

Pro Bono Services: Improving the Profession

Adapted from an *AIArchitect* article by Jonathan Moore

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SUMMARY

It's a truism worth remembering: Giving one's time and talents to others begets unexpected rewards. Moreover, for architects as well as all professionals, pro bono work is integral to professional practice. As the *AIA Code of Ethics & Professional Conduct* states, "Members should render public interest professional services and encourage their employees to render such services."

It is no surprise, then, that AIA members, through their components and architectural foundations, have organized to give communities abundant pro bono services.

BENEFITS OF PRO BONO

Pro bono services are rendered for the public good without compensation or expectation of a fee. There are rewards, however, both tangible and intangible, not the least of which is the satisfaction of giving back to the community. On a more material level, pro bono work increases firm-name recognition, improves public understanding of the value of the profession, and yields valuable strategic contacts thus business development.

With increased attention to the public benefits, pro bono practice is making its mark from coast to coast. For example, architects are revitalizing neighborhoods, schools, and parks in our nation's capital under the AIA/DC Community Design Services (CDS) program. Directed by the chapter's Washington Architectural Foundation (WAF), CDS pairs architects with local nonprofits to provide preliminary designs and other technical assistance. Expert guidance includes cost estimates, zoning analysis, conceptual models, and other visionary ideas for structural and landscape renewal. "CDS is a key component of our outreach mission," says WAF board president Stephen J. Vanze, AIA. "Through its collaborative efforts, architects are restoring many of Washington's hidden treasures."

A spirit of brotherly love is abundant in greater Philadelphia as well, with architects, engineers, and other design professionals volunteering with the

Community Design Collaborative. Created by a handful of volunteers in 1991, the collaborative began as a special initiative of AIA Philadelphia, became an independent nonprofit entity in 1996, and currently places more than 100 design professionals with local nonprofits each year. The collaborative offers preliminary design assistance such as structural and mechanical assessments, conceptual design, cost estimates, and programming and space planning. Each year the collaborative provides an estimated \$5,000 to \$15,000 in nonbilled services. Like CDS, the collaborative provides architects with outlets to test and convey their visions for community environmental renewal.

Projects under both programs have sometimes led to billable work. "Design firms support the collaborative because it offers professional development and the chance to bring design into the neighborhood arena," says its executive director, Beth Miller. "Our volunteers' early involvement provides leverage for additional grants and services that take the project to the next step in the development process."

SERVING THE PUBLIC

In San Francisco, requests from Bay Area nonprofits were piling up on the desk of John Peterson, AIA, principal of Peterson Architects. Receiving a broad spectrum of project requests, his firm's pro bono workload began exceeding billable orders. This resulted in his firm's creation of Public Architecture, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization putting architectural resources in the service of the public interest.

Offering creative solutions for problems associated with the built environment, Public Architecture seeks to move architecture beyond time-honored guidelines of conventional practice to provide a stable venue for experimentation and exploration. "Public Architecture's nonprofit clients are often initial recipients of new ideas and design concepts," says Peterson. "Its operating structure helps design professionals become more proactive with problem identification and creative solutions through innovative research, new technologies, and creative application concepts."

Rather than waiting for commissions with predefined tasks, a central tenet of Public Architecture's mission is creating more of a leadership role for architects as problem *identifiers*—complementing their more established role as problem solvers. Peterson believes pro bono work will help architects remain competitive with other professions well known for community service. "Architects nationwide are contributing in many ways to benefit our daily lives," he adds. "We just need to leverage more instances of public recognition in support of our efforts."

ALL THEY ASK IS 1 PERCENT

Inspired by formalized systems in the legal and medical professions encouraging pro bono service, Public Architecture launched its 1% Solution program on April 1, 2005. Led by Executive Director John Cary, Assoc. AIA, the 1% Solution challenges firms and individual practitioners to dedicate a minimum of 1 percent of their working hours to pro bono service annually.

Growing from Cary's belief that design professionals nationwide lack the encouragement and support needed to record their pro bono work, the 1% Solution establishes measurement goals itemizing architecture's contributions to their states and localities. "Pro bono should be viewed not as *free* but *for the public good*," says Cary.

Public Architecture calculates that 1 percent of the standard 2,080-hour work year would total 20 pro bono hours, representing a "modest, but not trivial, individual contribution to the public good," according to Peterson. Cary readily acknowledges certain nuances associated with pro bono practice: documenting nonbillable hours, pursuing untested design concepts, and greater reliance on Good Samaritan liability laws, to name a few.

With the rewards outnumbering the potential liabilities, however, Public Architecture believes pro bono work promotes an intrinsic value of practice as well as political clout vis-à-vis other licensed professions. "Adoption of 1%'s goals and objectives by firms large and small will further enhance architecture's ability to compete in the public relations and public policy arenas," Cary adds. As of June 2007, participating firms had pledged more than 49,000 hours of pro bono services.

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

The [1% Solution](#) Web site shows architecture's creative imprimatur on a variety of projects. For Hands On Atlanta, a nonprofit volunteer placement group, an unscheduled move led to the purchase of an old seafood distribution warehouse. Roy

Abernathy, AIA, and his team at Jova/Daniels/Busby offered to help. First, they outlined what Abernathy terms a "low-impact comprehensive plan taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies and unusual character of the building." Transforming a fish warehouse facility to administrative offices included installation of high-efficiency light fixtures, an overhaul of water and ventilation systems, and use of "gently worn" carpet and furniture from corporate donors.

Abernathy extols pro bono's virtues, believing it establishes "collateral credibility" for design professionals on many levels. In his view, this credibility translates into more effective advocacy before zoning boards, code enforcement agencies, urban planning councils, and other design and construction sectors.

AND IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

A coalition of parents, teachers, and school administrators in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, D.C., joined forces to improve the quality and condition of their eight public-school libraries. With the help of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, the [School Library Project](#) started in 2005. The project Web site states, "The substandard condition of the libraries was identified as a critical concern common to all the schools, and thus, the School Libraries Project was born."

The WAF joined the School Library Project as a core partner to link architects and schools in need to help lead the renovation process. Each library renovation was designed by a different architecture firm or team of firms from the Washington, D.C., area. Since 2005, three of the libraries have been completed, and the other five are scheduled to be completed by the start of the 2007–2008 school year.

YOU CAN DO IT, TOO

The benefits of increased public exposure as new ideas come to life have many architects singing the praises of pro bono work. Through programs such as CDS, the Community Design Collaborative, and Public Architecture, cost analysis and image projections are being transformed into virtual reality.

"CDS serves as a catalyst for concept projects that might not otherwise be considered," says Mary Fitch, AICP, WAF executive vice president and AIA/DC executive director. "Expanding community outreach to local nonprofits is what energizes our foundation, and through CDS, these activities provide tangible blueprints for fundraising initiatives, while showing other potential stakeholders a project's future potential."

About the Contributor

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RESOURCES

For More Information on This Topic

See “Public Service and Community Involvement” by William M. Polk, FAIA, in *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 7, page 172.



See also the 14th edition of *The Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 09.01.04 Gratuitous Advice: All Risk, No Pay
- 09.01.07 Emerging Risk in Practice
- 09.01.09 Pro Bono Risk Management

Feedback

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Issues
- Social Issues
- Public Outreach
- Pro Bono Services