



Do Something Good

Robert Schwartz, FAIA Receives 2004 John Wiebenson Award

by Mary Fitch, AICP

It was the unanimous decision of the Washington Architectural Foundation's Board of Directors that Robert Schwartz, FAIA receive the 2004 John "Wieb" Wiebenson Award for Architecture in the Public Interest. Given in honor and memory of John Wiebenson, this award celebrates architects who make careers out of doing good.

"It's a tremendous honor to be linked with Wieb," said Schwartz upon learning he had won the award. "Wieb was an exceptionally good person who led an exemplary life. There are very few people I would consider role models, but I felt that way about Wieb." Schwartz met Wiebenson when he first came to Washington and always looked forward to seeing him. "He had strong opinions but he was basically a lot of fun. Even when you disagreed with him, you appreciated his honesty."

Schwartz started his career at the University of Cincinnati Architecture School. He participated in the co-op program that allowed him to work at many architecture firms all over the country and experience lots of different ways of practicing and different office sizes. "In those days, you could get a job anywhere. It was an invaluable experience. I even worked overseas." One project in particular helped to shape his design philosophy. "We were in school and thought we knew everything, of course, and were asked to design a commercial street. We unveiled our design with every expectation that we were brilliant and the merchants just hated it. They went through a list of everything they needed which of course was not what we had done. This was an important moment for me, it planted the seed." Schwartz then studied planning at Harvard and MIT with Kevin Lynch as his mentor. "Before Lynch, few people were looking in any sort of scientific or systematic way



La Clinica del Pueblo
by Schwartz and Peoples

about how people see things or why people feel the way they do. This fascinated me."

Schwartz' firm, Schwartz and Peoples, works on residential projects, clinics, and religious buildings, which Schwartz believes are the best project an architect can get. "It combines all the quality of a residential project, with a civic structure and then you add the deeper meaning, the spiritual quality, of the space. We like the kind of projects that require consensus building. Other architects may hate that but we think it makes the project more interesting."

Schwartz tries to make his *pro bono* work really cheerful. "These clinics we've done for Mary's Center and La Clinica del Pueblo really help people to feel better. There is so much fear and impatience related to doctor visits and our spaces seem to calm that. These populations we are serving are often relegated to second-class space, and now not only are they getting first-class space, it is uniquely designed for them. It is really empowering."

Asked why he thinks *pro bono* work is important, Schwartz responded "You always get back more than you give with these projects. People are so appreciative and thankful. There is something more satisfying with this. If you have a technical skill and you can use it in some way to improve society, I think that's very important." Schwartz believes he has received more jobs because he does *pro bono* work, "Regular paying clients have a very positive feeling about the kind of work I do for my *pro bono* clients."

"I think I like doing this work," he continued, "because I am very comfortable with people and look for ways that I can help, a way to do something good. Wieb was like that, too. He was so comfortable with himself and so interested in people. I am deeply honored to be counted in his company." 🙏