



IN MEMORIAM

Ian Donald Turner
Associate Professor of Architecture
UC Berkeley
1939 – 1996

“Whatever it takes.”

Everyone who knew Don Turner — in his work in the U.S. and in developing countries, at Harvard University and during his years at the University of California, in the California state government and his years as charismatic president of the BRIDGE Housing Corporation — will recognize the spirit, energy and inspiration in the way he used these words.

“Whatever it takes” was the way Don Turner lived. Over the years, his efforts helped thousands of grateful families to have homes. Along the way he inspired a host of students, colleagues, politicians and businessmen. His spirit and idealism moved a generation of younger people to follow his example and work for the common good and to work in the public and nonprofit sectors.

Born April 8, 1939, he died on April 3, 1996, in a plane crash on his way to assist in the efforts to build refugee housing in Bosnia and Croatia. Turner was part of a delegation of U.S. leaders of the construction, engineering, and communications industries to accompany Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown on the mission. He was killed on a mountainside near Dubrovnik, 25 years after he had done similar work in Vietnam. He often spoke of this work as an opportunity to reduce the “unspeakable” conditions war forced upon men, women, and children living in poverty in a world that could do better. It was the mission of his life.

A New Jersey native, Turner earned a B.A. in architecture, an M.A. in city planning, and a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Much of his research took the form of work in developing countries and in U.S. cities where urban neighborhoods had been bypassed by the development of the postwar years. This experience prompted him to write a major chapter in *Freedom to Build* (Ed. John Turner, 1972), a call to empower residents in low- income communities to help solve their own housing problems.

While working on his dissertation he began to teach at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. Later, he joined the faculty at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). During the same period he was also engaging the housing problems of the troubled East Bronx community in New York City. He saw the need for a vehicle to take ideas into practice and became one of the founders and then director of the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB), a nonprofit organization aimed at helping low- income tenants to convert their buildings to safe, healthy, and affordable homes. When UHAB’s activities attracted a much- publicized visit and resounding endorsement from President Jimmy Carter, this approach became a model for cities around the country.

In 1973, the University of California, Berkeley's College of Environmental Design began a search to fill a new faculty position. The goal was to strengthen the Department of Architecture in the area of housing and community development, and Turner was invited to the campus to speak about his work.

He hesitated to leave MIT and his work at UHAB, but he accepted the invitation and was touched to see Oscar Stonaroff's bust of Professor Catherine Bauer Wurster in the College of Environmental Design Library. Catherine, one of the great figures in American housing policy and a founder of the College of Environmental Design, was one of Don's idols. The shared connection and the spirit it represented were part of Berkeley's attraction for him. In turn, Turner's work, his passion and his energy moved the faculty to select him for the position.

In 1976, Turner was appointed to tenure as associate professor of architecture and director of the Center for Planning and Development Research (CPDR) in the College of Environmental Design. In 1978, he was appointed associate dean for research. The breadth of his interests and his skill in getting people to look beyond their own positions brought new energy to the college and to the recently established CPDR. In his introduction to the center's annual report for 1976-77 he listed eight new projects, cited significantly increased faculty and student participation and over \$250,000 of new research support and brought a focus on priorities in housing and community development and the emerging area of energy.

Turner's interests were also becoming priorities for the state of California. Recognizing this, Governor Jerry Brown invited Professor Turner to come to Sacramento and lead California's efforts in housing and community planning. Turner asked for, and the University approved a leave of absence, and in 1978 he was appointed director of the California Department of Housing and Community Development. He also became a member of the board of directors of the California Housing Finance Agency.

In Sacramento, Turner found the opportunity to make policy around many of the ideas and issues that had brought him to California. Under his leadership, the department became a nationally recognized advocate for quality communities and affordable housing. He made creating quality homes and communities, more than mere advocacy, a priority of the department. He argued for and presided over a huge increase in state funding for housing. He put affordable housing on the political map in California.

In 1981, University of California policy did not allow faculty leaves of more than two years. Committed to his work for the state, Turner resigned his position at the University.

The University's loss was also an opportunity for Turner. It freed him to take his work to a new level. After completing his term in state government, he was offered the leadership of BRIDGE Housing, a new nonprofit corporation with the mission to "strengthen communities and increase the quantity and quality of affordable housing in California." Turner became president of BRIDGE in 1983. Rick Holiday, who had been one of his students at the College of Environmental Design, came with him as vice president. This was the beginning of a tradition that has brought many CED graduates to come to BRIDGE and then on to careers in the public, nonprofit and private sectors.

As its first president, Turner led the team that built BRIDGE from the dream of its founding board to the point where it was nationally recognized and internationally acclaimed for the energy and originality of its achievements in affordability and the quality of the homes and communities it built and managed. At the time of his untimely death, Turner had led BRIDGE in the creation of homes for 6,000 families and seniors in healthy urban living environments enriched by programs that included child care, recreation, continuing educational opportunities, and senior services. Major philanthropic organizations, foundations, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development came to support the organization and to use it as a model for their own programs. Built on the base Turner developed, BRIDGE continues to build and to expand and refine the scope and the quality of the services it provides. As of 2009, about 15,000 families live in homes and communities completed by the organization.

Turner welcomed opportunities to share the lessons learned by BRIDGE. In 1994, he participated in the first U.S. presidential mission to South Africa, where he spoke with President Nelson Mandela about the African National Congress's plan to build a million new homes for workers. Whether in San Francisco, the South Bronx, Vietnam or Bosnia, regardless of the scale and complexity of the bureaucracy he had to cut through, no matter how much money he had to raise and how many people he had to convince, Don Turner was passionate and single-minded about building good homes and good communities — about giving people better lives and dignity.

His passion and his joy in the work he was doing rang clear in the stirring commencement address he delivered at the College of Environmental Design not long before his death. He had the art and eloquence to bring the work he was doing to life. He inspired people to dream and to act, to choose careers of service and to follow him out the door and find a rewarding life's work.

Shortly after his death, the more than 800 people who took part in a spirited service at the Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco heard him described as an "entrepreneur of dreams" who inspired people to want to do the best for those less fortunate. We heard of his "boundless energy and optimism" and how in the midst of a busy public life he saved his best for his family: his wife, Deirdre English, his two children, Michael and Rebecca, and his two stepchildren, Sarah and Jonah.

To honor this unique and active life, the I. Donald Turner Distinguished Professorship in Affordable Housing and Urban Policy was established by the University of California, Berkeley, in July 1999.

We feel lucky to have worked with him and to have shared the creativity, the hard work and the pleasure of doing "Whatever it takes."

Richard

Bender
2009