

Published: September 7, 2005

## Master Plan

The decrepit building that a U.S. school planner spotted in Honduras a decade ago has led to blueprint for better facilities.

By Robert C. Johnston

San Pedro Sula, Honduras

During a volunteer stint on a hydroelectric-power project in the mountains of Honduras in 1996, William **DeJong** began *the walk*. As the president of **DeJong** Inc., one of the top school facility planners in the United States, he wanted to study the conditions of schools in the rugged Central American countryside far from his home in Dublin, Ohio.

Call it fate, or one of life's little surprises, but *the walk* has continued for nine years, during which he joined forces with Honduran officials to catalog the conditions of more than 17,000 school sites. The resulting database helps direct development money to where it is most needed. **DeJong** also founded the nonprofit agency Schools for the Children of the World, or SCW, and has overseen the planning and construction of several prototype schools.

"It's just been a little overwhelming," he says by phone in July on the eve of his 28th trip to Honduras. "If anybody had told me all of this was going to happen, I would have never believed them."

But back to those first steps.

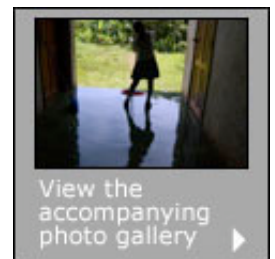
Walking along dirt roads deeply creased by heavy rains and little upkeep, **DeJong** arrived at the primary school in the village of Canchias. Compared with the sprawling, modern schools he helps plan in the United States, this was a sad relic: a one-room adobe building with a sagging tile roof and a single window.

Local residents later explained that the building was so dark, hot, and leaky, that many children simply did not go to school—essentially accepting illiteracy over persistent discomfort.

"Bill was astounded at what he saw," recalls the Rev. Miguel Pinell Garcia, a minister who directs the local mission-based development organization Heart to Honduras and was working with **DeJong** on that trip. "He said, 'What can we do about it?'"

A former president of the Council of Education Facility Planners International, **DeJong** returned home and placed an ad in that organization's newsletter inviting school architects to join him on a trip to study school facilities in Honduras, one of the Western Hemisphere's poorest countries. Two weeks later, he recalls, "I had checks for \$1,000 from some of the best school architects in the country."

**DeJong**, also a former executive director of the National Community Education Association, returned to Honduras with the architects in 1997. They spent a week talking with educators and community leaders in Canchias about a new school. As the team drove away from the village, **DeJong**



(Requires [Macromedia Flash Player](#).)

### Timeline

#### April 1996

William **DeJong** goes to Honduras for the first time, working as a volunteer on a hydroelectric-dam project. Seeing the dilapidated state of schools, he decides to come back to conduct a detailed study of school facilities in rural and underserved areas.

stopped the pickup truck, he says, and turned to his colleagues and asked: “Well, are we going to come back and build this or what?”

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Today, the road leading to Canchias is just as rock-strewn and uneven as it was in 1996, and the heaviest traffic comes from cattle and horses.

But there is a difference. The old adobe schoolhouse, sitting vacant in the shade of a thick canopy of evergreens, is closed. Its replacement is 50 yards down the road: a welcoming collection of single-story, cream-colored buildings, supported by sky-blue and turquoise-colored columns and opening to a large courtyard.

The school is everything the community’s roughly 50 families and their municipal government wanted and, more important, were willing to work for.

The community room, playground, and covered entryway—more like a huge gazebo that is used for special events—were priorities for the community. Educators lobbied for the three spacious classrooms, each of which is nearly as large as the entire previous school.

Meanwhile, the architects spruced up the school with color and used translucent ceiling panels and wide, wire-mesh openings in walls to allow in as much natural light as possible and to improve ventilation.

Escuela Rural Bertha L. De Castaneda de Canchias was dedicated in July 1998—six months after **DeJong**’s team of architects met with the community.

The project proved pivotal because it provided a template for future SCW construction projects: The municipal government provided land and paid for skilled labor. Local residents provided their advice and unskilled labor, and are responsible for taking care of the site. And SCW provided blueprints, oversight, volunteer labor, and about \$50,000 in materials.

International-development experts say that this mix of local and outside effort is a basic, but often underappreciated, strategy for school facility projects.

“If you try to develop without the participation and ownership from the inside, it doesn’t work,” says Sam Worthington, the national executive director and chief executive officer of Plan USA, a Warwick, R.I.-based international-development agency. “One of the big mistakes is to say, ‘Here, we built you a school. It’s yours.’ ”

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Though **DeJong** continued to bring volunteer groups to Honduras to help design and build schools in this country of 7

## April 1997

**DeJong** and a group of architects, engineers, and planners from the Council of Educational Facility Planners International travel to Honduras to meet with community leaders and study school buildings in northwestern Honduras. They return to the United States to draft a report of recommendations and guidelines for schools in Honduras.

## January 1998

The group begins working under the name Schools for the Children of the World to organize volunteer work groups from the United States and to work with Honduran officials and nongovernmental organizations to build and renovate schools in Honduras.

## July 1998

On July 15, 1998, Schools for the Children of the World dedicates its first school, a demonstration primary school in the village of Canchias.

## July 2000

**DeJong** and other members of his group facilitate the first of many work sessions with the Honduran Ministry of Education and architecture students from two universities in Honduras.

## May 2003

SCW becomes a 501(c)(3) organization in the United States, and receives a contract that year from Honduras to draft a school-facility master plan.

## October 2003

Some 350 Honduran soldiers begin a two-month survey of every school site in Honduras, often traveling by horse, canoe, and on foot to get to some of the most remote settings in the mountainous country.

million people, the enterprise took on a new dimension in 2000, when his teams began meeting with Honduran officials and architecture students.

At one meeting, Minister of Education Carlos Ávila Molina talked about plans to build schools in Honduras as a complement to the United Nations' Education for All campaign to improve access to basic education.

But something was missing.

Molina and **DeJong** found each other at the end of the meeting and agreed that a strategy was needed: a master plan for Honduran school facilities that included structural guidelines and an inventory of facility needs that could be linked to the nation's goals of increasing enrollment and raising academic standards.

More than 90 percent of Honduran children begin primary school; only about 60 percent finish 6th grade.

"Part of what moved us was the need to have a master plan to take advantage of outside groups that have been operating in isolation ... so that others know where and how to help," says Molina. "The lack of construction standards gave rise to partial solutions that were not in step with education priorities."

The idea took hold, and in 2003, 350 elite Honduran soldiers set aside their arms to be trained by Honduran architecture students in how to administer a school facility survey designed for the project.

That fall, the soldiers spread out to the mountains, shores, and cities of Honduras to document any site in which students were taught. One state, Gracias a Dios, was so remote that soldiers hiked for more than a month to find and survey 193 school sites. Architecture students and volunteers from **DeJong** entered the information as it came in.

The surveys were briefly interrupted when half the soldiers were sent to Iraq.

The Honduran government paid for food and lodging, as well as fuel and auto maintenance, and canoes, and boats for the survey teams, which eventually visited and surveyed about 20,000 sites. The project was partially financed with a \$545,000 grant from the Inter-American Development Bank.

In April 2004, the master plan was released. It contains suggested dimensions for classrooms, schematics for community centers, libraries, and offices that are shaping school-design decisions in Honduras.

More important, perhaps, is that the plan includes what may be the most detailed information on school facilities assembled for a country in Central or South America. The hard-copy and online catalogs detail the conditions of more than 17,000 schools. They list whether each site has electricity or running water, the quality of roofs and sanitation, and whether students attend school in a permanent facility, a rented house, or even outside under a tree.

The inventory, which found 62 percent of classes take place outside a school facility, allows donors from other countries or nongovernmental agencies to target development spending. "We found that 60 percent of schools had no electricity, but there were all these foreign countries wanting to donate computers," **DeJong** says. "Basically, the schools were just four walls and a door and often no windows. The conditions are just really bad."

## April 2004

The Honduras School Facility Master Plan is presented to the president of Honduras and released publicly. The report includes a Web site that details the conditions of more than 17,000 school sites. The Web site is [www.hondurasplanmaestro.com](http://www.hondurasplanmaestro.com).

## January 2005

Alejandra Madrid is named executive director of the newly formed SCW-Honduras. In February, she oversees the dedication of a fifth school built by SCW.

## July 2005

In July, the 17th SCW volunteer group travels to Honduras to work on school improvement projects in several rural schools.

President Ricardo Maduro used the plan last year to help fulfill a promise to improve the 100 worst school facilities in Honduras.

“Normally, it would have taken weeks just to determine the neediest schools,” says Alejandra Madrid, who worked on the project as an architecture student and now is the executive director of SCW-Honduras. “But overnight, the president had a list.”

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The future—and the challenges—of school improvement can be studied through Santa Cruz de Yojoa’s new school. Resting on a plateau of red dirt carved out of a hillside in northwestern Honduras, it is the most recent school SCW built.

Inaugurated this past February, at the end of a work trip by SCW volunteers, the school replaced a stuffy, rented cinderblock house. Nearly 100 students had rotated in and out of the home’s 9-by-16-foot living area in two-hour sessions each school day, sitting on makeshift chairs of tree stumps and sheets of wood.

“They couldn’t learn. I’d do what I could, but I couldn’t use my didactic material,” says Mirna Victoria Suazo, the director of the Panacam Primary School. “I ran out of energy asking for a new school. When I was told there would be a new school, I thought it was a lie.”

Suazo’s new classroom, which is one of five, measures 27 by 30 feet. The school has five toilets, two outdoor sinks, a community meeting room that doubles as a library, a kitchen, and a covered entryway. Cement sidewalks allow for wheelchair access. And in case a teacher has to travel far from home to work at the school, there is a room to sleep. SCW, which collects contributions to pay for most of the work, invested about \$70,000 in the school for materials, and other costs.

“I’m very satisfied,” says José Cecilio Hernandez, the vice president of the Panacam Association of Parents. “We want our kids to have the best education, and now, we have the best school in the municipality.”

Hernandez says the parents are already trying to hook up electricity so that high school classes can be offered at night. Right now, most local children stop school at 6th grade and begin working in the fields of corn, pineapple, coffee, and other crops, earning as much as \$3 a day, he says. Besides, it costs 14 *lempiras*, or about 75 cents a day, to ride the bus to the nearest high school. That is a big chunk of the \$5 minimum daily wage for a parent working in a nearby textile factory.

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But Suazo is more concerned about the present, and what she sees as the community’s indifference to caring for the school.

She points to a hole in a mesh wall that a dog made while trying to escape after being left in the community room following a meeting, and she laments that someone stole the school’s trash barrel. A teacher’s handwritten note in the community room asks parents to clean up after themselves.

“They act as if this is an amusement park,” Suazo says of children who use the school after hours, “and they can do whatever they want.”

Madrid, the executive director of SCW-Honduras, who oversaw the construction of the Panacam school, chalks up some of the complaints to growing pains. She even jokes about the lessons she’s learned—like realizing during the Panacam inauguration ceremony that the school had no flagpole.

The bottom line is that this school must be kept up by the community. And this is the message Madrid delivers to Hernandez of the parents’ association during a recent visit.

“The community should be involved in the school, from planning and design,” she says. “And when

it's done, we give *them* the keys to the school, not to the mayor, but to the community.”

While Madrid tries to keep up on projects after they are completed, most of her time in the coming year will be spent using the facility inventory to identify needy schools and visit those communities to see if there is interest in working toward a new school.

She is also working on a new project to connect nongovernmental organizations that invest in education and health projects to the wealth of information the inventory offers, in the hope they'll use it to better channel their funding.

“That's definitely a good idea,” says Jeffrey Landsdale, who has used the inventory in his work drafting educational standards for Honduras as part of a project financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development. “It is definitely underused. It's a crying shame the Ministry of Education doesn't access it more, but that's part of the problem. Technology still isn't fully exploited.”

As Madrid steers SCW-Honduras forward on a path that will be increasingly independent of the U.S. organization that spawned it, William **DeJong** is also planning to branch out.

He would like to see his Ohio-based SCW take its model to Africa. “We are still in the infancy and trying to figure out how SCW will work and what it will do,” **DeJong** says. “My vision is using international nonprofit aid, coupled with local contributions, to find out how we get two plus two to equal six.”

The volunteer groups **DeJong** has organized will go on as well. “We will continue to do the demonstration projects,” he pledges. “I've seen how this changed young peoples' lives, and, besides, we are not going to ask people to do things we are not willing to do ourselves.”

*Robert C. Johnston conducted some interviews in Spanish.*

Vol. 25, Issue 02, Pages 36-40

#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

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“**Notes From Honduras,**” July 29, 2005.

“**World Bank Joins School Rebuilding Campaign,**” April 14, 2004.

“**States Scrutinize School Construction Costs,**” May 4, 2005.

“**Expert Encourages Creative Thinking in Building Schools,**” November 3, 2004.

“**Doling Out Facilities Aid Proves Tricky,**” June 20, 2001.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **School Construction**.

#### RESOURCES ON THE WEB

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**Dejong Inc.** provides information its **current projects**.

The **Council of Educational Facility Planners International** posts **facilities resources**.

**Heart to Honduras** describes its development **objectives and approach**.

A **case study** on the education system in Honduras is available from **Oxfam International**.