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James Abell, FAIA, Honored with 2010 Kemper Award for Service to the AIA

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Washington, D.C.

Summary: The American Institute of Architect's Board of Directors bestowed the Edward C. Kemper Award to James Logan Abell, FAIA, on Dec. 3, rewarding a career that's been spent offering the public all the community design solutions the AIA has to offer through its **Regional and Urban Design Assistance Teams (R/UDAT)**. The Kemper award is given annually to an architect who has contributed significantly to the profession through service to the AIA.



Over his 30-plus-year career, Tempe, Ariz.-based James Abell has time and time again been the public face of what architects and the AIA can do to help people in need of better cities, towns, neighborhoods, streets, homes, and businesses. He's worked with numerous R/UDAT programs across the nation, assembling diverse groups of design professionals to lead community forums in developing design solutions for changing communities. In many ways, Abell has become something of a traveling design missionary; going from place to place to tell people about the quality of life that better designed communities can win back for all. Writing in a recommendation letter about Abell's participation in a Pleasant Grove, Utah R/UDAT, Seattle architect Jerome Ernst, FAIA, compared him to a uniquely American figure: *"After the final presentation, someone in the audience referred to James as 'Arizona's Will Rogers,'—a characterization which seems quite appropriate."*

As impressive as this professional record is, Abell has done more than empower others to collaborate and realize the fruits of quality design: He's lived it and designed it himself in practice. Abell founded **Abell & Associates Architects** in 1979 in Tempe, where he's lived for almost 40 years. Today, the firm offers a diverse array of design services: architecture, landscape architecture, & urban planning.

In 1974, Abell won a fellowship for work and travel in Northampton, England while finishing his architectural degree at Arizona State University (ASU). A Mark III British New Town, the Northampton Development Corporation sparked his early interest in sustainable urbanism and afforded new experiences in urban design and master planning. Abell further developed this expertise as a 10-year member of the City of Tempe's Planning and Zoning Commission.

A Public Voice for Community Design

Abell has participated in 16 major community design charrettes, including **AIA R/UDATs** and **AIA Vision 20/20** events in Vermont, Utah, California, Ohio, Texas, and Arizona. In each of these places, Abell has expertly assembled groups of elected officials, designers, local residents, preservationists, and activists, and helped them to find their own unique design interventions that can secure the future of their communities. *"As the most public face for these initiatives, James used his passion for sustainable urbanism and his unique humor and compassion to communicate complex ideas in an*

accessible and compelling way, touching the minds and hearts of hundreds of participating citizens,” wrote Robert Herman, AIA, of Edwards and Daniels Architects in Salt Lake City, in a letter of recommendation.

Writing in a recommendation letter about Abell’s work for the Mountain Green, Utah, R/UDAT, James Christopher, FAIA, of Brixen and Christopher Architects, praised Abell’s ability to empower others: *“He has left the citizens of Mountain Green with not only a well conceived vision for the future, but most importantly, a ‘can do’ attitude to make things happen.”* Abell first became involved with the AIA’s R/UDATs in 1974 in Phoenix, and he led his first design assistance team in 1994. He’s been a consistent presence in the AIA’s regional and urban design committee since the mid-80s, and helped craft an AIA design assistance team handbook. Paul Barwick, a senior city planner in Boerne, Tex., worked with Abell on an R/UDAT for his town, and wrote in a recommendation letter of Abell’s ability to pull the public into the design process. *“What struck me first about James was his uncanny ability to rapidly connect with people, quickly making them comfortable enough to share their thoughts and experiences in an open public forum. The keystone of the R/UDAT process is public participation, and I firmly believe that James did a tremendous job in getting as much out of those who participated as was possible.”* **“James,”** wrote Ernst in his recommendation letter, ***“is without peer in his commitment to the program.”***

A Mentor to Design Activism

Abell has used many of his R/UDAT projects as opportunities to enroll architecture students involved in design activism and community outreach, and throughout his career, he’s been a constant mentor to aspiring designers. He’s taught **architecture classes at ASU** and the **Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture** in Spring Green, Wis., and Scottsdale, Ariz. Hundreds of high school students have heard his career lectures on the design professions, and Abell helped initiate and develop a 16-week architecture curriculum for Phoenix fifth and sixth graders that was taught by 90 AIA architects.

In 1988, Abell became a local team leader for the AIA’s Search for Shelter national design charrette in Phoenix. For this project (which occurred simultaneously in 26 American cities), Abell led a group of ASU students in examining how abandoned buildings in downtown Phoenix could be renovated into safe, quality housing for people transitioning out of homelessness. Abell and Associates Architects eventually designed and built one such project—the Casa Teresa Home in Phoenix, a single room occupancy residence for previously homeless women. This project, like many his firm takes on, was done on a pro bono basis.

“James Abell has used the R/UDAT process as an intensive and innovative master class in both volunteerism and urban design for the communities he has worked in, the team members he has worked with, and perhaps most importantly, for the myriad of R/UDAT student volunteers he has recruited,” wrote Herman in a recommendation letter.

Past Projects and Honors

Notable projects by Abell’s firm include Arizona Mills, a major retail center, the McClintock High School Multipurpose Facility in Tempe, a sports and classroom complex; campus master plans for ASU and local community colleges; an 1905 historic renovation for the Lambert-Miller Gallery in Phoenix; and The House of 3 Courtyards, an early earth integrated residence. In 1989 at the age of 38, Abell won the AIA Arizona Architect’s Medal, the youngest architect to do so. Named in honor of the AIA’s first executive director from 1914 till 1948, the Edward C. Kemper Award has been awarded to notable architects such as William Perkins, FAIA (1950), Norman Koonce, FAIA (1998), Norbert Young, FAIA (2005), and Barbara Nadel, FAIA (2009). **Ω**