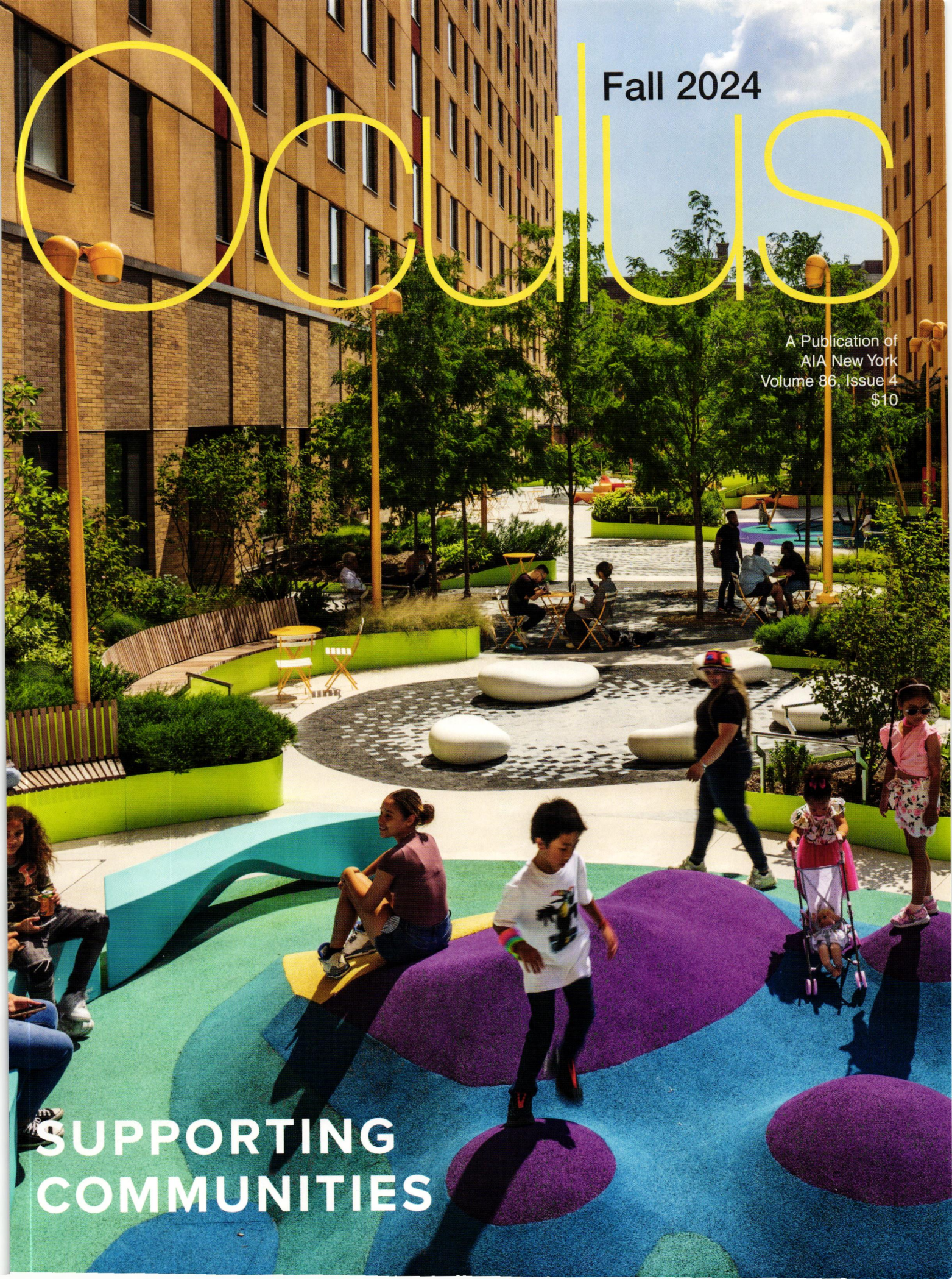


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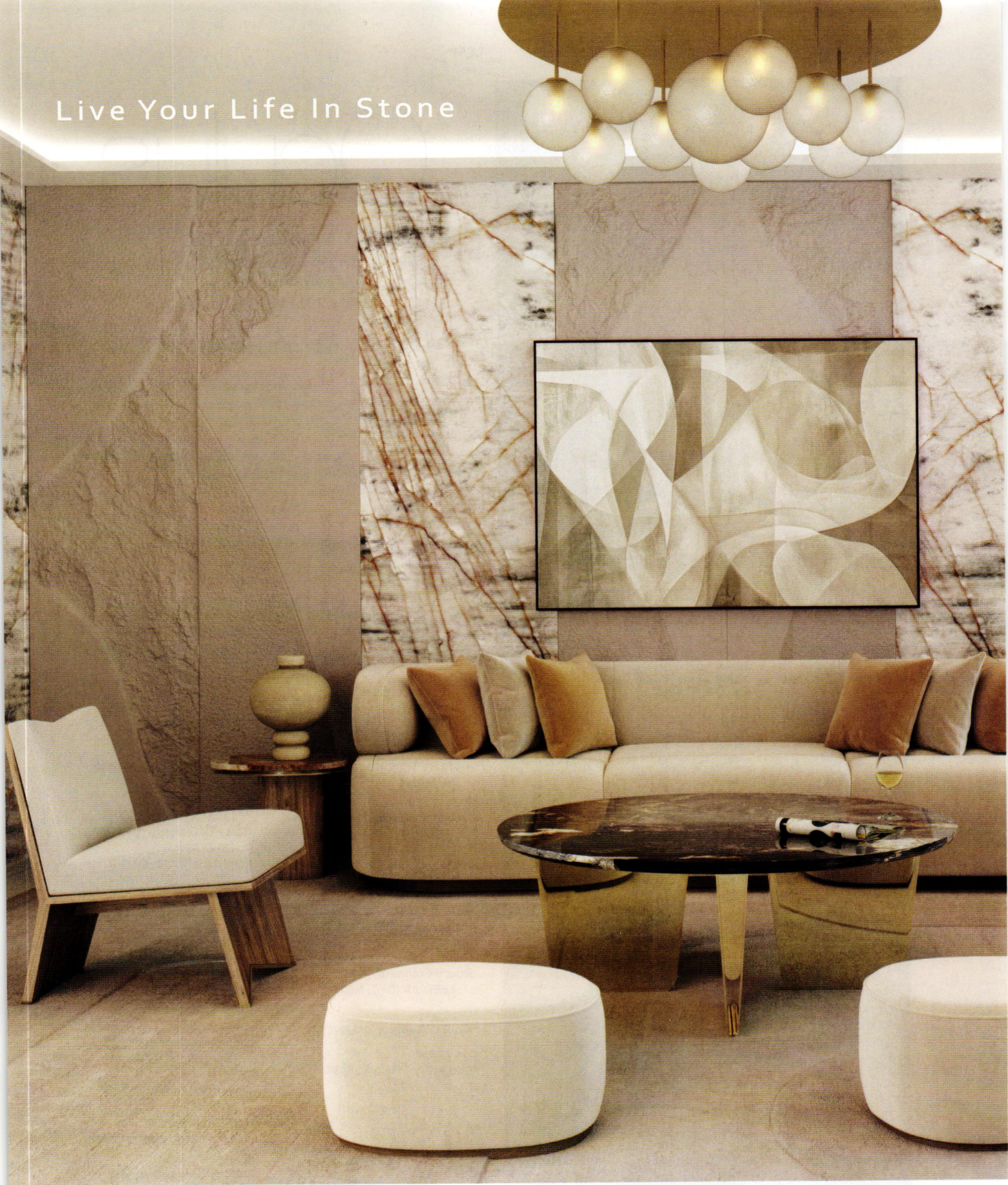
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FALL 2024 Vol. 86, Number 4

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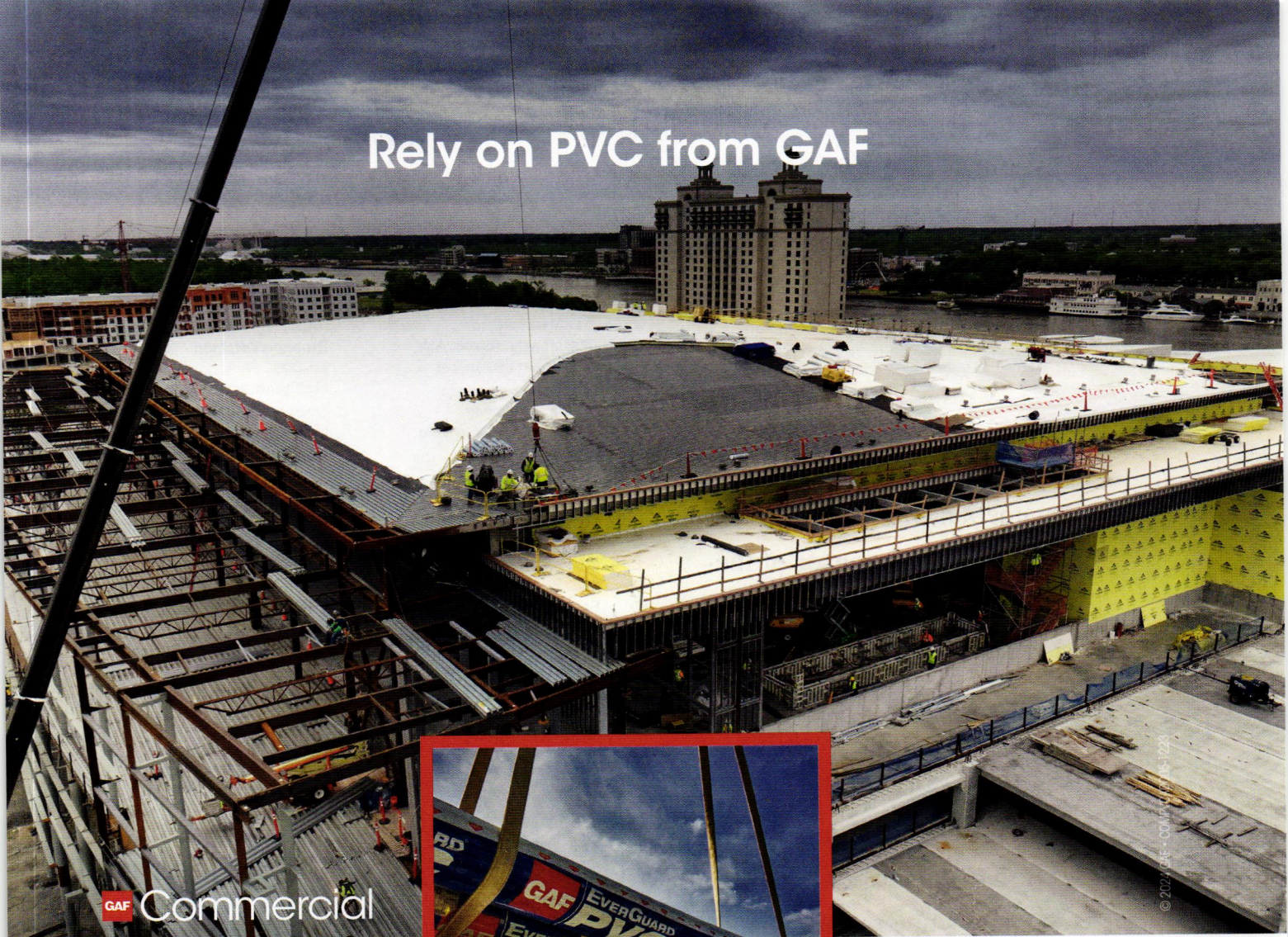
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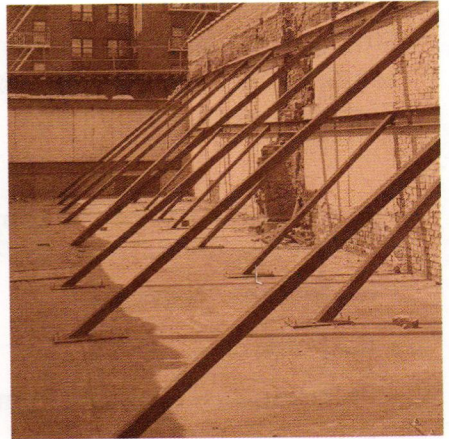
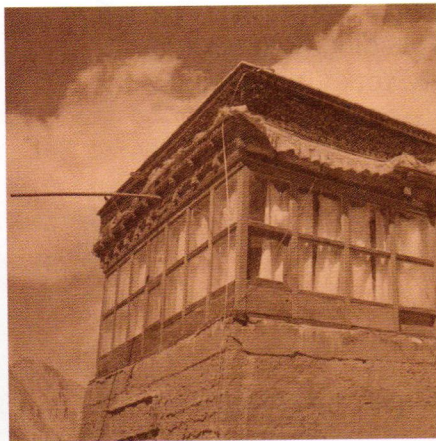
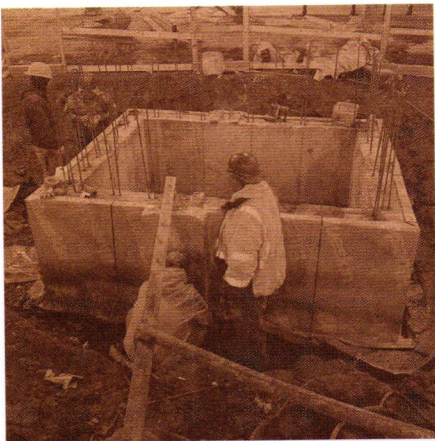
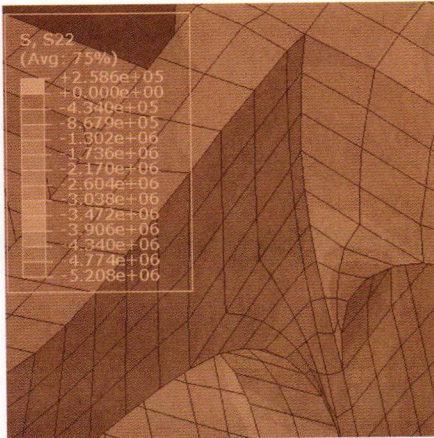
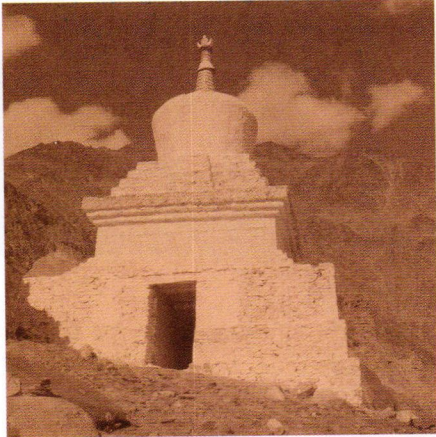
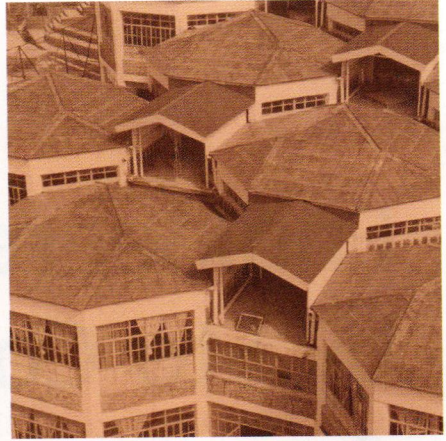
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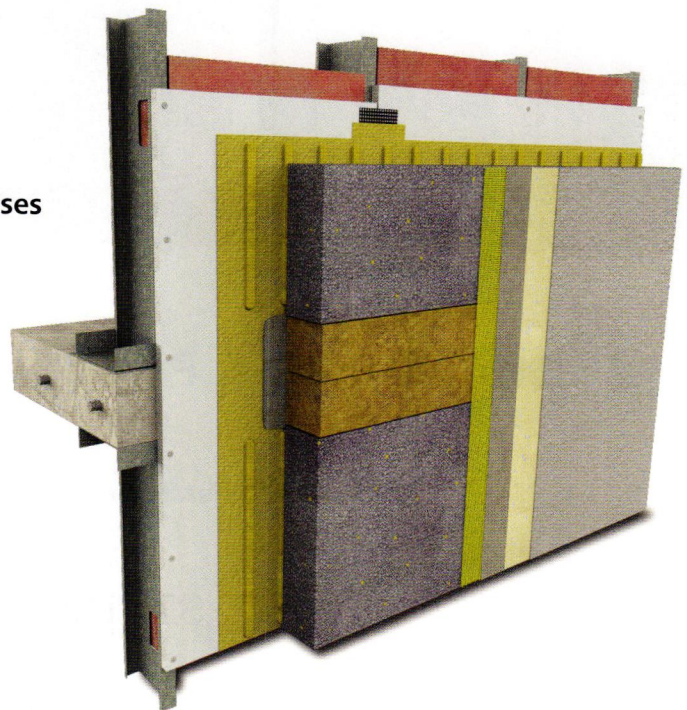
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**Cover:** Located in East Harlem, Sendero Verde, designed by Handel Architects, offers 709 designated affordable apartments in the world's largest Passive House building.

**Top:** A graphic depicting the ways in which New York City is improving public spaces, from a June 2024 Public Realm Report.

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# Finding Belonging in the Built Environment: A Personal Reflection

BY AIANY PRESIDENT **GREGORY T. SWITZER**, AIA, NOMA, NCARB



My tenure as president of the AIA New York Chapter this year has been a remarkable journey of collaboration, inspiration, and foundation-setting. With a goal of sparking dialogue and rethinking default models of practice, my presidential theme centered the concepts of belonging and community engagement.

Well-being, quality of life, and flourishing are directly tied to belonging—patterned experiences of being recognized and personally connected to physical spaces. This is another reminder that no practitioner is a neutral actor, and design is never neutral, either. Community voices and perspectives bring important considerations, priorities, and possibilities to the forefront when participation on-ramps are intentional, valued, and facilitated throughout the design process.

My own lived experiences are often difficult to articulate, though my start in life mirrored the context of millions of Black Americans born in the North to hopeful, young parents who left home to find better economic opportunities and escape the violence, oppression, and indignities of Jim Crow. My family settled in the South Bronx, New York City's poorest area at that time, drawn by its affordability. My earliest years unfolded in a third-floor apartment facing an elevated train line that rumbled past the window every 15 minutes, day and night. The elevator rarely functioned, and a persistent foul odor permeated the

hallways. Our apartment was spacious but had been long unmaintained, and we suffered from infestations beyond imagination. We had no better solutions, though; rent was just \$25 a month, and these conditions were commonplace throughout the community.

These were hard times—the journey made bearable by the extraordinary care, compassion, and sense of community that surrounded us. Every race and ethnic background seemed to be present in our neighborhood, and attitudes and mindsets of pride and solidarity were nurtured. Adults watched each other's children, assisted those in need, and transformed portions of nearby Crotona Park into safe play areas. We youth painted benches, repaired swings, and adorned abandoned buildings and rock outcroppings in the park with graffiti art featuring positive messages. On scorching summer days, we opened fire hydrants and splashed with all the other kids in the streets, while box fans in our kitchen windows worked tirelessly. We did what we could with what was available to us, and our experiences were almost always collective. My subsequent years in Colonial Park Houses, a public housing project in Harlem, were extremely similar. I have no doubt these experiences of displacement, poverty, inclusion, and intergenerational community-mindedness continue to inform my excitement about this year's theme.

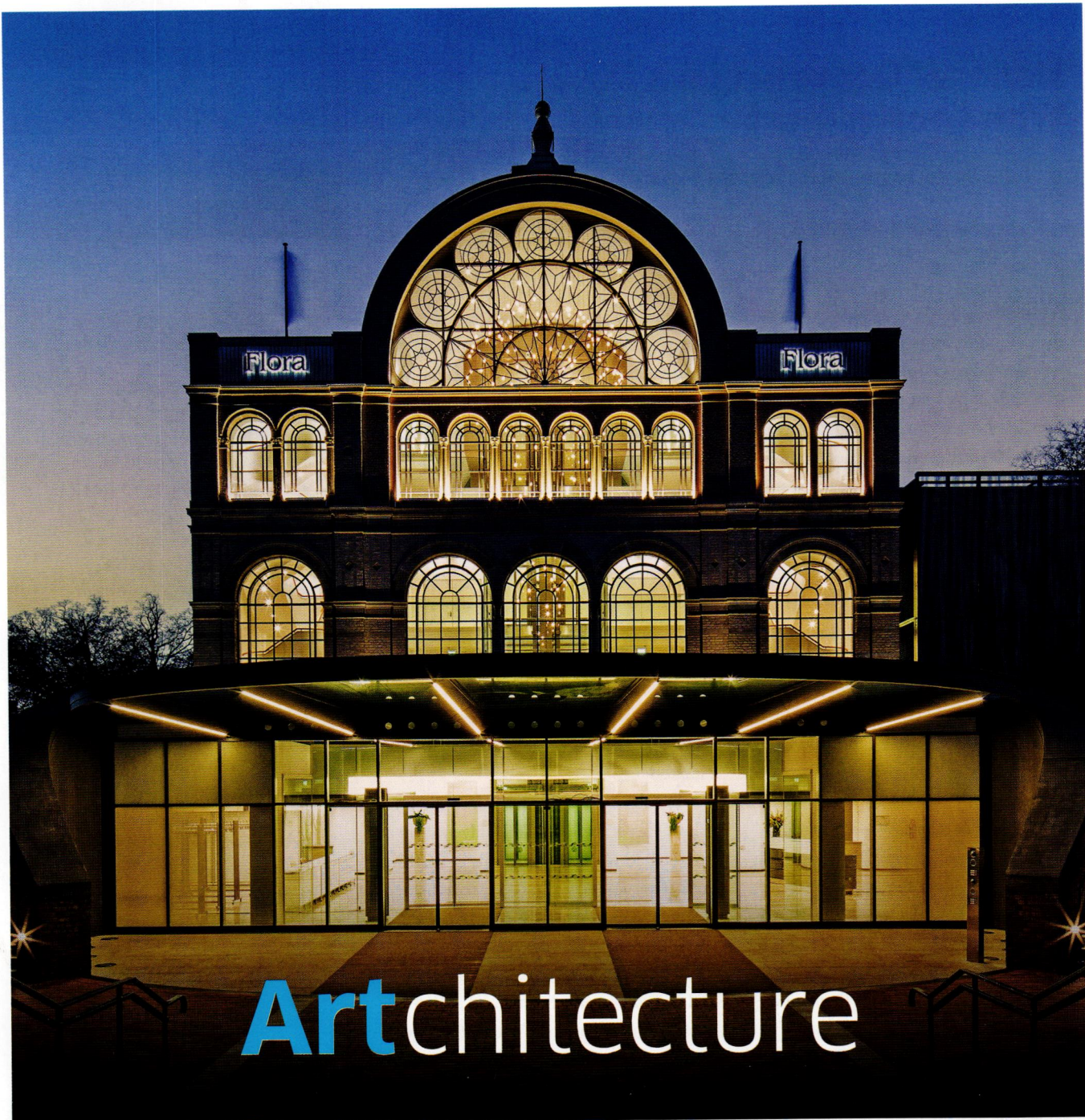
The practices of unpacking our own lived experiences and assumptions, and listening to and learning from others' lived experiences and priorities, can and should profoundly impact the ways we frame and pursue every design project. As I stated in my inaugural speech:

At the heart of our work as architects lies an unwavering faith in the transformative power of design. The voices and wisdom of our communities must never be sidelined in the processes that shape the environments they envision and inhabit. Architects possess not only the ability to mold the physical landscapes where people dwell, work, and recreate, but also the power to advocate for how we perceive ourselves and one another within the intricate tapestry of society.

Please stay curious, informed, and engaged as AIANY prepares to support practitioner learning, mindset, and practice shifts, and advocate for community engagement reform and opportunities for innovation over the next few years. And think about your own and others' lived experiences, and the types of expertise therein, in the meantime.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Switzer".

Gregory T. Switzer, AIA, NOMA, NCARB  
2024 AIANY President



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# National Conversations With Local Impact

BY OCULUS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF JENNIFER KRICHELS



As this issue heads to press, we are less than a month from the country's divisive presidential election; Hurricane Milton has made a devastating landfall in an already storm-battered Florida; and New York's Mayor Eric Adams faces indictment on federal charges as many around him resign.

For each of these history-making moments, the nation's housing crisis is a backdrop in some respect. The two presidential candidates have made very different proposals for how to solve the issue, and any possible solutions promise to be bureaucratic and slow. Political power shifts also have implications for the resources our cities are given to remediate and plan for natural disasters related to climate change—something we are reminded of every time warming seas give rise to another massive storm.

Moreover, just over a year ago, Mayor Adams unveiled City of Yes for Housing Opportunity, a proposed amendment to the city's 1961 zoning code that could adjust current regulations and pave the way for more housing. As Bill Millard writes in his report on this issue (see page 22), "The plan will shape citywide housing policy in ways that extend beyond the current administration. It's an outcome that proponents are not taking for granted." Today, it remains to be seen how turmoil surrounding the mayoral indictment might affect this initiative in the long term, but the City Planning Commission voted to approve the proposal in late September, with a City Council hearing planned for late October and a final City Council vote by the end of the year.

On a more positive note, architects can be, and are, at the center of local and national conversations about how to make our cities more livable, and how to connect residents to essential services, amenities, housing, and each other. When the editors and Oculus committee members conceived this issue, we wanted to look beyond the city's need for more housing units, which has been well established. Often left out of the conversation are the issues tangential to housing; especially in urban areas, there are a host of other concerns and elements that make cities actually *livable*, and not just tolerable, for their inhabitants.

The city is capable of change, however slow. This is the work and conversation we seek to represent with this issue, in our reported pieces, in Q&As with three leaders in evolving areas of urbanism, and in an expanded op-ed section, in which professionals weigh in on issues related to housing, health, and built environment stewardship that they are confronting in their work. In this way, we hope to expand our conversation of housing past the deficit of units to the ways in which architects are joining, and sometimes winning, the fight to create more abundant, well-designed housing that also meets community needs for education, health, and equity. We hope you will continue to join us in this conversation.

Jennifer Krichels, Editor-in-Chief  
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## Work to Watch

A number of fellowships and cohorts are bringing together promising researchers and interdisciplinary professionals to tackle issues of health, climate, housing, and equity in the built environment. Here are some we'll be watching in the year ahead:

### 2024 Cohort for the Academy for Public Scholarship on the Built Environment: CLIMATE ACTION

This opportunity is for architecture faculty, whose research intersects with climate action or climate justice, and is intended to help them impact conversations that affect everyone.

### "Big Swings" Fellowship

This year's fellowship from the Urban Design Forum seeks to build solidarity between leaders in New York and other cities taking "big swings" at their housing crises.

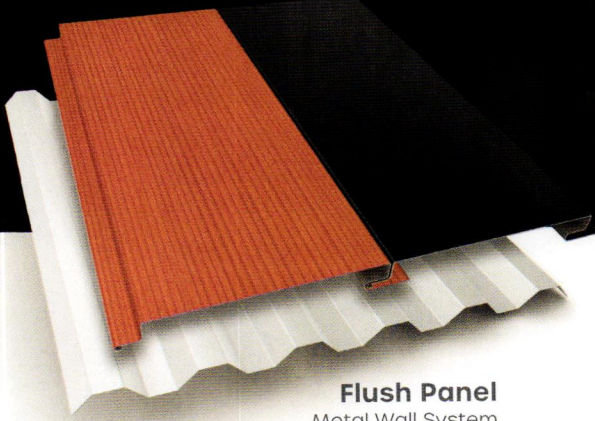
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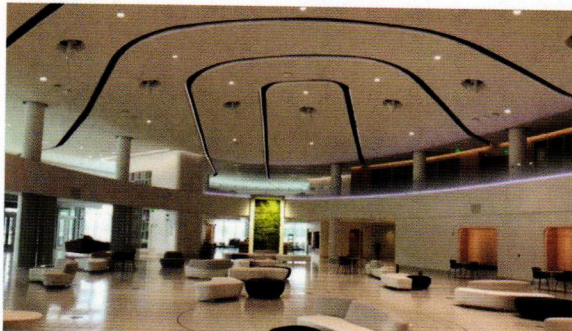
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Past, current, and future work by members of AIA New York, AIA Brooklyn, AIA Bronx, AIA Staten Island, and AIA Queens take over three floors of the Center for Architecture galleries, providing a snapshot of the community's impact on the city and the built environment at large.

The first exhibition showcasing member work since 2016's "New York New Design," "Built by New York" also marks the culmination of the Center's 20th anniversary celebrations. To commemorate this milestone, the projects featured in the exhibition either span the past 20 years or look ahead to the next 20, offering a comprehensive view of recent achievements and future possibilities.

The 281 projects include the work of 112 New York City architects practicing on all scales, from interiors to mixed-use developments to entire city proposals. Locations range from New York City to across the United States to 10 countries around the world, including Centro De Artes Nadir Afonso by Louise Braverman Architect in Boticas, Portugal, and the renovation of the landmarked Böllenfalltor Sports Hall by 1100 Architect in Darmstadt, Germany. A total of 212 projects, both built and in progress, are in New York City, illustrating the scope and quality of work in our ever-changing metropolis, such as the newly opened Gansevoort Peninsula Park Pavilion by nARCHITECTS and Field Operations, and the Korean Cultural Center by SAMOO Architecture. Typologies include secondary and higher education facilities, residences,



Graphic and exhibition design for "Built by New York" is by Once-Future Office.

theoretical/conceptual works, pavilions, cultural institutions, research projects, hospitals, hotels, stadiums, and retail. The exhibition features photographs, renderings, and models of built and unbuilt work.

Founded in 1857, AIANY is the oldest and largest chapter of the American Institute of Architects, with almost 5,000 architect, allied professional, associate, emeritus, corresponding, international associate, corporate, student, and public



Graphic and exhibition designers from Once-Future Office include (from left): Nikki Chung, Principal, Dungjai Pungauthaikan, Principal, Joseph Wulf, Designer, Helen Sywalski Prisco, Design Lead, Elijah Bobo, Environmental Designer, Tyler Hale, Senior Designer, and Sarah Wang, Graphic Designer.

members. “Built by New York” provides AIANY with an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of the profession with the public, inviting visitors to explore the architecture of New York City.

“At a time when the practice of architecture is changing at an unprecedented

pace and scale, ‘Built by New York’ provides a valuable opportunity to survey our community’s achievements and their impact on our city’s present and future,” says Jesse Lazar, Assoc. AIA, Executive Director, AIANY and Center for Architecture.

BEYOND THE CENTER

**Making Home—  
Smithsonian  
Design Triennial**

Cooper Hewitt,  
Smithsonian Design Museum  
2 East 91st Street  
November 2, 2024–August 10, 2025

“Making Home—Smithsonian Design Triennial,” opening November 2 at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, features 25 debut commissions that illustrate the ways design is embedded in contemporary life. Domestic objects, built environments, and social systems are included in the exhibition, which considers home as an expansive framework with varying cultural and environmental contexts, and “making home” as a universal design practice. Organized in collaboration with Smith-



  
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A contemporary hale (structure) in progress in Hāmākuā, Hawai'i. It was designed and built by a hālau (school) of architects, cultural bearers, and traditional hale builders organized by After Oceanic Built Environments Lab and Leong Leong, in collaboration with Jojo Henderson and Nalani Tukuafu.

sonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, and installed throughout the Andrew and Louise Carnegie Mansion, the exhibition explores design's role in shaping the physical and emotional experiences of home across the U.S., U.S. territories, and tribal nations. The museum floors are organized by familiar interactions—"Going Home" (ground and first floor), "Seeking Home" (second floor), and "Building Home" (third floor)—interpreted in 25 installations by designers, architects, artists, and their collaborators from across the nation.

"Making Home" engages directly with the domestic history of Cooper Hewitt's own home in the Carnegie Mansion. The exhibition design, by the architectural firm Johnston Marklee, draws inspiration from the building's early 20th-century interiors, anchoring each floor with a central gathering space. Aspects of the Carnegie-era interior—including area rugs, drapery, upholstered furnishings, and brocades—are reintroduced through techniques of scaling, patterning, color saturation, and trompe l'oeil in contemporary industrial materials. The visual identity for "Making Home," developed by Office Ben Ganz, contrasts bold designs with intricate details that reflect the mansion's craftsmanship and decorative motifs. Reconnecting the building to its history as a home, exhibition texts and signage are deployed

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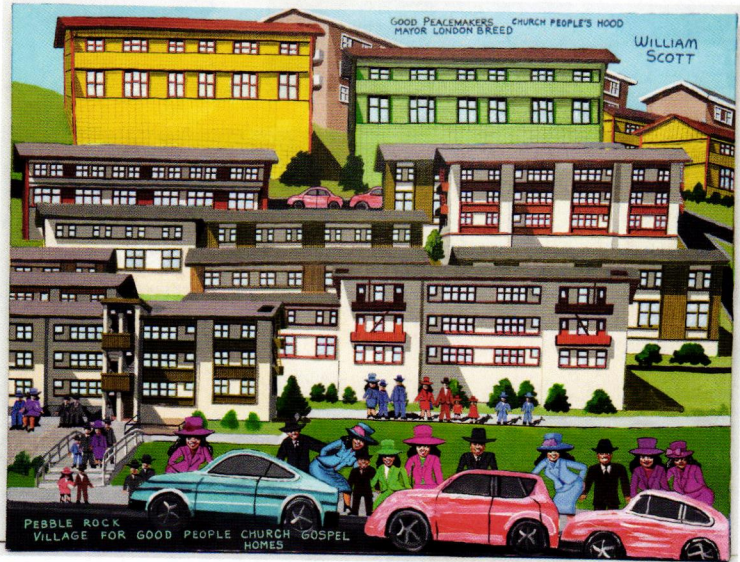
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**Left:** "Mobile Refuge Room, Designing Justice + Designing Spaces," Oakland, CA, 2019

**Below:** *Untitled*, William Scott, Acrylic on canvas, 2024.



on reimagined home furnishings in the shape of folded screens and playful plinths.

During the course of the exhibition, Cooper Hewitt's dynamic public programming will expand on the topics of "Making Home" with talks, performances, screenings, and hands-on workshops. Programs will invite all audiences—adult, family, teen, and visitors with disabilities—to explore the contemporary U.S. experience from cultural, environmental, and historical vantage points. The quarterly "Making Home Saturday Series," launching November 2, will feature two in-person program segments, including special guests, curators, and Triennial participants. Programs will take place at Cooper Hewitt and beyond the museum at select organizations across New York City, and at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. *The Editors*

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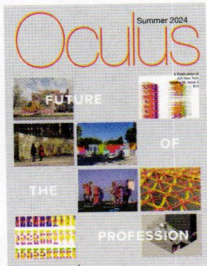


## Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Stephen Zacks's article, "Schools of Thought," in the Summer 2024 issue, does a good job of reporting on the intense debate surrounding the NCARB "Pathways to Practice" initiative. However, the article omits a significant and promising solution to increasing access to the profession: online education.

I teach a studio in the newly established online graduate architecture program at Arizona State University. The



"Schools of Thought" appears on pages 16–21 of the Summer 2024 issue of *Oculus*.

online program is asynchronous, which gives students flexibility to work within their individual time constraints. Most of my students have jobs, and some have families, but they still find time for school. I've discovered we can achieve the same rigor and level of instruction as the in-person modality. We are even able to create a sense of social space, holding a weekly Zoom meeting for all sections, which is optional, but well attended and

lively. We also have a website that functions as a community forum to post work and hold discussions. Instructors provide weekly feedback and are available for office hours (i.e., "desk crits") on Zoom. This is not the online education that was hastily improvised during the pandemic.

Tuition for the online degree is affordable. Students participate from across the U.S. as well as from overseas. Upon completion of the program, online students receive a Master of Architecture degree that is indistinguishable from the degree received by their in-person colleagues. I agree with Michael J. Monti, executive director of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), and Mo Zell, ACSA president and interim dean of art and architecture at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, who were quoted in Zacks's article, that increased emphasis on the experience path as a solution to inequitable access to education will result in a two-tiered profession. With online education, that need not happen.

Sincerely,

**DAVID WALLANCE, FAIA**

## Call for Winter 2025 Op-Eds

### ARCHITECTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Architects are required to communicate in many different ways: internally about a project's progress, externally in client presentations, on a community level while doing research, and even on a national or global level, when approached by the press or when seeking opportunities to elaborate on the significance and meaning of their work. Architects are also recipients of an untold amount of information from outside sources, including the clients and communities they serve, contemporary media, and their own peers and professional organizations. Our Winter 2025 edition asks architects to consider issues of communication in their practice, and weigh in on the importance of adapting to a world that invites them to elevate their own voices, while simultaneously synthesizing a wide variety of viewpoints and ethical goals.

**What are your thoughts on the intersection of architecture and communication?**

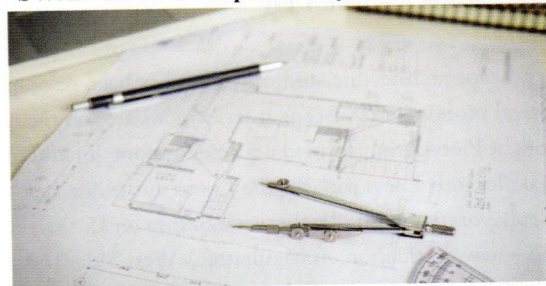
Please submit op-eds of approximately 800 words to [editor@aiany.org](mailto:editor@aiany.org) by December 1.



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## Plaza 33

MNLA's new Midtown design offers a respite for bustling pedestrians.

BY ANTHONY PALETTA

The landscape architecture studio MNLA has been responsible for several prominent landscape interventions around the city: Its work at Pier 42 transformed a former parking lot and industrial pier into a new park for the Lower East Side, and the firm's collaboration with Heatherwick Studio on Little Island created a new destination on Manhattan's West Side. The studio has also led the design of plenty of less visible but equally thoughtful efforts, such as the Hudson Street reconstruction and Bogardus Plaza in Tribeca. One of its most recent efforts, Plaza 33, is also making a significant difference for pedestrians in navigating a knot of congestion and crowds near Madison Square Garden.

The space, a half block of 33rd Street just west of Seventh Avenue, was first transformed into a temporary pedestrian area in the summer of 2015, with a W Architecture plan that brought

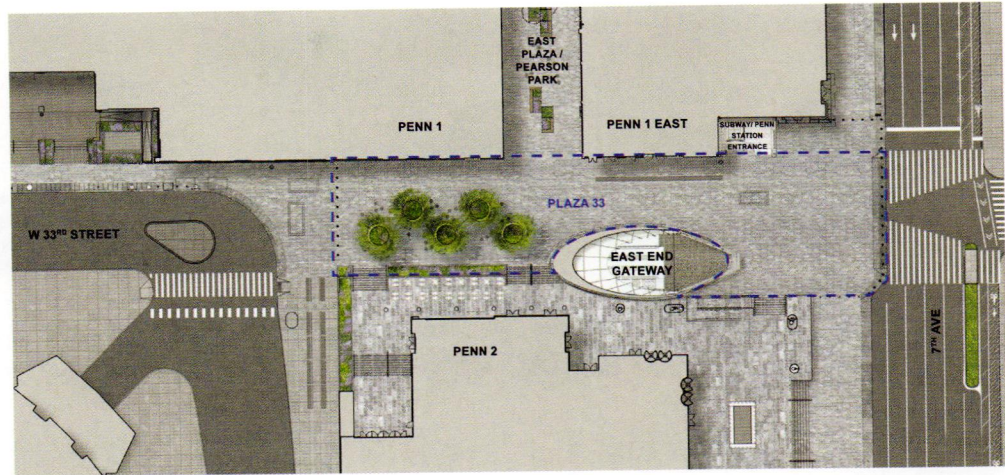
terraced seating to the site. MNLA began additional work there in 2017, as a process of improving privately owned public spaces (POPS) around Penn Station, in real estate investment trust Vornado's "Penn District." The effort accompanied a variety of improvements, most noticeably MDeAS's recladding-plus-cantilever-plinth addition of 2 Penn Plaza. Some elements of these projected redevelopments remain up in the air, but Plaza 33 is very much a fact on the ground, bustling today.

MNLA dealt with more practical challenges on this site than on most. Founding Principal Signe Nielsen explains, "This plaza is unlike any other plaza in New York City in that it is a primary access point to the busiest train station in the United States." This wasn't the only complication of the design brief, however. A new entrance to the Long Island Railroad was added to the eastern end of the block in 2020. Thirty-Third Street remains open to vehicle traffic on the western half of the block, providing trucks access to Madison Square Garden's loading docks. A lane of the plan also had to remain open for emergency vehicle use—and to accommodate droves of commuters on foot. An average of 8,000 people per hour use the block's new LIRR entrance. All of this was literally built on top of the train station, requiring the designers to work within a maximum of three feet and a minimum of five inches clearance before hitting Penn Station's subterranean roof.

**Opposite:** Plaza 33, north of 2 Penn Plaza and Madison Square Garden, is a reimagined pedestrian oasis in the heart of one of the city's busiest intersections.

**Right:** The plaza design elevates the existing roadway at Seventh Avenue and 33rd Street.

**Below:** MNLA created a seamless public space with trees, plantings, distinctive stone paving, new lighting, and public seating.



Working deftly within these constraints, MNLA managed to place five red maple trees along the south side of the site, each surrounded by irregularly curved marble fixtures that are half-bench, half-planter. These are topped by stainless-steel rings, providing an adequate cradle of soil—akin to olives atop a submerged sandwich. Melissa How, senior associate at MNLA, says the structural soil for the trees rests on a concrete subbase layer, a setting bed of the pavers, and then the pavers themselves.

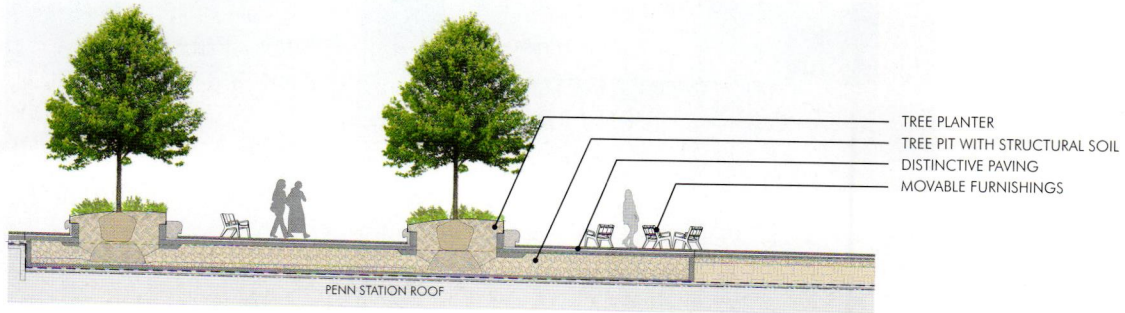
Nielsen elaborates on the choice of rounded planters. “We’d talked about a lot of different ideas during the course of the project,” she says, “but the main ideas are about maintaining circulation space, not unnecessarily cluttering the plaza, and making it a welcome space for people to pause during their daily commute.

We eventually settled on the rounds because that seemed the friendliest and most democratic way of using the space.”

The soil stretches for 1,000 cubic feet for four of the trees. In spite of their space-maximizing plans, the landscape architects chose October Glory maples, with small root balls, to fit into these tight spaces.

The designers also employed paving as another way to animate the site. For durability and character, Vornado selected six-inch-square cobble pavers made of Belgian *petit granit*, used widely in European public spaces. The aggregate includes traces of fossilized aquatic life, and the paving is laid in concentric “cloud” patterns. “It is also very evocative of the historic blue-stone you see in other neighborhoods in New York,” says How.





**Top:** A section cut shows MNLA's raised circular tree planters, which provide both soil volume to support tree health, and an opportunity for fixed seating.


**Above:** The Georgia Pearl gray marble planter-benches in use.

The planter-benches are carved out of Georgia Pearl gray marble, chosen for its veining and smooth texture well-suited for seating. Their irregular form has both aesthetic and practical inspirations. “The asymmetry feels very nice; it lends a little bit of dynamism to the plaza,” says How. “The round shape works very well with all the orthogonal buildings around.” The designers also planned for shade to be accessible to those who weren’t seated on the benches by using movable chairs on the plaza. “We want people to have the same experience of being under the trees even if they’re unable to sit on the bench,” she says. “So by not ringing the entire thing with seating, we allow people to pull up chairs underneath the trees.”

The maples were chosen for their varying seasonal shades of red. “We wanted the red to offset the very gray and stainless-steel look of the buildings around it,” says How. The trees will retain a relative formality, Nielsen explains, suiting the dignity of an urban plaza, and are expected to reach a height of 40 feet or so. “What I am most pleased to see,” she says, “is that even though it’s just five trees, their placement is such that it creates a special environment. It’s not a lot of random, scattered trees—they come together to create a total.”

What’s also notable is what isn’t there—namely, streetlights. The site is largely lit by spotlights on nearby buildings. This “moonlighting” strategy was designed to keep the plaza free of light poles that would obstruct pedestrian and emergency vehicular circulation. The elimination of light poles also allows for fewer constraints on the locations of movable furnishings for temporary events and activations. As the plaza already has a lot of ambient light from the adjacent buildings and the illuminated signage of the district, lighting within the plaza is intentionally designed to provide subtle downward illumination that will not blind visitors or contribute to light pollution. The moonlighting is accented by tree up-lighting and additional lighting at the base of the tree planters.

A testament to the project’s success has been its very considerable use. “People create the vibrancy—they are the vibrancy,” How explains. In a location defined by people rushing by, some are now able to sit down for a while. ■

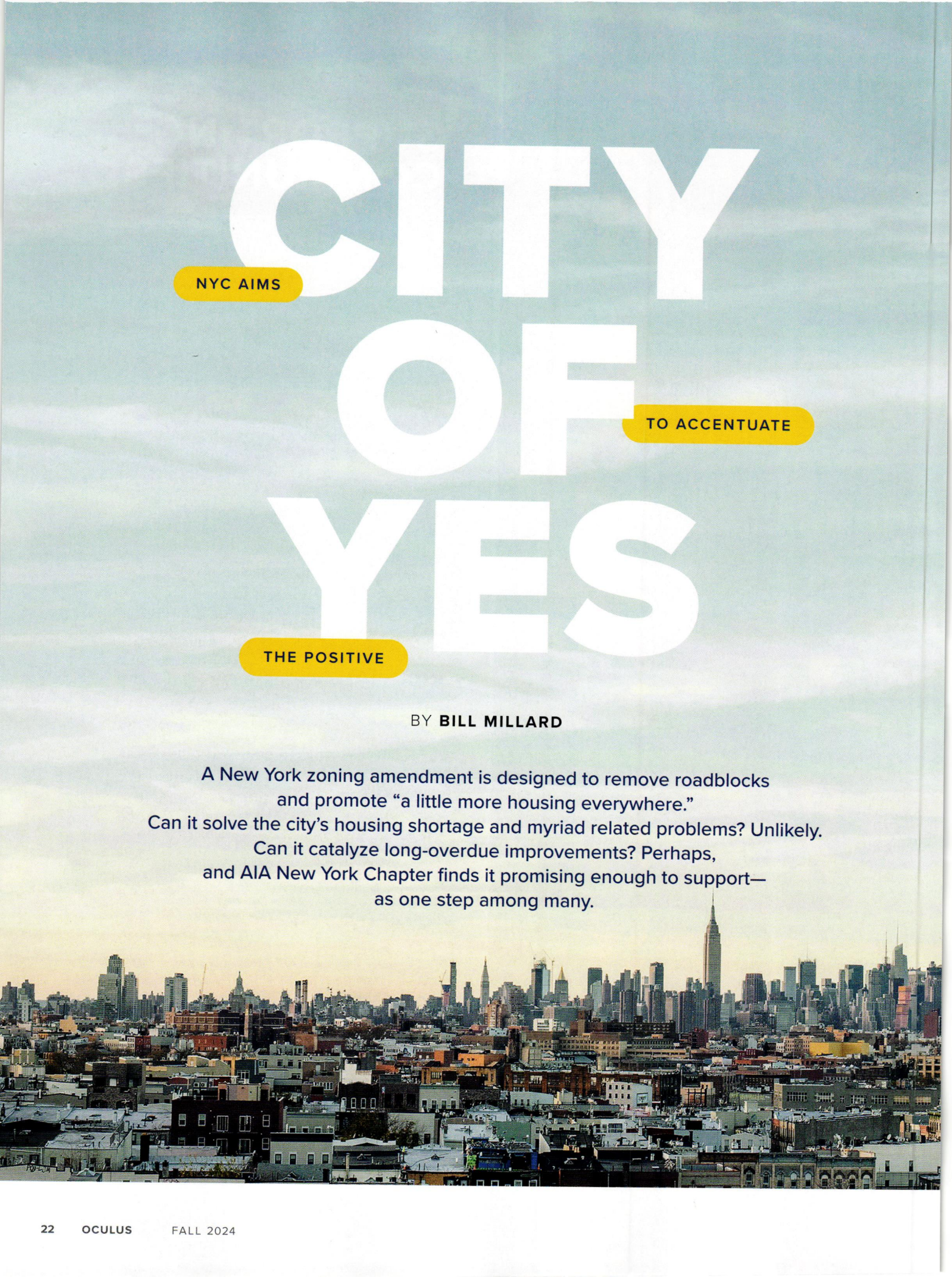


FALL 2024 FEATURES

# SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

For many of us who live in New York City, it's an experience of extremes: the highs are euphoric, and the lows have us face-planting onto our beds at the end of the day, shoes still on. While there is magic in the make-it-or-break-it cycle, there are many aspects of city life that are just plain difficult, imbalanced, or outright inequitable, especially when it comes to the housing, public infrastructure, and the systems we all need to move through our days with adequate support. In this issue of *Oculus*, our contributing writers focus on the ways architects are working to make the city a more livable place for citizens of all types—including themselves—such as creatively adapting to zoning changes that would bring about more affordable housing options, or executing a planning exercise that resulted in less segregated public schools. The work documented on the following pages touches on many of the precise and surgical ways that architects can improve the housing situation, upgrade and beautify neighborhoods, and connect residents to their communities.

A colorful 7,500-square-foot mural, *Flowing Together*, on the pedestrian areas of the 14th Street Busway, between Broadway and University Place, designed by Queens-based artist Talisa Almonte.



# CITY OF YES

NYC AIMS

TO ACCENTUATE

THE POSITIVE

BY **BILL MILLARD**

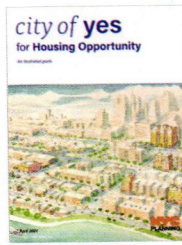
A New York zoning amendment is designed to remove roadblocks and promote “a little more housing everywhere.” Can it solve the city’s housing shortage and myriad related problems? Unlikely. Can it catalyze long-overdue improvements? Perhaps, and AIA New York Chapter finds it promising enough to support—as one step among many.

With more than half of its residents currently rent-burdened, a net vacancy rate of 1.4% (below 1% for rent-stabilized units), and the power balance between tenants and landlords grievously askew, New York City needs a sharp increase in its housing stock. Every mayoral administration for decades has recognized the problem. None, to date, has solved it.

In September 2023, Mayor Eric Adams unveiled City of Yes for Housing Opportunity, a proposed amendment to the city's 1961 zoning code that strives to create "a little more housing in every neighborhood" by strategically adjusting regulations that have impeded construction. In late September, the City Planning Commission voted to approve the proposal. The City Council Subcommittee on Zoning and Franchises will hold a two-day hearing on October 21 and 22, followed by a final City Council vote before the end of the year. The plan will shape citywide housing policy in ways that extend beyond the current administration. It's an outcome that proponents are not taking for granted.

The housing component is one of three City of Yes initiatives that Adams first made public in June 2022, alongside initiatives promoting carbon neutrality and economic opportunity. Details have been under public review since April 2024, but a [website](#), created by FXCollaborative, illustrates the different measures affecting low-density districts, medium- and high-density districts, and the city at large. (FXCollaborative also provided zoning and strategy recommendations, as well as graphic and digital design for the proposal.)

"We have an unequal geography of housing production," says planner Veronica Brown of the Housing Division at the Department of City Planning (DCP). "Only a few areas are producing a lot of housing, while some produce none." Brown believes the plan of action proposed in City of Yes will introduce



An April 2024 illustrated guide describes the key proposals under City of Yes for Housing Opportunity, including changes to zoning in low-, medium-, and high-density districts to create more affordable housing.

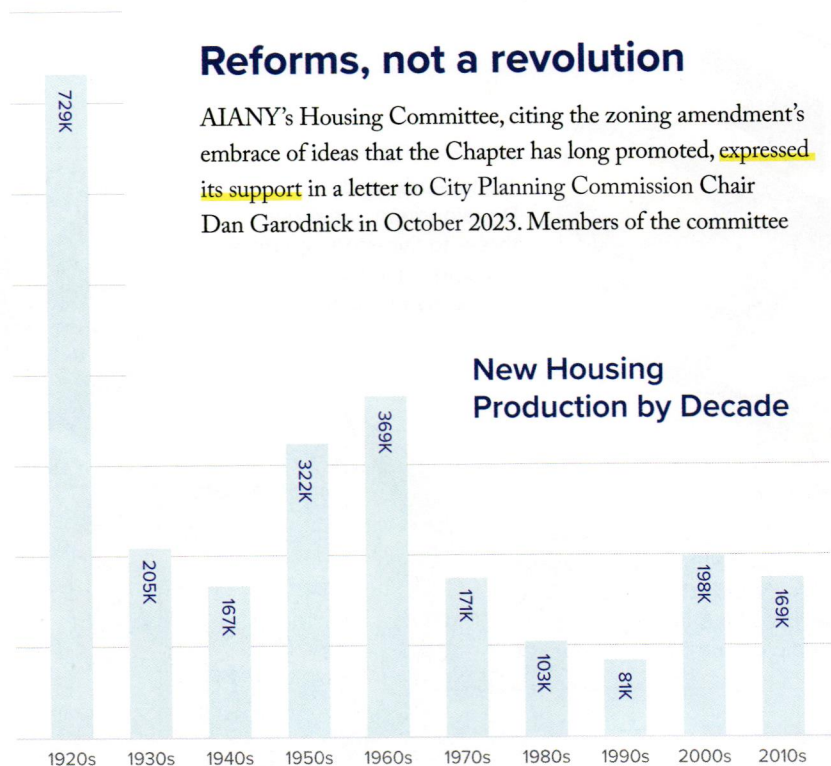
incremental growth in housing options for New Yorkers who need it most.

Perhaps by signaling that its measures will be a decisive victory for YIMBYs over NIMBYs, City of Yes has attracted energetic support, with favorable statements by the [Regional Plan Association](#), the [New York Housing Conference](#), and (more provisionally) the [Citizens Housing Planning Council](#) and the [Municipal Arts Society](#). It has also inspired vehement opposition. Though four borough presidents (all but Staten Island's) have recommended the measure, over half the city's 59 community boards have voted against it, and of the 17 favorable votes to date, only two were unconditional. (The counts may change after press time: *City Limits*, the non-profit news organization, maintains an [interactive map](#) tracking the boards' positions, with links to their recommendation letters.) Commentators in [assorted media outlets](#) have assailed City of Yes as a [disrupter](#) of low-density neighborhoods and a boon to developers, with no guarantees that the public will benefit from it. On the other hand, some supporters, like Peter Bafitis, AIA, managing principal at RKT Architects and former co-chair of AIA New York's Housing Committee, applaud the proposal's goals and strategies and believe "it should have gone farther."

Rosanne Haggerty, founder of Common Ground and Community Solutions, comments that "City of Yes is impressively pragmatic. It has a smart focus on housing forms and density levels that reinforce the existing, diverse physical and household character of NYC neighborhoods. And the proposals are well communicated, with sensitivity to the questions likely to be encountered in the public process."

## Reforms, not a revolution

AIANY's Housing Committee, citing the zoning amendment's embrace of ideas that the Chapter has long promoted, [expressed its support](#) in a letter to City Planning Commission Chair Dan Garodnick in October 2023. Members of the committee

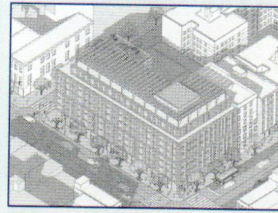
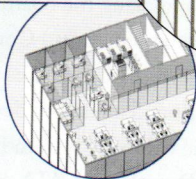
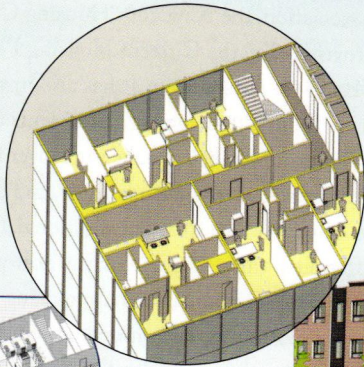


# City of Yes has 8 components:

2

MEDIUM- AND HIGH-DENSITY AREAS

Streamlined procedures for residential conversion of offices and other building types



1

MEDIUM- AND HIGH-DENSITY AREAS

A **Universal Affordability Preference**, allowing buildings to include 20% more housing if the units are permanently affordable at 60% AMI



3

LOW-DENSITY AREAS

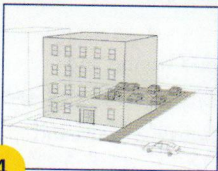
**Town Center Zoning**, legalizing housing above businesses in low-density areas



4

CITYWIDE

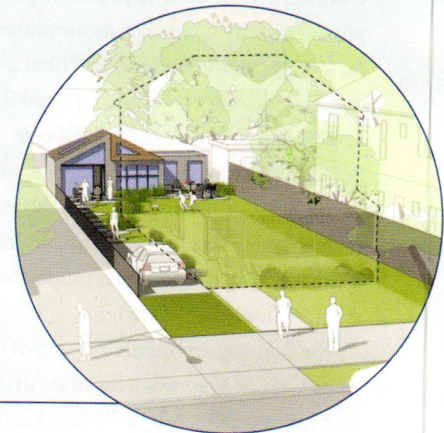
The **lifting of parking mandates** in new buildings



5

LOW-DENSITY AREAS

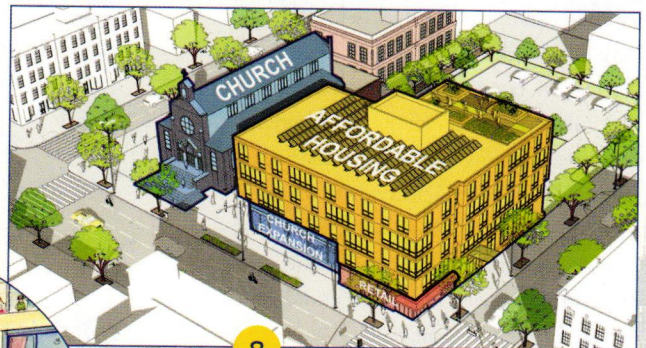
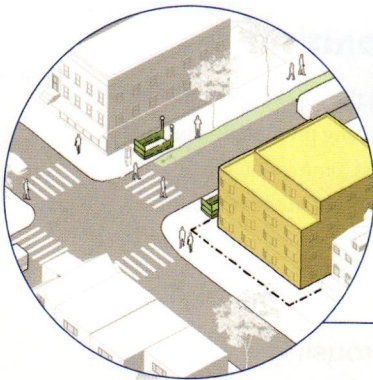
The allowance of **Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)**, creating units up to 800 square feet in garage, basement, attic, and backyard spaces (carriage houses, casitas, or “granny flats”)



6

LOW-DENSITY AREAS

**Transit-Oriented Development**, legalizing three- to five-story apartment buildings in low-density areas served by public transit



8

CITYWIDE

**Campus infill**, easing development of contextual buildings on large lots with underused space

7

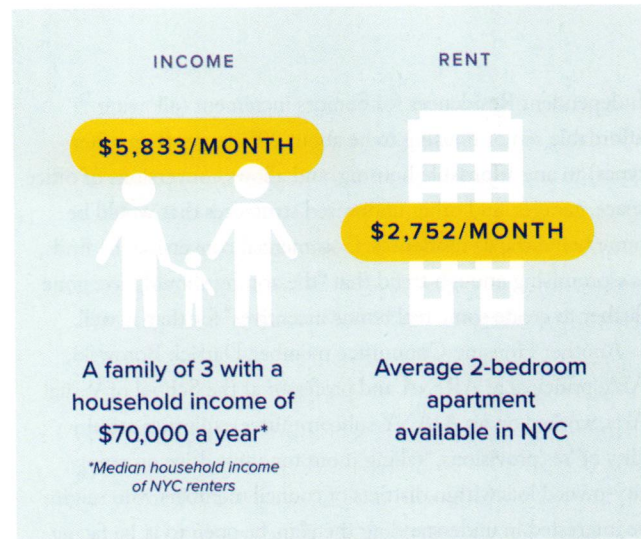
CITYWIDE

Enabling **small and shared housing**, reintroducing housing with shared kitchens and other facilities, and allowing more studio or one-bedroom spaces



acknowledge that City of Yes does not satisfy all parties on all issues, but welcome adjustments to details. David West, FAIA, a founding partner at Hill West Architects, Housing Committee member, and zoning specialist who has studied the details of City of Yes for the zoning and design committee of the Real Estate Board of New York, finds “a lot of good stuff in here, particularly in the medium-density zones. There’s almost nothing not to like.”

The treatment of high-density (R10) zones, West says, has caused concern for developers and some members of the AIA and the Citizens Housing Planning Council. Projects in those zones have relied on off-site inclusionary-housing certificates, which City of Yes replaces with “one-to-one ratio of affordable to market-rate housing, whereas the current voluntary inclusionary-housing program gives you three-and-a-half market to one affordable,” West explains. “At one-to-one, it’s not going to be economical to produce those certificates.” The sunset of existing certificates not only affects the real estate industry’s interests, but “also is a problem for the not-for-profits that have generated a lot of these certificates.” Still, he says, the proposed mechanisms encouraging transit-oriented development and conversions, allowing ADUs, and removing costly parking mandates add up to a favorable package. (Fears expressed in some low-density, transit-desert areas that City of Yes would ban parking construction are misplaced, West says. Where local market demand supports parking, “you’ll still be allowed to put



as much parking in the building as you can today. However, it’s just not *required*.”)

The zoning amendment’s so-called campus-infill provisions, West continues, improve on the 1961 code’s height-factor zoning, which encourages tower-in-a-park models and makes it difficult to free up leftover air rights, or floor area ratio (FAR), from uses such as parking lots “spread around in between buildings in ways that don’t really benefit the public.” As the New York City Housing Authority has unsuccessfully tried to do on some of its sites, West and colleagues once managed to add residential space at Columbus Square on the Park West Village superblock in the Upper West ’90s. “We channeled the floor area onto a parking lot that was no longer required to be left as a low-rise place,” he recalls, “and by hook and by crook, we manipulated the height-factor calculations to squeak out one big building there. But there are large areas of that site left unbuilt, and we’ve studied it for decades. How do we add something there that was almost impossible under the current zoning, mainly because of the height-factor rules? Under City of Yes, we would be able to add a couple of good-sized buildings on that site. We’ve looked at several of these sites and, invariably, the City of Yes infill provisions work 100 times better than the current zoning.” West summarizes, “I don’t know of a single site where we have people saying, ‘I wish City of Yes wouldn’t pass and we would be able to build under the old rules.’”

Bafitis points out several ways City of Yes corrects anachronisms in the 1961 zoning code, adopted “at a time when the car was king, and zoning was centered around car-oriented development.” Comparing the 1961 zoning to “death by a thousand cuts” and calling for its overhaul, he sees City of Yes as providing a long-needed “thousand Band-Aids.” It promotes transit-oriented development, expands the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development’s Affordable



Independent Residences for Seniors increment (allowing affordable senior housing to be about 20% larger than other types) to any affordable housing, and allows conversions of office space, garages, and other underused structures that would be more beneficial as residences. Commercial conversion, he finds, is a promising enough trend that “the zoning should have gone farther to create some real bonus incentives” for that as well.

Another Housing Committee member, Darrick Borowski, AIA, principal at ARExA and professor at the School of Visual Arts, worked on an AIANY subcommittee exploring certain City of Yes provisions, “taking it out for a test drive on empty, city-owned lots within districts of council members who might be interested in understanding the plan, be open to it, be facing resistance, or be resistant themselves.” ARExA tackled ADUs; Magnusson Architects studied the plan’s Universal Affordability Preference (UAP), transit-oriented development, and Town Center components (see graphic on page 24). From this exercise and the feedback from the electeds, Borowski says, “the new proposals we have tested out in specific sites and neighborhoods have not been terribly disruptive of the fabric of those neighborhoods.” Concerns from community boards over spatial effects, such as towers within a landmarked district, were not borne out; if anything, Borowski says, the changes were “underwhelming,” and the chief concern was how the program might reach its targets.

Local benefits, however, could be significant. At one test site in Jamaica, Queens, Borowski found that a change in minimum lot width in low-density zones under City of Yes made it possible to replace a house that had been torn down after the 1961 zoning (enacted after much of the neighborhood was built, and banning construction on lots below 40 feet wide). With this change, a small increase in FAR, and the option of an 800-square-foot ADU on the site, the lot could not only accommodate a rebuilt house, but could also include an income-generating component. “Having a rental in my house is why I can afford to live in New York,” he says. “For the middle class, that is an extremely powerful tool for staying in the city.”

## What City of Yes does and doesn’t do

While supporting City of Yes elements, Borowski finds that process-related critiques have some merit. “Communities feel like this is being dropped in their laps from on high,” he notes. “To an extent, I understand why they feel that way, because this has been happening in closed rooms.” Infrastructure to support densification in outlying regions of the city strikes him as a legitimate concern, but is “a planning conversation. I don’t know that it can be covered within a zoning proposal.” The proposal’s success, he



notes, will also depend on concurrent work on related challenges: transit-oriented development and construction freed from parking requirements, for example, are both premised on reliable transit infrastructure, so that the potential benefits from both are inseparable from the problems of transit funding and congestion pricing.

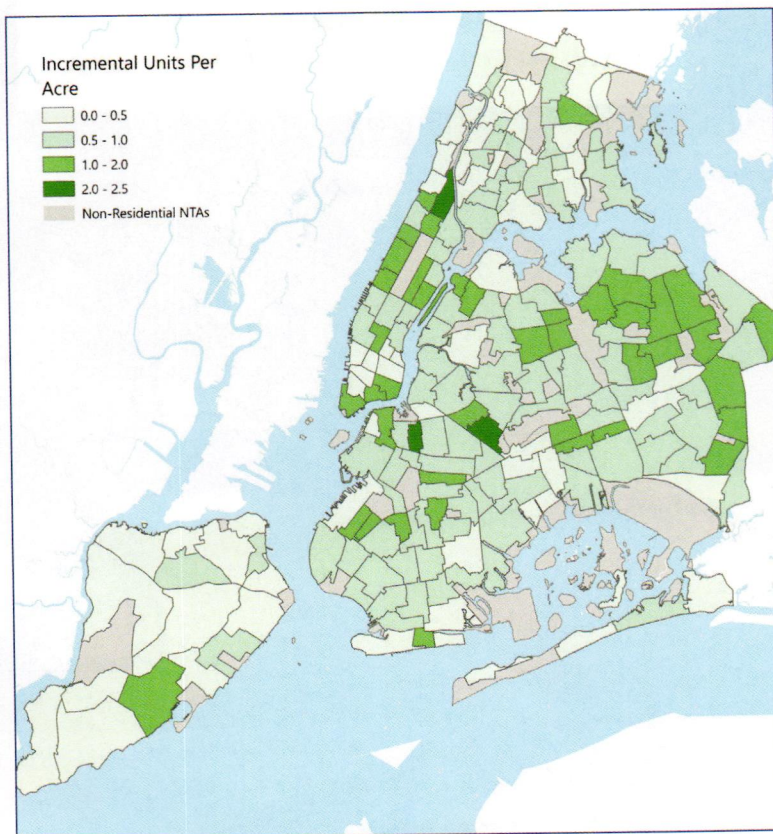
Misperceptions of City of Yes goals have been widespread. For starters, it is not a radical rezoning. It does not rezone any district, but merely revises provisions applying to existing zones. Brown rejects claims that “this proposal is one-size-fits-all, is top-down, or is taking only one approach to every kind of neighborhood.” Different housing opportunities, she says, suit each zoning district, neighborhood, or density level, and “no single neighborhood is being asked to take it on alone.” Borowski has heard “a narrative going around that ‘we’re fundamentally changing the feel and character of my neighborhood.’” But, he says, “we’ve tested a bunch of sites, and we just don’t see it. The impacts are like 12 extra units here, five extra units here. In medium-density areas, the bump you get from UAP is a little bit higher. The changes we’ve seen are incremental and don’t feel like the end of small, low-density living in New York’s outer boroughs.” Bafitis points out that in the past, “new housing and development has been concentrated in places people don’t want it, in a lot of low-income communities, and none has been in wealthier communities.” City of Yes strives to distribute new housing evenly. “I like the egalitarian nature of this—the idea that we’re going to do it everywhere, even in rich neighborhoods.”

That the proposal encourages new affordable housing without mandating it strikes some observers as a positive feature, and some as a flaw. The Department of City Planning considered an

affordability mandate in low-density areas, but decided the low development potential would most likely prevent any housing from being built at all. “We’re relying on private development and the market to produce affordable housing,” West notes. “That’s the tool we have at our disposal. We don’t have huge investments of federal dollars coming in, or even state dollars, as they had in the postwar era, when so much subsidized housing got built, and a lot of that was middle-income housing.” He sees some critics “looking for the zoning to solve larger societal problems. I don’t think that’s a realistic expectation. The zoning is just creating the box within which all these things can occur. But it’s got to be a good box. It’s got to be big enough. It’s got to make sense.”

RKTB President Carmi Bee, FAIA, turns to 20th-century history for examples that made sense and strengthened communities. He recalls the Sunnyside Gardens plan by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, with “Mom-and-pop apartments and duplexes, which became a model throughout Queens. You had a lower apartment, and the parents lived on top.”

### An environmental review estimates that City of Yes zoning proposals will result in a citywide housing unit increment range of 58,200 to 108,900 units.



Courtesy NYC Department of City Planning

By legalizing ADUs, City of Yes allows multigenerational spaces. “To me, the whole idea of keeping a family unit together is very important,” he continues. “This happens in multistory districts.” Citing an [infill prototype](#) that RKTB developed in 2004, a four-story walkup “meant to fill in vacant lots in medium-density districts,” Bee envisions its possible reintroduction under City of Yes as one of many options that could retain the middle class, “the backbone of a city. I remember when there were all these public programs to produce middle-income housing, and it was very simple: you needed a middle-income population to make a city whole.” If private development can’t accomplish this, Baftis adds, “I think the state should be more proactive in providing housing, especially given the dimensions of the crisis we’re in now. What other entity can marshal the forces at a scale that’s necessary, except the state?”

City of Yes implies that New York has too long been a City of No, red-taped to the point that residential construction can’t

come close to meeting the populace’s needs.

By “re-legalizing housing types that have been banned by our current zoning,” Brown notes, including mixed-use buildings in low-density districts, and buildings with multiple exposures and a courtyard, a new regulatory atmosphere may foster progress against the city’s housing gap. The key question is, how much? Mayor Adams has conjectured that City of Yes would yield 100,000 new homes over the next 15 years, a step toward the [“moonshot” goal of 500,000 homes in a decade](#). For context, a [May 2024 McKinsey and Company report](#) for the [Regional Planning Association](#) found a current region-wide shortage of 540,000 housing units, possibly rising to 920,000 units by 2035. Recognizing that zoning is one of many tools available, Brown notes that the city will continue pursuing the Department of Housing Preservation and Development affordability programs, state tax incentives, and other tenant protections.

“Zoning does not dictate exactly what will happen just because we have allowed things,” Brown says. “Zoning is a long game. Zoning alone isn’t going to be enough to solve the housing crisis.” City of Yes for Housing Opportunity may be a meliorist, roundabout approach to a problem that some believe requires fundamental changes—but it is a start. ■

# A Lifestyle Adjustment

Beyond place, architects and planners envision a more egalitarian, livable New York City.

BY PATRICK SISSON

**N**ear Brooklyn's Prospect Park, a new apartment development doesn't just stand out from its neighbors, it literally stands over them. One Sullivan Place, designed by RKTB Architects sits—and sprawls atop—the corner of Sullivan Place and Washington Avenue in Crown Heights, a Tetris-shaped, 12-story tower of affordable apartments that cantilevers over adjoining buildings.

Architect Peter Bafitis, AIA, says that while the unique shape complicated and added significant cost to the build-out, which was finished last April, a different kind of math made the building pencil out. By securing more space above other buildings to expand to a 52-unit project, more market-rate apartments could cross-subsidize the affordable options. “It illustrates the weird and innovative way you have to start thinking about designing in New York City,” says Bafitis. “You have to create more available land.”

In a crowded city, volume has always come at a premium. Land and construction costs continue to rise. But architects have found that rethinking the precious resource of land and space—adding community areas to projects, improving access to more people, fusing different functions, even cantilevering apartments over their neighbors—can have a significant impact on urban livability. “When I went to architecture school, we were really thinking within our lot lines,” says Adam Lubinsky, principal at WXY. “There wasn't enough that was spilling out into the urban realm. Today, you're seeing architects more focused on data, and you're seeing more architects thinking about urban context.”

A central courtyard unites Handel Architects's Sendero Verde housing and mixed use development in Harlem.



One Sullivan Place by RKTB adds 52 new senior, affordable, and market-rate apartments to Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood. The project features large steel trusses that cantilever the structure over portions of an adjacent building, an architectural solution that makes such a large development possible on the site.

**“This is really just the start. We had tenants from other buildings attending the meetings because they want to do this in their buildings.”**

**HANNAH ANOUSHEH**

East New York Community  
Land Trust Campaigns Director

that a community land trust—a nascent but growing type of communal property ownership—acquired a 21-unit apartment building in Brooklyn last March underscores the need for new ways of approaching development. It was the first time such a group had purchased a private building. “We’re really excited to expand this model,” East New York Community Land Trust Campaigns Director Hannah Anousheh told *Bisnow*. “This is really just the start. We had tenants from other buildings attending the meetings because they want to do this in their buildings.”

Affordability continues to worsen; the city will be half a million units short by 2032, and with a vacancy rate of less than 2%, options and mobility have dwindled. Factor in a pedestrian safety crisis, increasingly strained transit systems, longer commutes, and widening income disparity, and it makes sense for architects to look well beyond aesthetics. News

The definition of urban livability can be slippery. But as the focus of architectural work has evolved from design excellence to elevating social connection and community, according to Dan McPhee, executive director of the Urban Design Forum, “people want that conversation around commerce, finance, development, and public policy.”

For architects seeking a building block for connection and culture, the public library makes a great foundation. That’s the theory behind *The Eliza*, a 14-story development that opened last June, which grafts affordable housing atop a local branch library. Designed by Fogarty Finger and sheathed in taupe-gray bricks and terra-cotta panels to reflect the neighborhood’s Art Deco façades, *The Eliza* truly reflects the community on its bottom two floors, which contain a library designed by Andrew Berman Architect, a universal Pre-K center, a STEM Center, and space for job training, classes, and cultural activities.

The idea of mixed-use, retail, and residential projects, or vertical villages, isn’t revolutionary. What stands out about *The Eliza* is the way it was assembled to foster the non-commercial aspects of community that often remain sorely undernourished in 100% affordable housing developments. Consider a day in the life of a family living there: The kids can be dropped off at child care, parents can check out community programs and job training through midday, and teenagers can spend afternoons

doing homework among the stacks. At night, parents, kids, and neighbors can congregate amid the upper-level amenities—a gym, a spacious laundry room with views of the Hudson River, and rooftop gardens.

These library-focused projects are poised to expand, with a new development taking place on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. But other iterations of the idea are being attempted, especially as a shortage of development sites turns attention to

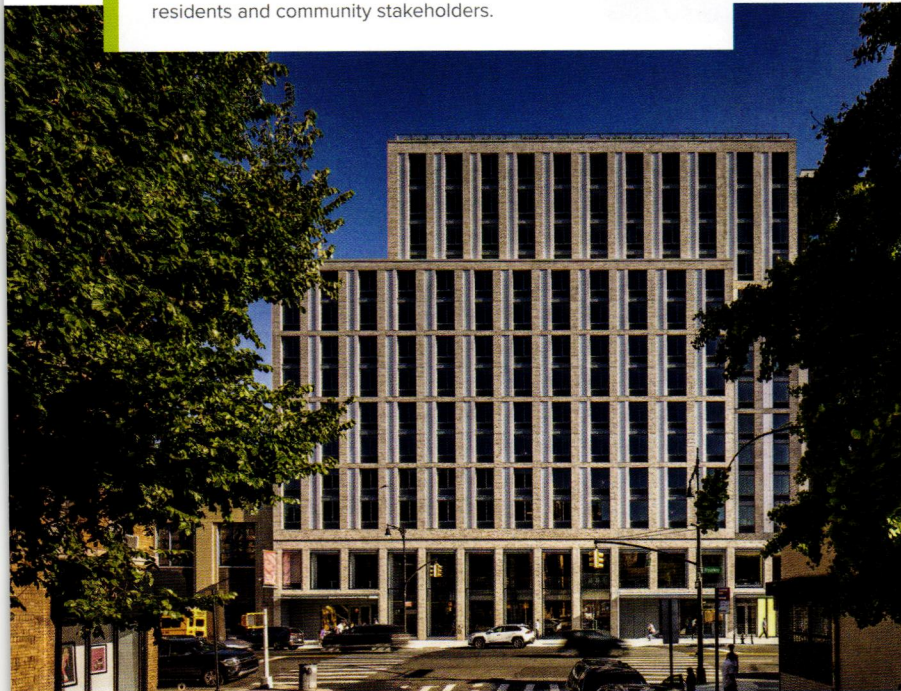
The Inwood Library is integrated with The Eliza, an affordable housing project, in Queens. Designed by Fogarty Finger in collaboration with Andrew Berman Architect, the development came about as a result of extensive engagement with local residents and community stakeholders.

government-owned or brownfield industrial space. Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center, by Mega Development, which just held a ribbon cutting in September, seeks to redevelop a former chocolate syrup factory into a 174-unit affordable housing project in Brownsville, Brooklyn, with 39,000 square feet of light industrial space for small businesses on the ground floor.

The Eliza resulted from the New York Public Library and the city seeing the potential in developing on library property, rethinking how that space could work, and pursuing the larger vision despite neighborhood pushback and lawsuits.

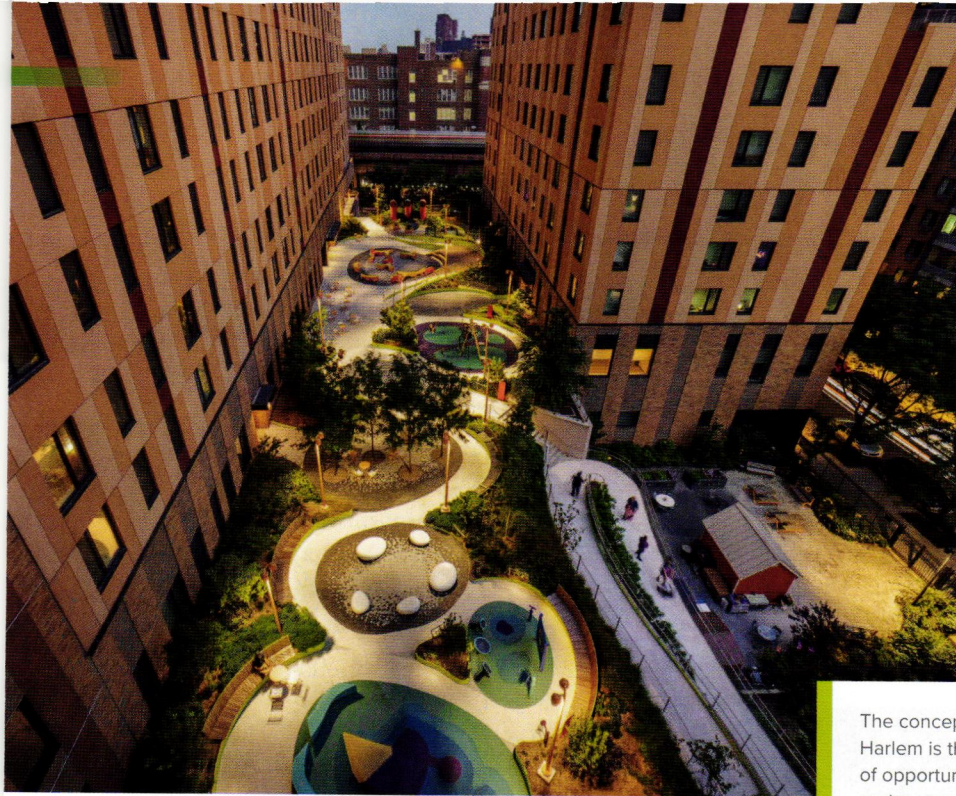
Now, Upper Manhattan has 175 apartments, renting for \$500 to \$1,600 a month, near a striking new library. Chris Fogarty, AIA, whose firm Fogarty Finger designed the building, says in addition to incorporating so many everyday amenities, his team also spent significant time elevating the material choice and unit layouts. “Affordable housing is still living in a little bit of a Dark Age,” he says. “We hope that when we lay out an apartment, it doesn’t feel like it’s just ticking the box.”

At a time when the vital concerns of affordability and accessibility seem to trump all, projects that also consider livability are that much more important. For Justin Cruz, chief operating officer of the Cruz Companies, a Boston-based firm that focuses on affordable housing, it’s imperative that projects don’t feel cheap. It’s a commitment the firm takes seriously: the Cruz Companies will be a commercial tenant in its under-construction Michael E. Haynes Arms development in



**“Affordable housing is still living in a little bit of a Dark Age. We hope that when we lay out an apartment, it doesn’t feel like it’s just ticking the box.”**

**CHRIS FOGARTY, AIA**  
Fogarty Finger



**“I love that architects—but also engineers, lawyers, and other technical experts—are embracing a kind of new entrepreneurial spirit. How can we help our neighbors, and do it in partnership?”**

**DAN MCPHEE**  
Executive director of  
the Urban Design Forum

The concept behind Sendero Verde in Harlem is that by providing a variety of opportunities and support services under one roof, the project can work to break the cycle of poverty.



is a block-sized, multibuilding project incorporating 709 units and a 34-story tower. Celebrated for its green, sustainable design—it’s the tallest such structure to be certified Passive House—its success, according to architect Blake Middleton, AIA, of Handel Architects, results just as much from its engagement with the community and streetscape.

Once an open lot that included neighborhood gardens, Sendero Verde still seeks to tend to the community’s growth. Meandering paths lined in green—the project’s name means “green path”—include a grand staircase that pulls pedestrians off Park Avenue, creating interaction

and gathering spaces. The massing of the three buildings was arranged to maximize sunlight for those taking a stroll. A courtyard, redesigned with the input of the neighborhood Acacia Network, features a school, a separate youth and senior center, a stage, and demarcated meditative, gardening, and play areas.

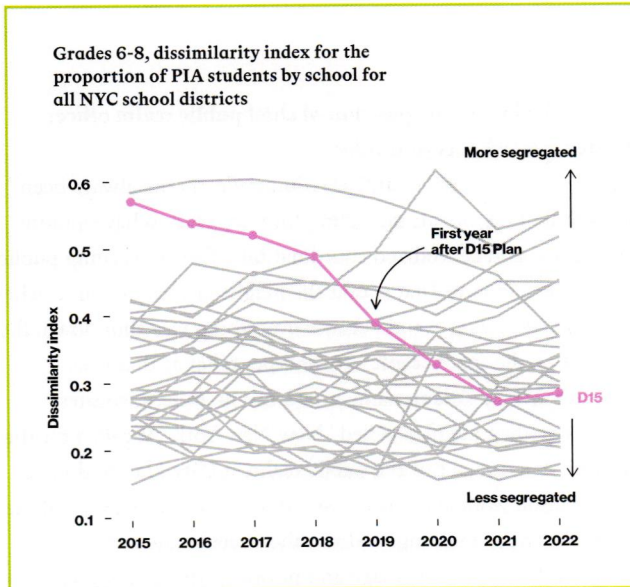
Just as new residents build on the human capital of cities, these new housing developments utilize their budgets and footprints to add new neighborhood infrastructure to the community. Many architects see their role as advocating for this infrastructure, whether by changing housing policy and pushing for zoning and building code reform, like Mayor Eric Adams’s City of Yes for Housing Opportunity proposal, or by wading deeper into the intersection of policy and its social impacts.

Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood, which will eventually include retail, office, a café, community recreation space, and roughly 100 affordable apartments.

Part of doing that was pulling back on unit quantity and focusing more on quality. “New York is also having this push to maximize space,” says Cruz. (It’s true; new one-bedroom apartments are about 40 square feet smaller than they were a decade ago.) “So it’s really a balancing act. We’d rather not do a 150-unit box. Maybe we do something in, say, the 80-unit range. Not impossible, but it enables us to do a deal, but not sacrifice the things that feel important to us.”

That philosophy can also work on much larger scales. In East Harlem, the Sendero Verde development, which finished in April,

By viewing schools, and the equity of the public education system, as part of social infrastructure, WXY's Lubinsky utilized his architectural training to help rethink policies for District 15, which includes South Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Park Slope and Sunset Park. Schools and housing remain intimately intertwined: good school districts boost property values and development, while some residents who can't afford to move from poor-performing schools feel like prisoners of their kids' limited educational options.



Beginning six years ago, Lubinsky and his colleagues created a series of proposals to decrease inequity in the diverse student body. The district's middle schools were the second most socioeconomically segregated when WXY started with this work, which included robust community engagement sessions. The end result advocated reforms such as removing admissions screens, adding multilingual classrooms, and instituting a priority lottery for low-income students. A recently released five-year study of the program found that segregation has decreased and test scores have improved. "On a basic level, we're an office that's really focused on the built environment," says Lubinsky, "and we see schools as integral to the shape and nature of neighborhoods and cities."

Lubinsky connects these issues most directly to something so many architects, planners, and developers have endeavored to improve: a sense of a divided city. Schools, like so many other factors, don't just impact property values and rental rates, and alter development decisions, they can also form enclaves of inequity. Eliminating these enclaves may—like the green accents on the paths winding through Sendero Verde—be the true connective thread in all this work. Any nod towards building community space, improving interaction, and making the complex and crowded lives of New Yorkers more livable, brings people together.

"I love that architects—but also engineers, lawyers, and other technical experts—are embracing a kind of new entrepreneurial spirit," says McPhee of Urban Design Forum. "How can we help our neighbors, and do it in partnership?" ■



**Above:** A graph created by WXY Studio as part of a District 15 diversity plan. The dissimilarity index measures how different each middle school's proportion of students who are eligible for priority in admissions (PIA) is from the proportion of PIA middle school students within the district overall. A higher dissimilarity index indicates a higher degree of segregation within the district.

**Left:** Designed by RKTB, the Hellenic Mixed-Use Cultural & Residential Complex in Astoria is owned and operated by the Greek Orthodox Church and expands an existing two-story building into a 10,000-square-foot cultural center and 14 apartments above.

# Living in the Moment

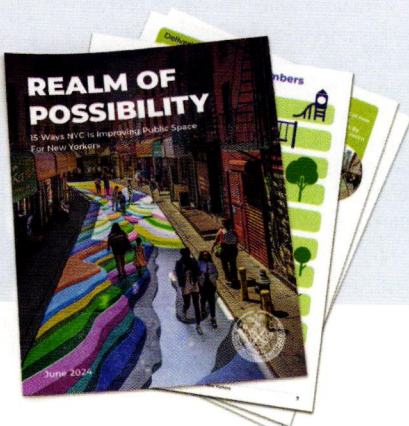
Three experts share their research and on-the-ground work to improve urban environments.



## Working in the Public Realm: Ya-Ting Liu

INTERVIEWED BY STEPHEN ZACKS

About a year into his term as mayor, Eric Adams created a new position in his administration to improve the quality of public space in New York City. Chief Public Realm Officer **Ya-Ting Liu**, a transportation policy advocate with a background in conservation and planning, now works in the office of Deputy Mayor for Operations Meera Joshi. In June, Liu issued a report, “Realm of Possibility: 15 Ways NYC is Improving Public Space for New Yorkers,” sharing her vision for implementing the nation’s best outdoor dining program, removing sidewalk sheds, planting more street trees, renovating and building more public restrooms, opening schoolyards to the public after-hours, and activating and upgrading public spaces.



Liu’s June 2024 report details the ways in which the city’s public spaces can be improved.

### How and why was the position of chief public realm officer created, and what is your role?

Ya-Ting Liu: Since the 2021 election cycle, there’s always been a handful of organizations calling for City Hall to have a more intentional and centralized coordination effort concerning public space management. That was at the height of the pandemic, when the city was reeling—and because everything was shut down, the value of public spaces came into sharper relief at that time.

When Mayor Adams came into office in 2022, advocates pulled together an effort called “New New York.” It called for the creation of a director of the public realm at City Hall to do that coordination work and create a set of priorities for what I call the “spaces between buildings”—from the street to the curb to the sidewalk. How do we manage and prioritize those very precious spaces that have a lot of demands on them?

### In your report, you discuss reducing costs through coordination across agencies or using more efficient procurement processes. What tools are available—or are you creating—that will enable that to happen more fluidly?

This has been a professional and personal learning curve for me, coming inside government and understanding the Byzantine rules involved in how the city builds anything. Some of the tools are legislative action we need from Albany to allow city agencies to do things like design-build, for example. That effort is being spearheaded by Deputy Mayor Joshi, with a lot of legislative asks from Albany that we’ve won in the last couple of sessions, and outstanding items that we still need.

In terms of my team, we’ve created standing meetings with all the capital agencies that are building things, adding to the public-space footprint of the city: Department of Parks, Department of Transportation (DOT), Department of Design and Construction, Department of Environmental Protection. We all meet regularly, and some of the tools are just making sure agencies are prioritizing these public-space projects, giving City Hall regular updates on where they stand, and whether there are delays. It’s not sexy or a magic bullet, but it involves project management and being hypervigilant about where we are with things.

### What are your plans to reduce the city's ubiquitous sidewalk sheds?

This is definitely one of our top-top priorities, and it is also a quintessential, perennial, and seemingly exceptional New York City issue that has plagued all the administrations of the past. What we are doing is multipronged. Number one, we need stronger carrots and sticks at the Department of Buildings (DOB) to make sure building owners are better incentivized and motivated to take down the scaffolding. As long as the cost to put up scaffolding is cheaper than the underlying façade repair work they have to address, they will always try to put it off and forget about it. And the current permitting and fine process incentivizes building owners to do that.

Right now, we have a package of legislation before the City Council that will give DOB a lot more tools and change the reporting and fee structure for building owners. Some of these bills would require building owners to keep showing proof that they're either actively doing or making a good faith effort to do the underlying repair work, or the fines for keeping up scaffolding will grow. That's one way: right-sizing the incentive structure.

The second is around design. Under the Bloomberg Administration, there was a design competition for sidewalk sheds, and the winner was the Urban Umbrella. That competition resulted in a monopoly of one company having the intellectual property rights for that design, so it's seen as a luxury product that only high-end buildings can afford. The DOB has recently selected ARUP and PAU as two firms to present new designs. The intellectual property would be owned by the city, and we would make that available to everybody. The idea is that once we have some design standards in place, we would pursue legislation that would require the new designs going forward.

### Can you talk about street tree plantings and aspects of water containment that are supposed to alleviate stormwater runoff and combined sewer overflows?

Every time DOT is looking to create a new pedestrian plaza, or the parks team is building a new playground or doing a renova-



**Above and below:** Liu's report calls for streamlining the permitting process for public space activations.

tion, we ask them, "What can we do to make it as water-absorbent as possible? What are we doing to make these assets more resilient? How can we create more shaded areas and reduce the heat island effect?"

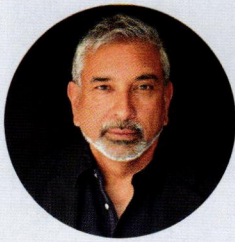
### What do you hope to accomplish in your role, and how would you like the city to eventually look and feel?

I think about prioritizing public space management through what I call hardware, software, and "org-ware." When it comes to hardware, it's a lot of this capital stuff we were talking about at the beginning. Software gets into all the programming and maintenance work. Is it well maintained? Is it clean? Are interesting things happening in the space? That is critical, because you can build a brand-new plaza, but if it's filled with trash, no one is going to use it. The software piece is just as important; it is not sexy, and hard to fund, but it is absolutely critical. The city relies on partners to do this work: business improvement districts, friends of parks groups, conservancies, neighborhood groups. But for partners who want to host an open street or do maintenance and programming, we make it very hard for them, so that's been a real focus of ours.

We need these partners—how do we make it easier for them?

And lastly, "org-ware" is more internal. How do you ensure this focus lasts through different administrations? The priority and emphasis always come from the mayor, deputy mayors, and senior levels of the administration. If the senior executive team is not focused on it, you won't have a lot of juice or resources in your own office. The fact that the deputy mayor for operations has prioritized this has enabled us to do a lot in a short amount of time.





## Vishaan Chakrabarti

INTERVIEWED BY **STEPHEN ZACKS**

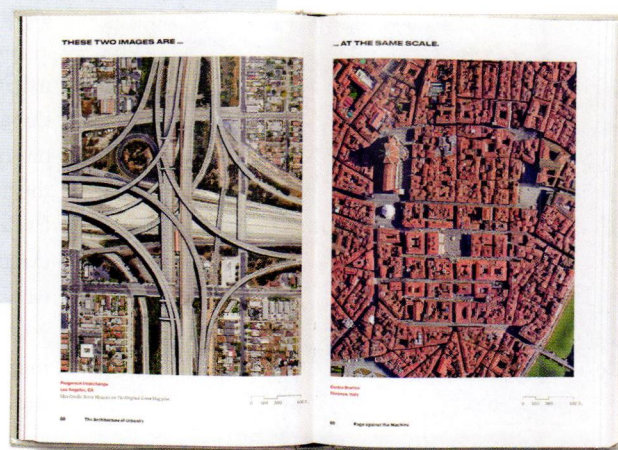
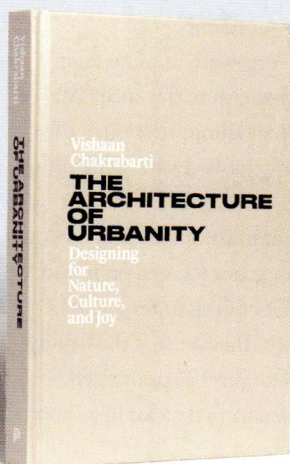
Vishaan Chakrabarti's latest book, *The Architecture of Urbanity: Designing for Nature, Culture, and Joy* (Princeton University Press, 2024), is intended to be an argument with his first book, *A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for Urban America* (Metropolis Books, 2013). Over the past decade, he has taken several cross-country trips through the middle of the U.S.—including several towing an Airstream trailer, during the pandemic, accompanied by his son—and has embarked on a number of projects in Detroit, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Niagara Falls that have brought him closer to Middle America. Chakrabarti emphatically believes that forms of density adequate for walkability and well-designed public spaces that encourage the experience of cultural difference are possible and economically viable in small towns, as well as large ones. *The Architecture of Urbanity* sets out to show how graciously designed places and good public policy can help.

### What do you mean by “architecture of urbanity”?

Vishaan Chakrabarti: The first book argued for the merits of density, especially transit-oriented density. Since then, the issue of density, even what people today call “gentle density,” has entered our political culture wars. A lot of reasonable people said, “Look, we get the technocratic argument about why urban growth is good, but most new urban development is terrible.” I found that hard to argue with. Most new urban development is pretty terrible. I wanted to do a second book about the role design plays in urban growth being successful or unsuccessful, from large-scale urban and regional moves, like transit systems, all the way down to where you put a doorknob. This book is much lighter on infographics and data, but it is much heavier on an argument not just for design, but why design matters to the big pressing issues of our day, specifically climate change and social division.

### Another term that threads its way through a lot of the chapters is “connective tissue.”

Yes, connective tissue and connective design. Connective design is the term of art that the book uses quite a bit. I believe people will be much more accepting of urban growth if it's not just designed well, but designed to connect people to their places, and to the narratives and identities of their places. Take the Domino Sugar Refinery, for example. That building can't be anywhere else. Even though parts of it are very futuristic and forward-looking, the building pulls history forward with it. It connects people to a sense of what makes New York New York, our industrial legacy, and this sense that it can't just be picked up and moved anywhere. This is one of the biggest challenges we face as designers today, because materials are mass-produced and, especially when it comes to housing, it's all becoming very generic.



Vishaan Chakrabarti's book, *The Architecture of Urbanity: Designing for Nature, Culture, and Joy* (Princeton University Press, 2024)

**“I believe people will be much more accepting of urban growth if it’s not just designed well, but designed to connect people to their places.”**

Part of why there’s community pushback about new housing density is that people see buildings going up in their neighborhoods, and they feel they are losing their sense of where they are and who they are. Connective design is meant to cover quite a broad range of ideas. Some of them are at the scale of urban planning and urban design. I’m trying to take it a step further and put it squarely in the realm of architecture. I don’t mean postmodern historicism; the easiest reference point in terms of architectural theory is actually critical regionalism. If you think of the work of Francis Kéré, Alejandro Aravena, Tatiana Bilbao, or Marina Tabassum, the through line is that it’s unabashedly contemporary: I don’t think you could ever call it historicist or pastiche, but it is also trying to be place-based. Their work is trying to respond to a certain sense of not just immediate physical context, but cultural context, and most of it is pretty mission-driven.

There is a major shift in the profession away from object-based architecture and into different forms of what it means to be a successful architect. It’s not just virtue signaling, but it’s what we do in the profession and the communities we help to build. The larger sociopolitical issue is that architecture is a counterpoint or antidote to the political and cultural division that social media has brought.

A lot of the work my office is doing is in the industrial Midwest, where the blue pixels and the red pixels meet. I just finished my sixth cross-country trip, so I know the middle of the country really well. The last couple of times I’ve done it, my son and I have pulled an Airstream we bought during the pandemic. We, at Practice for Architecture and Urbanism (PAU), won the Miller Prize in Columbus, Indiana, for this wonderful canopy structure in the heart of Columbus. We have a bridge under construction in Indianapolis; we’re doubling the size of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, originally the I.M. Pei building. We’re working in downtown Niagara Falls.

A lot of these communities are different scales, they’re in different parts of the country, but they have certain aspects in common: downtowns that were hollowed out by shopping malls and e-commerce. They are cities, but they’re not exclusively



**Top:** The renovated Domino Sugar Refinery, now an office building, and revitalized Domino Park along Williamsburg’s waterfront.

**Bottom:** A rendering of a planned community and cultural hub in East New York, Brooklyn.

liberal, progressive cities. If we can create spaces where people of difference can see each other and attract each other, they begin to understand that people who look different or pray differently are not the threat that social media makes them out to be. This is why I think these spaces are so important to the times we live in. Even in the middle of a presidential election with heated political debate, it’s really, really important, because my experience with this country is that it’s nowhere near as divided culturally as we are told every day and made to believe.



## Berit Lavender

INTERVIEWED BY **BETH BROOME**

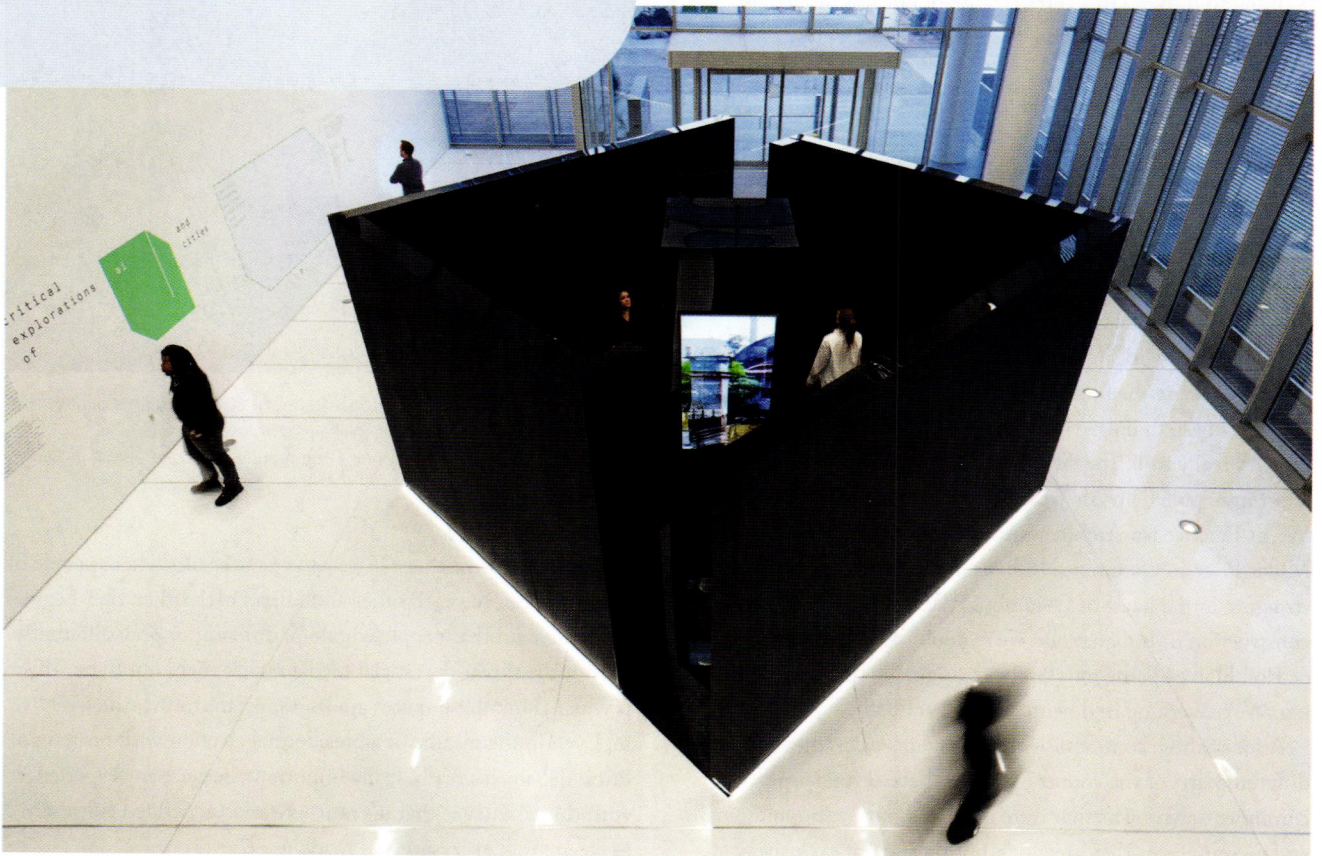
**Berit Lavender** is the executive director of the Norman B. Leventhal Center for Advanced Urbanism (LCAU) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The center serves as a theoretical and applied research platform for creating and disseminating knowledge for affecting change in the urbanized world. Before stepping into her new role in August, Berit was co-director of DESIGNxRI and, prior to that, spent eight years as director of exhibitions and programs at New York's Center for Architecture.

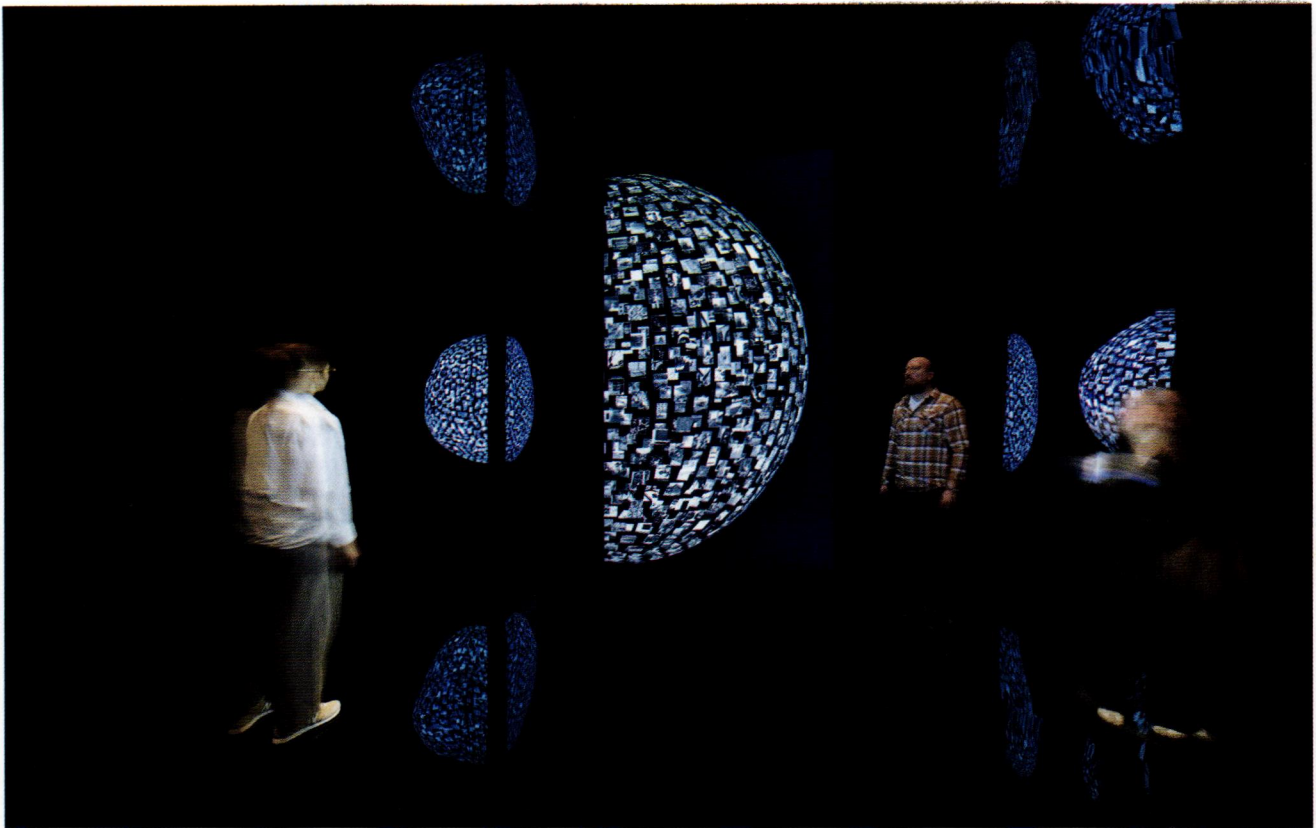
**Tell us about the LCAU—how it is structured and what its mission is.**

The LCAU was founded just over 10 years ago. It's a center at MIT, which means we are not a department, and we are not housed within a department. We're housed within the School of Architecture and Planning, and we are independent—but independent while striving to be multidisciplinary. Our goal is to address forward-thinking urban issues at a variety of scales through collaborations with interdisciplinary experts. We have 40-plus affiliated faculty, primarily from Architecture and Planning, but we try to bring in educators from across the university. We just gave out some large seed grants that included faculty in computer science. Of course, at MIT there are so many smart people doing such a variety of things—the ultimate goal is to get as many fields as possible interested in connecting to research around creating livable cities.

**What are some of the top concerns the LCAU is focused on right now?**

The LCAU develops themes, which we focus on for roughly two years. The first theme back in 2012 was infrastructure. Then we looked at suburbia, housing, and equitable resilience. And we're now coming off the end of digital urbanism, which feeds into the background of current faculty director, Sarah Williams, who





Opposite page and above: “Unboxed City: critical explorations of [ai] and cities” was on view last winter at MIT’s Leventhal Center for Advanced Urbanism.

leads the Civic Data Design Lab at MIT. These themes aren’t going to go away. We are still looking at housing, of course, and are doing a project right now on equitable resilience, which focuses on how cities can prepare now for a form of future resilience that avoids some of the current pitfalls that have resulted in displaced communities. And digital urbanism, which examines the intersection of cities, technology, and design, in some ways touches almost everything we do.

**Tell us about some of LCAU’s recent or current initiatives.**

While our themes help us home in on particular topics, we also are in tune with critical, timely issues that might not fit into a given focus—we are very broad. For example, we just received funding to look at access to food and water in a settlement in Colombia. Public space is always an important topic—right now we’re wrapping up a project in Australia with the University of New South Wales, for which we deployed street seats with sensors to understand how people were interacting with them. While in some cases our research can be informed by grants we apply for, we are fortunate in that we also distribute funding, so we’re able to be very nimble in creating our calls. We just did a round of seed grants where we collaborated with global engineering, architecture, and consultancy firm Sidara to solicit proposals for experimenting with novel forms of knowledge and data, generating innovative urban solutions.

**We are doing a project right now on equitable resilience, which focuses on how cities can prepare now for a form of future resilience that avoids some of the current pitfalls that have resulted in displaced communities.**

**What lies ahead for you in your new role?**

We’re announcing a new theme in December, which we developed with our affiliated faculty, and I’m looking forward to seeing how that deploys. After launching the new theme, we’ll announce the third round of the Leventhal City Prize, which is open to urbanists, architects, and planners. The first round went to a project called the Malden River Works, in Massachusetts, which recently got funding to be built. It’s super exciting to know we funded this idea that will become a reality. The second round was New York-based. It was a collaboration between MIT faculty, the NYC Housing Authority, and the non-profit Green City Force. I’m excited to see what this next round of proposals will consider. And, more generally, moving ahead in my new role, I’m looking forward to playing a small part in highlighting cutting-edge urban research around the globe. ■

# Professional Ambition

## A Special Op-Ed Section

Architects weigh in on how they hope to make the city a more equitable, livable place for citizens of all types.



### Designing a Livable Future

BY **YADIEL RIVERA-DÍAZ, ASLA, PLA**



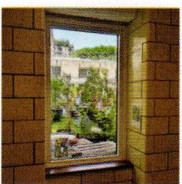
### The rise and fall of outdoor dining spaces

BY **YUMIKO MATSUBARA, AIA, NCARB**



### The State of Our Indoor Urban Environment

BY **JOSH GERBER, AIA**



### Patterns and Policies of New York City's School Green Roof Trend

BY **SARAH KENNEY, ZISHI LI, ZEYNEP UGUR, ZIDA LIU, LETTY LAU, SHAWLON HSIEH**



### Reimagining NYC's empty office buildings through creative design

BY **ROSALIND TSANG, AIA, LEED AP BD+C**

## Designing a Livable Future

BY **YADIEL RIVERA-DÍAZ, ASLA, PLA**

Visualize walking through a neighborhood park where children laugh as they play on swings, adults jog along wooded paths, and families gather for picnics under the shade of oak trees. Now, picture another park where the green is sparse, the equipment is outdated and beyond repair, and heat radiates from the pavement with no shade in sight. These contrasting images are all too common in the five boroughs of New York City. Access to usable, high-quality, open space that fosters community, provides shade, and invites activity is a privilege often reserved for a few centralized neighborhoods. This disparity is not just an inconvenience—it affects how we live, breathe, and experience the city. The inequity to open space shapes the way I approach design as a landscape architect at Marvel. We push our design practice to create flourishing public spaces that function as equitable resources for entire communities.

New York City is a vibrant metropolis, but lack of access to quality open spaces remains a key differential in quality of life. For a city to be truly livable, it must provide all residents—regardless of income, race, or location—with access to parks, clean air, respite from the heat, and streets safe from the dangers of vehicles. Clean, inviting open space should not be a luxury, yet, in New York City, there is a noticeable divide. Parks are not just aesthetic elements—they are vital public amenities that impact physical and mental health, provide cooling effects in the summer, and offer a sense of community. The absence of well-maintained parks in underserved areas contributes to inequities in health outcomes, exacerbates the urban heat island effect, and limits opportunities for social interaction.

The urban heat island effect—where dense urban areas trap heat, leading to significantly higher temperatures—is severe in low-income neighborhoods. According to the New York City’s Environment and Health Data Portal, the Heat Vulnerability Index of neighborhoods like the Concourse and Mott Haven in the Bronx, and East Harlem in Manhattan, is 5 out of 5—the highest value for neighborhoods. This means their residents are at greater risk of death during periods of extreme heat. For the most part, these communities also lack tree cover and access to waterfronts: two critical components in cooling urban environments. Vegetation and presence of water sources have proven to impart cooling effects, but these elements tend to be poorly distributed.

When Marvel began designing Bronx Point, a community-driven park and waterfront esplanade along the Harlem River, the client and design team’s goal was to create a usable, accessible waterfront that serves as a model for how thoughtful design can address the needs of the community. Throughout the design process, the project prioritized both ecological and community health, showcasing how landscape architects can create a more equitable urban realm through meaningful community involvement. Our community engagement process involved hosting more than 20 meetings and workshops, at which local voices shaped the features and programming of the space.

The resulting design transformed a fenced-off, empty, and asphalted lot—a site that used to be part of the Bronx Terminal Market—into a new, green, lush waterfront community amenity, expanding Mill Pond Park south. Bronx Point is an example of how integrating critical natural elements into urban spaces can create “cool islands” that not only provide shade and lower temperatures, but also improve air quality and offer refuge from the oppressive heat.



As landscape architects, we have a responsibility to mitigate adverse effects and ensure that cities offer adequate and equitable open spaces. Our role is not only about designing aesthetically pleasing environments, but also about devising dedicated spaces that improve public health, foster community, and address environmental challenges. In the face of climate change, urban spaces must be resilient, adaptive, and inclusive. Designing for resiliency must address coastal and storm flood mitigation, habitat restoration, and the viability of public spaces to serve multiple functions—as recreational areas for community activities, and as ecological assets that improve the health and livability of the city and its people.

Bronx Point’s addition of 4.6 acres of parkland affirm how landscape architecture can address issues head-on, reconnecting the surrounding Bronx communities and communities across the river in Harlem to their waterfront. More than just a park, it is a public resource designed with direct input from the residents. The park serves multiple functions. It offers active spaces for recreation—including a nature-themed playground, a barbecue area for families to gather, and places for jogging and exercise—alongside quieter, educational spaces like the “river get-down,” where children and families can learn about the river’s ecology. Ecological restoration is central to the design, with an upcoming Billion Oyster Project reef and the reintroduction of a native tidal marsh that helps stabilize the shoreline

and provide a habitat for wildlife. Importantly, Bronx Point is also an affordable housing development, integrating open space with the need for dignified community living. This combination of affordability, accessibility, and ecological enhancement makes it a model for future developments on New York City’s waterfronts and beyond.

Designing livable cities requires more than creating beautiful landscapes—it means ensuring that all residents have access to spaces that enhance quality of life. Bronx Point is just one example of how community-driven design can make a difference. But to make New York truly livable, we need all parts of the city to invest in places like Bronx Point—parks that are accessible, resilient, and equitable. Architects, urban designers, and landscape architects must continue to advocate for and create spaces that bring people together, foster belonging, and provide a respite from urban life. Our city can and should be a place where everyone, regardless of zip code, has access to clean air, cool parks, and the opportunity to connect with nature. The future of our city depends on it.



**Yadiel Rivera-Díaz, ASLA, PLA**, leads Marvel’s landscape architecture practice, with more than 16 years of experience in landscape architecture, architecture, and urban design. A registered landscape architect, he specializes in the design of public spaces, with a focus on inclusive design and community engagement.

## The rise and fall of outdoor dining spaces

BY YUMIKO MATSUBARA,  
AIA, NCARB

August 3, 2024, was the deadline for some NYC restaurants to make decisions about their outdoor dining spaces. Food-service establishments that had erected outdoor dining sheds during the height of the pandemic now needed to apply for permits to keep those structures in place, or demolish them by August 3—based on new protocols outlined under Dining Out NYC. One of the most controversial parts of the new outdoor dining rule is that roadside structures need to be demolished every year by the end of November, and businesses can then rebuild them after April.

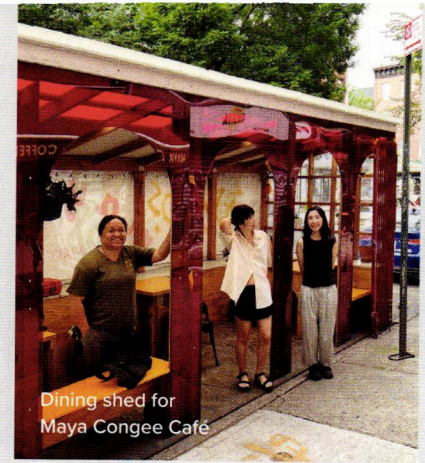
Maya Congee Cafe, a small Asian cafe and grocery store in the Bed-Stuy neighborhood of Brooklyn, built a roadside outdoor dining space in 2021. I met the cafe owner Layla Chen through Design Corps, an online platform that connected restaurants, cafes, and bars with architects during the pandemic. I designed the structure as pro-bono work and Chaos Build, who worked with minimal compensation, built it.

The completed structure has accommodated many customers and events since then. The cafe's owner, friends, and I ate congee, drank boba teas, played mahjong, and met new friends. Some of the design features we planned turned out well: benches that bisect the wall between the interior and the street side of the structure attracted passersby and customers alike. A half-opaque, half-translucent roof allowed us to sit on whichever side was more comfortable (either shaded or sunny) throughout the year. Plants grew on an open shelf we created to protect users from the traffic. There were also some unexpected troubles, especially in the early days.

Even though the project was completed at a relatively reasonable cost, it was still a large investment for the small cafe. This year, before the August 3 deadline, the owner decided to demolish the outdoor dining structure due to the amount of effort and cost needed to keep it under the new rules. On the morning of July 30, the owner, the Chaos Build team, and I met in front of the cafe to take the last photos before taking it apart. A question came to my mind: So, why do we need to demolish this?

That was also what I was asked by many of my friends when I told them this story. In addition to the seasonal disassembly requirements I mentioned above, there are license fees, annual fees, and a security deposit required of each restaurant if they want to build an outdoor dining structure. How many small businesses would have the space and money to store a dining structure for months and rebuild it annually? Is it physically possible to stitch together structural components and lumber once they are disassembled? I expect many small businesses won't be able to follow the new regulations.

Before this rule was finalized, a group of architects, advocates, and restaurateurs participated in the Open Restaurants Innovation Workshop in 2022 to discuss the future of outdoor dining spaces. This workshop was organized by AIANY in collaboration with many organizations including DOT and DOB. Maya Congee Cafe's outdoor space was a participant in this workshop, where I had a chance to propose ideas and hear other people's perspectives. The participants learned that many city residents and organizations had complaints about the noise of outdoor dining, the difficulty it posed for emergency vehicles passing through the streets, suspicion that dining sheds are incubators of rats, concerns many did not follow accessibility requirements, and others. The group of architects and advocates including myself presented possible future "prototypes" of outdoor dining spaces to the city at the



Dining shed for  
Maya Congee Cafe

end of this workshop. After over a year, some of those ideas were adopted, and the new program was announced.

Many workshop participants were aware that taking down structures every winter would be a significant hurdle for restaurants and would result in a large amount of construction waste. It still feels unfortunate that this point was not reflected in the final rule.

Despite their casual appearance, those structures can hurt people and public health if built improperly. Unfortunately, a large number of restaurants that did not follow construction regulations highlighted this concerning aspect of outdoor dining spaces. At the same time, we can see that many architects and builders took their responsibility seriously and created ingenious spaces, forming a completely new streetscape in NYC since the original program was launched in 2020. It is really sad to see them taken down. As we move onto the next stage of this outdoor dining journey, I hope the new program is enforced in a way that rewards the businesses, designers, and builders who sincerely follow the rules and try to contribute to the community.



**Yumiko Matsubara,**  
AIA, NCARB, is a  
registered architect in  
New York and Japan.  
After working on a

variety of award-winning design-build projects at Takenaka Corp. in Japan, Yumiko relocated to the U.S. to study at Harvard GSD. She currently works as a senior architect at BIG—Bjarke Ingels Group while collaborating with local businesses to provide design services.

# The State of Our Indoor Urban Environment

BY JOSH GERBER, AIA

New Yorkers crave an opportunity to experience nature at just about any scale—from the vast lawns of Central Park's Sheep Meadow to the plant shop that just restocked the replacement pothos we've been waiting for. The pandemic transformed our desire for outdoor space into a necessity. Outdoor terraces, plazas, and parks are in huge demand as new building projects are established. But architects in New York, and New Yorkers in general, know this: outdoor real estate comes at a premium. A simpler way that architects can provide urban dwellers access to nature at home and at the workplace is by incorporating interior landscapes.

Beyond the quantifiable improvements to air quality and general well-being, interior landscapes offer an experience greater than the sum of their parts. The difference between potted, decorative plants and a thoughtfully curated horticultural experience is significant. More than anything, careful planning, expertise, and a little bit of ingenuity can forge a new path toward interior gardens being as pleasurable as their traditional outdoor counterparts. This, in turn, will make our workplaces and our cities more livable.

Just as parks are natural gathering places, interior landscapes can bring people together. People want true connections to nature that are thoughtful, designed, and immersive. For these to be successful, we need to reject the old ways of thinking about indoor plants. Green walls offer only a two-dimensional gesture toward landscape. Green roofs satisfy an important part of efforts to reduce the heat island effect and storm runoff, but they're only comfortable in certain seasons. These interventions, while crucial developments in building practices, leave us with an impression of nature stripped of its dynamic qualities. They are static and distant, proxies of nature devoid of real character and depth. Advances in LED technology and HVAC systems now allow for the careful calibration of interior environments, and the opportunity to merge human comfort with horticultural dynamics. With the careful selection of plant material, drainage, and watering techniques, there really is no limit to what is possible.

## The Enclosed Forest

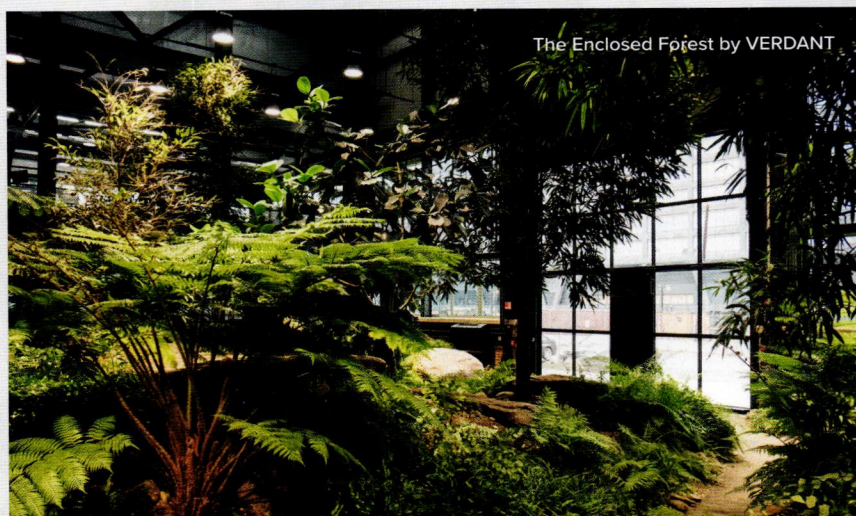
For example, in a project we call "The Enclosed Forest," my studio, VERDANT, was fortunate to work with an ambitious and progressive client, whose focus was on quality of life for its employees. This garden functions more like a park than a landscape installation. At the time of the project's design and construction, the idea of investing so much time and money in an indoor landscape felt risky. But in the intervening years,

there have been surprising advances in technology (lighting, irrigation, etc.). We as designers have also learned from this process and are eager to take the next step in implementing that new tech, at this kind of scale.

## What Constitutes Nature

What ultimately defines an experience with plants is sensorial: a mixture of temperature, light, humidity, scent, and movement. The dynamic nature of a garden is often forgotten in application, in favor of a kind of sanitized stasis, where the real life cycle of plants is covered up. If perfection is the goal, the result is something more clinical. People deserve landscapes that embrace the unexpected, and it's okay if things get a little messy—that's just the natural environment at work. In order for an interior landscape to convey natural beauty, we must reflect on what constitutes nature and, by extent, beauty. Is it the plants themselves that pull us in, or is it really the ebb and flow of something that is living and not staged?

Interior landscapes are one tool at our disposal that can be readily implemented, and can quickly raise the standard of just about any kind of interior space. So much of the metropolitan workforce is bound to a computer or desk. By collaborating with all the stakeholders and investing in a little more green space both indoors and out, we can collectively make more and more interior spaces that bring joy and uplift our everyday endeavors.



The Enclosed Forest by VERDANT



**Joshua Gerber, AIA,** is a senior project manager and designer at VERDANT, a landscape design-

build studio based in Brooklyn. Drawing on his passions for historic buildings and New York history, he appreciates any opportunity to blend architectural ingenuity with the natural environment.

# Patterns and Policies of New York City's School Green Roof Trend

BY SARAH KENNEY, ZISHI LI, ZEYNEP UGUR, ZIDA LIU, LETTY LAU, SHAWLON HSIEH

During June's heatwave, we were suffering in a sweltering New York City. We walked the hard streets, drenched in our own sweat, trying to visit the green roofs on the city's public schools. Up there, gentle breezes passed by, while trees, pavilions, and canopies absorbed heat from the radiating sun. Heat waves, so stifling from below, are not as oppressive on a green roof. This palpable difference demonstrates what everyone knows on paper: that green roofs unquestionably improve the livability of cities. And yet, looking out from my office at the desaturated paint and tar of surrounding roofs, green is largely absent. It is a failure of New York's infrastructure policy that, despite widespread desire and support, there are still so few green roofs. We can't help but wonder: *Where are they?*

In the early 2000s, green roofs gained traction as a type of sustainable infrastructure for cities. The traditional design of an infrastructural green roof is a wide, flat, planted roof area, constructed with a waterproofed membrane, a root barrier, drainage, soil, and plants on top. Further complicating implementation, many rooftops don't adhere to a standardized format, making standardized designs impossible. And even though cities like New York understand the benefits of green roofs, and the city government strongly supports their installation with funding and regulations, there are still only 736 green roofs among the city's one million buildings, which amounts to only 0.07% application overall.

To understand the underlying cause of this critical absence, my firm, Studio Link-Arc, is studying green roofs on New York City public and private schools. My colleagues and I have visited

a quarter of them, and have already noticed unexpected patterns, leading us to believe that the practical application of green roofs is not well understood.

For schools that have managed to implement a green roof, the projects have been wildly successful. Each school's spaces deviate from the traditional infrastructural style, incorporating educational spaces, rooftop classrooms, agricultural spaces, climate observation stations, performance spaces, laboratory gardens, and countless other areas. Their designs vary wildly, reflecting both the social identity of the schools and the broader architectural trends in New York City.

A few milestone examples from our study show the wide range of practical applications. For instance, Ballet Tech in the Flatiron District features a 15,000-square-foot, drought-resistant green roof installed as part of a renovation. Although it is non-occupiable for students, it hosts beehives managed by a local beekeeper, and the honey produced is sold around the city. In Upper Manhattan, P.S. 6 Lillian Blake School provides another model; its roof includes



A green roof concept by Studio Link-Arc

a greenhouse classroom, a small orchard, and a green wall habitat. The planted spaces are in sculpted raised beds as opposed to being spread evenly across the total roof surface. By spatially prioritizing these design components over infrastructural ones, the design supports hands-on environmental and urban agricultural education. Meanwhile, P.S. 41 in the West Village combines infrastructural, educational, and environmental elements, creating a space where students can engage in scientific studies and complex ecological interactions.

School green roofs are unpredictable and idiosyncratic, the natural product of an imperfect system. Although New York's school green roofs generally fulfill their promises, their deployment is uneven, often concentrated in affluent areas where municipal infrastructure faces fewer stressors.

School green roofs illustrate broader policy issues affecting sustainable development in New York. The city has supported the application of green roofs largely through funding and grants, but building codes, practical concerns, and



An existing green roof at the public Ballet Tech school in the Flatiron

public policy all play a role. Throughout the city, the government has defined priority community districts (PCDs), zones that suffer from high heat and storm surges, making them high-impact zones for green roofs. But, in practice, sustainable infrastructure continues to be applied not in PCDs, but in affluent and stable ones. The reasons for this are myriad, but the most critical are improper allocation of funds, practicality limitations, and limited legislation.

First, financial opportunities are available but remain largely untapped, and targeted funding has not led to increased build-outs in PCDs. The city's tax abatement program allows building owners to be reimbursed for some or all of the costs when replacing a traditional roof with a green one. While this program has significant potential to make strategic applications more equitable, it does not address all the ways that money limits access. An engineering study to determine the mere feasibility of establishing a green roof can cost around \$50,000. For public schools, which face budget cuts citywide, this study often takes a backseat to more pressing needs like upgrading ventilation systems, repairing deteriorating façades, and updating classrooms.

Second, practical issues also contribute to the limited number of green roofs. For anything beyond a basic sedum roof, maintenance becomes costly and challenging, often deterring administrations from moving forward with such projects. Water management remains a significant concern for the viability of these roofs. Among the few schools we visited so far, at least four have experienced serious water management problems. Of these, three schools have closed their green roofs, and one is in the process of completely replacing theirs.

Finally, new legislation could support green roof installation, but early adoption has been underwhelming. Local Law 97 mandates either solar panels or a green roof on new construction. However, most new projects are opting for solar

panels due to their relative simplicity. Additionally, Local Law 97 does not address sustainable infrastructure for existing buildings, which constitute the vast majority of New York's built environment. Representative Nydia M. Velázquez (D-NY) has repeatedly championed the Public School Green Rooftop Program Act, which would use federal funds to prioritize green roof applications on primary and secondary schools. This is not the first time this measure has been proposed, but it looks more promising.

Our research underscores the need for a more integrated approach to green roof installation. We would like to see city departments leading by example, using publicly owned buildings to promote green roofs. Addressing policy gaps and ensuring equitable application across different types of schools will be essential for increasing the number of green roofs in New York City. As we move forward, it is crucial to balance new regulations with the needs of existing structures and address the disparities to improve city life through green roof design.



Clockwise from upper left: **Sarah Kenney** (junior architect), **Zishi Li** (junior architect), **Zeynep Ugur** (associate architect), **Zida Liu** (design architect), **Letty Lau** (senior associate), and **Shawlon Hsieh** (managing director) are members of Studio Link-Arc, an international team of architects and designers who collaborate across disciplines.

## Reimagining NYC's empty office buildings through creative design

BY ROSALIND TSANG, AIA,  
LEED AP BD+C

Office vacancy in Manhattan hit a record 22.7% last year. That's more than 75 million square feet of New York City office space sitting unoccupied—the equivalent of nearly 30 Empire State Buildings. Without significant intervention, the current vacancy rate is projected to persist through 2026.

The question on everyone's mind, of course, is: What do we do with these empty office buildings? And, more importantly, *how* do we do it?

### The opportunity of vacant office spaces

As office towers continue to sit partially empty, with an estimated \$1.6 trillion in commercial property financing expected to mature in the next two years, the threat of default and stranded assets is real. At the same time, the housing crisis in New York City continues to worsen. It's getting harder and harder for people to find a place to live in the city that is within their means. The urgency is being felt: New York City has established a moonshot goal of building 500,000 new dwellings by 2033.

However, for a number of technical reasons, including floorplate-to-envelope ratio, the distance between the core and perimeter envelope, and structural grid spacing, not all existing office buildings are conducive to residential conversion. For those buildings, New York's market necessitates the creative integration of new programs into vacant spaces, with the goal of bringing each one back to full capacity.

**The need for creative thinking**

Take the challenge of natural light as an example. With some existing office stock, a common challenge is that floorplates are too deep to facilitate residential conversion, limiting access to natural light and air, and inhibiting our ability to introduce livable suites that make economic sense. What if we thought outside the box? Film studios, for example, are not only operational under lower natural light conditions, but in fact benefit from a lack of natural light. Additionally, the advent of virtual filming technologies significantly reduces the need for large-scale studio footprints. High-profile films and TV shows, such as *The Mandalorian*, are increasingly being produced using virtual sets; as NYC embarks on a “studio boom” in an effort to turn the city into Hollywood East, there’s a very real opportunity to turn an office floor currently sitting vacant in Midtown Manhattan into the set of *The Mandalorian*.

This isn’t just a pipe dream. Our studio, BDP, for example, has converted underutilized office floors into media studios and broadcast hubs in Toronto, which is experiencing its own high level of office vacancy. One project included reconfiguring mechanical services to optimize ceiling height, leveling the floor slab, and implementing internal acoustic barriers along the exterior façade to enhance lighting control and mitigate urban noise pollution. It can be done—it just requires a bit of imaginative thinking.

**Complete communities**

It’s not only film studios that present opportunities for these outside-the-box conversions. Healthcare and medical facilities, life science hubs, vertical retail, community centers, and recreation space should all be given consideration when we’re analyzing what to do with surplus spaces that are currently sitting idle.

Whether it’s transforming empty office floors into a film studio or a new healthcare hub, the approach remains the same: deeply understand the context

and needs of the local area, assess the technical possibilities (different buildings present different opportunities for efficient conversions), and think creatively.

Imagine an office tower that currently sits underutilized being reimaged into a true mixed-use environment, with new residential floors providing housing, retail and grocery access, a community center, and office space as informed by existing structural and space constraints and floorplate optimization. Neighboring low-occupancy office buildings present even further opportunities to create complete communities.

**The need for urgency**

By adapting existing buildings for new uses, we can create positive economic and social—as well as environmental—impact. By repurposing existing office space, we significantly reduce embodied carbon, when compared to constructing a new building.

This approach to addressing the city’s challenges is gaining significant momentum, including at the policy level: The City of Yes initiative, for example, seeks to reimagine zoning in New York City to unlock significant housing and economic opportunities through adaptive reuse.

The time is ripe, but it’s going to require creativity, collaboration, and outside-the-box thinking from the architecture, engineering and construction industry, as well as from the property developers, owners, municipalities, and policymakers with whom we work. ■



**Rosalind Tsang, AIA, LEED AP BD+C**, is New York City studio director at BDP, a global architecture,

interiors and urbanism firm. She is passionate about addressing urban challenges centered on social value, sustainable design, and innovation.

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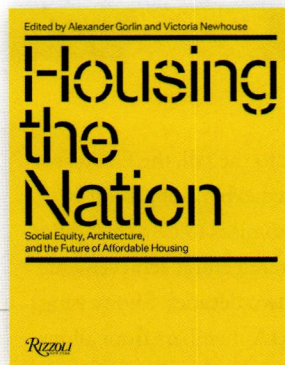
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# Lit Review

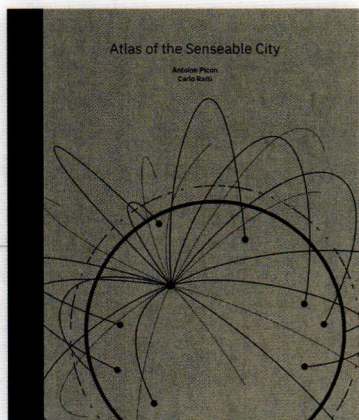
BY AJ KUSHNER



## Housing the Nation: Social Equity, Architecture, and the Future of Affordable Housing

Edited by Alexander Gorlin and Victoria Newhouse  
Rizzoli, 2024, 240pp.

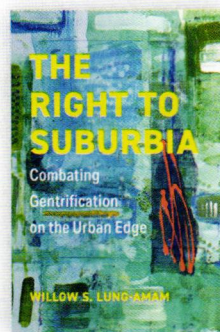
This volume is a comprehensive collection of urgent, concise essays on the myriad aspects of America's affordable housing crisis. Bold headings, unsparring prose, and clear charts from leaders in architecture, urban planning, and social policy present innovative solutions for creating equitable, sustainable housing. Through diverse perspectives and an appendix of noteworthy projects, the book highlights successful models and challenges traditional approaches, providing a road map for addressing the affordable housing crisis, with a focus on ecological concerns and social justice.



## Atlas of the Senseable City

By Antoine Picon and Carlo Ratti  
Yale University Press, 2023, 240pp.

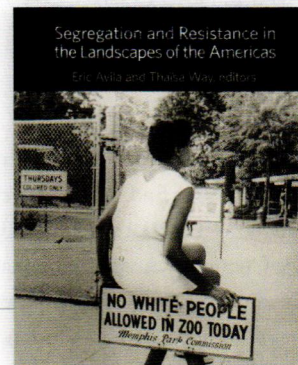
Picon and Ratti show readers the innovations in sensing technologies and digital mapping that are expanding how we document urban life. The authors explore how new ways of collecting data, along with novel surveying and mapping techniques, allow urban planners, politicians, and invested citizens to better understand how cities function. They also look at the benefits and consequences of increased monitoring.



## The Right to Suburbia: Combating Gentrification on the Urban Edge

By Willow S. Lung-Amam  
University of California Press, 2024, 384pp.

As American suburbs become more urbanized and gentrified, uneven costs and benefits of redevelopment present challenges to the marginalized communities that call these municipalities home. With the Washington, D.C., area as a case study, the book shows how activist groups and political leaders are fighting for their communities to stay in place and benefit from the new investments in their neighborhoods.



## Segregation and Resistance in the Landscapes of the Americas

Edited by Eric Avila and Thaïsa Way  
Harvard University Press, 2023, 406pp.

This compelling collection of essays examines how landscapes, land use policies, and land access shape racial and social inequalities of place, while also showcasing grassroots resistance efforts that challenge these injustices. The book offers a nuanced understanding of how racially segregated landscapes become sites of both oppression and resilience, and discusses the place-making and community building practices that arise in response.

# Twenty Years of Design and Dialogue

BY **JESSE LAZAR**, ASSOC. AIA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
AIANY/CENTER FOR ARCHITECTURE



As we near the end of our 20th anniversary year, I find myself reflecting on a unique and special run of exhibitions at the Center for Architecture that forecast the direction in which we hope to collectively move as an institution.

This year, the Center has hosted a lineup of exhibitions that continues to push the boundaries of architectural discourse and civic engagement. The 2024 calendar has not only explored a wide range of themes, but has also attracted new and diverse audiences to the Center, underscoring its role as a critical hub for dialogue on design, urbanism, and social justice.

One of the standout exhibitions this year was “Constructing Hope: Ukraine,” on view from May through September. This moving and timely exhibition emphasized how architecture can play a pivotal role not only in the reconstruction of buildings, but also in healing a nation and fostering a sense of community. The show captured the attention of the public and critics alike, most notably earning a review in *The New York Times*. In its June 2024 feature, the *Times* praised the exhibition for its sensitive yet powerful portrayal of the resilience and rebuilding efforts underway in Ukraine amid the devastation caused by the war.

Another groundbreaking exhibition this year, “Spatializing Reproductive Justice,” expanded the Center’s

## **Our 2024 exhibitions have been a testament to the power of design and to the Center’s commitment to fostering meaningful experiences and dialogue that reach a broad spectrum of visitors.**

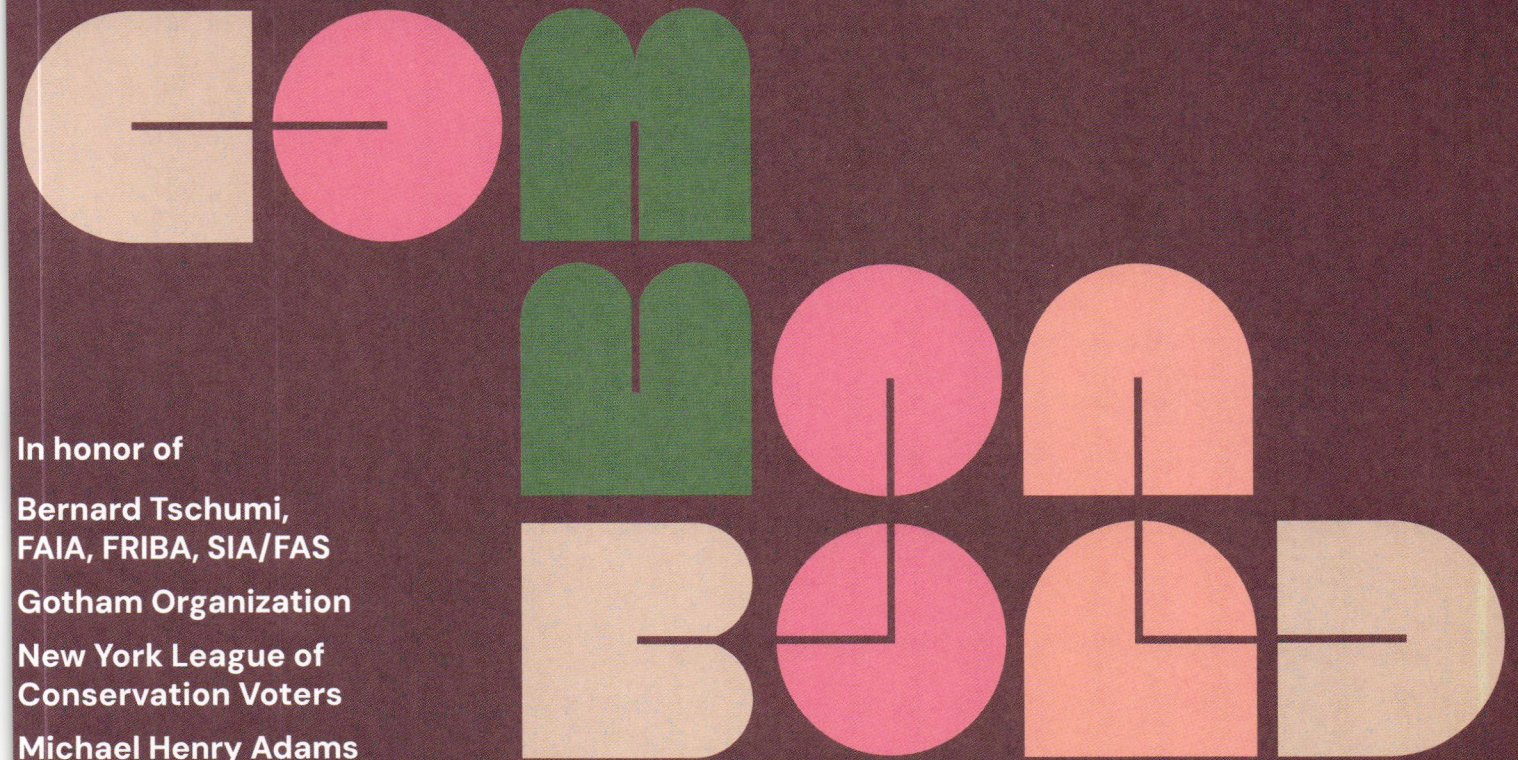
engagement with pressing sociopolitical issues, their intersection with design, and the role of the architect in addressing them. This show delved into the spatial dynamics of reproductive healthcare, examining how access to facilities and services is shaped by urban environments, zoning laws, and public infrastructure. Through architectural models, interactive installations, and real-world case studies, the exhibit sparked conversations about the built environment as an agent in enabling or hindering access to reproductive care. This exhibition was particularly noteworthy in the extent to which it reached new audiences, including activists, healthcare professionals, and community organizers, many of whom may not typically visit architectural exhibitions.

As we look to the fall, the Center’s recently opened exhibition, “Built by New York,” promises to be a celebration of the city’s architectural achievements over the past two decades. Showcasing the work of AIA members from all five borough chapters (a first for the Center), “Built by New York” highlights projects that have shaped the city’s skyline and its communities, including affordable housing, iconic public spaces, and the built environment at large. It offers a unique opportunity to reflect on how architecture has evolved in New York since the Center’s inception in 2003.

Together, these exhibitions provide an important glimpse into the evolving role of the Center for Architecture in the city. On the one hand, we have the opportunity to engage audiences on subjects that matter to them but aren’t traditionally architecture-related, inviting them to encounter our particular lens and design-centered point of view. On the other, we will always show the public the best of what our members and communities are building, and how those projects are improving lives and creating a more beautiful and vibrant city. Our 2024 exhibitions have been a testament to the power of design and to the Center’s commitment to fostering meaningful experiences and dialogue that reach a broad spectrum of visitors.

# Center for Architecture Gala

Save the Date  
October 24  
Chelsea Piers  
Pier 60



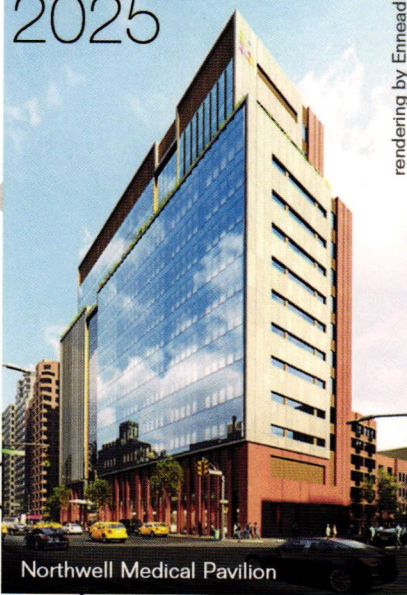
In honor of  
Bernard Tschumi,  
FAIA, FRIBA, SIA/FAS  
Gotham Organization  
New York League of  
Conservation Voters  
Michael Henry Adams

Join us for a celebration of design,  
community, and belonging.

[centerforarchitecture.org/gala](http://centerforarchitecture.org/gala)

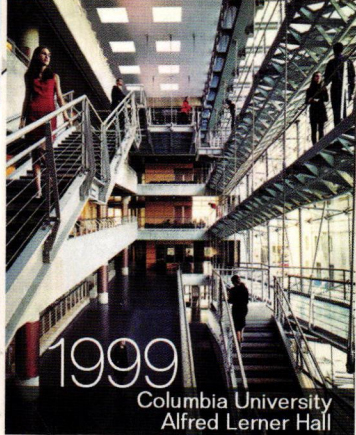
# Severud Associates

2025



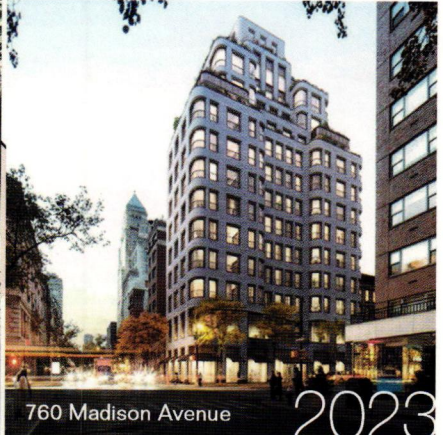
Northwell Medical Pavilion

rendering by Ennead



1999

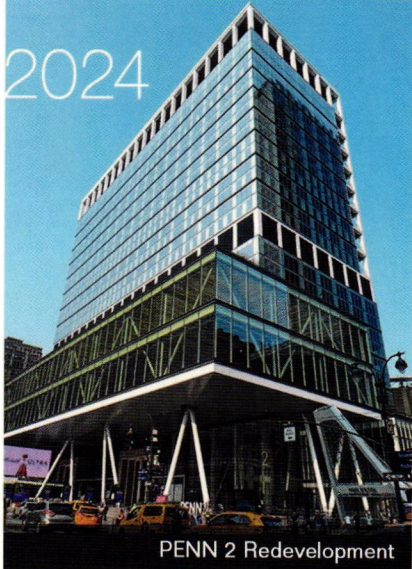
Columbia University  
Alfred Lerner Hall



760 Madison Avenue

2023

2024

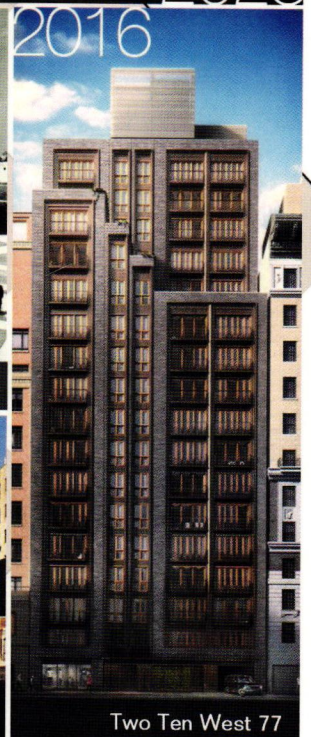


PENN 2 Redevelopment



1964

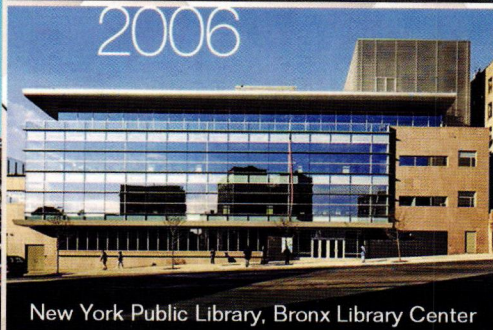
Lincoln Center, New York State Theater



2016

Two Ten West 77

2006



New York Public Library, Bronx Library Center

## Severud Associates

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Celebrating  
95  
Years of  
Structural  
Engineering  
Excellence