

## Loving Community: The Act of Intimacy of the Citizen Architect *by Michael B. Lehrer, FAIA*

*Los Angeles-based architect Michael B. Lehrer, FAIA, is well known for the design of his community-based projects, such as the award-winning James M. Wood Community Center and Downtown Drop-In Center, both in Downtown LA's Skid Row. His community action includes membership and leadership positions with AIA Los Angeles, Homeless Health Care of Los Angeles, Hollywood Planning & Design Review, LAUSD's School Construction Bond Oversight Committee, and the Harvard Graduate School of Design Alumni Council, among others.*

I'm sorry, but I am just not enamored with the phrase "giving back" to the community. It suggests a level of sacrifice that inevitably doesn't tell the whole story. Engagement with community and the pleasure of making a difference in society is what architecture is all about. It is what drives the architect. It is rudiment of leadership. I would rather call it "loving community."

Architects materialize ideas. We are reality and vision based; that is, we are wired to see problems and oppositions as opportunities for optimistic and beautiful outcomes. That's our job. That is what we do. It is this wiring that makes us important players in a good society. It is what good leaders look for to achieve their goals. They look for other good leaders as well. It is why they look to us—if they can see us. Of course, we must be present to be seen.

Community involvement has always been second nature to my practice. The family, the neighborhood, the city, the academy, the profession, the alma mater, the temple, the dance company, the green group, you name it. We are all members of so many communities. At any given time we are either overwhelmed or engaged by them. Architects, like few others, are made to give form and meaning to the aspirations of these communities, if they chose to. If they are bold enough to.

But isn't that the fun of it? Isn't that what love and intimacy are all about? Listening, caring, digging deep to achieve meaningful, happy and even beautiful outcomes for those you care about. And in the listening and caring, you come to love them. And they might even come to love you.

How else can you know community? How else can you learn the genius loci of the place and its people? How else do you learn nuance? Develop intuition? You have to embrace stalwarts, smart ones, idiosyncratic groups, the works; you have to listen honestly, attentively, caringly, critically and non-judgmentally. This is how you learn community.

People get it, when you get them.

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And, of course, you have to lead. You must embrace the truth and speak it with force and passion. Community craves this because so few people do so. Not everybody will love you. So what? Ultimately, this life of engagement brings wisdom and empathy that transforms the practicing and designing architect. A life of loving community alongside and beyond the scope of our direct practice, empowers us as designers and shapes us as leaders. Designers, as leaders, make powerful citizens.

Architecture is grounded in the Vitruvian attributes of *Utilitas, Firmitas, Venustas*—that is, utility, firmness, and delight/beauty. Sounds like love to me. That is our mantra. Bring that to bear on community and everyone will be chanting it together happily.

