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High Demand, Low Funding

## Design Center Reorganizes To 'Do More With Less'

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The Community Design Resource Center (CDRC), a nonprofit group doing pro bono design work for community organizations in and around Boston, needs two things to survive: money and volunteers.

This year has been a mixed bag – they've got plenty of willing architects and designers, but a smaller budget than ever before. So the nonprofit is reinventing itself, changing its structure to meet the high demand for its services while delivering them for lower costs.

The CDRC's two co-sponsors, The Boston Society of Architects (BSA) and the Boston Architectural College (BAC), each cut contributions down by nearly one third. The nonprofit had been operating with a budget of \$80,000 since it was created in 2005; this year, the budget is \$55,000.

"The BSA and the BAC sort of forced the hand a little bit," said Nancy Jenner, a director at the BSA who is on the CDRC's board. "I think, like parenting, you are sort of more supportive when you encourage your fledgling organizations to think a little more creatively and figure out how to do more with less."

With new construction grinding to a halt, there are a lot of architects looking for something to do. In terms of volunteers, the CDRC has never been richer.

"Since the economy has crashed, there are a lot of designers out of work," said Jenner. "But a lot of designers and architects want to stay active, and that's what's keeping this organization engaged: the designers and architects want to do this good work."

With budgets tighter all around, there are plenty of community nonprofit organizations that need the conceptual and schematic design work. The CDRC provides foundations for community organizations to then bring to fund-raisers, municipalities and other architects.

### 'Now We Move Forward'

"Most people are more likely to fund something where a professional has worked through it," said Karen Spence, the CDRC's project director who joined the nonprofit in December of last year. "Nobody wants to invest in some organization that doesn't look like it's got its stuff together."

But the nonprofit's problem in the past has been connecting the volunteers with the projects efficiently.

"We used to have a sort of convoluted process," said Spence. "We had too many steps between meeting the client and getting that client hooked up with a team. And that's only because we were learning; now we move forward."

Jenner, Spence and CDRC Board of Directors President David Gamble have worked this year on finding a better model. On Oct. 14, the CDRC had an event in its offices at the BSA where it paired more than 40 volunteers with five projects in one evening. Spence said as soon as more candidate projects are identified, another matchmaking session will be scheduled.



A conceptual design of proposed zoning changes in Union Square in Somerville the CDRC completed for Union Square Main Streets. The CDRC's work helped get zoning reform passed in Somerville.

For the last four years, the CDRC has been governed by a board of directors which hired and oversaw a full-time executive director. That executive director oversaw several volunteer committees, and handled the bulk of responsibility for nominating projects, project review, finance, fund raising, and program development. The majority of the budget was used on administration costs.

Starting this year, the board of directors' executive committee will take a more hands-on approach, and the job of executive director will be split into two part-time roles: a project director and a program director. The greater board of directors will serve more as an advisory council, connecting the CDRC to potential donors, projects and other community involvement.

Gamble stressed that the nonprofit wasn't taking away work from other architectural firms searching for jobs. Gamble said the CDRC, by pairing nonprofits with individual architects and firms alike, is making professional relationships through its pro bono work.

"[The] work that we take on tends to be for clients that simply can't afford to hire architects, or more often than not, they're not yet prepared to hire an architecture firm," Gamble said.

He cited the CDRC's work with Chelsea Neighborhood Developers. Together, the two nonprofits engaged the community to learn what the residents' priorities were, and then created schematic designs for the Shurtleff/Bellingham neighborhood, as part as a revitalization plan. Together they designed new street layouts to improve parking, trash collection, seating and lighting, and a greenway that will run through the neighborhood and connect to a new park.

"The work that we'll produce will ultimately be the point of departure for a request for proposals or a request for qualifications for professional firms to advance the work," he said. "So we see ourselves as a catalyst for development."