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Gensler Gives Back

by [Sarah Lynch](#)

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A group of designers from the San Francisco offices of [Gensler](#) volunteered last April for [Habitat for Humanity](#) East Bay's annual Earth Day Build-A-Thon, and they were hooked! Working with architect Gary Struthers on the Edes Avenue development in Oakland, the Gensler group helped frame one of the development's 54 homes from the foundation to the roof. Since the Build-A-Thon, the Gensler group has gone back once a month to help finish up the homes on Edes Avenue. Scroll down to hear what the members of the Gensler group have to say about their experience.



Sheryl Samson, LEED AP, NCIDQ, IIDA Board Member

Q: Tell us about the Habitat for Humanity project you are involved with?

A: My involvement with Habitat EB began in early April with their Build-A-Thon initiative to frame 20 "green" homes in 4 days. Further interest materialized after spending two days appreciating the art—more like excruciating manual labor—of building a home from scratch. With our construction backgrounds, I believe we all felt it hard to walk away from an unfinished site/project and my fellow team members and I decided we would continue with monthly visits to see "our" house to completion. This past December, half of the 20 home owners received their fully built homes. The event itself did not disappoint and I have become a Habitat groupie ever since. The way the organization handled their diligent onsite recycling programs and their green vision alone impressed me and what ultimately won me over was their ideal of "sweat equity". Each home was given to a deserving family, but each family had to perform "x"

number of hours as their down payment to their new home. Giving back to the community came with a purpose and I applaud Habitat for utilizing their time to help others achieve that dream.



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Kerry Bogus, LEED AP, IIDA Board Member

Q: What are your reasons for selecting this organization?

A: I started working with Habitat by chance, a friend of mine was participating in the Build-A-Thon and I thought it sounded like fun. After that I was hooked. I was fortunate enough to work with Gary Struthers, the architect that designed the first phase of the Edes development, and with his help (and the wonderful Megan Sallabedra - Volunteer coordinator) was able to come back as often as I wanted. I started bringing my co-workers and friends and we formed the Gensler group. Now every time I'm heading down I round-up people from work to come and help. I had never really felt so excited about a volunteer opportunity as I did about Habitat. Living in Oakland I see the conditions that many families are forced to deal with. Helping hardworking people to become homeowners is an important and urgent need that Habitat successfully addresses.

Habitat has given me a new perspective on what I do and satisfies a desire to actually make something real. I think designers have an eye for detail and a love of how materials connect (so I try to be really careful!), but I feel like I have benefited more from Habitat than they have from me. I work hard when I'm on the site, but I'm not a builder. The cool part is seeing how all the things someone designed come together. The ways a wall is framed or even how a window is installed is exciting for me because when I'm sitting at the computer all day it can feel very removed from real life and real constraints.

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Yana Ronin, LEED AP, NCIDQ, IIDA

Q: What has been the most memorable or most rewarding part of your experience?

A: When we were working on the framing of the LEED Certified House with Habitat for Humanity East Bay, we were working alongside our “house mom” – the future owner of the house. She was working on a shear wall, hammering in nails by hand, at 2” increments for the entire length of the wall. It took her most of the day, but she did not give up. She was saying that it was the most important wall in the house, and she would do a good job on it. Which of course she did. It was great working alongside with her and getting to know her as we hammered our day away. I remember her saying that her house was going to be the best house in the world, as it was built with love of people in the community.



Rebecca Ruggles, LEED AP, NCIDQ, USGBC

Q: What can other members of the design community do to help out?

A: There are many opportunities for designers to get involved. Habitat for Humanity & Rebuilding Together are always looking for people. [Architecture for Humanity](#) is also based in San Francisco and their local chapter always has projects & competitions going on that require design talent. [Handsonbayarea.org](#) & [Onebrick.org](#) are also great resources for finding volunteer opportunities in the local community.



Juan Rodriguez Beltran, LEED AP

Q: What have you learned from your experience?

A: The most valuable thing members of the design community can do is devote their time. One's talent and knowledge can inspire many to help others. Therefore, whether it be to give, teach, plant or build, there's nothing more gratifying than treating our community like family. Help educate and better our communities for future generations.

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