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"The Pro-Bono Client"

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THE PRO-BONO CLIENT

The San Francisco nonprofit **Public Architecture** makes the case that sometimes the most important client is the one you don't know.



by James McCown

They are the most unlikely group of architectural clients: men in their 20s and 30s, most from Mexico and Central America, and most without the legal right to work in the United States. They can be seen gathering on virtually any morning in Home Depot parking lots from coast to coast, hoping to be chosen by building contractors for a day of substandard wages. They need from a building the most rudimentary things: Shade from the sun. A place to sit down. Toilet facilities. Enter the Day Labor Station, designed by Public Architecture.

"Architects are trained to be problem solvers, not problem identifiers," said John Cary, Assoc. AIA, the executive director of Public Architecture, a nonprofit based in San Francisco that both designs needed facilities like the Day Labor Station and recruits firms from around the country to commit to doing pro-bono design work.

"Once we identified the need, we then began interviewing a lot of day workers, truly treating them as the clients," he said. He put his colleague Elizabeth Ogbu in charge of design, and she conceived a structure with a Solomonic simplicity — "boxes" on either side, one accommodating the bathroom and the other for food preparation and serving — akin to the roadside food stands that are social centers throughout Latin America. In the center are benches and an expandable shade awning. "We're getting interest in these from cities, large and small, around the country," said Cary.

These are good times for architects, and Cary wants to harness their natural idealism so needed buildings like the Day Labor Station don't remain just dreams on paper.

"Architects have been doing free work forever," he said. "We're just shining a

light on it, and coming up with a way to match pro-bono work with organizations that have real building needs. The legal profession has been taking the same approach for decades with great success." Cary has developed a Public Architecture program called the One Percent Solution, which encourages firms to contribute one percent of their total billable work to nonprofit organizations. A recruitment brochure asks provocatively: "You could have been anything. You chose to be an architect. Why?"

Large firms such as Perkins+Will have signed on to the One Percent Solution, both as participants and benefactors. Phil Harrison, president and CEO of Perkins+Will and based in Atlanta, cites both historical and regional inspirations for becoming involved.

"Our firm motto is 'Ideas and Buildings that Honor the Broader Goals of Society,'

A LAXART. Client: LAXART. Architect: zellnerplus. Structural Engineer: Dale Christian SE. General Contractor: California Modern. Photo by Joshua White. **B** P-Patch Community

Garden Shed. Client: Interbay P-Patch. Architect: CAST Architecture. Photo by Matt Hutchins. **C** 21st Century Community Learning Center. Client: Technology Access

Foundation (TAF). Architect: The Miller | Hull Partnership. Associated architect: Public Architecture. **D** Affordable-Infill. Client: Philadelphia Neighborhood

Development Collaborative and Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha. Architects: Interface Studio Architects LLC, through the Community Design

Collaborative; Jody Beck. **E** Faces of the Fallen (The Women's Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery). Client: Faces of the Fallen Advisory Board. Architect: CORE

architecture + design. Photo by Max Hirshfeld. **F** Day Labor Station. Client: Day Laborers. Architect: Margot Lystra and Phoebe Schenker for Public Architecture. **G** Prototype for green



F



E



D



G



H



C

and that goes back to our founding in the 1930s," he said. "Here in the South, we're also aware of the tremendous contribution of [architect] Sam Mockbee and the Rural Studio. The One Percent Solution allows us to have the most impact. I think we're better off wielding pencils than wielding hammers." At present, Perkins+Will is investigating using its One Percent time to design at least two homeless shelters in downtown Atlanta, Harrison said.

Smaller firms are also drawn to the One Percent program. Miller | Hull Partnership

in Seattle, winner of the 2003 AIA Firm Award, is currently designing a new learning facility in the city's diverse White Center district for the Technology Access Foundation, a local group that teaches computer and technology skills to minority children. The group enjoys the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"The head of TAF wanted a real in-your-face approach," said Craig Curtis, one of four Miller | Hull partners. The firm is giving them just that: a daring cantilevered building that makes heavy use of recycled and discarded materials. Talk about a "win/win" situation: A design firm is given free rein to design an exciting structure; it's for an eminently worthy cause; and it's sustainable to boot. "We're literally designing the building with material that would otherwise end up in a landfill," Curtis said.

A running clock on the One Percent

website (www.theonepercent.org) tallies the professional hours that have been pledged to the effort — 52,083 at this writing. A new initiative, "Version 2.0," promises to offer more legal and professional support, as well as match-making services. By redefining "client," the perennial problem of finding clients suddenly evaporates: Clients are all around us. ■

James McCown is the director of communications at Sasaki Associates in Watertown, Massachusetts.

residential design. Architect: EPoc Partnership. **H** Trilogi. Client: People's Emergency Center (PEC) and the Furman Family. Architect: CICADA Architecture/Planning,

through the Community Design Collaborative. **I** Creating a Legacy for our Future Youth: The Byron Story Foundation. Client: The Byron Story Foundation. Architect: Becker Winston

Architects, through the Community Design Collaborative. **J** Campus D'Espoir (Campus of Hope). Client: Hope for the Children of Haiti. Architect: Studio Luz Architects.



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