Practical architecture

Making life easier

An exhibition in New York provides simple, stylish ideas for improved living

Sep 30th 2010

It once was thought that social problems could be solved with smart urban design. The devastation of world wars and the rise of cities led to a demand for grand-scale visions. But history has not been kind to the utopian schemes of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and other great architects. When it turned out that low-income families do not thrive in isolated towers of flats, architects stopped being viewed as the masterminds of a better future.

Yet architects can still have a powerful social impact, as is made plain by an inspiring show, “Small Scale, Big Change”, which opens at New York’s Museum of Modern Art on October 3rd (and runs until January 3rd). It is just that their solutions these days need to be practical and local, free of grand theories and manifestos.

The exhibition has 11 projects that have been built or are under construction in nine countries. They vary from a beautiful two-storey school in Rudrapur, Bangladesh, made from moulded earth, to a cable-car system in Caracas, Venezuela, that links people living in crowded barracks to the rest of the city. The projects are managed and financed in various ways, some with help from local governments, others from private donors or backed by an NGO.

What they share is not only a desire to help a badly served community but also a sense of where architecture fits in. Few of the architects have famous names. Their projects, demonstrated with models, pictures and films, are not glamorous, but they are thoughtfully designed, often in collaboration with local groups, and aesthetically stylish. Many are made with local materials and labour. One or two are especially arresting, such as the colourful concrete housing complex for fishermen in Tyre, Lebanon (shown above).

Andres Lepik, the exhibition’s curator, conceived the idea last year when the recession and housing crisis drove home the need for more socially engaged architecture. The demand for new precedent-setting ideas is great: unplanned cities are growing faster than planned ones and more than half the world’s population lives in an urban setting. But Mr Lepik says he was disappointed with the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2008 because it examined the problems facing contemporary architecture without proposing models or solutions. For his own show, his aim was “to start with the solutions”.

The result is a rousing display of ingenuity. A new primary school in Burkina Faso was built from mud bricks made by newly trained villagers. An architectural school affiliated with a university in Alabama is tackling the problem of affordable housing by designing a house that can be built for $20,000. And three architects in Paris have researched an inexpensive way to improve and renovate existing modern housing developments while residents stay in their apartments. In each case, the architect’s approach is like that of a microlender: strategic, modest and mindful of the immeasurable dividends to come.

This article appeared in the Books and arts section of the print edition