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In keynote, sustainability meets design

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"The moment you put something on this planet, you're making a political statement about what you want to do," Cameron Sinclair told an audience of students and members of the Rhode Island design community who filled Sayles Hall Friday afternoon. "This is where architects and designers are working together to make a difference."

Sinclair's keynote lecture, called "Design for Life: When Sustainability is a Matter Of Survival," was part of the three-day "A Better World by Design" conference, a joint effort between Brown and Rhode Island School of Design that brought together professionals from different design disciplines to discuss design solutions for today's global problems. The lecture addressed issues ranging from the role of designers in developing countries to promoting sustainability to the importance of local input during the design process.

The lecture was one of two keynote speeches that Steve Daniels '09, one of the co-coordinators of the conference, said focused on the "more creative forces" of the design process.

Sinclair, co-founder and executive director of Architecture for Humanity, showed slides of his projects in places such as the Ivory Coast, Southeast Asia and New Orleans, emphasizing the importance of local community input in order to combine functionality with aesthetic appeal. Since clients in developing areas often have difficulty understanding the importance of innovative engineering designs by commercialized architecture firms, he said that his firm's objective is to incorporate new technology into designs familiar to the community for which he builds.

The group's approach, Sinclair said, is much more humanitarian than that of many NGOs and government agencies, which often subcontract jobs and ignore local customs in their effort to provide sustainable, easily-created buildings in developing countries, particularly after natural disasters such as the 2004 Southeast Asia tsunami.

"The last thing these people need is someone coming in with their portfolio, since many of them are just trying to find their house in the first place," he said.

He described using art and music as a way of drawing in members of the community to help with the design process. Unlike most architecture firms, who force designs onto the local communities, Sinclair's group demands that everyone taking part in the design process must sign off on the final drawings before breaking ground. This approach fosters communal pride, he said, because these people will be able to tell younger generations that they helped design these buildings.

His method, Sinclair said, allows the group to treat members of the local community as equal participants in the design process, because they are the "real experts of the community."

Sinclair also showed a video of the design process in Ipuli, a town in Tanzania that did not have a functional hospital. Sinclair's organization created a birthing hospital in the area. The building, which he described as a "hybrid between high-tech and low-tech design," is an example of how he fuses new

technology and a community's aesthetic into his projects.

"It's not just about creating a solution for one village," he said after the video, "you then become the advocate."

Despite logistical issues involved in this type of design work such as shipping costs and using appropriate materials, architecture can be a vehicle for peace in today's global community, he said. Sinclair also highlighted the importance of action to stop global issues such as world hunger and sanitation.

"When you get involved, when you put your foot in the mud, other people notice, and they're not going to let you fall," Sinclair said. "So I don't care what realm of the world you're going to enter in, I just want you to give a damn."

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