

## The ins and outs of authentic publicity

By Joan Capelin,  
Hon. AIA,  
Hon. AIA NYS,  
Fellow PRS

STANLEY STARK



ARCHITECTS VYING FOR ATTENTION ON THE STREET.  
THE PUBLIC - CURIOUS TO INDIFFERENT.  
12-2-05 / SA.

You can't win fame; you earn it. You don't get all those honors and awards by being lucky; that's a myth. They come after very hard work and years of building your reputation.

There are dozens of ways for architects to become well known, perhaps esteemed, without having an immediately publishable project.

If you get famous without achieving something, you've probably committed a crime. In today's journalism, "What's gone wrong?" sells far more papers than "What's working?" Only the sports pages root for the home team.

Time was when the work came to the architect. Without branding. Without advertising. Without publicity (well, that could be argued). Just good solid family connections and a modicum of luck.

In the late 1970s, all that changed. The Feds decreed that professionals of all stripes were free to seek work from people they didn't know, just like any other business. Once design firms rushed into the marketplace, everyone else had no choice but to do the same. Competition heated up.

But not every firm has great work or even current work. How can a new firm compete, with no portfolio to show? For that mat-

ter, how can a long-standing firm do so, if there's nothing current to provide visibility? How does anyone stand a chance, when the so-called starchitects have so skewed the public perception of the profession that you can't get choice work unless your last name is Gehry, Stern, or Viñoly?

Architects are justifiably proud of their projects, into which they have poured their heart, talent, and time. They've been roughed up by the client, the builder, the program manager, and the city agencies, even by the community. Would it be too much to ask for a design or newsstand magazine to publish the work?

Actually, yes. One reason is that it has never been the editor's job to promote your project for you. More to the point, like the mega-lotteries, the number of magazine pages may be rising as the economy recovers, but many deferred, publishable projects are coming on line, so the chances for your efforts to get covered are not improving. Even the other sections of the magazine – practice, technology, book reviews, and letters to the editor – are stuffed.

**Fame Principle 1: Redefine "accomplishment," as in "helping the design community to prevail."**

This article provides stories about how fame finds people who place themselves in its path. The first anecdote is about the Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership, then a client of mine and still a regional firm in Oregon with a reputation that was strictly west of the Rockies. ZGF's reputation-making Justice Center was occupied, and the citizens had come to accept Portland's first downtown mixed-use tower. Things were

picking up speed – until ZGF hit a dry spell: all its work was in process, with nothing to show.

At the same time, the nation's design community had gone into shock. Insurance rates had risen sky-high. Pay the premiums, and any profit would vanish. Risk going bare and court dire consequences. Robert Packard, Assoc. AIA, managing partner of ZGF recalls, "We couldn't talk about our designs; we had nothing to show. And I was preoccupied by this insurance thing's assault on our stability. You challenged us to show equal leadership in firm management by finding ways that ZGF could help the entire industry remedy this destructive situation."

ZGF joined with local lawyers and accountants to explain to business and civic leaders the far-reaching economic consequences of this destabilizing insurance situation: that is, construction would simply stop and firms would fold.

Packard didn't restrict his perspective to Oregon; his advocacy of project insurance galvanized the professions, brought ZGF attention and credibility, attracted local and then national media coverage, and brought about extensive new connections. And, it enabled the firm to renegotiate its contracts with its clients, an important bonus.

**Fame Principle 2: If you don't ask, you don't get.**

A few years back, Michael Avramides ran a flourishing community housing practice. When word of an opportunity to design, *pro bono*, an 890-square-foot Ben & Jerry's "partnership" on 125th Street reached him, Avramides got the

I'm nobody!  
Who are you?

assignment from the startled owner, who almost didn't expect anyone would step forth. The scoop shop was staffed by residents from a nearby shelter who worked there for the training and sense of purpose.

Although Avramides wasn't concerned, as his consultant I was hesitant to tell the world – especially his clients – that he was designing for free. Good things started happening immediately. Ben and Jerry themselves traveled from Vermont for the mid-summer opening. Opening day, crowds came for the special events and free ice cream, served by “celebrity scoopers,” including some Avramides clients.

National media turned up, too. Kids and ice cream is a good photo op, and Los Angeles was in flames that same month. Every network, every New York daily, and *People* magazine carried interviews and pictures of the store, the workers, and especially the owner, with his arm around his beaming, if somewhat embarrassed, architect. *Metropolitan Home* celebrated Avramides's good heart (so much for my instincts about his charitable gesture). Success derived from a great story, not about the prescribed and humble architecture, but about the selfless architect.

### Fame Principle 3: Get caught doing good deeds.

Charles Linn, FAIA, in addition to his long history as an editor and special projects organizer within *Architectural Record*, was part of the team that annually presented extraordinary discussions about architecture and ethics at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. “Choose something you know about, and have

a passion for, and get out there and do something about it,” Linn exhorts. “Get known! People do have to know you are doing something.”

In other words, if Bob Packard had just said his fill at that businessmen's luncheon and sat down, if Mike Avramides had just sketched out the store and gone back to his office, or if Charles Linn had sent out an announcement of the program – their service to their community, client base, and profession would not have been as effective and influential. Inspire others to similar engagement and inevitably you bring attention to your own service.

Don't enter every competition that comes along. Besides the expense and emotional toll, your chances of getting visibility and useful connections are far greater if, say, you lobby actively to change a law that hampers your community's ability to build, as Russ Davidson, FAIA, has done. Become truly expert in some facet of architecture and lecture. Raise the level of architectural literacy in the U.S. That will cut through the cacophony of the marketplace “so dominated,” as Stanley Stark, FAIA, says, “by celebrity and entertainment values.”

Or, run for office. I remember standing on a windy street corner to hawk the candidacy of the late architect John Boogaerts, FAIA, when he decided to run for Congress. Then someone got in my face: “What makes you think that an architect – an architect! – could ever be an asset to the House and to the

Choose something you know about, and have a passion for, and get out there and do something about it

neighborhood?” What a moment of truth for someone who has spent her career telling people about the value of good design!

Boogaerts didn't win the seat, but he had moxie that ultimately catapulted his architectural career. A decade later, Richard Swett, FAIA, parlayed his excellent training and connections into a term in Washington and then service in Denmark as our Ambassador. If he never designed a building, Swett's advocacy earned him important visibility.

### Fame Principle 4: It all comes down to access.

Long ago I realized that there are only three things you want from astute public relations: visibility, credibility, and access. I have already pointed out that you do not need built work to be visible or credible. But how do you get access? By getting curious about what other people know – among them, the client base.

Michael Farewell, FAIA, actually achieved all three in a way that bespeaks creativity and professionalism. Invited to address the New Jersey State League of Municipalities on cultural entities and economic development – a great audience, if you design civic structures – Farewell wondered how arts institutions around the state viewed his topic. What things might really get done, or not, and why? He hit the road, interviewing New Jersey museum and theater directors in person. This research added color as well as authority to his remarks. His speech was well

promoted, well received, and reported – and he now has access to these influential citizens and officials.

### Fame Principle 5: “Accomplishment” depends on your own perspective.

A young architect earnestly asked for my advice. He had restored the lobby of a Queens apartment building and wanted to get it published. Usually people come to me with entire buildings to promote; still, I talked him through the drill, wondering if it were irresponsible to raise his expectations. The lobby may have become more distinctive, but would an editor find it consequential?

Clearly, he felt empowered. He produced his package – design statement, storyline, pictures and captions, plans, fact sheet, binder – went the rounds, and landed up with coverage in *Oculus*, *New York Construction News*, a couple of the real estate publications, and one of the design magazines. They appreciated his well-prepared presentation and took him seriously.

This final anecdote is not meant to rev up every young practitioner or new office; rather, it's to point out that if you think you're good and that what you do is good, it probably is worthy of attention, somewhere.

### Final Fame Principle: Follow your star boldly – then use the results wisely.

Joan Capelin, president of Capelin Communications and author of *Communication by Design*, salutes poet Emily Dickinson, whose poem provided the title to this article.