Premise: It's both an exhilarating and challenging time to be a student of architecture. This is due, at least in part, to 1) changing models of practice resulting from globalization and 2) rapidly expanding construction alternatives fueled by technology. We can build bigger, taller, faster; we can build anywhere; and our buildings can take on almost any form executed in almost any material. This is not inherently good or bad; it just is.

In this time of greater possibilities and fewer constraints, it is incumbent upon each of us to consider the question ‘to what end do we build?’ Corbu said, “Nothing has the right to exist that cannot answer the question ‘why.’” Oftentimes today the answer seems to be, “Why not?” This is a reactive stance signaling either an irresponsible lack of reflection or an intentionally glib reply to a critical question.

A more exacting query might be, ‘what good do we want to put into the world, and how do we prepare ourselves to make that offering intelligently and effectively?’ Of all the ways to practice, how do we choose our path?

While this course does not presume to fully answer this question, it does offer an opportunity to explore the modest and sometimes overlooked avenue of professional practice focused on humanitarian design.

Architectural activists engage a vast array of social justice issues and humanitarian design projects, but one commonality among them is that they work in marginalized, poor and vulnerable communities. In working with these communities they seek to identify the preexisting cultural, social, economic and physical systems in place not only to understand what the most pressing needs are but also to maintain the community’s identity and richness. What imbues their work with resonance and meaning is the ability to accurately identify the problem at hand and design (sometimes implement) a creative, respectful and effective solution.

Course Content:
We will study 1) both well-known and under-the-radar architecture and activist architects; 2) the systemic nature of design solutions necessary to turn good intentions into good design solutions; 3) the potential of architecture to impact poverty, conflict and productivity and 4) the thorny issues and criticisms embedded in the practice of humanitarian design.

Methodology: In the first half of the semester students will research and critique humanitarian architecture, architects and other relevant players. They will employ readings, films and case studies in order to analyze their built works, strategic partnerships, and business models. Critical essays and presentations will be the modes of dissemination and reflection. In the second half of the semester each student will research and engage a design project that responds to a real-world problem. Because need and opportunity abound, the location of the project can be anywhere in the world and involve any underserved community.

(Note: This course is unrelated to Habitat for Humanity or Freedom by Design. It does not involve design-build activities.)

Texts & Films: Throughout the semester the professor will assign films and readings from books, scholarly essays and articles in the architectural press. These will be scanned to Google Drive. No text is required.