

# Breaking Ground, Building a Future

BurkettDesign's New Building for the American University of Afghanistan Has the Capacity to Change the Course of History

by Sarah Goldblatt, AIA



*Renderings courtesy of BurkettDesign, Inc.*

Architects worldwide are engaging in design projects with a social purpose. These efforts, recently classified as the “humanitarian design movement,” dispense with the preconceived political and utopian ideals that early Modernists espoused to combat social ills. Instead, these architects are seeking design solutions relevant to the communities they serve with the objective of improving the human condition. With the seemingly constant threat of catastrophic weather, environmental disasters, terror attacks and unremitting social inequity, there is no shortage of opportunities to heal and repair.

Projects in the U.S. Gulf Coast, Haiti, Africa and Japan dominate the news. But Denver-based BurkettDesign has found itself doing work in an equally devastated locale: Afghanistan. Here is a country known to most Americans only through news accounts of war and terrorism — and not typically on the radar of a small woman-owned architecture firm in Colorado. Indeed, those doing work there describe it as turbulent, but also as a place undergoing a transformative rebirth. According to American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) President Dr. Michael Smith, restoring Afghanistan’s “intellectual capital” is central to this metamorphosis, and the AUAF — the only private, not-for-profit, independent university in the country — is making strides to make this objective a reality. Central to AUAF’s mission is providing Afghan women with access to higher education and advancing their role in society. Currently, the school has more than 800 full-time students enrolled, with 21 percent of them women.

In 2011, AUAF did a global search for a woman-owned architectural firm, with experience doing work in the region, to design its new \$5 million International Center for Afghan Women’s Economic Development in Kabul. BurkettDesign was selected in fall 2011 and began work on the 59,000-square-foot building that will bring together the services provided by the U.S./Afghan Women’s Council, various nongovernmental organizations committed to women’s issues in Afghanistan, the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women Initiative and the university’s professional development programs devoted to women’s empowerment. When completed in October 2012, there will be classrooms,



View toward the International Center for Afghan Women’s Economic Development and entry plaza from the main campus entry

office and meeting space, videoconferencing facilities, a radio station and a 200-seat auditorium — all of which will support the work of these programs and provide a safe, collaborative environment for students and teachers.

Amy Burkett, AIA, LEED AP, president and owner of BurkettDesign, and her in-house team, comprised of Kitty Yuen,

also traveled to Kabul on multiple occasions to hold meetings with students and women’s entrepreneurial forums to confirm their needs and aspirations for the building. She summarized the resulting design as one that “looks forward to the future, with a reflection of the past.”

Planned as the cornerstone of a new AUAF campus, the architects employed

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AIA, LEED AP; and Ben Niamthet, did not imagine exporting their Western design approach to a place layered with religious and cultural complexity. To inform its perspective, the design team did extensive research on Islamic architecture, and traditional building methods and materials, and it even looked to 17th-century Afghan poetry for inspiration. Burkett has

strong geometric forms in their design to represent the strength and power of Afghan women. These shapes are pervasive in Islamic culture, but here they are translated into a modern vocabulary to emphasize the potential of Afghan women. For example, the design incorporates a steel screen wall with a traditional organic motif to be fabricated by local artisans — a subtle reference to the emblematic veil worn by women. The screen wall is lifted up and over the building and serves to visually shift the building’s axis, signaling the main campus entry at one end, while acknowledging the bombed-out Darul Aman Palace that looms in the landscape in the opposite direction. To complement the refined exterior palette of glass and plaster, the auditorium is clad in a distinct white Heart marble. This volume defines the cascading entry plaza, creating a strong sense of arrival and communicating the building’s message that all are welcome.





**American University of Afghanistan, Kabul – International Center for Afghan Women’s Economic Development**

**Architect:** BurkettDesign, Inc.

**Location:** Kabul, Afghanistan

**Client/Owner:** American University of Afghanistan

**Collaborating Organization:** Friends of the American University of Afghanistan

**Scope:** 59,000 square feet

**Purpose:** Educate, develop and train Afghan women

**Design/Build Construction Company:** Technologists, Inc., Kabul, Afghanistan

**Consultants:** Berger Group

**Cost:** \$5 million

**Construction Completion Date:** Late fall 2012

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Second-floor plan

One may wonder just how welcome a woman-owned firm is in the design of a facility intended to redefine the future of women in a culture where they have historically been marginalized. In fact, the involvement of female professionals is central to the success of the project. “We have women from opposite sides of the planet working together in every aspect of this project,” explained Kabul-based Lucy Hunter, P.E., director of the Design Division of Technologists, Inc., who orchestrates daily cross-continent

coordination between BurkettDesign and her 26-member design-build team comprised of Afghan engineers, architects, surveyors and many local woman-owned construction companies. “The process of the design, engineering and construction of this building is indicative of its intended use,” Hunter noted, adding, “We are all very excited to be part of this undertaking.”

This collaborative design process is symbolic of a building that will have the capacity to connect women from across the country, empower Afghanistan’s next

business leaders and create a new economic reality for women and their families.

Burkett’s team members and their Kabul-based counterparts recognize the significance of their professional contributions and the potency of the design solution to effect change in a country where, 10 years ago, girls were banned from any education and the roles of women were restricted outside the home. “The building has the potential to change the country and change the world,” Burkett said. “It has that much potential power within it.” ●



View of the International Center for Afghan Women’s Economic Development from the proposed central quad of the new AUAF campus