



## Architecture firms find happiness in pro bono

By Riddhi Trivedi St. Clair

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Five years ago, Penny Malina learned from a friend and fellow animal lover that the St. Louis animal shelter needed a larger facility.

Since then, Malina, information technology director for St. Louis-based Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum, and at least four architects and designers from the firm, have spent about 4,000 hours of unpaid time working on the plans.

HOK encourages its employees to donate time to worthy community projects. And it isn't the only local architecture company to do so. Pro bono work, normally associated with the law profession, is growing among architecture firms, say local professionals.

"As architects we have a social responsibility to better the situation as we see it," said Art Bond, a principal in Clayton-based Bond Wolfe Architects Inc.

The increase in pro bono architecture work stems from a sense of social responsibility, he said.

An indicator of that is the growing number of companies signing up for the 1 percent initiative by San Francisco-based, nonprofit Public Architecture, formed in 2002.

Three years ago Public Architecture launched an initiative to get every firm in the country to donate 1 percent of its hours to pro bono projects, said David Meckel, vice president of the organization.

Since then, 390 architecture firms have signed up. This year, they will donate 107,000 hours to pro bono work.

If every architecture company in the country signed up, it would equal 5 million pro bono hours each year — the equivalent of a 2,500-person firm, Meckel said.

"It would be like the largest firm in the world working pro bono," he said.

Recent architecture graduates are the driving force behind the pro bono movement, Meckel said.

"They have a greater sense of responsibility to the environment and social justice. Those qualities were not as present in the generations before," he said.

## HOW IT GETS STARTED

An architecture firm's involvement in such projects most commonly begins with an individual employee, said Jarrett Cooper, principal in St. Louis-based Rosemann & Associates.

"They (employees) bring us a project because they feel strongly about it and want to work on it, and we encourage them to do it," Cooper said. "We allow them time during regular work hours or maybe build a team in the office to help them."

Rosemann donated architectural services to the 14th Street Mall — a residential and commercial development in a run-down north city neighborhood — and the farmer's market in the Ville neighborhood.

Other projects begin as a firm effort, said Andy Trivers, president of Trivers Associates, based in St. Louis. Company principals and clients hear of worthy causes through boards and organizations they are involved in and bring them to the firm.

Most projects are for non-profit organizations. While younger employees may get the ball rolling, they are not the only ones to participate. Company higher-ups, like Tim Rowbottom, a principal with St. Louis-based Lawrence Group, often get involved, too.

Rowbottom designed the interior for the Downtown Children's Center in St. Louis on his first day at work and has been donating time to the project for four years.

## REWARDING WORK

Pro bono work tends to make employees more productive overall, Bond said.

Bond Wolfe recently helped Voices for Children, an organization that provides legal counsel to abused children and those in foster care, find a new location and design the interior.

"It (pro bono work) makes (the firm's employees) feel good about their contribution to society," he said. "That makes them more effective."

And a satisfied employee is more likely to stay at the company longer, Meckel said.

Nonetheless, most companies have to balance their employees' pro bono ambitions with profitability.

While strengthening the company's ties with the community are important, Cooper said, "you have to weigh the pros and cons of what you are getting into."

Most of the time, the decision depends on the company's size and workload.

"A lot of it has to do with how busy we are at any particular moment," Trivers said. "We have a commitment to our (paid) clients, and if we are very busy, we have to pass" on the pro bono project.

It also depends on how much work is entailed. A pro bono project can be anything from a one-time consultation to thousands of hours over several years.

Several architects and designers at the Lawrence Group got involved in the children's center and over the years have donated the equivalent of \$90,000 in billable hours to the project, Rowbottom said.

The 285 professional employees in HOK's St. Louis office donate about 2,000 hours to pro bono work every year — the equivalent of one full-time person. Bond Wolfe employees contribute 150 to 300 hours — roughly 5 percent of total billable hours, according to Bond.

## PERSONAL CONNECTION

Pro bono works give architects more opportunities to be creative.

"It's not that you don't care about the work when you have a paid client, but when you are doing it pro bono, you are sharing something special and unique,"

said Jen Stauber an architecture and urban designer for Trivers.

She's working on the renovation of a four-story former furniture store for the Jacoby Arts Center in Alton.

Horvath can make design decisions on his own, experiment with different tools and designs and when a project is done, feel like he had a personal connection to its success.

He designed the new animal shelter to be a green building, included spaces for prospective pet owners to interact with the animals and created a separate space for ill animals to be quarantined.

By contrast, one of the paid projects he was recently working on was a multibillion-dollar, 6.5-million-square-foot university campus in Saudi Arabia, which at its peak required 250 to 300 people from 10 different HOK offices.

"When you do that you are part of a huge team. It is like collaborative design — every decision has to get passed through a whole team," Horvath said. "That doesn't need to happen in a smaller (pro bono) project."

With a paying client, Horvath said, each design decision has to go through a series of approvals.

In the end, the charity work benefits the firms by building goodwill.

"In that way, it (pro bono work) is not totally selfless. It helps us network within the community," Bond said. "It helps us get more business."

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