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The Shaw Contract Group's 5th annual "Design Is..." Awards received 250 submissions from 14 countries. The jury chose 12 finalists, then 6 winners. From these, online voting (400,000 responses) selected a People's Choice project. Without knowing it was a pro bono project, voters chose the Charlotte, NC, Dress for Success store designed by Cynthia Urbanik Interiors. The mission of Dress for Success is to promote the economic independence of disadvantaged women by providing professional attire, a network of support, and the career development tools to help women thrive in work and in life.

PHOTOS: JOEL LASSITER/LASSITERPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Corporate Social Responsibility as the New Business Model

Stretching and Stressing Your Marketing Approach

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

A new business model has emerged. It may answer some of your own personal agenda. It will definitely stretch and possibly stress your marketing approach. Here's what you need to know.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has overtaken the nation's businesses and now has gnawed its way into the design and construction industry. Previously, the answer to the question, "Why are you in business?" was "to make a profit." But ask that same question today, you'll often hear "to contribute to the well-being of the organization's stakeholders."

Who are the stakeholders? Employees and their families, the local community, and society at large compose the tally. Add to that list not just the beneficiaries/end-users but also consultants, suppliers, contractors, and related agencies that will be encouraged to get involved.

What is the result of the design community's embrace of CSR? Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of projects are designed, built, or renovated each year. These include low-cost housing, a playground created where there once was a parking lot, a nice new store for Goodwill or Dress for Success, a house painted for someone who couldn't afford it, an increase in women's shelters, a 250-bed hospital for Haiti.

"Corporate social responsibility has overtaken the nation's businesses."

“There’s a lot of poverty and need out there that go unnoticed,” comments **Craig Park, FSMPS**, of the Sextant Group. But the warm-hearted designers and builders of our country have fanned out to help, often in kind, in a big way. Some of this outreach goes a long way back and is part of the corporate DNA.

ARUP San Francisco’s **Sara Paul** points to its corporate language: “Corporate responsibility is not simply a policy at Arup but a way of working. The firm’s active engagement with humanitarian and charitable causes is almost a defining feature of Arup people and has been from the founding of the firm in 1965.” Paul indicates that “helping the community to thrive also attracts the best and brightest to Arup.” And from a marketing standpoint? “There’s not a lot of opportunity for work out of this,” she says, “but that’s not factored in.”

Roy Abernathy reports the same long history at Jova/Daniels/Busby, where he is president/CEO. The firm has been actively involved with the community since Henri Jova founded it in 1965.

“Smart companies make sure that their effort is recognized as a benefit to the firm and its clients.”

What was sporadic before is now a mushrooming phenomenon. The very idea of socially-focused enterprise first surfaced in the early 1980s. The trend gained legitimacy as a business metric from the parallel triple bottom-line movement, which added “people and planet” to profitability as business’s traditional gauge of success.

Let’s hope that you’re not wearying of acronyms, because triple bottom line (TBL or 3BL) is important to this discussion. 3BL surfaced in the late 1990s, and now we hear it daily as an essential underpinning of the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards. Wikipedia to the rescue, with this definition: “In practical terms, triple bottom-line accounting means expanding the traditional reporting framework to take into account ecological and social performance in addition to financial performance.”

Why is the concept of business responsibility to societal issues now taking such a hold? There are many reasons, each with insight into life at the dawn of a new millennium.

Joe Brown, FASLA, as of this last October AECOM’s Chief Innovation Officer, provides an insight into what underpins the change: “Philanthropy is an American principle. You don’t see it elsewhere, for instance in the socially-based democracies. It’s rooted in American values, a rich cultural imperative in the American mindset.” AECOM has a formalized CSR program that includes

four parts: pro bono work, charitable contributions, sustainable business practices [internal], and sustainable practices [clients]. Its corporate mandate includes, “Focus on the communities that we impact through our work and where we operate.” When you have more than 400 offices in 100+ countries, you can focus on many causes.

It has become clear that government has broadly lost respect, with posturing politicians and understaffed agencies seemingly unable to make progress happen definitively and speedily, or perhaps they are just ineffective. The fallback position, many citizens and business owners have concluded, is to solve social problems through business taking responsibility.

One member of the design community has responded to this problem. In 2002, **John Peterson**, an impatient San Francisco architect, created Public Architecture, chaired its board, and in 2008 became full-time staff and strategist-in-chief. Here’s how the organization describes itself: “Rather than waiting for commissions, Public Architecture takes a leadership role by identifying significant problems of broad relevance that require innovative research and design... recognizing the dearth of resources supporting pro bono work within the architecture profession, Public Architecture has created a national campaign called the 1% Solution. Supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the 1% Solution encourages architecture firms to formalize their commitment to the public good by pledging one percent of their billable hours to public interest work.”

Public Architecture has enabled 856 firms with 281,000 volunteer pro bono hours pledged annually. Here’s how that math works: A design professional who works 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, and is 80% billable would work 1,600 billable hours. One percent of that total is 16 hours or 2 days of pro bono work per year. This can add up. One of the first to sign up, HKS—where every office has a program—has pledged 9,000 hours annually.

It is possible that CSR in the design professions began in 1967 at the American Institute of Architects. AIA has indeed led the way in social responsibility. Its Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct includes this sentence: “Members should render public interest professional services and encourage their employees to render such services.”

For nearly a half-century, AIA Regional and Urban Design Assistance Teams—called R/UDATs—have worked with more than 250 communities, performing technical assistance ranging from charrette-based projects to ongoing assistance. In 2005, AIA began to field Sustainable Design Assistance Teams (SDATs). All told, more than 1,000 professionals from 30 disciplines have provided millions of dollars in professional pro bono services across the country.

R/UDATs and SDATs use volunteers from many firms. Their engagements are paid for partially by the community and heavily by AIA. According to AIA staff member **Joel Mills**, the return on investment is considered to be high respect for the institute and the profession.

What's very useful for R/UDAT and SDAT volunteers is that engagements are finite, the organization impeccable, and the welcome genuine. Once the pro bono rhythm began and a broad group of professionals were indoctrinated and trained, it was a simple matter for firms to internalize the outreach approach, contacts, and performance.

Another factor pointing the way to CSR is that, perhaps snapped into action by the 9/11 assaults on our country, business and people have gotten far more engaged in strengthening their communities. The September 10, 2009, issue of *Time* was devoted to "The Responsibility Revolution." It included an interview with America's volunteer-activists-in-chief President and Mrs. Barack Obama.

"Corporate America has discovered that social responsibility attracts investment capital as well as customer loyalty, creating a virtuous circle," *Time* concluded. "The most progressive companies are talking about a triple bottom line—profit, planet, and people—that focuses on how to run a business while trying to improve environmental and worker conditions."

Inspired also by President Obama's trajectory and "yes-we-can" spirit, by the passage in March 2009 of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, and by the cheerful, somewhat hyped beta testing of the new ISO 26000 standards for social responsibility, CSR is maturing and taking center stage.

Here's the best of the insights into what's going on privately in the design world. This last September 12, Christopher Hawthorne, architecture critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote: "Certainly it would be tough to argue with the idea

that a major generational shift, the kind of turn toward social responsibility that seems to emerge in the profession every four or five decades, is well underway."

He observed, "Architects in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, even as they are highly literate in computer-aided digital design, are far more likely to be engaged in socially or ecologically conscious work than their older colleagues, or to reject a quest for celebrity in favor of experiments in communal design. In the kinds of careers they hope to shape for themselves, they are responding—directly or indirectly—to the architectural excesses of the past 10 years and to the sense that, as top architects grew more famous and their projects exploded in scale, they found themselves with less political power than they had before those commissions came along, not more."

The short of it is that companies have been obliged to rethink their role in society, with their employees—especially their younger ones—all but demanding it.

Here are a few profiles of design firms that have become engaged in CSR-based programs. HGA has a culture of design advocacy, according to **Vicki Hooper**. A healthcare facilities project manager, Hooper was part of the group that, five years ago, included this language in its strategic plan: "Make a contribution. We will practice community and environmental stewardship." HGA has no formal program and becomes involved on a case-by-case basis, including the design of a hospital in Africa. "We don't give up paid time, but we are certainly flexible if someone is involved in a pro bono project," she explains, adding: "There is no pressure to participate."

Perkins+Will is impressively organized in the way it has taken hold of its social purpose projects—to the point that there is an annual report and a dedicated place on its Web site chronicling its socially responsible work. Inspired by its 2007 board meeting in New Orleans, the firm realized that it had to live, not just mouth, its motto: "Ideas and buildings that honor the broader goals of society."

On the Cover: The Diabetes Health and Wellness Institute at Juanita J. Craft Recreation Center



Diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in the United States, higher among African-Americans and even higher than the national average in South Dallas. Perkins+Will's Dallas office designed this first-of-its kind facility, pro bono, for the City of Dallas and the Baylor Healthcare System. P+W transformed and expanded a recreation and health center building for diabetes diagnosis, treatment, and prevention. The face of Juanita Craft, a prominent civil rights leader, is fritted into the glass in the new, two-story-high front entry.

PHOTOS: CHARLES DAVIS SMITH, AIA

“Social commitment is part of our legacy,” president/CEO **Phil Harrison, FAIA**, says. “If you are concerned with the social result of space, you have to be involved with CSR.” Honored last May on its 75th anniversary with the National Building Museum Award for Civic Innovation, the firm puts in the equivalent of 15–20 full-time people per year on socially responsible projects.

It is also a model for how to walk the fine line between showcasing good deeds so they inspire others and bragging about them. Witness this comment in a bylined article on social responsibility within the healthcare facilities design sphere: “It is not an option or an afterthought in our work but a necessary investment in our world and integral to our daily practice,” P+W’s **Jamie Huffcut** wrote in the October 25, 2010, issue of *Contract*.

“We are all starving for good news,” says **John Syvertsen**, “so let’s create some.” Syvertsen, Chicago-based principal of OWP/P / Cannon Design, related, “A couple of years ago we launched a movement that we call ‘Engage!’ The simple premise is that, if we follow our stated purpose—which is to improve peoples’ lives through our work—then we must engage with the world outside the walls of our offices. That involvement increases our knowledge and appreciation of the social/cultural and environmental context in which we live and work.”

Syvertsen, a member of Cannon’s six-person executive leadership team, is currently focused on firmwide environmental sustainability and social engagement. He proudly speaks about the “amazing

young people who believe that their primary purpose is to improve people’s lives,” and who have taken on full-service pro bono efforts. This effort has now spread to all of Cannon’s 15 offices; leaders in each location weigh in on monthly conference calls.

But you don’t have to be an industry giant to be a CSR leader. An interview with architect **Bengie Daniels**, partner in the two-partner, sometimes-four-person Latitude firm in San Antonio, indicates how well it can be done on a small scale but with big enthusiasm all round. Wanting their new firm to be known as “community driven,” the partners decided to donate \$50,000 in services to a worthy non-profit organization for a real project where they could have impact. Through their Web site, they set up a call for proposals that attracted nine applications as well as a fair amount of attention for themselves and those non-profits.

Latitude recruited members of the North San Antonio Chamber of Commerce to whittle down the selection to three. Then the general public was asked to vote, again on the Latitude Web site, about which organization should get the job.

Excitement was expected, but the winner garnered an astonishing 11,000 votes. And that’s how Camp Tejas in Giggings, TX, which needed a dining hall, got a design, drawings, and budget with which to go forward for funding. An engineering firm stepped forward to help out, because, it turned out, one of the partners had gone to the camp.



IMAGE: COURTESY LATITUDE ARCHITECTS INC.

In San Antonio, Latitude Architects hosted a competition among nonprofits to select the one that would benefit most from Latitude’s offer of \$50,000 worth of pro bono services. Camp Tejas, a nondenominational Christian camp in Giggings, TX, was selected. Above is the design for the camp’s new dining hall, which will seat all the campers at one time.



Proceeds from the sale of John Cary’s book, documenting the growing pro bono movement in architecture, benefit Public Architecture (www.publicarchitecture.org).

“Not everything makes sense from a business standpoint,” Daniels observes. Here is the ongoing appeal on the Web site as they move ahead for the next project: “Clients, consultants: Would you consider helping us with our humanity endeavors through the giving of your time and/or resources? Maybe you would like to match a percentage of our professional fee to help build a home or orphanage for someone in need.”

If you are looking for a raft of case studies, pick up a copy of John Cary’s new book, which proves that pro bono is a viable part of a business model. All proceeds from *The Power of Pro Bono, 40 Stories about Design for the Public Good by Architects and Their Clients* go to Public Architecture, where Cary was executive director for several years.

Setting up a formal CSR program is serious business. Here are four imperatives.

1. Be clear on your definitions.

- How do you define *corporate social responsibility* or *pro bono*? There is no one meaning. On a good day, unanimity in design firm partnerships is rare, but lack of a shared language where time and probably money are involved will surely create problems.
- How do you define the stakeholders for the firm in general? For this project in particular, is this group in synch with your firm’s goals?
- How do you define success for the project at hand? **Meg Brown**, HR director at Perkins+Will, told an audience at the 2010 AIA national conference, “We need to identify a metric like LEED.” ISO 26000, now in beta testing, will take a stab at this, and it will stop the CSR equivalent of “green washing.” That said, the recommendation is that you set simple business and humanitarian guidelines and goals for your firm.

2. Pick the right recipient and kind of project for your firm.

Bob Packard, COO of ZGF, says the choice is intuitive, but it must have impact and it “must support education and the arts, because that’s ZGF’s focus.”

OWP/P / Cannon Design’s Open Hand Studio participates in a community mixer where candidates and providers can meet and decide if what’s important to the candidate is mutually important. Roy Abernathy reports, “Jova/Daniels/Busby has had problems where we have been flooded with requests and had to turn a non-profit’s request down, so we try to be very targeted and make sure that our pro bono work has the biggest impact.”

Many firms are seemingly casual about how they decide where they will become involved. More than once I heard, “People come to us, and the partners decide and authorize on a case-by-case basis.” Mancini-Duffy, for example, became involved with the Anne Frank Museum because broker friends came to the firm with the situation. Still, indicates chairman **Tony Schirripa**, they did some due diligence, checking to see if there is liability exposure to the firm and whether the project might entail any legal, financial, or political repercussions.

AECOM’s Joe Brown cautions to look in both directions, in and out: “You have to be careful; people have their own agenda. We work with the Trust for Public Land and ULI; they are perfect partners because they are open and multi-directional. You have to do unequivocal, un-agendized good.”

3. Staff appropriately.

The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* makes the point to have the right people on the project and then have good project management to get the most benefit from the contribution of their time. Enthusiasm counts. Abernathy explains, “The principals are the ones who decide where the effort is focused, but very often the employees bring requests forward.”

Given the economy, a few firms find that CSR is a good way to use people who aren’t billable. HKS’ **Ralph Hawkins, FAIA**, observes, “In a little way, it always justifies keeping people around.”

Meg Brown indicates that the younger generation wants ownership “because it trains them in leadership and teamwork.” In his book *Citizen You, Doing Your Part to Change the World*, **Jonathan M. Tisch**, chairman/CEO of Loews Hotels and a major philanthropist, provides pointers on how they can make their case: “Create a written proposal [to management] and a brief presentation that describes the group or cause and explain how it fits in with your company’s culture and mission.”

4. Organize the CSR work as if it were a paid project.

Former President Bill Clinton, who describes himself nowadays as an NGO, participated in a private Webcast of a UBS Wealth Management Roundtable last October 27. Here’s what he said: “To be an effective do-gooder, you have to be hard-headed and keep score... You have to ask ‘How?’ not ‘How much?’—or nothing will get done. Have a vision, explain that vision, develop and execute a strategy, judge whether you are making progress, and perhaps change your strategy accordingly. And keep going and restating the vision.”



In the SMPS Marketing Resource Center

The annual reports of these firms detail their CSR activities. To read the reports, visit the Marketing Resource Center on MySMPS.org and access the *Marketer* folder for December 2010.

For our world, the AIA's 2008 publication "Institute Guidelines to Assist AIA Members, Firms, and Components in Undertaking Pro Bono Services Activities," spells out everyone's obligations thoroughly. Beyond that, plan on progress reviews by a senior task force. Communicate broadly through regular and perhaps social media channels. Set this volunteer category into performance reviews. Coordinate with the firm's marketing team. Know whether this campaign will be limited to this one project or become part of a long-term commitment, and act accordingly. Give the project a job number so time can be monitored. Marshal all the resources you need: people, services, and perhaps financial support. Be clear but flexible about whether the work will be done during or outside of work hours. Look for opportunities to create training from the local community or end-user.

How does all this relate to marketing?

An interesting site called tbl.com makes a good point: "First you do good, responsible work that must be executed on a continuing, sustainable basis. Supporting a cause, while intrinsically commendable in itself... must necessarily have a direct relationship with the company business."

Smart companies make sure that, internally and externally, this effort is recognized as a benefit to the firm and its clients. Look at this marketing message from Jova/Daniels/Busby: "We do pro bono work for religious, higher education, institutional,

and non-profit clients." Roy Abernathy affirms, "We extend the promise that, through our engagement with corporate, law, and government clients, we will continue to do this pro bono work—showing the for-profit clients that by hiring us they are giving back to their community."

Rather than treat CSR as a distinct activity, think about it holistically. Here are some ideas for discreet promotion: Create a dedicated Web page to get people involved and the rest of the firm excited about the commitment. Use it also to acknowledge the people working on the project, who are most likely doing this in their spare time (and, of course, nobody has that). Link that page to your recruitment page. One firm took out a full-page ad in a trade publication to praise its pictured volunteers. PR Newswire convened a virtual conference called "Engage CSR 2010"—no reason that our industry couldn't do its own.

Other ideas: Give a firmwide Social Responsibility Award. Send out an appropriately modest news release explaining the work, the purpose being less to laud your firm than to call attention to the fact that everyone deserves good design, no matter their circumstances. There is a CSR circuit on BusinessWire, if you want to invest further.

If you have a blog, tap into it to find like-minded participants. If you're in the 1% Solution program, be sure your work is featured on that site. Communicate regularly to the shareholders, as well.

“You don’t have to be an industry giant to be a CSR leader.”

Work with the beneficiary on ways for them to tell the story; as Ralph Hawkins says, “Most organizations will say they are being helped and give this visibility.”

In short, let yourself get caught doing good deeds—which, incidentally, is one of the oldest definitions of public relations.

One other bonus from CSR, assuming it is integrated with the firm’s marketing: You can show the young professionals involved how marketing works to their and their firm’s advantage.

Certainly, there are many benefits from a CSR program: It’s great for a company’s reputation, helps with retention and recruitment, and strengthens relationships among workers. It trains people to listen to the stakeholders and to each other, and listening is a skill that sorely needs developing.

But is there a downside to CSR engagement? Oh, yes. Anticipate potential problems. A poorly defined, poorly managed project can create unintended consequences. People have become skeptical to the point of maliciousness. Chevron, for example, recently broke its compelling “We agree” campaign, which declares: “Healthy businesses need healthy communities... We’re making a difference where it matters. Because the truth is, our business depends on thriving communities.” But the ads and Chevron.com/weagree were pirated and pilloried. The Yes Men, brand terrorists, broke the campaign a week early, perfectly copied and parodied.

A rash of essays make “The Case against Corporate Social Responsibility,” which is the title of an article in the *Wall Street Journal* last August 23 by Dr. Aneel Karnani, an associate professor of strategy at the University of Michigan’s School of Business. He wrote: “Can companies do well by doing good? Yes, sometimes. But the idea that companies have a responsibility to act in the public interest and will profit from doing so is fundamentally flawed... Influential institutions like the Academy of Management and the United Nations, among many others, encourage companies to pursue such strategies... It’s not surprising that this idea has won over so many people—it’s a very appealing proposition... But it’s an illusion, and a potentially dangerous one... Very simply, in cases where private profits and public interests are aligned, the idea of corporate social responsibility is irrelevant: Companies that simply do everything they can to boost profits will end up increasing social welfare.”

I admit, after months of research, that I am nervous about “cause fatigue.” I’m concerned that the ubiquitous triple bottom line is becoming a meaningless mantra. Change is in the offing, but how

much of what was spontaneous and good before corporate social responsibility became an acronym will be lost once CSR becomes organized, scrutinized, and measured? It would be remarkable if “all organizations with promising solutions [could] be equipped to successfully take on urgent social challenges,” which is how the Taproot Foundation views the CSR movement.

In other words, there would be no tradeoffs, no turf issues, no upturned business paradigm. Instead, economic efficiency and social equity, hand in hand. What will it take to get to that point? Are you in, or out? [m](#)

About the Author



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Learn More

Learn more about corporate social responsibility and the projects and companies referenced in this article on the Web.

- **AECOM:** www.aecom.com/About/Social+Responsibility
- **American Institute of Architects:** www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia/documents/pdf/aia082967.pdf
- **Arup:** www.arup.com/About_us/Making_a_difference.aspx
- **The Chronicle of Philanthropy:** www.philanthropy.com
- **International Organization for Standardization:** www.iso.org/iso/social_responsibility
- **Latitude Architects:** www.latitudearch.com/humanitarian_endeavors/he_overview.html
- **The One Percent:** www.theonepercent.org
- **OWP/P | Cannon Design:** www.owpp.com/content.cfm/about_open_hand_studio
- **Perkins+Will:** www.perkinswill.com/purpose/social-purpose.html
- **Public Architecture:** www.publicarchitecture.org/The_1.htm