

Designer Case Study

No 11

Designer/
Interface Studio
Architects

Philadelphia, PA
Cambridge, MA

Founded/
2005



An ongoing series of Case Studies featuring Designers doing pro bono work.



The American
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of Architects

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ISA – Interface Studio Architects, LLC is a design and research office engaged with projects in cities across the U.S. The firm has leveraged the opportunities and challenges of its home city of Philadelphia to drive a busy, innovative, and thought-leading practice that takes on the complex context of the post-industrial American city. ISA designs buildings, master plans, installations, and conversations that address changing climates, lifestyles, technologies, and urban environments.

We have become very interested in the idea that great design and impact are not mutually exclusive. We call this 'practicing influence,' by which we mean that we don't have to make buildings to make an impact.



Looped In, Philadelphia, PA

Brian Phillips, AIA, LEED AP, is the founding principal at ISA and a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. He leads the practice along with Deb Katz, ISA Principal and Cambridge Studio Director.

ISA was launched during the recession, and operates as a true 21st century practice. We are interested in projects that innovate the everyday, in figuring out how architects and designers can affect everyday people on an everyday basis—whether that's working on developer housing with modest design ambitions, or urban revitalization through low-budget tactical installations.



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Firm size: 9

Staff participating in pro bono work: 8

Pro bono hours pledged annually: 1,000

Principals:
Brian Phillips; Deb Katz

Locations:
Philadelphia, PA
Cambridge, MA

Date founded: 2005

Type of services:
Architecture

Affiliations:
AIA, LEED AP

Favorite social impact project:
Mass Logic – a supportive housing project in Syracuse, NY, driven by evidence-based performance concepts.

Model/ philosophy:
The best idea wins.

is-architects.com

Cover: Roxbury E+, Boston, MA



Staff meeting inside the ISA office.

These are the kinds of projects we find interesting and haven't traditionally been the focus of most designers. We think of design as multifaceted problem solving, where the many constraints on design imposed by a project's surroundings and stakeholders serve as productive drivers of innovation.

ISA advocates for new kinds of value within the practice of architecture. We curate exhibitions, speculate on big questions through competitions, and organize conversations with designers, developers, builders, neighbors, and other project stakeholders. A few years ago, I organized a symposium called "Making Space," which was about the future of practice, and how designers need to tackle the profession differently.

We like to look at the impact of architecture broadly – it can have to do with social value, the value of resources and environmental performance, or the cost structure of building.

The notion that 'great design can be affordable' is a value that we don't talk about enough. It doesn't have to be that if you don't have a lot of money

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you're not going to get good thinking or a good building, but if you have a big budget we're going to bring our game.

When we designed the Modules, a 72-unit student housing building near Temple University, it was the largest pre-fab, wood frame, modular, LEED-rated building in the U.S. We were using simple, off-the-shelf technology that many architects have shied away from, because it often looks cheap. We have found that modular manufacturers tend to be skeptical of architects because they don't know how to make their systems work—they always want things to be more expensive, they want things to be cooler. Our project worked within the modular system and let the architectural interest come out of its constraints. We were thrilled to see a project engaged with everyday systems attract so much attention in the press and through awards.

People often think of pro bono as referring to a very traditional model of practice. The classic example is the law firm, where they make a lot of money doing corporate mergers and then volunteer a small portion of their time to help immigrants get their green card. That model doesn't really

If social impact design is about the bottom 20%, and most design is about the top 1%, then we're really interested in the middle 79%. It's the middle landscape of America that isn't terribly sexy and that designers don't really have a clear path to impact. But it's the majority of the architecture that people experience so it's important.



Mass Logic, Syracuse, NY



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Gray Area, Philadelphia, PA

We're always operating on a hybrid of pro bono and market-based projects, and this situation forces us to reconsider our day-to-day work, our fee structures and our long-term ambitions for practice. We find the traditional model of pro bono less interesting.

work for small architecture practices. We think of pro bono in a more integrated way – we build social impact thinking into all our projects, an hour at a time.

A great recent example of how we approach pro bono work is the GRAY AREA project which, was funded by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, but also had a lot of donated time from ISA. The project investigated how the right kind of public dialog could contribute to innovative potentials for historic preservation. The result was a card deck that guided a small group of participants through a shared conversation. The format diffused an often hot button issue into a reflective format of shared stories, opinions, and perspectives.

Pro bono work has to go beyond just volunteering time for projects that generally aren't shown attention by the private marketplace. For us, pro bono work represents the desire to invest in thought leadership that otherwise would be impossible—very much like R & D in other industries. This ranges from exhibitions and public conversations, to adding time to contract-based work to amplify its potential impact on the public realm.

We prefer to think of pro bono work as an opportunity for innovation, while our market-driven projects offer an opportunity for impact. We're learning to renegotiate pro bono as an office.



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1+ PROGRAM

The 1+ program is a first-of-its-kind effort to encourage pro bono service within the architecture and design professions. It connects nonprofits with architecture and design firms willing to give of their time. Visit www.theoneplus.org

PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE

Public Architecture is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in San Francisco. It engages architecture firms, nonprofits, and manufacturers to commit to design for the public good through its nationally recognized 1+ program. Visit www.publicarchitecture.org

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IN PARTNERSHIP

Public Architecture is one of several organizations supporting the architectural profession that the AIA confers with to obtain and share information to assist members. Find more information on the AIA's Alliances.

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