RIGHT NOW WHERE

Words by KIRSTY DE GARIS



A Sydney architect has parlayed his design skills into helping a less-fortunate community.

IT WAS LATE 2005 when Sydney-based architect Sam Crawford was approached by a friend to become involved in a project that addressed the non-medical needs of people devastated by HIV/AIDS in a rural region of Malawi in Africa.

Thyolo district lies 45 kilometres south of the country's largest city, Blantyre. The local population supports itself through subsistence farming but the AIDS pandemic has hit Thyolo – indeed all of Malawi – hard. In 2006, around 23 per cent of the 500,000 population of Thyolo was infected with the virus.

Hong Kong-born, Australian-based photographer Claude Ho established the Friends of Claude Ho in Thyolo Association (FOCHTA), a benevolent organisation committed to addressing the needs of the local people. FOCHTA had received a gift of \$10,000 worth of books. The headquarters needed a library and that's where Sam Crawford entered the picture.

A graduate of architecture from the University of Sydney, Sam had built his practice with award-winning designs. He embraced the opportunity to be involved in a project that could have lasting benefits for the Thyolo community. Once Sam had visited Malawi and gained a greater understanding of what

was needed, he took the project to Architects Without Frontiers (AWF). AWF is an Australian-based volunteer organisation committed to improving life for people in need across the world through the design and construction of practical, durable housing and community structures. Sam was a director of AWF and is still an active member.

In designing the FOCHTA youth centre and community library, Sam was adamant that he and the design team (both staff from his practice and FOCHTA volunteers) use locally sourced materials with an eye on sustainable design. "I felt it was really important to educate the kids about global warming and sustainability," he explains. The traditional way of making bricks was to pile mud blocks on top of a fire made from local timber. This process was both expensive (firewood is scarce in the area) and was also contributing to erosion due to deforestation.

Sam convinced the people of Thyolo to use handoperated brick presses, purchased from South Africa, to make sun-dried bricks. Not only are they better for the environment, but the community can also produce thousands of bricks in no time for other projects. "It has started up a little industry as well," Sam explains. The structure, which has recently received final building approval, is designed to be made from materials that can all be sourced at the local hardware store. "There is nothing that needs to be imported specially, aside from the steel roofing, but that comes from South Africa, which isn't far away," he says. "The FOCHTA building was designed just to look like a local building; nothing special and certainly not like a tourist resort," adds Sam, which is why they opted for the steel roofing. The recent trend among resorts nearby is for thatched roofs, which the locals wanted to avoid when building their own community centre.

Sam and his wife, also an architect, have four children, and the juggling act of work and home life hasn't been easy. But the Malawi project is one that Sam finds deeply fulfilling. "I have gained incredible satisfaction from seeing something start from a conversation, then a set of drawings, then a set of models, and getting involved in raising the money for it," he says. "It has also certainly given a whole lot more meaning to the architecture that I do."

For more information on the project, visit www.fochta. org.au or www.architectswithoutfrontiers.com.au. Visit www.samcrawfordarchitects.com.au for more on Sam.