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785

FIRMS

271,296

HOURS

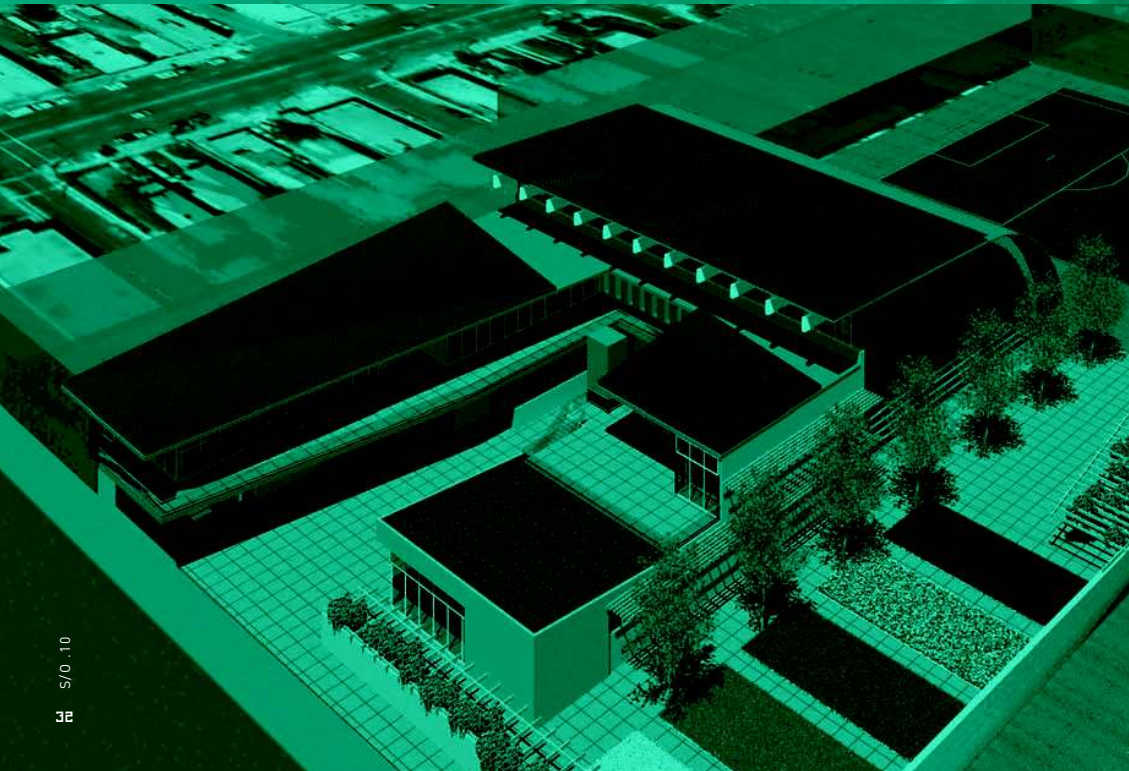
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NON-PROFITS

PAY IT FORWARD

BY

JACK SKELLEY





Why L.A. firms are working pro bono, and what they stand to gain when the power of design outweighs the power of profit

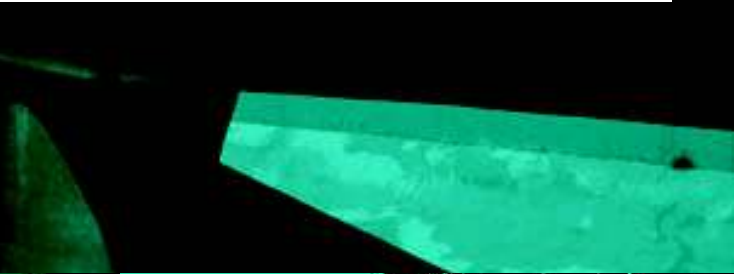
A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO DOING PRO BONO WORK: ARCHITECT John Peterson found himself. During a recession, when billings are down, design firms may be drawn to community-service projects as a way of maintaining a high profile. Peterson, who founded the San Francisco-based Public Architecture in 2002, finds that the benefits of pro bono work transcend business to strike at the very core of his identity as an architect. "I'm an example of someone who didn't have an interest in pro bono work," says Peterson. "For a long time, social-justice issues were seen as a distraction from the clarity of design. But I began to see that attitude as juvenile. Architects have an impact on people that goes beyond pure design."

He and Public Architecture are now pro bono evangelists of sorts, demonstrating how quality of design can improve quality of life. The non-profit firm aims to serve the public by identifying issues that may be solved through good design and supporting solutions through grants and donations. Its portfolio of schools, public spaces and affordable-housing projects is sizable, but perhaps more important is its role as a catalyst for other firms. In 2005 Public Architecture launched The 1%, a pro bono program that coordinates donated services (about one percent of a firm's time) with worthy non-profits.

"We fully understand there is only so much pro bono work you can do," says Peterson. "But look at the doors it opens. It can be a vehicle for testing out R&D. It can provide service models that are both socially and environmentally significant, as well as models for financially sustainable practice. It can expand existing client groups and reach potential new ones. And it's a great way to experiment with new contacts, new skills and new project types."

But such work also reflects the trade's growing interest in socially responsible design. "Social justice issues will rise just as high as green issues have," says Peterson. "In fact, we're seeing a change in the definition of sustainability to include a much broader set of criteria."

Public Architecture's The 1% program inspires architects to work pro bono. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Fuller Lofts by Pugh + Scarpa Architects. Electric Vehicle Charging Station by Pugh + Scarpa Architects. Fuller Lofts. Training center for A World Fit for Kids by Perkins + Will. Portable Construction Training Center by Pugh + Scarpa Architects with Office of Mobile Design.

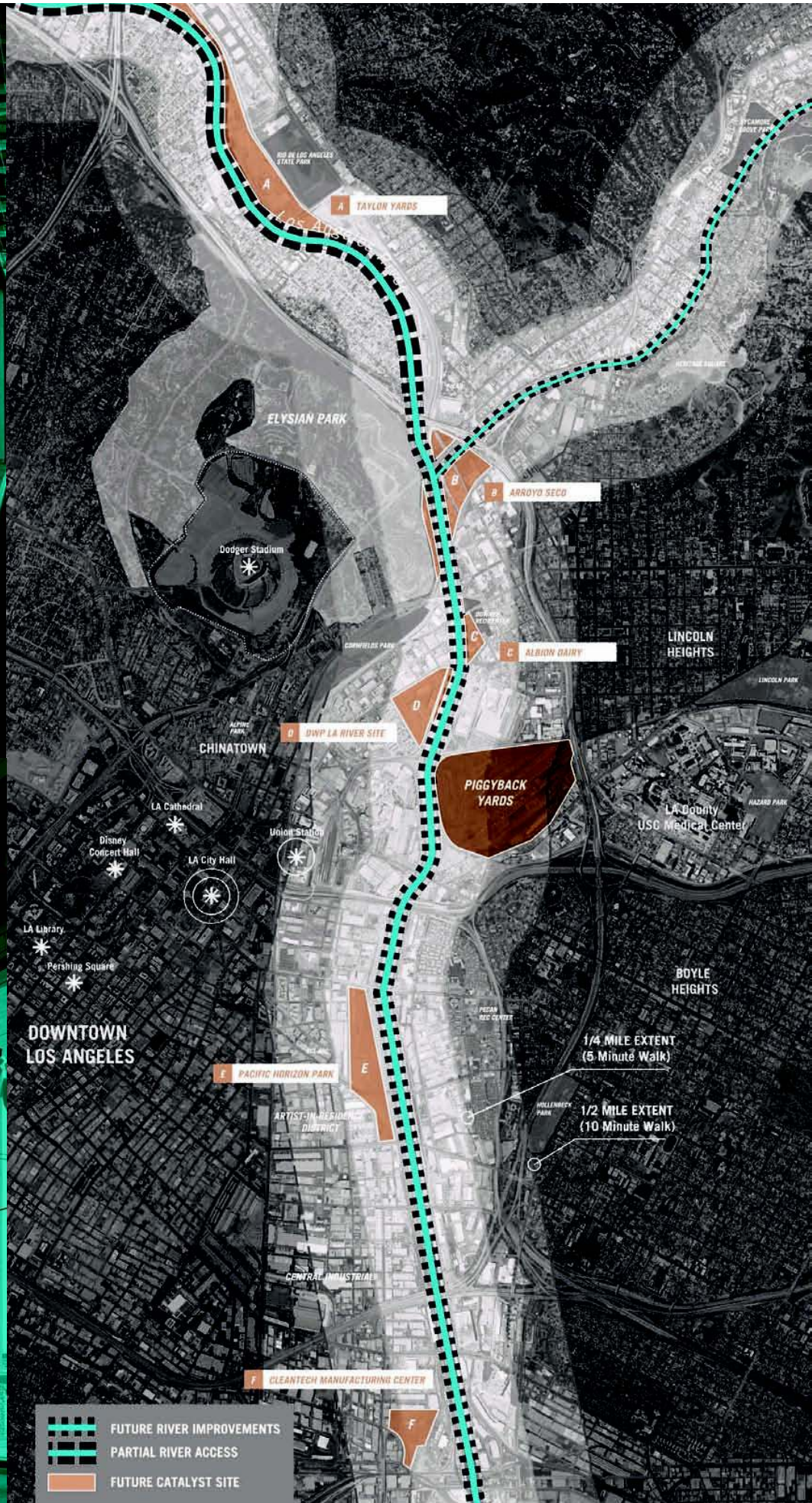




IF
237,599*
ARCHITECTS
 DONATED
1%
 OF THEIR
40 HOUR
 WORK WEEK

IT WOULD TOTAL
5,000,000
HOURS
 ANNUALLY

*Approximate number of architecture professionals working in the U.S. today. Source: theonepercent.org



“SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES WILL RISE JUST AS HIGH AS GREEN ISSUES HAVE. IN FACT, WE'RE SEEING A CHANGE IN THE DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABILITY TO INCLUDE A MUCH BROADER SET OF CRITERIA.”

—JOHN PETERSON, FOUNDER OF THE 1%

In this regard, The 1% has been hugely influential. The organization now includes 785 firms pledging 271,296 hours annually to 376 non-profit organizations by donating one percent of their workday. But the pro bono impetus is always there, whether it's part of a formal program or not.

“We've done a ton of The 1% work,” says Lawrence Scarpa, principal with Santa Monica-based Pugh + Scarpa Architects. “But I've always been a believer that good design and disadvantaged people are not mutually exclusive. So we have a long legacy of doing this prior to The 1%.” Though Scarpa admits that pro bono work “hurts our bottom line, financially,” he adds, “not everything is about business. Engaging in this is a simple equation: We evaluate if a pro bono project is realizable, and if it serves a real community need.”

The list of Pugh + Scarpa community-service jobs—both within The 1% and without—includes Fuller Lofts (renamed Alta Lofts), an adaptive reuse and vertical expansion of a 1920s industrial concrete building located near a recently constructed light-rail line. The firm also engineered the Electric Vehicle Charging Station for the City of Santa Monica, and, working with Jennifer Siegal of Office of Mobile Design, completed the Portable Construction Training Center for Los Angeles's Venice Community Housing Corporation.

Among the Los Angeles offices engaged in The 1%, perhaps the most active is Perkins + Will. The company has many projects in motion including, coordinating several Los Angeles firms in designing a conceptual master plan of the Piggyback Yard for the Friends of the L.A. River, a vision package for the national training center of A World Fit for Kids and an interior renovation of the Burke Health Center's dental suite for the Venice Family Dental Clinic. To approve and track its many undertakings, Perkins + Will created a Social Responsibility department, overseen by senior associate Leigh Christy. “We felt it was important to solidify our commitment to what had been an ad hoc pro

bono effort by establishing a policy in which we have goals for the amount of time we dedicate to these efforts,” says Christy.

And to ensure its time is well spent, the firm chooses its projects carefully. “We don't focus on experimenting,” Christy says. “It needs to be an established non-profit with a clear impact on people, so that the organization can better serve a local neighborhood.” And though the non-profits, and the people served by the organizations, receive a tangible benefit from the work of Perkins + Will, the firm enjoys its own form of payback. “Our pro bono projects provide valuable professional development and mentoring opportunities for junior and senior staff,” says Christy. “And there's the reward of employees knowing that their design efforts really make a difference.”

On the fringe of this trend is Los Angeles-based Marmol Radziner. With a program called Heavy Trash, it has created social-provocateur initiatives that walk the line between community design and guerilla art. “It's not about trying to drum-up work,” says managing principal Leo Marmol. “It's about letting people know who you are.” A recent project named Aqua Line erected “coming soon” signs through West L.A. asking for public comment on a fictional new rail line. Partly a spoof of the city's transportation crisis and partly a call to action, the Aqua Line signage included a phone number for questions and comments from the community. “We've always had an interest in communicating social, urban issues, but so often those dialogs are critical and hurtful,” says Marmol. “We believe they should be healthy and human.”

And, like Peterson, Marmol fully endorses the idea that socially conscious design is a logical extension of sustainable design. “These ideas are closely linked to Modernism and its ideas on a building's natural relationship to the exterior, which is about the ecosystem, which is about the planet, which is about people. For us, this is business as usual.” ■

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: Portable Construction Training Center. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: Fuller Lofts. OPPOSITE: Master plan of the Piggyback Yard for the Friends of the L.A. River by the Piggyback Yard Collaborative Design Group, including Perkins + Will, Chee Salette Architecture Office, Michael Maltzan Architecture and Mia Lehrer + Associates.