

How Architects can be Catalysts for Civic initiatives

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Judson A. Kline, AIA

Sr. Vice President

Herschman Architects, Inc.



The 1000 Points of Light...We are the Point at the End of the Light

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There are many inspirational platitudes delivered to encourage participation in community service. A few of which include:

“You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give”, Sir Winston Churchill;

“It’s easy to make a buck, it’s a lot tougher to make a difference”, Tom Brokaw;

“It is one of the beautiful compensations of life, that no man can sincerely help another without helping himself”, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

However, without a substantial understanding of why it is important architects engage in this effort and how they can participate, the likelihood of these calls for support will go largely unheeded.

Architects have the potential to make a difference affecting the quality of life in their communities through the application of both the design skills employed in producing projects and the leadership skills engaged in guiding community initiatives. In exploring strategies for community leadership endeavors,

recognizing the value they can provide for both their practices and the communities in which they practice will result in the increased involvement with their communities by architects, interns and students..

In promoting the significance of community service through the profession, the foundation is built through inspiring students to recognize the future role they play in the practices they will enter. Through fostering a core value encouraging and supporting the actions of a profession that can be of ever increasing value to our communities, the future practitioners become the source for community involvement and challenge the profession to pursue worthy endeavors. If the preferred outcome of producing architect-leaders is to be achieved, then the importance of instilling a commitment for civic action and providing the tools and examples to achieve it is critical in the development of students and interns.

Preparing students for the role they will play in society leads to learning how to be a community asset as a knowledge source for creative intervention. By recognizing the value of civic participation as both an academic pursuit and a practice business strategy, students, academicians and professionals will increase the potential for architects to take action. By examining case studies of programs and projects led by practitioners, the architects who produce these projects will serve as the example for others to find challenging opportunities for engagement. The mission, therefore, is to encourage participation in service and to promote interest in creating initiatives through practice based activities. To

achieve the mission of creating a more engaged profession, the recognition of objectives to achieve the goal is essential and includes: gaining an insight into why architects, in particular, need to participate along with the strategies, tactics, and knowledge as to how to become involved.

Essential to stimulate involvement is answering the questions why should architects participate as volunteers, let alone, become the leaders in programs and projects? Where are areas of engagement? What are the opportunities for involvement? How does the process happen?

Why Be Involved?

Architects are naturally raised community leaders, but often do not see the potential in civic roles. The education, ideation skills, creativity, vision and problem solving capacity possessed by architects are fundamental for creative intervention to improve the quality and opportunity to succeed in producing community enterprises. The challenge is to enlist participation. In order to encourage engagement, a motivating spark is needed and is derived from understanding why participation is important.

Simply stated, it is the right thing to do. Taking part in community in the community adds meaning and fulfillment to daily practice. Furthermore, it makes good use of the resources architects have to offer both in economic terms and intellectual ones.

Rotary International an organization linking local business people with those around the world through a desire to provide service to their local communities, refers to “the Four Way Test “ as a barometer for measuring the need for involvement and the value it provides. The test is made up of four questions which participation should address through the service action:

1. “is it the truth?”
2. “is it fair to all concerned?”
3. “will it build good will and better friendship?”
4. “will it be beneficial to all concerned?”

The answer to these questions is that service is a worthy endeavor and fulfills the lives of the providers and those it impacts.

There is a need for architects to step up and become leaders of service endeavors arising from a shift in the available talent pool of resources. In the past, community leaders turned to the corporate organizations within their cities and towns to undertake the responsibility of husbanding civic projects. With the departure of many of the locally based corporations, a void in community leadership has occurred. This void provides opportunity for a new civic leader to emerge and architects are uniquely positioned to answer the call. Furthermore, the need for talented, creative involvement to address complex issues and challenging situations perfectly suits the skill set possessed by architects. In a socially diverse environment, having participation by a group accustomed to

sorting out solutions from various interests is essential to achieve the desired result.

There are business benefits derived from involvement in community service. These are both internal and external in their impact on practices. External benefits to community activism are derived from the relationships developed in the community and how architects are perceived. Architects can be seen as leaders building trust and legitimacy. They demonstrate character fundamental to practice. The architect has a free opportunity to illustrate professional capability and how they can be good resources. Through their community involvement, the opportunity is afforded to associate with quality potential clients who will observe the abilities of architects as creative participants. Through many service projects, a clear commitment to building a better future for the community results in a better environment for practice. It also serves to define practice, differentiating from others and attracting both clients and staff. The mere participation helps to provide value and meaning everyday to practice and the lives it touches.

The internal benefits of community service are multiple as well. By participating as a group, a “sprit de corps” is built, molding teams and character. In addition, it provides a level of satisfaction and pride. No matter how mundane the work of the firm may be, the addition of creative participation in community activities enhances the lives of the participants and increases commitment to the firm.

Through the simple act of taking on responsibility for these endeavors, future firm leaders emerge and are incubated.

What are the opportunities?

The opportunities for engagement are almost limitless. Some of the major areas include: academic support; community planning and development; human services; government; service to the profession; and service to the institute. These categories of service can be supported through civic organizations; community boards and commissions; service organizations; social clubs; religious groups; and professional societies.

Educational support can be provided through engagement as a resource for careers; as an educational volunteer tutor for students; as a mentor and role model; as leaders; and as a link to the business community for future career path development.

Community planning and development is another area where architects and students can play an important role making a significant contribution to the quality of the community and its institutions. As a resource for not for profit groups, institutions and local agencies, architects and students can provide invaluable service in assisting in pursuing development goals of their facilities. By providing design insight in assessing the program requirements and facility development areas these groups are pursuing and then producing simple graphic

resources which can be used for budgeting and fundraising, the contribution of architects can positively impact the future of these organizations. In addition, there is a role to play as a knowledge resource in educating communities to understand development principles such as sustainability and smart growth.

The impact architects can have in the area of human services offers an additional opportunity to provide invaluable benefit for communities. As a resource for agencies to achieve their goals by providing creative interventions in assisting in finding ways to facilitate or serve their constituents, by serving on boards, by volunteering to help organizations' programs in doing the work on projects and events, and by supporting organizations and causes through funding activities as sponsors or fund raisers.

Government service is another place where the architect can become engaged in the civic arena. This is an area which should be of critical interest, but is often ignored as being perceived to be underappreciated and undervalued. This could be the furthest from the case and is among the areas where architects could have the greatest influences on the quality of the communities. The knowledge base possessed by the architect and, for that matter, architectural students and interns has the potential to provide great resource. Through serving on boards and commissions, participating in neighborhood studies and investigations for government initiatives, and even running for legislative office, architects have the

knowledge, experience, and capability to provide community leadership often lacking in their towns and cities.

Not to be overlooked is service for the profession and professional associations. Critical to building the status in the community are the actions taken by professionals and future professionals, which significantly influence the perception of value in the community. Achieving this goal requires a commitment to building a future engaged in civic action, mentoring young professionals, linking the endeavors of architects with those of other professions and civic groups, and imbuing the profession with a desire to build a knowledge base and then share it with colleagues as well as the community. Furthermore, improving the profession also includes serving and promoting the professional institutions by participating in its leadership, raising awareness of its opportunities for involvement, and expanding the collective body of knowledge of an engaged community.

Where are the opportunities?

As the opportunities are limitless, all that is necessary is to identify what to do and then determine where is the best place to undertake the initiative. The sources include: civic organizations, community boards and commissions, service organizations, social clubs, and religious organizations. By contacting these groups and offering services or participation, professionals are greeted with great enthusiasm.

Case Studies

Through examining several projects produced by a single firm, examples of opportunities for community engagement can serve to encourage and provoke others. Herschman Architects, a firm of 85 with a practice based in Cleveland, Ohio and Tucson, Arizona, has integrated community service as a core value to the firm's practice. Several of the activities and projects undertaken by the organization are worth review as they embody the type of service leadership discussed. The projects identified fall into the service areas as educational support, community service organizations assistance, not for profit group involvement, and governmental participation. The projects discussed represent only some of the actions of the firm, but represent and describe what can be produced and the value architects can add to the quality of life in their community.

1. Educational Support: an Introduction to architecture program was developed and produced by the firm at the Cleveland School for the Arts. The program evolved out of a simple donation. The firm was replacing technology and sought to usefully dispose of older computers and plotters by contributing them to the Cleveland School for the Arts, a magnet high school in the Cleveland Municipal School District. The intent of the contribution was for the computers to be utilized by the school's architecture program (assuming a School for the Arts would include an architecture program). The donation of the computer equipment was welcomed with great appreciation. When the

donation was presented, the school's principal noted they really did not have a course of study in architecture and inquired if the firm would be interested in starting a program? Subsequently, the firm established a program at the school including: developing curriculum, selecting and screening students for the course, providing educational materials, and teaching the course during the academic year. With the help and support of firm principles, its architects, engineers, interns and students, the program has been taught for eight years.

In Their Own Words

Herschman Architects has allowed the Cleveland School of the Arts to add an architectural education program that's aimed at generating interest in the field among students. Here, the team from Herschman and the school stand under the Mark E. Howard mural at the school. **LEFT TO RIGHT:** Andrew Hamlett, chairman of art department at the Cleveland School of the Arts, and Herschman Architects' David Berkovitz, Cynthia Turk, Jud Kline, Carole Sanderson, and Mike Cristip.

PHOTO BY: RUGGERO FATICA

"Recognize that diversity is essential to creative thinking. Respect and value alternative opinions."

Jud Kline
Vice President
Herschman Architects
NorTech Innovation Award Winner

Why the affirmative action plan was needed . . .
"The innovation grew out of an initial idea to contribute to the Cleveland School of the Arts some hardware and software that we were no longer using. We contacted the school to make our contribution to their architecture program. Upon discussing the gift with school representatives, we found that no such program existed and were asked if we would like to assist them in starting a program. The rest is history.

"The program was needed to address the fact that the number of inner city and particularly African American students who pursue architecture as a career is very limited. This is due in large part to the lack of exposure to the opportunities available. By developing this program, we felt we could encourage more students to pursue careers in the field and ultimately come to us as professionals."

How we foster innovative thinking . . .
"As a design firm, innovation and creative thinking are essential aspects of our everyday activities. A program such as this is a collateral outgrowth of the normal process."

If the CEO of another company asked me for tips on how to make it more innovative, I'd say . . .
"Recognize that diversity is essential to creative thinking. Respect and value alternative opinions;
"Be an active listener. Very often, innovative ideas are stimulated by the thoughts of others;
"Rail against conformity;
"Seek options through understanding both sides of the question; and
"Develop all of the tools at your disposal so that all problems aren't solved with the only tool you have. (If you only have a hammer, all problems look like nails.)"

Herschman Architects' website is www.herschmanarchitects.com. Requests for information can be e-mailed to mail@herschmanarchitects.com. The company's phone number is 216-464-4144.

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2. Community service organization support: a local Rotary club sought to assist the community they served by building a "gazebo" in the community's park as a part of helping the town complete its plan for the park's development. As one of the Rotarians was a member of the firm, the group asked if the architects could help produce the project and help meet the club's commitment to the town. The firm participated by: working with the Rotary club and the town to determine the best use of the site, which with the input of the architects turned out not to be a gazebo instead, the firm suggested creating a defined space that could be used at different scales for a variety of community activities. The result was the creation of a plaza and colonnade which are now used for band concerts and the summer home for a local Shakespeare in the park group. As an added component, the local historical society came to the architects and asked if an architectural remnant saved from a locally significant building could be incorporated into the design? The structure was amended and the element was then integrated into the project giving the design a focal point of local importance. With the firm's assistance which included: design of the facility, gaining the approval of the local design review board, bidding, construction management, creating fund raising promotional material and helping with funding, the project was completed and is now enjoyed throughout the Summer by local residents.



3. Not for Profit organizational involvement “the local Ronald McDonald House at the Cleveland Clinic enjoyed the benefit of the firm’s engagement through the design and building of an accessible tree house for children undergoing treatment at the hospital, The project named Aaron’s House in memory of the son of one of the architects who led the project, included not only the tree house, but also the paths and gardens where it was set.



4. Government participation: among the most valuable community service activity architects can offer is participating in the shaping of the community form and image. This often takes place by having a position on local planning commissions, design review boards and zoning appeals boards. By encouraging and supporting this type of service, several firm members hold seats on these boards in their local communities.
5. Other projects and programs include: working with the local AIA chapter and organization of inner ring suburbs to provide a storefront concept program to revitalize neighborhoods; assisting a local pediatric counseling center to develop plans for a new facility; creating a fund raising feature for a local

synagogue; donating design services for the local Adoption Network and Aids Housing organizations to enable them to raise money and build needed facilities; and designing plus building playhouses for children as a fund raising source for the local children's hospital.

The potential to create and develop programs and projects serving community needs has no limit. The challenge is to determine a plan of action and then to pursue the skills, tactics and the best use of resources. The way to begin a pathway of service is to marry the interests and passions of the individuals participating with the opportunities available. To initiate a plan for service participants must recognize there are two primary courses of service each requiring a distinctly different set of qualifications and skills. In order to be considered for the second avenue of service, participation in the first is often a prerequisite.

1. Community program participation: is the area of service arising out of existing programs or projects where support is required to fulfill the goals of the group. Special knowledge or experience may or may not be necessary to be involved. All that is necessary for engagement is a willingness to help and then only to show up with commitment.
2. Civic intelligence participation: is an area of service based upon being a resource for ideas and expertise, a community consultant role. This avenue of service is sought out by the leaders of a community to assist in producing a project or program where specific knowledge or experience is needed.

With an understanding of the need for architects to become engaged, the value of participation, and examination of case studies to gain insight into examples to provide inspiration, and recognition of pathways for service, the challenge is only to do it. By being educated on community needs, investigating quality programs benchmarking what can be accomplished, promoting the value of civic action, informing practitioners and students on how to participate, and then creating opportunity for involvement, all that is necessary is to deploy the troops and choose a path to follow.

Conclusion: A personal anecdote, "The 1000 points of Light...We are the point at the end of the light"

I was working on a project in south Florida and had occasion to stay overnight in a hotel that fronted the beach. As I usually get up early in the morning, I went to breakfast around 6:30 am. Needless to say, aside from the staff, there were only about two or three customers in the restaurant.

The Hotel's restaurant was a large, glass fronted room facing the ocean. As I gazed out of the window, I looked at the horizon where there was a line of clouds reaching from the edge of the sky down to the ocean. Behind the clouds, I could perceive the beginning of the sunrise. The top edge of the clouds grew brighter and brighter with each passing minute. I knew this particular sunrise was going to be something really special (little did I know what I would learn from it). I watched with utter amazement as the sky grew brighter and more intense and

the light seemed crisper. I began to see where the source was and focused on its arrival above the white screen fence concealing it. All of a sudden, boom! The sun popped from behind the clouds and a beam of light raced across the top of the ocean and hit me like a shot. I was so startled by this beam that I got out of my chair and began to take other seats in the restaurant to observe if and how this same beam of light might follow me to the next chair, believe me when I tell you the other customers and staff noticed my bouncing from chair to chair in the restaurant. I then got up, walked outside to a set of exterior stairs from the restaurant to the street below and went across the street to the beach, where I started walking up and down the beach to see if I could still see this beam of light and I did.

It was right there I realized this was my own personal beam of light. Well, I am not egotistic enough to believe, the sun only shines on me and I own the only ray of light, but rather we each have a ray of light that only we can see, where we have the conditions to observe it. Each morning we arise to this ray of light that shines on each one of us individually. What a tremendous blessing and a burden.

1. We are each individuals with our own ray of light to inspire us.
2. Each day we are under the spotlight and what we do is important.
3. We are individually important and can make a difference
4. We are each the point at the end of the light.

With this knowledge it is hard to not consider how we can be catalysts for civic initiative.

