



Rebuilding Street Kids' Lives

Anna Kerby and **Nicola Sansom** tell how
former street children built their own
recycled classroom from plastic bottles

How could 3,800 plastic bottles inspire children who have been living on the streets to dream of a different future? S.A.L.V.E (Support And Love Via Education) International is a UK and Ugandan charity that supports children living on the streets in Jinja, Uganda, to return to a safe family home and re-enter education. They believe in the potential of every child.

Life on the Streets

When children live on the streets in Uganda (and many countries across the world), they become the local recycling system. If homeless, you try and find a way to make the resources of the streets support you. If you organise the maintenance of urban centres, you want reusable resources to be collected in a cost-efficient manner. Subsequently, in Uganda, you can see children living on the streets filling their sacks with metal and plastic bottles to sell. It is sold by weight and the children use the money from recycling in order to survive. In addition to this, a large number of the children use these same bottles to sniff *mafuta* (aeroplane fuel) before taking it to be recycled. They soak a rag in the fuel, insert it into the bottle and then sniff the fumes. They do this to feel stronger, warmer, to suppress hunger (a *mafuta* hit is cheaper than food), and to forget their problems.

“The streets are dangerous. They kick you, beat you. They are tough in the heart. You can even die. This is why we sniff from the bottles,” says Fred, aged 12, who lived on the streets for three years.

The Plastic Bottle Classroom

Children who formerly lived on the streets worked with volunteer students from The University of Manchester, S.A.L.V.E's Ugandan team, and local builders, to create a recycled round classroom made out of plastic bottles.

Permaculture encourages us to look for patterns and to work effectively with the skills and resources at hand. S.A.L.V.E wanted to work with homeless children to turn these bottles into something positive that could inspire change. We wanted to use that spirit of recycling and industriousness

to create something to symbolise hope and the future.

The classroom was built on S.A.L.V.E's 2 hectare (5 acre) site in Eastern Uganda. It allowed the children to recycle the bottles positively to create a place of learning. It also inspires everyone who comes to the site to think about how they can do building projects that are cheaper and more environmentally friendly (as they aren't having to burn bricks but instead are using something that is a waste product). It is a building technique that demonstrates you do not have to forget the past, but can take ideas from it to learn how to create something new and build a better future.

Building Style and Resources

We chose to make the classroom in a round house format using traditional Ugandan building materials and techniques, such as a grass thatched roof. We wanted to make something that was beautiful to look at and would fit the natural environment, so that the plastic bottles became part of something more natural.

We thought about where people spent their time on the site, and chose to locate the building between the residential home and the existing library and classroom.

The walls were built with a large gap creating an open window to the view of the surrounding countryside. This was to help keep the building cool and also to provide an inspirational backdrop to all the children's lessons. It has an additional benefit that it feels like you are outside, despite being inside a structure, so it helps the children as they transition from a life lived outside on the streets to a life in a home and school again. →



Photos © Nicola Sansom





The 3,800 plastic bottles were cleaned and dried in the sun. When dry, they were packed full of sand, which was taken from our nearby Lake Victoria, where it is an abundant natural resource. Everyone could help with this job, young and old alike. We filled the bottles and then used sticks to compress the sand down into the bottles, as they needed to be packed hard so they could be used like bricks.

Professional builders made the foundations and the support columns to give the building structure. With all the bottles facing the same direction we laid them together in rows; they were tied together for strength. This created a beautiful design of bottle tops and bottle ends as well as creating a sturdier and more even wall. Cement was used to help to solidify the structure.

In making the classroom round, we created something that resembled the traditional round house home that is commonly seen in Uganda. It has the additional benefit of being an inclusive and welcoming shape, where everyone is equal within it. We also built seats into the walls so that we don't need to carry chairs to and from the structure to be able to use it. Grass

thatching was laid over wooden frames to create the roof.

Finally, for the finishing touch, the floor inside the classroom was tiled with broken stones that were quarried locally, giving the interior a colourful finish and a cool floor. Using their artistic flair the children chose to spell out the name of the organisation 'S.A.L.V.E' on the floor.

In helping to build their own classroom, the children demonstrated the importance of hard work and working together. They feel very proud of what they helped to create and it is now their favourite building on the site, where you will often find children relaxing and playing games in between classes.

Next Steps

S.A.L.V.E's site is a temporary home for children as they adjust to life off the streets. This classroom will be one of a series of permaculture features across the site with the aim of inspiring the children. We want them to go home with new skills that they can teach their family and friends. It helps to change the balance from them being perceived as a 'problem' child to being a 'solution' child. We will also invite back former street children for special learning camps to learn new skills.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the volunteers from Manchester University who fundraised for the building of this very special classroom.

Please go to www.salveinternational.org to find out more about this project and how you can get involved. We want to make sure that no child has to call the streets their home.

Anna Kerby is a student of Social Anthropology and Philosophy at the University of Manchester. Nicola Sansom is the CEO and Co-founder of S.A.L.V.E International. S.A.L.V.E owns a 2 hectare (5 acre) site near Jinja in Eastern Uganda which they are developing using permaculture principles to provide learning opportunities for children who were living on the streets.

Further resources

Also from S.A.L.V.E: 'Bringing communities together with tree planting'
<http://tiny.cc/SALVE-tree-planting>