

Larger Context

for



◀ Students at The Rural Studio, a program of the Auburn University School of Architecture in Alabama, combine their design talents with their values as citizens of the community to create homes for low-income residents. This house was designed by second year students and built from tire construction techniques previously employed by the Rural Studio. The tires penetrate the interior of the building creating a winding staircase that wraps around the family room. The exterior of this house is clad in oak shingles cut from wooden shipping palettes. The Rural Studio received the 2005 ASID Educator of Distinction Award.

Design

BY JASON PEARSON

Good designers ask good questions ... questions that transform apparently insurmountable challenges into rich opportunities for positive, practical action and change. At no time has this ability been more important and vital than today, when we face a complex and daunting array of social and environmental issues. We live in a challenged and challenging world, and if ever we needed the benefit of designers' transformative abilities, this is the moment.

A growing number of committed designers—part of a larger movement of deep practice, social entrepreneurship and corporate responsibility gaining momentum among professionals in every field—are responding to this need, applying their unique skills and resources to seek hidden opportunities for innovative, design-based solutions to society's pressing challenges. Individually, their projects target specific contexts, but collectively they are part of a broad movement of socially and politically engaged practice that is making good on the immense promise of good design as a force for deep, positive change.

ASID / Habitat for Humanity Design Account

Nowhere is the need for designers' creativity, leadership and professional services more pressing than on the U.S. Gulf Coast, where successive hurricane seasons have left a devastated landscape of wrecked homes, crippled infrastructure and displaced families. The task of recovery and re-

building is a design challenge at every scale.

Members of the ASID Florida West Coast Chapter, led by Harriet Stephenson, Allied Member ASID, and Wes Snyder, ASID, are working with Habitat for Humanity on an innovative new program to improve the design and quality of affordable housing in Sarasota. In this partnership, Snyder will act as Habitat Liaison for the ASID Florida West Coast Chapter, coordinating an entirely new model for delivering design services and furnishings to Habitat clients. First, through an expanding network of ASID members and local suppliers involved in the project, Snyder solicits donations of furnishings and materials to the Habitat for Humanity Store, a resale store and warehouse that helps to support Habitat activities by selling donated building materials to contractors and the general public. In the ASID program, designers and suppliers are encouraged to donate returned or used items in good condition to the Store. On a recent high-end residential ren-

ovation, for instance, Snyder salvaged almost \$8,000 worth of practically new, high-quality kitchen cabinets and appliances for the Store. Habitat then credits the retail value of these donations toward a running ASID "design account."

Next, Snyder works with individual ASID volunteers to match them with Habitat clients who will soon be moving into new homes. Each designer is given a \$2,000 credit toward items in the Habitat Store that can be used in furnishing a well-designed, high-quality interior, tailored to the needs of the client family.

The project's benefits are numerous: ASID members are able to redirect thousands of dollars worth of furnishings from likely landfill disposal toward continuing productive use in society. On the basis of these donations, using the "design account," Habitat is able to raise its standard furnishings allocation from \$500 to \$2,000 per contract, thus providing higher quality interiors for their clients. And the ASID Florida West Coast Chapter, by offering their

embers a structured opportunity provide pro bono design services Habitat clients, has been able to ump start” the participation of umber members, for many of whom e projects represent an opportunity to gain valuable leadership experience. This is deep practice at work.

oration with another of the Heartland Alliance’s projects, Heartland Housing, Inc., the project is to design and furnish the living and dining areas for former Chicago Housing Authority families relocating to a new mixed-income community called Jazz on the Boulevard. Each

a position in a high-profile design firm to found Design Corps and create a design practice that could meet the needs of “the 98 percent” who typically don’t have the opportunity to influence their physical surroundings through access to direct design services.

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— Susan Fredman, ASID, Designs for Dignity

esigns for Change

eanwhile, a thousand miles north Chicago, a similar project is underway, led by a unique organization called Designs for Dignity, founded in 2000 by interior designer Susan Fredman, ASID, to provide pro bono professional design services to create interiors that reflect dignity, hope and comfort at area nonprofit organizations. As Fredman explains, “The need is extraordinary and the solution is so simple. Within the design industry, there are enormous resources available. There are problems we can uniquely solve—and so we should.” Designs for Dignity transforms existing nonprofit spaces through donated gifts of design talent, merchandise and installation. As a project of Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights (www.heartlandalliance.org), a service-based human rights organization, Designs for Dignity works with a network of designers, manufacturers and suppliers to match materials and expertise to the specific needs of Heartland program sites seeking to restore dignity and hope to their surroundings. Currently, through a project called Design for Change, Designs for Dignity is creating an opportunity for individual interior designers to bene- fit directly and actively involved in public service as an expansion of their professional practice. In collab-

family is paired with a pro bono designer who has volunteered to design and help furnish the family’s new apartment. Designs for Dignity works with the volunteer designers to procure furniture, paint and window treatments, either through donations or from current inventory, giving the resident families an opportunity to create a space that is truly their own.

By the time the project is complete in early 2007, each of 30 volunteer designers, having been guided through the process of soliciting and securing donations by Designs for Dignity, will be in a position to independently undertake with confidence their own pro bono projects.

Design Corps

Some designers have found ways to dedicate their entire professional practice to socially responsible design activities, developing completely new modes of alternative practice. Bryan Bell, founder and executive director of the not-for-profit design organization, Design Corps (www.designcorps.org), is a pioneer in this area.

In 1997, realizing that the conventional model of architecture practice limited him to serving what he calls “the two percent,” the small community of clients who could afford direct design services, Bell left

Design Corps provides affordable architectural services to those underserved by conventional architecture practices, while training students and interns in quality community-based design. Design Corps projects tend to be located primarily in rural areas serving low-income populations where other resources for quality design are lacking. Frequently, their projects are funded by federal or state government agencies whose target clients will benefit from the high-quality design that Bell and his colleagues provide.

Currently, Design Corps is responding to Florida’s severe statewide shortage of migrant worker housing. An estimated 300,000 migrant farm workers, most of whose annual incomes do not exceed \$10,000 per year, support the agricultural industry throughout the state. Affordable housing for these workers is often limited to mobile homes that are extremely vulnerable to storm damage, and recent hurricanes have destroyed or damaged hundreds of units, exacerbating an existing shortage.

Through a partnership with Florida Legal Services, and funded by a \$10 million state appropriation, Design Corps will design and build 50 high-quality prefabricated housing units for migrant farm workers at a cost of less than \$100,000 per five-

person unit. Working closely with the workers and their families, Design Corps has created a new unit design that specifically meets their needs. The first prototype will soon be built at the University of Florida, and the rest will be built within the year. An additional appropriation of \$25 million in 2007 will be used to build similar units to meet the tremendous need.

Design Corps also plays a leading role in building networks of socially responsible designers by annually hosting "Structures for Inclusion," a conference that showcases efforts to provide design services to "the 98 percent," with the results of the first conferences compiled in a collection called *Good Deeds, Good Design*. Recently, like-minded designers, academics and activists met in Boston, and then again in New Orleans, to create a new network called SEED

meeting, it became clear that, although the pressing need for housing represented the most obvious prospect for design engagement in New Orleans, it far from solved the problems of a minority population largely isolated from economic opportunity, particularly with illiteracy rates in the city hovering at 40 percent. So Palleroni, founder of the 12-year-old BaSiC (Building Sustainable Communities) initiative (www.basicinitiative.org) at the University of Washington School of Architecture and currently Visiting Luce Professor in Sustainable Development at the University of Texas at Austin, and his colleagues asked a new question: How can design organizations and professionals contribute to rebuilding not only the physical capacity, but also the economic and social capacity, of neighborhoods in New Orleans?

Deep Practice

Many of today's designers share an ambition to use design as a means of deep practice, engaging with the world to achieve lasting, positive transformation. They are collectively forging new forms and definitions of professional practice that respond meaningfully—and pragmatically—to current social and environmental needs. These new forms of practice include

- Expanded practice allows design professionals in conventional practice to also provide design services to traditionally underserved client communities, thus expanding the context of design activity.
- Alternative practice allows design professionals to create new types of organizations that focus exclusively on applying the benefits of design innovation and excellence to broad social challenges.
- Systemic practice is undertaken by design professionals who seek to positively transform the ways in which all design activity occurs.

—Jason Pearson

If every architecture firm in the country were to commit one percent of billable hours [to pro bono work], the collective resources would be the equivalent of a 2,500-person firm working full-time for the public good.

(Social Economic Environmental Design), which will bring together organizations and practitioners who seek to use design to address broad social challenges. Over the coming year, the group will develop a set of principles for socially engaged design practice and an online forum for exchanging ideas (www.seed-network.org).

Katrina Furniture Workshops Project

Sergio Palleroni has been a leader in Structures for Inclusion and the SEED Network, and his newest project is a coordinated effort among attendees at the New Orleans SEED meeting earlier this year, including Bell and Stephen Goldsmith of the Enterprise Foundation. During that

The Katrina Furniture Workshops Project is their response. It focuses on three priority neighborhoods, each of which has donated a public building in need of reconstruction. The buildings will be renovated through design/build studios conducted by the University of Texas at Austin, Tulane University and Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., each of whose faculty and students will collaborate with the neighborhoods to design, renovate and equip the buildings for use as fully functioning carpentry and furniture workshops.

Once complete, the workshops, which have been organized as an independent not-for-profit organization, will be used to train community members in the crafts of carpentry

Designers' Social Responsibility for Housing for the Poor and Underprivileged Addressed in *Implications*

In the January 2006 issue of *Implications*—the monthly newsletter of *InformeDesign*® (www.informedesign.umn.edu)—Thomas Fisher, professor and dean of the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, asserts that designers have a necessary role in addressing homelessness and inadequate housing—due to environmental disaster or economic situation—in which more than two billion individuals around the world live.

To properly deal with problems of such a global scale, Fisher, a contributing editor with *Architecture* magazine, recommends that designers get involved in partnerships with existing public, private or nonprofit agencies dedicated to assisting the homeless in the United States and beyond.

According to Fisher, a number of socially conscious designers who have become involved in such relationships are making a difference in the lives of thousands, signaling a new era for the design community based on “advocacy, activism and attention to what the rest of the world wastes.”

Written by leading experts in the featured subject matter, each issue of *Implications* explores one major subject in relation to design and human behavior to help designers take their work to the next level by infusing their designs with research-based knowledge.

InformeDesign is the first searchable database of design and human behavior research on the Web. The site currently contains more than 1,200 “practitioner-friendly” Research Summaries of findings from research literature transformed from more than 150 scholarly journals related to design and human behavior. All services on the *InformeDesign* Web site are available at no cost to visitors. In addition to the searchable database of Research Summaries, the site features a calendar of research-related events and a glossary of terms.



and furniture making, and in the fundamentals of operating the workshops safely and economically.

The workshops will also act as community centers, with weekend sessions to teach community members skills to rebuild their homes. To give them a head start economically, Mercy Corps, the international relief organization, has offered to annually donate \$50,000 worth of furniture-grade cypress salvaged from the reconstruction of New Orleans. Staff from the Hamer Center at Penn State will provide training in deconstruction and salvage so that much of the high-quality material from damaged buildings in the city will become new building materials and furniture. Local marketing of the workshops' products will be facilitated by Ashé Cultural Arts Center and other New Orleans-based arts organizations, with the option also under discussion to market some furniture through a national retailer.

There is no tidy professional category for this kind of collaborative, multidisciplinary, cross-functional alternative practice. And that is exactly the point. Designers are uniquely equipped to ask meaningful questions of our most difficult social, economic and environmental challenges, questions that can transform difficult challenges into opportunities for a hopeful positive future.

Public Architecture and The 1% Solution

John Peterson, a San Francisco architect, has created a program to systematically encourage every designer in the country to ask and respond to these kinds of important, socially relevant design questions. Hosted by Public Architecture (www.publicarchitecture.org), a not-for-profit organization partially subsidized by Peterson's professional practice, “The 1% Solution” acts as a catalyst for progressive, alternative practice.

The “1% Solution” is a national initiative to convince every major design firm in the country to pledge at least one percent of its billable hours to pro bono design activities in the public interest. It is modeled on the policies of the American Bar Association, which suggest that every lawyer should donate at least 50 hours of pro bono legal services per year (2.5 percent of total billable hours). Public Architecture calculates that if every architecture firm in the country were to commit one percent of billable hours (20 hours per year per person), the collective resources would be the equivalent of a 2,500-person firm working full-time for the public good, totaling an estimated 5,000,000 hours of work annually. Since the program launched last year, it has received pledges of more than 20,000 hours from firms across the country.

Public Architecture is engaged in deep, systemic change, working to transform the very definition of professional practice. Its efforts are both a model and an invitation for designers around the country—product designers, interior designers, architects, planners—to seek out opportunities to engage their own communities in deep and meaningful ways, to ask unique, ambitious design questions and to join the other leaders to become deep practitioners in their own right.]

Jason Pearson, architect and author of University–Community Design Partnerships: Innovations in Practice, is executive director of GreenBlue (www.greenblue.org), a sustainable research and design institute.