



# Design for Good

Pro bono work not only helps worthy clients communicate their message through design, but provides unexpected benefits for the designers as well.

BY LESLIE WOLKE



David Berman ends his manifesto *Do Good Design: How Designers Can Change the World* with the Do Good Pledge:

1. I will be true to my profession.
2. I will be true to myself.
3. I will spend at least 10% of my professional time helping repair the world.

Intentionally broad and inclusive, this pledge resonates with today's design community as we all struggle to find purpose in our work during times of environmental, social, and economic instability. Nearly 90,000 hours per year have been pledged since his book debuted at the end of 2008.

How are environmental graphic designers harnessing their talents for the public good? Their interpretations of "Doing Good"—as well as the visual expressions that arise from them—are as diverse as the talents within our profession.

## "For the public good"

Probably the first thought that comes to mind when exploring the idea of "doing good" is the term pro bono, shorthand for the Latin pro bono publico or "for the public good." By volunteering their services for worthy projects and organizations, designers can craft meaningful tools to convey their clients' messages—tools that may have been out of reach without in-kind donations.

Designers often engage with their pro bono clients through informal introductions, but new matchmaker DesignNYC ([designnyc.org](http://designnyc.org)) facilitates those connections and curates resulting projects in

**Opposite** Gensler Los Angeles broke through some disciplinary and hierarchical boundaries by involving its entire staff in the Los Angeles Police Department Memorial to Fallen Officers. (Fabrication: A. Zahner Company. Photos: Ryan Gorbuty/Gensler)

**Right and below** Adam Brodsley of Volume (San Francisco) sees pro bono work—such as an innovative donor element for the York School, his alma mater—as a chance to break ground. (Fabrication: Pinnacle Exhibits. Photo: )



the New York City area. Founded by Edwin Schlossberg, principal of ESI Design, DesignNYC recently paired The New York City Housing Authority with Rooster Design Group to collaborate on a “Green Guide” educating residents about their carbon footprint.

### Giving back, breaking new ground

Adam Brodsley of Volume Inc. (San Francisco) found his pro bono inspiration at his high school alma mater, The York School in Monterey County, Calif. He was asked to donate his services to design a donor plaque for the school’s LEED-certified science and math building.

“We usually try to break some new ground with these types of projects,” Brodsley explains. Pro bono engagements “give us permission to flex our muscles.” This is how Brodsley transformed a typical plaque into a cornerstone/time capsule, complete with a countdown clock ticking the seconds until the capsule will be opened. At the school’s upcoming 50th anniversary, students will fill the time capsule to be unsealed on York’s 100th anniversary. “By adding layers of meaning [the cornerstone became] a conversation piece. The students loved it, the faculty felt it reflected the creative spirit of the school, and the donors felt duly honored.”

### Low bono, high impact

PlainJoe Studios (Corona, Calif.) mirrors Berman’s mandate to “be true to yourself.” Co-founder Peter McGowan calls the interdisciplinary design firm “very close to a ministry.” About one-third of the firm’s portfolio consists of environmental graphics projects for Christian churches and non-profits, reflecting the religious priorities of the firm’s team members. McGowan characterizes his engagements with their church clients as “low bono or low-down-discounted design.” One-third of their work, mostly web design and development projects, are engagements with corporate clients like Nissan and provide about two-thirds of the firm’s annual income. “I wouldn’t call it a business model as much as a design ethos,” McGowan explains.





Plain Joe Studios recently completed an environmental graphics program for the first permanent home of Elevation Church in Matthews, N.C., in a renovated K-Mart. Over the years, McGowan and co-founder Mike Foster have learned how to stretch their clients' small budgets from design through installation, even using bedframes to hold banners. From project to project, they often partner with the same fabricators who have learned how to work with volunteer labor from the congregation to install exterior and interior signage.

### Beyond the bottom line

Another unique take on blending the talents of a for-profit design firm with a passion for serving non-profits is Mark Randall's twin endeavors: Worldstudio Inc. and Worldstudio Foundation. In the mid-1990s, Randall started the marketing and design firm Worldstudio, whose credo is "corporations hold the power to make lasting social and environmental change." Under that umbrella, Randall and his team have produced influential work with clients such as Adobe Systems and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. In parallel, he started Worldstudio Foundation to "give back to the creative community" and prove that "design can reach beyond the bottom line." The foundation's central mission has been to provide scholarships and mentor programs for young designers.

In 2006, the two Worldstudios—Randall often calls them the Brain and the Heart—partnered to create The Urban Forest Project (<http://ufp-nyc.com/>) for longtime Worldstudio client The Times

Square Alliance. The idea was to "plant a forest of creativity" in Times Square by soliciting designers to design outdoor banners for the neighborhood. Hundreds of designers responded to a short creative brief asking for concepts based on using a tree to express an environmental issue. Professionals and students from 21 countries designed nearly 200 banners.

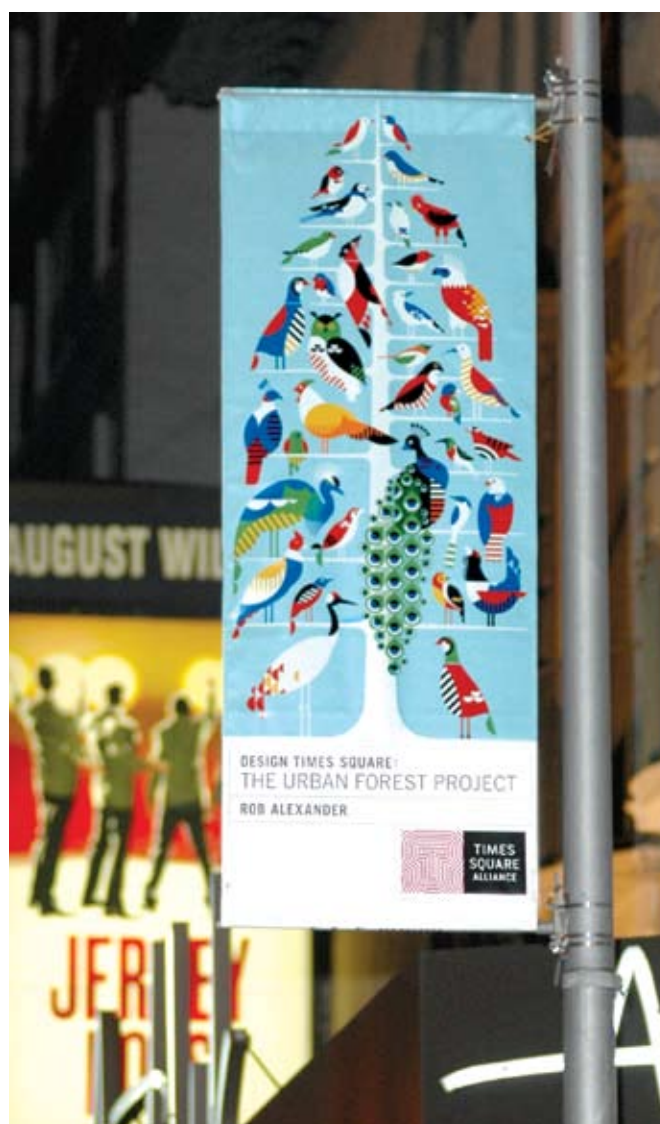
After delighting visitors for three months, the banners were recycled into tote bags by accessory designer Jack Spade and auctioned off, bringing in thousands of dollars for scholarships, "sustaining the next generation of artistic talent," explains Randall. The event was so successful, Randall and his business partner Andréa Pellegrino streamlined the Urban Forest into a repeatable business model and fundraising tool; to date there have been Urban Forest Projects in four cities and this year Toledo, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, will blossom.

### One size "good" fits all

It's easy to assume that the personal vision, agility, and small size of Randall's Worldstudio and McGowan's PlainJoe Studios enable them to "Do Good" in a way that large corporations cannot. Global architecture and design firm Gensler, with 30+ offices around the world, would prove that assumption wrong.

Gensler signed on to Public Architecture's 1% pledge, which asks architects to dedicate 1% of their firms' person hours per year to pro bono service. In February, Public Architecture founder John

For the Urban Forest Project—conceived by Worldstudio and Worldstudio Foundation for The Times Square Alliance—200 designers (including Rob Alexander) created banners expressing environmental issues. The banners were recycled and sold as tote bags, with the proceeds going to scholarship and mentor programs for young designers. (Photos: Mark Dye Photography)



Peterson reported: “The firm of more than 2,000 employees pledged a staggering 43,680 hours, a major gesture of generosity during a time when pro bono design services are more needed than ever.”

“We take on projects that people might not expect a big firm such as Gensler to be doing,” says David Herjeczki, design director in Gensler’s Los Angeles office. A good example is the Los Angeles Police Department Memorial to Fallen Officers, which opened in September 2009. The pro bono project came about through a longtime professional relationship between Rob Jernigan, managing director of Gensler LA and Jim Wyatt, chair of the Los Angeles Police Foundation.

Herjeczki and his peer design directors immediately sensed that this project furnished the opportunity to explore a new and inclusive ideation method.

“We seized the opportunity to involve everyone in the office—literally—to reinforce the idea that everyone has a voice in the design process and can and should contribute to the realization of an idea regardless of their discipline or experience.” Starting with an open call that elicited 30 ideas, a studio-wide critique narrowed the field to four concepts.

“This stage also gave an opportunity for some younger staff to participate in presenting the design work to the Foundation and the Chief of Police,” adds Herjeczki. Even the later phases of the design process broke some traditional boundaries when the four design directors collaborated on the final design. “We hadn’t really worked

together before, since by definition, we individually direct the design of projects. Rather than a clash of egos, this process turned out to be really refreshing and rewarding, strengthening our relationship as design colleagues.” The resulting monumental wall is a layered and shimmering abstraction composed of brass plates inspired by police officers’ badges.

### Baking pie, doing good

Far outside the traditional design firm structure, 14 young designers re-thought the role of design and the community it can serve and came up with PieLab, “a ‘social design studio’ disguised as a pie shop” in Greensboro, Ala ([www.pielab.org](http://www.pielab.org)). Their simple, whimsical formula is “pie + conversation = ideas; ideas + design = positive change.” In other words, to understand how their skills can be employed for the residents of Greensboro, these designers created an informal, comfortable meeting place and started baking. The result is more than a pie shop, it’s a prototype for engaging designers directly with people who inspire them to Do Good. [X]

Leslie Wolke ([leslie.wolke@gmail.com](mailto:leslie.wolke@gmail.com)) is a consultant who specializes in interactive wayfinding and donor recognition systems.

**Below** PlainJoe Studios uses the income from its for-profit clients to help subsidize its “deep-discount” work for churches and Christian

ministries, such as the Mariners Church Student Center in Irvine, Calif. (Photo: PlainJoe Studios)

