

# JOURNEY TO FUTURE

**BSHF's international study visit to  
Gårdsten, Sweden, 12-17 May 2006**

By Dr Kamal Rasul



# Part 1

I must admit that I had never heard of the Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) before. But when I received their invitation to participate in their latest international study visit to see a solar housing renovation project in Gardsten in Sweden, I found the project attractive and potentially very interesting and productive. Now after the visit, the unanimous feedback from the 26 international visitors, all of whom were high calibre professionals, was that what we have seen, experienced, and learnt exceeded our dreams and expectations. It was a unique informing, enriching and inspiring experience.

Yes, BSHF is a British foundation. It is celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. It was established “to research and promote innovative housing policy and practice. It now works both in the UK and internationally, identifying innovative housing solutions and fostering the exchange of information and good practice.” What makes BSHF unique in its vision and practice is its ‘focus on housing solutions rather than problems’ and its infinite global horizons which makes it an effective facilitator of international exchange of updated knowledge, innovative experiences and in-depth scientific expertise. Each year BSHF “provides bursaries for participants from around the world to attend study visits to the winning World Habitat Awards projects.” Our recent international group visit to Gardsten in Sweden was only one of a series of such annual visits.

What Gardsten experience substantiated for me is that BSHF has managed to create an effective international community of knowledge. However, even this statement would be underestimating if we do not explain: what kind of knowledge? It is not easy to answer this question. It is a sort of knowledge which you can experience and live! Therefore the boundaries between knowledge and experience almost disappear to create an environment in which real human beings really concerned about global environment, global issues and problems and global solutions interact, exchange and share lessons, visions, innovations and simple personal thoughts and perceptions.

We must also qualify what we mean by global. It does not mean grand designs which can only be thought out and implemented by huge organisations. No. Global is local and local is global. A small local project embodying purposeful intelligence, design and good is and can be automatically a global project. But this can only happen if it is shared without boundaries of border, bureaucracy and exclusive benefit. BSHF’s international bursary programme achieves this in a wonderful way which you can only really appreciate if you experience it.

## **Informal and friendly**

I mentioned words such as bursary, programmes, international, project, etc to talk about my visit. These are cold dreary words. Language can be misleading and mystifying. It is; when it is isolated from real experience, from the authenticity of human interaction, exchange and emotions. Now in the age of Internet and e-mail, we

may find ourselves trapped in the maze of faceless, voiceless nets and messages. We forget how alienating this is until from time to time we are reminded of our humanity by a warm voice or a real human face or feeling or a realisation that there are real people at the other end who think of you as a human being rather than an electronic extension of your hardware or software.

Even when I got my bursary I was really sceptical whether it is worth to dedicate a whole week for a mission whose rewards are uncertain. I did not confirm within the two week period but felt uneasy about this. I just needed a small push to move me to this or the other side of the fence. Just a convincing word, a persuasive whisper. It was then that I realised that BSHF is not just a lifeless instrument of international exchange like a plane carrying you around. I did receive further encouraging emails written in simple friendly language. Then there were telephone calls: friendly voices and exchanges. I felt we had known each other before I see them and felt already as part of the project. That was the friendly hand I needed. I was one of the 26 people awarded the bursary among 200 applicants.

Just from this I learnt something important: to be professional does not mean to be dehumanised by external rules and regulations. To be professional is to achieve best results in the best appropriate way. And personal contact and approach remains the most appropriate and effective way to outreach and empower. We are after all humans.

So, here, I would like to thank BSHF administrator Jennifer Neville for her friendly approach and encouragement. Jennifer was not part of the visit but I was not surprised, but pleased, when I heard her name mentioned, in the feedback session, with affection and respect and some participants were keen to make sure that their thanks would reach her too. Then we saw the real faces of BSHF. We found this human sympathy, care and personal attention perfectly personified by BSHF's Director Diane Diacon and International Programme Officer Silvia Guimaraes. All arrangements were just perfect and exemplary. Throughout the week, we did not experience anything negative: a delay, a mistake, something going wrong. Yet, I did not feel there was any sort of management. There was only leadership, friendship and care.



**Diane Diacon and Kamal Rasul (Photo: Kamal Rasul)**



**Silvia, Sahar and Kamal. (Photo: Kamal Rasul)**

## Goteborg

The first evening was for registration. While I had an easy and cheap ride with Ryanair, which lands in the small exclusive very modest Goteborg city airport, I found other participants were not so lucky. Nancy had come from the US and had to endure delays and connections. Other friends from South Africa, Colombia, Chile and Argentina also had very long and tiring journeys. Just the global diversity of the participants was something to be excited about. There were participants from: Argentina (3), Australia (1), Austria (1), Chile (2), Colombia (1), Czech Republic (1), Georgia (1), Kazakhstan (2), Poland (1), Romania (1), South Africa (2), Switzerland (1), Turkey (1), UK (3, including England, Scotland and North Ireland), Ukraine (1), Uruguay (1) and USA (1). Of course Diane and Silvia were also from UK.



**Goteborg City Airport: checking in. ((Photo: Kamal Rasul )**

Accommodation was booked for us in a three-star hotel called Spar hotel, not far from the centre of the city. The hotel was clean, spacious, light and very accessible. We had buffet breakfast at its restaurant every day and had our own presentations in a conference room in the evenings. I did not expect the programme to be so intensive. For the three main days it was almost from 9.00 am to 11.00 pm. That is why I say the aim (or the outcome) was not just an invitation to see an innovative project but to be part of a global community of knowledge and vision.



**No management just leadership, friendship and care. Spar hotel reception area: Silvia and Diane make sure everyone is there! (Photo: Kamal Rasul).**

## **Sightseeing**

Everyone was refreshed with good rest and enlivened with expectation for our first day. It was a sight-seeing day of the city of Goteborg with Ms Jeanette Rigne of City Planning Department. Diane and Silvia were early at the reception area, head-counting to make sure everyone was included. This was a good and proper starter. Through the history of various buildings, sites and housing complexes, Ms Jeanette explained the history of the city. City is urbanisation: it is about buildings, landmarks, markets and social spaces. Each landmark carries a historical signature and symbolises an era or idea. There is a curious mixture between politics and aesthetics, armies and architectures, faith and façade. I was interested in picking up planning considerations and ideas behind the construction and development of the city. It is a depressing fact that historically it is barbarism i.e. war and conflict over wealth and power, which is behind human civilization especially the emergence of city-building. Goteborg is no exception. Its early architecture, location and shape were conditioned by requirements of war and resistance. Until 1800, Jeanette told us, the whole city was locked behind gates at night.