

Architects Gain By Giving To Charity

By Fleming W. Smith Jr., FAIA, Principal, Gresham, Smith & Partners

The Siloam Family Health Center in Nashville was designed by Gresham, Smith & Partners on a pro-bono basis, with load-bearing, insulated, non-composite precast concrete panels donated by Gate Precast.

Contributing expertise can be more valuable to charities than money, and designers can gain in many ways, learning the value of precast in the process, says architect



*Fleming W. Smith Jr., FAIA,
Principal, Gresham,
Smith & Partners*

Many architects and their firms donate money to worthy causes, including giving to local churches and charitable organizations. Of even more value to some groups, however, is the donation of an architect's time and experience. Such a contribution not only provides assistance that the charities can't buy for themselves, but provides a return to designers that enhances their regular work and provides immeasurable benefits besides.

In some cities, the architectural communities are organized, keeping track of which designers and firms are interested in participating and fielding requests from groups that are passed along. There also are national and even international groups to which architects can contribute on an even more extensive level (see the sidebar). There are a wealth of opportunities if an architect is interested in making a contribution of his skills.

My architectural firm, Gresham, Smith & Partners, has contributed time and design skills on a regular basis over the years, and we've found that it is well worth the expenditure to become involved. Typically, our contribution takes the form of creating an architectural design and plans for a building being constructed by a local charitable organization. Such work can't be done for every group that might be interested, but by selectively choosing your spots and becoming involved, you can make a difference and receive a tremendous payback.

Over the years, we have typically become involved in one project every two years here in Nashville, although the contributions haven't been as regularly spaced as that seems. Among the clients with whom we have worked are:

- **The Second Harvest Food Bank**, for which we designed a 30,000-square-foot industrial building. It involved some food-processing activities, in which the group processed the food it received and kept it cool or frozen until it was needed.
- **The Friends of Warner Park**, a not-for-profit group that provides educational programs in Nashville parks. We designed the Warner Park Nature Center, which was built with donated money. It included a heavy timber frame and wood siding to create a rustic appearance.
- **McDonald's Corp.**, for which we designed a Ronald McDonald House to work in conjunction with Vanderbilt University Medical Center. It consisted of a series of apartments to house cancer patients.

Each of these projects had its own challenges and required its own programmatic needs, based on its functions and goals. In all cases, the commonality they offered was that they were close to the kind of work we routinely do. I wouldn't want to tackle a type of project as pro bono work if I'm unfamiliar with it from our regular practice. These designs require all of your skills and experience because they often have challenges that go beyond your usual commissions, especially in budget terms.

Our most recent project, completed last October, was designed for the Siloam Family Health Center. It featured a 12,000-square-foot medical office building on a difficult site. The Christian, non-denominational group provides free primary medical care to indigent families. We provided the architecture work while other activities, such as engineering, medical-equipment planning, interior design and landscaping, were left to other contributors.

Typically, the catalyst from these projects comes from one major donor who contributes money to begin the construction process and wants to produce something with which they will be proud to be associated. To make that happen, a

major ingredient for success is to ensure the involvement of other professionals — a general contractor, subcontractors and key suppliers.

One significant ingredient that helped this project happen was that we asked Gate Precast in Ashland City, Tenn., if they would consider contributing. Gate personnel had recently visited our offices to discuss their new product: load-bearing, insulated, non-composite precast panels. I contacted them to ask if they would be interested in contributing a gift in kind, in whole or part, and they generously agreed to do so.

'Frugal' Ground Rules

The precast concrete panels were designed using a set of "frugal" ground rules, owing to the small budget with which we had to work. That meant using white concrete, local aggregates, only two textures, reveals but no projections, no conduit or outlets in the precast and an interior precast wall that served as the final finish.

Medical office buildings typically feature drywall interiors, but the owner viewed a sample of the panels in the Gate plant and accepted the finished panel with a caulk joint and textured paint. That minimized interior

finishes, saving considerably in the budget.

The result of our contributions was a building that the organization can be proud to use. In fact, the precast concrete panels were treated with an anti-graffiti coating because it was located in a neighborhood that was susceptible to such vandalism. But the building hasn't been touched, which speaks well of the group and the building that houses their work. I'd actually like to see how well the coating works, but I also hope I never get to learn its effectiveness.

Many Benefits Result

These projects offer a great return to the architect in ways that may not be apparent. Certainly, publicity is generated and good press accrues to the companies that are most involved. But participating in such a project simply for the public-relations aspect is a bad motivator. In truth, while you'll receive publicity, it won't be enough to justify the contribution of time that such a project will require.

But architects receive much more than just publicity. Foremost, they learn about the true costs of materials and what creates the expense in producing them, as the designers try to pare construction

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Despite a tight budget, the insulated precast concrete panels allowed for some decorative accents that provided visual interest.





Architects who involve themselves with pro-bono work learn the true costs of materials and what creates the expense in producing them. Precast concrete manufacturers are experts at helping designers find ways to achieve expensive-looking appearances in more economical ways.

costs to the bone. You learn what is readily available and how to maximize the return on every dollar, what goes up the quickest and the easiest and what provides the best look for little expenditure.

One thing we have learned through these projects is the value that architectural precast concrete panels can provide to a project. We've discovered that you can produce an amazing variety of designs. Even if you have a limited palette and budget, you still have a lot of opportunities to achieve different looks. You learn how to use precast's ability to replicate pieces economically and where the major expenses will arise as you add design features.

Precasters do a great job of sharing their expertise and explaining where and why costs arise in production — and how these costs can be minimized. They also are experts at finding ways to achieve expensive-looking appearances in more economical ways. We often talked with Gate about the project goals and how we could accomplish them while saving money. That approach can easily be transferred to other projects for clients who have more expansive budgets.

Designers also learn more about how others function as part of a team. That was perhaps the largest surprise to me from this work. You discover which subcontractors and suppliers will rise to the occasion, and which won't — and you never can predict that beforehand. I have been amazed by the quality and extra effort that some suppliers and trades will provide without being asked, considering that they won't receive payment in return. It is fun to see people get excited about a project, and that excitement is remembered long after the project is finished.

To be sure, architects must pick and choose the projects with which to get involved, as there are too many to contribute to everyone who requests help. But if it's a worthwhile cause to you and the project is one with which you are familiar, I encourage you to find out more and participate. It can be a truly enjoyable experience, one from which you learn a lot that can be transferred to other clients and help expand your own skills. ■

Architecture For Humanity

Architecture for Humanity is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization founded in 1999 to promote architecture and design solutions to global, social and humanitarian crises. It sponsors competitions, workshops, educational forums and partnerships with aid organizations that require the help of architects and designers.

The organization works with local groups to coordinate efforts among architects to aid community groups. Active groups are based in Atlanta, Boston, Chattanooga, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, New Orleans, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, St. Louis, Toronto and Washington, D.C., as well as several European cities.

The organization currently is providing design services and reconstruction help in the Gulf Coast, as well as in India and Sri Lanka. To learn more about the group and its local activities, visit www.architectureforhumanity.org.