

Construction, Design & Engineering

Building a community connection through philanthropy

For architecture and design firms, planning and designing physical buildings and spaces comes naturally. But building community connections through philanthropy? There's not always a blueprint for that.

Community stewardship is most authentic and apparent when it's not just a one-off effort, but when it's part of a company's core values. When the idea of giving back is steeped into a company's everyday operations, it finds its way into stakeholder meetings, staff social events and even new business opportunities. The benefit of community outreach for architecture and design firms is more than just a tax write-off or a publicity pull. It's a way of operating.

Of course, there are many important benefits to incorporating community stewardship into your company's set of core values. We see them as creating a positive impact on the world, driving business development and enhancing office culture.

Creating Impact

Businesses have many choices on where and how they can make an impact on the world. It's important to have a mission and vision to help drive the decisions about how to get involved, and whom to support. Creating impact might involve the donation of time, services, goods and financial contributions.

One way to focus your efforts is to choose partners that align with your company's mission or skills, such as envi-



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ronmental nonprofits, housing support or leadership and mentoring opportunities. Choose the types of organizations that help to build stronger ties to your community in ways that feel significant to the work you do, and the people you help, and your whole team – as well as your stakeholders and clients – will want to get behind it. Partner with clients on projects that help to build stronger communities themselves through the development of community-based projects like libraries, affordable housing, detention centers, hospitals and community centers. Building stronger communities builds a stronger humanity.

Business Development

Business and profitability keeps our companies running and our staff employed. Making an impact in our community also brings benefits to business operations in several ways.

One is the opportunity to network with new potential business partners through like-minded organizations or connect partners in need of services to skilled professionals who can fill their needs. Another is the opportunity for team building with existing clients and consultants supporting a common cause,



Marc Lubline, John Norland and Kody Nathe of OZ Architecture (from the left in the foreground) packing breakfast meals for people with life-threatening illness at Project Angel Heart

which can bring the relationship of business partners to another level.

Finally, community stewardship can bring about opportunities to build new skills within the organization. These may include young designers learning framing and window installation on a home-building site, skills development through mentoring, or leadership training through coordinating and promoting service days.

Company Culture

Company culture is often overlooked, cited as an intangible concept that lacks the benefits of direct revenue. Yet culture is a multifaceted concept that is one of the single most important factors for long-term stability and employee retention. If you like the people you work with and have the ability to connect with them on a deeper level, then you'll be happier at work and more connected to the company's mission and goals. A community-oriented mission is one of the many facets that can create greater buy-in from staff, increase happiness and productivity, and improve employee retention.

Cultivating a culture of giving back is one way to drive a strong, meaningful company culture. There is no better or faster way to form a stronger team than to complete service project together, whether planting trees, constructing a home or completing a design challenge with children. Prospective employees in particular place strong value on a company's culture when considering a career move. Plus, a culture of doing good just feels good, and inspires others to do good too.

No matter what level of giv-

ing is right for your firm, there are small steps you can take to incorporate community outreach into your business mission. If you're thinking about ways your firm can begin to escalate its community impact, there are several models to consider.

- **Revisit your company's values.** A good place to start is to revisit your company's mission and values. Consider incorporating some context for philanthropy, service and giving back to the community. When it's part of who you are, it's easier to find ways to live your mission from the inside out.

- **Organize collective giving opportunities.** From there, one option is to organize collective giving. In this model, there is organized collective giving of time, goods, services or financial contributions. These activities could be periodic or regularly scheduled collection drives for goods like winter jackets, canned goods or school supplies. They could be service days at soup kitchens, build sites or schools. Consider organizing a monthly service activity or quarterly fundraising drive.

- **Support nonprofit organizations.** On that note, another model is charitable donations in support of nonprofit organizations. This can be a one-time or regular contribution of a monetary donation or a targeted sponsorship for an event or program. Consider focusing on nonprofit organizations with the potential to develop a long-term relationship benefiting your staff and business as much as their organization. These donations are often tax-deductible, but the benefits go far beyond that.

- **Encourage individual giving.** Another option is

to promote individual giving. This often occurs when employees choose to support their coworkers' independent causes, such as their children's sporting events or school fundraisers. While there is little monetary investment by the firm, creating an environment of support can provide emotional encouragement and inspiration to get involved on a personal level.

- **Form your own nonprofit foundation.** Taking this a step further, another model involves forming a nonprofit foundation. This can allow for a separation of the business and the charitable giving. A resulting benefit is that the foundation can collect donations themselves to support their missions and activities at a higher level, including scholarships, support from other organizations or funding pro-bono design services. A foundation typically is operated as a separate arm of the company and governed by a board of directors.

Our firm has woven stewardship for the community into our core values. We also created OZ Gives, our own internal steering committee, which provides direction for partnering with community organizations, coordinating volunteer service days, and organizing fundraising and donation efforts throughout the year. This core value has made an indelible impact on our company culture, influencing the way we do business as well as the way we impact the world around us.

By cultivating values of philanthropy, an architecture and design firm can build stronger ties to its community and generate a more direct and lasting connection to the places where we live, work and play. ▲



Philip Stewart of OZ Architecture discussing architectural design with students at CCC School in Denver with the Cleworth Architectural Legacy Program of the Denver Architecture Foundation