



All in a day's work

Self-contained day labor station, San Francisco, USA

Regional competition

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North America; page 65

In many US cities day laborers use street corners as informal hiring sites. For hours on end they wait by the roadside and in parking lots, often in the hot sun and without any amenities. They wait for an employer to stop by and offer a day's work for a day's pay. The self-contained day labor station designed by a team of committed architects aims to improve the life quality of those who find themselves on the edge of the American Dream.



For the past few hours five Mexicans have sat on the steps in front of a small sports ground. Sapped of energy, they share only a few words; bored, they stare into the distance. And wait, perhaps the whole day, for work. As day laborers, they are like hundreds of others who wait around San Francisco's most famous informal hiring site, César Chávez Street.

Over a hundred thousand more are stretched across the USA. For a few dollars an hour, they are hired to paint walls, maintain gardens, move furniture, or work on building sites. Potential employers cruise by in their cars, check out the faces, and choose someone they think they can trust. Perhaps qualifications or experience are asked for.

It is an informal system presenting a myriad of health, safety, and community concerns.

No chance on the job market

Even though competition to get hired is tough, there is little sense of resentment between the laborers. At the end of the day, they spend more time together on a street corner than working. Engaging the five Mexicans in conversation, however, is difficult.



Isidoro from Mexico: Lost a permanent job when the business changed ownership, he has relied on day labor for years.

The concept is flexible – the day labor station can be altered to fit the realities of a given location.

Yet the eldest, Isidoro, is a little more forthcoming than his friends. He has been in San Francisco for the past six years – “At first I worked in a restaurant, but it was sold and we all lost our jobs.” Since then he has searched for permanent work but to no avail. Day labor is his only option.

“Sometimes I have work for three days in a row, then maybe it’s ten days of nothing,” he says. “You never know what tomorrow brings, but you learn to accept it.” But how does he spend his time when there is no work? “I just sit here, perhaps till the afternoon. What else can I do?”

Better life in “sanctuary cities”

US-Immigration officials estimate that illegal immigration has continued to outpace the level of legal immigration since



the 1990s. Almost half of all illegal immigrants arrive on a visa but overstay its expiry. Others risk crossing the border between Mexico and the USA. Without valid papers, there is no chance of legal work. Many find themselves on the informal market just because there is no other option.

The day laborers who call San Francisco home do so because of its reputation as a “sanctuary city”. Around 20 locations in the USA are similarly known – their town hall authorities and police force ask no questions about a person’s residency status. Life is better but it certainly isn’t easy. If employed by disreputable contractors, perhaps they are not paid for their labor. Robbery is common – paid in cash, they make an easy target.

The Day Labor Program, a non-profit organization, tries to address these issues

via their 100 official centers established across the country. The centers aim to connect workers with jobs, at a fixed hourly rate, and with their rights respected. They also offer education programs – language or computer skills, for example. Yet most day laborers avoid the centers – mainly because they believe they have a better chance on the street, but also because it raises fears about their status.

Engaging non-profit work

Thanks to an initiative by architectural studio Public Architecture, a solution to improve the situation of day laborers who want to stay on the streets has been developed. Their self-contained day labor station offers flexible structures, shelter, benches, wash-rooms, a kitchen and an education/ training space. Green and recycled materials are used to minimize the environmental footprint and economic cost of each facility.

The studio of Public Architecture based in the center of San Francisco was established by John Peterson in 2002. “I found myself wanting more balance in my architectural work – up until then it was mainly high-end residential projects,” he explains. “I wanted to make a bigger impact on the community.” Together with his team, ideas for a public space project in San Francisco were sketched – it led to conversations with different agencies. Public Architecture was founded. It also led John Peterson to do some more thinking.

“I realized that few architects engage in non-profit work, but there is an enormous potential for us to contribute something worthwhile to the community.” The 1% Program sprang to life. “The 1% Program challenges architecture and design firms to pledge a minimum of 1% of their time to pro bono service,” he says. “We act as a



facilitator to connect firms with the non-profit organizations who need design assistance.” The program is having its desired impact – in 2005, its first year, 20,000 work hours with a market value of USD 2 million were offered.

Identifying problems

John Peterson describes Public Architecture as “a new model for an architectural practice.” Supported by foundations, corporate and individual donations and grants, the studio can work outside the economic constraints which apply to conventional practices. Public Architecture therefore can work for the public good.

“We’re a venue where architects can identify problems and think about how to solve them – not just respond to a client who says: ‘Make that!’,” he says. As an example, the team looks at how innovative design

can encourage people’s interactions in public areas. “A bus stop is not just a bus stop,” he says. “It’s a meeting point, especially in the suburbs where people exist in detached isolation. It’s a place to engage with others.”

Several years ago John Peterson discussed this idea with a colleague who was involved with the migrant community. “Instead of a bus station for commuters, we began to develop ideas for a day labor station – a sheltered space for them to wait for work, as well as a restroom.”

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Liz Ogbu quickly developed a strong relationship with her day laborer clients – a big advantage in the project.

Innovative and adaptable

John Peterson designed the day labor station together with Liz Ogbu. Born in San Francisco, and trained at Harvard, Liz Ogbu has always seen architecture as more than the design of an object. With her father, an anthropologist, discussions around the family dinner table informed her opinions about social issues early. All her projects to date have fulfilled a strong societal need. Further, they are developed as prototypes which can be adapted to the needs of



communities anywhere. “I like to create something that is both innovative and adaptable – it must have potential to be multiplied and fit the realities of a given location.”

For the day labor station, Liz Ogbu followed the same developmental process. “First we went and talked with day laborers about their needs,” she says. “Their business model is very simple, but successful – a potential

employer arrives, describes the job, agrees a price with the laborer and takes him to the site. Our design needed to take account of this process.”



Restroom: Toilet facilities are a basic yet critical need often lacking at most informal sites. In situations where there is a larger day laborer population, the flexibility of the Station’s design concept allows for more than one restroom cube.



Kitchen: The kitchen can function as a food business, serving as an income generator for the Station as well as a food service training opportunity for workers. With employers as well as patrons from nearby businesses as customers, it also provides a focal point for social interaction.



Office: The Station not only has the potential to host meetings, but in situations where the day laborers desire a coordinator, a cube can be designed as an office.

- 1 Photovoltaic modules (mounted on translucent panels; the number of panels can be adjusted to accommodate the actual energy load of the station or adapt to the budget of individual projects)
- 2 Translucent polycarbonate panels
- 3 Gutter connected to rainwater collection system
- 4 Air flow through seating area
- 5 Used billboard vinyl wrapped panels mounted on fiber cement panels
- 6 Locally sourced, salvaged, or certified lumber (used throughout the Station)
- 7 Photovoltaic system container (rainwater collection tank also stored underneath bench)



“Workers view their hiring sites as sacred – our structure should reflect that.” Liz Ogbu

Yet, the day laborers were amazed when Public Architecture took their ideas seriously. “They were our clients, but had no experience at being treated as such,” she says.

The main problems they described were no access to water or amenities during their sometimes long wait for a job. Using amenities in nearby restaurants was their only choice, which generated ill will. Standing in the sun for hours was debilitating. A further point was the need to ensure they had good eye contact with the potential employer. “That is how jobs are allocated,” Liz Ogbu says. “Visual contact is key to a worker’s perception of a fair hiring process.”

Flexible and self-sufficient

The station the architects designed was very similar to the bus station of their original discussion. The day laborers sit on raised wooden benches under a canopy roof. At each end boxes can be attached for use as

toilet or kitchen – the latter, similar to a mobile food vendor, could generate funds to support maintenance. The station is self-sufficient. Electricity comes from photovoltaic modules integrated into the canopy. Designed to make a minimal

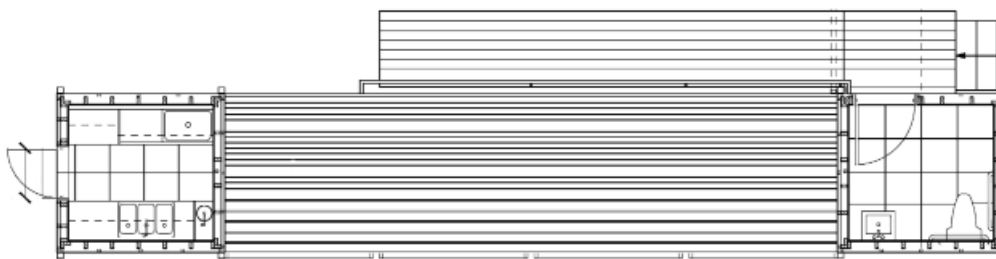




footprint, it utilizes green materials such as recycled PVC tiles, billboard vinyl, fiber cement panels and locally sourced, salvaged or recycled timber. The kitchen can be fitted out with recycled restaurant appliances.

The prototype demonstrates its flexibility to be adapted to any situation. “For the toilet, we have various possibilities,” Liz Ogbu says. “In some places it could even be a camper-toilet.” With few modifications, the station

could be converted into a classroom. As most jobs are assigned by nine in the morning, for the remainder there is the opportunity to use their free time for learning programs that support organizations offer.



Flexible Solutions: Because community needs vary, the station is designed as a kit of parts to be altered to fit the realities of a given location. The specificity in each context is determined through discussions and coordination with the diverse stakeholders at each project location.

Social and aesthetic

The station amply meets the social requirements of the brief. But it is designed with aesthetics in mind as well. “For the team at Public Architecture, these things go hand-in-hand,” Liz Ogbu says. “Workers view their hiring sites as sacred – our structure should reflect that.” John Peterson adds: “We aim to answer the question: how can we design something of beauty that solves a genuine social need. The strength in design shouldn’t be underestimated – it demonstrates we value our clients highly, no matter what strata of society they occupy.”



Day labor: life in the margins

Each day around 120,000 day laborers wait at informal hiring sites in the USA for work, principally in the construction industry. Mainly located in the dense urban centers of the east and west coast, only one in five day laborers use the infrastructure of non-profit support organizations. Others make it on their own, on the streets. Two-thirds are Mexican, a quarter arrive from other Central American countries. Most are between 18 and 27 years old and earn hardly enough to live on.

The demand for day labor has grown strongly in recent years – the border between fixed and casual employment is more fluid in many regions and industries. Particularly in the construction and agricultural sectors, temporary or seasonal workforces are the norm. A study shows that, each year, one in five day laborers in the USA are involved in a serious work-related accident.

Indeed day laborers live on society's periphery. The station concept creates a sensitive living environment which meets their daily needs. In addition the structure provides a physical location for outreach programs and enhances social cohesion amongst the laborers themselves. It provides them with a more dignified presence in the public realm, in the face of, at times, community hostility. In the end, the day labor station is not just a station. Just as a bus stop is not just a bus stop. It is an opportunity for advocacy about the role of day laborers in the fabric of society.

Demonstrating their commitment to the project, the hope is that day laborers will

Liz Ogbu and John Peterson from Public Architecture: Good quality design can solve real problems.

self-build their stations. This is also to keep costs to a minimum, which would need to be covered by the state, donations or non-profit organizations – “it is difficult to find a good solution that isn't too expensive,” Liz Ogbu says. Without foundations or solar collectors, the cost per unit is around USD 100,000.

Willing to work for a better life

Although built as a prototype, discussions are ongoing with several cities which are eager to trial the concept. From a city's perspective, its potential for improving health and security for day laborers as well

as the broader community is high. “The informal sites are controversial,” Liz Ogbu explains. “Over three quarters of the sites occupy spaces meant for other uses such as home improvement store parking lots.”

The irony she sees is that day laborers echo core American values, despite their mostly illegal status in the country. “They are here to get a better life for themselves and their children – and they're willing to work for it!”

In the long run, politics will play a significant role in whether day labor stations are deployed as informal hiring sites across the country or not”, Liz Ogbu says. “As architects, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to advance conversations on issues such as this,” she adds. “Without a holistic vision, how can we create a better world?”

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