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# Perspectives - Cannon Design's Open Hand Studio

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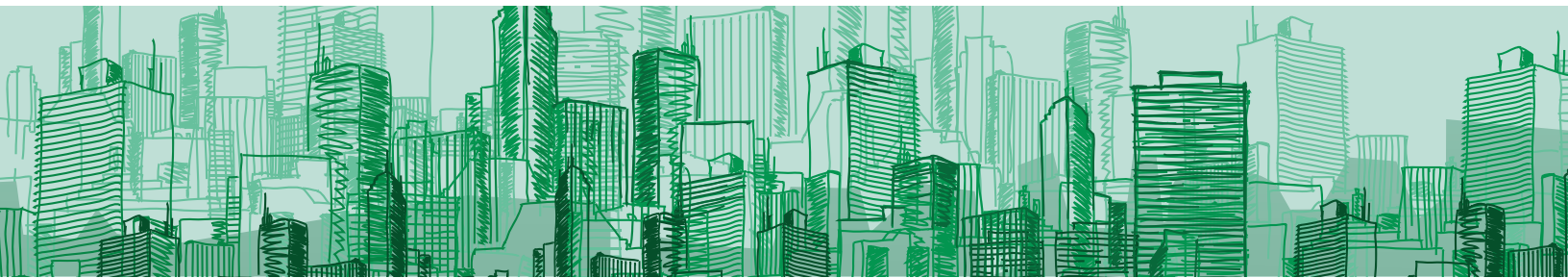
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# THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT



## Perspectives

### Cannon Design's Open Hand Studio

*Not only can architects create great space, they can also inspire better connections between the built environment and the social sector. **John Syvertsen, Chris Lambert, and Ashley Marsh** talk with **Sahar Nikanjam and Professor James Hagy** of *The Rooftops Project* about their work with not-for-profit organizations through architectural firm Cannon Design's **Open Hand Studio** initiative.*

*John Syvertsen is a senior principal in the Chicago office of Cannon Design. He has been an architect in Chicago since 1976, practicing for the past 22 years as a principal and for 10 years as President of the architecture firm OWP&P, which combined and merged with Cannon Design five years ago. His professional focus has been largely on the education sector and in city design, public interest, and social impact and equity. He collaborated with Ashley and Chris in imagining and launching Open Hand Studio initiative. At the end of 2014, he will be leaving private practice to focus his time exclusively on public interest and social impact, including as Chair of the Board of Regents of the American Architectural Foundation.*

*Ashley Marsh spent almost a decade with Cannon Design (formerly OWP&P), first in the Chicago office and later in San Francisco, concentrating her professional focus on the education sector. Her passion for thinking about how design practice might have a better social impact on society led to her work helping to found Open Hand Studio. Since our interview, she has joined the San Francisco office of the architecture, design, planning, and consulting firm Gensler as Senior Design Strategist.*

*Chris Lambert started with OWP&P (now Cannon Design) in 2000, working in marketing and in the firm's Sustainability Services Group. He consults with clients to make projects more environmentally responsible and has collaborated with John and Ashley in developing the Open Hand Studio concept.*

**RTP:** Tell us a little about Cannon Design's professional practice.

**John:** We are a firm of architects, engineers, interior designers, and graphic designers. We do a great deal of work in health care, in both K-12 and higher education, and in the corporate sector, with various forms of buildings and working places. We also have a city design practice that embraces a whole range of disciplines, vectoring forces for good in the design of, and actually the redesign of, cities. We place a great deal of emphasis on the value that a cross-disciplined, integrated approach brings to this work.

**RTP:** What is the philosophy behind the Cannon Design approach with clients, and how did that lead you to the Open Hand Studio concept?

**John:** Much of our work is to create design solutions to the greatest challenges facing our clients and society. We see Open Hand Studio as a mechanism to integrate these societal concerns more effectively early into our work.

Our sustainability practice is both something integral to all of our work and a subject matter in itself. It is incredibly important, growing more and more as a robust offering for our clients.

**RTP:** Through the Open Hand Studio, you serve not-for-profit clients, while also facilitating and inspiring other design and construction professionals to work with other not-for-profits on their own. How do you think about these two distinct roles?

**Ashley:** We feel strongly that social relevance and design excellence don't have to be incompatible. To describe the work of Open Hand Studio as a specific number of projects is actually somewhat limiting. More often, we try to think of it as the number of clients that we've impacted. Last year, we had over 50 different touch points and projects as part of the Open Hand Studio initiative. I would venture a guess that in the last five years we've impacted hundreds of organizations, whether through formalized hard projects that fall under the Open Hand umbrella or individual initiatives by our staff.



**John:** It isn't about projects. It's about impact. One of our fundamental rules, from the beginning, was that when [potential clients] call us, we may or may not be the right people to provide help. But we take ownership of responsibility to steer and advise them. We count those people among our friends in this endeavor.

**Ashley:** Open Hand Studio is a virtual studio, a movement, a call for action for the firm to encourage pro bono architectural and engineering services in partnership with not-for-profits. Its goal is to take on assertive, propositional, and even scalable projects that can address issues in some of the most vulnerable communities that we see and with which we interact. We partner not only locally but also sometimes globally. It embodies a vision that John mentioned earlier: we are trying to create solutions to the greatest challenges that both our clients and society face. Open Hand was definitely founded with the idea that our practice can be something much larger than itself.

**RTP:** Your organization co-produced the resource book *The Third Teacher*, which is composed of an amazing variety of facts, short essays, and ideas about the role of design in creating effective formal and informal education spaces. Do you consider this an example of how your efforts can have an impact beyond the direct clients for whom you might do discrete design work?

**Ashley:** Yes. *The Third Teacher* premise says that your first teacher is your family and community, your second teacher is your physical teacher, and your third teacher is your environment or space in which you're being taught. *The Third Teacher* has led to a greater movement, and we're engaging in a broad, national dialogue with progressive organizations about the role of space in education.

Another good example of the sort of initiative in which we are involved is Archeworks. It has spun off and produced projects like the Convergence Academies. [Archeworks is a Chicago-based not-for-profit that provides education about the impact of design in building sustainable and healthy communities. The Convergence Academies is an initiative launched by the Center for Community Arts Partnerships at Columbia College of Chicago to work closely with the Chicago Public Schools district to implement creative, integrated learning experiences in high-need neighborhood schools].

**RTP:** What would be the ideal profile of a client for whom you would provide direct architecture and design services through Open Hand Studios?

**Chris:** The core of Open Hand Studios is a relatively small group of people. But Cannon Design is made up of roughly a thousand people operating in four, maybe five, different countries on three continents. We have lots of possibilities. That level of diversity means that there are lots of projects that might fit the profile. There are advantages and disadvantages to that. The common characteristic for a really successful pro bono project is someone in a local office who is committed to a set of issues that the not-for-profit sponsor cares about. As an example, John and Ashley both come out of our education practice. A lot of the clients with whom we work have an educational mission. Part of the reason that those efforts are successful is because it's consistent with what we do every day.

**John:** Chris leads a vetting process, a filtering process, to discipline us as opportunities come along. It's a wonderful template that we've shared with our friends around the country. One key is the viability of the client. What is the likelihood that this client is set up to be successful in this endeavor? We want to help people who can take advantage of this help and move forward. Answering this question takes a process, time well spent. It's not as simple as someone knocking at our door, and it would be cool to help. We try to concentrate our efforts where we can be the most helpful.

**RTP:** Are there several prongs to your assessment of viability? Programmatic viability or financial viability of the organization is one aspect. But do you look also at whether the project in which your help is sought is achievable within the organization's means?

**Chris:** Yes. A lot of times clients will come to us with a specific question, and we may end up providing a solution that is pretty different from where that relationship started. They'll come thinking that what they really need is a full set of construction data documents so that they can go out and build something. They may want that at no cost, as you might imagine. But often the fundamental value is in working with the design professionals as a resource. We might be able to develop materials that allow them to start a capital campaign, for example, that then would allow them not only to build the thing that we would be designing but also pay the architect, whether that's us or some other firm. That might be a better starting point than giving someone a set of construction documents and then hoping that they can actually raise the money to get it executed. It is a nuanced conversation. There's an art to being able to convince [people] that the thing that they asked you for when you had your initial meeting isn't realistically the thing that we're going to give them at the end of the day.

**John:** So in a weird way it may mean that the center of the value that we've provided over the last five or six or seven years is up front rather than the design itself. We have helped more people by urging them to go down the right path as opposed to being incredibly naïve and not knowing what they might be getting themselves into. We can touch more people that way, too. Then, it's often likely that we won't be the people to do the work for them. They are in a position to bring in another design practice, perhaps at a reduced fee, to get the work done. But we were there when they really needed us, to provide great strategic thinking.

**RTP:** In these pro bono situations, are you typically involved as early as you would like? Or do you sometimes find yourselves being invited into projects later than you might have wished?

**John:** We have a choice. If we have a paying client, we will do whatever we need to do. But with pro bono projects, I think we are much less hesitant to say, "You're down the road farther than we would like." We might try to find out if there's a way to back up, to help them reconstruct the reasoning for whatever they're doing. With pro bono, we do have a certain confidence in what we have to offer, and we aren't beholden to them. So there's an amazing kind of freedom. This should happen on all projects, to be confident in what you're offering.



**Chris:** As a specific example, John and I worked together recently with a small theater company that was looking to relocate its offices. They were pretty far down the road. They had selected a building in which to lease. The rent in this new space was going to be incredibly cheap. They had committed making a pretty significant investment in that building because they were able to obtain some third-party funding on favorable terms. But it was not an accessible building and, if they wanted to get that grant funding, they were probably going to have to add an elevator, which would have eaten all of the budget from the grant. We were able to outline the potential pitfalls and the reason to be cautious, which was a benefit. But it would have been a far better idea to talk early on to a design professional, who could have taken a look at that space and outlined the challenges that might be inherent in it before the theater company started putting a memorandum of understanding or a lease together.

**John:** Can you imagine on day one, if they planned to sign the lease in three days, having the nerve to say, "You can't sign this lease until we have more time to help you evaluate this because this could be a terrible mistake"? We never uttered those words, but I think we conveyed that sense without saying it so directly.

**Chris:** And John is an artful guy, so he was able to convey that pretty well.

**John:** But we think they signed the lease!

**RTP:** We're hoping that we are conveying these messages through The Rooftops Project, too. The hope is to help not-for-profit organizations understand what events in the life of the organization implicate occupancy and deserve attention, and what the professionals do, whether paid or pro bono.

**John:** Imagine the value and the number of people that you can touch that way. It's pretty big.

**RTP:** How can the built environment or physical interior or exterior space impact the mission of a not-for-profit organization? Beyond basic occupancy, what can the built environment contribute to an organization that's not about real estate?

**Ashley:** What [The Rooftops Project] is doing is exactly the approach we are advocating through Open Hand. We're trying to identify the issues that organizations and society are up against and to find ways that we can be involved in projects proactively, rather than how people typically think of architects and designers. Last year at our forum, we were talking a lot about the fact that there is something like a three-trillion-dollar social sector economy. Design thinking might impact the sector, but the social sector operates this built environment. Designers are largely absent from that conversation. If we can find more ways to be present early in those discussions, there is huge potential.

**Chris:** One important aspect of the value of the built environment in the public-interest and social sector is work toward human dignity. That's a really important aspect of what a designer brings to this equation and is something

that is too often missing in the conversation. This motivates our staff and gets people interested in these pro bono efforts. It's not so much about the hours we give or how many projects we take on; it is about the kind of lives that get touched by the work that you do.

**John:** A neat example is our work with Cook County Hospital clinics distributed around the city. At the very beginning of our conversation, I suggested that maybe there was a way we could help make the clinics nicer. People who have unequal access to design excellence are often working and living in demeaning environments. That is a fact, a simple reality. So if you can improve design, and I mean through excellent design, not just something that anybody can do, then you are going to elevate human dignity. In the case of the public health clinics, the interesting fact of the matter is that they need to improve the patient experience because with Obamacare they are competing for patients in ways they weren't before. So the beautiful reality is that patient experience is important. Part of this is the physical environment. Our job is to turn a potentially demeaning experience into an elevating experience. We know we can do that.

**Chris:** The aesthetic of that experience means more than the finishes that one is using. The patient experience requires good light, the appropriate choice of colors, furniture that is not demeaning. It's also allowing people to avoid visual clutter in the signage that's around them, which allows them to be processed more quickly and effectively, and more humanely, in the space. It's not tangible like this desk that we're sitting at right now. But it makes the experience better for patients.

**John:** Ultimately it's about health and wellness in the community. My dream, our dream, is that we would be able to demonstrate that through the adjustments that were made, more people are coming, they're getting better care, and the community five years from now is healthier than it was before. There's no better reason to do that.

**RTP:** How does space communicate a brand?

**John:** That's such a great question, Chris...Ashley...

**Chris:** An example is a recent project that we did through Open Hand Studio. We worked with Convergence Academies, which is a collaboration between Columbia College here in Chicago and the Chicago Public Schools district. Both organizations work together, and they co-submitted successfully for a grant from the Department of Education. They are creating what they call digital ateliers in two Chicago public schools: one a K-8 school, and one a high school. They came to us with the idea that we would produce a set of documents that they were going to build from, and that was going to be the end of the relationship.

Where it landed was a pretty different idea. First, we brought in a lot of other partners: other design firms, graphic designers, and a pretty wide range of professionals who could contribute. We held a series of really deep focus groups, interviewing staff and representatives from each of the two schools. It created a very participatory design process, not only about these two pilot projects but also for the future. The end result was a tool kit that allows them to think about these spaces as independent and unique spaces that are student



centered, within the environment of a Chicago Public Schools building. That was fundamental to what they wanted to do, allowing Convergence Academies' brand to be evoked in different schools. A striking case was the Tilden High School on Chicago's south side. It is a very underutilized school, which was built for 2,500 students and currently has an enrollment of about 400. So there was no shortage of space in which to put this atelier. But there was a very real stigma about going to school there. Creating this space was certainly about increasing digital literacy and closing the digital divide, things that are important for an educational mission. But it was also about creating a space that was theirs and that they could feel safe in. The project was built over this past summer with a grand opening at the start of the new school year.

**John:** A process about brand hugely increases and deepens the design discussion. It is not just logo design. Brand is a deep, broad subject. On some projects, we may drive ourselves close to insanity because clients want to get to a physical result so quickly, and we have to keep saying, "Wait, wait, wait, we need to do more so it's formed properly."

**Ashley:** The elevation of brand is the elevation of pride. We're completely tied to the idea of human dignity being at the core of what we're trying to do. So often organizations are struggling to understand whether the built environment is an extravagance, but in reality it's about pride.

**RTP:** In *The Third Teacher*, one of your colleagues observed that it was relatively infrequent for a design professional to be on a not-for-profit board. His experience may be a random sample, but what are your perspectives? Is that problem worth solving, getting architecture and design at the table on an ordinary day in not-for-profits?

**John:** That's a great question. It's a scary question in a way, because how many boards can you be on? Can you be more effective serving not-for-profit organizations in other ways? I don't know the answer. I do know from personal experience that when you start to work for a not-for-profit organization, you are sometimes asked to be on the board. But do you feel like diving in? Of course, it would be useful because your design voice would be at the table.

I was thinking about our experience with Hyde Park Arts Center. They're friends of ours. They very graciously hosted our first Open Hand Studio meet and match four years ago. Then Kate Lorenz, the executive director, asked us to help design a facility assessment process so that they knew when to replace their air-handling units and a gazillion other things. It became a matrix, a kind of roadmap of maintenance stuff. Kate has said it's their bible for work, a living thing that they keep up to date. That's awesome.

She came by not long ago and wondered if I might be interested in considering being on the board. I said no; the right thing was to do exactly what she asked me to do, which is to work on very specific tasks. They do not have a design professional on their board, but they do have me on the sidelines. I'd much rather do that 10 times than to be on a board once and only every once in a while have something specific to offer.

**RTP:** Producing *The Third Teacher* was a one-time project from your perspective, but do you find that it has a continuing life? There are so many engaging ideas in it, and it fosters enthusiasm for the contributions that the built environment can make, not just on education but on other types of organizations.

**Ashley:** *The Third Teacher* has inspired a living practice within the firm that in a very significant way has infiltrated most of the work that we do, especially across the education market. A lot of the thinking behind it has influenced the work that we have done through Open Hand Studio. For me, I think it is a hyper-relevant launch point for the thinking that we bring to most of our clients, regardless of their type or the complexity of the question that is at hand.

**RTP:** We gather from your comments that you think that some of the points made in *The Third Teacher* are relevant beyond not-for-profits that have an educational mission.

**Chris:** We have a health care client in our New York office that sponsors a charity hospital in Haiti. Hospitals here send their doctors down there to operate a clinic effectively. It's a really fulfilling experience, from what I understand. The charity hospital in Haiti was in duress and really needed some architectural services. We came in with the Open Hand Studio project. Aligning our goals with our client's goals made a lot of sense.

**John:** The ultimate challenge for Open Hand Studio is to move pro bono from the department of good into an integrated aspect of our thinking in the design field. A few years ago, when Ashley and I presented *The Third Teacher* at the Design Future Counsel in Boston, it was a way to illustrate the future of bringing social impact thinking and public interest into the heart of practice. Our dream is that this isn't so much about doing wonderful pro bono projects; it's about having every single client that we engage with thinking with us about this issue.

**RTP:** Recently you moved to new, leased space for your own offices here in Chicago. After helping so many other people in the world, how did you transfer the design principles you apply in your work when Cannon Design was its own client here?

**Chris:** The not-so-nice way of saying it is that we were self-absorbed [laughter]. Maybe a better way of saying it is that we were reflective about how we used the space. Fundamentally, we saw this move as an opportunity to experiment with the design decisions that we're making on behalf of clients. Our space is a living laboratory. It can be a showroom, too. We certainly bring people through it a lot. We often ask colleagues to clean up their desks when a client will be walking through.

**John:** By the way, this place was a mess before you got here! [laughter again]

**Chris:** In all seriousness, there's something really truthful about being able to tell a client that we operate in an open-plan environment where literally 99 percent of the employees from the principal level on down are sitting in an open workstation. The real estate reality is that we were spread out on "fourish" floors in our old space, which was about 72,000 square feet. Here, we're in about 60,000 square feet. So we saved about 20 percent of the space for roughly the same head count. Yet I think it still feels bigger; there's a lot of open space in the center of the office. This may sacrifice personal space, but there isn't much of a sacrifice. People were in an open workstation environment in our old offices, too, although here there are more people who



don't have offices. This is something that we embrace, and it is not a problem for us. It's not only saving money and saving square footage, but it is about actually improving the way you operate. That level of practicing what you preach is very important to us.

**RTP:** You all have an assigned spot though?

**Chris:** Yes. We're not hoteling.

**RTP:** Most of you are here all the time?

**John:** A lot of people are gone a lot, but not so much that a home base doesn't exist.

**Chris:** Our intent was not to expand. There's not much room to do so. We like all being on one floor. So if we grow significantly, we could accommodate hoteling within this footprint right now.

**RTP:** With an open plan and less partitioning, was air handling easier to design and install?

**Chris:** Actually, it's reasonably complicated in this space. Our floor crosses two adjoining buildings, although they are under the same ownership. Our lease is for 13 years. We punched a couple of holes between these two buildings. There are two-hour fire-rated windows that come down between the two buildings. There are two HVAC [heating, ventilating, and air conditioning] systems, too. The two systems have to be balanced. All the plumbing and utilities had to align, too. We used literally every penny of our tenant improvement allowance from the landlord; there was nothing left on the table!

**RTP:** Another benefit of open plan too is that you can change the configuration easily, without moving drywall?

**John:** Boundaries are not an issue. Another tie between the learning and work environments is flipping the classroom idea to permit collaboration and cross-disciplinary work, focused learning. We have mashed disciplines together much more than when we were forcibly segmented. That has had a big effect on the way that we work. We love to show not just corporate but also education clients the space, because the design isn't butts in seats with a teacher in front of the classroom. It has inspired some of our educational clients to see that we can really loosen up our thinking.

**Chris:** The technology supports an environment that applies to an education, or a health care, or a corporate client. There are surprisingly few complaints amongst staff about what isn't working. It worked well from day one.

**RTP:** But of course your staff don't really think or care much about space to begin with... [laughter]

**Chris:** Yeah, right. One of the first points in *The Third Teacher* is that everyone is a designer. In our case this is literally true. The number of opinions could

have made this a tragedy. Actually, people embraced moving into this space. Ashley, as a person who used to work in this office and now works in a different office, what is your impression? I'm curious.

**Ashley:** I shed a tear every day I don't walk in to the Chicago office.

**RTP:** Obviously, there are often a lot of stakeholders in design projects in the not-for-profit sector. In addition to staff and clients, there may be visitors, patrons, even the public. When you try to bring all these voices into the design process, how do you make them feel heard? How do you bring consensus?

**Ashley:** You have to ask the qualitative questions and not the quantitative ones. It's the classic Henry Ford situation, right? If I asked people what they wanted, they would probably say a faster horse. I think Steve Jobs adapted a version of that. If you're doing really well at engagement with clients, you're not asking them what color they want. You're asking them to describe what kinds of behaviors they want to enable in their environment. You're asking them to describe the quality of life they want people to have in that space. And you are responsible, as the professional, to tell them what kind of colors and what kind of special configurations are going to do that.

In a project with the School of the Art Institute [of Chicago], the faculty and staff at one point asked, "How much space do we want?" That resulted in a recommendation that was almost double the size of the institution. So through a series of very strategic questions that we hashed out with the client, we were able to show them that they could almost get everything they wanted and only increase the campus size by 15 percent. Knowing how to ask the right questions is kind of an art.

**John:** The design process as Ashley is describing it is not a familiar process. Clients often make assumptions about what the design process is, invariably focused on the quantitative stuff. So there is a real challenge to help a client understand that it is necessary to lay the groundwork properly. The beauty is that you arrive at a solution that makes sense, both today and tomorrow.

**Chris:** There can be a negative side. Members of the client organization may participate in [the exploratory discussions at the beginning of design] and leave with the impression that they are going to get exactly what they want. One of my colleagues said to me, "If a design professional tells you that, you should fire him, because the purpose isn't to hire someone who gives you exactly what you want; it's to give you what you need." Once again, with a pro bono client, the designer can say very, very honest things that the client does need to hear.

**RTP:** Perhaps sometimes the pro bono client takes your advice more willingly than the private sector business client that is paying market rates for services?

**John:** Sometimes you get what you don't pay for!

**RTP:** Tell us about the Ace Mentorship program, where you are drawing high school students into a design project.

**Chris:** Ace is a great program. John is on the board of the national organization, and Ace Chicago is an organization that we have supported for a long time.




High school students come in, usually in groups of 10 to 20 students at a time. They collaborate with members of the architecture, construction, and engineering community. They have an active role on a theoretical design project. We take them through the steps in a design project from beginning to end. The goal is to inspire them to choose a career that fits what their interest might be, whether that's in a professional field or something else. One of the great outcomes of that is that frequently the participating firms bring on the interns for the summer and give them real professional experience that you really would not have as a high school student if you didn't participate in this. There are dozens of success stories of students who have gone on to either architectural or construction careers. One of the benefits of the program is its strong alumni network.

Thanks. I really appreciate you coming in and bringing these issues to the forefront. We appreciate the work you are doing through The Rooftops Project.

**Ashley:** I would echo Chris. I think this is the kind of stuff that makes us get out of bed in the morning. It's these conversations that remind us of the purpose of what we're after and that keeps pushing us to move forward.

**John:** I'm laughing. Being shameless self-promoters is contrary to our nature but this is awesome.



**Sahar Nikanjam**, a candidate for the juris doctorate degree at New York Law School in 2016, is a student member of The Rooftops Project Team. She is a Chicago native and is highly passionate about human rights and social justice issues. In her spare time, she likes to explore different neighborhoods in New York City. She received a B.A., *cum laude* in English Literature, at DePaul University in 2012.



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