Design is fulfilling a greater role through humanitarian work across the globe.

By Janet Liao
For a growing number of designers, social issues and crises resonate beyond newspaper headlines. Concerns from unemployment to the AIDS epidemic are inspiring design philanthropists to roll up their sleeves and get to work — creating a new wave of humanitarian designers.

“There’s a desire on the part of designers to address critical issues in the world,” says Bryan Bell, Founder and Executive Director of Raleigh, N.C.-based Design Corps, which provides affordable architectural and design services to low-income families and rural communities.

BEYOND THE TIPPING POINT

With distinguished designers and architects like Sergio Palleroni, Maurice Cox and Teddy Cruz leading the way, humanitarian design is poised to open new doors for designers — both those looking to advance the profession beyond its traditional borders and those who “simply want to make a name for themselves by doing something good,” Bell says.

Thanks to Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee, Co-founder of Auburn University’s School of Architecture Rural Studio program, the concept of humanitarian design and “shelter for the soul” has spawned a generation of designers tapping into a new set of social and economic values. Mockbee, who died in 2001, was known for his work serving impoverished residents in rural Alabama through design and architecture. His work continues to inspire designers.

“Fifteen years ago, people didn’t get the idea of bringing design to social issues,” Bell says. “They saw design as something for the wealthy that really had nothing to do with social issues.” Even issues such as affordable housing, where it seemed obvious to Bell to incorporate design concepts, suffered from lack of support. “[Designers] thought it was a budget issue and not somewhere for real design talent and energy.”

But all that has begun to change.

“There’s been a cultural shift that occurred in [the United States] over the last few decades where Americans have more disposable income, more time to spend on humanitarian issues,” says Patrick Rhodes, Founder and Executive Director of Project Locus, a non-profit organization based in Los Angeles that aims to fill a “professional void” in architecture by addressing problems through public service.

“We’ve definitely passed the tipping point in the last year,” Bell says. “Somehow the public gets it, and we’re no longer just playthings for the rich, as Sambo [Mockbee] used to call us.”

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GETTING ORGANIZED

The proliferation of humanitarian design organizations such as Architecture for Humanity, Design Corps, Project Locus and Philanthropy by Design (PBD), based in San Francisco, proves that interior designers have the desire and ability to give back to the world. “Designers have skills that they can bring to these projects that most non-profits are unaware of,” says Diane Nicolson, ASID IP, Former President of PBD.

Nicolson, a Showroom Manager at William Switzer and Associates in San Francisco, was first drawn to humanitarian work after experiencing a disconnect between design and the surrounding community. “I was seeing the opulence of the design industry,” she says, but driving past the homeless and people affected by AIDS on her way home from work reminded her of the “continued need out there.”

Since PBD’s inception in 1987, the group of volunteer design professionals has channeled more than $5.5 million in products, labor and services to renovate the interiors of community service organizations, benefiting thousands of Bay Area residents, at-risk youth, seniors, AIDS patients and the homeless.

“Most of us have a sense of needing to give back to feel that life is worthwhile, rather than just going into your daily grind,” Nicolson says.

Likewise, a growing number of younger designers just out of school are attracted to humanitarian work “out of frustration and shock of the limited practice of architecture and design in this area,” says Rhodes, who founded Project Locus in the fall of 2000 after being inspired by Mockbee at a 1996 University of Florida lecture. Rhodes later worked with Mockbee on a project in the Los Angeles area.

“What we really wanted to do was to continue the kind of work that Sam [Mockbee] did,” Rhodes says. Project Locus, modeled after Mockbee’s Rural Studio, allows students to transcend “paper architecture” and gain experience designing and building structures for the underserved.

“We construct new and transform existing public spaces that can affect a potentially large number of people,” he says. “The goal is to ease human suffering in any way we can.” Bell agrees there is a void that many architects and interior designers experience in a profession that has just begun to shed its stigma as a luxury service. “There’s a frustration with not being as relevant as we could be,” he says. “You can call it non-profit or you can call it humanitarian, but ultimately, it’s letting design fill the greater role that it can.”

A Group Effort

Individual interior designers aren’t the only ones contributing to the greater good. IIDC is also tackling humanitarian issues and taking on philanthropic causes through the IIDC Foundation — a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing interior design through education, research and knowledge.

The Foundation’s mission is to raise funds for a number of educational causes through programs like the Designing for the Future Campaign, which in 2006 raised more than $34,000 toward interior design educational programs.

Sometimes it takes a group effort to kick-start a movement.
CULTURE CHANGE

Today, design philanthropy is becoming a part of the company culture at design firms worldwide as employees are encouraged to get involved in humanitarian issues. Global design, planning and strategic consulting firm Gensler is known for taking on pro-bono projects. “As a leading design firm, Gensler feels a strong responsibility to give back to the communities in which its designers work,” says Carlos Martinez, IIDA, AIA, LEED AP, Principal and Regional Design Director for Gensler Chicago.

Gensler sees its design work as a contribution to a better future. Its current involvement in the design of the forthcoming Center on Halsted – a community center for Chicago’s lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender community – has provided designers an opportunity to become involved in a unique community fundraising endeavor. To finance the building’s furnishings, Gensler designers envisioned a new way in which to raise funds: a “Furniture Shower,” whereby an online registry was created and made available to the public.

“Purchasing a piece of furniture enables donors to have a direct and physical connection with the Center and its mission,” Martinez says.

Whether done on personal or corporate time, humanitarian design is setting a new standard, and it’s here to stay.

“I don’t think of it as a movement; I think of it as a permanent change in the practice of design,” says Bell, who sees it as a cultural event that taps into “greater values” like socioeconomic and environmental justice.

The humanitarian design trend will “be over when we solve every problem in the world, and I’m not worried about that happening in my lifetime,” Bell says. 

Donate Your Design Skills

Even if your firm doesn’t explicitly endorse volunteer work or participate in community design projects, you can still make a difference. Design-focused organizations need all the funding and manpower they can get to keep projects going. “We could make this a full-time job for everyone on our Board,” says Diane Nicolson, Philanthropy by Design.

Forget You’re a Designer. Put your own agenda aside and be a true student for a while, says Bryan Bell, Design Corps. Study your community’s problems. “Clean up an alley or volunteer,” he says. “This will give you a level of expertise you’ll need to understand community needs and produce a meaningful design proposal.”

Be a Jack-of-All-Trades. After you’ve gained an understanding of the issues in your community, think of ways to address that situation based on your expertise. And be ready to take on other responsibilities aside from making the proposal. “You may have to do the fundraising yourself,” Bell says. “You can’t just do the design piece and expect everyone else to do the other hard work.”

Develop Working Relationships With Designers and Non-designers. Getting the community to chip in can give your cause an extra boost. Forming relationships with community members was the key link to Gensler Chicago’s successful launch of its “Furniture Shower” for the Center on Halsted. “The campaign involves people who were not even connected to the original project,” says Gensler’s Carlos Martinez, IIDA, AIA, LEED AP.