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Bronx Renaissance

When the new Yankee Stadium opens this month, it will mark a milestone in the Bronx's long-running resurrection. But in the shadow of supersized bids for the borough's rebirth, architects at work on more modest, community-driven developments are finding a range of creative tactics to cultivate a greener, socially sustainable future.



In Mott Haven, a former warehouse was transformed into the Betances Community Center and Boxing Gym by architect Stephen Yablon. Hypertexture for Stephen Yablon Architect

Not so long ago, if Neapolitans wanted to describe a place in ruins, they'd reach across the Atlantic for just the right simile: E' come u Bronx—like the Bronx. That it came to represent urban chaos in Naples, a city renowned for the same, speaks volumes about the Bronx's stubborn reputation, cast in the 1970s and fixed in pop-cultural memory for decades after.

Today, with the Bloomberg administration raining billions of public-private investment on the borough—a result of the South Bronx Initiative, an interagency effort launched in 2006 to encourage more housing, retail, and local jobs—there is no shortage of big-budget, star-quality projects. The new Yankee Stadium, a revamped Hunts Point Market,

and the Gateway Center on the site of the former Bronx Terminal Market are all poised to make a dramatic impact on Bronx fortunes.



COURTESY AT ARCHITECTS

ARCHITECT ANA MARIA TORRES WORKED WITH SUSTAINABLE SOUTH BRONX TO INCLUDE AN EXTENSIVE GREEN-ROOF INSTALLATION ATOP A FORMER THEATER, WHICH WILL SERVE AS A NEW HOME FOR THE ABUNDANT LIFE TABERNACLE.

At the other end of the spectrum, smaller projects in the borough—receiving less media coverage and funding—have arguably undergirded much of this restoration, with impact far beyond their modest budgets. Be they green-roof entrepreneurs, supportive-housing visionaries, or boxing-gym designers, architects are transforming the borough one vacant lot or storefront at a time. Working alongside established architects such as Richard Dattner, whose 323-unit Courtlandt Corners is among the

city’s larger affordable housing developments, they have made the range and reach of community-driven Bronx development more vibrant than ever. And by engaging Bronx residents, they’re connecting the dots between social, environmental, and economic sustainability.



TERRY CHEN

Few grassroots groups understand the synergy between design and community goals as well as Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx). Miquela Craytor, the group’s director, said that the Bronx has become a magnet for green technology because so much of the borough’s negative press centered on its severe pollution and decay.



RAY WILLIAMS

SUSTAINABLE SOUTH BRONX WORKED WITH COLUMBIA ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS TO DEVELOP PLANS FOR AN ECO-INDUSTRIAL PARK IN OAK POINT.

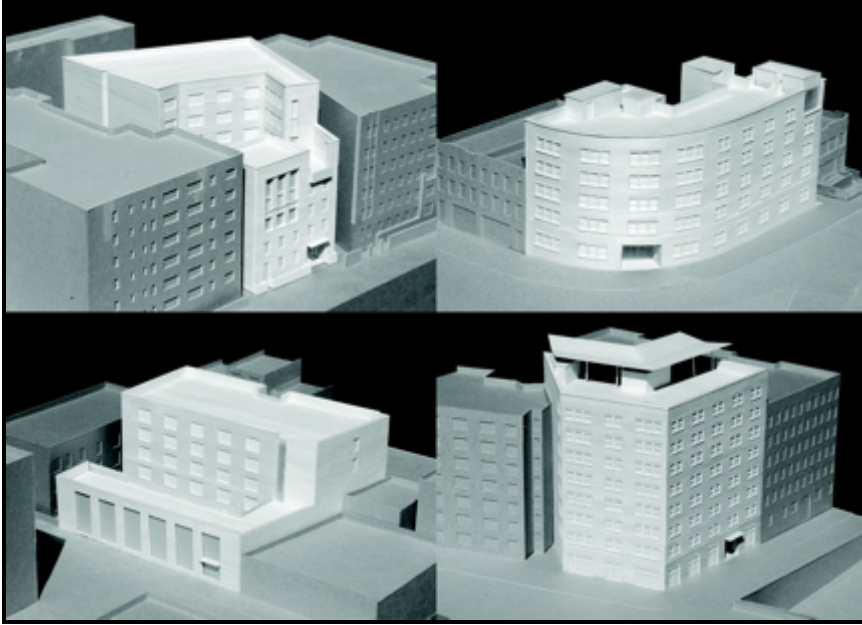
As one of many efforts to reinvent the borough through green design, the group has collaborated with Columbia University’s GSAPP to explore turning Oak Point’s industrial waterfront—where the city had planned to site a new jail—into an eco-industrial park. In 2003, taking matters into its own hands, SSBx started a program to train students to build and maintain green roofs, and four years later founded its own green-roof company, SmartRoofs. That has opened the door to real architectural opportunities.

On a recent afternoon, Craytor and Jesusa Ludan, Smart Roofs' director, visited a new client's property: the Olympic Theater in the Longwood neighborhood. Once a cinema for Spanish-language films, the Olympic was bought by Abundant Life Tabernacle and will be remodeled as the church's new home by architect Ana Maria Torres. Torres, principal of at architects, suggested incorporating more than 12,000 square feet of green roofs into the design, a boon for a neighborhood sorely lacking open space. "This is ambitious, yes, but we're going to make it," Torres said as she showed off the project. "The economy is more difficult, so we need to be creative." She aims to complete the job for \$2 million, a budget made possible through so many donations—both of money and labor—from church members.

Adaptive reuse was similarly successful in Mott Haven, a neighborhood south of the theater, where the New York City Housing Authority converted a basketball gym, once a warehouse, into the Betances Community Center and Boxing Gym. The bold design by Stephen Yablon Architect has garnered numerous awards, including a 2009 Merit Award from the AIA New York chapter. Set to open in May, the center consists of the first floor of a housing tower connected to the former warehouse space through an arcade. The central attraction is the ring itself, where children and teenagers are taught the art of boxing in what Yablon called a "glass-enclosed cube": a triple-height space lined with clerestory windows. Adapting the building involved raising the roof and installing an underground drainage system, but in Yablon's hands the complex job, as he put it, seems "almost childlike in its simplicity."

Other architects have literally roamed the gritty streets in search of opportunity. In the early 1990s, Jonathan Kirschenfeld, known for designing New York's floating swimming pool, decided that the best way to secure commissions for publicly-funded housing was to find sites on his own, study their zoning parameters, and then approach nonprofit groups. "I did a lot of feasibility studies," he said. "Ultimately, I got to understand who was looking for sites." With so few parcels remaining, those available are often irregularly shaped and frustrating to work with. But the key, he said, "is to solve the public spaces first."

His project for Bronx Park East, for instance, looks to be a row house from the street, with a double-height common space and adjoining roof terrace. But it's connected to a seven-story unit set back at an angle, creating a central courtyard between the large and small volumes. The project's almost sly jump in scale is part of Kirschenfeld's effort to counter what he called "a lack of faith in urbanism" that marked much of the 1980s housing solutions, including Charlotte Gardens, the 90 single-family houses that make many architects livid. "It kills me, looking for sites in R7 and R8 [medium- to high-density zones] and passing vinyl-sided, one-family houses with wrought-iron fences," he said.



Models of Jonathan Kirschenfeld's multiple infill housing projects currently underway in the Bronx.

Courtesy Jonathan Kirschenfeld Associates

Kirschenfeld now has company in his quest to urbanize the Bronx's low-density pockets. **The Women's Housing & Economic Development Corporation was granted a triangular site at Intervale Avenue to build a 127-unit building, with a third of its apartments set aside for formerly homeless families. Dubbed Intervale Green, the building sits just a block away from Charlotte Street, where a 1977 visit from President Jimmy Carter brought worldwide attention to burned-out buildings and rampant crime. Constructed on a former brownfield, Intervale Green's three green roofs and two courtyards have already proven a hit. New resident Carolina Beltre plans to share her one-bedroom apartment with her ten-year-old son, whom she left in the Dominican Republic five years ago in search of better work. "It's a new beginning for this area," she said. "Everybody needs to know what's happening in the South Bronx."**

Even some of the largest Bronx developments are taking cues from their smaller siblings. Though the neighborhood around Yankee Stadium has rarely shared its team's success, planners are applying a whopping injection of urban acupuncture to the area: The new stadium will be followed by a big-box shopping mall called the Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market. Just down River Avenue from the stadium, the center juggles multiple roles as it links the neighborhood to a planned Harlem River park across the Major Deegan Expressway. "The project was conceived to accommodate two vastly different scales of experience," explained Gregory Cranford, partner at BBG Architects. "You have the highway scale—as the building would be experienced from the Major Deegan—and then the pedestrian scale."



The Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market features mid-block piazzas that will connect the residential neighborhood near River Avenue to a future riverfront park. courtesy bbg

Though community groups criticized the project for displacing two-dozen wholesale produce merchants, the architects strove to knit what could have been another blank box into the neighborhood. The mass is broken into urban blocks, with two pedestrian passageways leading toward the river, and incorporates a historic market structure. “[City Planning Director] Amanda Burden was adamant about the pedestrian nature of this development,” Cranford explained. “We worked closely to really anchor the pedestrian experience.”

A similar debate over an influx of new retail has played out in the east side of the borough, where the Bloomberg administration aims to make the Third Avenue corridor an economic catalyst, anchored on the north by Boricua Village, the mixed-use project built around a vertical campus for Boricua College. The area is also home to Melrose Commons, a housing development that galvanized the neighborhood in 1992 when local residents deemed the initial plans unresponsive to their needs. This resulted in the community group Nos Quedamos (We Stay), formed to counter the shortcomings of the Melrose project—whose finished form is now seen as a model of cooperative design. The city aims to attract more name retailers to the area, a goal that Yolanda Gonzalez, executive director of Nos Quedamos, said is reasonable, but not at the expense of what she called the mama-and-papa stores that have long been neighborhood mainstays.

The most successful projects, Gonzalez stressed, are those that give community groups a strong voice in the design process. That’s what has made the borough’s smallest new developments its most exuberant, a lesson planners would do well to heed as the Bronx continues to rebound. “There hasn’t been a lot of sit-down and get-together, and that is an issue,” Gonzalez said about the city’s Third Avenue plans. “It should be a collaboration that creates cohesiveness. It’s important.”

Angela Starita and Malachi Connolly

Angela Starita writes frequently on urban design and architecture. Malachi Connolly is an architect at RKT&B in New York.