



PHOEBE SCHENKER & MARGOT LYSTRA

Public Architecture's *Day Labor Station*

By Liz Ogbu

Dignifying an Honest Day's Work

Editor's Note: Many Catholic Charities agencies have been concerned about the difficult conditions day laborers experience while they wait to find work, such as the lack of shelter, water, and bathrooms. The concern is exacerbated by the intense public debate over immigration, especially when protesters target day laborer waiting sites as public nuisances and safety hazards. Public Architecture's compact cost-efficient Day Labor Station is an appealing option as agencies consider how best to serve day laborers.

The failure of federal immigration legislation last summer highlighted the debate about the role of immigrants in American society. In doing so, it has brought attention to groups previously operating under the radar. One such group is day laborers. It is the debate surrounding this population that Public Architecture, a San Francisco-based nonprofit, is working to impact.

Everyday, more than 110,000 people, primarily—but not exclusively—of Hispanic origin, look for day labor work in the United States. These individuals have found a niche within the economy, filling jobs for which there is a critical

need but not enough labor. The informal day labor market “is hardly the only manifestation of the shadow immigrant economy, but it is the hardest to ignore.”¹

More than 75 percent of day labor hiring sites occupy spaces meant for other uses, such as street corners and home improvement store parking lots. A relatively small number of officially sanctioned worker centers exist, but informal gathering sites remain the norm. These sites are far from ideal; their presence in spaces designated for other uses means that laborers often lack even the most basic amenities (shelter, water, toilet facilities, etc.). Further,



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the lack of capacity to accommodate them within existing infrastructures often presents health, safety, and community issues.

The “Day Labor Station” project of Public Architecture offers a unique solution to these issues. The station is a self-sustaining structure that can be deployed at informal hiring locations, creating a specific space for day laborer gatherings. Made with green materials and designed with the ability to exist off the power grid, the station provides restrooms and a sheltered space for day laborers to wait for work. Depending on the workers’ needs, the station can also house a kitchen or office. The structure is also capable of serving various other uses, including as an employment center, meeting space, and classroom. Recognizing that community needs and desires vary, the station’s design can be altered to fit the realities of a given location.

Public Architecture believes that the Day Labor Station is not just about the design of a shelter, but also an opportunity to resolve the conflict about day laborers and the spaces they rely on to find work. To that end, Public Architecture maintains a project Web site, www.daylaborstation.org, where one can learn about the project as well as get more information about the day laborer population. Public Architecture recently exhibited a full-scale section of the Day Labor Station in an exhibit at the

Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York as part of an exhibition titled “Design for the Other 90%.”

The immigration debate has thrust day laborers into the limelight, but still they are often considered to be a singular, faceless mass. Lost in this debate are their individual stories, which often echo the hope and values of those working toward the American Dream. Together with a prominent photographer and graphic designer, Public Architecture has produced a series of portraits of day laborers that demand that they be looked at as individuals, not as members of a faceless group.

Public Architecture is currently in discussions with a few communities about building the first prototypes of the Day Labor Station as well as working to engage other like-minded organizations in this effort. This project has the potential to have a far-reaching impact. Ultimately, Public Architecture envisions Day Labor Stations deployed across the country. ■

For more information, please visit www.daylaborstation.org. Public Architecture is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization established in 2002. It acts as a catalyst for design for the common good through advocacy and design. Visit www.publicarchitecture.org to learn more.