

Architects designing for social improvement

By [Kate Walker](#)

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Singapore-based billionBricks (bB) is a non-profit architecture and design group made up of a team of designers, architects and building industry professionals who believe that houses or shelters for the poor should not be poorly designed or built.



bB's project manager Astrid Hugo implores design professionals to consider the social impact of their work and shares her ideas on designing for social improvement.

Since it was established in 2013, bB has built homes and shelters for children, refugees and homeless families in some of the world's poorest places. To date, they have made an impact in Mumbai, Cambodia and Nepal by providing 784 homeless people with shelter. They are currently working toward completing homes for 1 155 homeless people and a school for 240 children. bB falls into a minority of organisations who use their skills to take on the global problem of homelessness.

Hugo, a Belgian architect and engineer, has more than three years of experience in architecture and project development. She is confident that designers can make a difference by getting involved in social projects where they can continue to practice the disciplines they are passionate about. In an advice piece on the organisation's blog, Hugo writes, "Designing for social improvement is a rewarding yet challenging practice".

In 2015, Hugo headed up the development of bB's winterHYDE, a fully insulated shelter designed to protect homeless

families from harsh weather elements. Their design team created the structure after they learnt that 50 children in a North Indian town had died from the cold when night temperatures fell below freezing.

Trying to find a solution to a problem such as this requires a different design approach. “Designing for homeless is primarily about efficiency as the needs of the client are urgent and basic,” says Hugo.

The budget is another element to consider when working in a non-profit environment. Hugo points out that while “budget restrictions usually force you to be very pragmatic,” they also push you to “think differently and to innovate.”

On this note, bB is able to continue the work it does by sticking to a three-tiered finance model, which includes funding partnerships, consulting services, and market-based product solutions.

Hugo notes that there are two important points to consider when designing for social improvement. Like the principles of commercial architecture, the “goal is to satisfy the client’s needs and to do so by understanding them thoroughly.” Working closely with communities in need leads to effective solutions that consider “different cultures and different ways of life,” she adds.

Understanding your client ties in with the second point, which calls for design solutions that can be well integrated into communities. The best solutions are long-term, sustainable ones that can be easily adopted by the end users.

Hugo says that by “leveraging local resources, whether materials or manpower, integrated designs achieve high-quality results at low cost.”

“Social integration also means attention to different kinds of users. The integrated design is inclusive and benefits the community as a whole,” she adds.

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