



Rose Court Apartments:
19 units of
intergenerational
housing, community
space and child care,
renovation of 1880's
Crocker Old People's
Home with addition of
third floor and sunroom
at the rear courtyard.

Photo: AND

For-Profit Techniques Help a Not-for-Profit Architectural Firm: A Profile of Asian Neighborhood Design and Rose McNulty, AIA

By Kenneth Caldwell

One possibility for architects interested in socially responsible architecture is to work for a community design center or a not-for-profit design firm. We caught up with Rose McNulty, AIA, former AIA SF board member, to find out about her experience as a principal architect at Asian Neighborhood Design (AND).

AND was founded as a nonprofit organization in 1973 by a group of Asian American students at UC Berkeley who saw a need to improve the environment in low-income neighborhoods. Some of the original founders were activists involved in the struggle in the late 1960s and 1970s to save from demolition San Francisco's International Hotel, which housed thousands of seasonal Asian laborers. Throughout its history the organization has been involved in a number of activities, including job training, family and youth services, and housing development. The architecture and planning component provides architectural services for other not-for profit organizations, including housing development corporations and social service agencies.

Rose McNulty, now a principal architect, has been at AND since 1991. She spent part of her career working at for-profit firms. When she understood that she could be paid a reasonable wage to do socially responsible work, she realized, "This is for me. I joined this agency because of the social agenda." She thinks one of the reasons she was hired at AND is that she brought a perspective from for-profit firms to the not-for-profit community. She believes that not-for-profit design firms also have to be run like a business. Although she says that the salary is not the same as it is in the private sector, it's enough for staff to "pay their bills." Many of the architects work at AND because of a social commitment, but she also feels people have to be paid a living wage. "All jobs have a fee or hourly limit, which we track monthly to make sure we spend our time efficiently. The difference between us and for-profit firms is that the 'profits' go back into the agency to subsidize activities that might not get enough funding."

Like other firms, AND will give some pro-bono hours, but in a parallel to the for-profit world, McNulty says that you have to set the pro-bono hours to a limited amount. Clients can take advantage of generosity in part because they

don't understand how many hours it takes to do the work. AND sends an invoice for pro-bono services so the client understands the value of the donated services. "One of things I learned working with Philanthropy by Design was that people had to pay something for what they got. When it's all free it doesn't work."

McNulty agrees that most architects want to contribute but don't always know where they can go. She thinks organizations such as Rebuilding Together and Philanthropy by Design offer those opportunities. But she stresses, "You have to treat a pro-bono job like any other, and give it the attention it deserves. If your time is limited, find friends or coworkers to pitch in with you."

Since AND charges competitive fees for its affordable housing and community center designs, we asked, what would be the advantage of hiring the firm? She responds, "In hard times, it seems like all kinds of firms want to do affordable housing or work for nonprofits. When they realize the architectural fee limits set by funders or budgets and the paperwork required by the funders, they often lose their enthusiasm. When the economy improves most of them return to more lucrative clients. We always tell clients, 'This is the work we do. We do it in good times and in bad times.' We'll be there when they need us." Many of the housing development corporations have been repeat clients of AND for more than 20 years. Social service agencies have started with small projects and returned to AND repeatedly with increasingly larger projects.

When asked how AND has changed, McNulty says, "When AND started it was on a much smaller scale, designing playgrounds and alley improvements. While we still provide services for small-scale projects like nonprofit office renovations, feasibility studies, or residential hotel lobby upgrades, we also provide full architectural services on larger projects." Currently, AND is working on a 205-unit senior housing renovation at Broadway and Van Ness; a new facility in the Mission District for Native Americans that contains residential treatment spaces, offices, meeting rooms, and counseling rooms; facade improvement programs in the Mission, Tenderloin, and on 6th Street, as well as in East Oakland; a complete rehab for a senior center in the Tenderloin; scattered site rehabs in a historic West Oakland neighborhood; and the conversion of a former motel into intergenerational family housing in Oakland.

Being a nonprofit also allows AND to undertake research projects. Several years ago they produced the Materials Handbook, outlining good material choices for high-density affordable housing. The handbook is based on interviews with housing managers and maintenance staff. The San Francisco Mayor's Office of Housing sponsored research and publication for the handbook, which is currently being updated to include sustainable materials

McNulty feels the practice of architecture is too reactive. "I see architects as reactors rather than agents for change. Once a problem is given to them they can come up with creative ideas, often ones the client never envisioned. But they generally are not initiators. I'd like to see more brainstorming from architects on how to address larger social problems." McNulty feels this is where the AIA can play a role with design charrettes to address specific

problems. She says the members of the AIA SF Housing Committee are interested in creating a forum for discussion of how architecture can address some of these social issues. One opportunity for involvement begets another.

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