

PRO PRO BONO

BY DUO DICKINSON

Architects often aspire to have the recognition—and pay—of the other licensed professions: law, medicine, engineering. Unfortunately for our bottom line, we don't save lives, keep people from the electric chair, or prevent bridges from collapsing: Our value is found more in enhancing the quality of life than in preserving life itself.

Our desire for recognition can lead to a perception that we are megalomaniacal, self-promoting empty suits, obsessed with our own agenda and used to treating others as a "means to an end." This persona, of course, is a caricature, but it seems viable to the general public, which sees design hipsters on TV spouting words that make little sense to those outside of the profession (and not much more to those of us inside). Most of these trendsetters create structures that have little to do with context, comfort, or usefulness but that do project the image of something never before built. These buildings are often aesthetic paradigms that can be viewed as having no social value.

Yet this state of our art is not true of the many architects who realize they have a gift, work hard to refine it, and think they'd be wasting it if they didn't help make buildings better for those who can't afford to hire an architect. By donating their time to efforts that have few resources beyond moral sway, these professionals beat against the tide sweeping architecture into fashion.

FOR RICHER AND FOR POORER

My office works for a demographic kaleidoscope of clients ranging from the very rich to the poorest of the poor. In the early 1990s, for example, I designed a 15-unit rental complex for the formerly homeless at the same time as a 16-foot-square master bathroom with no straight



lines and 8,000 precisely located custom tiles—and a budget that far exceeded the cost of an entire rental unit. New owners later ripped out the bathroom, but the affordable housing (above) still keeps 15 families off the street. Both projects won awards, but which was more important?

The answer came to me during a final inspection of the complex, when a fairly hostile voice from four floors up called out, "Who are you? What are you doing?" I looked up, abashed, and said, "I'm the architect." The woman, a new resident, widened her eyes and yelled in a similarly declarative tone, "God bless you!" From then on, I knew that there were no meanings more important to my work than those found in helping people who could never afford to hire me.

Working for the non-elites does have some baggage, however. Several eulogies for the heroic architect Samuel Mockbee noted that his social conscience was rare in a field where style so often trumps substance. "For the last couple of decades, you could pretty safely presume that any architect who focused his or her talents on helping the poor did so at the expense of design," wrote Paul Goldberger (March 2002, page 67), applauding Mockbee as an exception. Indeed, Sambo's influence is still widespread, and his design ethic was shared and lives on in his Rural Studio and in others who aspire to create innovative projects that touch people in need. From Michael Pyatok and Studio E to the designers supporting Habitat for Humanity or their own religious communities, these architects toil to make the world better with almost no recognition.

PRO BONO C.E.U.S.?

Meanwhile, Legal Aid and Doctors Without Borders receive well-deserved praise for their high-profile work. And now a group of architects in San Francisco, Public Architecture, offers a benchmark—"The One-Percent Solution"—proposing that all architectural professionals dedicate 20 hours per year to "work in the public interest." Nowhere is expertise better used than where there are scant resources to effect change. Why not offer continuing-education credits for donated time?

Whereas cash streams constantly into the medical and legal professions, architects serve a boom-or-bust industry where there is either too much work or not enough time to donate resources to projects without pay. This reality can suggest that architects are either "too good" to do pro bono or that such jobs are "second best" and can be abandoned when "real" work comes in the door. While my assessment may seem harsh, it rings true to those of us who do this work for the underprivileged on an ongoing basis, through good times and bad. In the end, doctors, lawyers, and architects have to live with themselves and how they conduct their professional lives. Ego is present in all of us, but ego to the exclusion of our common humanity is elitism, which inevitably means relevance for the few and irrelevance for the rest. Is that the legacy we want?

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