

housingnetwork

Insight, advice and best practice from the community

guardianprofessional

From Peckham to Palestine: lessons in building communities from the ground

Iranian-born architect Nasser Golzari says his work in the Middle East informs the way he designs social housing in the UK

Amena SaleemGuardian Professional, Monday 15 August 2011 08.30 BST

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Palestinians inspect a house after it was hit by an Israeli missile in Gaza, March 2008. Photograph: Suhaib Salem/Reuters

Whether working in the most deprived areas of London or the Gaza strip, architect Nasser Golzari is trying to create in the face of destruction.

He takes his experience of more than two decades working in England to the Middle East and brings back skills that can be applied locally, in what he refers to as a "continuous knowledge link between here and the Middle East".

That trade in architectural knowledge began in 2000 when Golzari led a student field trip from [Oxford Brookes University](#), where he was teaching, to Iran. Of Azerbaijani descent but born in Iran, the journey marked his first visit to his home country to since leaving at the age of 15.

He found that an unthinking, uncritical attitude towards construction had developed, which he describes as a "culture of laziness".

"I saw that the modern buildings were completely denying the culture and climate and using materials that were irrelevant to the context, such as big glass facades that heat up in the summer but lose that heat in the winter," he explains. "Like many countries in the Middle East, they were using western concepts of architecture."

His critiques of modern Iranian architecture led to a commission from the Iranian Ministry of Oil to design an energy efficient building. From this began a [development](#) of ideas in the [practice](#) he started in 1992, [Golzari \(NG\) Architects](#), around cultural identity, energy efficiency and empowering residents to address local issues in the regeneration of their areas.

The ideas were applied to the firm's work in England, including a park and low-rent housing project in Tower Hamlets, east London, which was nominated for a Civic Trust award. Then Golzari took on a new associate architect, Yara Sharif, who had extensive experience of working in Palestine. "She told us that the same issues we were discussing here existed in Palestine," says Golzari.

Golzari, Sharif and Murray Fraser, a professor of architecture at the University College London, formed the [Palestine Regeneration Team](#), which was invited to develop regeneration projects in the West Bank.

Last year the team, along with a group of experts in everything from thermal comfort to daylight planning issues, travelled to Gaza to face the issues caused by Israel's three-week war on Gaza in 2008-09. [According to the UN](#), nearly 5,000 Palestinian homes were destroyed by the Israeli bombardment, and close to 60,000 suffered damage. Israel's blockade of the region extends to a ban on construction materials entering Gaza.

In response, Golzari and his team developed a self-build prototype home which can be constructed using materials found inside the territory, including rubble recycled from destroyed buildings. There was immediate interest from [UN Habitat](#) (a UN agency focusing on planning, land and housing issues,) the [Palestinian Housing Council](#) and local NGOs; Golzari was invited to present the prototype at a series of workshops.

The team worked with professionals and with families to develop building blocks made of broken rubble, concrete and rammed earth. Rooms were designed with a green focus, with guidelines on ventilation, reflective lighting and how to harness the most sunlight. Homeless families have signed contracts to take part in the project, and Golzari is determined to return to witness its progression.

Back in England, Golzari says his experiences in the Middle East now inform his work in England and other parts of the world. "I find it just as unjust to see the destruction of social housing in England, and social exclusion caused by lack of funding, as to see the destruction of homes and lives in Palestine. It's all destruction. It's just the context that's different."

Building homes behind the blockade

When Golzari and the [Palestine Regeneration Team](#) (PART) were invited to work on projects in the West Bank, the team took along its experience of urban planning and regeneration in London. He described the situation as a unique challenge.

"We have to be aware that we're in a very special situation," Golzari explains. "[People] have lost their confidence and we have to win that confidence and see what's beautiful in their lives," he explains.

Work in Hajja was especially difficult; the village is overlooked by an Israeli settlement and land has been taken from it by the Israeli separation wall.

PART brought a sustainable approach to the regeneration of Hajja. It encouraged cuts in the use of electricity using ideas borrowed from the London borough of Islington, and looking at how to recycle water with the Centre of Technology in Wales. The team also promoted the use of small collective gardens, based on traditional allotments, to grow food.

"In the UK, green recycling is a bit of a luxury because people don't need to do it, but in Palestine it's a question of survival – people are demanding it," says Golzari. "You start to think differently and to appreciate resources."

[This article was amended on 16 August 2011. It previously named Murray Fraser as professor of architecture at the University of Westminster and stated that UNESCO was

involved in the regeneration project.]

This content is brought to you by Guardian Professional. Join the housing network for more like this direct to your inbox

On this site

[About us](#)

[Advisory Panel](#)

[All today's stories](#)

[A-Z of this site](#)

[Become a member](#)

[Blog](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Case studies](#)

[Finance](#)

[Housing benefit](#)

[Policy](#)

[Professional Development](#)

© 2011 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.