

## The house that built us

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Upon volunteering with Architects Without Borders in my final year of Environmental Design, I was granted a scholarship and the opportunity to gain international experience. I chose to travel with an organization called Shine the Light, which provides dental and medical services to the community as well as builds a home for a family in need in a village called El Javillar, Dominican Republic. We spent seven days in Javillar, and I was overwhelmed and humbled by this experience.

The urban fabric of Puerto Plata was unlike any city I had been to before. Many structures had re-bar jutting out the top of buildings and others were unfinished, taken over by lush green vegetation. Once we arrived to the village of El Javillar we received our first taste of culture shock, a vibrant community and coconut water. Groups of people gathered around awaiting our arrival with signs, speeches and a prepared dance. The homes in the background were small and weathered, but the people were filled with life and joy.

Each day that we spent in the village of Javillar the sense of community grew. Many family, friends and neighbors of the homeowner gathered each day to help build the house. The homeowner chose to curve the corner of the home, to allow space for her neighbor to park their jeep, even though it sacrificed a large amount of space. When it was time to install the roof, the curved wall became much more complex, we had to figure out how to match the roof to the curved wall. The locals did the first try the evening before. When the Shine team arrived back on site the curve was not successful. The second time around, ten people gathered speaking in English and Spanish in hopes of finding a solution. Someone held a piece of sheet metal on the roof, while another person on the ground held a long stick and a marker attached. A curved line was drawn on the roof panel, which would later be cut. With only the technology of our minds working together we were able to solve the project's most challenging design problem.

There were no machines present at the jobsite, and the entire house was made from concrete. This required a lot of human strength to move bricks, mix concrete, sift sand and much more. This was daunting at first, but as the days went on I learned that our bodies are much stronger than we may think. The manual labor became a therapeutic experience and more enjoyable each day. Watching the home grow from nothing to a livable home in seven days was extremely rewarding, knowing that many hands and hearts came together to build a home.

The attitude of the community was extremely enlightening. It became very apparent that we were not just building a home, we were building friendships, providing safety, comfort, and bringing a family back together under the same roof. Thinking about architecture on a global scale changes our perspective when we experience how other cultures inhabit their environments. The people of Javillar may not own many material possessions, but they are rich in their hearts. Along with the new building skills and friendships, I came home humbled with a greater understanding of community, happiness, and the role we can play in changing lives globally.

We may have travelled a long way to build a house, but it was the house that built us.