Expo that integrated both would be a great way to bring together a series of potential housing futures."

He added: "The key point about the Expo is that Haiti's government, the people of Haiti and NGOs can actually see and debate various alternative approaches to getting the right housing and new community solutions to meet a range of different urban and social needs."

The competition is supported by organisations including the Clinton Foundation, World Bank, and Architecture for Humanity. The dwellings will be built on a two hectare site near Port-au-Prince airport. A "mixed income village" with units designed by different architects will be occupied by about 150 families after the end of the Expo; prefab designs will also be prototyped.

The housing projects will be low-tech and feature extensive use of locally available building materials and labour. Malcolm Reading said he expected up to 30 architectural practices to take part in the housing design competition.

"The Expo will also attract mass-housing specialists," he said, "but we very much hope they will work with genuinely talented architects. It's not just about putting roofs over people's heads, but about setting a new standard of living. I'm very encouraged by the fact that among the architects who seem to want to get involved are real innovators such as the Haitian architect Rodney Leon and the American practice, Duany Plater-Zyberk."

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