

# THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

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## NEWS

09.25.2008

### The \$6,000 House

South African firm wins humanitarian design prize



A COMPLETED 10X10 HOUSE (RIGHT), WITH ANOTHER UNDER CONSTRUCTION. COURTESY UK COLLEGE OF DESIGN

The Pritzker Prize has often been called, or at least explained as, the Nobel Prize of Architecture. If that is the case, then the Curry Stone Design Prize could be considered architecture's Peace Prize. Established this year by the University of Kentucky College of Design through a generous gift from architect Clifford Curry and his wife H. Delight Stone, the prize honors innovative achievements in humanitarian architecture and design.

[MMA Architects](#) of South Africa took the top prize of \$100,000, which was announced today by the school. The firm, based in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Berlin, won for their 10X10 house, an extremely affordable structure built using sandbags and timber. It requires no tools or advanced construction knowledge and can be built for slightly more than \$6,000, while still presenting a striking, modern design.

"We feel it's important to give back to the community we come from," Luyanda Mphlwa said in a telephone interview. "Most black people in South Africa come from the projects, and the shantytowns are actually growing. No one should be living in shantytowns. So anything we can do to help that, we will."

Mphlwa, who shares the firm with Mphethi Morojele, said that a key component of the house was to provide not only shelter but also social justice and pride. The house was originally designed for an affordable housing competition last year that required architects to devise a house for 50,000 rand (\$6,200), which required some very unusual thinking. "My view is that there is no way you can use conventional materials and methods if you want to resolve the housing crisis that plagues the world," Mphlwa said.

In addition to utilizing inexpensive and locally accessible building materials, which required not even a single electrical outlet to put together, the designers turned to the community to build the houses, the first of which was recently completed, with nine more planned for a community in Cape Town. Mphlwa said that this approach not only saves on labor costs but gives an added sense of ownership to the occupants and work for those in a community that is riven with unemployment.

Other [finalists](#) included Shawn Frayne, who designed the world's first non-turbine wind-powered generator; Wes Janz, an architect and professor at Ball State University who builds "leftover places" with scavenged material; Marjetica Potrc, an artist who has designed a number of clever devices for impoverished communities, including a "dry

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toilet" in Caracas and rainwater harvesting system in New Orleans; and Antonio Scarponi, a Venetian architect who constructed a "Dreaming Wall" in Milan that allowed people to text social messages onto it. Each runner-up receives a \$10,000 prize.

"From the jury's point of view, it was both a conventional and unconventional firm doing conventional and unconventional work," David Mohney, secretary for the prize, said. "They saw it as an inspiration to other conventional firms that they could start doing unconventional work themselves, that they can bring a high level of design and comfort to a project that doesn't usually have access to it."

To call MMA unconventional could be considered an understatement. As one of only a handful of black firms in the country, they have long struggled to get work. "Old prejudices die hard," Mphahlwane said. "Some people take one look at me and do not believe I can build them a house." The firm took a number of government commissions out of a sense of civic pride and duty but also because they had little choice. Thanks to the success of those projects, including embassies in Berlin and Adis Ababa, they have been able to afford more humanitarian work.

As a testament to MMA's commitment to that work, when asked what he would do with his share of the money, Mphahlwane said he would probably buy a few more 10X10 houses and send some underprivileged kids to architecture school. On top of the two he has already sent.

#### **Matt Chaban**



SANDBAGS HELP FORM THE STRUCTURAL CORE OF THE HOUSE.



MMA HAS PLANS FOR TEN HOUSES IN A HOUSING PROJECT IN CAPE TOWN, ARRANGED SOMEWHAT LIKE IN THIS MODEL, WHERE SOME HOUSES HAVE BEEN COMBINED INTO DOUBLE-WIDE UNITS.



MPHAHLWA ADMIRES HIS WORK...

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