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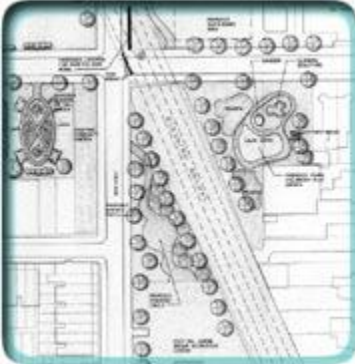
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October 14-20, 2004

CITYSPACE

Altruistic



Free form: Conceptual plans for community open-space improvements in Tioga are part of trend toward pro bono and low-cost design work.

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The design community branches out into more pro bono work.

by Linda Dottor

John Peterson is principal of Peterson Architects, a small Bay Area (Calif.) architecture firm that specializes in high-end commercial and single-family housing. In that capacity, he also created Public Architecture, a nonprofit branch devoted to pro bono design projects.

The work started with an open-space plan for San Francisco's South of Market, a former industrial district that was shifting to a mix of new residential and commercial uses without an open-space strategy. To help that district adapt, Peterson Architects drew up "a series of small interventions" to make open space a permanent part of South of Market. Once that project was underway, Peterson asked himself, "How can we do more of this?" He says he knew Peterson Architects alone could not put enough focus and energy into nonpaying projects. So two years ago, Public Architecture was born.

"I really enjoy my practice," says Peterson, "but you can feel trapped when you do only high-end work."

Today, Public Architecture is assisting architects who are working on a prototype for a day-laborer's facility and a press kit publicizing the effects of Wal-Mart on the physical character and economies of rural places. (Peterson donated facilities and a full-time employee to help establish the nonprofit, which is working to raise funds to cover operating expenses. The projects are done by outside architects who work pro bono through the nonprofit.)

As an advocate for pro bono architectural services, Public Architecture is now conducting a national campaign -- The 1% Solution -- that challenges architects to contribute a minimum of 1 percent of their working hours, or 20 hours per year, to public-interest efforts. They've surveyed firms about their current pro bono efforts and to get their reactions to the concept. Many responded that they are already close to that 1 percent mark.

"It's not as scary as it sounds at first," Peterson says. "Lots of firms are doing work, but not as wisely as they could."

Peterson says a little more pro bono could go a lot farther if it were done strategically. He points to the legal profession as a model for how architecture firms can incorporate it into their business plans. According to Peterson, law firms use interesting pro bono projects to recruit new attorneys and as a business development tool.

Public Architecture is part of a national movement among practitioners to do design outreach.

The trend extends to Baltimore's Neighborhood Design Center (NDC), which provides community design and planning services to nonprofits in that city and inner-beltway communities around Washington, D.C., and the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh (CDCP).

Mark Cameron, executive director of the Baltimore NDC, says, "We tailor our assistance to meet individual project needs, but we also try to address larger issues that cannot be resolved through a single project."

In 2003, NDC provided technical assistance on 70 projects while addressing regionwide open-space issues through Community Ties, a Baltimore-based schoolyard improvement program, and Livable Communities, which promotes open space and neighborhood beautification. The CDCP, says executive director Anne-Marie Lubenau, has a design fund that offers grants to community-based groups to hire architects, landscape architects or planners in the early stages of revitalization projects.



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ities for people in the design professions to do pro bono or reduced-
of AIA Philadelphia targets nonprofit organizations who need preliminary
both individual practitioners and firms to work directly with the

"Preliminary design is important when the owner's needs and desires or the physical limitations of the building or site aren't yet clear," explains Michael J. Paul of LZA Technology.

Adds Todd Woodward of Susan Maxman & Partners, "The fact that a group has engaged in preliminary design discussions and activities shows potential funders its willingness to pursue its goals."

Peterson says that the initiative has improved the atmosphere in his office.

"We always had an eye for doing stuff outside ourselves but it's changed everybody ... we're more aware of what's going on in the world and more sensitive as participants in the public realm," he says, adding that the staff doesn't take the perks of high-end clients for granted. "We really appreciate when a client can afford a full-scale mockup to refine the subtle details."

Linda Dottor is Program Manager with the Community Design Collaborative of AIA Philadelphia. The collaborative provides nonprofits with pro bono preliminary architecture, landscape architecture, engineering and planning services; promotes best practices in community development; and offers design professionals a unique way to volunteer their skills in service of communities. See the collaborative's recent work on display at The Rotunda and Liberty Place through Oct. 30.



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