



THE JOURNEY OF THE HOMELESS ARCHITECT

by Tyler Blue, Santa Barbara Newspress Correspondent



In Durham, N.C., a new rescue mission is currently being constructed on three city blocks. It includes both transitional and long-term housing. In Long Beach, two blocks have been set aside for mixed-use urban redevelopment involving low-income housing. These just happen to be the latest projects for local architect R. Brian Nelson, who is considered one of the world's preeminent resources on rescue missions, having worked on 50 of them across the U.S., Canada and Jamaica.

When it's time for a new one to be built or an old facility to be expanded, he's often the one who gets the call. It all began in 1984 when he was hired to design the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission. A specialist on three- to five-unit condominiums, he had never done anything quite like it. Hailing from rich architectural stock as the son of Richard Bliss Nelson, he was up for a new challenge.

His father worked for Lutha Maria Riggs for 17 years; one of the grandmothers of Santa Barbara architecture. Mr. Nelson never thought he would follow in his dad's footsteps and, other than being an architect, he hasn't.

"I realized I didn't enjoy high end residential architecture," he says of his early career course. "I'm more of a big picture person." In 1984, the rescue mission was on the corner of Yanonali and State Street with just 17 overnight beds. In order to prepare for the project, Mr. Nelson visited other facilities to educate himself on the new norms. "It was no longer three hots and (a) cot. It was homeless service and a recovery program; a year-long drug and alcohol recovery program," he says of his findings. "We went from 17 to 100 overnight beds, 40 recovery beds for adults and 40 for children. It was a big departure, but I went out and did the research and it has functioned well since."

The new rescue mission was built on the corner of Yanonali and Calle Cesar Chavez. Mr. Nelson followed it up by designing Bethel House, a facility specifically for woman, next to the rescue mission. It has since moved uptown.

Rather than treating it just as a job, the architect took a vested interest in the rescue mission. He was asked to join the board of directors. Ten years later he became chairman of the board.

Mr. Nelson quickly realized that the business side of the ministry was not being attended to so he wrote a job description for an executive director. A devout Christian, he says he felt God's calling to fill the position himself on a temporary basis. It took a year longer than the six months he expected to find a replacement. He recalls, "I left and I thought, 'I know how to design one. I know how to run one. I have something no one else has.'"

In 1995 he went to a convention for the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions and put up a display with a title he came up with: The Homeless Architect. The moniker stuck and Mr. Nelson has continued to earn it. Word started to get out about his expertise and the phone began to ring. Since then, he has designed an average of three to five rescue missions per year. He has sat on the board of the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions for the last seven years.

When his services are commissioned, he typically makes 3 3-day trips to the location. Some of the projects are remodels or expansions while others are built from scratch. In those cases, sometimes finding a piece of land can take a little time. Thus things often take a few months to a year to get started. On the trips, Mr. Nelson gathers a wide array of information and offers consultation on issues such as zoning, real estate options and fundraising.

He's well-versed in putting together a Case for Support, which is a compilation of all the applicable information like

the size of the center, number of beds, parking requirements, number of volunteers and any special needs for the given community. This helps ensure that the appropriate size piece of property is selected. Many of the rescue missions opt to break their projects into phases due to financial constraints. Surprisingly, given the recession, there are more private and corporate funds available than ever. "We're able to tap into grants on a much bigger scale," Mr. Nelson explains.

The Santa Barbara Rescue Mission didn't enjoy such a luxury. It was supported fully by the local community and was a "cash-built" operation. Herb Jauchen, the executive director at the time, insisted that it would only be built as fast as the organization could raise funds. Thanks to a work training program, a group of homeless men were hired to work on the construction. Through the two-year process, 120 men contributed their services. About 15 of them went on to become carpenters and assist in the construction of Bethel House.

Every rescue mission is an independent work of Christian faith. Each community supports its own. These centers have come a long way with their standards over the past decades. Mr. Nelson elaborates, "Every rescue mission across

the nation has a homeless section, a recovery section, job training, vocational training and thrift stores. The ultimate goal is to take them from homeless to home ownership and dependent to independent." Anyone can be housed and fed, but those attending recovery programs are required to attend bible studies.

Focusing on the addition of learning centers has been a key to this process. Mr. Nelson notes that 80 percent of those in drug and alcohol recovery programs have attention deficit disorder, are dyslexic or dual-diagnosed.

"The cycle for homelessness starts many times by having dyslexia," he points out. "The average person has dropped out of school in eighth grade and we don't see them for ten years until they're desperate enough to come back. They start using drugs and alcohol to hide the shame and the pain. We bring them in and try to help them move their education forward. We put them in a recovery program and they learn social skills, work skills and all the things it takes to be functioning in today's society."

Adapting the design of each facility around the special needs of its individuals is one of Mr. Nelson's most valuable contributions. "The important part to me," he explains, "is the rescue mission should be one of the nicest buildings in town. For someone starting in a recovery program, it needs to be a place that feels like home. It needs to be conducive to healing."

He always recommends as much green landscaping as possible, even in frigid climates. The architect is adamant that the interior is as important as the exterior. "It needs to be super clean," he says. "Someplace anybody would walk into." When designing the learning centers, he goes out of his way to ensure that they bear little resemblance to school rooms which people can associate with previous failures.

Mr. Nelson moved to Santa Ynez two years ago to accommodate his wife's business in the equestrian field. He was born and raised in Santa Barbara, thus it has been a difficult adjustment for the avid surfer who was used to living in view of the ocean. Fortunately, he is able to integrate his hobby with his work on occasion. Four years ago he volunteered to go to Jamaica to help start a rescue mission and found time to sample some Caribbean surf. He has designed homes for ministry members in Oahu and caught massive waves during his downtime. He is returning in April.

He surfed in Daytona Beach, FL, one day before a shark attack occurred at the same spot. On land, one of his most memorable experiences was visiting Gettysburg, PA, while working in the nearby town of Lancaster.

"It's been a cultural experience," he says. "If you go to Philly with all of its history and the politics that go on in a big city, it's really different. It's important to understand the community. They all have nuances." Part of this entails keeping the rescue mission projects under wraps while in the analysis phase to avoid stirring up controversy or opposition.



When he's not designing rescue missions, Mr. Nelson still conducts his regular architectural practice. He has done three replacement homes from the Tea Fire. Condominiums and commercial projects are also part of his repertoire. He is a tireless volunteer associated with the Calvary Chapel and gets much enjoyment from taking part in mission trips around the world. He has built homes in Mexico and done outreach in Australia. On the home front, he taught a hand drafting class at Dos Pueblos High School for five years for free.

He has no doubt that every step along his path has been part of a bigger picture. "I believe that God directed me to design the rescue mission in Santa Barbara," he said. "When I became the executive director, it was an opportunity for me to understand more about that ministry. It was all orchestrated so I could help the ministries nationwide. I believe all of this was part of God's plan for my life."

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