

Editorial

By Robert Ivy, FAIA

Something's in the air. Call it community-based design. Call it architecture for people. In any understanding, socially conscious architecture seems to be blossoming again. Kate Schwennsen, FAIA, the incoming president of the AIA and an educator, says the sea change is palpable in the design studio. According to Schwennsen, students seem interested in a different agenda from an earlier generation, which was more focused on career or technology. Quietly, the people-centered component of architecture is spreading like goodwill, putting designers and builders in touch with real people in real places.

Our collective hunger for humanistic design and planning is not new. In the not-so-distant past, think of Frederick Law Olmsted and the 19th-century parks movement, offering open space and fresh air for tenement-bound urban dwellers. More recently, remember storefront architecture of the late 1960s and 1970s? The attitude accompanied the haircuts and the tie-dyes; environmentalism of the same period had a strong social component.

While art with a capital "A" or design for design's sake attracts many young people, idealism provides another primary rationale for their vocation. As a group, students are often interested in helping individuals obtain higher quality of life, whether in housing or in public places. Graduation, however, can be a wake-up call. The business world offers few opportunities to spread our fellow feeling, much less our good works. Where, we wonder, can we exercise our skills on behalf of others?

Look around and see that architecture for people comes in different forms. It's not all about freebies. Michael Pyatok has built a practice with clients who need his services in special ways. The YWCA Family Village in Redmond, Washington, for instance, includes a diverse program of services and housing for homeless women with children. In California, Ann Fougeron designed women's clinics in Bay Area malls that create a sense of comfort while providing colorful, secure environments. On the opposite coast, in Massachusetts, architect Carol Burns designed a shelter called Casa Nueva Vida for embattled Hispanic women.

Universities have long been in the hands-on business. Steve Badanes and Damon Smith have led a design-build studio that has created the Danny Woo Community Gardens (an urban park in Seattle) and the T.T. Minor Elementary School play area, among others. The University of Washington, where Badanes and Smith teach, has reached out to communities as far away as Mexico, spreading design power south. Still farther it

spreads: The College of Architecture and Planning at Ball State University in Indiana recently headed to Southeast Asia. This year, 21 students made the trek to Sri Lanka, site of the devastating tsunami.

Many programs, like Auburn's Rural Studio in Alabama, are already superstars. You know about organizations like Habitat (and Architecture) for Humanity, which provide both basic shelter and disaster relief. And you probably recognize New York's Robin Hood Foundation, which redistributes Wall Street wealth to the public schools, employing talented designers for libraries. But do you know about Design Corps, which Bryan Bell founded in 1998 to provide decent housing for migrant workers? Or the theoretical programs by San Diego architect Teddy Cruz, such as "Living Rooms at the Border?"

Architect John Peterson, a San Francisco practitioner, started something entirely fresh that is growing into a powerhouse. Public Architecture, a nonprofit organization that his firm hosts, has evolved from its initial efforts at community building. Although only in its "adolescence," according to Peterson, it has come up with a great idea.

The "1% Solution," proposed by Public Architecture, suggests that architects donate a small but statistically meaningful percentage of their time toward the public good—a small, but powerful notion. John Cary, Public Architecture's executive director, hopes that architects can donate time or resources "without having to make extreme sacrifices." One percent translates into 20 hours of volunteerism, or 1 percent of financial resources, piddling amounts that, when added together with the work of many other architects, could make tremendous changes. The idea is smart, clean, and memorable.

With all this youthful enthusiasm, and all these programs, has the pendulum decisively swung from formalism to activism? Apparently, it's tilting in a new direction. Perhaps after a decade of technical and material advancement, armed with the realization that we can make anything we set our minds (and our computers) to, we are turning our attention to the fundamental question: Who are these amazing forms intended for?

