Giving versus getting: Altruism is alive and well in architecture

Practice Matters

By Jane F. Kolleeny

Larry Scarpa, AIA, of Pugh Scarpa Kodama, never gave much thought to why he ended up designing facilities for the downtrodden of Los Angeles. Perhaps his blue-collar roots or watching his father work three jobs to support the family contain the seeds of his motivation. Michael Pyatok, FAIA, of Pyatok Associates in Oakland, recalls his flight from tenement-building poverty into a scholarship-financed Ivy League education in architecture, but the impact of his early origins never left him—his firm also focuses solely on architecture for those who cannot afford it.

These architects are not alone; many have a heightened sense of civic duty and design integrity that has little to do with financial gain. This article attempts to explore how architects provide services that are free or offered at a reduced cost to clients who are either nonprofits or too poor to afford services, and what means they used to accomplish it.

Discounting unintentionally donated services (often motivated by the aspiration to perfect a design), statistics show that many architects do indeed provide pro bono services deliberately. AIA's 2000–2002 Firm Survey shows 59 percent of architects for the year ending 1999 reported providing no-cost services to clients. This survey included approximately 14,500 respondents nationwide, indicating that altruism is alive and well in architecture. Yet how are these architects able to manage projects that include principled civic and humanitarian goals with accountability and practicality?

Designed by Lehrer Architects, the James M. Wood Community Center, in L.A.'s skid row, brings good design to a population that rarely has an opportunity to appreciate it.

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How architects serve charitable organizations

Carol Burns, AIA, of Taylor & Burns Architects, Boston, taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the early part of her career. During that time, her firm designed Casa Nueva Vida, a woman's shelter in Boston. "We devoted time to the project beyond the small fee we were paid because we believed that it was a good cause and our basic livelihood was secured as full-time faculty." Many junior faculty members at architecture schools launch independent architectural practices by banking on the relative stability of income from teaching. It's not uncommon for them to take on low-paying projects to land or complete a commission they consider important.

Finding ways to balance pro bono or low-fee work with commercially based work is common, so that the ratios allow the firm to retain profitability. Dowling Thorpe James in Boulder, Colorado, never goes over 10 percent pro bono at any time; Pyatok Associates subsidizes low-fee work with student dormitories, which typically pay a higher fee. "We have discovered that designing student housing for universities is rewarded with fees that come closer to what it takes to cover the costs of our services. Mixing this type of work with our affordable-housing work helps to stabilize our practice."

Some architects simply volunteer. The AIA-founded committee Search for Shelter, long defunct as an established arm of the AIA, lives a healthy life in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, where firms such as Blumentals Architecture volunteer to perform weekend design charrettes under its auspices for provider agencies dealing with the homeless.

Some firms ease into a project by offering predesign-phase studies and advice at no charge, guiding low-income clients toward gaining the confidence and knowledge they need to undertake a project. These firms recoup their losses on the delivery end of the project. Magnusson Architecture and Planning (MAP), in New York City, spends a minimum of 10 hours a week working on behalf of Nos Quedamos, a community advocacy group in the South Bronx. Petr Stand, a principal at MAP, notes that the architectural commissions themselves are never pro bono, "yet the firm conducts zoning studies and interviews developers, builders, and contractors interested in working with the local community group free of charge." The architects help the community that controls much of the area's development, which prepares the ground for future opportunities for themselves—a light at the end of the tunnel.

Part of a revitalization in a heavily trafficked neighborhood of Oakland, Pyatok Associates' Deborah Muse Manor includes affordable housing and community services.

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The value of good publicity

There is no doubt that altruism generates good public relations. Architecture for Humanity, founded by Cameron Sinclair, brings attention to the needs of Third World countries through sponsorship of high-profile competitions that receive considerable publicity, encouraging architects to participate both as a show of goodwill and an opportunity to gain public attention. Some firms, such as Mostue & Associates, Boston, find that their commitment to socially meaningful work attracts high-calibre job applicants.

Livable Places, a nonprofit group in Los Angeles, undertakes charitable projects and offers high-profile attention. Under a National Endowment for the Arts grant, it hosted an urban-design competition that included a cash prize and an exhibition of the winning entries. This approach creates buzz for the architects who participate and also shifts the financial burden of sponsoring such work from the architect to funding agencies that focus on social services. Because the architect relies less on government subsidies to fund these projects, there is freedom to decide what is best for the project without a nondesign professional imposing constraints.

RESULTS OF THE AIA FIRM SURVEY INDICATED THAT ALTRUISM IS ALIVE AND WELL IN ARCHITECTURE.

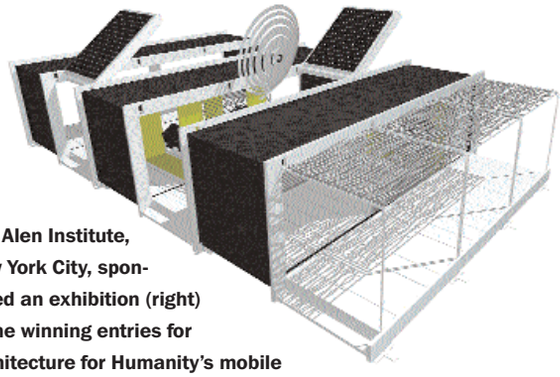
The appropriately named Robin Hood Foundation, which fights poverty in New York City, developed a program with the Board of Education to build 31 libraries in public schools to combat illiteracy. It enlisted prominent architects—including Tod Williams Billie Tsien, Gluckman Mayner, and 1100 Architects, among others—to design these facilities at reduced fees. Quality design elevates the profile of the client's cause in the eyes of the public and provides the architects an opportunity to give something back. Tod Williams says, "We were happy to donate our first library design without pay. This year Robin Hood is compensating architects, but we continue to do this work for less than our typical fees. We do the work because we know it is an investment in changing peoples' lives for the better."

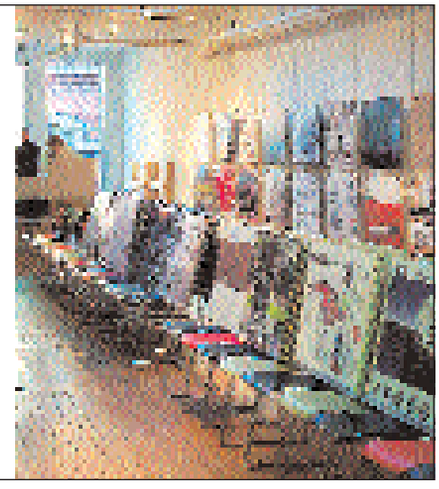
Help comes outside the field of architecture

Susan Fredman, a former interior

designer in private practice in Chicago, made a most interesting discovery when she tentatively asked vendors to donate goods to Lake County Council Against Sexual Assault, which had just undertaken the design of a facility. She discovered a great excess of products in the industry and a willingness among building-materials manufacturers to help charitable causes. She created a nonprofit organization called Supporting the Spirit that matches vendors and design services with needy clients. It is not uncommon for large building-products companies like Whirlpool, Dow Chemical, and Hunter-Douglas to donate their products on a regular basis to Habitat for Humanity and other causes in exchange for sponsorships and publicity.

Help on the client side happens, too. Some cities and states across the nation have become creative at raising money in an effort to repair the fabric of their communities. A number of interesting examples were recently noted in *The Christian Science Monitor*. The state of Kentucky uses unclaimed lottery funds to facilitate low-income families owning homes; Massachusetts, Maine, and Connecticut collaborate with the National Trust for Historic Preservation to renovate abandoned houses for the working poor; and Chicago's mayor offers incentives to employers to help low- and middle-income workers with housing costs. In Minneapolis, the mayor created a for-profit company to make prefabricated homes for the underprivileged, and in Baltimore, the city is reclaiming abandoned property to encourage developers and nonprofit groups to upgrade them. Such progressive steps on the part of commercial or institutional entities shifts or shares the burden of charitability with architects.





Van Alen Institute, New York City, sponsored an exhibition (right) of the winning entries for Architecture for Humanity's mobile HIV/AIDS health clinic for African villages. First-place winner KHRAS Architects from Virum, Denmark, is shown above.

IMAGES: © JIM LAMB (RIGHT); COURTESY VAN ALEN INSTITUTE (LEFT)

Roadblocks to pro bono work

Any architect who has undertaken projects for the economically challenged client will tell you there is a huge administrative stumbling block standing in the way. Assessing and

understanding the vicissitudes of government subsidies, funding streams, and regulatory parameters is essential to working for charitable organizations. Such work can have four to 10 funding sources. In addition, quality of design is at risk. Says Larry Scarpa, "HUD has their specific design guidelines, the local jurisdiction has theirs; in most cases, the guidelines conflict with each other. If you have funding from each source, you need to run the gauntlet of the most acceptable common denominator. It is hell if you aspire to provide a place of inspiration."

In addition to administrative difficulties, there are issues of liability. Wouldn't it be ironic if your firm undertook pro bono work for a needy client and then that client or a third party sued you for damages? According to Barry B. LePatner, of the legal and business advisers firm LePatner & Associates, this could happen. The same "standard of care" applies to the work product whether or not one is paid. "The issue will be whether the design professional signed or sealed their documents," says LePatner. The only way to attempt to withdraw from liability would be for the architect to get the client to indemnify him or her from any claims, "produce design documents without signing and sealing them, or label them 'not for construction,' thus shifting the burden from the architect." Most design professionals do not think about these issues, nor, according to LePatner, are there any known lawsuits that have triggered such claims. "Given that architects are often generous to a fault, it behooves them to secure the added protection that is their due," he says.

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Is the architect covered by insurance to the same degree as he or she would be if performing fee-based services? According to Lorna Parsons of Victor O. Schinnerer & Company, a large provider of insurance to architects, the answer is yes. Parsons notes, "Even so, every firm should have a company stance on pro bono services, because claims out of services can impact the firm's policy. First, the architect's firm should be notified if a staff member is performing pro bono services, since it is the firm's insurance that will cover the architect." Second, Parsons warns against "moonlighting." If the archi-

Tod Williams and Billie Tsien designed the library at P.S. 101 in East Harlem, New York City, as part of a Robin Hood Foundation program to fight illiteracy.

PHOTOGRAPHY: © MICHAEL MORAN

tectural firm's insurance policy does not include moonlighting, the firm is not responsible.

Just as personal and corporate donations are tax deductible, one might think an architect could receive a tax benefit from offering pro bono services, but there is no silver lining here. If a professional provides no-cost services for a charity, the time provided is not deductible as a charitable contribution under the tax laws, says LePatner, but out-of-pocket expenses, such as the cost of transportation and/or meals, are deductible.

THE VALUE OF AN ARCHITECT'S TIME PROVIDING NO-COST SERVICES FOR A CHARITY IS NOT TAX DEDUCTIBLE.

Giving or not giving it away

With all the obstacles and lack of perks, it's amazing that so many architects feel a deep commitment to the underprivileged. The bane of the architect's profession is that while they have such a strong civic urge, they must nevertheless cope with tight profit margins and long working hours, causing them to question the practicality of their generosity. This, combined with liability issues and complicated red tape for low-income clients, makes being generous that much more difficult.

One might feel that giving services away potentially undermines the value of architect's fees altogether. Victoria Beach, AIA, of Beach Design, Cambridge, Massachusetts, who is chair of the Boston Society of Architects Ethics Forum and a professor at Harvard Design School, feels this is not true, since these are services that no one will ever pay (much) for and would otherwise not happen if not through volunteerism. "The very definition of the profession and its protection through licensure obliges it and deems it as vital to society, regardless of a client's ability to pay." She continues that free or reduced-rate services (including competitions) provided in order to get "a juicy commission from someone who can and will pay has wrought havoc on the capacity of architects to sustain their services to others [who cannot pay]."

Dan Solomon, FAIA, has spent much of his life focusing on affordable housing and repairing the urban fabric of cities. An example of this is 101 San Fernando (above), in San Jose, Calif.

Some architects feel that charitable activity within the community does far more to focus attention on architects as meaningful change makers in society than the perpetual "black cape" architects, posing for photo-ops, ready to undertake the biggest, most prominently positioned competition for an iconic building. The field of architecture, of course, encompasses both of these aspects of the profession and more. Princeton Architectural Press just came out with a book entitled *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service Through Architecture*, by Bryan Bell. It seems that altruism is in the air. ■

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