

# WESTERN HOME JOURNAL ASPEN

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CHARLES CUNNIFFE ARCHITECTS

Inspired Community  
Service





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CHARLES CUNNIFFE

# HONORED FOR INSPIRED COMMUNITY SERVICE

Charles Cunniffe's peers recognized his lifetime of community service and celebrated his achievements with an award this year for his personal and professional commitment to improving the daily lives of people in his community.





This year the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Colorado West Chapter granted Aspen resident and architect Charles Cuniffe, AIA, its Honor Award for Community Service. The prestigious award to Charles Cuniffe recognizes his longtime service to Aspen and Telluride. This award follows last year's 2010 AIA Colorado West award for Firm of the Year, an award for consistent distinguished architecture and significant contributions to the profession. Charles Cuniffe Architects also received the City of Aspen's Business of the Year Award in 2009.

Voluntarism and service tie together the fabric of a community, but by its nature, service is selfless and under recognized. The members of Cuniffe's firm sought to remedy this and call attention to Cuniffe's contributions when they nominated him for the AIA Chapter award. In preparing the nomination proposal, the firm's members listed a staggering number of service achievements for the thirty plus years Charles Cuniffe has lived and worked in Aspen. Considered in tandem with the firm's architectural design work in over 17 countries and 32 states (the firm completes approximately 40 projects annually) and the awards and recognitions received for the firm's planning and design commissions, the nomination and award tell of a robust commitment to community service. Despite the demands of career, Charles Cuniffe relentlessly pursues unpaid efforts for the benefit of the community. Staff made the additional point in the nomination that he inspires others to community service by encouraging each staff member and his architectural clients to volunteer their own time.

Charles Cuniffe Architects (CCA) currently supports over 30 organizations through Charles's service on multiple boards, and his and CCA's pro bono work, sponsorships, volunteer time, and donations. In recent years CCA has especially focused on Child Help River Bridge in Glenwood Springs, a center for abused children; Challenge Aspen, a wilderness retreat for war veterans and their families; Rifle's Colorado Mountain College campus masterplan and addition; YouthEntity/Computers for Kids; and Theatre Aspen's new facility.

*Western Home Journal* asked Charles Cuniffe to speak about his views on the importance of community service and to discuss why this work inspires him.

## Why is community service important to you?

Aspen and Telluride are our home and our base. We have been given a lot of opportunities here both personally and professionally. I see it as both paying back and paying forward. There are great deserving populations that because of circumstances need help. With time, money, and a personal commitment we can make a difference in their lives. We will donate or provide services to almost any worthy cause.

## What were some of your early involvements?

I had an early interest in historical preservation. In fact, renovating the Jerome Hotel was my first project in town. I served six years on the Aspen Historic Preservation Commission, and I was VP of Aspen Historic Trust. In addition, we were involved in the renovation of the Aspen Historical Society's Wheeler/Stallard Museum. I was a founding board member for Jazz Aspen and helped it get off the ground, and I'm proud of that. I was a volunteer for the creation of the Aspen Art Museum and a founding member of Telluride Sheridan Arts Foundation. Also, our firm did a renovation of the Sheridan Opera House and the Ouray County Courthouse. I have a background in and a strong affinity for music.

## How would you characterize Aspen's historic buildings, and do communities benefit by preserving historical buildings?

I grew up in Westford, Massachusetts on the Minuteman Trail and I lived in an environment steeped in history and surrounded by historical buildings. In the west we are sometimes split in our view toward saving historical buildings. I feel that they are important structures and they are essential in giving this community its character.

The buildings in Aspen and Telluride come from a number of traditions that make for an interesting mix: silver mining, Victorian, Gothic and Second Empire, ski-era modern, practical structures built for efficiency and ease, and some important buildings designed locally. Combined, they make our community feel real and established.

*(continued from How would you characterize Aspen's historic buildings, and do communities benefit by preserving historical buildings?)*

Largely we're known for our Victorian influences from the late 1800's, and we have some wonderful buildings like the Wheeler Opera House, Hotel Jerome, the Wheeler/Stallard House, and others.

For Aspen, the historical buildings set a physical scale for new buildings, and they offer an identity so that Aspen is not just another place. Many other communities want to emulate Aspen, but our historical character makes us different. So, destroy the historical buildings, destroy our character.

## As a general view, do you hold that architects and builders have a responsibility toward the communities in which they work?

Architectural practice brings with it a social awareness and consciousness. We have an obligation to exercise our practice with respect for our communities.

## Your recent service projects have brought people together through music and performing arts and offered somewhat disenfranchised groups (like low-income workers, disabled veterans, and teens) places with dignity. How has the community as a whole benefitted from this approach?

By embracing all aspects necessary for a healthier community. Some people cannot achieve what they need alone, and it won't happen if you don't help them along the way.

While Aspen had its beginning as a mining town, it had a renaissance in the 1940's with the arrival of Walter Paepcke. One of his many legacies is the ideal of becoming healthier physically, intellectually, and spiritually. This is one of the many magical aspects of Aspen that inspires us.





## Has your work on these community projects in any way changed you or your approach to design?



THEATRE ASPEN rendering by Charles Cunniffe Architects

Certainly. It has broadened our perspective, and we have different motivations. It provided us a more balanced view of the life in our community. We have enjoyed partnering with the community and that has enhanced our ability to collaborate and given us greater awareness of the value of everyone's contribution—the whole of a group offers much more than one individual.

There have been so many satisfying moments like seeing people enjoying facilities and creating healthier organizations, which have provided great meaning and a sense of fulfillment. The work has been a reward in itself.