

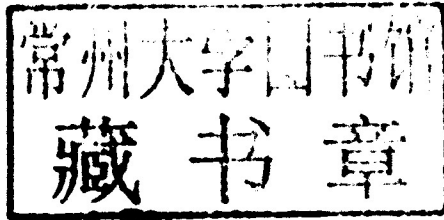
THE POWER OF

PRO BONO

**40 Stories about Design for
the Public Good by Architects
and Their Clients**

Edited by John Cary and Public Architecture

The Power of Pro Bono



Credits

cover

SHoP Architects
39751 Project, Pass Christian, Mississippi.
2006

pages 36–37

Min | Day
Art Farm, Marquette, Nebraska. Rendering

pages 68–69

Public Architecture
Day Labor Station, Los Angeles, California.
Rendering

pages 100–101

Public Architecture
Sidewalk Plaza, San Francisco, California.
Rendering

pages 136–37

Pugh + Scarpa
Green Dot School, Los Angeles, California.
Rendering

pages 174–75

Perkins+Will
Juanita J. Craft Recreation Center, Dallas,
Texas. Rendering

pages 210–11

Koning Eizenberg Architecture
28th Street Supportive Housing,
Santa Monica, California. Rendering

Peter Aaron / Esto 43, 44

Joe Aker / Gensler 155, 157–59

Courtesy APTUS Architecture 33

Iwan Baan 233 top left, 236–37 top

Richard Barnes 194 middle left,
195 top three

Robert Batey 17

Robert Benson 145–48

Eduardo Calderon 31, 239, 240 top, 241

Courtesy CAST Architecture 87–89

Rico Castillero 151–53

Courtesy CBT Architects 24

Chuck Choi 274

Courtesy CORE 39–41

Grey Crawford 191, 193, 194 top,
195 bottom right, 196 bottom

Will Crocker 57, 58, 61, 83, 84 bottom,
213, 215 top and bottom

Bruce Damont 139–42

Mark Darley / Esto 109, 111, 181–83, 263

Marvin Dungao xii

Courtesy ECI-Hyer 217–19, 221

Courtesy Elmslie Osler Architect 77–81

Courtesy Eskew+Dumez+Ripple 59

Franco Fanfani / Public Architecture
68–69, 267

Jamie Myers Forsythe 51–55

Jeff Garland 185–87, 189

Courtesy Gluckman Mayner Architects
vii

Jeff Goldberg / Esto 164 bottom right,
165 top right and bottom, 167

Art Gray 243–47

Chris Grimley / Public Architecture 277

Steve Hall / Hedrich Blessing Photog-
rappers 16, 125–29, 268

Richard Hammond / Gensler 223–25, 227

Kristin Harp / Perkins+Will 22

Courtesy Hathorne Architects 188

Ken Hayden 21 right

Courtesy HOK 205–9

Walter Jennings / Maurice Jennings
Architect 47–49, 281

Courtesy Jova/Daniels/Busby 113–15, 117

Alan Karchmer 25

Joel Koyama 177–79

Courtesy Kuhn Riddle Architects 249,
251–53

Brad Leibin / Public Architecture 100–101

Alexei Levedev / Momenta 229, 230, 232
top left, 233 top right and bottom 234,
237 bottom

Chris Machian / minorwhite studios 64

Courtesy Marpillero Pollak Architects
171, 172

Peter Mauss / Esto 162, 164 top left,
bottom left, and top right, 165 top left,
166, 169, 264, 265 (Library)

Charles Mayer 269

Courtesy Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle
103–7

Matthew Millman 21 left, 194 bottom left
and bottom right, 195 middle and bottom left,
196 top, 273

Courtesy Min | Day 36–37, 63, 66–67, 261

Greg Murphey 119, 120, 123

Courtesy Perkins+Will 174–75

John Peterson / Public Architecture xi

Christian Phillips 23, 131–35

Undine Prohl 214, 215 middle

Courtesy Pugh + Scarpa 136–37

Brian Rose 255–59

Matt Rouse / EHDD 91–95, 271

Cesar Rubio 19

Sally Schoolmaster xv

Courtesy Scott Edwards Architecture
199–203

Courtesy SHoP Architects 74

Pete Sieger 276

Courtesy Steelcase 278

James Sweeney / Design Corps 27

Lara Swimmer 240 bottom

Courtesy uRbanDetail 98, 99

Charlie Varley ix, 230, 232 middle left,
bottom, and top right, 233 middle right

Albert Vecerka / Esto 161

Roderick Villafranca / Koning Eizenberg
Architecture 210–11

Andrew Wainio 97

Seth Welty 84 top, 85

Courtesy William McDonough +

Partners 231

Courtesy Wnuk Spurlock 29

Roy Zipstein cover, 71–73, 75

Contents

vi Foreword
Democratizing
Design
Majora Carter

x Preface
Why Pro Bono?
John Peterson

16 Architecture as
a Social Act
John Cary

Arts

70 39571 Project
Pass Christian,
Mississippi
SHoP Architects

76 Food Chain
Los Angeles, California
Elmslie Osler Architect

82 Hollygrove
New Orleans, Louisiana
orgarchitecture

86 P-Patch
Seattle, Washington
CAST Architecture

90 Randall Overlook
San Francisco,
California
EHDD

96 Roosevelt Park
Detroit, Michigan
uRbanDetail

38 Fusebox
Washington, D.C.
CORE

42 Green Street
Middletown,
Connecticut
Centerbrook Architects
and Planners

46 Halcyon
Fayetteville, Arkansas
Maurice Jennings
Architect

50 p:ear
Portland, Oregon
SERA Architects

56 Prospect.1
New Orleans, Louisiana
Eskew+Dumez+Ripple

62 Soft Cube
Omaha, Nebraska
Min | Day

Civic

102 Alvar Street
New Orleans, Louisiana
Meyer, Scherer &
Rockcastle

108 Goodwill
San Francisco,
California
McCall Design Group

112 Hands On
Atlanta, Georgia
Jova/Daniels/Busby

118 Kam Liu
Chicago, Illinois
Studio Gang Architects

124 Lavezzorio
Chicago, Illinois
Studio Gang Architects

130 Yawkey
Boston, Massachusetts
Chan Krieger NBBJ

Community

Education

138 Bridge School
Hillsborough, California
WRNS Studio

144 Calvin Hill
New Haven,
Connecticut
Gray Organschi
Architecture

150 Hanna Fenichel
Solana Beach,
California
Stephen Dalton
Architects

154 KIPP
Houston, Texas
Gensler

160 Library Initiative
New York, New York

170 Outdoor Classroom
Staten Island, New York
Marpillero Pollak
Architects

Health

212 Alligator House
New Orleans, Louisiana
buildingstudio

216 Camp Kushtaka
Cooper Landing, Alaska
ECI/Hyer

222 Emerald Bay
Catalina Island,
California
Gensler

228 Make It Right
New Orleans, Louisiana

238 Roxbury Estates
Seattle, Washington
Olson Kundig Architects

242 Sierra Bonita
West Hollywood,
California
Patrick Tighe
Architecture

248 Stanley Street
Amherst, Massachusetts
Kuhn Riddle Architects

254 Tassafaronga
Oakland, California
David Baker + Partners

176 Adopt A Room
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Perkins+Will

180 Homeless Prenatal
San Francisco,
California
Peterson Architects

184 Judson Center
Royal Oak, Michigan
Hathorne Architects

**190 Planned
Parenthood**
San Francisco Bay Area,
California
Fougeron Architecture

198 Virginia Garcia
McMinnville, Oregon
Scott | Edwards
Architecture

204 YWCA
Chicago, Illinois
HOK

Housing

260 How to Pro Bono
John Cary

282 Acknowledgments
John Cary

**284 About the
Contributors**

286 Credits

The Power of Pro Bono

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**Edited by John Cary and Public Architecture
Foreword by Majora Carter**

Metropolis Books

Contents

vi **Foreword**
**Democratizing
Design**
Majora Carter

x **Preface**
Why Pro Bono?
John Peterson

16 **Architecture as
a Social Act**
John Cary

Arts

38 **Fusebox**
Washington, D.C.
CORE

42 **Green Street**
Middletown,
Connecticut
Centerbrook Architects
and Planners

46 **Halcyon**
Fayetteville, Arkansas
Maurice Jennings
Architect

50 **p:ear**
Portland, Oregon
SERA Architects

56 **Prospect.1**
New Orleans, Louisiana
Eskew+Dumez+Ripple

62 **Soft Cube**
Omaha, Nebraska
Min | Day

70 **39571 Project**
Pass Christian,
Mississippi
SHoP Architects

76 **Food Chain**
Los Angeles, California
Elmslie Osler Architect

82 **Hollygrove**
New Orleans, Louisiana
crgarchitecture

86 **P-Patch**
Seattle, Washington
CAST Architecture

90 **Randall Overlook**
San Francisco,
California
EHDD

96 **Roosevelt Park**
Detroit, Michigan
uRbanDetail

Civic

102 **Alvar Street**
New Orleans, Louisiana
Meyer, Scherer &
Rockcastle

108 **Goodwill**
San Francisco,
California
McCall Design Group

112 **Hands On**
Atlanta, Georgia
Jova/Daniels/Busby

118 **Kam Liu**
Chicago, Illinois
Studio Gang Architects

124 **Lavezzorio**
Chicago, Illinois
Studio Gang Architects

130 **Yawkey**
Boston, Massachusetts
Chan Krieger NBBJ

Community

138 Bridge School
Hillsborough, California
WRNS Studio

144 Calvin Hill
New Haven,
Connecticut
Gray Organschi
Architecture

150 Hanna Fenichel
Solana Beach,
California
Stephen Dalton
Architects

154 KIPP
Houston, Texas
Gensler

160 Library Initiative
New York, New York

170 Outdoor Classroom
Staten Island, New York
Marpillero Pollak
Architects

Education

Health

212 Alligator House
New Orleans, Louisiana
buildingstudio

216 Camp Kushtaka
Cooper Landing, Alaska
ECI/Hyer

222 Emerald Bay
Catalina Island,
California
Gensler

228 Make It Right
New Orleans, Louisiana

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184 Judson Center
Royal Oak, Michigan
Hathorne Architects

**190 Planned
Parenthood**
San Francisco Bay Area,
California
Fougeron Architecture

198 Virginia Garcia
McMinnville, Oregon
Scott | Edwards
Architecture

204 YWCA
Chicago, Illinois
HOK

Housing

260 How to Pro Bono
John Cary

282 Acknowledgments
John Cary

**284 About the
Contributors**

286 Credits

Democratizing Design

Foreword by Marjora Carter

One of my guiding principles is a phrase I first heard from a single mom in my neighborhood of the South Bronx. I was fortunate to meet her when I was running a nonprofit that worked to find environmental justice solutions to the area's economically and environmentally challenging conditions. She said, "You shouldn't have to move out of your neighborhood to live in a better one."

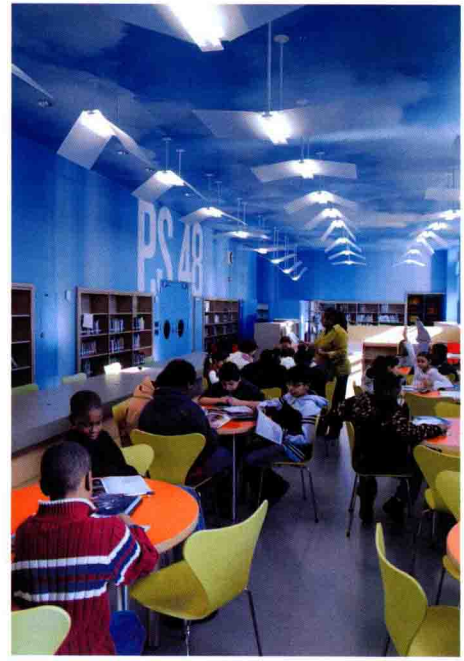
This notion has economic and environmental implications that span the globe. How we design and operate our built environment determines how people will move through it, to it, or out of it. When we let the design of our communities sink to the point where the only move people want to make is *away*, we create problems. Combining innovative thought with practical local knowledge dramatically increases the chances for something good to happen in those areas.

Too often, talented designers and the money to implement their creativity are not dispersed equally throughout our society—leaving portions of the population desperate to see something positive in their lives, while knowing that elsewhere (and not very far away), people are in more human-friendly surroundings. The good air, the green open spaces, the clean water, the healthy food, and the good design are all somewhere other than where these people are. This influences a person's self-image and many things that stem from it.

The global environmental problems we are beginning to face up to are a result of infrastructure design that treats poor people as less valuable than their wealthier counterparts. I imagine that if we had placed our transport, energy, waste, and agribusiness infrastructures within rich and poor communities equally, we would have had a clean, green economy decades ago. But we didn't.

This book shows how even seemingly small efforts can make people's day-to-day experiences healthier, more engaging, and more life affirming. It's unfortunate that these designers have to work pro bono. The product of great design has

Students work in the library at P.S. 48 in the Bronx, designed by Gluckman Mayner Architects as part of the Robin Hood Library Initiative.



lasting economic impacts that benefit some people directly and also benefit those who otherwise would be paying higher costs for social services but seeing lower educational outcomes and productivity. Well-informed, sensitive design can diminish the opportunity costs to a society that does not enable every person's creativity and passion to contribute to the greater good.

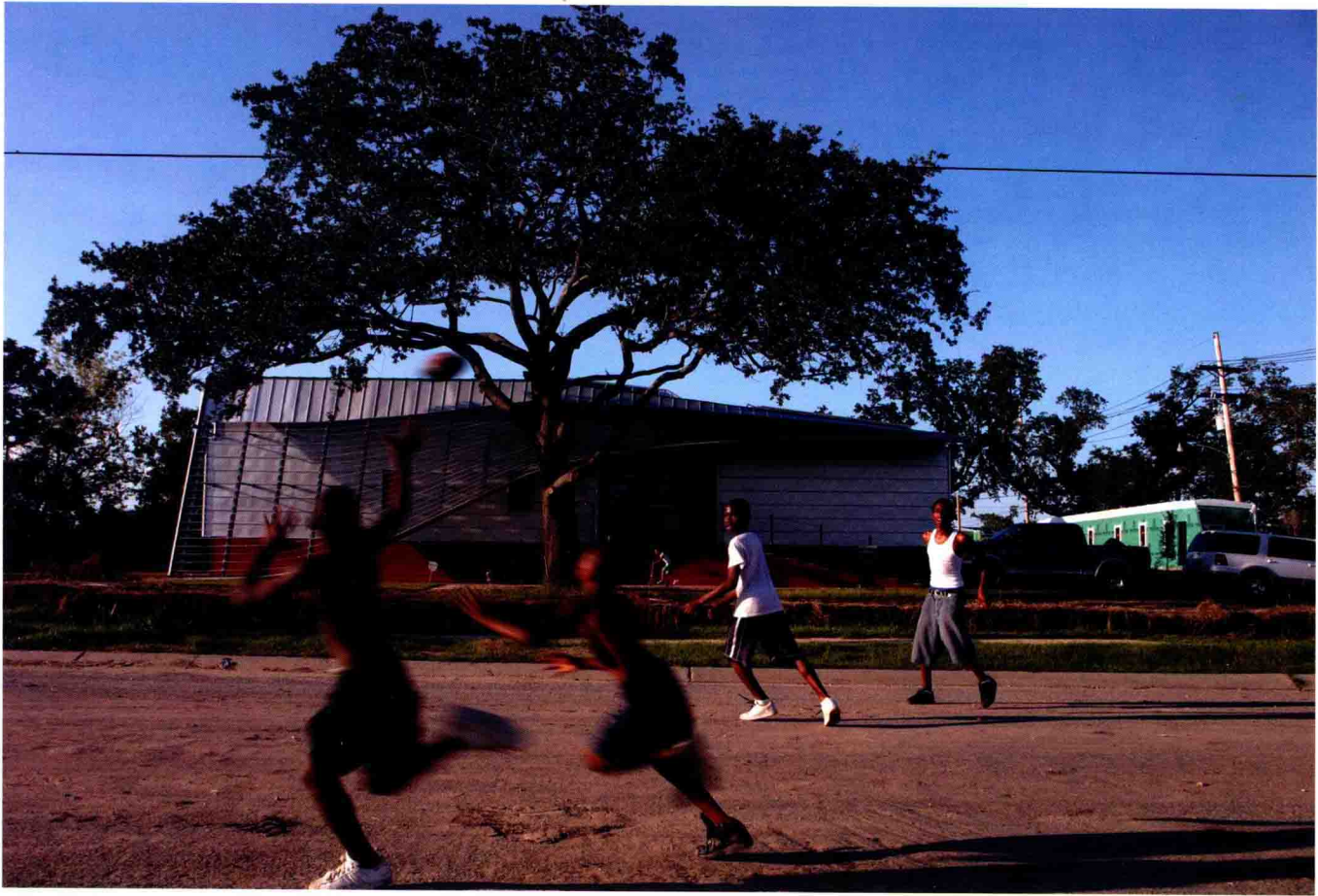
Recently I paid a visit to my former elementary school, P.S. 48 in the South Bronx, to dedicate the newly refurbished library, which is one of many libraries featured in this book, and which was designed on a pro bono basis through the Robin Hood Library Initiative. When I was growing up, the space was your standard public school no-frills library, but it worked for me, in part, because I was blessed with a very active imagination, a supportive family, and luck. Too many of my peers did not have those things going for them. We grew up when “the Bronx was burning,” and many of the people around me died, went to prison, had babies at a very young age, or some combination of the three. How many would still be here if they had had this library and just that little extra safe space in which to dream? Where would they have focused their lives if their local environment had been filled with trees and green open spaces instead of diesel and power-plant exhaust and dangerous truck routes that lined their way to school? Although the Bronx is no longer burning, the hopes and dreams of many of our young people are.

Currently the U.S. holds about 5 percent of the world's population but produces 25 percent of its greenhouse gases. You might not know that 25 percent of the world's incarcerated population is held in the U.S., too. Studies by major universities have linked proximity to the sources of fossil-fuel emissions to learning disabilities in young children. Among poor children, the presence of these disabilities is a leading indicator of future jail time. A lack of green in people's lives also contributes to higher stress, lower self-esteem, and subpar school performance. These are all leading precursors of incarceration, domestic abuse, and increased high-school dropout and teen-pregnancy rates.

In the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, boys play in front of a house designed by Trahan Architects as part of the Make It Right Homes project.

Our built environment *is* our environment, and we have some control over it as a society. The design projects in this book and the people behind them show how a select group of people chose to collaborate and improve our world. I hope that this pro bono phase is just the proving ground needed to demonstrate the true value of good design and its implementation. These projects are valuable for the people who plan and execute them and for those who experience the finished products in their daily lives.

We can achieve an America that is as good as its promise—but not by accident. I hope *The Power of Pro Bono* helps you dream bigger about where you are and talk about it with your friends, family, and others. That’s how all great things start.



Why Pro Bono?

Preface by John Peterson

Because we should? Because it's good? Many would argue that all of us have a responsibility to "give back," and, moreover, that architects have a professional responsibility to provide services to those who can't otherwise afford them. This is a reasonable argument, and I generally agree with it. Yet this idea has done little to motivate me, and I don't believe it will do much to mobilize most designers.

Pro bono service is a good thing to do—although my definition of "good" may not be what you expect. While I don't want to undermine the importance of charitable intention, I do want to fuel the fire of charity by exploring other reasons why people might engage in this work.

"Greed Is Good"

I don't fully support Gordon Gekko's argument in the 1987 film *Wall Street*, but it can help expand the concept of good intentions. For instance, several times a week I run in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. My friend Tom and I frequently end our run by walking a short section of beach, picking up debris along the way. Frankly, Tom began this tradition and he does most of the work. We don't get any recognition for our efforts, but one of our national parks is a little cleaner, and maybe there are fewer shore birds with bellies full of plastic.

Pretty selfless, right? Not really: I get a lot from this activity. I assuage the guilty feelings I have when I just watch Tom eagerly go at the task. I reinforce the sense of ownership I have for a place that has become like my backyard. And I simply feel a little better about myself. I don't imagine that many people would fault me for these selfish motivations, because the outcome is positive and there is a responsible balance between selfish and altruistic intentions.

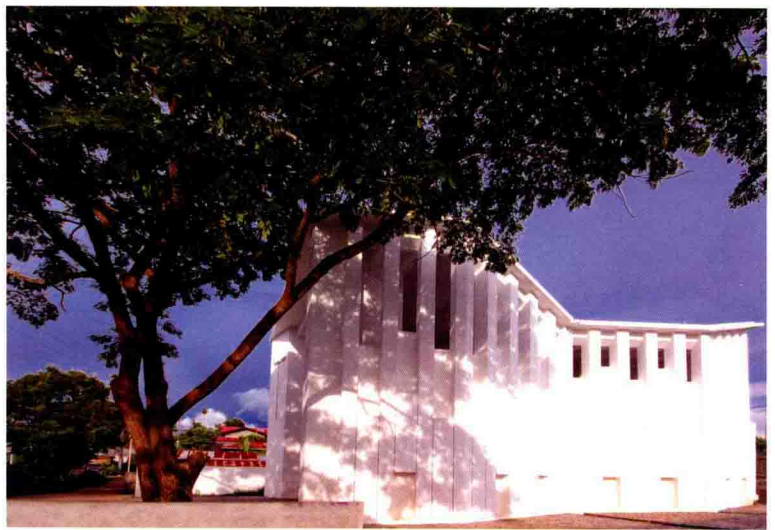


All generous acts involve similarly self-serving motives. At the very least, they make us feel good. If we are going to get profit-oriented businesses, like architecture and design firms, to undertake the most pro bono service that they possibly can, then healthy, self-centered motivations are imperative.

Lesser Stepchild

To date, architecture firms and the profession at large haven't made very good use of pro bono service. There are, of course, exceptions, and this book is full of them. But pro bono projects remain the lesser-loved stepchildren of architectural practice. These are the projects that we typically fit in between our paying jobs, that don't make the portfolio, or that we hand off to the less experienced staff. We simply expect less from these projects. But we *are* being compensated for them, even if not in monetary terms. This is a core message of Public Architecture, the nonprofit organization that I founded in 2002, as we encourage architecture and design firms nationwide to formalize their commitment to the public good. We show firms that pro bono service is good for business, and we help the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors understand the valuable role that design can play in advancing their causes.

Over the years, just as we have faced reluctance from some leaders in the architecture profession about the need to formalize their commitment, we have found that nonprofit and philanthropic leaders are often so focused on the urgency of their day-to-day work that they can be slow to take advantage of opportunities that seem tangential to their primary task. For instance, they may find it difficult to invest in their own work environment when doing so would divert resources from causes like overcoming illiteracy or reducing domestic violence. Organizations shouldn't, of course, invest in facilities if doing so doesn't ultimately improve their bottom line: advancing their mission. But good design can do exactly that.



Not for Nothing

Pro bono service is an investment of architects' time and expertise. When we make an investment in a client, we bring something to the relationship that goes beyond the quality of service. This puts the architect and client in a relationship that is anchored by a shared goal or mission, as opposed to one that is structured by the exchange of fees for services. The architect comes to the table as more of an equal. As we are bringing an investment of in-kind service, we should, within reason, expect to have more influence over the selection and development of a pro bono project. Just as financial donors select and work with nonprofits to identify the best use of their money, architects can similarly guide the focus and use of their gift. This flies in the face of how architects typically approach pro bono projects.

Additionally, we often lower our design expectations under the misguided notion that the highest level of design is inappropriate for the populations that most nonprofits serve. Architects have had a troubled history serving these populations, and poorly conceived projects are often blamed on the arrogance of the architect. But our arrogance is not in elevating the design expectations; it is in our unwillingness to understand and embrace the desires of the people we serve. If the design does not respond to the particular needs of a community, it isn't good design.

Pro bono projects routinely generate deeper client/architect relationships than conventional fee-generating work. Often pro bono clients come to rely on their architects for a broader set of services, so that the architects find themselves in the role of a trusted advisor. One might think that this is about money: pro bono clients will ask for more services because they cost little or nothing. Cost likely has some influence, but the gift of the architects' time and talents conveys to their client that they are dedicated to the same goals. Pro bono or not, the trust of the client is the most significant component of realizing good architecture.