Global Architecture Brigade: Honduras Summer 2015 Reflection

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I did not really know what to expect in Honduras since the organizers were extremely vague regarding what our project would be. Regardless, I packed my bags excited for an adventure in a part of the world I have never been before. Upon arrival in the community Guaricayan, northeast of the capital Tegucigalpa and impossible to find on a map, our group was greeted with open arms and friendly faces. After introductions, we were set immediately to work. They were in the middle of building a Caja Rural, which would become a community bank. This would give the impoverished families a place to sell and purchase goods, take out loans, and manage their money.

The building was made out of adobe bricks in traditional style. In ED4A Design and Activism, we talked about earthen buildings, their aesthetic, strength, and environmental impacts. I never expected to take that knowledge outside of the classroom, but I was so excited for the hands-on experience. I loved every part of the process: hearing the mud squelch under my boots as I stomped down pine needles, scarring my knuckles as I packed the worn brick molds, analyzing the wall to make sure the bricks were level, and smoothing over any cracks to prevent critters from creating homes in the walls in the future. For something that appears so rudimentary, it is incredibly sophisticated.

Over the few build days, I grew close to one woman in the community in particular: Lena. While unassuming and petite, she could easily lift bags of heavy mud without any aid and was not afraid to point out my mistakes. And I learned the hard way that my initial attempts were not up to her standard. Though I did not speak a lot of Spanish, we connected through smiling eyes, laughs, and a dedication to pounding mud into the brick molds. She taught me not only how to fill in every crack, but also a strong work ethic. Lena was not inside, cooking for the men, as I would have expected. As I was sweating, nursing cuts on my hands, she continued to slap mud down and smooth the surface without rest. It was a reminder that this is not just another building and this was not just a project to feel “warm and fuzzy inside.” I was not a volunteer, but became a part of the community and together, we built the Caja Rural.

I was amazed at how inviting the community members were. We were complete strangers, yet were invited to tour some of their houses to see what living in rural Honduras was like and traditional construction techniques. There was a language barrier, but I never felt isolated. I was amazed by the unconditional smiles and warmth they extended towards each other and to my Global Brigades group. Amid the early mornings and relentlessly humid days, I enjoyed getting covered in mud. It was hard work, but at the end of the day, incredibly satisfying to look as the walls slowly grew. And with that, the hope of the community members as their Caja Rural was becoming more than just an elementary mockup.

On my 30 hour trek back home, I continued to think about the community. I know the chance of returning is slim to none, but I wish I could travel back to thank the community members. Not only were they generous enough to open their homes, but they also showed me success is not built on materials. Architecture is not only something physical, a structure to house a family or store agriculture goods. Design is a universal language, but more importantly is the human connection. I came hoping to find a love for humanitarian work, as I have looked into the Peace Corps, and left with the conviction that this is something I want to continue to do. I feel blessed to have this opportunity and grateful for everyone I was able to meet for making this so memorable. I am looking forward to a future filled with opportunities as warming and rewarding as this one.
The landscape of Honduras was breathtaking. It was so lush and green with sandy hills and mountains misty in the distance. There was always a faint smoky taste in the air from the controlled burns of sugar cane harvesting.
Just one of the many examples of how welcoming the community members were; they made us a sign! The misspelling of “UC Berkeley” made it even more special.
This was the Caja Rural when we first arrived. Some rooms will be used for storage while others will be offices. They even plan on having a small store to sell agriculture goods like pesticides and seeds.
Some of our adobe bricks lying out to dry. We thought it would be fun to write our names in the bricks so we would always be a part of the building.
Me, Anatasha, and Maeliosa right before taking a lunch break. Though out of the shot, our pants and shirts were grey with dust and dried mud. At least our faces escaped the splatter of mud, but only for a short period of time.
Tamara, a fellow brigader, Juan, our bus driver, and I laying down adobe bricks. Sometimes it felt precarious balancing on boards and crumbling bricks, but actually working the walls was the best part of the construction.
The dark areas are the fresh lodo, or mud, used as cement between the adobe bricks. Each brick was about 20 kg and, as such, it became more challenging to lift them from the ground as the walls grew higher.
The inspirational Lena who taught me how to properly pack the adobe brick molds. She worked as hard as any of the other men and was like a Honduran mom to me.
There was never a dull moment while working, especially with the gregarious architect Joaquin. Nicole, Joaquin, and I stand in front of the Caja Rural on our last build day. He even made a sign on the front where we could all carve our names so we would forever be a part of the community.
On the last day, we taught the short lesson “What is Architecture?” to the children of the community. Here, they were drawing their dream houses including all the elements we decided together made a house (doors, windows, etc).