

## Forging a New York City Practice Rooted in a Social Agenda

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Need architects adhere to a social agenda, or any agenda at all? Driven by an ideal of achieving harmony of material and form, architects seek to improve the built environment. How can an architect's ambitions of reaching "the ideal," and an impulse to inject theoretical architectural ideas into projects, collide with practical realities of creating progressive educational centers, or housing the homeless and other underserved groups?

Edelman Sultan Knox Wood / Architects, founded in the early 1960s as The Edelman Partnership Architects, relied on Modernist principles to design effective architecture with a goal to serve those populations often overlooked. We have been committed to providing strong design on limited budgets to provide the best possible buildings for our diverse city's underserved populations. Over the course of forty years, we have navigated economic waves, adapted to our clients' growing need for different types of affordable and supportive housing, and addressed community and education centers' calls for progressive modes of learning. A tenet of the longevity as a firm is this: forging a practice that is committed to both promoting social ideals and designing beautiful architecture is our way of contributing to the diverse New York City fabric. Our ethos is grounded in the philosophy that, as architects, we need not conceptualize two seemingly disparate realms—meaningful architecture and serving a social mission—as mutually exclusive.

In a city where the average rent is \$3,418<sup>1</sup> and home ownership is inaccessible to so many, we find it critical that New Yorkers of all incomes and all abilities can live richly, continuing to contribute to the complexity that makes New York City unique. Serving the underserved New York City populations by working alongside clients whose social missions inspire us, has resulted in a varied body of work. Four distinct projects, spanning the 1960s to today, plumb the idea that socially conscious architecture is not only important to the lifeblood of our diverse city, but should also be beautiful and innovative.

### 9G Cooperative Housing Affordable Housing

One of our earliest projects, the 9G Co-ops, rehabilitated in 1960, became an architectural model that has since been mimicked in myriad iterations. Featured in Robert Stern's *New York City 1960s*, the project helped solidify the firm as one unafraid of exploring unexpected design solutions married with democratic interests.

The project came about because nine traditional townhouses were slated for demolition, but athlete Jackie Robinson's wife, Rachel Isum, and a friend persuaded the city to save the historic structures. The impetus for the 9G project was prescient of a burgeoning historic preservation movement of the 1960s that embraced New York City's historic neighborhoods. As Stern notes about the 9G project, "The most important aspect of the 9G Cooperative is proof furnished that

the city can be saved as a fit habitat for a highly differentiated society, and that it is the architect who must do the saving."<sup>2</sup>

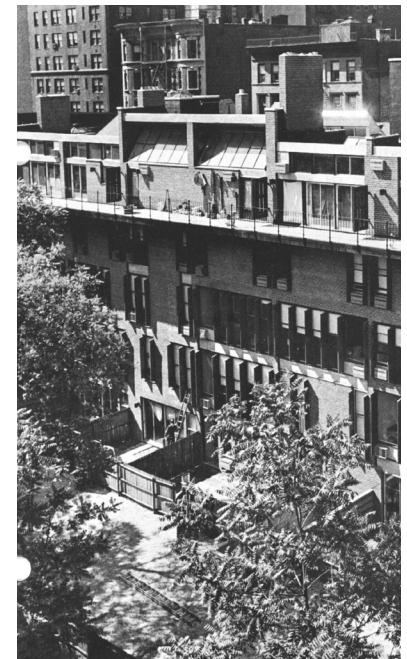
Led by Judy Edelman, the office put forth a radical idea: instead of splintering up the townhouses, she proposed connecting them internally and keeping the historic façades intact. This proposal unified the buildings into one, making the structure economically feasible for individuals to purchase a co-op unit. The solution of running a common corridor through the row of brownstones parallel to the façades and adding one stair and one elevator re-imagined the structure as a communal apartment building. Cooperative shares

were sold on the module of a brownstone floor; neighborhood applicants could affordably buy half a floor, a floor and a half, two floors, etc. Judy interviewed each shareholder, tailoring the unit design to individual's needs, and then proposed a layout based on the tenant's programs and requirements.

The rear non-load bearing façade of the building was redesigned in a modern pattern of punched openings with vertical sunshades. These elements tied together the co-ops formally while allowing for tremendous natural light and ventilation. The solution also figured in to the firm's Modernist design approach. As Judy says, "There was never any



9G Housing



question about Modern or not Modern...[meaning] great attention to structural integrity; when the way the building is put together is apparent; when it doesn't look like something else." The 9G project's success speaks to how this commitment to Modern design is effective in modifying a structure in order to preserve it; from a social perspective, this design mode allowed a historic building to continue as part of New York's urban community fabric.

### **New Settlement Community Campus (NSCC)**

#### **Community + Education**

Our long-time client, the non-profit housing developer Settlement Housing Fund (SHF), in partnership with

the New York City School Construction Authority (SCA), purchased several degraded properties on Jerome Avenue in the Bronx. SHF provides housing to more than 900 families in the Mt. Eden neighborhood of the Bronx, but missing was a community center from which to run their many programs and a new school to relieve local over-crowding. The solution was a unique development of a small public neighborhood school consisting of a primary school and intermediate/high school serving 1,163 students, including children with special needs, and connected community center with its own unique features: a 75-foot pool, dance studio, multi-purpose room, and adjacent green roof terrace. SHF manages the building and

makes use of the school's large group spaces after hours and on weekends. Partnering with Dattner Architects, we were honored to be part of the team to design this new concept for a community-based school.

Because so much of the desirable real estate in New York City has been developed, very often only secondary or even tertiary sites are available and affordable to non-profit and city organizations. These parcels are often characterized by difficult soil conditions or hazardous material contamination. In the case of NSCC, the site had long been used for auto repair, and required extensive remediation to remove the petroleum-contaminated soil. We often run up against the prob-

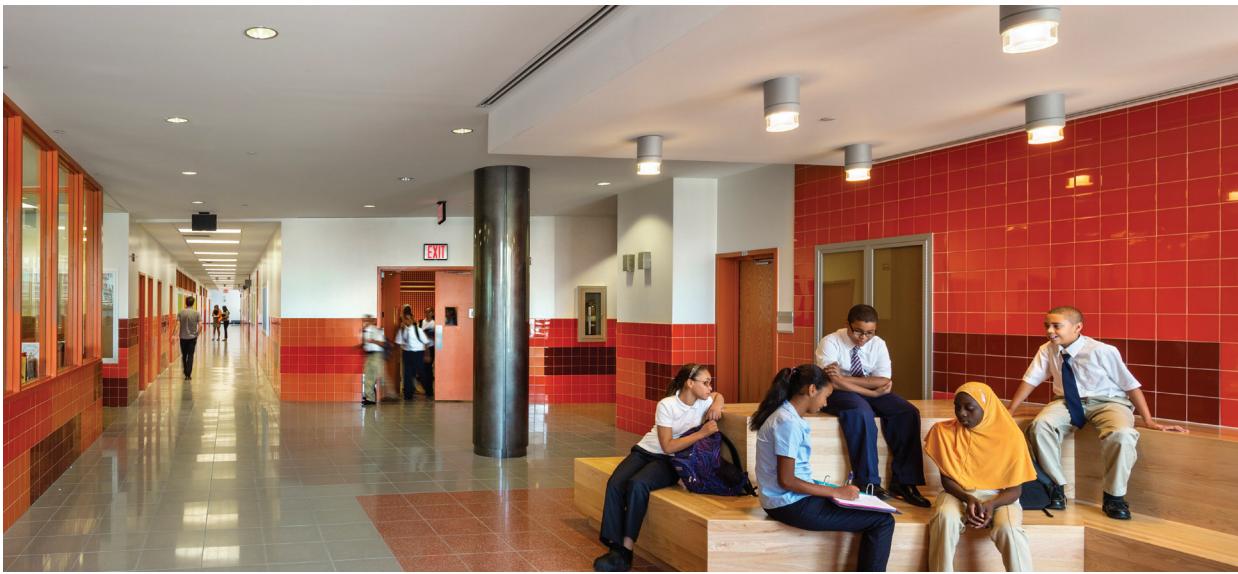
lem of fitting our client's dreams into the plausibility of repurposing these existing sites; however, redefining these neglected sites can become a genesis for community renewal.

As we repurposed the physical site, we considered the changing cultural conception and needs of a small community-based school. Parents' and the community's needs have grown beyond what a traditional learning environment can offer. They desire facilities that provide health and nutrition education and extensive enrichment opportunities. NSCC offers a promising model for wrap-around programming: school spaces (auditorium, competition gymnasium, cafeteria, and library)



*NSCC plan*





are used after hours for programs including dance classes sponsored by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; reciprocally, the school's students have swimming class in the community center as part of their base curriculum.

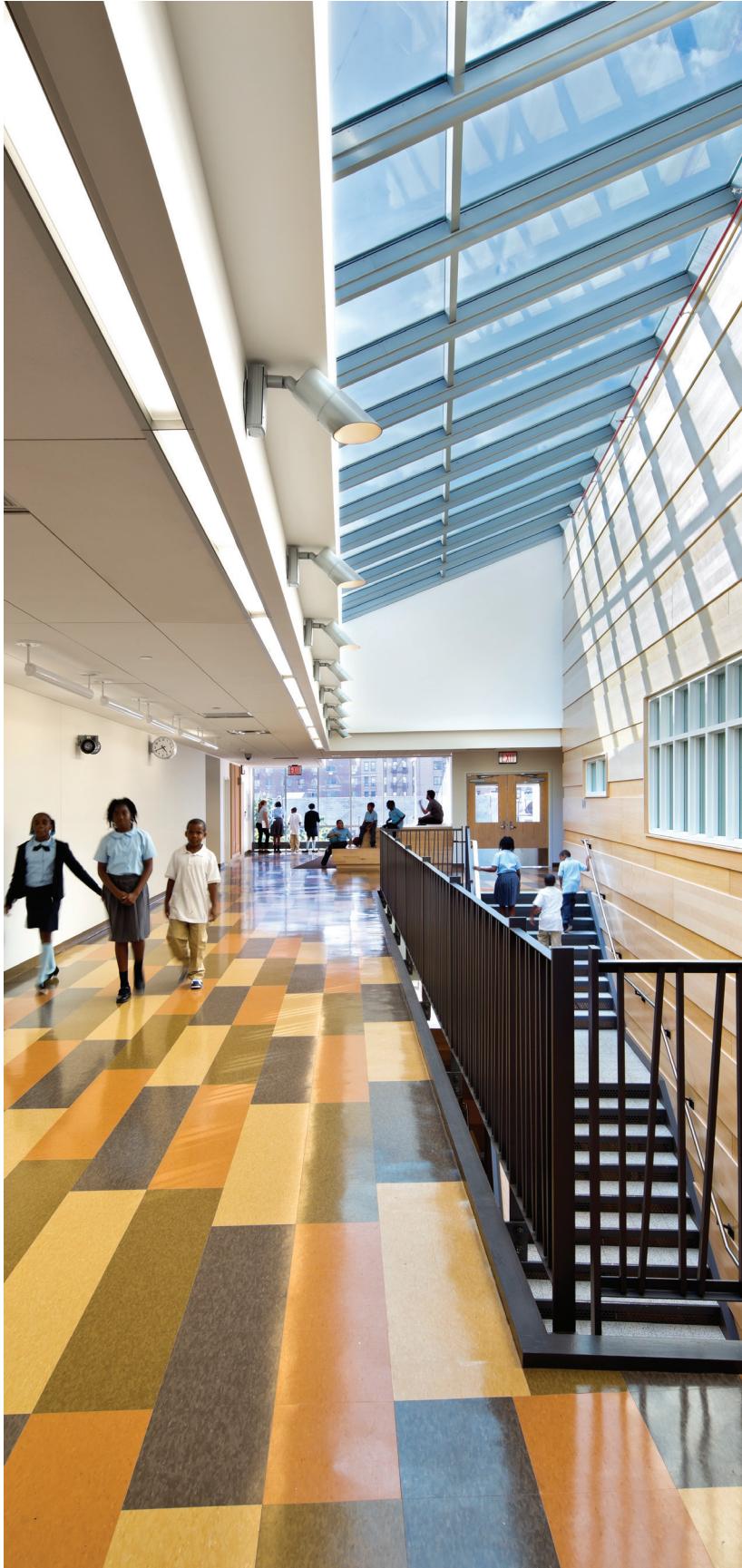
In a school serving students ages four through eighteen, security and adjacencies were prime concerns but were seen as opportunities for design. We spent a great deal of time thinking about how students move through the building, as many types of learning no longer take place solely in a traditional classroom. Additionally, we sought to design visual connections while choreographing physical interactions. For example, vision panels from the high school lobby, the elementary school Green Commons area, the community center, and from the public street all overlook the gymnasium, allowing each population to connect with see each other. This design move was inspired by research that has shown how younger and older students can have a positive influence on each other when programmed carefully. Breakout spaces carved from corridors create alternative teaching spaces. The Green Commons on the ground floor is a liminal space that marries the corridor to the gym below while the Red Commons on the second floor serves as story time space adjacent to the library. The use of distinct color schemes on each floor differentiates school programs and fosters identity.

### **True Colors Residence**

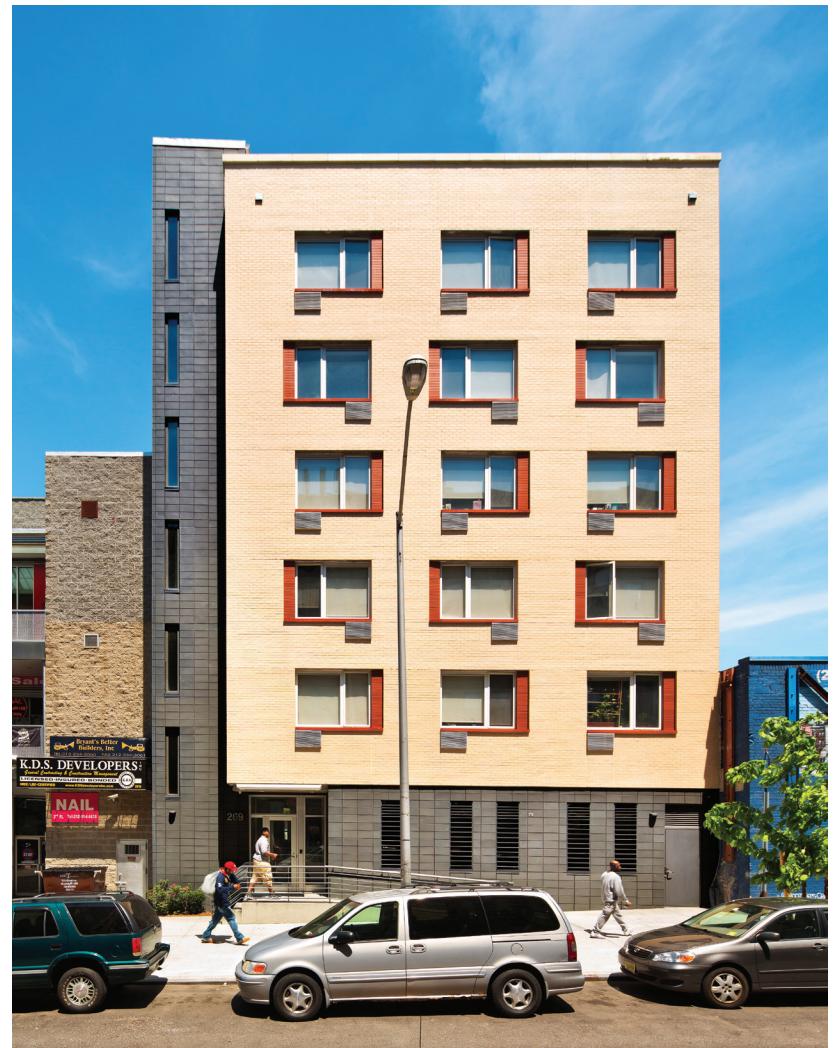
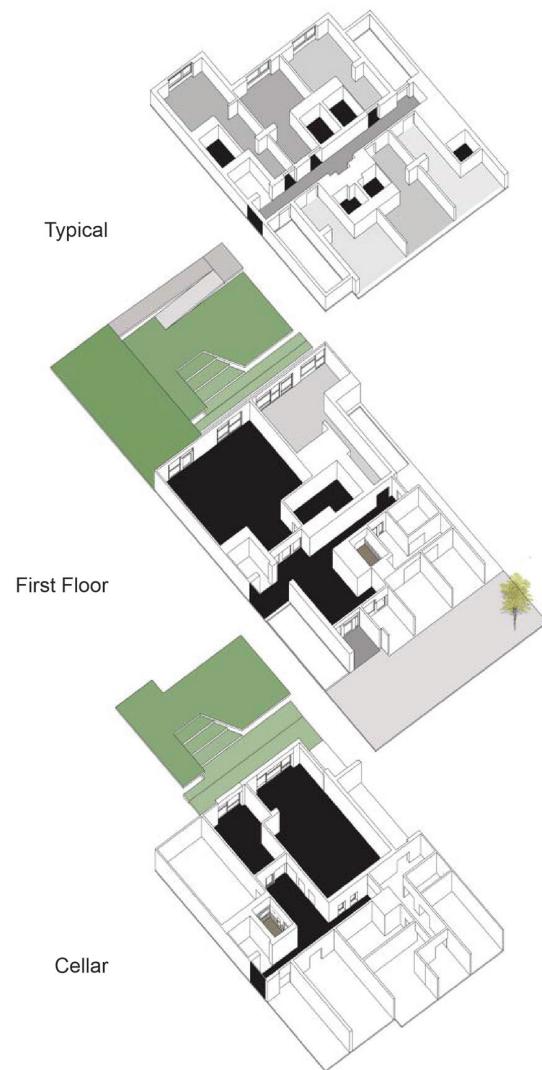
#### **Supportive Housing**

An increased visibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) rights, as well as that group's higher risk of homelessness, was the spark for a new project sponsored by West End Residences and Cindy Lauper's True Colors Fund. True Colors Residence is the first housing facility of its kind in New York City and serves the disproportionate number of LGBT homeless youth. As







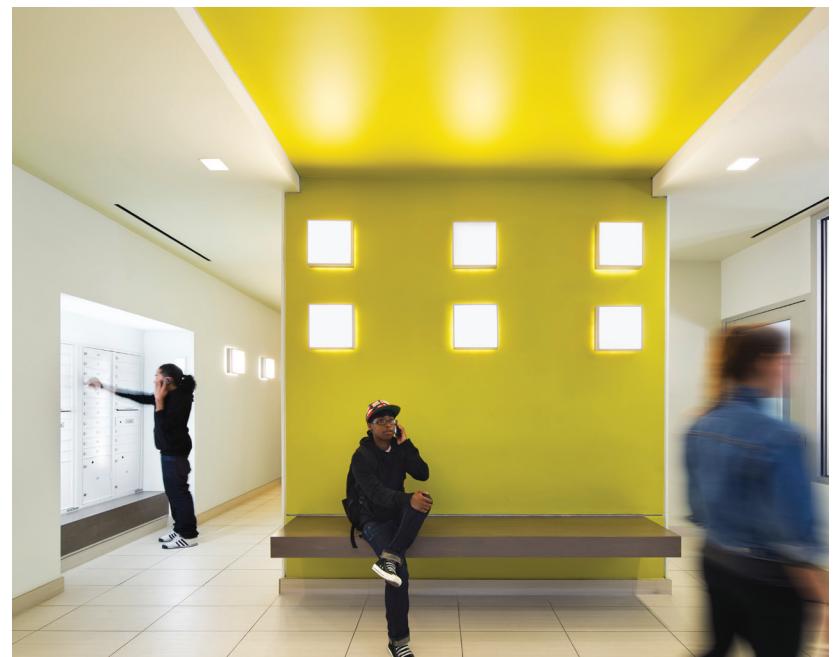


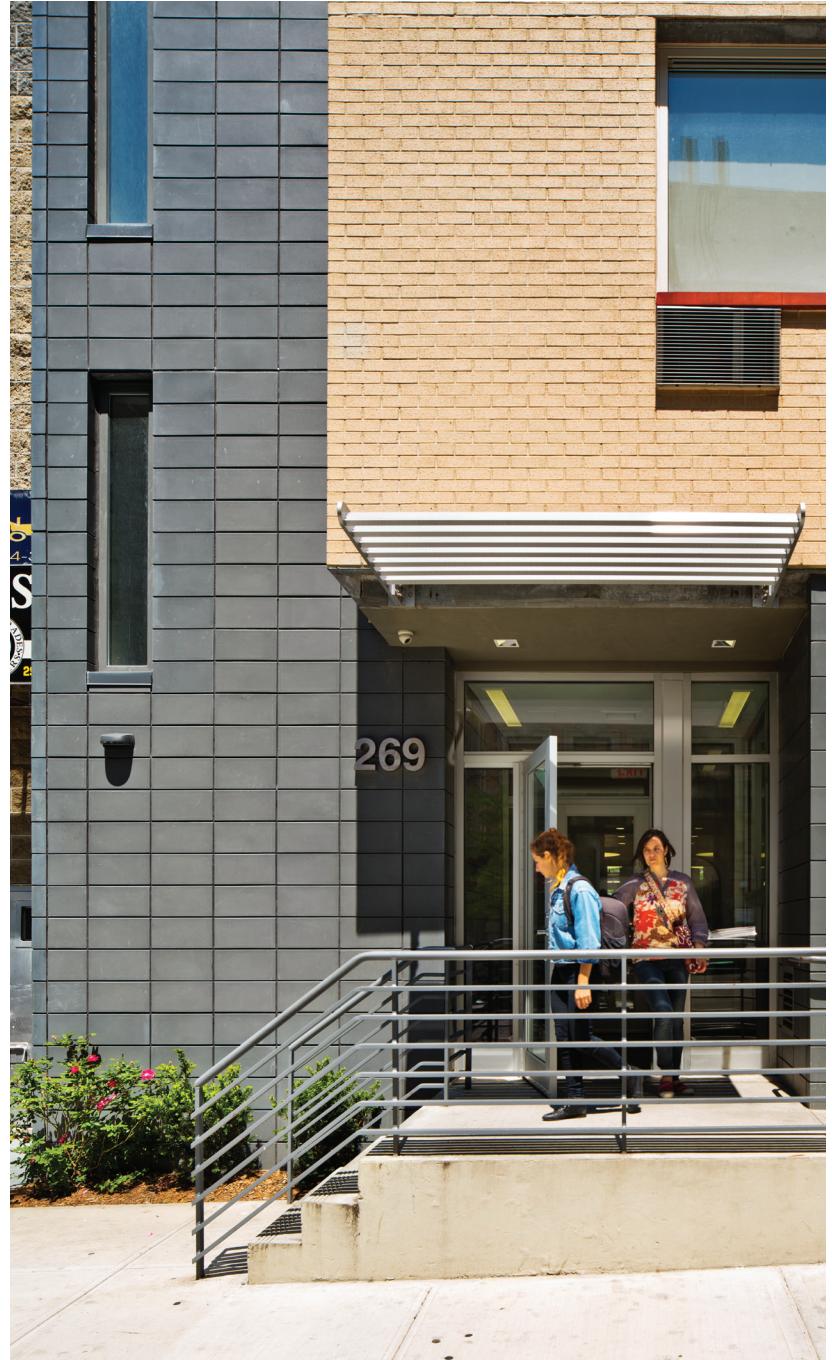
many of the selected residents had shuttled from shelter to shelter prior to coming to True Colors, the priority of the not-for-profit developer was to provide permanent supportive housing, not another temporary housing situation.

West End Residences placed great importance on creating a unique residence that would engender a place of pride and—despite a limited budget—move beyond what many imagine as traditional subsidized supportive housing. The supportive programs give each resident an opportunity for education and career development. The building design facilitates secure living as well as a support network that bolsters confi-

dence which stems from being able to maintain one's own apartment—a responsibility that most homeless youth at True Colors had never before experienced.

As with so many projects on complicated sites, the physical execution butted up against practical realities. The 50-foot wide lot's location between two existing buildings and the site's high water table posed serious challenges to construction. Typical of construction on an urban site bound by adjacent buildings, hopscotch phasing allowed the contractor to move equipment and build on the remaining free space. Situated on three different tiers, the rear yard was an opportunity to provide a variety of





*Left page, top: Front facade  
Left page, bottom: Interior space  
Right page, bottom left: Communal spaces in the rear yard  
Right page, top left: Rear facade  
Right page, right: Entrance*

green, communal spaces, including a shaded trellis, a yoga area, and a gathering patio.

West End Residences consciously wanted to keep True Colors at a small scale, believing that this would encourage tenant community building and lend a sense of security. With only 30 efficiency studio apartments, the project is small for housing of its type. The six-story block and pre-cast concrete plank building has five floors of residential units and two floors for support and services. The façade design distinguishes the residential and support floors by use of dark grey, ground-faced block for the stair and support floor and a buff-colored brick with recessed orange brick accents at the window openings for the residential floors. The façade design is referential to the neighboring buildings and visually lively at the same time.

Apartments are designed as simple palettes so residents can make the spaces their own through furnishings and decorations. Although compact in plan at 285 square feet for each studio apartment, the high ceilings and large windows expand each studio's sense of volume. The building is sustainably designed, meeting New York State Energy Research and Development Authority certification. Continuous exterior building insulation, fiberglass windows with trickle vents, lighting design at less than one watt/square foot, water conserving fixtures, and kitchen countertops with recycled glass aggregate fabri-

cated locally in the Brooklyn Navy Yards are a few of these sustainable features. Residents pay rent based on their income and are responsible for their own electric bills. These responsibilities are firsts for most residents, and many have learned to be more energy efficient as a result.

#### **4380 Bronx Boulevard Homeless Shelter**

In 1981, the New York Supreme Court cited Article XVII of the New York State Constitution, placing the burden of housing all homeless men in New York on the City and State. The historical Callahan vs. Carey decision required the City to provide numerous amenities and services to all men who were homeless “by reason of physical, mental, or social dysfunction.”<sup>23</sup> Still, New York City's homeless shelters are perennially underfunded and wanting of beds, and concurrently the demand for homeless shelters has grown.

Since the Callahan vs. Carey decision, New York City has evaluated costs for emergency services provided for the city's mentally ill population and determined that prevention and support is a significantly more cost-effective solution, prompting the development of shelters for homeless New Yorkers. Delivering support for this population allows them to not only avoid living on the street and costly emergency room visits, but ultimately encourages them to become self-sufficient members of their community. Thus, it has become essential to build facilities that house



*Torqued roof structure are situated above each sleeping quarter*

homeless people in the short term, but also provide programs to reintegrate them in society. Non-profit organizations and architects have embraced untraditional structures to employ creative renovations that are tailored to serving the particular needs of these clients.

We are in construction of the Bronx Boulevard Project for Project Renewal, the renovation and conversion of a two-story, 20,000 square-foot manufacturing facility into a 108-bed homeless shelter. The 1928 building was most recently a working factory for plastic and metal products. In addition to sleeping and bathing areas, the program includes space for medical and psychiatric treatment, social services, a dining room, recreation areas, and administrative components.

Going beyond a typical conversion, this project fosters a sense of well-being through an abundance of light and air in the dorms. We used the strict New York City Department of Building guidelines as an opportunity to provide this in an unusual way—five torqued roof structures atop each sleeping quarter provide a special interior experience. The structures break down the scale of the 20-bed dorm rooms into perceptually unique components, creating a series of moments within each dorm. Throughout the building, the existing rough utility aesthetic of the exposed structure is infused with clean lines of the new architecture. Sometimes original elements have been left in place to preserve the muscular design. Conceiving these historic characteristics as opportunities rather than obstacles was



the key to reconfiguring 4380 Bronx Boulevard to better serve the homeless population.

### Conclusion

Inherent in our practice, articulated in some way in every project, is the belief that good design is necessarily inclusive. It is not reserved for a particular class, income level, or geographic area. New York City is all the stronger for its diversity, and an overarching goal of the city is to empower every population. We attempt to design from the inside out, crafting spaces

for an individual experience; we seek to further projects that encourage unity, foster a sense of citizenship, and are integral to a democratic society. Our clients' social missions drive our design agenda, from homeless shelters to schools to residences. With a keen eye toward preservation—as well as a bold desire to building the most elegant new projects—we rely on Modernist principles as a facet to realizing socially conscious projects.

### Notes

1. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/real-estate/manhattan-the-city-of-sky-high-rent.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/real-estate/manhattan-the-city-of-sky-high-rent.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)
2. Robert A.M. Stern, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: 1995, The Monacelli Press, Inc, and Robert A.M. Stern), 753.
3. <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/the-callahan-legacy-callahan-v-carey-and-the-legal-right-to-shelter>

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