In June 1968, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) invited civil-rights leader Whitney Young Jr. to speak at its national convention. Just two months earlier, riots had devastated dozens of American downtowns in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. AIA members wanted to know what had happened, and how they could help. But Young, then the president of the National Urban League, offered far more condemnation than comfort. “You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I’m sure this has not come to you as any shock,” he observed. “You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance.”

Two and a half decades later, another upheaval—the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles—jolted architect Michael Maltzan, M.Arch. ’88, into action. After earning his degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD), he had moved to that city to work for Frank Gehry, drawn to the intense urbanism of the sprawling metropolis. When the riots broke out, he reflects, it was difficult to see L.A. become a place “that, all of a sudden, you had to understand in a very different way—a much more complex way, a much more real way.” Maltzan had helped build the city that was being torn apart, and he wouldn't settle for complete irrelevance.

Soon, he won his first solo commission: to build a campus for Inner-City Arts, a nonprofit arts-education organization based in the downtown Skid Row neighborhood. It was a perfect launching pad for his new practice, Michael Maltzan Architecture (MMA), offering the rare opportunity for an early-career architect to design an institutional building. Even more appealing, he adds, were the “fundamental questions” about social, political, and community issues that the project forced him to answer.

Twenty years later, MMA’s buildings dot the Los Angeles land-
scape. In the neighborhoods surrounding Inner-City Arts, he’s worked with the Skid Row Housing Trust, a nonprofit community-development corporation (CDC), to construct three apartment buildings that offer permanent housing to formerly homeless residents. The New Carver Apartments, the second of the three, rises next to the Santa Monica Freeway like a cylindrical drum, the unique shape designed to insulate residents from the noise of passing cars. But, as a review in *Architect Magazine* put it, the project makes a bigger statement as well: that “affordable housing is not a blight that needs to be hidden away.”

These kinds of design-based solutions to social problems similarly attracted Theresa Hwang, M.Arch. ’07, to work with the trust. Hwang had left Cambridge convinced that a career in architecture would never let her work on real social issues. “When I finished school,” she says, “I basically thought, ‘Design is nice and wonderful, but it’s not for me.’” But in 2009, after two years as a community organizer, she entered the Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellowship, a program that pairs early-career architects with CDCs. For three years, she split her time between MMA and Skid Row Housing as she worked on the Star Apartments, Maltzan’s third project for the nonprofit. In 2012, she joined the trust’s staff full time as a “community architect,” a hybrid (and self-designated) title that she thinks best describes what she does each day: talk to affected communities, understand their needs, and translate those ideas into the language of architecture.

Hwang’s initial disillusionment with architecture’s social impact is an old, common problem. But the career she’s created for herself less than 10 years out of the GSD offers a relatively new solution, part of a growing movement within the design fields that proponents have named humanitarian, socially conscious, or, most often, public interest architecture. A simple idea motivates public interest designers, Hwang explains: “It’s important for beauty to be equally distributed to all communities.”

The principles of public interest design are embedded deeply in the history of architecture. Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, who served as the first chair of the GSD’s department of architecture, once called design “neither an intellectual nor a material affair, but simply an integral part of the stuff of life, necessary for everyone in a civilized society.” But the cultural touchstone for an architect has at times been far closer to Ayn Rand’s Howard Roark—arrogant, individualistic, and committed to the genius of artistic vision above all.

Whitney Young’s thunderous condemnation planted the early seeds to change the conversation. The AIA formalized its fledgling volunteer community-design programs, begun a year earlier, and in 1972 created an annual award for public service, named in Young’s honor. Individual architects founded a small number of untraditional, grassroots community-design centers.

And at Harvard, the GSD saw 1968 as a moment of reckoning. The capital campaign launched that year struck a dire tone, with a booklet outlining the school’s role in solving the titular Crisis! in American cities. In response, campaign chair John L. Loeb ’24, LL.D. ’71, donated funds for a mid-career fellowship for architects, planners, and other design professionals—those whom Jim Stockard, the curator of the fellowship from 1997 to 2014, describes as “people who love cities but are unsatisfied with them.” For the last 45 years, the Loeb Fellowship program has served as something of an incubator for many leaders of the public interest design movement, giving designers with a strong aesthetic...
background the business and organizing skills necessary to get the movement off the ground.

These core Loeb Fellows (LF), joined by a number of GSD alumni dissatisfied with traditional architecture careers, have had diverse experiences as public interest proponents—working in big corporate firms and small nonprofits, on projects in downtown Los Angeles and rural Senegal. And they face significant challenges in creating new models of design and practice. They have had to convince their peers that taking on these projects, sometimes even on a pro bono basis, is a central obligation of architects and a chance for innovative work. Beyond the profession, architects have needed to convince potential clients in the social sector, from hospitals in rural Africa to community centers in the United States, that design offers something tangible. The result has been a movement, small but growing, whose aspirations could help redefine the very definition of what an architect does.

Beyond “Design For Design’s Sake”

Early in his career, John Peterson, LF ’06, admits that he was a traditional, “purist” architect, focused on residential projects and “design for design’s sake.” But as his practice grew, and the scale of his projects began to encompass entire blocks and neighborhoods, he began to worry about what his designs failed to consider. “I became very interested in the opportunities that the design of the built environment had for achieving social outcomes,” he explains. “And as I looked around in the world to see who was doing that sort of work, I was frustrated.” He set out to change that.

When he founded his nonprofit, Public Architecture, in 2002, few firms offered a model for how to take on social projects or clients who might not be able to pay for design services. Architects in the community-design movement, born from the turmoil of the 1960s, were still quietly at work. But even today, Peterson’s San Francisco-based nonprofit remains one of the “grandfather” organizations of the larger public interest design field. Other early organizations, founded in the 1990s, include the Auburn Rural Studio, a design-build program at that Alabama university, and nonprofits like Architecture for Humanity, which began with the motto “Design like you give a damn” (the organization filed for bankruptcy earlier this year).

Peterson began taking on individual pro bono projects under Public Architecture’s auspices. He worked on plans to maintain open spaces in San Francisco’s South of Market neighborhood, and designed ScrapHouse, a demonstration project, built entirely of salvaged materials, erected on the city’s Civic Center Plaza. But his ambitions soon outgrew what one man could do in his free time, and the projects he wanted to tackle required convening design and planning professionals with diverse expertise. What if all architects helped out? he wondered. His solution was the One Percent Project, a pro bono commitment program he launched in 2005, that asks architects at participating firms to dedicate, on average, at least 20 hours a year to working on pro bono projects.

The reaction to this call to service was mixed. Some firms already engaged with nonprofit clients signed on, understanding how pro bono work fit their mission, served as good public relations, and could ultimately open their practices to new, paying clients. But pro bono wasn’t embedded in the ethos of architecture; the AIA added an explicit encouragement for engaging in this kind of free professional work to its code of ethics only in 2007. (And, unlike the American Bar Association, which encourages 50 hours of annual pro bono work for lawyers, the AIA does little to define that commitment.) Some critics thought working for free would degrade a profession that wasn’t particularly well paid to begin with. Another barrier, Peterson says, is that many of his peers see social value in all their work. Getting architects
to think critically about how their projects could do more for the
closer community, and encouraging them to take on clients who
could not pay market rate, became major challenges.

In the fall of 2005, Peterson came to Harvard as a Loeb Fellow,
eager to gain some of the business skills that might expand his
vision. Ten years later, Public Architecture has gained traction,
with more than 1,300 firms agreeing to the pro bono commit-
ment, including half of the country’s 20 largest.

One of the most progressive participants has
been Perkins+Will, a global firm with a staff of
1,500 that joined the program in 2010. This work
has formalized a commitment to the firm’s found-
ning motto—“Ideas and buildings that honor the
broader goals of society”—says CEO Phil Harri-
son ’86, M.Arch. ’93, who now serves as a co-chair
for the GSD’s current capital campaign. Today,
Perkins+Will’s pro bono work adds up to the
equivalent of a 15-person firm working full time,
year round.

From the Studio to Senegal

Like their corporate counterparts, smaller,
boutique architecture firms have similarly dis-
cerned the potential appeal—in freedom to choose and execute
more interesting projects—that the occasional pro bono client
presents. Consider Toshiko Mori, Hubbard professor in the prac-
tice of architecture, who has used a pro bono project in rural Sen-
egal to connect her work in the classroom to the work of her firm,
Toshiko Mori Architect (TMA).

Mori’s work with Le Kinkeliba, a medical nongovernmental
organization in eastern Senegal, began in 2009, when she took a

group of students in her third-year studio to meet its local clinic
leaders. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation—a Connecticut-
based nonprofit that honors the legacy of two prominent mem-
bers of the Bauhaus faculty—had begun working with these clinics
years earlier, and wanted the GSD students to help develop
land-use plans for newly acquired acreage along the Gambia Riv-
er. At first, Mori resisted what she saw as “voluntourism”—and
even considered donating her travel-grant money directly to the
clinic. But the site visits for the two studio courses she eventually
organized (the second focused on plans for a community cul-
tural center) convinced her of their value. As her students held
midterm reviews in front of an audience of local residents, Mori
says, “They figured out that there’s something we have to rethink
about architects. We don't want to be bringing Western notions
as an imposition. There’s something about give and take, and re-
specting the way they live, and working with local materials.”

After two studios, Mori decided to turn designs from her second
studio into a reality, assigning her former student Jordan MacTav-
ish, M.Arch. ’12—by then at work in her New York office—to direct
pro bono designs for a community arts center in the village of Sin-
thian. He has since helped turn the cultural center into a reality, par-
ing down his original design and figuring out how to integrate local materials and building techniques in ways that are both innovative and replicable. The result, scheduled to open in March, features a sweeping, undulating roof, curved around two large open spaces for performances and events. At either end are two artists’ residences, where brickwork vents—meant to evoke the patterns of Bauhaus tapestries—are functional as well, letting air in and
keeping dust out. The constraints of the Sinthian project have forced the architects to be highly innovative, uniting form and function so that each ele-
ment can serve multiple purposes. The roof’s complex geometries—
achieved using simple, local materials like bamboo and thatch—are
designed to catch 30 percent of the community’s water needs.

Projects like these help break down the traditional idea that
the “architect as artist” is entirely separate from the “architect
as social actor.” For John Cary, Public Architecture’s executive
director from 2003 to 2010, the pro bono model “doesn’t position
design ‘for the public good’ outside of, or separate from, the rest
of architectural excellence,” as he wrote in his 2010 book, The
Power of Pro Bono. “We hold up really a fairly narrow view of what
great architecture is,” Peterson agrees, adding that these creative
pro bono projects can serve as a necessary corrective to the con-
straints of “starchitect” culture.

A major moment of arrival for many public interest designers
was the conferral of the 2014 Pritzker Prize, the most prestigious
award in the field, on Shigeru Ban. The Japanese architect is best
known for his innovative, often temporary design solutions in so-
cieties recovering from natural disasters. GSD dean Mohsen Mo-
stafavi told ArchDaily at the time, “Socially conscious architecture rarely gets any praise for its contribution to the field. Shigeru’s work does that with an economy of means, lightness of touch, and great sense of beauty.” (The choice has not been without criticism. Tod Williams, an architect and former teacher of Ban’s, told The New Yorker that, though the choice offered a “good, clear message,” Ban’s work was “barely architecture.”)

Not “Servants of a Luxury Product”

The public interest design movement has grown out of crises: from the riots of the 1960s to the humanitarian devastation following natural disasters such as those in New Orleans, Haiti, and Japan. Another moment of reckoning came in 2008, as the global financial crisis brought the U.S. building industry to a halt.

Michael Murphy, M.Arch. ’11, was then halfway through his GSD master’s program; when he looked around, he saw what he calls a “value-proposition problem,” as seemingly expendable architects were the first to lose their jobs. “When it only becomes about sculpture, it loses the key asset of architecture, which is that it can add tremendous value to people’s lives,” Murphy says. The challenge was convincing the rest of the world that architects could be not mere “servants of a luxury product” but “providers of a social good.”

Murphy had already faced this problem of “value proposition” two years before the crash, in December of his first semester at the GSD. On World AIDS Day, he sneaked out of the studio—near-sacrilege in the round-the-clock work mentality of architecture school—to hear Kolokotrones University Professor Paul Farmer speak about his nonprofit, Partners In Health (PIH). As Farmer described PIH hospital projects, Murphy realized, “They were building buildings, building housing, building architecture, but calling it healthcare.” Yet when Murphy asked which architects had worked on these projects, Farmer replied, simply, none.

That summer, Murphy received a grant to visit PIH clinics in Rwanda. Meeting with local builders, he began to understand some of the design and construction considerations that went into creating a rural hospital. When he returned to school that fall, just as the rest of the architecture economy began to falter, he and a group of his GSD friends began working on a plan for a new PIH hospital in Rwanda’s rural Butaro region. But the plans conceived in the comfort of a GSD studio never responded well to local conditions, the environment of the site, or the real needs of the doctors and patients in Rwanda: the results looked, Murphy recalls, “like a military barracks.” So he took a year off, moved to Rwanda, and a new business was born—MASS Design Group (for “Model of Architecture Serving Society”).

As near poster-children for the growing movement of humanitarian architecture, Murphy and his MASS Design Group co-founder Alan Ricks, M.Arch. ’10, have told the story of that initial meeting with Paul Farmer thousands of times. Their first project, Butaro Hospital, was done pro bono, as what Ricks—now COO of the firm—calls a “proof of concept” for the value of design: “By building a hospital that could deliver better health outcomes, that could keep staff there, that could make patients happier, that could have the community invested in the process to sustain it,” they’ve proven what architecture can offer. Their continued partnerships confirm that; PIH has hired MASS Design for other work in Rwanda, and they’ve received funding from the Rwandan government as well. Only five years after founding their firm, they have worked on projects and consulted in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, and the United States.

SEEDing Value

For architect Bryan Bell, LF ’11, the key question that public interest designers must face is: how can one put a value, quan-
tifiable or qualitative, on design’s return on investment? During the past two decades, under the auspices of his chameleonic non-profit Design Corps, Bell has been at the forefront of the movement. He has developed housing for migrant workers, created fellowship programs for young, socially conscious designers, and run major outreach operations: his annual Structures for Inclusion Conference. (The first conference, in 2000, had the prescient theme “Designing for the 98 percent without architects.”) For the last five years, Bell has led efforts among architects to address this question of “value” explicitly.

In 2005, a group of Loeb alumni met at the GSD in the months following Bell’s annual conference (that year themed “Going to Scale”) to discuss creating measurable standards for public interest designs. Their answer came in the form of a proposal that architecture student Kimberly Dowdell—then an undergraduate at Cornell, now a Johnson Leadership Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School—had made during an internship at the federal government’s Office of the Chief Architect. What she wanted was a social-consciousness metric similar to LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design), the U.S. Green Building Council’s successful rating system for sustainability. And so, with the Loeb group’s approval, SEED (Social Economic Environmental Design) was born.

Today, the network of professionals interested in these SEED techniques has grown from the initial meeting of about 30 Loeb alumni and friends to more than 2,300 members. In 2008, the network set down a number of principles of community engagement to guide its work. “I’d been practicing 20 years, and I had never seen what I was trying to do written down in such clear fashion,” Bell reflects.

In the fall of 2010, Bell himself arrived in Cambridge for his fellowship year, eager to work on developing SEED from a set of principles into a functional business that could foster action.

To measure the value of design, Bell and other leaders of the initiative launched the SEED Evaluator, to help guide projects through the steps of community participation, feedback, and inclusive planning that are necessary to create truly socially engaged designs. (Last fall, the Evaluator marked a major milestone when the U.S. Green Building Council announced that participation in the first steps of the SEED process would count toward a project’s LEED certification.) The evaluator focuses more on participatory process than checklists, and requires architects to think about their work’s long-term impact. “Architects are used to handing over the keys to a building, taking a photograph, and walking away,” Bell says. “We kind of feel that’s the beginning of the story.”

MASS Design has begun the SEED Evaluation process for the Butaro Hospital, and Murphy and Ricks have focused on tracing concrete metrics like rates of disease transmission and doctor turnover. More difficult will be accounting for the less quantifiable but no less real benefits architecture can offer. MASS Design board member Jay Wickersham—a lawyer, architect, and associate professor in practice of architecture—points to “comfort, and beauty, and clarity, and the embodying
of the culture and the history and the ecosystems of a place. There are intangibles that are hard to quantify and yet are, I think, central to making a good society.”

Jim Stockard, the former Loeb curator, points to the success of MASS Design as part of an emerging model for architecture businesses. “They’re making their way toward a practice that lots of other people would die to have. And they’re doing it not by courting high-end condominium builders or owners, not by courting the big job with the library or the concert hall, but by doing social-justice projects all over the world,” Stockard reflects. “They’re developing a new mode of practice that I think will become more and more real, going forward.”

**Can a Redefined Architecture Take Root?**

But that’s still the big issue for movement leaders like Bryan Bell: how can more people break out of the traditional mode of corporate architecture, and figure out a way to follow in MASS Design’s footsteps?

In 2011, the AIA awarded Bell and a group of three other architects, including fellow Loeb alumnus David Perkes, the head of Mississippi State University’s Gulf Coast Community Design Studio, a $100,000 grant to study this question. Their 2013 report, built on survey work that Bell had begun during his Loeb year, showed a strong desire to make public interest work easier to accomplish. Of the nearly 400 AIA members surveyed, 30 percent named “improving quality of life in communities” or “putting creative abilities to practical use” as one of their top two reasons for pursuing architecture. But the challenges were clear—more than half named lack of necessary education as a barrier to doing this kind of work.

To fill that gap, Bell’s Design Corps has launched a series of continuing-education courses, called Public Interest Design Institutes. Bell and Lisa Abendroth, a professor in communication design at Metropolitan State University of Denver, have compiled the lessons into a book, *The Public Interest Design Practice Guidebook*, to be published next fall. These outreach efforts, for Bell, present the same opportunity for impact-at-scale that motivated John Peter-
son’s One Percent pledge: the idea that all architects, right now, can fit such design work into their normal practice model. It’s why Bell says he’s shifted much of his focus to training already registered architects: “That’s where the immediate capacity is.”

And among those coming through the ranks now, interest is growing. Jim Stockard witnessed strong growth in the interactions among students and Loeb Fellows during his years as curator. “In all honesty and fairness, if this is happening at Harvard,” he reflects, “it’s happening in spades in lots of other places.” Schools like Portland State University have long been known for their strengths in this area, and last fall the University of Minnesota began offering a certificate in public interest design for its students.

Such efforts, Bell hopes, will normalize public interest design work by treating it as a fully independent profession, with permanent pathways for those aspiring to make a difference. With public interest law or public health as his model, he holds on strongly to his identity as a “public interest architect”—the kind of title, he hopes, that signals more than just a passing professional fad.

But others who engage in these socially conscious projects, including Murphy and Ricks of MASS Design, don’t think this delineation should exist. “All architecture should be public minded,” Toshiko Mori reflects. “In a sense, to make it something special just shows you how warped our society is.” Whether they embrace the title of “public interest architect” or not, those who engage in such projects say they’ve often been pushed against the boundaries of what most people expect an architect to do. And indeed “public interest design” has broken down barriers, embracing architects, planners, landscape architects, and other professionals.

Some practitioners have found even the broad boundaries of design to be limiting. A decade after coining the phrase SEED during a college internship, Kimberly Dowdell has enrolled at the Kennedy School to take classes in real-estate finance and development, hoping to gain the skills needed to join conversations about city-scale change before the design process begins. “If you can be at the decision-making table, at the very beginning, then that’s where you’ll have the most impact,” she explains. “I think that I can bring my architectural sensibilities to the beginning part of the process.”

Maurice Cox, LF ’06, whose wide-ranging career has spanned practice, academia, and government, has brought his architectural sensibility to the policy arena. Cox began his career in Italy—a country where architects “could be instigators, could be opinion shapers.” He was frustrated when, after returning to teach at the University of Virginia, he found his opinions held little sway. He soon ran for city council, on what he calls an “architectural agenda,” and later served as mayor. After his stint at the GSD, Cox served as director of design for the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 2012 moved to New Orleans to lead Tulane City Center, that university’s community-engagement center. There, Cox says, he works to make known the “secret” that architecture is about far more than shelter. “If you can find what the aspirations of a community are, and you can use the design process to bring that forward,” he says, “then you can do extraordinary things with your discipline.”

Public interest professionals, working as designers, policymakers, developers, and planners, have surmounted some of the definitions that hem in architecture’s potential impact. What they’ve found, in common with all architects affiliated with the public interest design movement, is this: All buildings will interact with their environment, bring in new residents or kick out old ones, and create further ripple effects in the community and beyond. The question, then, is how to build great architecture, to great effect.

“...All architecture should be public minded....To make it something special just shows you how warped our society is.”

Staff writer Stephanie Garlock ’13 formerly wrote for The Atlantic’s CityLab.