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Mission-Driven

Leddy Maytum Stacy's new Ed Roberts Campus epitomizes the firm's commitment to socially relevant design.

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Most architects strive to establish a singular brand, but there's one firm that wants others to replicate its work. That's because its firsts aren't about a trademarked form; they're about finding news ways for architecture to bring about social change. Under this philosophy, the stars of the show are not the architects but the clients. In the case of the Ed Roberts Campus, a center for disability rights and services in Berkeley, California, these stars are more likely to accessorize with white canes and wheelchairs than black turtlenecks and angular eyewear. And when you watch them proudly entering the ERC building through the front door, not some loading ramp out back by the Dumpster, you realize just how powerful good design can be—even without the pyrotechnics.

The firm is Leddy Maytum Stacy, and its three principals have been plying the trade they like to call "mission-driven design" for almost three decades. William Leddy and Marsha Maytum, who are married, met at the University of Oregon architecture program in the 1970s. In 1982, Maytum went to work at the San Francisco firm Tanner & Van Dine, where she met Richard Stacy. Leddy joined the company the following year. The firm's makeup morphed a few times, and by 2000 the names on the door were Leddy, Maytum, and Stacy.

In essence, the partners grew up together, and together they've developed a way of working that is rigorous in both its value system and its attention to detail. At Tanner & Van Dine they started as project architects, deeply immersed in every door and strut. "And we've really never let go of that," Stacy says. "One of the consistent comments we get is how thoroughly thought out the buildings are down to the smallest detail." They expect the same of their 18 employees; no one is simply a designer or a spec writer. One partner and one associate are assigned to each project, and that duo sees the job all the way through. "We're not just sketching and never appearing again," Leddy says of the partners. "That's how we like to spend our days, but we also think it results in much stronger projects."

It's also an approach well suited to taking on tough challenges. "We have a track record of being the first to tackle something really complicated," Stacy says. When the National Park Service took over the Presidio military base in San Francisco, the firm landed one of the first commissions, the Thoreau Center for Sustainability. The bureau wanted green architecture, but this was in the mid-1990s, before the LEED rating system, and there weren't many existing examples. As the lead architect on the project, Maytum tracked down materials like cotton insulation made from old blue jeans and designed an entrance canopy of photovoltaic panels. If these sound like common green features today, that's because the building became a model for the NPS's sustainability guidelines—and for green projects nationwide. "The work we did helped them understand that it can be done," Maytum says, "and in a fiscally responsible way."

Though it has done its share of commercial, for-profit projects, the bulk of LMS's work is for clients with a social mission, be they government agencies, schools, or nonprofits such as ClimateWorks and the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It gets down to the shared set of values that we've all had since we were young'uns," Maytum says. "We've made conscious decisions over the years that if there's something we can contribute through our work, then that's what we want to do. I mean, what more could you want to do with your professional life?"

Ed Roberts, namesake of the new campus in Berkeley, had a similar philosophy. In the early 1960s, he was the first student with significant disabilities to attend the University of California at Berkeley. He went on to cofound the World Institute on Disability and became a pioneer of the independent-living and disability-rights movements. After Roberts's death in 1995, his colleagues looked for a way to continue his work. They decided to bring together in one building local organizations that address disability rights, either through policy work or direct services.

The \$47 million project houses 11 different organizations, and it took nine years and a complex mix of government and private funding to complete. That led to a challenging design process that ERC's president, Dmitri Belser, likens to "designing a kitchen for seven couples." One thing the groups agreed on was that the campus should go beyond just meeting their physical needs. Buildings for people with disabilities tend to look institutional and somewhat foreboding, but, Belser says, "we wanted to make this a building that was open, that welcomed people in and also showed them what was happening inside." Many universal-design projects get bogged down by a hyper focus on ADA compliance, especially accessible bathrooms. But the campus's ambition demanded a higher level of thinking. "Fundamentally, this project is about the idea that good design is a social-justice issue," Leddy says. "Everyone deserves to experience a thoughtfully made place."

To approach the larger issues of disability rights metaphorically, he and the project architect, Gregg Novicoff, homed in on a small, quotidian detail, what the latter describes as "that socially awkward moment when the person in the wheelchair takes the ramp while her ambulatory friend bounds up the stairs and waits at the top." From this came the idea of a ramp that wasn't a tacked-on afterthought but the main architectural event, placed at the lobby entrance. Inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, Leddy took a structural spiral, made it lighter and more

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The building creates a proud civic presence for the Berkeley, California-based disability-rights organization.
Tim Griffith



sculptural, and wrapped it around an exhibition space at the bottom and a round skylight above. LMS had the idea to suspend portions of the ramp from the ceiling and brought on Arup to engineer it. By putting support rods only at the interior edge, Arup was able to cantilever the ramp and make it appear to be floating in midair. Panels of red composite resin make up the ramp's walls, giving the building a signature color and filling it with a rosy glow when sun from the skylight streams through them.

The task for the facade was to raise the profile in the community of people with disabilities. A sweeping, arc-shaped plaza gives the campus a civic presence and reaches out to hug the city. Ipe screens soften the exterior and echo the neighborhood's wood-shingle houses. The campus is at the Ashby BART station, primarily to make it accessible to people with disabilities—but the location has the added benefit of visibility. "Part of the idea was to come out of the shadows and give these folks the opportunity to really be there in the community, to have people engaging them," Leddy says. One move in this direction was to put a BART parking lot directly behind the campus. Commuters pass through the building's lobby to take the elevator down to the underground train platform.

Inside, every detail takes universal design into consideration. You notice it in the automatic doors and lights, the long-distance security-card readers (which can detect a card inside a backpack hanging on the back of a wheelchair), and the elevator's oversize kick buttons. But some of the most important universal features are invisible. A fountain at one end of the interior courtyard doubles as a location device for the sight impaired, who use its sound to determine where they are in the building. The street-facing café is accessibly designed both in front of the counter and behind it, to allow for customers and employees with disabilities. An impressive degree of daylighting throughout the campus aids those with sight impairments, and an acoustical ceiling treatment—fabric stretched over a sound-absorbing finish—lessens ambient noise for the hearing impaired. The floor plan is an easy-to-navigate loop, so that people with cognitive disabilities can find their way without assistance. And all the materials and finishes have low levels of VOCs or none at all, to accommodate chemical sensitivities.

What's perhaps most surprising about this degree of universal design application is how much sense these features make for any user. What's good for people with disabilities—daylight, healthy indoor air quality, pleasant acoustics, a rational building layout—is, by and large, good for everybody. Universal design really is universal. Though the ERC decided not to take on the expense of green certification, the building has all the sustainable features of a typical project by the firm and was designed to meet LEED Gold standards.

What you won't find here are a lot of experimental tech innovations—that would undercut the firm's belief in making its projects replicable. "They weren't interested in being an R & D project," Novicoff says of the campus. "It's a more powerful narrative to say, 'You can do what we did in your neighborhood,' instead of saying, 'You need to buy all these doodads and gizmos because it won't work without them.'" The firm hopes the project will become a case study for other architects, proving that good-looking modern design can be universal and green.

The case-study approach has made Leddy Maytum Stacy one of the country's leaders in sustainable design. The evolution of green architecture can be charted through the firm's projects from the past decade and a half. As technology, materials, and popular opinion grow more sophisticated, LMS extensively researches to find the newest and most effective technologies and materials. The firm has earned four AIA Committee on the Environment Top Ten Green awards, including one for the conversion of a 1951 Greyhound garage by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill into the San Francisco campus of the California College of the Arts. The idea of adaptive reuse as a sustainable move was new in 1997, and it turned the building itself into an object lesson that is now part of the curriculum. "Being that it's a design and architecture school," Maytum says, "what better way to teach that than to have the building be this great transformative use of an existing building?"

The Nueva School, built in 2007 in Hillsborough, California, exemplifies a later phase in green design, when schools became eager to incorporate such teaching moments. A living roof provides a habitat for an endangered butterfly species and helps connect the K–8 students to the natural world. And the two-year-old Michael J. Homer Center, at Sacred Heart Preparatory, in Atherton, represents the latest stage of sustainable architecture. A building-management system with interactive touch screens lets students monitor the energy use in the building on an hour-by-hour basis. Both Top Ten Green projects, the schools use natural ventilation and PVs to consume about 65 percent less energy and 50 percent less water than a typical U.S. school would.

As other firms and the market catch up on these ideas, LMS is still at the forefront, pushing for the next level of green: buildings that don't emit carbon or consume more energy than they make. The Vai Avenue Case Study, a private residence in Cupertino, may be the first carbon-neutral, net-zero-energy suburban house. Just as the original Case Study House Program reinvented housing for the late 20th century using then-new improvements in manufacturing and materials, this is a case study for the realities of the 21st. "That was then," Leddy says. "Now there's a different reality—and how do we rethink things in terms of living a prosperous life?" The strikingly modern three-bedroom house uses off-the-shelf materials and existing construction technologies to show that ideas like a net-zero, net-carbon home are attainable now.

Next, LMS plans to build another net-zero residence, this one an experiment of a different sort: a residence for 16 autistic young adults in Sonoma. The recent, alarming increase in autism among children raises new questions about how the most severely affected will live as adults, and this project, funded in part by the nonprofit Sweetwater Spectrum, hopes to set a higher standard by trading the dreary nursing home for cohousing with an organic garden. "The idea behind the residence is that they would grow old together," Maytum says, "and that their families would be assured of a nurturing place for them to achieve their greatest sense of independence."

If there ever were a concern that recent converts to green architecture would steal LMS's thunder, the Sweetwater Spectrum project should prove that there will always be new social issues for Leddy, Maytum, and Stacy to tackle. As more firms start to adopt the practices it has pioneered, it's LMS's integrative philosophy that really deserves to be copied. "It pains me to see these modifiers before the word design—sustainable design, green design, universal design," Leddy says. "Good design does all of these things or should aspire to." The same could be said of good architects.