

# part of the solution

tapping our potential as community leaders

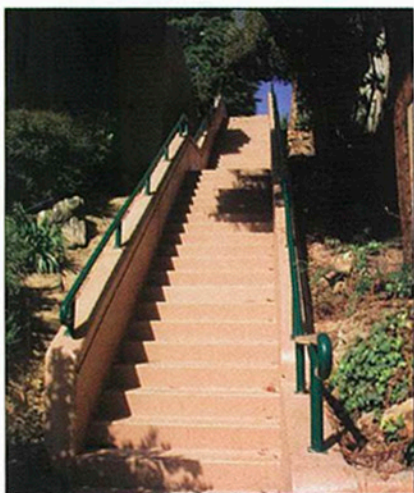
by kurt lavenson, aia

ately, I have become interested in the leadership roles architects can play within our communities. My interest was piqued when I observed the reactions of the New York City public to the first round of proposals for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center, which they found numbingly bureaucratic and unconscious. There was then a renewed call for inspired guidance from the design community. I believe this call was for more than just handsome buildings. Ultimately the emergence of Daniel Libeskind and his poetic schemes for the site were an indicator of the great power architects possess to solve difficult puzzles at all scales and to give tangible form to the needs of the community. Although his role in the final building construction might wane, it was this architect who pointed the way toward resolution of a quandary that spanned the physical and emotional realms. He galvanized the vision and confidence of a city and world needing exactly that. I suggest that his role as an enlightened public advocate and leader will ultimately prove more important than



the details of the buildings.

This makes me wonder why I do not see more architects involved in the public process. Is it that we do not consider ourselves “political”? How does the act of building not become political? We change cities and manipulate the natural environment. Our work affects the value of property and the daily experience of most people. We are actors in the political realm whether we like it or not. So why not be consciously engaged and proudly add our voice to the conversation? I would like to see more architects on planning commissions, at the helm of development projects, in mayor’s offices and in higher elected positions. The public process of building a society needs skilled



Photos: Top: Alan Geller; above: Kurt Lavenson

The author donated his architectural expertise to the restoration of a public stairway in Oakland, Calif. He also designs private projects for his own practice, including this remodel of a 1960s house (above) in Alamo, Calif., and the on-the-boards residence shown on the next page.

problem solvers—designers of integrated solutions. I am dismayed by the number of architects I hear complaining about building codes, zoning, or design review. Too often these regulations have been implemented without participation from skilled designers who could have mapped the way

to better policy.

Yes, the process becomes political and it is messy and frustrating, but ultimately it can be very rewarding. It is better to get involved and take responsibility, at any scale, than to complain powerlessly from the sidelines.

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### stair necessities

During the past year I have put this idea into practice by volunteering to serve on my local neighborhood association board. Our board had been working for several years with the public works agency here in Oakland, Calif., to restore four sets of staircases that run through the neighborhood. However, as construction loomed, the association was not able to communicate effectively with the public works agency. That is when my expertise became particularly valuable. I understood the issues and I could work with the public works people to resolve construction-related problems. I also found that I could deal with irate or alienated neighbors and draw them into the process. The stairs themselves were a great metaphor for the step-by-step process of uniting the community and completing the project. Negotiating the impacts of changes in the built environment was what I already do

because they represent pieces of a much larger urban fabric that makes the city valuable and livable. Similarly, on the grand scale of public advocacy this was a minor effort but it had a significant effect. I discovered that working with a small group of people willing to devote their time, and willing to risk disappointment, I was able to cross over and become “they”—the infamous “they” who “should” fix broken public structures or devise better solutions to the problems around us. The new stairs are hardly the World Trade Center, but when I traverse them it feels great to talk with neighbors and know that I made a lasting contribution to the community.

The stair renovation reminded me that architects are accomplished marketers. We are taught in university and through professional competition to present our ideas in a convincing manner. Architects know how to

the project to the local historical society, who honored it with one of their annual awards, and more press. This exposure, in turn, provided support back to the agencies and to our city councilperson—people who struggle constantly for priority and funding of their efforts. Around that same time, I learned that a fourth flight of our stair railings, which had been deleted from the budget, was restored and funded. I am convinced that the public acknowledgement we generated was critical to securing the additional funding. Press coverage can be a very effective design and planning tool.

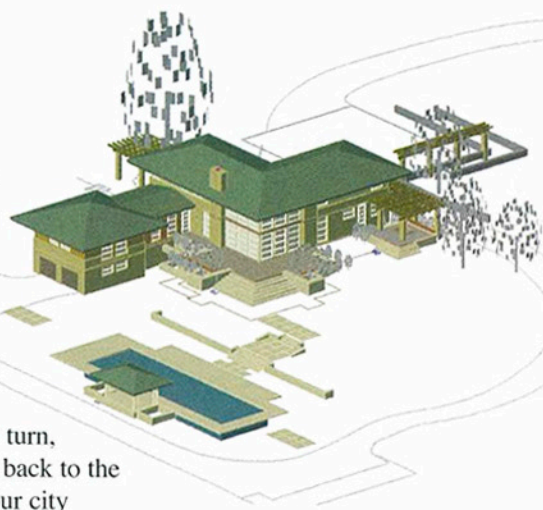
### the vision thing

On a related note, I found it very interesting a few years ago when Microsoft founder Bill Gates chose to proclaim himself “Chief Software Architect.” Once I got over my frustration that he had claimed a professional title for which I am licensed and he is not, I realized that he had actually paid architects a very high compliment. Why did he not choose “Chief Software Engineer,” the more common description for his profession? I propose it is because he aspired to be thought of as a more visionary, artistic, and comprehensive designer. It appears to me that he realized the value of the architect “brand” more than our own profession

often does. This should serve as a reminder to architects who struggle with valuing their own services, whether billable or pro bono. Our profession has substantial relevance, beyond the making of buildings.

Architects straddle an abyss with one foot in the world of the conceptual artist and the other in the world of the pragmatic builder. We resolve conflicts between these worlds on a regular basis. We create beauty, value, and delight from chaos and conflict. Those who may not consider themselves great negotiators are probably designing clever compromises every day. Good design is the masterful resolution of desires and constraints. Our society needs these skills in generous proportions. The acknowledgment received in return benefits us as individuals and our profession. Let’s embrace this opportunity and responsibility for involvement throughout our communities. *ra*

*Kurt Lavenson, AIA, is an architect and former builder. His firm, Lavenson Design, is based in Oakland, Calif.*



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on a regular basis. When doing it for the local community, however, I experienced a surprisingly rewarding level of personal satisfaction and public recognition.

On the grand scale of the city this was a very small project. However, those public stairs remain important

communicate the end goal of a project and how to win support for it. Using those skills, I sought publicity for our private group and for the public agencies that worked on the stairs. I was able to garner a good bit of acknowledgement from the local press. I also submitted





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