

Architects can influence policy and contribute to the public good

Practice Matters

By Andy Pressman, FAIA

Many architects share aspirations to improve communities and the environment and to address basic social problems through design. This drive toward civic activism is not only laudable but essential if practitioners are to enhance the public's perception of architecture and make the field more relevant to broad segments of society.

Activist strategies

There is growing evidence that architects are skillfully forging alliances in the realms of politics, policy, and education. And there appears to be an increasing awareness of what architects can offer in the civic arena. Local planning and zoning boards and other profession-related groups, such as the

United South Broadway Corporation in Albuquerque, often require advice from architect-volunteers or board members. Architects bring value to such groups because they can specifically guide an A/E selection process, represent the organization's interests in neighborhood planning and economic development, help assess prospective sites, and advise on proposed project feasibility.

Identify appropriate organizations

It is critical to approach prominent members of the community to learn where help is needed most. Attending city council meetings is a great way to see who is active in

unteer designers from professional societies and universities. (The Association for Community Design publishes a directory of these centers.) Regional or local foundations also present opportunities for applying specialized architectural expertise. Cornerstones Foundation in New Mexico, for example, is well known nationally for its excellent community-based church-restoration program.

Pro bono work can provide enormous benefit to society. "Clients" who might not otherwise afford architectural services—and who really need them for code compliance or other facility improvements—include religious institutions, child-care centers, and homeless shelters. This type of work can take many forms but should be executed with the same reasonable standard of care as any other architectural project. Outline services in writing so all parties are aware of specific objectives.

There are worthy local projects to which architects can offer their special skills and energy. DiGeronimo, Pa., architects of Paramus, N.J., allots 7 to 14 percent of gross receipts to charities as pro bono service. For example, the firm renovated a halfway house for babies afflicted with AIDS. The "house" was upgraded (walls, heating system) to comply with code. The architects developed and filed documents with the building department and stayed with the project through construction.

While the motivation to pur-

sue publicly minded work is fundamentally noble, there are secondary pragmatic benefits. Greater exposure and contacts are natural consequences and may produce leads for future work involving the community and important social agendas.

Case studies

Bruce Fowle, FAIA, of Fox & Fowle Architects in New York City, refutes the Rodney Dangerfield dictum that architects "don't get no respect." Fowle implores architects to "speak about community issues." Contrary to what architects believe, Fowle says the public respects them and wants to hear what they have to say.

Speak out he does, especially regarding zoning initiatives. Fowle is currently involved on an AIA task force that is assessing a proposal to simplify New York City "bulk" zoning regulations. His primary concern is the impact of these restrictions on the quality of architecture in the city. Fowle says, "There's nothing more important than ensuring that zoning regulations are not unduly restrictive and that they allow the culture of the city to survive. Due to zoning constraints on tall, thin towers, you can't even design an Empire State Building anymore!" He believes that if architects are not in the trenches, then developers and bureaucrats will make myopic decisions without considering long-term implications or the public interest. If Fowle and his

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National Trust for Historic Preservation, Main Street, Habitat for Humanity, the Congress for New Urbanism, and AIA chapters, for example, need volunteers or board members. In these roles, architects can be innovative and persuasive in proposing and implementing bold initiatives, and they can testify at hearings on pressing community issues. In a general sense, the skills architects practice virtually every day make them especially effective in public service: a capacity for synthetic vision, problem solving, and group facilitation.

Nonprofit community-development corporations, such as the

town and to gain insight into the disposition of council members and the mayor. Ask them about becoming an adviser or board member. Moreover, there might be an opportunity to sit on city policy committees. Consider writing an op-ed piece for the newspaper, communicating directly with government representatives, or even running for office.

Community design centers, located throughout the country, typically provide planning, programming, building survey and evaluation, cost estimates, and design services to nonprofit community groups. They are supported by a network of vol-

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committee had not been so vocal, an architectural perspective would not be a respected part of the dialogue. Fowle orchestrates a successful system of checks and balances in one of the largest and most politically complex cities in

public forums and sponsored talks about the housing crisis. That led to membership in the National AIA Affordable Housing Task Force, which promoted housing-related projects at various chapters. He observes, "Talented designers have power they haven't begun to tap. They have an automatic platform since they are credible. They can use that platform to advocate important causes at the same time

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the world.

Architect Michael Pyatok, FAIA, based in Oakland, Calif., is another brand of activist. He has called on architects to take leadership positions on affordable housing, urban planning policy, environmental sustainability, historic preservation, and design guidelines. Pyatok became active in his local AIA chapter; he held

they're making awesome buildings."

Supplementing Fowle's and Pyatok's large-scale approach, Albuquerque architect Mark Childs, AIA, believes architects can use their skills to raise children's awareness of the built environment. He volunteers to work with elementary school teachers to develop and present urban design workshops in the classroom. One

urban design game he conducted with second graders was an original idea he devised for the incremental development of a town. They were enthralled: "Why'd you put your gas station next to my house?" They stayed through recess to play design.

Yet another example of activist effort is illustrated by New York City architect Richard Dattner, FAIA. He is a master at engaging the political process. He "demarginalizes" his practice by selecting commissions that align with his socially responsible principles. For example, Riverbank State Park in West Harlem was built on the roof of a sewage-treatment plant in a neighborhood opposed to the plant's construction.

Eight years of political maneuvering included extensive design sessions with neighborhood residents and elected officials. The intent was to demonstrate that high-quality design and programming of recreational facilities would provide a genuine commu-

nity amenity and neutralize the plant's location, thereby avoiding the NIMBY issue. A constant threat of loss of funding from federal, state, and city agencies prompted the state to require a value engineering analysis.

Dattner responded with creative design solutions that preserved the project's original spirit while reducing costs. His overarching responsibility and determination to contribute to the public good resulted in one of the most frequently used parks in the state.

Architects design projects of all types, but they can also strive to become model citizen-professionals. By wisely embracing social responsibility and political process, they can positively influence the public domain in ways that extend their talent and good will beyond buildings. In light of society's challenges, it seems especially timely for more of us to consider emulating these examples and become agents of progress and indispensable resources in our communities. ■