

An Architect's Office as Community Meeting Place

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March 2007

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"We shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us."

—Winston Churchill

SUMMARY

The office of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects in Memphis has become a center of community activity as the site for a wide variety of civic, social, and business functions. These events have not only helped the community in many ways but also have had a positive impact on the firm.

AN IDEA WAS BORN

New Orleans is a great city, and Tulane introduced me to how a school and a body of students and professors can be part of the social fabric of the city. This was most evident during Mardi Gras, art gallery openings, and the Beaux Arts Ball. After studying for a year at the Architectural Association (AA) in London and participating in city nightlife and AA events, I joined the Sydney, Australia, firm of McConnell, Smith and Johnson (MSJ)—a great firm and a fun place to work. At MSJ, scarcely a week went by without a major event—usually a party but often events that attracted the public, including lectures, presentations, concerts, corking parties, and fundraisers in the garden. I promised myself that my office, should I ever have one, would follow this model.

AN OFFICE WAS FORMED

When I started my firm in 1975, I purchased two older houses in Midtown Memphis that were unique because they faced parallel streets, creating a courtyard between them. Many boards and civic organizations that we belonged to would ask to use our conference room or courtyard for events. Not only were



we centrally located but our unusual office site also helped attendees associate a place with their meetings.

We expanded our offices in 1986 and 1993 with an eye toward an even greater connection to the community. We increased the size of our main foyer to use it as an art gallery and increased the number and size of our meeting rooms and "outdoor rooms" to make our office work well for community events. As a result, we had the location, parking, large gallery area, and meeting rooms needed to invite the public into our space—and they came and continue to come in great numbers.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

Today the functions at our office include charity events, professional development programs, nonprofit and civic group meetings, lectures, art shows, and a wide variety of social gatherings, as described below.

Art shows. Our office gallery is the perfect place to display the work of emerging Memphis artists who are largely unknown and unable to show their work in other local galleries. Our residential scale, 12-foot ceilings with track lighting, and polished oak floors make our foyer a natural exhibit space.

Since our first art show in 1987, 185 local artists have shown their work in our gallery. All works are for sale, and we don't take a commission. We do ask artists to leave us a piece of art. Consequently, the firm now owns a valuable art collection.

We pay for the wine, bartenders, food, flowers, and cleanup. The artists produce the invitations, give us enough copies for our mailing list, hang and take down their art, and handle all sales. Their work remains on exhibit for



about 30 days. In 2006 we had five well-publicized art shows, featuring the work of eight artists. Shows attract an average of 300 visitors—often friends of the artist whom we haven't met before.

R&B parties. In 1987, then-associate (now partner) Joe Wieronski, AIA, conceived the idea of a rhythm-and-blues party to raise money for a local charity, St. Jude Children's Hospital, while also helping us to meet new people. Joe put on a great party and raised \$450 for St. Jude—not much but a start.

The next R&B party had a beach-party theme, and several truckloads of sand helped us create our own "beach," complete with lifeguard towers, palm trees, and hot tubs. Wildly successful, this beach party set the standard and put the R&B party on the map.



Now known around town as "The Architects' Party," this event is held twice a year, attracts 1,000 to 1,500 people, and generates \$15,000 to \$25,000 for the charity running the party. It has evolved to an outdoor event using two stages, an upper VIP level for sponsors, and sometimes even a martini bar. A neighboring bank permits us to take over both parking lots (100' x 200'), giving us ample room for large bars, tables, concessions, ticket booths, and dancing areas. Part of the attraction is the way our office allows the crowd to flow from stage to stage, getting a beer along the way. All costs, including cleanup, are paid for out of the proceeds. Of course, photographs of our best projects also line the gallery for this event, which showcases our work and helps many new people get to know us. To date, this party has raised more than \$400,000 for local charities.

Meetings. Our office, in the middle of Memphis, has been a good meeting place for groups seeking a central location, including the AIA, AIA150, USGBC, IFMA, CSI, and other building-related organizations.

Our large conference room seats about 40 people, and two smaller meeting rooms hold 10 to 12 people each. We make these rooms available after 5 p.m. for many nonprofit and civic organizations, including the Boy Scouts, Senior Services, alumni groups, and

neighborhood groups. Our kitchen enables groups to prepare and serve their own food. Our meeting-room scheduling is computerized and coordinated with a firm-wide electronic calendar.

Lectures. The large gallery becomes a lecture hall when we position the speaker at the far end, rent folding chairs, and use the other rooms as breakout rooms, food rooms, or other necessary spaces. Because our gallery has so much natural light, we had to devise ways of reducing the light during afternoon and early-evening lectures.

Lectures in our office have appealed widely to the general public and deal with issues that are relevant to our community. Recent topics have included the history of architecture in our city, green architecture, facilities management, and disaster recovery, to name just a few. We often invite the public to a "gallery talk" by the artist whose work is hanging in our gallery.

Other social gatherings. Our office hosts many social gatherings, including cocktail parties, receptions, and small parties. Held for a variety of friends, linked organizations, and clients, these events usually involve food, flowers, music, and an open bar. Our gallery can be combined with the conference rooms, kitchen, and interior courtyard to accommodate 500 to 600 guests. Some of the more notable gatherings include weddings in our courtyard under a canopy of flowers, high school reunions, parties donated to our favorite charities as silent auction items, and Christmas parties. We even allowed one group to hold a margarita party in the courtyard with a full mariachi band.

Training. In 1990 our firm received the national AIA IDP (Intern Development Program) Award for our in-house training programs. We have always believed that training is not only necessary to increase our knowledge base but also a factor in employee retention and hiring. We constructed a six-person training room off the main gallery, equipped with the latest computers. Training and the dissemination of information to our staff made a big difference to our firm. Without a dedicated training room, training tends to be a stepchild and seldom gets done. Using a firm-wide yearly training matrix, we schedule our employees to learn the programs appropriate to their positions. Our firm is now 100-percent Revit-based, which has required much additional training.

GET IT IN WRITING

During the past few years we have developed agreements and contracts with a variety of groups that use our facility. Always concerned about

increasing our liability, we have devised ways to mitigate this risk of dealing with the public. Any organization that interacts with the public must be well organized and have written agreements, schedules, and contracts to avoid problems down the road.

A signed agreement is recommended for all but the most casual event. The agreement should address who is responsible for what, who pays, and who is in charge. (A copy of our standard agreement is available from Sarah Long in our office at sarah@anfa.com.) We tried to keep it simple, friendly, and devoid of legalese. It's important to define the purpose of the event, the times of the event, security provisions, cost allocation, cleanup, damage repair, control of invitations, and sponsors. To date, no one has objected when asked to review and sign this agreement; in fact, most organizations welcome it because it carefully spells out everyone's responsibilities. Be sure to have all parties sign the agreement before the event.

Once you get on the map, many will want to use your facility. How do you choose which organization can meet in your office, which artist can show his or her work in your gallery, and who can have a party in your parking lot?

Our answer has been to accommodate groups that we know and support, either financially or with personnel. We ask that someone from our office "sponsor" a group that wants to use our facility. This means being responsible for them, opening and closing the office, and ensuring that things go right. A few organizations have formed alliances with us, and we go out of our way to work with them. Others ask us for meeting or party space, and we carefully evaluate whether and how we can help them. If we don't know them and it's a private social event, we ask them to contribute \$500 to Hope House, a local charity for children with AIDS. This separates those that care from ones just seeking free space.

A FIRM REPUTATION—STANDING APART

Aside from being known as the architects who throw that great R&B party, our firm has also become known as a place where people come together and learn. As a result, the local papers have given us the kind of publicity that helps distinguish our firm from others—a good thing. People constantly tell us they appreciate the time and effort we put into community activities. They may not know exactly what these activities are, but they do know we are doing interesting things. Our reputation for generosity with our time and place translates in the public's mind to being good to work with and open to suggestions.

Our connection with the community has paid off in several ways, the least of which is in new projects. Because many organizations use our space for their meetings, we encourage our associates and project managers to join the organizations of their choice and, if possible, to sit on their boards. This has greatly increased the number of people who are familiar with our firm. Our mailing list is second to none, and our clients and prospective clients receive invitations to our parties and art shows, e-mails about projects, and other mailings.

Our good image in the community and reputation as a fun place to work also make the firm a more attractive and competitive workplace. Employees' sense of pride, coupled with the firm's design excellence and creative recognition programs, go a long way toward boosting morale and retaining key people. At ANFA everyone is proud that we are known as folks who care about the community and do things to make it stronger.

By using your office as a place where the community can gather, party, learn, and celebrate, every architect can become known as a concerned and committed citizen of his or her community. We are recognized as people who care, our office morale is always high, several key employees have developed strong ties with our firm, and we have an extensive art collection at little cost. At the same time, ANFA and its people have increased awareness of community needs and activities as well as how much work must yet be accomplished to make our city great.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Lee Askew III, FAIA, is principal, founder, and CEO of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects, one of the largest architecture firms in the Memphis area. He serves as the AIA 150 Champion for AIA Memphis and has chaired the Advisory Groups of the AIA Facilities Management and Practice Management knowledge communities. In addition, Askew served on the editorial committee for *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 12th edition. In 1997 he received the Francis Gassner Award, AIA Memphis's highest award for contribution to the architecture profession.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

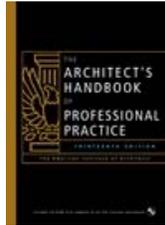
The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 11.09.03 Ten Principals of Community Partnering
- 01.05.04 ACE Mentor Program

01.05.03 Firms Benefit When They Charrette with Design Students

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Public Relations,” by Susan Liane Kennedy, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 7, page 167.



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.



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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Social issues
- Public outreach
- Community design centers