

Where Do Building Materials Come From?

A new initiative wants to root out modern-day slavery and labor exploitation in the global supply chain of many architectural products.

IF YOU ASK architects if they believe the buildings they design should be ethically constructed, under fair, safe labor conditions, almost all would say yes. But if you ask if they can promise the products they specify do not involve slave or child labor to extract raw materials or fabricate all the components, the question is likely to be met by a baffled silence or simply, “I don’t know.”

Last month, I attended a working group convened by the Grace Farms Foundation (GFF) that brought together architects, engineers, academics, activists, and others, to discuss an ambitious mission to eradicate modern-day slavery from the supply chain of materials that go into making architecture.

While news articles about forced labor and indentured servitude on construction sites in the Middle East and elsewhere have been widely published, the problem of slavery, coercion, and child workers in the building-products industry has been almost invisible.

The new initiative to combat such inhumane labor practices was launched by Sharon Prince, the president of GFF and the client for the lyrical, curving glass building in New Canaan, Connecticut, designed by SANAA, that the foundation uses for many of its programs (RECORD, November 2015). Joining Prince in starting the effort was my colleague William Menking, editor in chief of *The Architect's Newspaper*.

Prince’s aha moment came when she was a juror for a design award that honored the Gohar Khatoon Girls’ School in Afghanistan, designed pro bono by the late Robert Hull, of the Miller Hull Partnership in Seattle, along with architecture students at the University of Washington (RECORD, January 2016). Prince asked if the bricks used to build the school were made without exploitation, and no one knew.

Though child labor is against Afghan law, an estimated 25 percent of children under 14 are workers of one kind or another. Architectural photographer Nic LeHoux, who traveled to Afghanistan to photograph the girls’ school, also shot the brick factory and other building workshops, to document construction practices there. LeHoux told me there were children working everywhere, often with other family members (who could be bonded laborers). It’s a sign, he said, that poor kids have no opportunities. So here is a tragic irony: the school is a great leap for Afghan girls, studying inside walls of bricks made by children who will never get an education.

Of course, the United States and virtually every other country in the world have laws against importing goods made by slave or child labor. But the regulations are tough to enforce; in a global economy, the sources of raw materials and component parts tend to be obscured by the twists and turns in procurement from international suppliers. Still, it is not hard to grasp the ramifications of this vast humanitar-



ian problem. If you simply Google “child labor,” for example, you immediately see that children are not only exploited picking coffee beans and making sneakers and T-shirts, but they work under dangerous conditions in mines, quarries, and forests.

The GFF Architecture + Construction Working Group intends to battle this problem on several fronts. Borrowing from the green building movement—which has promoted environmental product declarations and lists of materials that don’t have a negative impact on human health or the planet—the group is pushing for transparency in the sourcing and manufacture of materials; it plans to develop a list of “slave-free” building products. And drawing on a broad coalition of experts and activists—including such groups as Who Builds Your Architecture? and Building Responsibly—they are raising awareness of the exploitation of labor among those who influence every stage of construction, from owners and lenders to designers, engineers, and consultants to contractors and product manufacturers. They are looking to intervene through any possible channel to prevent those who specify from ordering building products that can’t be certified as made without forced labor. And they are actively pursuing a pilot project to test constructing a certifiable slave-free building.

The challenges in bringing to light the exploitation of labor in building products seems daunting. But Sharon Prince believes people would like to do the right thing. “Once you know something, you can’t un-know it,” she says. “Once you name it, and it’s unbearable, you’re more inclined to do whatever you can.”

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